Hildebrand, Hypostasis, and the Irreducibility of Personal Existence

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On one reading, twentieth-century Christian personalists such as Max Scheler, Dietrich von Hildebrand, or Edith Stein merely translate into Christian terms a set of modern concerns that arise apart from and are at odds with the historical Christian tradition. According to this reading, modern philosophy makes a fundamental break with previous thinking when it turns inward to examine the interior, personal dimension of existence. A person who favors this inward turn will see the Christian personalists as vainly attempting to salvage traditional Christian categories while trying to keep up with the times. For example, someone who favors twentieth-century existentialism or psychoanalysis may sympathize with a Christian personalist account of the interiority and irreplaceable uniqueness of each person but despise the larger religious framework of grace and salvation. Someone who favors traditional metaphysics, by contrast, may see these personalists as falling prey to modern errors when they should have kept the faith. Such a traditionalist may think, for example, that an emphasis on the personal is an infiltration into Christianity from secular political philosophies of individualism and that this has been thinly covered over with traditional Christian language.

Both perspectives, however, ignore the historical roots of personalism much further back in the history of philosophy than Descartes and Kant. Central to this history is the idea that each person uniquely realizes an incommunicable dimension of his existence, irreducible to the category of nature or essence. While we are in nature and while we *are* a nature, our nature as nature remains purely general, describing *what* we are in common with every other member of our species. As particular persons exercising our freedom and spiritual existence, however, each of us concretizes that purely general nature in a unique, personal way. For many centuries, Christians have called the dimension that concretizes nature ὑπόστασις: each ὑπόστασις is a distinct realization of a general nature. When this notion is first introduced into Christian discourse during the second half of the fourth century, the uniqueness of persons as opposed to the uniqueness of individual pebbles or horses does not come fully into focus. Nevertheless, a thick conception of

ὑπόστασις develops in order to speak precisely about Trinitarian and Christological theology, and this context gives it a distinctly personalist character, especially when it is translated into Latin as *persona*. In order to speak of God as three ὑποστάσεις or *personae* in one essence and to speak of Christ as one ὑπόστασις or *persona* in two natures, the category of ὑπόστασις must be irreducible to the category of nature. Along this irreducible dimension, persons are irreplaceable *someones* in relationship with other someones rather than merely *somethings*, specimens of a kind more or less interchangeable with any other such specimen.

The rootedness of this philosophical concept in specifically Trinitarian and Christological doctrine means that it should count as a properly Christian idea if anything does. Over the course of these controversies, the Fathers of the Church appropriate the old Greek philosophical word and infused it with an entirely new meaning.[1] While this usage at first remains restricted to the purely theological realm, it slowly forces open a new passage in philosophical anthropology previously blocked in pre-Christian Greek thinking. In many ways, Christian philosophy does not make full use of this expansion until the twentieth century—perhaps encouraged in part by the change in emphasis that occurs in modern thought outside of Christian thinking—but we should see this development as the legitimate outgrowth of insights achieved centuries before.

We will begin with a passage from *Transformation in Christ*, characteristic of the Christian personalist movement, regarding what Dietrich von Hildebrand calls someone's "free personal center." According to Hildebrand, a person can stand back from the impulses that his nature delivers and either sanction those impulses or reject them. This ability reveals that being a person involves more than being a mere natural substance, enacting a life characteristic of one's kind. After examining this passage, we will turn to the historical development of ὑπόστασις as a new category in the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. While the ideas in Hildebrand certainly show a profound growth of seeds planted in early theology, this growth maintains a profound continuity with its origin. Finally, we will consider the ways that a certain kind of substance dualism in contemporary Christian philosophy seeks to capture the same spirit but does not go nearly far enough because it continues to focus on the person as a kind of thing.

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[1] For further discussion of this history, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," *Communio* 13 (1986); and Joseph Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," translated by Michael Waldstein, *Communio* 17, no. 3 (1990).

Hildebrand's Free Personal Center

In the context of *Transformation in Christ*, Hildebrand argues that Christian transformation involves a process of coming fully awake rather than remaining in the somnolence of "false consciousness." Only by doing so can a person achieve full moral agency because one must be truly conscious of the objective world of values in order to make a free moral response: "[True consciousness] is the awakening to full moral majority, the discovery of the capacity of sanctioning. The behavior of *unconscious* persons is dictated by their nature. They tacitly identify themselves with whatever response their nature suggests to them. They have not yet discovered the possibility of emancipating themselves, by virtue of their free personal center, from their nature; they make no use as yet of this primordial capacity inherent in the personal mode of being. Hence their responses to values, even when they happen to be adequate, will always have something accidental about them."[2] While the metaphysical structure of personal existence is not the focal theme of this passage, I want to draw attention to several rich details that suggest the background metaphysical picture that Hildebrand is working with. These elements can be found in the background throughout much of Hildebrand's work, but I want to focus closely on this one passage because here they are brought together in one place with a remarkable level of clarity.

