

# The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa

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## TRINITARIAN SEMANTICS

1. A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION · 2. GRAMMAR AND PHILOSOPHY
3. GREGORY: A CREATIVE GENIUS.

1. A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION. In ancient times, Greek grammarians knew “person” as a notion involved in the verbal inflection or in the staging of drama. Nowadays, modern philosophers know “person” as a concept of ethical—or human rights—theories. Having introduced the notion of “divine person” as an intermediate step between the two, Gregory of Nyssa is praised for having filled the gap between the grammarians’ πρόσωπον and the moral one. His method claimed that any ontological question should be formulated as concerning the meaning of a sentence *about* the persons of God. This meant that the metaphysical plan of argumentation was interestingly connected to the semantic plan of human knowledge which is expressed by means of language. Consequently, *trinitarian semantics* refers here primarily to a specific method employed by Gregory in his trinitarian passages and writings. Whether debating about the divinity of the Holy Spirit or discussing the innumerable nature of the Son, Gregory found in his semantic tools the surest device for unmasking anyone who opposed the faith in the divine personhood. Gregory’s way of arguing resulted in a prose so impressive that even some later theologians such as Maximus the Confessor or the Byzantine Leontius imitated this style. Trinitarian semantics could be considered as a durable feature in Greek-language theology, and this marks a significant difference from the philosophical style of the majority of Latin theological writers. It is perhaps not incorrect to describe the Nyssen’s method as a sort of “linguistic turn” in theology. Talking, e.g., about the Godhead means analysing any relevant sentence about God, in order to evaluate how its parts contribute to the truth of the whole. The meaning of its constituents is derived from the meaning of the complex as a whole. The most representative account of Gregory’s semantic method is given in *In illud Tunc et ipse* (III/II, 3–28). As usual, the starting point is a sentence from Scripture: here, Paul’s much-discussed statement in 1 Cor. 15.28: Τότε ὑποταγήσεται ὁ υἱὸς τῷ ὑποτάξαντι αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα (Cf. RAMELLI 2008).—In the second place, trinitarian semantics also designates a modern approach to Greek theology,

carried out with help of the logical devices of the analytic philosophy of language (cf. LA MATINA 2007 and 2009; → PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE).

2. GRAMMAR AND PHILOSOPHY. To appreciate the novelty of Gregory's theoretical approach, it is useful to look at the commonly accepted vision of parsing (*i.e.* the study of μέρη τοῦ λόγου) as a part of grammar or philosophy.

On the one hand, Hellenistic philologists considered grammar as divided into three parts: historical, technical and systematic (or properly, the *ἰδιαιτέρον* part). The exact nature of parsing was long disputed, for the proper task of the *ἰδιαιτέρον* was to fix both the elements of any well-formed sentence (*ἄξιωμα*) and the number of the word-classes (*μερισμός*). However, all through late Antiquity there were no shared criteria among the grammarians regarding the limits of each part. Sextus Empiricus—who had a comprehensive knowledge of the human sciences of his age—(*Adv. Math.*, I 77, 8 ff.) refuted such a partition. Instead, he accepted Crates' distinction between the competences of the *critic* and the *grammarian*: “The critic has to be an expert in logic” (τὸν μὲν κριτικὸν πάσης δεῖ λογικῆς ἐπιστήμης ἔμπειρον εἶναι), “whilst the grammarian just ought to know the explanation of words, their pronunciation and other similar matters” (τὸν δὲ γραμματικὸν ἀπλῶς γλωσσῶν ἐξηγητικὸν καὶ προσωδίας ἀποδοτικὸν καὶ τῶν τούτοις παραπλησίων εἰδήμονα). At any rate, grammar was generally considered as a method to investigate the usages of idioms and concepts among different peoples (ἡ γραμματικὴ ... μέθοδος τίς ἐστι τῶν παρὰ ταύτας ἑτέρων λεκτῶν τε καὶ νοητῶν). In spite of what Stoics were claiming, the sentential parsing was accomplished regardless of any investigation of meaning (τὸ σημαίνον).

From the philosophical point of view, the dominant approaches to parsing were, of course, influenced by Aristotle's logic and by Stoic semiotics. Both considered meaning as a constitutive issue for a philosophical analysis of language, although Stoics were especially interested in the nature of the simplest signs (e.g., words) as well as in the theory of logical inference. The most accurate theory of philosophical parsing was due to Aristotle. In *Categoriae* (2a30) he stated the priority of term over sentence: “meaning” is what one can define *before* two terms do melt with one another to form a sentence. Conceived in this way, semantics is a matter of a set of categories whose definition is given “apart from any bond” (κατὰ μηδεμίαν συμπλοκὴν). The semantic role of the sentence

(τὰ μὲν οὖν κατὰ συμπλοκὴν, οἷον ἄνθρωπος τρέχει, ἄνθρωπος νικᾷ) is separated from the semantic role of concepts (τὰ δὲ ἄνευ συμπλοκῆς, οἷον ἄνθρωπος, βοῦς, τρέχει, νικᾷ.). Aristotle's metaphysics was a consequence of his term-oriented semantics. It is precisely such an approach that Gregory turns upside down.

