THE TRINITY, UNIVERSALS, AND PARTICULAR SUBSTANCES: PHILOPONUS AND ROSCELIN

By CHRISTOPHE ERISMANN

During late antiquity, an interesting doctrinal shift can be observed: Aristotelian logic and its Neoplatonic complements, in particular the teachings of Aristotle's *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*, were progressively accepted as a tool in Christian theology. This acceptance met drawbacks and was never unanimous. Among the authors who used concepts that originated in logic in order to support their theological thinking, we can mention, on very different accounts, Basil of Caesarea,[1] Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria,[2] John Philoponus, Leontius of Byzantium,[3] Maximus the Confessor, Theodore of Raithu, and John of Damascus, the author of an important *Dialectica*.[4] In the Byzantine context, handbooks of logic[5] were written specifically for Christian theologians, showing that logic was perceived to be an important tool for theological thinking.

The fact that we can group together the authors just mentioned by the value they gave to logic does not mean that they share any doctrinal unity. The application of Aristotelian logic to theology gives different results according to the way in which this logic is interpreted. I will consider here

---

[1] See for example J. M. Rist, "Basil's 'Neoplatonism': Its Background and Nature," in J. P. Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1981), 1:137–220 and D. G. Robertson, "Stoic and Aristotelian Notions of Substance in Basil of Caesarea," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998): 393–417.

[2] According to R. Siddals, Cyril "shares with the Neo-Platonists of Late Antiquity a genuine fascination for Aristotle's *Organon* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*" ("Logic and Christology in Cyril of Alexandria," *Journal of Theological Studies* 38 [1987]: 341–67, at 341–42).

[3] See H. Reindl, "Der Aristotelismus bei Leontius von Byzanz" (PhD diss., University of Munich, 1953) and N. J. Moutafakis, "Christology and Its Philosophical Complexities in the Thought of Leontius of Byzantium," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (1993): 99–119.

[4] For an analysis of the philosophical sources of the *Dialectica* see G. Richter, *Die Dialektik des Johannes von Damaskos: Eine Untersuchung des Textes nach seinen Quellen und seiner Bedeutung* (Passau, 1964).

[5] On the theological use of Aristotelian logic in the Christian Byzantine context see M. Roueché, "Byzantine Philosophical Texts of the Seventh Century," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 23 (1974): 61–76 and idem, "A Middle Byzantine Handbook of Logic Terminology," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 29 (1980): 71–98.

the example of reasoning on the theological problem of the Trinity with a logical system that involves a particularist ontology (thereby rejecting really existing universals).

THE TERMS OF THE PROBLEM

Let us take as our starting point the Christian dogma as it is formulated by the Cappadocian Fathers in the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea (325);[6] the Christian God is described as follows:

One essence, three hypostases (μία οὐσία, τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις)

The philosophical origin of the vocabulary that is used is obvious. In Greek, the Christian God is *ousia*.[7] The Aristotelian flavor of this polysemous word is immediately perceptible to a reader acquainted with philosophy. Such a reader also knows that *ousia*, in Aristotle, can be understood in two ways, as referring either to the concrete individual or to the so-called secondary substance, which is the essence of several individuals, i.e., the genus or species.[8] In this Nicene formula, *ousia* is not used to refer to the concrete individual, since *hypostasis* is used in this sense. *Ousia* refers here to what is common to the three *hypostaseis* or persons.

In the thought of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, the distinction between essence and hypostasis was superimposed upon that between what is common (*koinon*) and what is particular (*idion*). *Ousia* is related to *hypostasis* as the common is to the particular. On this ground, Basil of Caesarea writes that "there is the same difference between essence and hypostasis as between what is common and what is particular, for example, between animal and a certain man."[9] Thus, in the case of the Trinity, the divine essence is some item common to the three persons.

---

[6] See, for example, Gregory of Nazianzus's *Oration on the Great Athanasius* 35 (ed. J. Mossay, SC 270 [Paris, 1980], 184–86): "We, in an orthodox sense, say one *ousia* and three *hypostaseis*, for the one denotes the nature of the Godhead, the other the properties of the three." On the history of this formula see J. T. Lienhard, "*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of 'One Hypostasis,'" in S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins, eds., *The Trinity* (Oxford, 2001), 99–122 and A. de Halleux, "*Hypostase* et *personne* dans la formation du dogme trinitaire (ca. 375–381)," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 79 (1984): 311–69 and 625–70.

[7] For a discussion of the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of a "substance," see W. P. Alston, "Substance and the Trinity," in S. T. Davis et al., eds., *The Trinity*, 179–201.

[8] Aristotle, *Categories* 2a11–16.

[9] Letter 236 (ed. Y. Courtonne [Paris, 1966] 3, 53, 1–3): Οὐσία δὲ καὶ ὑπόστασις ταύτην ἔχει τὴν διαφορὰν ἣν ἔχει τὸ κοινὸν πρὸς τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον, οἷον ὡς ἔχει τὸ ζῷον πρὸς τὸν δεῖνα ἄνθρωπον.

A current of interpretation pervaded Greek Patristic thought, from Gregory of Nyssa to John of Damascus, which proposed to understand the *ousia* of the Trinity as a secondary substance in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., as a universal.[10] Beside the passage from Basil that I have already quoted, note the testimony of Theodoret of Cyr who, in 447, reported the position of the Fathers — he is referring here to the Cappadocian Fathers — on this question: "according to the teaching of the Fathers, there is the same difference between essence and hypostasis as between what is common and what is particular, or between genus and species or individual."[11] The Cappadocian conceptual pattern, which is adequately summarized in these texts, holds in two equivalence series:

> Essence = common = species (universal or secondary substance) [*ousia = koinon = eidos*]
> Hypostasis = proper = individual (primary substance) [*hypostasis = idion = atomon*]

This originally Greek interpretation of the divine *ousia* as a universal, which was also present during the Middle Ages, offered important theoretical possibilities and opened the way to one of the most interesting examples of overlapping fields of research and intertwined problems. Moreover, it permitted the (re-)entry of philosophical thought into theology, of logic into Christian dogma. This interpretation brings together two problems that otherwise would probably not have converged — that of the nature of the Christian Trinity and that of the ontological status of species in the sensible world. If the Trinity is a universal, then the relation of the three persons of the Trinity to their divine essence is analogous to the relation of different men to the specific universal man.[12] So a theory about the universals of the sensible world is, at least in part, applicable to the case of divine essence. We may call "principle of parity" the thesis that, if the Trinity is a universal, then what is true of the universal man is true by analogy of the Trinity

---

[10] Such an interpretation makes a clear distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* necessary; the first term refers to what is common to several persons, and the second term to what is said to be proper to an individual. The most important theoretical discussion of this distinction can be found in Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *On the Distinction between Essence and Hypostasis* (formerly Basil, ep. 38).

[11] Theodoret of Cyr, *Eranistes* (ed. G. H. Ettlinger [Oxford, 1975], 64, 11–13): Κατὰ δέ γε τὴν τῶν πατέρων διδασκαλίαν, ἣν ἔχει διαφορὰν τὸ κοινὸν πρὸς τὸ ἴδιον, ἢ τὸ γένος πρὸς τὸ εἶδος ἢ τὸ ἄτομον, ταύτην ἡ οὐσία πρὸς τὴν ὑπόστασιν ἔχει.

[12] See for example Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Simplicium de fide* (in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* III/1, ed. F. Müller [Leiden, 1958], 65, 22–24): "As in Adam and in Abel there is only one humanity, so also in the Father and in the Son there is only one Divinity"; ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἀδὰμ καὶ τοῦ Ἄβελ ἀνθρωπότης μία, οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ θεότης μία.

and vice versa.[13] This analogy can shift in two directions: either in a descending perspective, in which the substantial unity of the divine Trinity is taken as paradigmatically substantial and is applied to other universal entities, or in an ascending perspective, in which the particularity of individuals is emphasized, and the importance of the unity of the universal element is reduced. In the first case, the analogy leans in the direction of the unity of the divine essence, by strengthening human specific unity and asserting that substance is numerically one. This, for example, is the position of Gregory of Nyssa, who upholds a strong realism:[14] "For we speak rightly of several hypostases of the unique man and of three hypostases of the unique God."[15]

The analogy can also lean in the opposite direction, that of weakening the unity of the divine essence to what is considered to be the level of ontological unity of species in the sensible world. In this case, divine unity will tend to be interpreted merely as specific unity. This direction is taken, among other thinkers, by John Philoponus.