Throughout Hildebrand's ethical writings, we often return to the theme of response. The world outside our head is replete with real values, some moral, others aesthetic or metaphysical (among many other forms of value). The beauty of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the goodness inherent in a father's act of forgiveness toward his son, the bond between two friends, or the health restored to an old woman after an illness are all really valuable whether a particular person subjectively finds them satisfying. These objective values appear for us in subjective experience and by so appearing place a call upon our lives, inviting us toward an adequate mode of response. The beauty of Beethoven's Ninth may simply call us to admiration, while the goodness of a father's forgiveness may call us to forgive in a similar manner. At the root of all these different modes of response, however, lies the same inner "yes" to value. Before I can step out and truly forgive my son, I must first see the value of forgiveness and say within myself, "Yes, this is good; this is what I must do." By doing so, I *sanction* my act of forgiveness, and it becomes an act that *I* perform rather than something that merely happens

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[2] Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1990), 62.

to me.[3] Hildebrand calls this a "primordial capacity inherent in the personal mode of being" because this capacity forms part of the fundamental difference between persons and nonpersons. Cats and trees do not have the capacity to stand back from the organic processes directing their existence. While each cat may have its unique quirks and each tree a unique branching structure, this type of uniqueness remains wholly an expression of their unfolding nature. As such, we can properly view each cat or tree as a specimen of a more general nature, whereas viewing persons as specimens of humanity ignores the act of sanctioning whereby each person may freely endorse the unfolding of his humanity as his own.

For example, suppose that someone named Peter forgives a terrible wrong done to him. It is natural that Peter feel compassion, and it belongs to the human species to comprehend the moral value in forgiveness, but it remains for Peter himself to sanction this particular act under these particular circumstances. When he does, we are right to see this act of forgiveness as an expression of Peter rather than merely an expression of humanity. To be sure, the capacity for sanctioning is also "natural" in its own way because it is part of human nature that we have the capacity for sanctioning. Indeed, even when we fully exercise "this primordial capacity inherent in the personal mode of being," we do not transcend or escape from our nature as though this capacity could constitute us as a separable being who could float free from our own humanity. Instead, our nature is simply that which constitutes the *kind of thing we are*, and this is not something that we can escape. In one sense, we *are* our nature: Peter *is* human, and there would be no Peter if there were not this instance of humanity. Peter's humanity, however, is no more his than Paul's except in the purely logical sense that one instance of a type is distinct from another. Peter's act of forgiveness, however, belongs to him and not to Paul as his own personal act, and it is an expression of his incommunicable personal identity. Human nature does not strictly determine this particular action but rather determines the limits within which Peter may act and the kinds of actions available to beings like him. By sanctioning his act, forgiveness is something Peter *does* rather than something *about* him that is a mere given of his nature. His acts begin to reveal Peter as an unrepeatable *someone*, a concrete moral agent, committing himself in *this* way now, even though his action belongs to a type characteristic of his species. Hence this capacity for sanctioning opens up a gap between the natural impulse

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[3] For a further development of this contrast between what *I* do and what happens *to me* and the correspondence between this and the person-nature contrast, see John Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), ch. 3, sec. 2.

toward action and the endorsed action itself, even when a person does go along with his first natural impulse.

While we all have this capacity, Hildebrand makes clear that many unconscious persons "tacitly identify themselves" with the responses dictated by their nature. While we have the capacity to stand back from it, we do have a nature, including the organic processes that direct our actions like other animals, and we do not always exercise our higher capacity. As an embodied animal, we feel the urge to eat or the urge to run from danger, even though as conscious persons we are under no necessity to act upon these urges. We can observe them and decide not to eat or not to run—even unto death. Those who are morally sleepwalking, however, experience little gap between natural impulse and action. They are carried along on the stream of natural causality and experience their lives as something happening to them rather than something they are doing. As they are carried along, the "I" that is capable of standing back from the steam of impulses grows quieter and quieter until it barely seems to exist at all.[4] Hence the "I" that they take themselves to be becomes more and more mistakenly identified with the stream of impulses itself. The glutton seems to become his craving; the coward seems to become his cowardice. This identification must be "tacit" because if someone were to articulate an identity between the self and the stream of natural impulses, he would, by that very act of articulation, begin to reveal the existence of a self that can stand back from the stream. The shallowness of a life immersed in this tacit identification remains even when we consider those cases where the impulses arising from nature drive us toward actions that we would and ought to sanction from our free personal center. We are inclined, perhaps, to sympathize with someone in pain or to seek companionship. Even lower animals do such things, but they do them without the explicit conscious agency of a moral person. When we do what we ought to do merely because we are carried along by our impulses rather than because we recognize that we ought to do it and assent to the moral value involved, we too live at a level below what is proper to persons.

