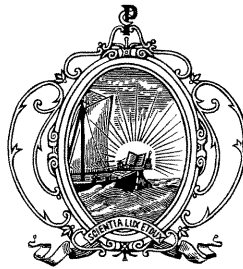# STUDIA PATRISTICA

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Cappadocian Writers
The Second Half of the Fourth Century
(Greek Writers)

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Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Revelation of Person.
Some Remarks on Gregory of Nyssa and
Maximus the Confessor

Marcello La Matina, Macerata, Italy

Foreword

It happens everywhere that people refer to other people by means of the word
'Person' or some translations of it. In many cases the word is used regardless
of any particular semantics so that it works as a mere dummy. Sometimes,
however, in more technical contexts it is employed as a *term* conveying – or
stating – a well-definite notion. These technical usages entangle us for they
nevertheless spread some ideology. It is a crucial question whether such modern
ideologies comply with the notions of 'Person' in current use among the Fathers
of Christianity. I think unless we try to state this question as a logical claim
too, we cannot appreciate the epistemological richness concealed in the Chris-
tian revealed ontology. In this short paper I want only to suggest that a correct
formulation ought to ascertain the right semantics of 'Person' by use of some
logical devices drawn from modern philosophy of language.

Glimpses

Let me begin with a historical divide. According to modern usages, being a
person seems to be a matter of agency. This causes the word 'Person' to refer,
on the one hand, to the intentional states of mind and, on the other, to the self-
consciousness of individuals. Being a person is the same as having a moral
stance, possessing reason, behaving with freedom, *etc.* A psychological amount
is thus expressed by such conceptions, so that the meaning of 'Person' draws
very closely on the Cartesian self: a sort of individual, who can be talked about,
at the last, only in terms of 'speciesism'.[1] What is troubling in almost all simi-
lar conceptions is their unaware use of a *sort* type logic. For being a 'Person'
is somehow being *a special sort of entity* rather than being *just an entity*.
It goes without saying that modern usages are not in accordance with the ancient

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[1] By 'speciesism' it is meant a conception assigning different values to different beings on
the basis of their membership to a given species.

ones, for 'Person' was not a sort type term. Neither the Greek nor the Latin did associate with 'Person' primarily any psychological or ethical or legal content. On the contrary, classical words like πρόσωπον or *persona* were commonly used with reference to nothing but the participants in acts of speaking. Namely, they expressed both the *role-taking* of communicating people – as in everyday life as in drama – and the *indexical slot* of verbal forms. Such words belonged to the lexicon of grammar as well as of theatre. It was thanks to its theatrical nuance that the word 'Person' played such a crucial role in the Orthodox debate against Sabellianism. For the sake of completeness, there was also an astronomical sense of πρόσωπον, documented specially in late Antiquity, but it is not influential here.

As all of us know, the words πρόσωπον and *persona* were regularly used by theologians as technical terms during the 4th century, though relevant differences can be observed between Western and Eastern traditions from a logical point of view. The former one – represented *e.g.* by Augustine and Boethius – seems not to have been very sensitive to the semantic aspects of 'Person', whilst the latter developed an original concept starting precisely from the analysis of the biblical sentences pertinent to the three-personal account of God. This is perhaps the reason why the notion of 'Person' was developed in Western theology as a solely moral concept, whilst it remained a specifically logical-semantic notion in the Eastern concept (though not yet approached until now as it deserves). Particularly – as here we will only suggest – in Gregory of Nyssa's and Maximus' writings.

Sources

From the origins of Christianity, Church Fathers acknowledged the genuine God as a speaking entity.[2] Of course, he used some human devices like utterances and words; he spoke the same Greek as his interpreters. A complete set of God's utterances was furnished by the Bible. However, at least some of these are *token-reflexive*[3] sentences, provided they are not only sentences *about* God, but also sentences *by* God about himself. Since both God and his interpreters spoke Greek, understanding God meant quoting or paraphrasing his statements within the same language. With the singular relevant exception of *Ex.* 3:14. In this famous passage, instead of the *indexical account* of God expressed by the original Hebrew text 'Ehjeh asher ehjeh', the LXX's translation gives Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν, 'I am *the being*', instead of 'I am *who I am*'. The substantive term does

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[2] This feature is already present in the LXX as well as in the early Fathers. See *e.g.* Philo, *Mos.* 1.75.2, Ps.-Justinus, *Cohort. ad gent.* 19D 2 and 19E 3.