---

[13] This path of thought is present in several Church Fathers, among whom are some of the most important thinkers of Christian dogma: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria. This led J. Lebon, speaking about the letter *On the Distinction between Essence and Hypostasis*, which is now attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, to say: "L'homoousie ou unité de οὐσία entre les personnes divines se trouve . . . parfaitement éclairée par l'unité de οὐσία qui existe entre les individus humains, c'est-à-dire l'unité générique" ("Le sort du 'consubtantiel' nicéen," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 48 [1953]: 632–82, at 633). Notice that the principle of parity is rejected by Gregory of Nazianzus. According to him, the unity of human essence can be conceived only by thought (ἐπινοία); it is therefore purely conceptual, whereas the unity of divine essence is real. See *Oration* 31, 15 (ed. P. Gallay, SC 250 [Paris, 1978], 304), where Gregory explains that the human community (κοινότης) possesses a unity that can be conceived only by thought (μόνον ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρετόν).

[14] For a discussion of Gregory's position on universals, see S. González, "El realismo platónico de S. Gregorio de Nisa," *Gregorianum* 20 (1939): 189–206 and A. Weiswurm, *The Nature of Human Knowledge according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Washington, 1952), 133–40 ("The Problem of Universals"). See also R. Cross, "Gregory of Nyssa on Universals," *Vigiliae Christianae* 56 (2002): 372–410 and J. Zachhuber, "Once Again: Gregory of Nyssa on Universals," *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 (2005): 75–98. For an analysis of the influence of Gregory on the Latin theories of universals, through John Scottus Eriugena and his translation of the *De hominis opificio*, see C. Erismann, "La genèse du réalisme ontologique durant le haut Moyen Âge: Etude doctrinale des théories réalistes de la substance dans le cadre de la réception latine des *Catégories* d'Aristote et de l'*Isagoge* de Porphyre (850–1110)" (thesis, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, University of Lausanne, 2006), to be published by Vrin, Paris. For a different reading of the same topic, see J. Zachhuber, "Das Universalienproblem bei den griechischen Kirchenvätern und im frühen Mittelalter: Vorläufige Überlegungen zu einer wenig erforschten Traditionslinie im ersten Millennium," *Millennium* 2 (2005): 137–74.

[15] Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Graecos ex communibus notionibus* (in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* III/1, ed. Müller, 29, 9–11): πολλὰς γὰρ ὑποστάσεις τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου καὶ τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις τοῦ ἑνὸς θεοῦ φαμεν δικαίως.

Although there are important differences among the theological and philosophical thoughts of the upholders of the principle of parity, we can attribute to them the following thesis:[16]

The divine essence is a universal shared by all three persons.

We can attribute this thesis to the theologians who believe that it is possible to speak about the Trinity using (Aristotelian) logic and that, in a way, logic — and to a certain degree, ontology — can apply to the Trinity. For them, logic is a tool that can be used when thinking about the Trinity.

Let us come back to the question of the formulation of Christian dogma by introducing another fundamental concept — that of *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος).[17] *Homoousios* is used to express the community of essence. In the case of the Trinity, *homoousios* expresses the fact that the three divine persons have one and the same universal essence.

The Christological dogma elaborated during the Council of Chalcedon (451) adds a new element to the question.[18] Christ is said to be in two natures (ἐν δύο φύσεσιν, *in duabus naturis*). He is fully God and fully man (*eundem perfectum in deitate, eundem perfectum in humanitate*). This can be translated into philosophical language as: Christ instantiates completely the universal of divine essence and the specific universal man. Even more interesting is the following addition. The Council of Chalcedon says that Jesus is *homoousios* to God the Father and *homoousios* to men:

ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ κατὰ τὴν θεότητα καὶ ὁμοούσιον ἡμῖν τὸν αὐτὸν κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα
consubstantialem Patri secundum deitatem et consubstantialem nobis eundem secundum humanitatem

The same word *homoousios* is used to designate the essential community of the three persons of the Trinity and the essential community of different individuals belonging to the species man.[19] This passage from the Symbol of

---

[16] This thesis is what Richard Cross, in a remarkable article, called the "Eastern view" of Trinity ("Two Models of Trinity," *Heythrop Journal* 43 [2002]: 275–94). See also idem, "On Generic and Derivation Views of God's Trinitarian Substance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003): 464–80.

[17] For a detailed history of this term, see C. Stead, "Homoousios (ὁμοούσιος)," in RAC 16 (Stuttgart, 1991): 364–433.

[18] For a presentation of the text of the Symbol of Chalcedon, see I. Ortiz de Urbina, "Das Symbol von Chalkedon: Sein Text, sein Werden, seine dogmatische Bedeutung," in A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht, eds., *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3 vols. (Würzburg, 1962) 1:389–418.

[19] The Council of Chalcedon is only codifying here a tendency among the Fathers to apply the term *homoousios* to men also. Cyril of Alexandria says that men are said to be "consubstantial" or of the same species (ὁμοειδεῖς); see *In Ioannis Evangelium* 1, 4, 37D

the Council of Chalcedon can be used as an argument for the view that *ousia*, as found in the Nicene formula, may be taken as a universal essence. The text of the council does appear to treat the community of divine essence and that of humanity in analogous ways. Since man is obviously a universal, it seems natural to conclude that the divine essence is also a universal.

If *ousia* in the Trinitarian formula is understood as a universal, i.e., if the term is allowed to keep its heavy philosophical, in particular Aristotelian, heritage, then the Trinity can be interpreted in several ways. It can have as many different interpretations as there are philosophical theories of universals. These can be grouped under three main headings. According to a scholarly Neoplatonic distinction,[20] the universal can be (1) *ante rem*, (2) *in re*, (3) *post rem*. These three solutions are all philosophically defensible, but only one, and that in a very narrow understanding, gives a *theologically* acceptable result. Only solution 2, that is, the understanding of the universal as being immanent, allows a theologically orthodox solution to be given. A version of realism that holds that the universal, which really exists, exists only in its subdivisions, that it is identical in each of them, and that it is numerically one, allows an explanation of divine unity as well as of the distinction of persons. The same universal must be completely realized in each subdivision in order for each person to be God without any difference of degree. This doctrine is theologically acceptable; but, if the principle of parity is endorsed, it entails a controversial philosophical thesis: the numerical unity of every specific universal. The essence of all men — the specific universal man — is taken to be numerically one. In consequence, a defender of this theological position will have the tendency to understand specific

---

(ed. P. E. Pusey [Oxford, 1868]) and *De Trinitate dialogi* 1, 407C (ed. G. M. Durand, SC 231 [Paris, 1976], 192). The interpretation of consubstantiality that is given by Cyril goes beyond resemblance and states an identity of substance between individuals of a same species: men are consubstantial because of this identity of substance (τῆς οὐσίας ταὐτότης) (*Thesaurus de sancta et consubtantiali Trinitate* 19 [PG 75:313D–316A]). See M.-O. Boulnois, *Le paradoxe trinitaire chez Cyrille d'Alexandrie: Herméneutique, analyses philosophiques et argumentation théologique* (Paris, 1994), 249–60.

[20] The Neoplatonic exegesis of the *Isagoge* allowed an interesting doctrinal construction to emerge, which gives a synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian elements. This doctrine defines three states of the universal: (1) The universals before the many (πρὸ τῶν πολλῶν): these are Platonic ideas, which will later be interpreted as the models, or ideal paradigms, which subsist in the Demiurge's intellect (or in the mind of God in a Christianized version of the doctrine). (2) The universals in the many (ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς): the forms that are immanent to individuals. (3) The universals after the many (ἐπὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς): the abstract concepts of immanent forms. This threefold division is sometimes associated with three points of view: the "theological," the "physical," and the "logical." For a formulation of this doctrine, see, among others, Ammonius, *In Porphyrii Isagogen*, ed. A. Busse, Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca (= CAG) 4, 3 (Berlin, 1891), 41, 10–20 and Proclus, *In primum Euclidis elementorum librum commentarii*, ed. G. Friedlein (Leipzig, 1873), 50, 16–51, 6.

unity as a numerical unity on the basis of an opinionated reading of the passage of Porphyry in which he speaks about the unity of the different individuals in the species.[21] One difficulty faced by this theory is the distinction of the persons. In this version of realism, individuals have their essence in common because all their substantial being is common and comes from the species. In the Christian reading of Porphyry's theory,[22] two individuals differ from one another only through their unique bundle of accidental properties. But there cannot be accidental properties in God; so what is the status of the properties that distinguish the Father from the Son?

The other two solutions have the following theological disadvantages.

