

The Cappadocian Distinction Between Person and Nature and Its Importance for Trinitarian Theology

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Throughout most of the fourth century AD, the Christian church struggled with the Arian controversy. This conflict was a debate over whether Jesus Christ was very God of very God or something less than God. Indeed, this controversy can be seen as the culmination of the church trying to come to terms with her belief in one God who is three persons. From her beginning, the church always confessed belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but how these persons were one was often the subject of debate. A major victory for the church was the Council of Nicea in 325, which settled on the term *homoousios* to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son: Christ is fully God because he has the same essence or nature as God the Father. Despite this victory, the council did not end the dispute; Arianism would remain a problem until the First Council of Constantinople in 381, which essentially ended the Arian controversy. During the time between these two councils, there were some who, although not being in full agreement with the Arians, were still not comfortable employing the word *homoousios* as they felt it blurred the distinction between the Father and the Son and either risked or introduced an heresy from previous centuries called Modalism. During this intermediate period, the task of refuting further Arian claims, of responding to the concerns of those who feared utilizing *homoousios*, and of refining the concepts which lie under the church's understanding of the Trinity largely fell to three men known as the Cappadocian Fathers: Sts. Basil the great, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their mutual friend Gregory Nazianzus. It was their formulation of triadology which was codified at the First Council of Constantinople, and an important aspect of their methodology was the distinction they made between the concepts of person and nature.¹ It is my purpose in this paper to show why such a distinction is important for theology. I will begin by briefly sketching the Modalist and Arian systems and demonstrate that, despite ultimately affirming different conclusions, one of the errors forcing them to their conclusions is a confounding of person and nature. Then, with St. Basil as our main focus, I will illustrate how a distinction between the two excludes mingling the persons of the Trinity (Modalism) or destroying their unity (Arianism) by examining what this distinction entails and how it preserves a balance between the oneness and multiplicity of God.

In the centuries leading up to the Arian controversy, the church had to combat the heresies of Marcianism and Gnosticism, which both taught a multiplicity of gods in some form or another. As a response to these heresies, two

¹ Throughout this essay, I will be using the term "nature," "substance," and "essence" as equivalent, and the terms "person" and "hypostasis" as equivalent.

other heresies emerged: Dynamic Monarchianism² and Modalistic Monarchianism. They are grouped under the name "Monarchianism" because they were concerned with protecting the monarchy or oneness of God.³ Our present concern is with the latter of these: Modalism or Sabellianism as it was known in the east. Although there were different nuances among the Modalists, they were all agreed that the terms "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" were just different names for the same diving being or person, which could signify his different aspects or the various modes in which he presented himself; the names did not denote real and distinct persons.

An early proponent of Modalism was Noetus of Smyrna. He taught that there was no distinction between the Father and Son and that one could even speak of the Father as being crucified. Responding to these views in a short treatise, St Hippolytus of Rome summarizes the reasoning of Noetus and his followers. After establishing from the scriptures that God is one, Hippolytus says that:

They answer in this manner: *'If therefore I acknowledge Christ to be God, He is the Father Himself, if He is indeed God; and Christ suffered, being Himself God; and consequently the Father suffered, for He was the Father Himself.'*⁴

As is apparent in this passage, the distinction between the names "Father" and "Christ" is only nominal; they both describe the same person. This lack of distinction is the result of failing to distinguish between person and nature, and such a failure is seen in the phrase: *"If therefore I acknowledge Christ to be God, He is the Father Himself, if He is indeed God."* The necessity present in this phrase for the Son to be the Father suggests the notion that to be God is to be the Father: in order for Christ to be God, he *has* to be the Father as well. Implied here also is that if Christ is not the Father, then he is not God, *but something else* or of a different essence. Thus, the Modalists have identified or equated the Father with *what* it means to be God - the divine nature. As this reasoning shows, they think that the personal names are indicative of an underlying nature and not of something distinct from that nature. Since person is the same thing as nature, it is impossible for the natures of unique and numerically distinct persons to be ontologically the same because *a distinction between persons entails a distinction*

² Dynamic Monarchianism is also known as Subordinationism. It is the belief that Christ was just a mere man whom God adopted and infused with his own power.

³ Gonzales, Justo L. *A History of Christian Thought*. Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 143.

⁴ St. Hippolytus of Rome, *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume V, p. 224. (Emphasis Mine).

between natures. Moreover, even if the natures of two (or three) persons are identical, the logic of this metaphysic demands that the natures are unique to each person, distinct from one another, and not shared; in other words, there is no real communion or ontological unity of persons, despite their nature being identical. Any attempt, therefore, to distinguish between the Father and the Son will result in an unsavory dilemma: Christ would either not be God because he would have a different nature; or, if Christ were to have a nature identical to the Father while remaining distinct from him, there would be two identical, but ontologically distinct, Fathers. Since the Modalists wanted to affirm both the deity of Christ and belief in one God, they were forced to conclude that the Son was the Father.

