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**LE *DE TRINITATE* DE SAINT AUGUSTIN**  
**Exégèse, logique et noétique**

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## The Semantics of Augustine's Trinitarian Analysis in *De Trinitate* 5–7

Augustine's crowning achievement in his *De Trinitate*, and the intellectual breakthrough that allowed him to complete some two decades of research and writing on the Trinity, is his distinction between substantial and relational predication—the keystone of Books 5–7.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by reading some of the Greek Fathers,<sup>2</sup> Augustine uses the distinction to refute the Arians and to defend doctrinal orthodoxy. Yet Augustine does not set out to establish, or even to explore, the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine is simply assumed, and its scriptural warrant canvassed in *De Trin.* 1–4. For in Books 5–7, Augustine is not engaged in metaphysics, as one might have expected in a work on the Trinity. Instead, he is engaged in the philosophy of language, and in particular the semantics of names.

To say that Augustine's efforts in *De Trin.* 5–7 are directed to the philosophy of language is not to say that he avoids all discussion of the metaphysics of the Trinity. His occasional remarks—they are no more than that—have been carefully studied by ontologically-inclined scholars: the compatibility of simplicity and multiplicity in *De Trin.* 6.6.8, for instance; his remarks on generic, specific, and numerical sameness; his comparison of the Persons to God as statues made out of the same lump of gold in *De Trin.* 7.4.7–7.6.11.<sup>3</sup> Yet on the whole Augustine

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1. Augustine began writing the *De Trinitate* around 399, and finished around 420/422 (though perhaps only as late as 426). For the composition and dating of Books 5–7, see the authoritative treatment in P.-M. HOMBERT, *Nouvelles recherches de chronologie augustinienne*, Paris, 2000.

2. Notably GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Or.* 29.16 (see also *Or.* 33).

3. See for instance the classic studies of I. CHEVALIER, *S. Augustin et la pensée grecque : les relations trinitaires*, Fribourg en suisse, 1940 and H.A. WOLFSON, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1970<sup>3</sup>, largely followed by scholars such as J.N.D KELLY, *Early Christian Doctrines*, London, 1968<sup>4</sup> and E. TESSELLE, *Augustine the Theologian*, London, 1970. Augustine's examples are traditional rather than original. BASIL, for instance, discussed the forms of common unity (generic and specific) and contrasted them with individuality in his *Ep.* 38, and in *Ep.* 52 BASIL compares the Persons to God as coins made out of the same bronze. Augustine's originality is in semantics rather than metaphysics.

is inclined to leave the Mystery of the Trinity a mystery, and to concentrate his attention on how we can talk about the Trinity in the least misleading fashion possible. That we must mislead is inevitable: our thoughts are not able to grasp the triune God, and furthermore our language is not equal to our thoughts—the initial remarks with which Augustine opens *De Trin.* 5–7 (5.1.1), echoed at the start of his treatment of the Arian dilemma (5.3.4):<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, we may begin to reply now to the critics of our faith, even as regards these matters which are neither talked about as they are thought about nor thought about as they are. Among the many things the Arians usually argue against the Catholic faith, they seem to put forward this one as their most ingenious trickery: “Whatever is said (or understood) of God is said not according to accident but according to substance; consequently, *being unbegotten* belongs to the Father according to substance and *being begotten* belongs to the Son according to substance; therefore, the substance of the Father is diverse from the substance of the Son.”

The Arians derive their heretical conclusion from semantic premisses about how statements about God can be true. Yet language need not mislead us. We can be on guard against heresy through better work in the philosophy of language, as Augustine illustrates with his distinction between substantial and relational predication. To the mistaken linguistic analysis of the Arians, Augustine counterposes his own superior account of the workings of language about the Trinity.