The *ante rem* universal. A Platonic realism that postulates a separated universal is not very useful theologically, since to the three persons, a fourth entity, the divine universal essence, would have to be added. This entity would be separated, independently existent, and ontologically prior to the three persons. As such, we would have four divine entities — the universal essence and the three persons — but this quadritheism is theologically unacceptable. Moreover, as highlighted by Athanasius of Alexandria, a Platonic theory of universals postulates the anteriority of the shared entity over the persons who share it. The persons of the Trinity would then be ontologically posterior to the divine essence. Other problems come from the fact that the Platonic idea involves degrees of participation: the universal is never entirely participated; moreover, the possibility that such a universal could be more or less completely exemplified opens the way to the heresies that hold that the Father is more God than the Son.

The *post rem* universal. It is possible to accept the interpretation of divine *ousia* as a universal without thereby defending a theory of universals as real entities: a merely conceptual existence can be attributed to them. In this application of particularism to the Trinity, the basic fact is taken to be the existence of the three persons understood as having three particular substances; the common substance is then "only" the result of conceptual abstraction. Each person has a proper substance that does not belong to either of the other two. This theory has been accused of leading to tritheism.[23]

This position is not very fruitful theologically and brought about various problems and condemnations for its defenders. It is nonetheless interesting for the historian of philosophy insofar as it testifies to the intersection of

---

[21] *Isagoge*, ed. Busse, 6, 16–23.

[22] Ibid., 7, 16–27.

[23] A. Benito y Durán has proposed to see Arianism as the result of the application of nominalism to the Trinity, in "El nominalismo arriano y la filosofía cristiana: Eunomio y San Basilio," *Augustinus* 5 (1960): 207–26. Tritheism seems a better candidate for this, in that it accepts an essence common to the three persons but denies its extra-mental existence. Arius's position is to present the Father and the Son as different substances.

two currents of thought. It links on the one hand the fundamental tendency in Greek Trinitarian thought to try to understand the Trinitarian dogma by using philosophy, with, on the other hand, a radicalized version of Aristotelian ontology that upholds ontological particularism (the view that everything that exists is necessarily particular). This particularist reading of Aristotle's ontology is mainly grounded in a sentence of the *De anima* in which Aristotle states that the universal animal either is nothing or is posterior.[24] The understanding of the universal Godhead as being, at most, *post rem* is the position I would like to discuss in this paper, through an analysis of one of the most philosophical of heresies, tritheism.

The historical problem of tritheism is a complex one. Tritheism was originally related to the monophysite line of thought in Christology;[25] it had several partisans. I shall not speak here of the supposed "father" of tritheism, the philosopher John Ascoutzanges, nor of the two most important tritheist bishops, Conon of Tarsus and Eugenius of Seleucia in Isauria.[26] I shall consider two philosophical defenses — the one Greek, by John Philoponus, the other Latin, by Roscelin of Compiègne — of the position that the Trinity comprises three particular substances, a position that has been presented as leading to tritheism. I shall focus on the analysis of the relation between their Trinitarian theology and their ontology, or more precisely, their theory of Aristotelian secondary substances.

Before analysing our two case studies, it is important to distinguish the following four ideas:

(1) the adoption of a particularist ontology that excludes real universal entities;

(2) the application, as a consequence of the principle of parity, of this ontology to the case of the Trinity, considered as a species with three members, i.e., a triadic species;

---

[24] Aristotle, *De anima* 1, 1, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1961), 402b7: τὸ δὲ ζῷον τὸ καθόλου ἤτοι οὐθέν ἐστιν ἢ ὕστερον.

[25] In monophysism — a doctrine that recognizes in the incarnate Word only one nature (φύσις) — natures are understood as being particular. Tritheism can be seen as a radical extension of monophysism insofar as it applies to the Trinity the thesis, which originated in Christology, according to which natures are particular. Notice also that monophysism — as opposed to the doctrine of Chalcedon — agrees with the Aristotelian thesis according to which an individual can belong only to one species, in that it attributes only one nature to Christ. However, a monophysite does not necessarily have to be a tritheist, as illustrated by the case of Severus of Antioch.

[26] See the articles of A. Van Roey, "La controverse trithéite depuis la condamnation de Conon et Eugène jusqu'à la conversion de l'évêque Elie," in W. C. Delsman, ed., *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. Dr. J. P. M. van der Ploeg* (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982), 487–97 and "La controverse trithéite jusqu'à l'excommunication de Conon et Eugène (557–569)," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 16 (1985): 141–65.

(3) the doctrinal result of 2, i.e., the theory that each person of the Trinity has a particular substance distinct from the other two, and therefore that the Trinity comprises three particular substances;

(4) the designation of "tritheism," which originates in opponents of the doctrine of three substances in the Trinity, who saw in this the implicit heterodox affirmation of three Gods.

It is crucial to insist on the fact that neither Philoponus nor Roscelin perceived themselves as tritheists. They held the theses involved in points 1, 2, and 3, but would not have agreed with 4. They certainly considered themselves as monotheists, but held a given theory of the Trinity — i.e., point 3. I shall not discuss here the problems of whether the use of the word "tritheism" to describe this position (point 4) is legitimate and thus whether this doctrine is really unorthodox. I wish to show that the result of applying Aristotelian logic to theological problems gives different results according to how it is interpreted. A realist understanding of Aristotelian *ousia* — the notion on which the problem focuses — makes it easier to understand divine unity. On the other hand, if a particularist understanding is chosen, emphasis is put on the distinction between the persons, sometimes to a very high degree, as we shall see.

The first author to be considered is John Philoponus, an important philosopher, known for his commentaries on Aristotle[27] and for his work on the problem of the eternity of the world.[28]

John Philoponus

Philoponus (ca. 490–575) was an Alexandrian philosopher[29] from the Neoplatonic school of Ammonius Hermeiou — a disciple of Proclus — and a Christian theologian.[30] The case of Philoponus is particularly interesting and

---

[27] There are extant commentaries on the *Categories* (ed. A. Busse, CAG 13, 1), on the *Prior Analytics* (ed. M. Wallies, CAG 13, 2), on the *Posterior Analytics* (ed. M. Wallies, CAG 13, 3), on the *De anima* (ed. M. Hayduck, CAG 15), on the *De generatione et corruptione* (ed. G. Vitelli, CAG 14, 2), on the *Meteorologica* (ed. M. Hayduck, CAG 14, 1), and on the *Physics* (ed. G. Vitelli, CAG 16 and 17).

[28] *De Aeternitate Mundi contra Proclum*, ed. H. Rabe (Leipzig, 1899).

[29] See H.-D. Saffrey, "Le Chrétien Jean Philopon et la survivance de l'école d'Alexandrie au VIe siècle," *Revue des études grecques* 67 (1954): 396–410.

[30] On Philoponus's theological thought, see, among others: E. Booth, "John Philoponos: Christian and Aristotelian Conversion," *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982): 407–11; H. Chadwick, "Philoponus the Christian Theologian," in R. Sorabji, ed., *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London, 1987), 41–56; T. Hainthaler, "Johannes Philoponus, Philosoph und Theologe in Alexandria," in A. Grillmeier, ed., *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, 2/4: *Die Kirche von Alexandrien mit Nubien und Äthiopien nach 451* (Freiburg, 1990), 109–49; T. Hermann, "Johannes Philoponus als Monophysit," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 29 (1930): 209–64.

perhaps unique: we know his exegetical work on Aristotle, his philosophical positions, in particular on substance, through his commentary on the *Categories*, and we can form for ourselves a precise idea of his theology, despite the vicissitudes in the transmission of his texts.

Philoponus's main theological work, the *Arbiter* (Διαιτητής), has been preserved in a complete version only in Syriac.[31] Fortunately, the seventh chapter, relevant to the problem of tritheism,[32] has been transmitted in Greek in John of Damascus's treatise *On Heresies*, as a supplement to heresy 83,[33] as well as in a seventh-century *florilegium* called *Doctrina Patrum de incarnatione Verbi*.[34] Syriac fragments of Philoponus's theological work are also extant.[35] In this respect, two sources are particularly important: Peter of Callinicum's anti-tritheist dossier[36] and Michael the Syrian's chronicle,[37] which contains a summary of the theological arguments advanced by the monophysite Philoponus against the theory of the double nature of Christ promulgated by the Council of Chalcedon.

According to Philoponus, Christian dogma must be explained and proved by philosophical argument. Gustave Bardy summarizes this as follows: "[Philoponus] was a very particular sort of Christian. For him, the teaching of the Church had to be proved by means of philosophical arguments, and so he went about reconstructing the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarna-

---

[31] For a remarkable analysis of this text and an English translation, see U. M. Lang, *John Philoponus and the Controversies over Chalcedon in the Sixth Century: A Study and Translation of the "Arbiter"* (Leuven, 2001).

