

QUESTION 29

The Divine Persons

Given these points about the processions and relations which it seemed we should have in mind beforehand, we must now consider the persons. First, we will consider them absolutely (questions 29-38), and then we will consider them in relation to one another (questions 39-43).

As for the absolute consideration of the persons, we will first consider them in general (questions 29-32) and then consider them one by one (questions 33-38). There seem to be four pertinent topics for the general consideration of the persons: (a) the signification of the name ‘person’ (question 29); (b) the plurality of persons (question 30); (c) the things that follow from the plurality of persons or stand in opposition to it, e.g., their diversity, ‘aloneness’, etc. (question 31); and (d) the things that pertain to our knowledge of the persons (question 32).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) What is the definition of ‘person’? (2) How is a person related to an essence, a subsistent, and a hypostasis? (3) Does the name ‘person’ belong to God? (4) What does the name ‘person’ signify in God?

Article 1

What is the definition of ‘person’?

In *De Duabus Naturis* Boethius formulates the following definition of ‘person’: ‘A person is an individual substance with a rational nature’ (*rationalis naturae individua substantia*). But this definition seems to be inadequate:

Objection 1: No singular thing is defined. But ‘person’ signifies something singular. Therefore, it is inappropriate to define ‘person’.

Objection 2: As it occurs in the definition of ‘person’, ‘substance’ is being used either for ‘primary substance’ or ‘secondary substance’. If it is being used for ‘primary substance’, then it is superfluous to add ‘individual’, since a primary substance is an individual substance. On the other hand, if it stands for ‘secondary substance’, then the terms are opposed to one another and it is wrong to add ‘individual’, since secondary substances are called ‘genera’ or ‘species’ [and not ‘individuals’]. Therefore, the definition is incorrectly formulated.

Objection 3: The name of a logical intention (*intentio*) should not occur in the definition of a real entity (*res*). For instance, it would not be well-formulated if one were to say, ‘A man is a species of animal’; for ‘man’ is the name of a real entity and ‘species’ is the name of a logical intention. Therefore, since ‘person’ is the name of a real entity (for it signifies a substance with a rational nature), it is wrong for ‘individual’, which is the name of a logical intention, to occur in its definition.

Objection 4: As *Physics* 2 says, a nature is a principle of movement and rest in that in which it exists *per se* and not *per accidens*. But there are persons, e.g., God and the angels, who are immovable beings. Therefore, ‘nature’ should not be used in the definition of ‘person’; instead, ‘essence’ should be.

Objection 5: A separated soul is an individual substance with a rational nature. But a separated soul is not a person. Therefore, this definition of ‘person’ is incorrect.

I respond: Even though universals and particulars are found in every genus, nonetheless, there is a special way in which individuals are found in the genus of substance. For a substance is individuated through itself. Accidents, on the other hand, are individuated by their subject, which is a substance; for instance, something is called *this* whiteness insofar as it exists in *this* subject. Hence, it is appropriate for individuals in the genus of substance to have a special name in preference to other things; so they are called ‘hypostases’ or ‘primary substances’.

However, there is an even more special and perfect mode in which particulars and individuals are found among *rational* substances, which have dominion over their acts and which are not just acted upon like other substances, but act on their own. Now actions belong to singular things. And so among the other substances, singular substances with a rational nature likewise have a special name. And this name is ‘person’.

And so ‘individual substance’ occurs in the aforementioned definition of ‘person’ insofar as ‘person’ signifies a singular thing in the genus of substance, whereas ‘with a rational nature’ is added insofar as ‘person’ signifies a singular thing among the rational substances.

Reply to objection 1: Even though this or that singular thing cannot be defined, nonetheless, that which pertains to the common concept of singularity can be defined—and so it is that the Philosopher defines ‘primary substance’. And it is in this sense that Boethius is defining ‘person’.