As he began, so Augustine continues throughout *De Trin.* 5–7, putting forward a semantic analysis of language about the Trinity that he hopes is as little misleading as possible. In what follows, I want to show how his semantic analysis achieves that goal. I’ll do so by reorganizing and restructuring Augustine’s discussion to bring out its systematic character, and to make his semantic theses explicit. In § 1, we’ll look at the metaphysics underlying his claims about how language in general functions. In § 2, we’ll look at the six different kinds of true sentences about God and the Trinity that Augustine countenances, and at his five semantic theses. The remaining sections (§§ 3–6) will look at each kind of sentence and how Augustine defends his semantic theses in the course of his analysis.

## I. – METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES

In the *De Trinitate*, Augustine adopts the language of a broadly aristotelian metaphysics. He speaks of the ten categories, of substance and the several kinds of accident (e.g. separable and inseparable), the four types of change, and the like.

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4. “Quamobrem ut iam etiam de his quae nec dicuntur ut cogitantur nec cogitantur ut sunt respondere incipiamus fidei nostrae aduersariis, inter multa quae arriani aduersus catholicam fidem solent disputare hoc sibi maxime callidissimum machinamentum proponere uidentur cum dicunt: Quidquid de deo dicitur uel intellegitur non secundum accidens sed secundum substantiam dicitur. Quapropter ingenitum esse patri secundum substantiam est, et genitum esse filio secundum substantiam est. Diuersum est autem ingenitum esse et genitum esse; diuersa est ergo substantia patris et filii.”

This metaphysics applies to the world at large, but it is inadequate to capture the divine, since God transcends any kind of categorial limitation (*De Trin.* 5.1.2). More exactly, Augustine insists, God is “undoubtedly a substance, or, if this is better, He is named ‘essence,’ which the Greeks call οὐσία” (5.2.3). For essence (*essentia*) is so-called from being (*esse*), and God “is Being itself (*ipsum esse*), by which being named ‘essence’ is suitable to Him especially and most truly” (5.3.4).<sup>5</sup> What God is, indeed what it is to be God—in aristotelian terms the what-it-is-to-be of God—is to be: God is Being, pure and simple, a point Augustine backs up with scriptural citations (e.g. *Exodus* 3:14). Hence God is Being in the highest degree.

Following a line of thought common in late Platonism, Augustine argues that God, because he is pure Being, excludes all accident. His reasoning is as follows (5.2.3). An accident  $\phi$  can be gained or lost by a subject  $S$ , which therefore can become at that point  $\phi$  or not- $\phi$ . But that is to say that  $S$  can not-be  $\phi$  or can be not- $\phi$ , and therefore either can or does lack some kind of being (namely *being*  $\phi$ ). Ordinarily this is an unexceptionable truism, but God, as Being in the highest degree, cannot lack being in any way. Hence God cannot be subject for any accident.

It might be objected that this line of thought fails for inseparable accidents, which cannot be gained or lost. Augustine replies that in these cases the subject of the inseparable accident can cease to exist, and thereby lose being. Yet this is not possible for God. Hence “there is nothing accidental in God, because there is nothing changeable or able to be lost” (5.4.5).

At first glance, Augustine’s reply looks as though he mistakes a sufficient condition for a necessary one. He has established that some sort of changeability is sufficient for the accidental, but not the converse. A strict aristotelian would distinguish *not being essential* from *being accidental*, after all, since if nothing else the *proprium* (ἴδιον) is not part of the essence (it neither belongs to nor follows from the definition), but it is not thereby an accident (something the subject may have or lack). Yet even before Augustine’s time, the recognition of ‘inseparable accidents’ in late Platonist logic called this aristotelian distinction into question.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine does not explain why he rejects the distinction, but his reason is not far to seek. What could bind some feature to a subject such that it could *never* fail to be found with the subject? There must be some reason why the subject always and unfailingly exemplifies the feature. Hence their relation must not be merely contingent or happenstance. If the feature is present in every possible world (as we

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5. Augustine offers the same derivation of *essentia* from *esse* in *De mor. cath. eccl.* 1.2.2 and in *De ciu. Dei* 12.2. Hence the proper translation of *essentia* for Augustine should be the concrete noun “beingness.”