In Hildebrand, then, we see a number of themes characteristic of the wider Christian personalist movement: a focus on the particularity of the person, an emphasis on the radical freedom involved in personal existence,

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[4] For a troubling expression of this truth, consider the explanation of the grumbling ghost in chapter 9 of C. S. Lewis's *Great Divorce*: "It begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. Ye can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no *you* left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine."

an account of the special dignity of the moral person, and a rich analysis of the interior dimension of our moral lives. At first glance, these may seem to be particularly modern themes, but a deeper reading of the ancient and medieval literature reveals that they are not. We find in Plotinus, for instance, a rich appreciation for our interior lives and in the Stoics a detailed analysis of freedom. The insistence, however, on the unrepeatable identity of the particular person and the irreducibility of this identity to the plane of nature cannot be found in pre-Christian ancient sources. The unwary student of philosophy whose history is spotty between Aristotle and Descartes may therefore suspect that such an insistence arises from modern concerns such as political individualism or the existentialist idea that existence precedes essence. In the next section, I will show that this is not the case. Instead, the notion of incommunicable personal identity emerges out of detailed Trinitarian reflection that takes place over the course of centuries.

The Emergence of Ὑπόστασις in Early Christian Thought

While Hildebrand approaches this question from the direction of phenomenology, the conception of personal existence that he is working with developed in the context of traditional metaphysics and theology. A rich metaphysical framework distinguishing the incommunicable, unrepeatable existence of the person from purely general nature emerges in the fourth and fifth centuries as Christian thinkers grapple with disputes over the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, ultimately giving a new meaning to the term ὑπόστασις. Christian thinkers arrived at this conclusion after a long struggle to articulate how three basic data of the faith could all be true:

1. Jesus of Nazareth *is God*.
2. Jesus prayed *to God* and spoke of his relationship *with God* his Father.
3. Nevertheless, there can be only *one God*.

Arians and adoptionists attempted to compromise the sense of "is God" in (1), while modalists such as Sabellius attempted to downplay the real relational distinction required by (2). Meanwhile, early Christians inherited from their Jewish roots a commitment to monotheism and from Greek philosophy arguments demonstrating that ultimate reality must be one. A denial of (3), therefore, remained off the table, although opponents of Christianity have always made the charge of tritheism. The early Christian community needed the conceptual resources to articulate the real ontological unity of God along one dimension while also maintaining a real relational distinction between

the Father and the Son (and by extension the Holy Spirit) along another dimension.

The solution to this quandary, primarily accomplished by the Cappadocians, comes when Christians begin to carefully distinguish οὐσία, usually translated as "substance" or "essence" from ὑποστάασις, usually translated as "person." We will see, however, that translating ὑπόστασις straightforwardly as "person" is misleading because the orthodox use of the term is established by Basil in order to emphasize the reality of the relational distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit against the Sabellian use of πρόσωπα, which can also be translated as "persons" but originally means "faces" or "roles in a play."[5] This results in the standard formula that God is three ὑπόστασεις in one οὐσία. In order to arrive at this formula, however, the Cappadocians need to invest ὑπόστασις with a new meaning that it does not possess in earlier Greek. Much of the difficulty in explaining Trinitarian theology to students comes from their eagerness to translate ὑπόστασις using a familiar notion that they already grasp such as "entity," "individual," "being," "personality," or even "person" in the ordinary English sense of the word, where it often means little more than "particular human being." Unfortunately, all these words either name a kind of thing (in which case we have three Gods) or name a mere mode, property, or activity of things (in which case Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not really distinct). Instead, we must appreciate how radical an expansion of existing metaphysical categories the Cappadocians accomplished: ὑπόστασις is simply irreducible to οὐσία.

Ilaria Ramelli has argued persuasively that Origen was the first to begin distinguishing οὐσία and ὑπόστασις.[6] Origen usually uses ὑπόστασις in a variety of meanings that were standard at his time, such as "reality," "existence," "substance," or "foundation."[7] According to this typical philosophical meaning in pre-Christian Greek, ὑπόστασις is used to emphasize that something really exists as opposed to understanding it as a mere conceptual abstraction, appearance, or phantasm. In a number of important passages, however, Origen begins to use ὑπόστασις in a technical sense contrasted with οὐσία. For our purposes, two of the most important will suffice. In *Contra Celsum* 8.12, Origen argues against Celsus's contention that the Christians should not object to the worship of other gods since they themselves "pay excessive

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[5] See Lucian Turcescu, "Prosōpon and Hypostasis in Basil of Caesarea's 'Against Eunomius' and the Epistles," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51, no. 4 (1997), 374–95, for further analysis of Basil's motivations and a large number of revealing passages.