[3] The expression is due to Hans Reichenbach, *Elements of Symbolic Logic* (London and New York, 1947).

replace the indexical one, modifying not only the surface grammar but also the deep logical form of the sentence. As an awkward consequence, every indexicality is narcotized from God's account, for He is not yet just the 'speaking I', the subject of the enunciation, but also one among the constituents of the sentence, *i.e.* the term 'the Being': His place moves from the extra-sentential act of uttering to the intra-sentential roles of subject and predicate. Many ontological consequences resulted from such a linguistic change.

Apart from such a remarkable exception,[4] the rule was the Greek to Greek translation. By the way, it is notable that up to now the interpretive basis of Greek theology is this sort of *endolinguistic translation*,[5] in which the Meta-language of the interpreters (*i.e.* the Greek of the Fathers) does incorporate the Object-language (*i.e.* the Greek pretended to be spoken by God). Though restricted in a sole language the word of God remained often mysterious, especially as for its ontological commitments.[6]

The New Testament, by revealing the three-personal God, made things harder to understand. What could the right semantics of Ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἕν ἐσμεν be?[7] How could the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost be, at the same time, a threefold person and a unique God? The more interesting sentences about God began to be *logically* analysed by the Cappadocian Fathers first by means of the categories of Greek philosophy. From then on, such a new Christian ontology will try to free itself from the metaphysical commitments of both Neo-Platonism and Neo-Aristotelism.

Backgrounds

Speaking in technical terms, the main problem consisted in giving sentences a *logical form* that could preserve both the three-personal account and the substantial unity of God. Answering this question could have settled – all in one go – both a metaphysical and a semantic perspective. From the one side, it had meant understanding how universals do melt with particulars; from the other, how any word like 'God', 'the Father', 'the Son' *etc.* does work in any sentence about God. But where can they find the logical devices they would have needed to accomplish such a task? The first candidate was the theory of Forms of Plato. The *Sophist* dialogue offered an original bridge between ontology and language to the Greek Fathers; for instance, in that famous passage (261e) where the

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[4] See the analysis made by Gregory of Nyssa in GNO I/1, 182.

[5] Such a category was first established by Roman Jakobson, The linguistic aspects of translation, in: Reuben Arthur Brower (ed.), *On translation* (Harvard, 1959), 232-9.

[6] Eunomius' heresy might easily be portrayed by use of this dichotomy. In fact, he inserted discontinuity between Object Language and Meta-language just modifying the expressive resources of the latter by means of names as *génnema*, *poíema* and so on (See *Adv. Eun.* I 1.74ff.).

[7] See GNO I/1, 170-2.

Stranger argues that there are two classes of words apt to denote substance: ὀνόματα and ῥήματα. According to his view, *naming* commits differently from *denoting* and words could not express anything *before* names combine with verbs in the logical form of a sentence (262c). Plato clearly differentiates the logical work of a name from that of a sentence and the ontological commitment of the subject from that of the predicate (262d). The question arose whether θεός ought to count as a subject or as a predicate? A large part of Gregory's *Against Eunomius* is devoted to this subject: Is 'θεός' the name of God?

In the strict sense, the *Sophist* did not account for sentences including names like θεός in predicative position; for they denote universals, *i.e.* unchangeable Forms. To make things more difficult, Christian theologians also incorporated within the sphere of Godhead some terms like 'the Son' and 'the Logos', which committed them not to a dualistic ontology of divinity.[8] How to reconcile a *particular entity* like that referred to by 'the Son' with the *universal Form* denoted by the predicate θεός? Applying the 'particular' *vs* the 'universal' dualism to Jesus Christ could have resulted in an aporia. Christ is expressly termed as χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως τοῦ Θεοῦ in *Heb.* 1:3, and that was unacceptable to Plato's ontology, according to which Forms are absolutely separated from their concrete instances. The point was whether admitting Jesus not to be really God, or, conversely, God not to be really unchangeable. Whatever one may think nowadays, Greek theologians could not have been Platonistic with regards to ontology.