[32] On the problem of Philoponus's tritheism, see the recent article of U. M. Lang, "Patristic Argument and the Use of Philosophy in the Tritheist Controversy of the Sixth Century," in D. V. Twomey and L. Ayres, eds., *The Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Fathers of the Church: The Proceedings of the Fourth Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 1999* (Dublin, 2007), 79–99. See also U. M. Lang, "Notes on John Philoponus and the Tritheist Controversy in the Sixth Century," *Oriens Christianus: Hefte für die Kunde des christlichen Orients* 85 (2001): 23–40; H. Martin, "Jean Philopon et la controverse trithéite du VIe siècle," *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962): 519–25; and M. Rashed, "Un texte proto-byzantin inédit sur les universaux et la Trinité," in *L'héritage aristotélicien: Textes inédits de l'Antiquité* (Paris, 2007), 345–78, at 352–57.

[33] I use the Greek text of the critical edition by B. Kotter, *Liber de haeresibus* (Berlin and New York, 1981).

[34] F. Diekamp, *Doctrina Patrum de incarnatione Verbi: Ein griechisches Florilegium aus der Wende des 7. und 8. Jahrhundert* (Münster, 1907), 272–83.

[35] These fragments are collected in A. van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 10 (1980): 135–63.

[36] See R. Y. Ebied, A. van Roey, and L. R. Wickham, eds., *Peter of Callinicum: Anti-Tritheist Dossier*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 10 (Leuven, 1981).

[37] An edition and French translation (in four volumes) of this important chronicle was published by J.-B. Chabot under the title *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (Paris, 1899–1910).

tion using the definitions provided by the philosophers as his starting point."[38]

I would like to suggest, as a hypothesis, that because logic is an instrument and not a part of philosophy, it can be used in theology. According to Philoponus, logic is an instrument that serves both parts of philosophy: practical philosophy (subdivided into ethics, economics, and politics) and speculative philosophy (subdivided into physics, mathematics, and metaphysics). If logic is an instrument that serves rational thought, it can be applied to different fields of knowledge.

Philoponus believes that the substance of the divine Trinity can be thought of as an Aristotelian secondary substance. In a particularist frame of mind, he defends the thesis according to which, if the Trinity comprises three persons (a thesis he accepts), then each of these persons has its own proper and particular substance. Since these three substances are resemblant, the mind can create a common and universal concept of divine substance. The common substance is therefore posterior and has only conceptual existence. The only *real* substances are the particular substances of the three persons.

As a first step in our analysis of John Philoponus's thought on the Trinity, we can cite a testimony on his position. It is an extract of the *De sectis*, mistakenly attributed to Leontius of Byzantium,[39] in which Philoponus is represented in a dialogue with a personification of the Church:

> While Theodosius was still established in Byzantium, the dogma of the tritheists was revived; its heresiarch was Philoponus. For he set the following problem to the Church:
> — If you say that there are two natures in Christ, you must also speak of two hypostases.
> To this, the Church objected:
> — If on the one hand the nature and the hypostasis are the same thing, we must accept the lack of distinction. But if, on the other hand, the nature is one thing and the hypostasis another, where is the necessity, if we say that there are two natures, of accepting that there are also two hypostases?
> The heretic answered the Church:
> — Yes, the nature and the hypostasis are the same thing.
> Then the Church said:
> — If the nature and the hypostasis are the same thing, then do we also say that there are three natures of the Holy Trinity, since it is accepted that there are three hypostases?
> When the Church had said this, Philoponus answered:
> — Let us also say that there are three natures in the Holy Trinity!
> He said this, finding a justification in Aristotle's writings. For Aristotle says

---

[38] G. Bardy, "Jean Philopon," DThC 8:831–39, at 833 (translation is mine).

[39] On the *De sectis*, see M. Richard, "Le traité *de sectis* et Léonce de Byzance," in idem, *Opera Minora* 2 (Turnhout and Leuven, 1977), n° 55.

that individuals have both particular substances (μερικαὶ οὐσίαι) and one common substance. In the same way, Philoponus was saying that there are three particular substances in the Holy Trinity, and one that is common.[40]

This text is interesting for three reasons. First, it gives a clear formulation of Philoponus's theological thesis: in the Trinity, there are three particular substances (μερικαὶ οὐσίαι) and one common substance (μία κοινή), which is, as we shall see, the product of abstraction. The theory is quite straightforward: each person of the Trinity has a particular substance. This idea goes against Cappadocian thought — in particular Gregory of Nyssa — in which *ousia* and *koinon*, substance and common, were associated. For the realist Gregory, the real substance is common, one for all the individuals of the same species.

Secondly, this text clearly associates Philoponus's theological position with Aristotle's ontological doctrine. According to the *De sectis*, Philoponus applies Aristotle's philosophical theses to the interpretation of the Trinitarian dogma. This is a testimony to the fact that Philoponus was considered to be a partisan of what I have presented as the philosophical understanding of the *ousia* of the divine Trinity: its interpretation as an Aristotelian secondary substance.

Thirdly, this text highlights the importance of the problem of the equivalence or non-equivalence between hypostasis and nature. The question of equivalence itself testifies to an understanding of nature as necessarily particular. If it is to be ontologically equivalent to the hypostasis (the individual), the nature must be particular. Philoponus breaks with his predecessors in that he rejects the Cappadocian idea that the concepts that refer to what is common — *ousia*, *physis*, *eidos* — are equivalent, and must be opposed to what is particular — the *hypostasis*, or *atomon*. According to Philoponus, everything that is, is particular, including natures and substances. What is common is only the abstract concept. Thus there is no reason to distinguish *hypostasis* from *physis*, since the *physis* is the particular nature, proper to a given individual.

The defense of three particular substances in the Trinity, which has often been interpreted as tritheism, is the doctrinal result of the application of particularist ontological theses to the Trinity.[41] Philoponus follows the prin-

---

[40] *Actio* 5, 6 (PG 86:1232D–1333B).

[41] According to R. Y. Ebied, A. van Roey, and L. R. Wickham (*Peter of Callinicum*, 33): "In conclusion it may be said that Tritheism draws its inspiration from a certain philosophical system that it applies to the Trinity. Tritheism is a rationalistic approach that seeks to explain the divine by concepts and principles derived from the created order." In "Patristic Argument" U. M. Lang has defended an alternative reading in which he emphasizes the importance of the patristic tradition over the philosophical one as the root of Philoponus's tritheism.

ciple of parity: if the Trinity is a universal, then what is true of the universal man will also be true, by analogy, of the universal God. He writes: "Just as for example undefined and undifferentiated man is common to us, so the undefined, adorable Trinity is what is called the common Godhead."[42] The only coherent position for a philosopher who considers the Trinity as a universal and believes in a particularist ontology is to endorse three particular divine substances.

As has been correctly noted by U. M. Lang: "Many Chalcedonian heresiologists of the Patristic age perceived an intrinsic link between Miaphysitism and Tritheism. They considered both to be deeply entrenched in pagan philosophy and particularly in Aristotelian ontology."[43] The association of tritheism with Aristotelian philosophy was recurrent among late ancient heresiologists — a fact that must be taken into consideration in an historical study of this doctrine. One of these is the priest-monk George (Georgius Hieromonachus) who, in the first half of the seventh century, accused Philoponus of using "Aristotelian verbal subtleties" (ἀριστοτελικαὶ τεχνολογίαι).

I will begin by presenting John Philoponus's Aristotelian ontology before considering how he applies it to Trinitarian theology.

The Particularist Ontology of Philoponus

Philoponus's ontological principle is that there are as many natures (or substances) as there are hypostases.[44] He thinks that any real substance is necessarily particular.[45] Each individual or hypostasis has its own particular nature, its individual substance. This thesis is completed by the statement that a universal substance can only be a product of the mind.

In chapter seven of the *Arbiter*, Philoponus rejects the idea that a substance may be common to several individuals:

> Now, this common nature of man, in which no one man differs from any other, when it is realized in any one of the individuals, then is particular to that one and is not common to any other individual, as we set forth in chap-

---

[42] Van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites," 156.

[43] U. M. Lang, "Patristic Argument," 82.

[44] This thesis is fundamental to particularism. It can be found in a particularly clear form in a twelfth-century logical compendium inspired by Gilbert of Poitiers: *Tot humanitates quot homines*. Cf. *Compendium logicae porretanum*, ed. S. Ebbesen, K. M. Fredborg, and L. O. Nielsen, Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen Âge grec et latin 46 (Copenhagen, 1983), 41.