[6] Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of Hypostasis," *Harvard Theological Review* 105, no. 3 (2012), 302–50.

[7] See ibid., 303–4, for an examination of these meanings and an excellent selection of references.

reverence to one who has but lately appeared among men."[8] Origen, however, maintains that Christians worship only one God and that Celsus has not understood the words of Christ, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30 KJV). Nevertheless, Origen feels the need to consider those who "from these words [are] afraid of our going over to the side of those who deny that the Father and the Son are two persons [δύο εἶναι ὑποστάσεις]."[9] He maintains, however, that this is not the case. While Christians "worship one God, the Father and the Son," nevertheless, "these, while they are two, considered as persons or substances [ὄντα δύο τῇ ὑποστάσει πράγματα], are one in unity of thought, in harmony and in identity of will." Origen further distinguishes the Holy Spirit as ὑπόστασις in his *Commentary on John* 2.10.75, where he claims that he is "persuaded that there are three hypostases, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"[10] These developments in Origen's use of the word, however, went largely unnoticed, and ὑπόστασις continued to be used by many Christian writers in a wider philosophical sense often synonymous with οὐσία. We can see this synonymous sense at work in a particularly momentous statement at Nicaea anathematizing those who claim that the Son is of a different "ὑπόστασις or οὐσία" from the Father.

Over the next half century, however, the term ὑπόστασις comes to identify the real basis of relationship between Father and Son in such a way that it does not compromise the unity of the divine οὐσία. For this to be so, ὑπόστασις must pick out a dimension that is simply not reducible to the familiar Greek metaphysical category of nature or substance, and it cannot simply name the familiar Greek notion that there are numerically distinct instances of a species—otherwise there would be three gods. We can see an early stage of this new meaning in Basil's Letter 236, in which he outlines the difference between ὑπόστασις and οὐσία as "the same as that between the general (τὸ κοινόν) and the particular (τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον)."[11] He illustrates this by contrasting "the animal" and "the particular man." This sounds much like the distinction between universal and particular, but when applied to God, Basil's thought is a little more complex:

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[8] Translated by F. Crombie in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4.

[9] Greek text from PG 11, col. 1533.

[10] Translated by Ronald E. Heine. It should be noted that in this same context, Origen uses the language of "created" and "uncreated" in a way that will later be repudiated by the Church, ultimately being corrected to the language of "unbegotten" for the Father, "begotten" for the Son, and "processed" for the Spirit.

[11] Translated by Blomfield Jackson in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8. Greek from editor Roy J. Deferrari (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926).

> If we have no distinct perception of the separate characteristics, namely fatherhood, sonship, and sanctification, but form our conception of God from the general idea of existence, we cannot possibly give a sound account of our faith. We must therefore confess the faith by adding the particular to the common. The Godhead is common; the fatherhood particular [κοινὸν ἡ θεότης, ἴδιον ἡ πατρότης]. We must therefore combine the two and say, "I believe in God the Father." The like course must be pursued in the confession of the Son; we must combine the particular with the common and say "I believe in God the Son," so in the case of the Holy Ghost we must make our utterance conform to the appellation and say "in God the Holy Ghost."

In the context of Letter 236, this explanation is little more than an aside, occupying only one paragraph in a series of answers to diverse questions that Basil had received from Amphilochius, but it is valuable because it gives us a glimpse into the earliest stages of the new idea.[12]

Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa, however, takes up this distinction in very similar terms, expanding on it considerably in Letter 38.[13] Gregory begins by drawing a grammatical distinction between what we would now call *nouns* and *proper names*, using *man* and *Peter, Andrew, John,* or *James* as examples. The nouns, he says, "indicate the common nature [ἡ κοινή φύσις]," while in the case of proper names, "the denotation is more limited [ἰδικωτέραν ἔχει τὴν ἔνδειξιν]." We arrive at this more limited notion, he says, through a "circumscription" (περιγραφή) of the more general and indefinite common nature. For example, in the case of Paul and Timothy, the word *man* does not apply to Paul any more than it does to Timothy. The name *Paul,* however, leads our minds to pick out a particular someone distinct from Timothy. Gregory holds that we form a clear conception of Paul in particular through the use of particular "differentiating properties" (τὰ ἰδιάζοντα). This leads us away from the vague and generic conception of nature and instead to the concrete conception of that "nature subsisting" (ὑφεστῶσα ἡ φύσις). Because of the concrete nature of this particularization, Gregory says, "My statement, then, is this. That which is spoken of in a special and peculiar manner is indicated by the name of the hypostasis [τὸ ἰδίως λεγόμενον τῷ τῆς

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[12] See Turcescu, "Prosōpon and Hypostasis in Basil of Caesarea's 'Against Eunomius' and the Epistles," for the dating of this letter.