3. GREGORY: A CREATIVE GENIUS. All through the *New Testament* one encounters sentences, whose trinitarian semantics is elusive; e.g. Ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἐν ἐμοί ἐστι, Ὁ ἐωρακὼς ἐμὲ ἐώρακε τὸν πατέρα, etc. In many cases a heretical attitude sprang from a misunderstanding of them. As Plato said: "It is difficult to conceive God, but to define Him in words is an impossibility" (*Tim.* 28e). In spite of this, Gregory's sentence-oriented semantics proved a powerful weapon against the most common forms of reductivism, for it forced the interpreters (no matter whether heretics or not) to distinguish between *having a private concept* of God and *explaining the word* "God" in the context of a *publicly* available sentence.

The *Eun* presents interesting arguments Eunomius claimed to impose a rigorous pattern upon the language of both the Old and the New Testament (*Eun* I, 1.74 ff.). He endeavored to introduce a certain discontinuity between the *language the Fathers talked about* (= the biblical κοινή) and the *language the Fathers talked in* (= the late-Antiquity Greek spoken in the fourth century). His goal was to deconstruct the fatherhood of God, i.e. to divide God from God, true God from true God, by appealing to a non-anthropomorphic semantics of γέννημα, ποίημα and ἀγεννησία, instead of the more weighty semantics of words like Πατήρ and Υἱός. The reason why Eunomius introduced such a new *Wortbildung*—so Gregory argues (cf. *Eun* I.1.159.1 ff.)—is obvious to all: when people, in fact, hear the words "father" or "son", they could understand the proper and natural relationship between the pair of names (ἀλλὰ παντὶ πρόδηλον οἶμαι τὴν αἰτίαν εἶναι τῆς καινῆς ταύτης ὀνοματοποιίας, ὅτι πάντες ἄνθρωποι πατὴρ καὶ υἱὸς προσηγορίαν ἀκούσαντες εὐθύς τὴν οἰκείαν αὐτῶν καὶ φυσικὴν πρὸς ἀλληλα σχέσιν ὑπ' αὐτῶν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐπιγινώσκουσι). Eunomius attempted to remove any anthropological depth, so that theology could be reduced to an abstract algebra of divineness. Moreover, he deliberately confused the οὐσία and the πρόσωπα of God (*Eun* I, 1.93), sometimes misinterpreting, e.g., the name of the Father (cf. *Ref Eun* 16.4: ἡ τοῦ πατρὸς κλησις οὐκ οὐσίας ἐστὶ παραστατική, ἀλλὰ τὴν πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν σχέσιν ἀποσημαίνει), and sometimes dividing the semantics of the referring expressions, in order to divide the reference

itself to the triune God (the personal σχέσις of the persons; *Eun* I. 1, 168; cf. also I, 1.92 and 187,3). The same applies to the Holy Spirit (I.1, 117).

The germinal account of Gregory's trinitarian semantics is represented by the famous *Ep.* 38 (→ *DIFF ESS HYP*), where a theoretical distinction between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις is clearly traced. Everybody knows that such words were synonymous at that time. Now Gregory—departing from their usual semantics—assigns them a new role within the logical analysis of trinitarian sentences. Instead of trying to differentiate οὐσία and ὑπόστασις as metaphysical (or ontic) concepts, he gives them a different logical role in the context of sentences. Accordingly, every metaphysical statement is to be interpreted as consisting of (a) an οὐσία part and (b) a relational noun for the ὑπόστασις (or πρόσωπον). He takes the οὐσία-words as very similar to what modern logicians call “concept-words” (or *Begriffswörter*), while he considers the ὑπόστασις- (or πρόσωπα-) words as similar to what is meant by “relation nouns” (or σχετικὰ ὀνόματα) or—just in anthropology—“verity names” (cf. LA MATINA 2005 and 2005; MAUSS 1938). In comparison to Aristotle, the novelty is represented by the *non-interchangeability* of them. In *Graec* he clearly says that “God” is not the name of God, for it is not a proper noun at all: “If the name ‘God’ were indicative of person (προσώπου δηλωτικόν), by necessity we would say that there are three Gods when we say that there are three persons. But if the name ‘God’ signifies substance (οὐσίας σημαντικόν), then when we confess one substance of the Holy Triad we reasonably declare that there is one God, since the term ‘God’ is one name of one substance” (*Graec*, 1.19). Accordingly—as Gregory elsewhere maintains—saying, e.g., that “the Father is God” will not imply the converse, i.e. that “God is (the) Father”—for, in the affirmative, the Son could not be God because of his not being (the) Father: εἰ γάρ, ἐπειδὴ πατήρ ὁ πατήρ, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ θεὸς ὁ πατήρ, ἐπειδὴ μὴ πατήρ ὁ υἱός, οὐ θεὸς ὁ υἱός (*Graec*, 1.23.17). On the contrary, the statement that “the Son is everything that the Father is, apart from being the Father himself” (*Ref Eun*, III.1.85.10, πάντα ὧν οὗτος ὅσα ἐστὶν ἐκεῖνος πλὴν τοῦ ἐκεῖνος εἶναι) is semantically testable.