Reply to objection 2: According to some, ‘substance’ is being used for ‘primary substance’—i.e., ‘hypostasis’—in the definition of ‘person’, and yet it is not superfluous to add ‘individual’. For the name ‘hypostasis’ or ‘primary substance’ excludes both the idea of a universal and the idea of a part (for we do not say that the universal *man* is a hypostasis or that a hand is a hypostasis, given that it is a part), whereas the addition of ‘individual’ excludes the notion of assumability from a person. For the human nature in Christ is not a person, since it has been assumed by a more dignified person, viz., the Word of God.

Nonetheless, a better reply is that in the definition ‘substance’ is being taken generically, insofar as it is divisible into *primary substance* and *secondary substance*, and that the addition of ‘individual’ restricts it to standing for a primary substance.

Reply to objection 3: Since substantival differences are not [always] known to us—or at least not named by us—it is sometimes necessary to use accidental differences in place of substantival ones. For instance, someone might say that fire is a simple hot and dry body. For proper accidents are the effects of substantial forms and reveal those forms. Similarly, the names of logical intentions can be used to define things insofar as these names are taken for certain unposited names of things. And so it is that the name ‘individual’ is used in the definition of ‘person’ to designate the mode of subsisting that belongs to particular substances.

Reply to objection 4: According to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 5, the name ‘nature’ (*natura*) is imposed in the first place to signify the generation of living things, which is called their nativity (*nativitas*). And since a generation of this sort comes from an intrinsic principle, the name ‘nature’ is extended to signify the intrinsic principle of any movement. And this is the way ‘nature’ is defined in *Physics* 2.

Since a principle of this sort is either formal or material, both matter and form are called ‘nature’ in general. And since the essence of each thing is completed through its form, the essence of each thing—which is what the thing’s definition signifies—is commonly called its nature. And this is the way in which ‘nature’ is being used in the present definition. Hence, in the same book Boethius says, “The nature is the specific difference informing each thing.” For the specific difference completes the definition and is taken from the thing’s proper form. And so in the definition of ‘person’, given that a person is a singular of a determinate genus, it was more appropriate to use the name ‘nature’ than the name ‘essence’, which is taken from ‘*esse*’ and is a more general term.

Reply to objection 5: A soul is a *part* of the human species, and so even if it is separated, it cannot be called an individual substance, i.e., a hypostasis or a primary substance, because it still retains the nature of a thing that can be united to something else—just as a hand, or any other part of a man, cannot be called an individual substance. And so neither the name ‘person’ nor its definition belongs to a separated soul.

Article 2

Is a person the same as a hypostasis, a subsistent, and an essence?

It seems that a person is the same as a hypostasis (*hypostasis*), a subsistent (*subsistentia*), and an essence (*essentia*):

Objection 1: In *De Duabus Naturis* Boethius says, “The Greeks called an individual substance with a rational nature by the name *hypostasis*.” But this is what the name ‘person’ likewise signifies for us. Therefore, a person is altogether the same as a hypostasis.

Objection 2: Just as we say that there are three persons in God, so too we say that there are three subsistents (*ita in divinis dicimus tres subsistentias*). But this would not be the case unless ‘person’ and ‘subistent’ had the same signification. Therefore, ‘person’ and ‘subistent’ have the same signification.

Objection 3: In commenting on the *Categories*, Boethius says that *ousia*, which is the same as ‘essence’ (*essentia*), signifies what is composed of matter and form. But that which is composed of matter and form is an individual substance and is also called a hypostasis and a person. Therefore, all these names seem to have the same signification.

But contrary to this:

1. In *De Duabus Naturis* Boethius says, “Genera and species only subsist, whereas individuals not only subsist (*subsistunt*) but also ‘stand under’ (*substant*).” But subsistents are so-called because of subsisting, just as substances or hypostases are so-called because of ‘standing under’. Therefore, since the *esse* of hypostases or persons does not belong to genera and species, hypostases or persons are not the same as subsistents.

2. In commenting on the *Categories*, Boethius says that the hypostasis is called ‘matter’, whereas the *ousia*, i.e., subsistent, is called ‘form’. But neither form nor matter can be called a person. Therefore, a person is different from a hypostasis and from a subsistent.