6. See A. C. LLOYD, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, Oxford, 1990.

should say), then it must be “built into” the subject—that is, being the subject is bound up with having the feature. But that is just to say that the feature is essential to the subject, i.e. that the feature belongs to the essence of the subject.

If we accept this reasoning, or something like it, then Augustine has not fallaciously confused necessary and sufficient conditions. At worst, he is guilty only of overstating his case—of calling anything that is not necessary to be in some sense “accidental.” We do not have to follow him on that score. It is enough that the necessary presence of some feature marks it as essential to its subject for Augustine’s reply, given above, to work. And that is sufficient for Augustine’s purposes here. In a slogan, he holds that mutability is the mark of the accidental.

Augustine holds this view so strongly that he is not entirely comfortable saying that God is a substance, since doing so encourages the mistaken view that God “stands under” (*sub-stare*) accidents or properties external to His essence (*De Trin.* 7.5.10).<sup>7</sup> Better to call God essence, since that connotes His pure beingness. Augustine then draws the obvious corollary: everything in God is essential, necessary, and eternal. This includes the Persons of the Trinity and their interrelations.

Augustine’s discomfort at saying that God is a substance is nothing compared to his hesitation over how to speak of the Persons of the Trinity. He declares (*De Trin.* 5.8.9–10):<sup>8</sup>

I say “essence” here where the Greeks say οὐσία, which we more typically call “substance”; they indeed also say ὑπόστασις, but I don’t know what difference they want to mark between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις.

Augustine adopts contemporary usage and speaks of “Persons,” though he is clear that this leaves the question of their ontological status quite open: “We say ‘three persons’ when it is asked, *Three what?*, not so much to say this as to avoid being silent” (*De Trin.* 5.9.10).<sup>9</sup> He is not trying to solve or even address the metaphysical questions, after all, but to show us how attending to language properly can help to keep us from wandering into heresy.

## II. – SENTENCE-TYPES AND SEMANTIC THESES

Augustine recognizes six types of sentences in his analysis. The first three are traditional, the last three are not. Again, his approach is broadly aristotelian.

The first type of sentence Augustine recognizes is what he calls the case of *substantial predication*. These are sentences that are designed to say *what* something is, to spell out the general kind to which some thing belongs: “Socrates is a human

7. Augustine’s source for this point might be DIDYMUS THE BLIND, *Spir. Sanct.* 38.

8. “Essentiam dico quae οὐσία graece dicitur, quam usitatus substantiam uocamus; dicunt quidem et illi ὑπόστασιν sed nescio quid uolunt interesse inter οὐσίαν et ὑπόστασιν.”

9. See also *De Trin.* 7.4.7–9, *De ciu. Dei* 11.10, and *Cont. serm. Ar.* 32.

being” or “Felix is a cat.” Roughly, such sentences are paradigmatically those in which the subject-term is identified as falling under a natural-kind term. They are contrasted with the case of *accidental predication*, which are designed not to say what something is but rather *in what way* it is something—what it is like, or how much, or where it is located, and so on, for all the nine aristotelian categories of accident. Thus “Socrates is fat” or “My dog has fleas” count as accidental predications.

Augustine follows Aristotle in contrasting these sentence-types as distinct kinds of predication, although their character stems as much from the semantic properties of the predicate (a noun or noun-phrase) as it does from the copula, which is the same in both kinds. Since Augustine is committed to a semantic theory that takes its fundamental units of analysis to be sign and signification,<sup>10</sup> he would find it natural to explain the semantic features of sentences by the semantic features of their constituents, each of which is explained, in the end, as a kind of signification—that is, as a kind of referring or denoting phrase, since a sign signifies its significante on the model of a name naming what it names. Despite the restrictions of this model, Augustine makes it surprisingly flexible, and since his analysis of trinitarian claims turns largely on how certain referring phrases function—a point common to ancient and contemporary theories—the difference between his and our approaches to the philosophy of language will not matter greatly.