A second candidate remained. Aristotle's logic really expanded that of Plato's *Sophist*, though radically modifying it. As we said, in Plato's view a sentence is well-formed, provided it holds a subject part and a predicate part. Now, according to Aristotle's new account of what a sentence is – currently termed as *two-terms theory* – every sentence can be viewed as well-formed, provided it holds two terms (two *horoi*), regardless of any structural difference of predicate and subject. However, as Sir Peter Geach once observed: 'It is logically impossible for a term to shift about between subject and predicate position without undergoing a change of sense as well as a change of role. Only a name can be a logical subject; and a name cannot retain the role of a name if it becomes a logical predicate; for a predicate purports to give us what holds good or does not hold good of an individual, but a name just serves to name or refer to an individual.'[9] The Aristotelian settlement was a false move that resulted in the logical confusion of *naming* and *being predicable of*, so that the two *terms* of a sentence were reduced to being just the two *names* of a sole thing. Since a pair of names is not a sentence but just the beginning of a list – what remained of the sentence in such an approach?

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[8] See *e.g.* GNO I/2, 321.
[9] See Peter Thomas Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford, 1972), 47f., 48.

A reformation of both the Platonic and the Aristotelian logic was unavoidable for there was no room in them for 'Person' (*e.g.* 'the human-divine Son of God') and their related events (*e.g.* 'the birth of Christ'). According to Plato's theory of Forms the universal was the very subject of true philosophy, whereas the particulars were dismissed. Aristotelian logic was centered on general statements like 'Wales are Mammals', while it took no interest in sentences like 'Socrates is mortal' or 'Χριστὸς θεοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεοῦ σοφία' for their singular terms were not suitable to occur, in turn, now as the subject and now as the predicate of a syllogism.[10] This is perhaps the reason why Greek Fathers were urged to exceed the boundaries (the *horoi*) of the *Logica Vetus* looking for new implements. Almost surprisingly, both Gregory and Maximus seemed to anticipate some notions of modern philosophy of language; for instance, that of 'places in a predicate'.[11]

The hidden places

Suppose I am a 4th century Church Father – or a simple-hearted man of faith – looking for the correct semantics of John's famous sentence:

(1) 'God is love.'

By using Plato I might understand (1) as committing to just an ontology of relationships among Forms: God, Love, perhaps Sameness. I might also wonder what happens here with the *Sophist*'s machinery of Subject and Predicate. Neither word is a verb, while the 'is' does not express but a relation of identity. Then, is Identity another – a third – Form? Of course, it could be troubling. Unfortunately, it does not work better with the help of Aristotelian logic. 'God' and 'Love' could be taken into consideration just as universal terms (for instance, occurring in the general premise of a syllogism). So that the logical form of (1) turns into (2):

(2) '"God" is predicated of (all) "Love".' (or *vice versa*)

Perplexity increases: What might the informative content of the latter be for believers? Perhaps that 'God' is interchangeable with 'Love', is it not? Everything goes as if the entities denoted by both 'God' and 'Love' were substances overlapping each other. Then, must 'Love' be conceived as *something* different from God (another οὐσία)? Or, in the negative, is God a narcissist substance?

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[10] For such aspects see Jan Lukasiewicz, *Aristotle's Syllogistic from the Standpoint of Modern Formal Logic* (Oxford, 1957), 5-7.

[11] The importance of such a notion is rightly stressed by Donald Davidson, Method and Metaphysics, in: *Deucalion* 11 (1993) 239-48; now in: *id., Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford and New York, 2005), 39-45.

The answer appeals to the revelation of 'Person' and urges us to commit to an ontology of persons. 'Love – Clive Staples Lewis once wrote – is something that one *person* has for another *person*. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was *not* love'.[12] So, (1) has its correct semantics if, and only if, 'Love' is viewed as, at least, a two-place predicate containing blanks or places as follows: '*x* and *y* love each other'. Equally, 'God' is to be read as '*x* is-God'. Thus, God *is* love thanks not to an impersonal 'Love', but because His being has so many places as *x*'s and *y*'s existing and loving each other. Such places and their logical filling-in are the key for understanding divine as well as human personhood.