[13] This letter is traditionally attributed to Basil and so appears in the sequence of his letters. Many scholars today, however, side with a minority of manuscripts attributing the letter to Gregory. For an overview of the issue, see Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 47–50.

ὑποστάσεως δηλοῦσθαι ῥήματι]." He further explains this choice of term: "This then is the hypostasis, or 'under-standing;' not the indefinite conception of the essence or substance, which, because what is signified is general, finds no 'standing,' but the conception which by means of the expressed peculiarities gives standing and circumscription to the general and uncircumscribed." Gregory uses a very similar example with slightly different language in his famous letter *Ad Ablabium* addressing the question of why it is not proper to speak of three gods. Here again Gregory begins by fixing the meaning of the terms ὑπόστασις and φύσις through the contrast between proper names such as *Luke* and common nouns such as *man*. Nouns, he claims, identify individuals "by the common name of their nature [ἐκ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῆς φύσεως ὀνόματος]."[14] By contrast, *Luke* is "the proper appellation [ἡ ἰδιαζοῦσα προσηγορία]" of someone and refers to him according to "that name which belongs to him as his own [ἡ ἰδία ἐπικειμένη αὐτῷ]." Hence the idea of the persons (ὁ τῶν ὑποστάσεων λόγος) admits of that separation which is made by the peculiar attributes (ἰδιότητα) considered in each severally.

A few cautions are in order at this point. First, the Cappadocians are careful to warn against the misuse of analogies applied to God. For example, in Letter 38 during an extended exposition of several analogies to describe the distinction in unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Gregory warns, "Receive what I say as at best a token and reflexion of the truth; not as the actual truth itself." We should not, therefore, directly transfer without qualification the relation between human nature and Paul onto the relation between Divinity and the Father, nor should we turn around and transfer our conception of divine ὑπόστασις directly onto Paul.

Second, the Cappadocians clearly do not have *personhood* in view as the primary object of analysis. This may be obscured both by the standard translation of ὑπόστασις as "person" and the frequent use of human persons as analogies for explaining the distinction between common and particular. While the particular technical meaning that the Cappadocians give it is new, the philosophical resonances of ὑπόστασις remain in the background, and the Cappadocians chose it in order to emphasize the real particularity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in contrast to the modalist views of Sabellius and his allies. The fact that the Cappadocians frequently draw upon the examples of individual human persons—among many other analogies—can partly be explained by the frequent occurrence of similar examples in the philosophical literature of the time. Aristotle, for instance, uses the example of an individual human to describe the distinction between primary and secondary οὐσία in *Categories* 2a, but he does this right alongside the example

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[14] Translated by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5. All Greek text is taken from Migne, PG 45, col. 120.

of a particular horse, so he clearly does not have in mind a kind of particularity special to the personal mode of existence. Porphyry, similarly, uses the example of Socrates as a particular instance of humanity in his discussion of individuation in *Isagoge* 7.20. While attempting to appeal to the "common notions" of the time in *Ad Graecos* 29.16–20, Gregory of Nyssa likewise uses the stock examples of individual man and individual horse to explicate his meaning of ὑπόστασις. Summarizing the teaching of the previous Greek Fathers, John of Damascus also uses the examples of individual man and individual horse in his definition of ὑπόστασις in *Dialectica* 42.[15] Throughout, therefore, we should not let the examples of human persons lead us to believe that any of these authors have in mind a special distinction between persons and nonpersons. Instead, the focus is the way that a general nature is made concrete. In the pre-Christian sources, the analysis remains rather undeveloped, whereas the distinctions necessary for a thorough doctrine of the Trinity force the Cappadocians to articulate a much richer vision.

Nevertheless, this richer vision *does* contribute historically toward the development of a profound notion of personhood. It does this for three reasons. First, by placing this richer vision of particularity in the context of Trinitarian theology, generations upon generations of Christian thinkers come to associate the notion of particularity with the intra-Trinitarian relations of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While there is a general philosophical problem of how to account for the distinction between one pebble and another, it makes a difference to begin one's thinking about the subject with the intensely personal language of Trinitarian discourse, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are really distinct yet not three instances of a species (unlike the pebbles). The consistent use of human persons as analogies for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit likewise encourages the mind in this direction, even if they were stock philosophical examples at the time.

Second, as Josef Seifert has persuasively argued, we should understand particular subsistence along a spectrum of realization, with persons realizing the self-presence of subsistence in a deeper way than that which is realized at the subpersonal level.[16] Seifert argues that the concrete particularity of a being subsisting as self-present and really distinct from others is at the core of the Aristotelian notion of substance. While this is realized in some way by all distinct beings, self-conscious moral persons realize this ideal of substance in its fullness. Hence we should understand the concept of person as the realization of substance *par excellence*. While we may want to speak for some

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[15] I am grateful to conversations with Jonathan Hill, who has helped me clarify this point and shared the reference to John of Damascus.