Augustine singles out what appears to be one kind of accidental predication for special treatment, namely the case of *relational predication*. These are sentences in which the predicate-term applies to the subject only in virtue of (its relation to) something, words such as “neighbor,” “teacher,” “sibling,” “employee,” and so on. The word “teacher,” for instance, only applies to a person in virtue of there being someone whom that person teaches, that is, there being a relation of *teaching* that holds with someone who can then correlatively be described as “student,” “pupil,” “trainee,” or similarly. Such instances of relational predication therefore have the form “Anne is (my) sister” or “Marcus is a student.” In keeping with the aristotelian tradition, Augustine treats polyadic relations as reducible to dyadic relations, and the latter as expressible in subject/predicate form, so that sentences like “Socrates is taller than Plato” are not at issue here. Furthermore, all dyadic relations are ordered, so that there is a “direction” of the relation from one of the relata (the foundation) to the other (the terminus).<sup>11</sup> Even apparently symmetric

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10. This is the kind of theory articulated in his *De magistro*.

11. Sentences of the form “Lindsey gives Sharon a ring,” for example, are putatively triadic, involving the giver (Lindsey), the gift (ring), and the recipient (Sharon), all linked by the relation of *giving*; the aristotelian tradition replaces this with the relation of *ring-giving*, which is dyadic, involving only the ring-giver (Lindsey) and the ring-recipient (Sharon). The same technique is used in the analysis of the dyadic version, so that “Lindsey is a ring-giver to Sharon” is semantically analyzed as a relation that characterizes Lindsey (the foundation), namely *being a ring-giver*, which she bears to Sharon (the terminus), with a correlative relation *being a ring-receiver* that Sharon bears to Lindsey.

relations, like *being next to*, are actually conflations of more basic ordered relations *to the right of* and *to the left of*.

These three sentence-types, namely substantial predication, accidental predication, and relational predication, are familiar enough. The next three, however, pose special problems in the case of the Trinity. The terminology I'll use to refer to them is mine rather than Augustine's, who does not introduce special vocabulary here, but it is meant to capture distinctions that he works with in his analysis, not to bring in anything new or foreign to his discussion.

To begin with, there are sentences in which the subject is God and the predicate is some divine attribute: "God is good" or "God is eternal," for instance. These *divine attributive statements* have the surface grammar of accidental predications—say, "Socrates is wise"—but are strikingly different in how the predicate-terms function as a result of the appearance of "God" as the subject-term.

Then there are sentences in which the subject-term and the predicate-term are theologically charged, namely the case of *personal predication*: "God is the Father" or "The Holy Spirit is God" or "The Father is not the Son." Such sentences seem to assert an identity or nonidentity between God and one of the Persons, or between Persons themselves. These sentences make up the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity: each Person is God but the Persons are severally different from each other. Not surprisingly, the semantic account of personal predications is complex.

Finally, there are also sentences in which some property or feature is attributed to one of the Persons: "The Father is unbegotten" or "The Holy Spirit is love," for instance, which appear to be ordinary accidental predications. I'll call these *emblematic predication*, since when true such sentences describe features that are distinctive or special to the Person.

Augustine's six types of sentence figure in the five semantic theses he articulates and defends in *De Trin.* 5–7:<sup>12</sup>

- [A1] True statements about God are either substantial or relational predications.
- [A2] Divine attributive statements are disguised substantial predications.
- [A3] Personal predications are identificatory.
- [A4] Reciprocal inverse correlatives can be coreferential.
- [A5] Inferences from a mixture of emblematic and personal predications may not be valid.

The sense of these claims will become apparent as we consider the types of sentences that can be used to express truths about the Trinity. We'll discuss [A1] in § 3, [A2] in § 4, [A3] in § 5, and [A4]–[A5] in § 6. Since Augustine typically

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12. Augustine adds a sixth thesis I mention only briefly at the end of § 6, namely that true divine attributive statements about God entail true emblematic predications for each Person singly and severally, but not as many.



explains and defends his theses in light of the semantic status of the associated type of sentence, the discussion has been organized around the several types of sentence rather than around the theses proper.