[45] Richard Cross uses the word *nominalism* to refer to Philoponus's particularist metaphysics: "his acceptance of particular natures is a direct result of his nominalism, his belief that universals do not have any extra-mental existence," in "Perichoresis, Deification and Christological Predication in John of Damascus," *Mediaeval Studies* 62 (2000): 69–124, at 77.

ter 4. Thus that rational mortal animal that is in me is common to no other animal.[46]

And a few lines further:

Thus that rational mortal animal that is in me is not common to any other man. Neither would the animal nature that is in this particular horse be in any other, as we have just shown.[47]

The substance, the essential being of an individual, is proper to it. The humanity of Socrates is not that of Plato. Socrates and Plato share no real common universal. Each species is a unique common nature; but each individual of this species possesses its own nature or substance, which is a particularized version of the common nature (and thus different from it); a species comprises a plurality of particular natures or substances.

This distinction allows Philoponus to say: "when a man, an ox, or a horse suffers, it is not impossible for other individuals of the same species not to suffer."[48]

This point is fundamental in Philoponus's theological argumentation. According to him, community of substance among the persons in the Trinity must be rejected; otherwise, the Father and the Spirit would have become incarnate with the Son.

The nature, man or horse, can only exist if there are individual men or horses.[49] Philoponus states that "it is impossible for a nature to subsist by itself without being considered in some individual" (ἀδύνατον γὰρ φύσιν ὑποστῆναι καθ' αὑτὴν μὴ ἐν ἀτόμῳ τινὶ θεωρουμένην).[50]

The central point of Philoponus's argument is that the nature as realized in an individual is irreducibly distinct from the nature as universal. Philoponus does not believe in any sort of real universal existence of common natures. He insists on the fact that they are not separated from the individuals; on this point, Philoponus follows both a classical theological thesis and

---

[46] Philoponus, *Arbiter*, chap. 7 in John of Damascus, *Liber de haeresibus* (ed. Kotter [n. 33 above], 52, 52–55): Αὕτη δὴ οὖν ἡ κοινὴ φύσις, ἡ ἀνθρώπου, καθ' ἣν οὐδεὶς ἄνθρωπος οὐδενὸς διενήνοχεν, ἐν ἑκάστῳ τῶν ἀτόμων γινομένη ἰδίᾳ λοιπὸν ἐκείνου καὶ οὐδενὸς ἑτέρου κοινὴ γίνεται, καθὼς ἐν τῷ τετάρτῳ κεφαλαίῳ ὡρισάμεθα. Τὸ γὰρ ἐν ἐμοὶ ζῷον λογικὸν θνητὸν οὐδενὸς ἄλλου κοινόν ἐστιν.

[47] Ibid. (52, 66–68): Τὸ γὰρ ἐν ἐμοὶ ζῷον λογικὸν θνητὸν οὐδενὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων ἐστὶ κοινὸν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷδε τῷ ἵππῳ τοῦ ζῴου φύσις ἐν ἄλλῳ τινὶ γένοιτ' ἄν, ὡς ἀρτίως δεδείχαμεν.

[48] Ibid. (52, 55–57).

[49] A Syriac fragment illustrates this: "Nothing that is called 'common' has existence of its own apart from the particular: there exists only this horse, only this man, only this angel" (*Contra Themistium*, frag. 22, in van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites" [n. 35 above], 162).

[50] Philoponus, *Arbiter* (55, 168).

the Aristotelian principle of the immanence of secondary substances.[51] Philoponus claims that the genus and the species "have their existence in the individuals — as in Peter and Paul for example — and apart from the individuals they do not subsist" (τὸ μέν ἐστι γένος, τὸ δὲ εἶδος, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν τοῖς ἀτόμοις τὴν ὕπαρξιν ἔχουσιν, οἷον Πέτρῳ καὶ Παύλῳ, χωρὶς τούτων οὐχ ὑφιστάμενα[52]). The common nature cannot exist outside the individuals. But in the individual, it does not exist as common, but as a nature particular to it. The only mode of being of the common nature is as a concept. The Syriac fragments provide a clear confirmation of the merely conceptual status of universal entities. The following fragment from the first book of his treatise on the Trinity gives a particularistic interpretation of the distinction between primary and secondary substances formulated in the *Categories*, read in the light of the passage from the *De anima* that states the posteriority of the universal:[53]

> However, species and genera are posterior to particular individuals, and — to say it simply — each common thing is constructed by our intellect from particulars. For this reason, the Ancients called such things posterior and intellectual beings. For, correctly speaking, Peter, John and every individual man are animal and substance, and the same goes for this horse and that ox. However, these names passed from these (particulars) to what is called genera and species, that is, from things which subsist in substance to those which are inferred by our intellect. This is why the important physicist, Aristotle, says: the universal either is nothing or is posterior. Nothing, because no universal has a proper existence, and our idea about them is not, correctly speaking, a substance. Particulars are called principal and first substances, whereas that which is said of many, i.e., genera and species, is called substance only in a secondary way. And this is why, when we speak not metaphorically, but properly, we call hypostases "substances."[54]

A universal is a concept that is constructed by the mind through a process of abstraction. This makes it posterior to individuals and devoid of proper existence. Another fragment confirms this interpretation: "Nothing common has an existence of its own nor does it exist prior to particulars; on the contrary, the mind abstracts it from these latter, and it only exists in [the mind]."[55] Philoponus's particularist commitment leads him to deny any real

---

[51] In Christological thought after Chalcedon, non-existent (ἀνυπόστατος), i.e., non-instantiated, universals must be rejected because of the two natures of Christ: it is necessary for the universal man to be entirely present (instantiated) in the individual Christ in order for him to be completely God and completely man.

[52] Philoponus, *Arbiter* (51, 49–52, 50).

[53] Aristotle, *De anima* (n. 24 above) 1, 1 402b7.

[54] Frag. 1; Syriac text in van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites," 148.

[55] Frag. 2; van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites," 148, trans. U. M. Lang, "Patristic Argument," 95.

existence to the common entity, which can only have conceptual existence. This is confirmed by a fragment from Philoponus's *Contra Themistium*, quoted by Peter of Callinicum:

> We have proved that the nature called common has no reality of its own alongside any of the existents, but is either nothing at all — which is actually the case — or only subsists as (formed) by our mind from particular things.[56]

The common nature is a construct of the mind, an abstraction formed by our mind from the particular natures of the individuals. Philoponus's thought can be summarized in the following way: he defends ontological particularism (everything that exists is particular); there are as many substances or natures as there are individuals. Common or universal natures are conceptual constructions that only exist in the human mind. These are the philosophical principles that Philoponus applies to the dogma of the Trinity, considered as a common nature, a secondary substance.

John Philoponus's "Tritheist" Trinitarian Theology

Philoponus's theory of three particular substances in the Trinity is rooted in the (philosophical) belief that every real substance is necessarily particular and that a universal can only be a product of the mind. The theological consequence is clear: since there are three persons, there is in God not one substance but three substances. Philoponus applies to the Trinity his general ontological principle, that there are as many substances as there are individuals.

Philoponus does not wish to question the consubstantiality of the Trinity.[57] By analogy with his particularist ontology of the sensible world, he wants to limit the unity of the Trinity to that of genera and species, making it purely conceptual. The unity of God is therefore only to be found at the level of the *ousia deutera*, which does not, as such, have existence. The divine substance considered as a unity is only the result of abstraction. In reality, in which things are necessarily individual, there is no common and unique divine substance but only the three particular substances of the persons. We have seen that Philoponus clearly defends what I have called the principle of parity.

---

[56] *Contra Themistium*, frag. 18a; van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites," 154, trans. Ebied, Wickham, and van Roey, *Peter of Callinicum* (n. 36 above), 26.

[57] Philoponus does not question the consubstantiality of men on the one hand and of the persons of the Trinity on the other. Better even, he grounds it in the plurality of particular substances. According to him, far from compromising consubstantiality, a plurality of substances is a necessary condition for speaking about "consubstantiality" (see frag. 16; van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites," 153–54). Consubstantiality is only possible between several substances. Hypostases *qua* hypostases cannot be consubstantial.

Both in the human and in the divine case, the common substance or nature has no proper existence and is only a construct of the mind.[58] The unity of nature in God promulgated by the Church can only be a purely intellectual unity, an abstraction. The divine unity cannot be an objective reality,[59] because such an entity would be a real, unitary essence common to several hypostases, a type of entity that does not exist in Philoponus's ontology.