I respond: According to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 5, ‘substance’ is said in two ways:

In one sense, what is called a substance is a thing’s ‘what-ness’ (*quidditas*), which is signified by the definition. It is in this sense that we say that the definition signifies the ‘substance’ of a thing. Substance in this sense is what the Greeks call ‘*ousia*’ and what we can call the ‘essence’.

In the second sense, what is called a substance is a subject or suppositum which subsists in the category of substance. Substance in this sense, taken generally, can likewise be denominated by a name signifying a logical intention, and in this way it is called a ‘suppositum’ (*suppositum*). It is also named by three names that signify a real entity—viz., ‘thing with a nature’ (*res naturae*), ‘subistent’ (*subsistentia*), and ‘hypostasis’. These names correspond to the three ways of considering a substance in this second sense:

(a) A substance is called a ‘subistent’ insofar as it exists in its own right and not in another (*per se existit et non in alio*). For things that exist in themselves (*in se*) and not in another are said to subsist.

(b) A substance is called a ‘thing with a nature’ insofar as it underlies a common nature (*supponitur alicui naturae communi*). For instance, this man is a thing with a human nature.

(c) A substance is called a ‘hypostasis’ or a ‘substance’ insofar as it underlies its accidents (*supponitur accidentibus*).

Moreover, what these three names signify generally within the whole genus of substance, the name ‘person’ signifies within the genus of rational substances.

Reply to objection 1: By its proper signification the Greek name ‘*hypostasis*’ signifies any individual in the genus of substance. However, in common usage it is taken for an individual with a

rational nature, by reason of the excellence of such a nature.

Reply to objection 2: Just as we say that there are three *persons* and three *subsistents* in God, the Greeks say that there are three *hypostases*. But since the name ‘substance’ corresponds to ‘hypostasis’ according to its proper signification, there is an ambiguity among us. For sometimes ‘substance’ signifies the essence and sometimes a hypostasis. So to prevent a possible occasion of error, it was deemed preferable to use ‘subsistent’, rather than ‘substance’, for ‘hypostasis’.

Reply to objection 3: The essence is, properly speaking, what is signified by the definition. But the definition includes the principles of the species and not the individual principles. Hence, in the case of things composed of matter and form, ‘essence’ does not signify just the form or just the matter, but instead signifies that which is composed of the *common* form and the *common* matter, since these are the principles of the species.

However, that which is composed of *this* matter and *this* form has the nature of a hypostasis and a person. So, for instance, soul and flesh and bone belong to the nature of man, but *this* soul and *this* flesh and *this* bone belong to the nature of *this* man.

Thus, ‘hypostasis’ and ‘person’ add the individual principles to the concept of the essence, and they are not the same as the essence in things composed of matter and form. This was explained above, when we were discussing God’s simplicity (q. 3, a. 3).

Reply to argument 1 for the contrary: Boethius says that genera and species subsist (*subsistere*) in the sense that subsisting belongs to individuals by reason of the fact that they are included under genera and species in the category of substance, and not because the species or genera themselves subsist—except according to the opinion of Plato, who claimed that the species of things subsist separately from the singulars.

On the other hand, to ‘stand under’ (*substare*) belongs to the same individuals in relation to their accidents, which fall outside the nature of the genera and species.

Reply to argument 2 for the contrary: An individual composed of form and matter is such that its ‘standing under’ its accidents derives from its matter. This is why, in *De Trinitate*, Boethius himself says, “A simple form cannot be a subject.”

But the fact that an individual subsists *per se* derives from its form, which does not ‘come to’ a subsistent thing from the outside, but instead gives actual *esse* to the matter in order that the individual might be able to subsist.

It is for this reason that Boethius attributes ‘hypostasis’ to the matter and ‘*ousia*’ (or ‘subsistent’) to the form. For the matter is the principle of ‘standing under’, and the form is the principle of subsisting.

Article 3

Should the name ‘person’ be used in the case of God?

