

Philosophy and Theology in Twelfth-Century Trinitarian Discussions

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Summary: Peter Abelard's theory of the identities and differences applied to beings and non-beings and Gilbert of Poitiers's conception of an individual person were new philosophical ideas developed in theological contexts. How much should those interested in medieval philosophy learn about medieval theology? It is argued that paying attention to the non-philosophical cognitive determinants of philosophical arguments is philosophically motivated. According to the suggested approach, philosophical studies of medieval philosophy should include systematic and evaluative discussions while the possibly relevant theological context may be treated as a merely historical factor.

1. Philosophy in Theological Context

In Western medieval theology, as distinct from the more Cappadocian Eastern tradition, the Augustinian conception of God's unity was so dominant that the doctrine of the trinitarian persons was relegated to the background, being reduced to abstract discussions about the relations between the divine properties. Théodore de Régnon sketched this picture in his *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité* (1892-6), and it has been revived in slightly different ways by Vladimir Lossky and his neopalamic followers, by the proponents of 'the social theory of the Trinity', and by various conservative theologians who are critical of what they consider inadequate interpretations of the Christian revelation (see, e.g., Lossky 1957, Feenstra and Plantinga [eds.] 1989, Jenson 1982, Pannenberg 1988). This historical thesis about the nature of scholastic trinitarian theology is not necessarily critical, however: it has also been defended as a basically correct doctrinal orientation with the proviso that the primacy of the unity does not undermine the trinitarian aspect of God (see, e.g., Courth 1985: 155).

This picture, whether it is meant to be a critical incentive to new ways of thinking or a description of the orthodox theological tradition, is a misrepresentation of historical facts. For one thing, it is a misleading simplification of the great variety of conceptual models applied to inner-trinitarian questions in the Middle Ages. In addition it gives a one-sided picture of even the trinitarian theo-

gy of Augustine, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas, who are regarded as the main architects of the model of the primary essential unity and the secondary relational plurality.

This controversy between historians of theology involves different religious evaluations of allegedly historical developments and as such draws attention to a question which is relevant to the history of medieval philosophy. Medieval theology has been mainly studied from the point of view of systematic theology with a particular interest in the authoritative teaching of the church. The resulting accounts are selective, of course, and they can be selective in a manner which does not serve the needs of those who require theological background knowledge in order to deal with certain examples used in medieval logic and semantics. In fact it is not unusual for the historian of medieval philosophy to meet religious examples referring to the liturgy or, say, the doctrine of evangelic perfection, the immaculate conception, the angels, hell, grace, the atonement, and so on. In the Middle Ages, a great number of philosophically interesting and powerful ideas were first formulated in connection with the doctrines of God, the Trinity, and the Incarnation. If it is true that the handbooks or systematic studies of medieval theology are sometimes not very helpful for those occupied with philosophical studies of medieval thought, how much should they learn about theology in general and how deeply should they dig into medieval theological controversies?

A purist conception of the history of philosophy suggests that a philosophical history of medieval thought should concentrate on what is philosophical. I think that even if there were an imaginary spotlight on the past illuminating only philosophical thought, it would still be good to know from what directions these items came into the beam of the philosophical light. It belongs among the tasks of the history of philosophy to pay attention to the birth of ideas. This requirement may demand investigation of the relations between philosophy and other branches of cognitive activity. To be conscious of such historical connections can raise one's consciousness about the historical and contingent nature of one's own preconceptions as well, which is no bad thing for philosophers. (For recent discussions of this question, see Chapter 2 in Kusch 1995.)

It is not my purpose to defend any particular conception of philosophy, except that I have in mind such studies of the history of philosophy as are interested in the philosophical contents of the

objects of historical reconstruction. I am not concerned with ahistorical hermeneutic works or works concentrating merely on external historical or doxographical details. The simple-minded searchlight example is an attempt to show that even the adherents of a very purist approach should feel obliged to think about contextual aspects. My question is how much those interested in medieval philosophy should learn about medieval theology, not only by consulting handbooks but also by investigating historical texts and controversies. The recommendation sketched in this paper is roughly as follows. I think that while the historical and systematic reconstructions of medieval philosophical views must always be complementary in the philosophical history of medieval thought, the discussion of the theological context of such views and the content of reasoning based on religious authority should be merely historical in philosophical works. When this delineation is accepted, the question of how extensively one should treat the theological context can be answered differently in different cases. Considering this question can also add to one's consciousness of the contingent features of one's own conception of philosophy. I hope that the following examples from the works of Peter Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers and their followers shed some light on this theme.