The best testimony to Philoponus's Trinitarian thought can be found in Damian of Alexandria, who cites two passages of Philoponus in his synodal letter. This letter is extant in Michael the Syrian's chronicle. Here is Philoponus's position according to this testimony:

> The Godhead and substance that is in the adorable Trinity is one not in reality but only in mind and abstraction. In this way God is understood as one, but there are three substances of God, with the substances and natures being divided in the hypostases. Thus the Father is another God, the Son another God, and the Holy Ghost another God.
>
> Just as all of us are one only when understood in the common intelligible content of substance whereas, however, we see that in reality and truth we are many men; so there is a single God solely in our thought by virtue of their having the substance in common. In reality and truth there are three of them, while the Godhead being divided in the hypostases; regarding what they have in common, however, it is the same.[60]

---

[58] In the preface to their edition of the treatise *Contra Damianum* of Peter of Callinicum (CCG 29 [Turnhout, 1994], xvi) Ebied, Wickham, and van Roey say: "His teaching [i.e., of Philoponus] on the Trinity develops his interpretation of the Aristotelian distinction between 'first' and 'second' substance: only first substance, in the fullest sense of the particular, is, for John, actual; second substance, the generic concept, is a creation of the abstracting intellect ('a posterior fabrication and invention of the mind,' in a phrase often repeated by Peter of Callinicus). Applied to the doctrine of God in Trinity, this means that each divine hypostasis is equally God (the three are 'consubstantial' in this sense) but there is no actual Godhead distinct from the particular Godhead each is. Consequently we may indeed speak of three Gods and three Godheads, three substances and natures; the 'one' of the Godhead is in the viewing mind alone."

[59] This position earned Philoponus many criticisms. In his presentation of Philoponus's doctrine, the priest-monk George accused him of having reduced the common substance to a mere mental abstraction with no existence of its own (ἀνύπαρκτον) apart from the three individual substances (ed. M. Richard, "Le traité de Georges Hiéromoine sur les hérésies," *Revue des études byzantines* 28 [1970]: 239–69, at 266, 22–267, 7). The accusation of considering the common essence of the Trinity merely as a rational abstraction, with no other existence than that of the particular substances, can already be found in the testimony of a discussion between a tritheist and Anastasius I, the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Antioch between 559–70 and 593–98. The Ἀκοινώνητος holds, in his dialogue with the Orthodox, that the common substance (γενικὴ οὐσία) of the Trinity can only be contemplated as a concept that is found in particular substances: ἐν ταῖς μερικαῖς μέν ἐστι, θεωρεῖται δὲ λόγῳ μόνῳ (ed. K. H. Uthemann, "Des Patriarchen Anastasius I. von Antiochien Jerusalemer Streitgespräch mit einem Tritheiten," *Traditio* 37 [1981]: 73–108, at 103, 750).

[60] Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, ed. Chabot (n. 37 above) 2, 330–31; 4, 361 = Frag. 29 and 30; van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites," 157–58, trans. U. M. Lang, "Patristic Argu-

This text gives a remarkable synthesis. In addition to the statement of the existence of three particular substances, Philoponus is shown here defending a particularist ontology that insists on the distinction between persons: each divine person is God. This passage is above all an excellent testimony of the understanding of the Trinitarian *ousia* as a universal. Philoponus compares it explicitly with the status of the human species, and the principle of parity is clearly present. Although we understand that there are in reality several men, we can conceive that we all have one and the same essence. In reality there are several men, but conceptually, and conceptually only, we can think the unity of essence. In the same way, there is only one God through the generalization of the essence, which is in our mind only; in reality, there are three persons.

Even if Philoponus's thought was not appreciated by theologians of his time, his theory is coherent. He rigorously applies his particularist ontology to the Trinitarian problem. Having established the purely mental existence of universals and the status of the *ousia* of the divine Trinity as a universal, he assumes the consequence of his premises by defending the existence of three necessarily particular substances and of a common Godhead whose existence is purely conceptual.

Roscelin of Compiègne

The study of Philoponus showed us a clear formulation of the thesis that the three divine persons are three particular substances, grouped under a common concept. The context of sixth-century Christianity allowed the public diffusion of such a doctrine, by reason of the existence of various churches and ways of understanding the dogma. The Latin context is different; there is only one Catholic Church. The monophysite current does not exist anymore. Doctrinal issues have been clarified and unified. In the *De Trinitate*, Augustine has codified the Latin terminology of Trinitarian discussion. We can nonetheless observe the appearance of a doctrinal position that is very close to that of Philoponus. It is attributed to Roscelin of Compiègne by his adversaries, in particular Anselm of Canterbury.

I am not supposing any contact or influence between Philoponus and Roscelin. At most, we may observe a similarity in structures of thought or, to use the expression of René Roques, in "theological structures" (*structures théologiques*); we can acknowledge that both authors argue for their position in a similar way, namely, by means of the application of a particularist ontology to the Trinity. Since Philoponus provides insight into the general

---

ment" (n. 32 above), 99. See also Ebied, Wickham, and van Roey, *Peter of Callinicum,* 31–32.

lines of tritheist thought as the product of both philosophical and theological preoccupations, we can apply this insight to analyze Roscelin's doctrine.[61]

For historical correctness, two aspects of Roscelin's "tritheism" should be considered: first, the position that is indirectly reported to be Roscelin's in the year 1090 and leans very strongly towards tritheism; and secondly, an extant text by Roscelin — a letter addressed to Abelard — in which he seems to expose an orthodox Trinitarian theology and Christology.

The Accusations of Heresy

Around the year 1090, Roscelin was suspected of heresy and accused on the basis of indirect testimonies. Our sources of information about Roscelin's doctrine are limited: Anselm's collected correspondence and the letter *On the Incarnation of the Word*, which he wrote against Roscelin. Let us first consider the doctrinal elements transmitted in these texts before attempting a reconstruction of Roscelin's position.

A monk named John addressed a letter to Anselm in which he transcribes an argument supposedly developed by Roscelin:

> For Roscelin of Compiègne raises the following problem: If the three persons are only one thing and not three things in themselves (*per se*), like three angels or three souls, in such a way that nevertheless they are the same in will and power, therefore the Father and Holy Spirit were incarnated along with the Son.[62]

---

[61] I am not questioning in any way — much to the contrary — the excellent analyses given by Constant Mews and Jean Jolivet; I am simply reconsidering the problem from a different angle. See C. Mews, "St Anselm and Roscelin: Some New Texts and their Implications. I. The *De incarnatione Verbi* and the *Disputatio inter Christianum et Gentilem*," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 58 (1991): 55–98; idem, "Nominalism and Theology before Abaelard: New Light on Roscelin of Compiègne," *Vivarium* 30 (1992): 4–34; idem, "St Anselm, Roscelin and the See of Beauvais," in D. E. Luscombe and G. R. Evans, eds., *Anselm: Aosta, Bec and Canterbury* (Sheffield, 1996), 106–19; idem, "The Trinitarian Doctrine of Roscelin of Compiègne and Its Influence: Twefth-Century Nominalism and Theology Re-considered," in A. de Libera, A. Elamrani-Jamal, and A. Galonnier, eds., *Langages et philosophie: hommage à Jean Jolivet* (Paris, 1997), 347–64; idem, "St Anselm and Roscelin of Compiègne: Some New Texts and their Implications. II. A Vocalist Essay on the Trinity and Intellectual Debate c. 1080–1120," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 65 (1998): 39–90. These articles have all been republished in C. Mews, *Reason and Belief in the Age of Roscelin and Abelard* (Aldershot, 2002). See also J. Jolivet, "Trois variations médiévales sur l'universel et l'individu: Roscelin, Abélard, Gilbert de la Porrée," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 97 (1992): 111–55.

[62] Anselm, Letter 128 (*Anselmi Opera omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt [Seckau, Rome, and Edinburgh, 1938–61], 3, 270, 8–271, 11): "Hanc enim inde quaestionem Rocelinus de Compendio movet: 'Si tres personae sunt una tantum res et non sunt tres res per se, sicut tres angeli aut tres animae, ita tamen ut voluntate et potentia omnino sint idem: ergo pater et spiritus sanctus cum filio incarnatus est.'"

Three things deserve notice: the chosen vocabulary and the expression *res per se*, the presence of the principle of parity (the ontological status of three angels or three souls is an adequate means for understanding the ontological status of the persons of the Trinity), and the presence of a classical tritheist argument we have already seen in Philoponus: if the three persons are not individual substances, how can we explain the fact that the Father did not become incarnate with the Son? This argument is a theological transposition of a classical anti-realist argument: if Socrates and Plato have the substance man in common, how is it possible for Socrates to die without entailing Plato's death?

Anselm's answer to John (Letter 129) is important because, in this text, Anselm takes a step further by reformulating what he believes to be Roscelin's thesis, drawing the following entailment: "But if he says the three persons are three "things" insofar as each person is God, [then] either he means to set up three gods or else he does not understand what he is saying."[63] Anselm draws the final consequence of the thesis he attributes to Roscelin, the existence of three distinct gods.