[16] See especially his *Essere e Persona* (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuere, 1989), ch. 9.

purposes of each blade of grass existing as a unique, self-subsisting being, the uniqueness of each nevertheless remains in the background, as it were, submerged in the nature that each blade has in common with every other. In the spiritual existence of the person, however, the unrepeatable particularity of each comes to the fore. While we *could* give a name to each blade, we are *compelled* to use names for each person.[17]

Third, ὑπόστασις comes to be translated in the western half of the Roman Empire by the Latin term *persona*. This is significant because *persona* does include within its primary meaning a distinction between person and nonperson, and it would be unnatural in Latin to illustrate the distinction between *persona* and *natura* by the example of a particular horse. Hence Western thinkers begin to combine their thinking about real relational particularity, irreducible to nature, with their thinking about what it means to exist in a rational rather than subrational mode. Before the Cappadocian settlement of fourth-century disputes, Tertullian had already introduced the term *persona* into Trinitarian discourse. In *Ad Praxean* 25, he appeals to scripture in order to justify the distinction in person and unity of nature: "These three (*tres*) are one (*unum*), not one (*unus*), as it is said, 'I and the Father are one (*unum*).'"[18] This way of putting things only comes out well in languages where the difference between gendered and neuter words is more universal. The distinction between *unus* and *unum* is the distinction between someone and something, between "who" and "what."

The distinction between "who" and "what" nicely brings together two critical distinctions: First, that between real uniqueness and common nature; second, that between personal and nonpersonal modes of existence. We see this aspect of the earlier tradition in Latin Trinitarian thinking put succinctly by the twelfth-century Richard of Saint Victor. In Book IV of his *De Trinitate*, Richard expresses his dissatisfaction with simply transliterating ὑπόστασις as a technical term into Latin discussions of Trinitarian theology because doing so needlessly obscures the meaning. Instead, he seeks a definition of *persona* that applies analogically down the ladder of being from Divine Persons, through angelic persons, all the way to human persons. In this effort, he observes the following: "The word 'substance' does not mean *who* so much as *what* [*non tam quis quam quid*]. Conversely, the word 'person' does not indicate *what* so much as *who* [*non tam quid quam quis*]." At the end of the same section, he likewise observes the following: "The word 'substance' does not refer to *someone* so much as *something* [*non tam aliquis quam aliquid*]. But conversely, the word 'person' does not refer to *something* so much as *someone* [*non tam aliquid*

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[17] See the profound meditation on this theme by Alexander Montes in this volume.

[18] Translated by Holmes in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 621.

quam aliquis]" (*De Trinitate* 4.7)[19] In this way, Richard wants to give meaning to the term *persona* by contrasting it with the term *substantia*, and he hopes that his audience will understand this contrast by referring to the intuitive, everyday distinction they already make between *quis* (who) and *quid* (what), between *aliquis* (someone) and *aliquid* (something).

Like Gregory, Richard attempts to flesh this out by contrasting personal names with common nouns and reflecting on the kinds of questions we ask and the kinds of answers we receive:

> When something is so distant from us as not to be distinguishable, we ask what it [might] be, and generally the answer we receive is that it is an animal, a man, a horse, etc. However, if [this *something*] has come closer so as to enable us to see that it is a man, we do not ask "*what* is that?" any longer, but rather "*who* is that?" The answer we receive is that he is Matthew, or Bartholomew, or someone's father or son. You see well that to the question "*what is it?*" we answer with a generic or specific word, with a definition or with something of that sort. On the contrary, the answer to the question "*who?*" is a proper name or something equivalent.[20]

Again we see that Trinitarian theological reflection prompts a Christian thinker, immersed in the tradition, to draw a categorical distinction between these two dimensions and extend this distinction outside the strictly theological sphere. This opens a door that, admittedly, neither Richard himself nor any of the earlier Church Fathers walk through: the full appropriation of these personalist insights to a properly Christian anthropology.

Returning to the Greek side of the Christian tradition, we see the next phase of development occur surrounding a number of specifically Christological rather than Trinitarian disputes. To the previous basic data we can now add a fourth:

4. Jesus of Nazareth *is a human being.*

Providing the metaphysical explanation for this was somewhat easier because the Fathers were able to redeploy the new meaning of ὑπόστασις. We call this doctrine the "hypostatic union" because the idea is that Jesus joins in his single ὑπόστασις two complete natures (φύσεις). In this dispute, the "what" dimension that stands in contrast to the "who" dimension usually goes by this name of

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[19] Translation mine; Latin is taken from Migne, PL 196, col. 934–35.
[20] Translated by Ruben Angelici.

"nature" (φύσις rather than οὐσία). Already in the earlier Trinitarian controversies, however, we have seen the Fathers frequently use φύσις interchangeably with οὐσία to denote that which is common between persons or things in contrast to that incommunicable identity that is peculiarly one's own.