Whereas confusing person and nature led the Modalists to identify the Son with the Father, the same cannot be said of the Arians: they completely cut him off from the Father. Arianism has its start with a fourth century Alexandrian priest named Arius. He and his followers believed that the Son was created by the will of the Father. The Son was the highest and most perfect being of all creation and was essentially in his own category of creature; but he was, nevertheless, of a different essence than God the Father and was in no way equal to him in divinity.⁵

The famous opponent of the Arians during the early part of the controversy was the bishop of Alexandria St. Athanasius the great. In his work *On the Synods*, he preserves an epistle from Arius and his followers written to Alexander, who had previously been the bishop of Alexandria. In this letter, the Arians affirm their commitment to a belief in one God who is the Father, and they reject several Trinitarian heresies, including Sabellianism. They then explain their views:

And God, being the cause of all things, is Unbegun and altogether Sole, but the Son being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, was not before His generation, but being begotten apart from time before all things, alone was made to subsist by the Father. For He is not eternal or co-eternal or co-unoriginate with the Father, nor has He His being together with the Father, as some speak of relations, *introducing two ingenerate beginnings*, but God is before all things as being Monad and Beginning of all.... But if the terms 'from Him,' and 'from the womb,' and 'I came forth from the Father, and I have come,' be understood by some to mean as if a part of Him, *one in essence* or as an issue, *then the Father is according to them compounded and divisible and*

⁵ St. Athanasius the Great, *De Synodis*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Volume IV, p. 458.

alterable and material, and, as far as their belief goes, has the circumstances of a body, Who is the Incorporeal God.⁶

The first thing that should be noted is that the Arians use the terms "God" and "Father" interchangeably in this section and throughout the whole letter and also speak of both as the beginning of all, ingenerate, unbegun, eternal, sole, etc. This unity of the notions of God and the Father indicates that, for the Arians, the criterion for what it means to be God is intimately bound together with their idea of the Father; whatever attribute one applies to the Father will apply to God and vice-versa. The Arians, therefore, fail to distinguish between what it means to be God and what it means to be Father; both are the same. This confusion between person and nature is also clearly seen in their concern that if the divine nature is parceled out in any way, then the Father would be divided, which is to say that if the divine nature is partaken of, then the Father is partaken of as well. Since the Arians reject Modalism, they must distinguish between the Father and the Son; however, since they also fail to differentiate between person and nature, they are faced with the aforementioned dilemma: either the Son has a different essence and is not God; or there are two Fathers because they believe that the essence of God denotes a sole ingenerate monad who is the Father; and thus, if the Son has the same essence as the Father, then *by necessity* he must be a sole ingenerate monad like the Father. Given their commitment to belief in one God and their repudiation of Modalism, the Arians must confess the Son to be of a different essence than the Father.

Having examined the systems of the Modalists and the Arians, it is clear that their failure to distinguish between the notions of person and nature led them to faulty conclusions. Since the Modalists and the Arians rightly rejected the existence of two Gods, they were forced to affirm that either the Father and Son were the same or that the Son was not God.⁷ They were not able to conceive of one God who is three persons because within the framework they are working, God can only be one if he is one person. Two distinct divine persons, even if they are equal in their divinity, would result in two distinct Gods. What confusing person and nature does, then, is completely exclude any real multiplicity in God because there is nothing that can act as a bond of unity to make the persons one. The task, therefore, that befell St. Basil was to disentangle the notions of person and nature and to provide clear and consistent definitions

⁶ Ibid, 458. (Emphasis Mine)

⁷ It should be noted that, although not discussed in this paper, the reasons which the Modalists give for why the Son is the same as the Father and reasons which Arians give for why the Son must be of a different essence can also be applied to the Holy Spirit.

of both in order to preserve the oneness and multiplicity of God, lest the equal divinity of the persons or their distinctness be compromised.

St. Basil the Great was archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia and was the eldest of the three Cappadocian Fathers. Most of his thought is contained in his many letters. Basil explains the distinction between person and nature most lucidly in his 38th letter, which he wrote to his younger brother Gregory. He begins with a discussion on what can be called indefinite and definite nouns. When ascribed to a plurality of subjects, an indefinite noun has a general meaning and denotes something vague and uncircumscribed. This “general thing” is what Basil understands as a nature or essence. The word “man,” for instance, is ambiguous and indefinite; it indicates not a particular man or individual, but the human nature all men hold in common. A definite noun, however, is just the opposite: it does not denote something general, but something limited, specific, and circumscribed. This “particular thing” is what Basil understands as an hypostasis or person. For instance, the name “Peter” refers not to the common nature he shares with Paul (or any other man), but to a particular individual who can be distinguished from other individuals by certain characteristics. In fine, nature refers to *what* is under consideration, and person refers to *who*. Both are two different concepts. Despite such a sharp distinction, however, person and nature are closely related. Basil elegantly summarizes this point:

This then is the hypostasis, or “*understanding*,” 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.⁸

Thus, a nature cannot exist apart from an hypostasis; it needs something to “stand under” it. This is not to say, however, that the hypostasis *is* the nature; but rather, it is the unique and concrete subsistence of the nature, which is localized and known by certain properties.