The third text is a letter from Anselm to Fulco, bishop of Beauvais (Letter 136), of which the central argument is the following:

> I hear — but nevertheless cannot entirely believe — that the cleric Roscelin makes the following claim: "In God, either the three persons are three things — [existing] in separation from one another (as do three angels) and yet [existing] in such way that there is one will and power — or else the Father and the Holy Spirit were incarnate. Moreover, [the three persons] could truly be called three gods if custom allowed it."[64]

According to Roscelin, the three persons are *tres res ab invicem separatae*, in the same way as three angels. If it were permitted by usage, one should speak of three Gods. Although evidence for Roscelin's position is rather slim in these letters, the *Epistola de incarnatione Verbi*, a remarkably well-constructed text that Anselm wrote against Roscelin, may give us some additional information. Some editions of it carry the subtitle: *Contra blasphemias Ruzelini sive Roscelini*. Anselm begins by repeating the accusation that can

---

[63] Anselm, Letter 129 (ed. Schmitt, 3, 271, 21–22): "Quod si dicit tres personas esse tres res, secundum quod unaquaeque Deus est: aut tres deos vult constituere, aut non intelligit quod dicit."

[64] Anselm, Letter 136 (ed. Schmitt, 3, 279, 3–7): "Audio — quod tamen absque dubietate credere non possum — quia Roscelinus clericus dicit in deo tres personas esse tres res ab invicem separatas, sicut sunt tres angeli, ita tamen ut una sit voluntas et potestas; aut patrem et spiritum sanctum esse incarnatum; et tres deos vere posse dici, si usus admitteret" (Anselm of Canterbury, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, trans. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson [Minneapolis, 2000], 263).

be found in the correspondence in almost exactly the same terms;[65] we can present in a near syllogistic form what Anselm believes to be Roscelin's central argument:

> If the three persons of the Trinity are not entities that are separated from each other (*tres res unaquaeque per se separatim*), as would be three angels or three souls,[66] but are one entity, then the Father and the Holy Spirit were incarnated with the Son;

> But the Father and the Spirit were not incarnated;[67]

> Therefore the three persons are three distinct entities.

A few pages later comes the following famous criticism:

> All men are to be warned to approach questions concerning the Sacred Page with utmost care. Nevertheless, in particular, those dialecticians of our day (or rather, heretics of dialectic) who think that universal substances are only vocal sounds [*flatus vocis*], and who cannot comprehend that a color is something distinct from the material object or that a man's wisdom is something distinct from his soul, ought to be blown right out of the discussion of spiritual questions.[68]

This passage tells us about three theses that seem to have been defended by Roscelin: (1) universals have no real existence but are only words. More precisely, Roscelin says that universal substances — i.e., genera and species — are only words.[69] Universality is a property of terms only; in consequence, everything that exists is particular. (2) Qualities exist only in a par-

---

[65] *Epistola de incarnatione Verbi* (ed. Schmitt, 2, 4, 5–9): "Cum adhuc in Becci monasterio abbas essem, praesumpta est a quodam clerico in Francia talis assertio: 'Si, inquit, in deo tres personae sunt una tantum res et non sunt tres res unaquaeque per se separatim, sicut tres angeli aut tres animae, ita tamen ut voluntate et potentia omnino sint idem: ergo pater et spiritus sanctus cum filio est incarnatus.'"

[66] Note that the example chosen by Roscelin indicates that he is thinking of a distinction of substance and not only of relation.

[67] Denying this would amount to accepting Sabellius's heresy.

[68] Anselm, *Epistola de incarnatione Verbi*, 9, 20–10, 21: "Cum que omnes ut cautissime ad sacrae paginae quaestiones accedant, sint commonendi: illi utique nostri temporis dialectici, immo dialecticae haeretici, qui non nisi flatum vocis putant universales esse substantias, et qui colorem non aliud queunt intelligere quam corpus, nec sapientiam hominis aliud quam animam, prorsus a spiritualium quaestionum disputatione sunt exsufflandi" (*Treatises*, trans. Hopkins and Richardson, 269).

[69] On Roscelin, universals, and ontological particularism, see L. Gentile, *Roscellino di Compiègne ed il problema degli universali* (Lanciano, 1975); E.-H. Kluge, "Roscelin and the Medieval Problem of Universals," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976): 405–14; J. Reiners, *Der Nominalismus in der Frühscholastik: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Universalienfrage im Mittelalter*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters 8, 5 (Münster, 1910); G. d'Onofrio, "Anselmo e i teologi 'moderni,'" in P. Gilbert, H. Kohlenberger, and E. Salmann, eds., *Cur Deus Homo* (Rome, 1999), 87–146.

ticular state in individual subjects (application of thesis 1 to the case of qualities). And (3) since the Trinity is a substance, the general theory of substance can apply to it.

If we take literally thesis 1, according to which the universal is just a *flatus vocis* (a universal name is a *flatus vocis* insofar as it does not refer to anything, in particular it does not refer to any existing universal essence), then, consequently, it involves the rejection, not only of ontological realism (this is obvious), but also of conceptualism. If we take Roscelin's theory in its strong version, it appears to depend upon a transfer of the problem to the level of language in three stages. First, Roscelin clearly rejects reified universals — nothing that really exists can be universal. Secondly, Roscelin does not appear to have recourse to (Aristotelian) conceptualism. Thirdly, Roscelin introduces his own solution: the unity of the members of a species (and of the Trinity) is neither ontological nor conceptual but can be explained through predication. Only the name "God" can explain the link between the three persons of the Trinity. That which unites the three persons of the Trinity, who are three particular substances, is not a common essence — such an entity cannot exist according to the principles of Roscelin's ontology — but the fact that the name "God" can be predicated univocally of those three persons, and only of them. Whereas Philoponus defended a conceptual divine unity, Roscelin interprets this unity as being one of name. Belonging to a species does not depend upon having a common specific essence but on the fact that the name of the species can be correctly attributed to the different individuals. Socrates belongs to the species man because it is correct to predicate "man" of his particular substance. The same seems to go for divine substances. According to Roscelin, there are only *voces* (i.e., names or vocal sounds) and individual things.

Then comes another, well-known, passage:

> For example, how will someone who does not yet understand how several men are one man in species be able to comprehend how in that highest and most mysterious Nature several persons — each one of whom, distinctly, is perfect God — are one God?[70]

Anselm is using here the principle of parity. Understanding the unity of the species man, as it is set out by Porphyry in his *Isagoge*, is a necessary preliminary to understanding divine unity. For his criticism to have any weight, Anselm needs to accept that divine unity is in some way analogical to the unity of the human species.

---

[70] Anselm, *Epistola de incarnatione Verbi*, 10, 4–7: "Qui enim nondum intelligit quomodo plures homines in specie sint unus homo: qualiter in illa secretissima et altissima natura comprehendet quomodo plures personae, quarum singula quaeque perfectus est deus, sint unus deus?" (*Treatises*, trans. Hopkins and Richardson, 269–70).

This passage suggests that if Roscelin is mistaken in theology, it is because he is first mistaken in logic: his heresy is therefore not to have applied a logical theory to the Trinity — Anselm accepts this way of proceeding — but that the theory that he uses is incorrect. According to Anselm, the main problem lies in the central thesis of Roscelin's ontology — that there are only particular entities.

After his Trinitarian criticism, Anselm goes on to discuss Christology and points out the other theological error that is generated by Roscelin's particularism. If there is no common nature — this is entailed by the thesis that universal substances are only words — then it is impossible for Christ to have taken human nature in general and not individually:

> Finally, someone who cannot understand man to be anything except an individual shall not at all understand man to be anything except a human person, for every individual man is a person. How, then, shall he be able to understand that man(kind), though not a person, was assumed by the Word? That is, another nature but not another person was assumed.[71]

Here again, Roscelin seems to agree with Philoponus, who defended the idea that the humanity of Christ was particular. Anselm criticizes Roscelin for having a merely particular understanding of "homo" ("man"). Roscelin understands by "man" only a human person. According to Roscelin, the reference of "homo" can only be the different individual men. But for Anselm, "homo" refers not only to an individual but also to the universal nature.