It was by the close tackling of the Greek 'common notions', that Gregory discovered the blanks of predicates. In the *Ad Graecos* he describes θεός as a predicate having three places, ἵνα ᾖ πατὴρ καὶ υἱὸς καὶ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, τουτέστι πρόσωπον καὶ πρόσωπον καὶ πρόσωπον, διὸ καὶ τρία πρόσωπα (GNO III/1, 1,20). Such a logical form is very close to that of βοηθός (analysed as '*x* is a helper of *y*' in *Adv. Eun.* I 1,571), for both terms do conceal a gap to fill. As Gregory points out, neglecting the hidden place for *y* could be the same as missing the semantic target of the word (ἐὰν ὑφέλῃς τὸ τῆς βοηθείας δεόμενον, ἤργησεν ἡ ἐμφαινομένη τῷ ὀνόματι δύναμις, *ibid.*).[13] Moreover, in the same work, he claims – as already Plato attempted and Aristotle neglected to do – that predicates and subjects are structurally different and not inter-changeable terms in any relevant sentence about God. Thus, 'θεός' is not the name of God, for [ε]ἰ τὸ θεὸς ὄνομα προσώπου δηλωτικὸν ὑπῆρχεν, τρία πρόσωπα λέγοντες ἐξ ἀνάγκης τρεῖς ἂν ἐλέγομεν θεούς (GNO III/1, 1). Item, being a πρόσωπον is not the same as being a special sort of entity for – we can add – it is not *a sort of thing* at all. Accordingly, committing to πρόσωπα does not insert any new entity in ontology.
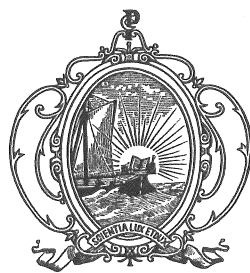
I consider the differentiation of οὐσία and πρόσωπον as the first step of the Patristic revelation of 'Person'. It acknowledged the ontological priority of sentences over any other linguistic category, for it is only within the context of a sentence that οὐσία and πρόσωπον can be discriminated. Therefore, this primacy gave evidence to God's *subjectiveness* against any Plotinian fusional-ity in philosophy or any Aristotelian mereology in theology. Discovering the logical role of πρόσωπον enabled Gregory to refer to particularity, without committing to new entities in God's economy. However, his analogical use of πρόσωπον as a synonym of the human individual (*tòn tinà tês ousìas*) yielded

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[12] Clive Staples Lewis, *Beyond Personality* (London, 1944), 25-6.

[13] Of course, relative terms like βοηθός were known to the ancient grammarians as well as to philosophers (see Arist. *Cat* 5b 11-29). However, the two examples discussed by Gregory in GNO I/1, 191 seem to account for a more comprehensive semantics of such terms, for they are used to relate the *sentence* plan and the plan of the *enonciation*. A similar remark can be found in Maximus' *Sch. In De div. nom.* (PG 4, 225B).

some semantic failures. If – according to some modern scholars – a Person is nothing but an ἄτομον or ἰδικὸν πρόσωπον (as *Ad Graecos* 3,1.31.13 seems to encourage), then predicates are distributive terms just binding their variables (the *x*'s and their values) within a given sort. What is the difference between such an only presumed sort type πρόσωπον of the Ancients and the real sort type 'Person' of such modern scholars? Greek Fathers progressively dismissed any idea of 'Person' as just a member of a set, and still a difference – though difficult to say – ought to be. I think there is much more in the Fathers' philosophy of language, provided one reads them from a logical point of view too. Anyway, such an inscrutability of reference necessitated a second step, in order to definitely differentiate the sort type notion of 'Person' from the non-sort type one. Whilst the former commits to a world of individuals, each of them belonging to some species, the latter is based on the personal *tropos* of Christ. Christ is neither an individual nature (like the Phoenix) nor a natural *Gattungswesen*, as a member of a set. Explaining the paradoxical singleness of the Son of God was the task accomplished by Maximus. At the end of my short paper, there is only space to mention his effort and his personal sacrifice. Should you consider this paper too general in nature, I hope to offer a more complete and extended version at a later occasion.

PEETERS