2. Abelard's Philosophical Ontology

In his letter to Abelard, Roscelin explained his ideas about the Trinity as follows. Different names do not signify one thing or another in the substance of the Holy Trinity, but signify only the substance itself. We do not therefore signify by the word 'person' anything other than by the word 'substance', even though we are accustomed out of a certain habit of speech to triple person, not substance, as the Greeks are habituated to triple substance. (The text is edited as an appendix in Reiners 1910. See p. 72.)

If this was his view, how was it possible that Roscelin was accused at the local synod of Soissons in 1092 of thinking that there are three Gods? Now, although Roscelin thought that there are no parts in the divine substance, he also maintained that the persons are three things (*tres res*). Anselm of Canterbury and some others took this to mean that the persons are so separate that they could be said to be three Gods. This view was based particularly on one premiss in Roscelin's dialectical arguments; he said that if there is

no difference between the persons, it is not possible that only one of them is incarnated. Roscelin was not the first to make this point, which connected the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, but he certainly stimulated twelfth century discussion of it.

Constant Mews has recently discussed the reception of Roscelin's view and some works of Roscelin's contemporaries on theology and grammar. These texts shed light on Roscelin's formulation, and show that his views were partially misunderstood by his critics (Mews 1992). Mews discusses an anonymous theological treatise in which it is argued that in God there is a trinity which cannot be understood by human beings. It does not consist in a trinity of substances, a trinity of parts of the substance, or a trinity of accidents of the substance. The persons can be called three things, but one cannot explain what these things are because they are neither substances nor anything attached to a substance. The author does not mention Augustinian relations in this connection, apparently because the nouns 'father' and 'son' in their ordinary use refer to beings which are in relation to something else. If this way of thinking is not far from Roscelin's view, his point could have been that there is one divine substance which all divine names refer to. In the natural world, plurality is caused by the plurality of substances or their parts or their attributes. As there are none of these pluralities in God and it is still assumed that some kind of plurality is expressed through the personal names with different meanings, it seems that there is no natural way to explain it. (See also the letter to Abelard, 76-7.)

The basic problem in medieval philosophical discussions of the Trinity is included in Roscelin's dialectical arguments. Since the standard Trinitarian personal names seem to refer to three different entities (or mutually exclusive relational properties), but there is only one simple and indivisible divine essence, how can the persons be said to be the essence and mutually different and three, or, as in the Incarnation, how could there be one person with two essences or natures?

Roscelin was interested in the idea that one could think about the Trinity as three separate spirits having the same will. This was not the view he explicitly defended, however, because it was heretical (Mews 1992). One might ask why the principle of unity should be an individual essence instead of a common will. Besides biblical monotheism, this position was strengthened by the fact

that one ultimate principle of reality was usually postulated in the philosophy of late antiquity. It is possible that many of the controversies about the Trinity could have been avoided if early Western theologians had accepted some kind of social unity model as the basis of their trinitarian doctrine. Perhaps no theologically important ideas would have been lost in that possible but unactualized history of Christianity. Abelard, however, would have found this remark totally misguided. He believed in the principle of sufficient reason according to which nothing holds true or is actual, without there being a proper reason why this obtains rather than something else. It seems that Abelard understood this principle in the ancient manner as being based on the assumption of the objective intelligibility of the world which is organized under the perfect first principle. Abelard's argument against the plurality of gods is that if there were several first principles, there would be no reason for any fixed number of them (*TSch.* III.12).