### III. – RELATIONAL PREDICATION

Augustine's first thesis [A1], that all true statements about God are either substantial or relational predications, is the most well-known. Given the metaphysical background he adopts in the *De Trinitate*, the argument for [A1] is straightforward. First, there is no principled objection to substantial predication in the case of God—that is, no reason why we should not be able to say what God is. But since God transcends all categories, substantial predication about God turns out to be equivalent to saying *that* God is, as well as to saying *who* God is. In each case, the relevant true statement is “God is Being” (*Deus est esse*), only a slight variant of God's scriptural avowal “I am Who am” (*ego sum qui sum*: *Exodus* 3:14). Augustine does not consider but surely would endorse the later mediaeval view that another way of expressing the same truth is with the sentence “God is Godhood” (*Deus est deitas*).

Since God is pure Being and cannot have any admixture of non-being, and hence no share in becoming or change, it is clear that there are no accidents in God. Any sentence predicating an accident of God, then, must be false. The challenge is identifying which sentences these are. The obvious proposal, namely that accidental predications are sentences that have predicate adjectives rather than predicate nouns, is overly simple. It fails even in the ordinary non-divine case, since there are adjectives that denote properties belonging to the essence of the subject: “Socrates is rational” is not accidental but essential. We'll look at these cases in § 4; for now we can simply accept Augustine's point that no sentence predicating an accident can be true of God. Everything in God is unchanging, eternal, and necessary.

Augustine holds that at least some relational predications also hold true of God, e.g. “God is the Father” (*Deus est Pater*). (This example is also a personal predication.) Recall that a relational predication is a sentence in which the predicate-term applies to the subject only in virtue of (its relation to) something, as for instance the term “uncle” applies to a man in virtue of his sibling's offspring. Augustine's substantive claim in [A1] is that there are some relational features in God, which perforce must be unchanging, eternal, and necessary. As we have seen in § 1, that is enough to ensure that the features are not accidents.

A parallel might help. Numbers are eternal objects and the ways in which they are related to one another are necessary, though non-temporal. An arithmetical sentence such as “ $3 > 2$ ” is necessarily true and points to a relational fact about the numbers 3 and 2, namely that they stand in a non-temporal ordering with respect to each other: *being greater than* for the number 3, and *being less than* for the number 2. Likewise, in the case of the Trinity, the Persons are necessarily related to one another. A sentence such as “The Son is begotten by the Father” points to

a relational fact about the Father and the Son, namely that they stand in a non-temporal ordering with respect to each other: *begets* or *is begotten by* depending on whether we focus on the Father's relation to the Son or on the Son's relation to the Father.

So much is clear. There are tricky details, however. Augustine deals with two at length. First, the distinctive property of the Father, namely *unbegotten*, looks like a substantive term rather than a relational term—unlike its correlative *begotten*, which is clearly a relational term. Augustine argues that negation does not change the semantic category of a term, and hence if *begotten* is relational (as it clearly is), then *unbegotten*, which Augustine claims is equivalent to *not begotten*, must be a relational term as well (*De Trin.* 5.6.7–5.7.8). There is a similar issue with “equality” and its use with substantive and relational terms. Other terms for the Father are less problematic since they are evidently relational: “source” (*principium*), for example (5.13.14).

Second, while “father” and “son” are clearly relational terms, whether in trinitarian or ordinary contexts, “Holy Spirit” is not. To make matters worse, Augustine maintains the double procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son,<sup>13</sup> and therefore has a genuine triadic relation on his hands, not the typical ordered dyadic relation he normally discusses. In the end, Augustine says little about the triadic character of procession. He does, however, take the hard line and argue that the most proper name for the third Person of the Trinity is not really “Holy Spirit” but rather “Gift” (*donum*), which is clearly a relational term, one that is arguably *n*-adic since a gift can be given by any number of givers: *De Trin.* 5.11.12–5.16.17.