It seems that the name ‘person’ should not be used in the case of God (*nomen personae non sit ponendum in divinis*):

Objection 1: At the beginning of *De Divinis Nominibus* Dionysius says, “In general one should not dare to say or think anything about the super-substantial and hidden divinity beyond those things which have been divinely expressed to us by the sacred declarations.” But the name ‘person’ is not expressed to us in the Sacred Scripture of either the Old Testament or the New Testament. Therefore, the name ‘person’ should not be used in the case of God.

Objection 2: In *De Duabus Naturis* Boethius says, “The name ‘person’ seems to derive from those

masks (*personae*) that were used to represent men in comedies and tragedies. For ‘person’ comes from ‘sounding through’ (*personare*), since a louder sound had to be shouted out through the cavity of the mask. Now the Greeks called these masks ‘*prosopa*’ from the fact that they are placed over (*pros*) the face (*ops*) and hide one’s visage from the onlookers.” But this cannot apply to the case of God except perhaps in accord with a metaphor. Therefore, the name ‘person’ is said of God only metaphorically.

Objection 3: Every person is a hypostasis. But as was explained above (a. 1), the name ‘hypostasis’ does not seem to belong to God, since, according to Boethius, it signifies that which is the subject of accidents, and there are no accidents in God. Likewise, Jerome says, “In the name ‘hypostasis’ poison lies hidden underneath the honey.” Therefore, the name ‘person’ should not be said of God.

Objection 4: If a definition is denied of something, then so is that which is defined. But the definition of ‘person’ formulated above (a. 1) does not seem to belong to God. For, first of all, ‘rational’ implies discursive cognition, which, as was shown above (q. 14, a. 7), does not belong to God—and so God cannot be said to have a rational nature. Again, God cannot be called an ‘individual’ substance, since the principle of individuation is matter, and God is immaterial. Again, He does not ‘stand under’ accidents, so that He might be called a ‘substance’. Therefore, the name ‘person’ should not be attributed to God.

But contrary to this: The Athanasian creed says, “The person of the Father, the person of the Son, and the person of the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another.”

I respond: ‘Person’ signifies that which is most perfect in all of nature, viz., that which subsists in a rational nature. Hence, since everything that involves perfection should be attributed to God—given that His essence contains within itself every perfection—it follows that the name ‘person’ is appropriately said of God.

However, it is not said of God in exactly the same way in which it is said of creatures; rather, it is said of God in a more excellent way—just like the other names which, having been imposed by us on creatures, are attributed to God. This was explained above when we were discussing the names of God (q. 13, a. 3).

Reply to objection 1: Even though the name ‘person’ is not said of God in the Scriptures of either the Old Testament or the New Testament, nonetheless, what the name signifies—viz., that God is maximally a *per se* being and utterly perfect in His understanding—is asserted of God in many places in Sacred Scripture.

Moreover, if it were necessary to predicate of God only those things that Sacred Scripture says word for word about God, it would follow that no one could ever speak about God in any language other than the languages in which the Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New Testament were originally written.

Again, the urgency of refuting the heretics necessitated finding new names to signify the ancient faith regarding God. Nor should this sort of novelty be avoided. For this is not a profane novelty that departs from the sense of the Scriptures; by contrast, it is *profane* novelties in terminology that the Apostle teaches us to avoid in 1 Timothy 6:20.

Reply to objection 2: Even though the name ‘person’ does not belong to God with respect to *that because of which* the name was imposed, nonetheless, it especially belongs to God with respect to *that which* the name is imposed to signify. For because famous men were being represented in the comedies and tragedies, the name ‘person’ was imposed to signify those who have dignity. Hence, in the churches it was customary to use the name ‘person’ for those who had some sort of dignity. For this reason, some define ‘person’ as follows: ‘A person is a hypostasis with a distinctive property pertaining to dignity’. Moreover, as has been explained (a. 1), it is because subsisting in a rational nature is a great dignity that every individual with a rational nature is called a person. But the dignity of God’s nature surpasses every

dignity, and, accordingly, the name ‘person’ belongs especially to God.