Abelard wanted to be a more orthodox theologian than his teacher Roscelin and he certainly attempted to avoid any hint of tritheism. Nevertheless, his theory of the persons being special types of properties was condemned at a council held in Soissons (1121) as a form of Sabellianism. It was argued that he did not treat the persons as sufficiently distinct. At Sens (1140) he was criticized for Arianist trinitarian subordinationism. This charge – which is incompatible with Sabellianism – was also brought against him at Soissons. (See Mews' introductions to the critical editions by Buytart and Mews in Peter Abelard 1987.) Abelard had no intention of deviating from the Catholic Creed. The line between Sabellianism and Arianism was, however, drawn in such a way that almost any explication of the doctrine of the Trinity could be suspected of one or the other. The situation was not resolved by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) where the standard of Trinitarian orthodoxy was settled for later medieval thinkers with the formulation that there are in one God three distinct persons each identical with the one divine substance or essence (Denzinger 1991: 804).

Abelard tried to explain certain features of the notions of divine essence and persons in his theological treatises by distinguishing between different uses of the terms 'same' and 'different' (*Theologia 'Summi Boni'* II.82-103; *Theologia Christiana* III.138-160; *Theologia 'Scholarium'* II.95-99). Many historians have analysed these passages which are said to include a remarkable attempt to

clarify the philosophical notions of identity and difference and to systematize the discussion of the trinitarian forms with their help. The distinctions are not quite the same in different works and the changes are related to the development of Abelard's philosophical ontology. Let us have a look at the succinct formulations in Abelard's last theological work.

According to Abelard, items are said to be the same in three ways: the same in essence and number, the same in property and definition, and the same by similarity. Those are essentially and numerically the same which are the same essence in such a way that they cannot be said to be numerically several things. In this way Socrates as a man is essentially the same as Socrates as an animal or as being able to laugh. Those are essentially different which have different essences or one of which forms part of the other. Essentially different things are numerically different when they do not share any common part. To be the same in property and by definition is to be the same in the strictest sense. Items which are essentially the same may differ in property and by definition, as matter and form in a bronze seal or the same sentence as a premiss and as a conclusion. Things are the same or different by resemblance when they are sufficiently similar or dissimilar to be counted as members of the same class or different classes (*TSch.* II.95-8, 112). In his earlier works, Abelard discussed separately the identities which are combined here. None of the types of identity and difference are meant to be merely mind-dependent.

According to Abelard, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same in essence, but differ in property or by definition. The Father is by himself and begets the coeternal Son, the Son is eternally begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. A typical feature of Abelard's theology is that the properties of power, wisdom, and charity are associated with different persons, though not exclusively. On the basis of his detailed theory of identities and differences, Abelard made use of a number of distinctions, such as *identitas essentiae* and *identitas proprietatis*, *idem qui* and *idem quod*, *identitas naturae* and *identitas personae*, and the Augustinian *alius* vs. *aliud*. (See, e.g., *Tchr.* IV.36-56; *TSch.* I.20; *Sent.*, ed. Minio-Paluello: 116-7; *Sent.*, ed. Buzzetti: 68.) These tools of analysis became very influential in later twelfth-century philosophical and theological thought (for an early application of the gender analysis to Trinitarian forms, see the anonymous *Summa*

Sophisticorum Elencorum in de Rijk 1962: 331; some further 12th-century and later-medieval examples are discussed in L. Valente's paper in this volume and in Knuuttila 1995). One can see some historical irony in the fact that later theologians (until our day) have used these distinctions while trying to make some sense of the trinitarian formulations of the Fourth Lateran Council.

Abelard thought that by considering the world, philosophers had to a certain extent discovered the reality of the Trinity. Finite things bear traces of God, and therefore one can find many analogies with the Trinity in the created world. Abelard presented a number of such analogies, believing that a correct analysis of the states of affairs in the world is of great help for partial understanding of the divine Trinity. In addition to the seal example already mentioned, Abelard was particularly interested in the notion of person in grammar, where one person is the first, the second, or the third, depending on whether one speaks, is spoken to, or is spoken about. (See, e.g., *TSch.* II.107-8.)

Abelard's attempt to understand trinitarian persons as power, wisdom, and charity was based on the view that the concept of the divine Trinity understood in this way is something which is known naturally. If it is granted that there is a perfect first principle, it must include these three properties (*TSum.* I.1-5). This is another application of the principle of sufficient reason, in this case applied to God's nature. If all people can know this, what about the mystery that allegedly exceeds our concepts? Abelard thought that what is mysterious is the fine structure. That is to say, we do not understand how the personal non-substances are real ways of being of one indivisible and simple being and why the difference between common and personal divine properties is what it is (*Tchr.* III.184-5, *TSch.* II.75-6).