The semantics of relative terms (or σχετικὰ ὀνόματα) involved a very serious question: how was the unbegotten being (τὸ ἀγεννήτως εἶναι) of the Father to be related to the being begotten (τὸ γεννητὸν εἶναι) of the Son? Eunomius' supporters considered ἀγεννησία and γέννησις as a pair of hypostasis-nouns which could be used to name the Father and the Son. Now, in at least three crucial passages of *Eun*, Gregory



contests such an explanation, with the help of a stringent series of semantical inferences. The pair—he claims—are not genuine names, for they do not *denominate* the divine persons. Rather, they refer respectively to the Father’s *being Unbegotten* and the Son’s *being begotten*. However, the real semantics of ἀγεννησία and γέννησις does not appear, unless we presuppose some sentences about the way the οὐσία of God is given to us. This *way of being* is for Gregory the self-determination (τὸ αὐτεξούσιον) of the divine ὑποστάσεις (or πρόσωπα). Thus, the problem of the ἀγεννησία and γέννησις of the divine dyad is correctly stated if, and only if, it is formulated in semantical terms. Gregory exemplifies his solution by appealing to the sample-sentence “this one was begotten” (and its contrary “this other was not begotten”), which amazingly he compares with Plato’s *Sophist* famous sentence *about the sitting* of Theaetetus (Θεαίτητος κάθηται—the Stranger said in the *Sophist*): τὸ γὰρ “ἐγεννήθη” καὶ “οὐκ ἐγεννήθη” ὡς ἂν τις ὑποδείγματι σαφηνίσειε, τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν οἶον καὶ τὸ “κάθηται” καὶ “οὐ κάθηται” καὶ ὅσα τῷ τοιούτῳ λέγεται τρόπῳ (CE 2.1.18.8 ff. See also 2.1.25 ff. and 2.1.34.1 ff.). The logical form is “*the such-and-such* was begotten” or “*the such-and-such* was not begotten”; the γεννητός/ἀγέννητος is thus relativised to the personal σχέσις—and not to the οὐσία—of the Father and the Son. It goes without saying that in such sentences there is no room for any hypostatisation like that of ἀγεννησία.

Another crucial document of trinitarian semantics is the short treatise *Graec*. Here Gregory questions the more common notions of the traditional Greek metaphysics. He clearly echoes Plato when he states the connection between sentences and ontological commitments, though capsizing Plato’s axiology. The word θεός stands for an οὐσία, although it cannot denote its τὸ τί, since we cannot have a finitely comprehensive idea of God. So it only works as a “δήλωμα τῆς οὐσίας” (rather than as a genuine concept-word) calling for some completion. The semantical role of the οὐσία is thus void of any ontological commitment, until a person-indicator (δήλωμα προσώπου) appears in the context of a sentence. Such indicators for πρόσωπα are not visible in the surface structure of the sentence, and can emerge only when a sentence is given a logical form. Anticipating a similar distinction made by the logician Gottlob Frege around the end of the 19th century, Gregory also seems to be aware of the difference between “features of an οὐσία” (later called *Eigenschaften*) and “characteristics of the individuals falling under a given predicate expressing such an οὐσία” (then called *Merkmale*). He also fights a duel about the semantics of indexical expressions like “this” and “the such-and-

such” (see STROBEL 2006) and about the semantical connection between being (existence) and numerousness. Among many original passages, we should note III.1. 19,7–20,11, which seems to anticipate a parallel passage about the nature of number found in Gottlob Frege’s *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (1884). Distinguishing among two uses of the connective *καί*, Gregory argues that what it expresses is not only a difference among individuals, but also the irreducibility of the persons to the oneness of their common substance. The logical relation between being and person, or oneness and numerousness, is the central topic of the short treatise *Abl.* (for which see now MASPERO 2008).

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