The heresies in this phase principally come from the recurring impulse to identify the ὑπόστασις of Christ with some missing part of his human nature. As Joseph Ratzinger puts it, all these early heresies "attempt to locate the concept of the person at some place in the psychic inventory."[21] For example, if the ὑπόστασις is simply the mind of a person, then we should conceive of Jesus as a partial human being—complete except that the finite human mind has been scooped out to make room for the Divine Mind to enter in. This impulse comes, again, from the inclination to think of ὑπόστασις as a kind of thing, and this in turn derives from the Greek predilection for a metaphysics preoccupied with thinghood. In controversy after controversy, however, the Church consistently affirmed that the human nature of Jesus was truly complete, fully possessing a finite soul, a finite mind, a finite will. Otherwise, it is hard to see how he could be "in all points tempted like as we are" (Hebrews 4:15 KJV). As Ratzinger says, "Nothing is missing; no subtraction from humanity is permitted or given."[22] What follows is the irresistible conclusion that ὑπόστασις is simply not a kind of thing. *Who* Jesus is simply cannot be reduced to a soul, a mind, a will, or any other *thing*. It names an altogether distinct dimension of his existence perpendicular, so to speak, to the dimension of substance or nature.

We can summarize the results of the foregoing analysis by borrowing the language of Karol Wojtyła in his incisive essay, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being." According to Wojtyła, the thinking of classical metaphysics is thoroughly "cosmological" in character.[23] The question that drives Greek thinking from the pre-Socratics, through Socrates and Plato, to Aristotle is the question τί ἐστι (what is it?). The answer to this question will be a certain kind of nature or substance given in general terms such that this kind of thing can be situated in an orderly, intelligible cosmos alongside other kinds of thing. Nature (φύσις) and substance (οὐσία) are not quite the same type of answer to this question, since the former places the emphasis on the internal, unfolding character of a kind of thing, while the latter places the emphasis on the real being of a kind of thing. They both have in common, however, an emphasis on thinghood and kinds. We can ask this type of question about the divine: "What is God?" And we receive the single divine οὐσία

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[21] "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," 448.

[22] Ibid.

[23] "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, ed. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 209–17.

as our answer (although this answer is not without a host of separate theological quandaries that need not trouble us here). We can also ask the question of Christ: "What kind of thing is Christ?" And we receive *both* the answer "human" *and* the answer "God." The new meaning of ὑπόστασις, however, opens up to us an altogether different kind of question and answer. Without abandoning the question "*What* is God?" we can also ask, "*Who* is God?" And we receive three answers: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can further ask, "Who is Christ?" And we receive just one answer: Jesus.

For some centuries, we do not see the new meaning of ὑπόστασις widely applied outside its strictly technical usage in the context of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine. The jump from theology to a Christian anthropology does not happen all at once but is rather a slow development that, in some ways, is still taking place. Nowhere in the Fathers do we find a dedicated, purely philosophical treatise on the hypostatic identity of individual human beings. Nevertheless, several of the passages I have examined and many more like them show that the Fathers are quite willing to apply these theological concepts to ordinary human individuals (albeit with an analogical and qualified sense) and even fix their meaning by reference to this ordinary sphere. It is only a matter of time before Christian thinkers interested in philosophical anthropology and interested in maintaining continuity with the Christian tradition will look to theological passages such as these for inspiration and guidance.

Nevertheless, the difficult work the Fathers accomplished in bringing us the theological notion of ὑπόστασις already does this much for our anthropology: it forces us to expand the familiar Greek metaphysical categories of substance and nature and consider deeply the existence of a particular *someone* in contrast to the generic *something* made concrete by the particular person. Ὑπόστασις names the dimension in virtue of which one stands in the logical space of I-Thou encounter, *who* one is, *someone* in relationship with other someones. Οὐσία, by contrast, names the dimension in virtue of which one is also situated in the logical space of I-It interaction as a thing in a cosmos of other things, *what* one is, *something* in an expansive nexus with other somethings. The expansion in thinking required here resembles what happens in the mind of a student when he makes the leap from two-dimensional geometry and begins to work with solids. Once we have accomplished this expansion and we turn to examine the phenomenological data, we have the intellectual resources to conceive of ourselves as more than a mere instance of a type. Along one slice of our existence we *are* instances of types, but this compressed perspective misses our full-bodied personal existence. Hence the experience of standing back from the stream of impulses given to us by our nature need not involve the identification of our true self with merely a higher impulse or another faculty within our "psychic inventory," for this

would restrict our search again to the plane of generic kinds. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ as a single someone irreducible to any nature breaks free our fixation on this plane in such a way that we may begin to conceive of ourselves by analogy as ὑπόστασις in a manner similar though not identical to his. The full development of this line of thought does not come until more modern Christian philosophy and theology, but it lies implicit from the beginning in Patristic metaphysics.