It is clear that much of Abelard's work on the different ontological distinctions was theologically motivated. He also developed the view in his later theological works that the properties signified by predicates are not necessarily things though they are objective. This *status* theory of properties, besides the general theory of distinctions, is considered the most interesting philosophical idea of Abelard's ontology. (See, e.g., the different interpretations in Tweedale 1976 and Marenbon 1996.) Was it an idea that was demanded by Abelard's Trinitarian thought or was it a view which he developed as an answer to philosophical problems created by his

earlier theory of particular forms? In dealing with Abelard's philosophy of being, one is obliged to put questions of this kind and to study his theological discourses.

If an interpreter thinks that theoretical philosophy includes generally comprehensible reasoning about the conceptual tools of analysis and argument, about the conditions of knowledge and belief, about the general structures of being and so on, he or she can find it applied in Abelard's theological discourses. In order to see how it works there one should try to understand Abelard's theological goals and the content of his religious beliefs. One can gain a deeper understanding of Abelard's ontological theory by asking why it is as it is. The theory can be considered as an answer to an understandable philosophical question and studied as such or as a response to the heterogeneous conceptual context in which it was developed. A question pertaining to the second approach is: how was Abelard's philosophical ontology influenced by his theological attempt to clarify the doctrinal Trinitarian forms? It is easily understood why historical questions of this kind are relevant in certain connections, but answering them in a historically correct and illuminating way can be a demanding task.

3. Individuals and Persons in Gilbert's Ontology

Gilbert of Poitiers's philosophical ideas were also embedded in theological discussions and he also encountered problems with church authorities. In Gilbert's view, every created thing is what it is (*quod est*) by virtue of something which makes it so (*quo est*). It is not necessary to enter into the details of this influential approach here; it is sufficient to state that its original motivation seems to be related to certain questions pertaining to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. (See, e.g., Marenbon 1988.) According to Gilbert, divine persons are divine by one and the same indivisible divinity and they are persons by the personal properties which are mutually different and incommunicable. What is the relationship between the God-making *quo est* and the person-making *quo estis*? In answering this question Gilbert was led to reconsider and develop the concepts of individuality and personality.

Abelard remarked that one cannot apply the Boethian definition of person as an individual substance of rational nature to the doctrine of God – there are three persons but not three sub-

stances in God (*Tchr.* III.179). Gilbert did not think any more than Abelard that the trinitarian persons were separate substances, but he was particularly interested in the notion of individuality included in Boethius's definition. Every *quo est*, whether simple or complex, is singular and numerically one, and it is this by which a singular being is what it is. If one *quo est* is generically or specifically like (*conformis*) another, they are not individuals. It is only a *quo est* which does not conform to any other in this way which is an individual and makes the corresponding *quod est* an individual (144.58-75). According to Gilbert, an individual form is always the whole entity and never a part of other individuals; for example, Plato's complex *quo est*, Platonitas, includes all those things Plato has been, is, or will be plus all those things he could be though they are never actualized (144.75-8, 274.75-95).

Gilbert's definition of an individual entity is, as far as I know, the first intensional concept of an individual being. It is associated with the idea of spelling out the meaning of modal notions with the help of the model of simultaneous alternative domains which started to be developed in the twelfth century and which itself had a theological background. It may be of some interest to realize that when this line of thought was elaborated further in later medieval philosophy, it always kept to the original view that one could speak about the same individual in alternative states of affairs – treating individuals as world-bound was probably something Leibniz first suggested (for further details, see Knuuttila 1993). Gilbert's interest in the notion of the individual was particularly motivated by his attempt to explain how one could speak about the Trinitarian persons. An individual cannot be included in another individual and, correspondingly, its complete concept cannot include any singular element which is simultaneously included in the concept of another individual (146.14-34, 272.27-33). As the triune God is an individual and the concepts of the persons are included in its concept, the persons are not individuals in the sense in which natural beings can be individual persons (147.41-148.81). The idea that persons cannot have any identical singular *quo est* in their complex *quo ests* belongs to the background of Gilbert's modal conception of an individual, which was also motivated by the Augustinian idea that God chooses actual history from a set of alternatives. If persons are supposed to have free will and if there are other sources of contingency in their his-

tory, then all possible variations in the histories of individual beings must be included as possibilities in their individual *quo ests*. The full extensional concept of the historical Plato is not an individual concept, because it is included in the modally qualified intensional concept which contains the simultaneous alternatives.