Moreover, there is a further aspect of this distinction that needs to be considered: the difference between what can be called personal properties and natural attributes. The former are those characteristics by which one hypostasis is distinguished from another. These properties say nothing about the common essence which is shared, and all the characteristics of one hypostasis will not be

⁸ St. Basil the Great, *Letter XXXVIII*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Volume VIII, p. 137-138.

identical to those of another hypostasis. For example, Peter and Paul both share the same nature as all men; however, one thing that distinguishes them from other men is that they are apostles. Although they share this distinguishing feature, there are others which only they possess: Peter was the first bishop of Rome, and Paul was God's chosen vessel to the gentiles. What this means is that since such characteristics are not ascribable to *all* men, they are not general and not ascribable to human nature; thus, these traits do not define *what* it means to be man, nor are they the person himself; instead, they help circumscribe and point to a specific nature subsisting - the *who* under consideration. The latter are those attributes which describe a common nature. These attributes are applicable *without qualification* to all hypostases sharing the same essence, but they do not touch upon the hypostases themselves. As Peter and Paul are both unique hypostases circumscribing human nature, they both possess the *totality* of that nature; one is not more human than the other. The human nature which Peter possesses, for instance, includes a body, soul, spirit, etc. Since Paul is a man, the same description will apply to him as well. These properties of human nature do not extend into the conception of person because they are not traits specific to either Peter or Paul, but are shared by all men. They are describing *what* Peter and Paul are, not *who* they are. Therefore, since a nature and its attributes are common, a person, by dint of being unique and having peculiar properties, is more than just his nature and is not reducible to it.

Having established what the distinction between person and nature is, Basil then turns to how it applies to Trinitarian theology:

Transfer, then, to the divine dogmas the same standard of difference which you recognize in the case both of essence and of hypostasis in human affairs, and you will not go wrong. Whatever your thought suggests to you as to the mode of the existence of the Father, you will think also in the case of the Son, and in like manner too of the Holy Ghost.... For the account of the uncreate and of the incomprehensible is one and the same in the case of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. For one is not more incomprehensible and uncreate than another. And since it is necessary, by means of the notes of differentiation, in the case of the Trinity, to keep the distinction unconfounded, we shall not take into consideration, in order to estimate that which differentiates, what is contemplated in common, as the uncreate, or what is beyond all comprehension, or any quality of this nature; we shall only direct our attention to the enquiry by what means each particular conception will be lucidly and distinctly separated from that which is conceived of in common.⁹

⁹ Ibid, 138.

In other words, whatever is predicated upon the Trinity must first be examined to see if it can be applied to all three persons, that is, whether it is a natural attribute or a personal property. Qualities such as incomprehensibility and uncreateness are attributes of the divine nature and describe *what* the persons are - their "mode of existence" - not *who* they are; and as such, they apply to each hypostasis simultaneously and equally. Because the attributes of the divine nature describe a completely different concept, they are not counted among the "notes of differentiation" or personal properties and therefore cannot aid in distinguishing the persons. Likewise, these notes of differentiation do not enter into the concept of essence. As Basil explains:

Wherefore in the communion of the substance *we maintain that there is no mutual approach or intercommunion of those notes of indication perceived in the Trinity*, whereby is set forth the proper peculiarity of the Persons delivered in the faith, *each of these being distinctively apprehended by His own notes*. Hence, in accordance with the stated signs of indication, discovery is made of the separation of the hypostases...¹⁰

Since these personal characteristics are not present in the common essence, they are not shared; and unlike the notes of differentiation among men, which, although they are not natural attributes can still be shared (such as apostleship), those applied to the Trinity are exclusive to each hypostasis and are *his own*. A person can only be discovered or recognized by looking at what traits are peculiar to him. Thus, when considering the three persons or the divine nature, the personal properties and natural attributes must be contemplated apart from each other.