Dualism Is Not Enough

I want to end with a brief application of the insights from the first two sections by developing in the context of contemporary philosophy of religion the idea that *who* I am cannot be analyzed solely in terms of generic thinghood. In current Christian philosophy, we see a laudable effort to defend the doctrine of the human soul against the desiccating forces of materialistic reductionism. For many reasons in Christian theology, philosophy of mind, and practical spirituality, Christians must maintain that human beings possess a soul and that this soul cannot be reduced to the mechanical interactions of molecules. All this is well and good, but once they have defended the doctrine of the soul, many Christians slip into identifying the true self with the soul that they have defended.[24] The thought, of course, is natural enough, and anyone who reads the *Phaedo* in school will have the idea somewhere in the back of his mind. A more careful student of the Christian tradition, however, will know that this identification of the self with the soul has been consistently considered and rejected by Christian thinkers. Thomas Aquinas, for one, in his *Commentary on First Corinthians* regarding the necessity of the bodily resurrection states plainly, *anima mea non est ego*. Certainly, the soul in the intermediate state between death and resurrection remains a person, and perhaps the soul has more to do with who we are than the body. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to simply identify who we are with the soul. Such a careful student of the Christian tradition may worry that personalists like Hildebrand fall into precisely this trap when they urge an emancipation of our "free personal center" (which might be read as the soul) from the impulses arising in our nature (which might be read as impulses from the body).

Our meditation on the early Christian struggle for the meaning of ὑπόστασις makes clear, however, both why the identification of self with soul would be a mistake and why Hildebrand is not guilty of this mistake. The

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[24] As just two examples, both Richard Swinburne and J. P. Moreland are well-known defenders of a nonreductionist metaphysics of soul who frequently slip into this identification of self and soul.

soul just as much as the body belongs to the realm of substance and nature. The soul is a *kind of thing*, and "soul" is an appropriate answer to the question, "What is it?" As human beings, we are invested with a particular kind of soul that comes endowed with a range of faculties and organic processes. This all belongs to our nature. From this sphere of our existence come the "responses" that "[unconscious people's] nature suggests to them." While many of these responses may derive from bodily desires such as responses to food or drink, many have a wholly psychological origin, such as responses to insults or flattery. Remaining submerged in the latter does not bring such people one wit closer to "emancipating themselves, by virtue of their free personal center, from their nature" than remaining submerged in the former.

Once we realize this, we may try to restrict our search to the faculty of free will within the soul rather than the whole soul. If we construe free will, however, as an essential faculty of a particular kind of nature, then free will by itself will fare no better than the soul as a whole. So long as "free will" amounts to no more than a generic faculty by which rational animals select among alternatives, "free will" must be understood as something that all rational creatures possess in common and cannot sufficiently explain the particularity of the person who does the sanctioning. Hildebrand speaks of a "primordial capacity inherent in the personal mode of being," and it may be tempting to understand this as a reference to the true person—as though the real person could exist as a capacity within the person. Just like the soul and the will of Christ, however, capacities remain "anhypostatic"—that is, standing in need of concretization in a determinate ὑπόστασις. Free will must always be realized as the free will *of* a particular someone, and free actions express the peculiar identity of this someone rather than the generic capacity that we all have in common. That being said, it is important to note that personal existence *does* require that one have a certain nature, for each ὑπόστασις is always the concretization of a general nature and could not exist without such a nature. Furthermore, the kind of personal existence and free, rational consciousness that Hildebrand describes requires a definite kind of nature with definite faculties in place. The "personal mode of existence" must possess a "free personal center" after all. Trees, for instance, do not have the necessary faculties in their nature to achieve moral agency, and therefore their general nature does not provide the necessary basis for the personal sanctioning that Hildebrand describes. Free will, then, remains an important necessary condition for concrete personal existence but should not be simply identified with the true person.[25]

Hildebrand speaks of the "personal mode of being," and I believe he chooses his words quite carefully here. He does not identify the person with

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[25] I am grateful to the reviewer Errin Clark for pressing me on this point.

some particular thing inside of us as though the person were just a mysterious kind of thing within the familiar human kind of thing. Instead, he identifies a particular *modality of being*, a distinct dimension of one concrete being along which a person exists as a *someone*. This is what it means to be a person. Being a *who* in addition to being a *what*; being a *thou* in addition to being an *it*. Thinking in this way must remain foreign to those whose metaphysics is shaped exclusively by pre-Christian Greek categories because such a metaphysics will always seek to flatten hypostatic existence down to the plane of nature. Hildebrand and other modern Christian personalists are only able to have the profound insights that they have because they are operating within a tradition of metaphysics initiated centuries before by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.