Anselm's argument in the next part of the text is to show that, as such, the thesis that the Father and the Son are two things is not heretical if we understand by these two things not their substance but their relations.[72] Anselm sets out to defend the substance of the deity as common to the three persons (*deitatis substantia quae communis illis est*[73]). Roscelin's mistake was not to apply logic to the Trinity, but to apply a non-realist, particularist logic and ontology to the Trinity. According to Anselm, he failed to accept the reality of the substance that is common to the three persons of the Trinity. Divinity is common to the persons of the Trinity in the same way as the substance man is common to all men. In the *Monologion*, Anselm defended the thesis that a substance can be universal, that is, essentially
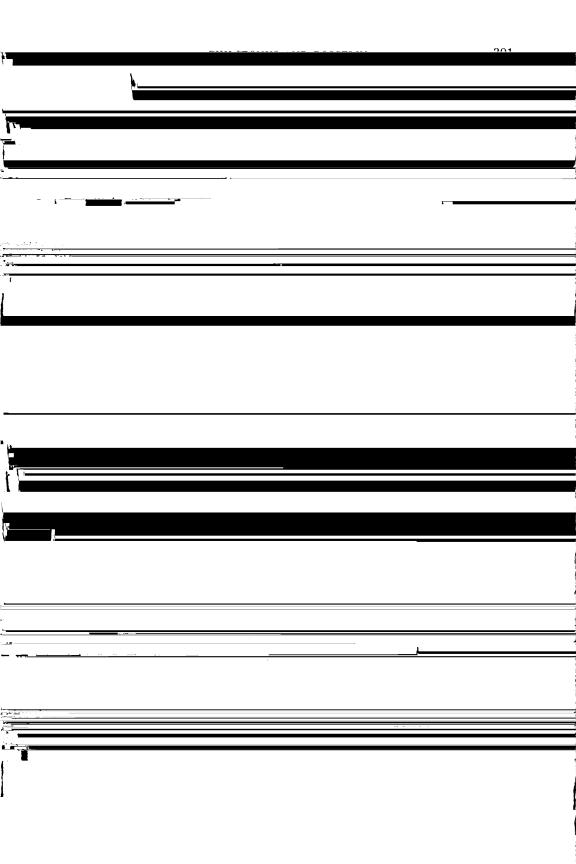
---

[71] Anselm, *Epistola de incarnatione Verbi*, 10, 9–13: "Denique qui non potest intelligere aliquid esse hominem nisi individuum, nullatenus intelliget hominem nisi humanam personam. Omnis enim individuus homo est persona. Quomodo ergo iste intelliget hominem assumptum esse a verbo, non personam, id est naturam aliam, non aliam personam assumptam esse?" (*Treatises*, trans. Hopkins and Richardson, 270).

[72] Anselm, *Epistola de incarnatione Verbi*, 12, 13–15: "Non enim sic sunt pater et filius duae res, ut in his duabus rebus intelligatur eorum substantia, sed eorum relationes."

[73] Ibid., 14, 6.

common to several individuals, just as man is common to all men taken individually.[74] If Roscelin cannot understand that, in the case of men, there is a common substance, he will not be able to understand it in the case of God. According to Anselm, it is a mistake to say that the Father and the Son are two substances; they are one and the same substance.[75] Anselm's general argument in the *Epistola* is the following: Roscelin refuses to acknowledge the existence of common (or universal) substances. He does so in the case of the sensible world, because he sees only individuals. Roscelin thinks that he can apply such a theory to the Trinity; he considers God to be nothing but three particular and distinct persons (thus avoiding Sabellius's heresy, which says that the Father became incarnate). Roscelin's position, as presented by Anselm, seems to be a consequence of his application of a particularist ontology to the Trinity. Roscelin leans towards tritheism

the Letter 83. The monk Walter of Honnecourt reproaches Roscelin for using it, and finishes his speech with this invective: "If any contentious indi-

in Latin, but let him barbarize three hypostases with the Greeks."[83]

Essentia = substantia (*substantia* understood in a general sense)

Persona = substantia (*substantia* understood in a particular sense; see the Trinitarian formula)

Roscelin then states:

Essentia = substantia = persona.

In Augustine and in the Latin tradition more generally, such an equivalence

both cases.[86]

As noted by Constant Mews,[87] Roscelin even goes to the point of modifying the authority of Isidore of Seville. Isidore said: "tres hypostases, quod

Conclusion

We recognize a similar strategy in both Philoponus[92] and Roscelin:[93] in one case, *ousia* is reduced to *hypostasis*, in the other *essentia / substantia* is reduced to *persona*.[94] Both put forth a reading in which substance (or essence) can only be particular and, in this sense, is synonymous with "hypostasis" or "person." This theoretical movement is grounded in ontological particularism, which is the idea that everything that exists is particular. Both for Philoponus and Roscelin, there are as many particular humanities as there are men; general humanity has no real existence. The identification of substance and person is a strong ontological thesis, which gives enhanced ontological value to the person, since each person has a proper substantiality. This line of thought is contrary to late ancient and early medieval realism, in which individuals tend to be understood as numerical variations of a common specific essence and in which all the substantial being of an individual comes from its species; in consequence, that which is proper to a given individual cannot be substantial.[95] Here, each individual has its own substance, which is neither common nor shared with other individuals of the species.

---

[92] In the case of Philoponus, this is evidently a consequence of his acceptance of monophysism, which postulates a perfect synonymy of the terms φύσις, ὑπόστασις, πρόσωπον. See T. Hainthaler: "The basic axiom of [Philoponus's] thought lies in his almost total equation of nature and hypostasis" ("John Philoponus, Philosopher and Theologian in Alexandria," in A. Grillmeier, ed., *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2/4: *The Church of Alexandria with Nubia and Ethiopia after 451*, trans. O. C. Dean [Louisville, KY, 1996], 107–46, at 112).

[93] It seems appropriate to disagree slightly with René Roques, who sees in Roscelin's letter a perfectly orthodox Trinitarian theology. Indeed, apparently, it is so; Roscelin is not seeking to convert others to his views. Prudently, and maybe by ambition, Roscelin retracted his view. It nonetheless seems that the understanding of *essentia* as a synonym of *persona* is a problematic reminder of his prior position. René Roques thought that "ces positions très fermes s'opposent donc de la manière la plus radicale et la plus totale à la doctrine des *dicta* reprochée à Roscelin vers les années 1090" (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, *Annuaire des cours*, Ve Section, années 1971–1973, 389). This opposition is perhaps more in form than in content.

[94] This reduction of *essentia* to *persona* is diametrically opposed to Cappadocian theology, which is based on the distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* understood as a common entity.

[95] On early medieval realism, see C. Erismann, "Immanent Realism: A Reconstruction of an Early Medieval Solution to the Problem of Universals," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 18 (2007): 211–29; idem, "The Logic of Being: Eriugena's Dialectical Ontology," *Vivarium* 45 (2007): 203–18; idem, "*Processio id est multiplicatio*: L'influence latine de l'ontologie de Porphyre; le cas de Jean Scot Erigène," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 88 (2004): 401–60.

The emphasis on personhood is grounded in belief in the essential individuation of particulars, i.e., in the belief that essences are particular entities and that each individual has a particular essence. It gives each individual a particularity that is substantial, and not only accidental, as would be the case in the early medieval version of realism that was upheld in Roscelin's time; according to this version of realism, the individuality of Socrates comes from a unique bundle of accidental properties.[96]

Both thinkers show clear confidence in the intellectual powers of man to know the nature of God and trust logic to express the structure of the divine being. Philoponus and Roscelin share the belief that logic helps to establish universally valid principles. Logic allows us to derive conclusions about substance — first of all the rejection of real common entities — that can be applied to any substance. Since God is thought of in terms of substance, which is indisputably the Nicene heritage, rules about substantiality are valid in this case also. Both thinkers postulate that every substance is necessarily particular; in consequence a real universal Godhead is not acceptable. Philoponus and Roscelin relate substantiality not, as did the Cappadocian Fathers, to the common deity, but to the three persons. They give ontological value to the persons; they attribute to each a particular substance that is not that of the other two. The theological effort of enhancing the substantiality and particularity of the persons is the consequence of an ontological decision. In both fields — Trinitarian theology and ontology of the sensible world — individuals have ontological preeminence; so it is not very surprising that Philoponus and Roscelin would agree on any Trinitarian description that states three substances.

Joining an understanding of the Trinity as a universal to a strictly particularist ontology can only lead to defending the existence of three distinct particular substances in the Trinity. The unity of the persons, be it of name or of concept, can then only be secondary and devoid of real existence. Since all real things are particular, the common element of the Trinity can only be conceptual or predicative.

University of Cambridge

---

[96] Anselm is a defender of early medieval realism: an individual is composed of its species and a collection of properties (*De grammatico* 20 [ed. Schmitt, 166, 2–5]). Each individual possesses properties, the collection of which cannot occur identically in another (*De processione spiritus sancti* 16 [ed. Schmitt, 217, 17–18]). Therefore, the collection of properties of Peter cannot be that of Paul (*Epistola de incarnatione Verbi* 11, 29, 15–16). On this Anselmian doctrine, see C. Erismann, "*Collectio proprietatum*: Anselme de Canterbury et le problème de l'individuation," *Mediaevalia: Textos e estudos* 22 (2003): 55–71. On the problem of individuation see J. J. E. Gracia, *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages* (Washington, 1984).