Reply to objection 3: The name ‘hypostasis’ does not belong to God with respect to that because of which the name was imposed, since God does not ‘stand under’ any accidents. However, the name does belong to Him with respect to the fact that it was imposed to signify a subsistent entity.

Now the reason why Jerome says that poison is hidden in this name is that before the signification of the name was fully known among the Latins, there were heretics deceiving simple people by using this name, with the result that the people were confessing belief in more than one essence by confessing belief in more than one hypostasis. This occurred because the name ‘substance’, which corresponds to the Greek ‘hypostasis’, is commonly taken among us for the essence.

Reply to objection 4: God can be said to have a rational nature insofar as ‘rational’ implies an intellectual nature in general—and not insofar as it implies discursive reasoning.

Again, ‘individual’ can belong to God not with respect to the fact that the principle of individuation is matter, but only with respect to the fact that ‘individual’ implies incommunicability.

Again, ‘substance’ is appropriately said of God insofar as it signifies that which exists *per se*.

Still, some claim that the definition formulated above by Boethius is not a definition of ‘person’ in the sense in which we say that there are persons in God. For this reason, Richard of St. Victor, wishing to correct this definition, claimed that ‘person’, as said of God, is “the incommunicable existence of the divine nature” (*est divinae naturae incommunicabilis existentia*).

Article 4

Does the name ‘person’ signify a relation in God?

It seems that the name ‘person’ signifies the substance, rather than a relation, in God (*nomen persona non significet relationem sed substantiam in divinis*):

Objection 1: In *De Trinitate* 7 Augustine says, “When we say ‘the person of the Father’, we are saying nothing other than ‘the substance of the Father’. Indeed, ‘person’ is said with respect to Him Himself, not with respect to the Son.”

Objection 2: The question ‘What is it?’ is a query about the essence. But as Augustine says in the same place, “There are three who give testimony in heaven—the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. And someone asks, ‘Three what?’, and the reply is, ‘Three persons.’” Therefore, the name ‘person’ signifies the essence.

Objection 3: According to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 4, the definition of a name is what is signified by the name. But the definition of ‘person’ is ‘an individual substance with a rational nature’. Therefore, the name ‘person’ signifies the substance.

Objection 4: In the case of men and angels, the name ‘person’ signifies something absolute and not a relation. Therefore, if it signified a relation in God, then ‘person’ would be predicated equivocally of God and men and angels.

But contrary to this: In *De Trinitate* Boethius says that every name pertaining to the persons signifies a relation. But no name pertains more to the persons than the name ‘person’. Therefore, the name ‘person’ signifies a relation.

I respond: The signification of the name ‘person’ presents a difficulty because (a) the name is predicated of the three in the plural, in contrast to the nature of the names belonging to the essence, and also because (b) it is not predicated relationally in the way that names signifying a relation are.

Hence, it has seemed to some that, absolutely speaking and by force of the word itself, the name

'person' signifies the essence in God—just like the name 'God' and the name 'wise' do—but that because of the threat posed by heretics, the name has been adapted by conciliar decree in such a way that it can be used for the relations. And it is used mainly either in the plural, as when we say 'three persons', or with a partitive name, as when we say 'The person of the Father is distinct from the person of the Son'. On the other hand, in the singular it can be used both for something absolute and for a relation.

However, this line of reasoning does not seem adequate. For if, by force of its own signification, the name 'person' were such that it signifies only God's essence, then the misrepresentations of the heretics would not have been put to rest by the decree that there are three persons; indeed, the heretics would have been presented with an occasion for even greater misrepresentations.

For this reason, others have claimed that the name 'person', as used of God, signifies both the essence and a relation together.

Some of them have asserted that it signifies the essence directly (*in recto*) and a relation indirectly (*in obliquo*). For a person is said to be, as it were, one *per se*, and oneness pertains to the essence; on the other hand, what is said *per se* implies a relation indirectly, since the Father is understood to exist *per se* in the sense of being relationally distinct from the Son (*quasi relatione distinctus a filio*).