According to Nestorian christology as Gilbert understood it, there were two persons in Christ (234.47-9). Much of Gilbert's discussion of the notions of person and nature was related to his attempt to refute this heretical view. It is clear that two individual *quo ests* cannot form a personal union, though *quo ests* of different natures may belong to one composition. One of Gilbert's problems was that Christ as a human being seems not to be an individual any more than Christ as a theological person. In this connection he sometimes calls the divine person-making property an individual property without an explanation. (Cf. the discussion in Nielsen 1982: 163-89.)

Abelard's theory of identities and differences applied to beings and non-beings and Gilbert's conception of an individual person were new philosophical ideas developed in theological contexts. Their systematic significance is not restricted to the explication of various Trinitarian forms and they can be discussed as philosophical theories. Through a historical analysis of their original theological context, one can see how these modes of conceptualizing things were brought into the philosophical discussion. To explain it is not a trivial task – much historical work is still needed in both cases. It seems that the theological projects were philosophically fruitful in these two cases, because the authors realized that the meanings of the terms used in the Trinitarian forms cannot be understood even in an analogous or metaphorical way without a systematic analysis of the corresponding terms as applied to created things. Theological problems led them to pay attention to the conceptual presuppositions of certain received philosophical views and to question their validity.

4. Some Later Developments

The distinctions such as *idem qui - idem quod*, applied to the doctrine of the Trinity by Abelard, were often used in later twelfth-century thought. It is of some interest that in the first known treatise on obligations logic, the anonymous *Tractatus Emmeranus de*

impossibili positione (edited in de Rijk 1974: 117-23), the *positio impossibilis* disputations are divided into two groups depending on whether they concern a union or not. The treatise contains disputational rules for dealing with two kinds of impossible union, the one maintaining a union of essences without a union of persons and the other maintaining a union of persons without a union of essences. Essential terms are said to be those that can be said of a whole and of its parts (for example *lignum*) and personal terms are said to be those which can be said of a whole but not of its parts (for example *homo*).

According to the basic rules, if the *positum* expresses a merely essential union and if an essential term is predicated and conceded of one member of the union, it is to be conceded of the other member as well, but if a personal term is predicated of one, it is to be denied of the other. If the *positum* expresses a merely personal union and if a personal term is predicated and conceded of one member, it must be conceded of the other, but if an essential term is predicated of one, it must be denied of the other. An example of the the first case is that Socrates is united to the donkey Brunellus through a merely essential union. There is one essence and two personal entities. If 'Socrates is the same as (*idem quod*) Brunellus' is proposed, one should concede it, but 'Socrates is Brunellus' should be denied. If Socrates is united to Brunellus through a merely personal union, one should concede the statement 'Socrates is Brunellus' and deny the statement 'Socrates is the same as Brunellus'.

These rules are directly influenced by the theological doctrines that there is one essence and three persons in the Trinity and one person and two natures in the incarnate Word. The corresponding statements about created beings were called impossible. The obligational *positio impossibilis* analysis was much employed in later-medieval Trinitarian discussions, but the examples dealt with began to be doctrinal impossibilities. (For a more detailed discussion of the texts and the development of the *positio impossibilis* approach in theology, see Knuuttila 1995.) This interesting version of obligations logic was mainly used in theological discussions of the Trinity and as such it is an example of the historical influence of the twelfth-century approaches mentioned above. A better known example of later developments is the extensive investigation of the types of inner-trinitarian identities (essential, personal,

formal) and distinctions (real, formal, nominal). A detailed summary of the results of this enquiry is included in Peter of Ailly's rules for essential, personal, communal, and notional terms (*Sent.* I.5). I think that the suggestion about how to deal with philosophical and theological themes in twelfth-century treatises on the Trinity applies also to these later discussions.

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