For all its rough-and-ready character, Augustine's distinction between substantial and relational predication seems well-founded. But a question is still pending about the status of accidental predications. Given that some predicate adjectives pick out essential properties, how can Augustine distinguish them from predicate adjectives that merely pick out accidents?

#### IV. – DIVINE ATTRIBUTIVE STATEMENTS

Augustine directly addresses this question in [A2], his thesis that divine attributive statements are disguised substantial predications. He reasons that attributive statements obey a different logic in the case of God than in the ordinary case, since the underlying metaphysics is different. Augustine carefully lays out what the difference consists in, using as an example the case of “great” (*De Trin.* 5.10.11):<sup>14</sup>

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13. Augustine holds that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son, which came to be the orthodox position in the Western church (see for instance *De Trin.* 5.12.13), and furthermore that the Son receives from the Father the power that allows the Holy Spirit to proceed from the Son as well as from the Father (*De Trin.* 15.26.47).

14. “In rebus enim quae participatione magnitudinis magnae sunt quibus aliud est esse, aliud

In the case of things that are great by participation in greatness, it is one thing to be and another to be great ... Genuine greatness is that by which not only a great house is great, and by which any mountain that is great is great, but also that by which "great" is said of anything else great. As a result, it is one thing to be greatness itself, another thing to be that of which "great" is said in virtue of it. This greatness is surely great primarily, and far more excellent than that which is great by participation in it. Now since God is not great by greatness that is not what He is, so that God were a participant in it, so to speak, when He is great—for in that case there will be a greatness greater than God, whereas there is nothing greater than God—hence He is great with the greatness by which He is Himself the same greatness.

Predicate adjectives, such as "great," normally pick out the feature in a subject in virtue of which the subject has the attribute in question. (False attributive statements fail to pick out the relevant feature since the subject does not possess it.) In the case of a sentence such as "Socrates is great," the term "great" picks out whatever the great-making feature of Socrates is. In the case of ordinary objects, the great-making feature is other than the subject it characterizes: Socrates is great in virtue of participating in greatness.<sup>15</sup> In other words, at least some ordinary attributive statements are disguised relational statements, since the signification of the predicate-term is given in relation to the paradigmatic Form through which the subject has the attribute in question.

The situation is reversed in the case of God. The semantics are the same: the predicate-term picks out whatever in the subject is responsible for the subject having the feature. But as Augustine argues in the passage cited above, greatness is not some thing other than God, nor even something in God other than God. God is identical with (His) greatness itself. Hence the predicate-term in a divine attributive statement picks out God (the subject), describing what God is—God is His greatness, God is His goodness, God is His wisdom, and so on.<sup>16</sup> Divine attributive

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magnas esse... Sed illa est uera magnitudo qua non solum magna est domus quae magna est et qua magnus est mons quisquis magnus est, sed etiam qua magnum est quidquid aliud magnum dicitur, ut aliud sit ipsa magnitudo, aliud ea quae ab illa magna dicuntur. Quae magnitudo utique primitus magna est multoque excellentius quam ea quae participatione eius magna sunt. Deus autem quia non ea magnitudine magnus est quae non est quod ipse ut quasi particeps eius sit deus cum magnus est (alioquin illa erit maior magnitudo quam deus; deo autem non est aliquid maius), ea igitur magnitudine magnus est qua ipse est eadem magnitudo."

15. Augustine does not clearly distinguish two alternatives: (a) Socrates has some feature  $\phi$  that participates in  $\phi$ -ness and by its participation makes Socrates to be  $\phi$ ; (b) Socrates participates in  $\phi$ -ness directly and thereby is  $\phi$ . The latter reading is compatible with the text and ontologically simpler, but the former is more in keeping with the late Platonist account of the ordinary "aristotelian" world of nature.

16. Augustine explicitly licenses the generalization of his analysis to all divine attributive statements: "Let the same thing be said of God's goodness, His omnipotence, His eternity, and, in short, of all categorical terms that can be predicated of God as He is spoken of in respect of Himself" (*De Trin.* 5.10.11).

statements are therefore disguised substantial predications, since they are designed to say what God is. The metaphysics, in conjunction with the semantics, does the work of separating out true and false attributive statements.