By contrast, others have claimed just the opposite, viz., that 'person' directly signifies a relation and indirectly signifies the essence. For 'nature' is used in an oblique grammatical case in the definition of 'person'. And this claim is closer to the truth.

To understand the matter clearly, notice that what is less general in a given signification is not contained in what is more general in that signification. For instance, *rational* is included in the signification of 'man', but it is not part of the signification of 'animal'. Hence, it is one thing to ask about the signification of 'animal' and another to ask about the signification of 'animal which is a man'. Similarly, it is one thing to ask about the signification of 'person' in general and another to ask about the signification of 'divine person'. For 'person' in general signifies an individual substance with a rational nature, as has been explained (a. 1). But an individual is that which is undivided in itself and distinct from others. Therefore, 'person of such-and-such a nature' signifies that which is distinctive in that nature; for instance, 'person of a human nature' signifies *this* flesh and *these* bones and *this* soul, which are the principles that individuate a man. These principles, even though they are not part of the signification of 'person', are nonetheless part of the signification of 'human person'.

Now, as was explained above (q. 28, a. 3), the distinctions in God arise only from the relations of origin. However, a relation in God does not exist as an accident inhering in a subject, but is instead the divine essence itself, and thus it subsists in just the way that the divine essence subsists. Therefore, just as the divine essence (*deitas*) is God, so too the divine Paternity is God the Father, who is a divine person. Therefore, 'divine person' signifies a relation as subsistent. And this is just to signify, in the manner of a substance, a relation which is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature—though what subsists in the divine nature is not different from the divine nature itself.

In this sense it is true that the name 'person' signifies a relation directly and the essence indirectly (*nomen persona significat relationem in recto, et essentiam in obliquo*). However, it does not directly signify a relation insofar as it is a relation, but rather signifies a relation in the manner of a hypostasis. Likewise, it also signifies the essence directly and a relation indirectly, insofar as the essence is the same as a hypostasis (*etiam significat essentiam in recto, et relationem in obliquo*). However, a hypostasis is signified in God by a distinctive relation, and so a relation, signified in the manner of a relation, falls under the concept of a person indirectly.

Thus, it can also be said that this signification of the name 'person' was not perceived prior to the misrepresentations of the heretics, and hence at that prior time the name 'person' in this sense was not in use except as one among other absolute names. But afterwards this name was adapted to stand for a relation—though congruently with its signification, viz., in the sense that its standing for a relation does

not derive solely from [this new] usage, as the first opinion claimed, but derives also from its own signification.

Reply to objection 1: The name ‘person’ is predicated with respect to itself and not with respect to another. For it signifies a relation not in the manner of a relation, but in the manner of a substance that is a hypostasis. And this is the sense in which Augustine claims that it signifies the essence, since in God the hypostasis is the same as the essence. For in God *that which is* does not differ from *that by which it is*.

Reply to objection 2: The question ‘What is it?’ is sometimes a query about the nature that is signified by the definition, as when one asks, ‘What is a man?’. And the response is, ‘A mortal rational animal’.

On the other hand, ‘What is it?’ is sometimes a query about the suppositum, as when one asks, ‘What is that swimming in the sea?’ And the answer is, ‘A fish’. And it is in this sense that ‘Three persons’ is the response to those who ask, ‘Three what?’.

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained, in the case of God a relation is what is understood by the concept of an individual (i.e., distinctive or incommunicable) substance.

Reply to objection 4: A different concept of something less general does not create an equivocation in the more general concept. For even though the proper definition of a horse is different from the proper definition of a donkey, the name ‘animal’ is still used univocally for both a horse and a donkey, since the general definition of ‘animal’ belongs to both. Hence, it does not follow that the name ‘person’ is being used equivocally, even though it is the case that ‘relation’ is contained in the signification of ‘divine person’, whereas it is not contained in the signification of ‘angelic person’ or ‘human person’.

On the other hand, the name ‘person’ is not used univocally of God and angels and men, either; for as was shown above (q. 13, a. 5), nothing can be predicated univocally of God and creatures.