Among these unique characteristics of the persons in the Trinity, Basil gives the following three: the Father derives his hypostasis from no cause or is ingenerate; the Son is begotten by the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.¹¹ A more general way of stating and summarizing these personal properties, as Basil does in another letter, is that they are "Fatherhood, Sonship, and the power to sanctify."¹² Having established how person and nature are distinct and what the notes of differentiation are, Basil is able to exclude *what* it is to be the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from *what* it is to be God. For example, the properties inherent in "Fatherhood," such as ingenerateness and producing the Son and Holy Spirit, are peculiar to one hypostasis – the Father; and they point to *who* he is, and not *what* his essence is. Since all three are unique hypostasis, they

¹⁰ Ibid, 139. (Emphasis Mine).

¹¹ Ibid, 138-139.

¹² St. Basil the Great, *Letter CCXIV*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Volume VIII, p. 254.

cannot define the divine nature, and therefore, they can possess a nature that is one and ontologically the same.

Although it is not Basil's primary concern in this letter to deal with how the three persons are one God, he does offer a few explanations, and it will be beneficial to touch upon them before concluding. Since the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons, the unity share is not one of person, but of essence. They are so unified in their being that there is no interval or void between them which separates them spatially or consecutively from each other. If one mentions the Holy Spirit, he automatically apprehends the Father and the Son since the Spirit is of the Father and belongs to the Son; and one has received the Father and the Spirit if he has received the Son because the Son cannot be separated from whom he has his origin and his own Spirit. Likewise:

He who receives the Father virtually receives at the same time both the Son and the Spirit; for it is in no wise possible to entertain the idea of severance or division, in such a way as that the Son should be thought of apart from the Father, or the Spirit be disjoined from the Son.¹³

This unity between the persons is such that, when one perceives, mentions, or receives any one person, then the other two are perceived, mentioned, or received instantly as well. In a certain sense, each person is somehow present within the other two without actually *being* the other two so that they *function* as one person while remaining distinct and retaining their peculiar properties. At this point it might be helpful to contrast this notion of unity with our previous example of Peter and Paul. Although Peter and Paul are one and unified insofar as they possess a common nature, Peter is not present in Paul; and when one thinks of Peter, he does not necessarily think of Paul. Both men exist separately and are able to be conceived of separately. Nevertheless, there is, as Basil implies, a certain tension between the unity and multiplicity in the Trinity that must be balanced:

But the communion and the distinction apprehended in Them are, in a certain sense, ineffable and inconceivable, *the continuity of nature being never rent asunder by the distinction of the hypostases, nor the notes of proper distinction confounded in the community of essence*. Marvel not then at my speaking of the same thing as being both conjoined and parted, and thinking as it were darkly in a riddle, of a certain new and strange conjoined separation and separated conjunction.¹⁴

¹³ St. Basil the Great, *Letter XXXVIII*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Volume VIII, p.139.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 139. (Emphasis Mine).

This tension can only be balanced by keeping the categories of person and nature separate; yet, as Basil concedes, how this “conjoined separation and separated conjunction” function together is still, ultimately, a mystery.

By distinguishing between person and nature and removing the notion of “Fatherness” from the divine essence, Basil has cut to the heart of the problem inherent in Modalism and Arianism. As was seen, the Arians and the Modalists both failed to balance the tension mentioned above because they thought that person and nature were the same thing, and that the Father, therefore, defined the divine essence. By supposing this metaphysic, the Modalists were forced to conclude that the Son *was* the Father, and the Arians were forced to conclude that the Son could not be God; the former eschewed all distinctions between the persons, and the latter rent asunder the unity of the persons. Both were right, however, to believe that God was one because there was one divine nature, but their confusion of person and nature led them to conclude that this meant one person as well. The Modalists and Arians, therefore, could not accept that both the Father and the Son are distinct individuals, and possess an identical nature that is *ontologically the same*. Such a view is impossible with their confusion between person and nature. Since a person essentially *is* his nature, it follows that even if two persons who have identical natures are distinct, then the natures are distinct as well. There can be no ontological unity or communion between the persons. The only way for there to be this kind of ontological unity among distinct persons is by observing the proper distinction between person and nature. Since person is not the same thing as nature, distinct persons do not entail distinct natures, and there can be a real communion and unity in the same essence because no one person defines or is reducible to the essence.

It should not be thought, however, that the Modalists and the Arians were the only ones to confuse person and nature. In fact, all subsequent Trinitarian and Christological heresies, such as Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and Monothelitism, can be traced to this confusion. John of Damascus, the great systematizer of patristic theology, observed that “the reason for the heretics’ error is their saying that nature and hypostasis are the same thing.”¹⁵ The next five Ecumenical Councils were responses to these heresies, and their theological formulations were predicated upon the triadology of the Cappadocian Fathers, including the distinction between person and nature. It is this dependence that makes the distinction between person and nature all the more important.

¹⁵ Saint John of Damascus. *Writings: The Fount of Knowledge*. Trans. Frederic H. Chase. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 272.

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