This result can be generalized in the ordinary case to single out sentences in which a property is predicated of its subject essentially, as in “Socrates is rational.” In these sentences the feature picked out by the predicate-term is necessary to the subject, though not the same as the subject. Socrates is not rationality, after all, but something that is (necessarily) characterized by rationality as long as he is what he is.

Substantial predication differs in its semantics. Rather than having the predicate-term pick out the feature in the subject in virtue of which the subject is characterized by the attribute, a substantial predication says what the subject-term is—namely, something that is also described or picked out by the predicate-term. A closer look at some substantial predications is thus in order.

#### V. – PERSONAL PREDICATION

At least some substantial predications can be made to conform to the model of the semantics for divine attributive statements sketched in the preceding section. Sentences that classify the subject as being of a certain type or nature—in an aristotelian universe, sentences that identify the species or genus of the subject—identify the subject as belonging essentially to a certain kind. So a sentence such as “Socrates is (an) animal” is true when it declares what Socrates is by classifying him as one of the animals, that is, when being an animal is part of Socrates’s essence.

Personal predications, such as “The Father is God” or “The Son is not the Holy Spirit,” are not like this, however, despite the fact that they are essential. (The names of the Persons also bring in a relational character, but put that aside for the time being.) The difficulty is that although “The Father is God” describes what the Father is, it does not describe the kind of thing the Father is (*De Trin.* 7.4.7). And while “The Son is not the Holy Spirit” seems like a simple statement that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not the same thing, i.e. not numerically identical, matters are more complex. The fundamental personal predications, namely “The Father is God” and “The Son is God” and “The Holy Spirit is God,” cannot be simple identity-claims, since transitivity fails. It is not clear what the correct semantic analysis of personal predication should be.

The key to Augustine’s analysis, I think, is to start from the idea that personal predications are similar to, but importantly different from, simple identity-statements. Consider the simple identity-statements expressed by sentences such as “Cicero is Tully” or “2=√4.”

To resolve these difficulties, Augustine argues first in support of [A4] that inverse reciprocal correlatives need not always refer to distinct objects, and second in support of [A5] that the inferences drawn from a mixture of emblematic and personal predication do not always work.

Ordinarily, reciprocal inverse correlatives refer to distinct objects. The murderer is not his victim, nor vice-versa; the master owns the slave and not himself; the father is not his own offspring. But not always. Consider “teacher” and “student.” These are commonly roles occupied by distinct persons, as for instance when Catherine teaches Julia to speak German, or to play the piano, or to do calculus. Yet Julia might instead have decided to teach herself how to play the piano, how to speak German, or how to do calculus. If she does, she is simultaneously teacher and student. On the one hand Julia sets herself the syllabus with lessons, goals, and homework exercises; on the other hand Julia studies her lessons and does her homework. In the end, she may well have succeeded as both teacher and student by mastering her subject. Hence we cannot infer that the object referred to by one of a pair of inverse reciprocal correlatives is not also the object referred to by the other member of the pair. This is the miraculous condition for “father” and “son” in the Trinity. In all other contexts, the object that is picked out by “father” is distinct from the object picked out by its inverse reciprocal correlative “son.”<sup>17</sup> Augustine, however, holds that God can stand in reflexive internal relations to Himself that can be described as “Father” and “Son,” much as Julia can teach herself piano. How this happens is miraculous and beyond our powers to understand, but it is not contradictory to think that such a case might be possible, any more than self-taught learners are. The semantics do not rule it out. Whether metaphysics does is a question that Augustine is happy to leave aside, having faith that it does not.

The real challenge comes with emblematic predication, since the distinctive properties of each Person contradict one another, and thus seem to argue for distinct subjects. The Father is unbegotten and the Son is begotten; since each is equally God, it seems as though God will have contradictory properties, namely *being unbegotten* and *being begotten*.

It is easier to see how Augustine resolves this problem if we cast it as a *reductio ad absurdum*:

- |     |                           |            |
|-----|---------------------------|------------|
| (1) | The Father is unbegotten. |            |
| (2) | The Son is begotten.      |            |
| (3) | The Father is God.        |            |
| (4) | The Son is God.           |            |
| (5) | Hence God is unbegotten.  | [(1), (3)] |
| (6) | Hence God is begotten.    | [(2), (4)] |

-----  
 Therefore, God is unbegotten and begotten.

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17. The qualification is important. A father is the son of his own father, just as a son may be the father of his own son, but a father is not normally his own son and a son is not normally his own father—which is the Mystery at the heart of the Trinity.

Augustine's move is to block the inferences to (5) and (6). In each case, the inference treats the emblematic predication of (1) and (2) on a par with the simple personal predication of (3) and (4). As the *reductio* shows, this is not always acceptable. Even in ordinary cases this "mixing" may invalidate inferences. Consider again the case of Julia teaching herself to play the piano. She is both teacher and student. As the teacher she has set herself a strict and demanding course of study, and is diligent in planning and preparation. But as the student, she is not at all diligent. Quite the opposite: she is lazy, feckless, and indolent. Yet from all this we can infer neither that Julia is diligent and demanding, nor that Julia is lazy and indolent. All we can say is that *qua* teacher she is diligent and *qua* student she is lazy. The analogously emblematic predications of "diligent" and "lazy," even in combination with the personal predications of "teacher" and "student," cannot be mixed to infer the contradiction—or, more precisely, they do not license the inference that the emblematic property characterizes the subject. So too in the case of the Trinity.

The reason the inferences fail is that emblematic predication refers to its subject as presented a certain way (Julia *qua* teacher or God *qua* Father), whereas the personal predication refers to its subject (Julia or God) without this presentation. Hence there is technically an equivocation in the inferences to (5) and (6), since the emblematic predications turn on a particular presentation that is lacking in the personal predications. Of course, this cannot be completely explained, since the Persons (unlike the roles Julia takes on) are supposed to be on the same ontological level as God. But the analogous failure in the ordinary case is instructive and establishes [A5] for Augustine.

A final remark. Augustine is careful to restrict the problems that arise from mixing emblematic and personal predication to the very few defining properties of the Persons: *unbegotten*, *begotten*, and *proceeding*. He devotes the bulk of *De Trin.* 6 to arguing for a further claim, namely that true divine attributive statements about God license true emblematic predications about each of the Persons, singly and severally, but not as many. Take for instance the divine attributive statement "God is wise," which is true in virtue of the fact that God is His wisdom. This licenses the conclusions that the Father is wise and that the Son is wise and that the Holy Spirit is wise. But it does not further permit the conclusion that there are three wise things (except in the Pickwickian sense that each of the three Persons is wise). There is only one wisdom by which each Person is wise, and it is the Wisdom that is God Himself.

#### CONCLUSION

The first part of the *De Trinitate* is devoted to scriptural exegesis (*De Trin.* 1–4); the last part to epistemology and the philosophy of mind (*De Trin.* 8–15). The middle books are devoted to the philosophy of language, in the tireless and unsystematic manner that is Augustine's hallmark. Some of his theses are nevertheless insightful and valuable, such as the distinction between identity statements

and identificatory statements. A fully-developed augustinian semantics would be worth pursuing. Unfortunately, Augustine's mediaeval successors chose to concentrate on the underlying metaphysics rather than on Augustine's semantic approach. Boethius's short treatise *De Trinitate* is a case in point. While he adopts the distinction between substantial and relational predication, much of his treatise is given over to articulating the metaphysical background and assumptions, and he says next to nothing about the details of Augustine's semantics. By the time semantics came to flower in the later Middle Ages, the bloom was off Augustine's approach, and his insights went largely unexplored. Perhaps it is not quite too late to give him his due.

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