

John Duns Scotus
Trinity via Three *Personae* and Two *Internal Productions*

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Note: *There are some minor edits such as some bold, some italics, some paragraph breaks, and other minor edits for easier flow in this format.*

Begin Excerpt:

Scotus on the Imago Dei

Scotus follows Augustine and Bonaventure as regards this mono-personal view of the Trinity and its image, the human soul. He first examines the view of Augustine in book X of *De Trinitate*, namely the image as ‘*memoria, intelligentia* and *voluntas*.’ Judging this model to be troublesome for several reasons, Scotus prefers the other image of the Trinity, also provided by Augustine, the view of the image as ‘*mens, notitia et amor*’ in book IX. The concept ‘*mens*’ is difficult to translate, for ‘mind,’ the obvious candidate, refers for us to the whole mind, not to just one aspect of it. For Scotus, however, ‘*mens*’ especially picks out the aspect of *fecundity*, which resides in a *habitual yet not actual* kind of knowing and willing. Hence ‘*mens*,’ with this double fecundity which yields knowledge and love, is for Scotus the proper term (*Lect. I, d3, p3, q4, §444–46*). According to him, the human soul as ‘*mens*,’ knowledge, and love mirrors the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For greater clarity, I prefer to speak of the image of the Trinity as *origin, knowledge, and love*. The term ‘origin’ captures Scotus’s focus on fecundity quite well and the use of the term ‘mind’ is problematic because of the aforementioned reason.

Basic Trinitarian Terminology

The basic Trinitarian formula states that there is one divine substance in a Trinity of persons, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian thought always took great pains to analyze what those ‘persons’ exactly are and how they are related to each other. Let us first take some time to rehearse the basic Trinitarian terminology.

In Greek, the fundamental Trinitarian formula became **one ‘ousia,’ three ‘hypostaseis.’** This was rendered into Latin as **‘una substantia, tres personae.’** To be precise: **‘hypostatis’** was actually rendered as **‘suppositum’** in Latin, a *supposit*, but a *supposit of a rational nature* is a *‘persona.’*

Now *‘ousia’* and *‘substantia’* can loosely be translated by the modern *‘essence’* or *‘nature’*; but what is a *‘hypostasis’* and what is its Latin counterpart *‘persona,’* a *supposit in a rational nature?*

On the traditional medieval understanding, *‘persona’* is a very technical term. It connotes for instance *‘incommunicability’* and *‘independence.’* I will further describe it shortly (chap. 1.8). For now, however, it is apparent that there is a fundamental difference with the meaning of the *modern* concept of a person. Therefore, from now on, I use *‘person’* for the ordinary modern concept of a person and *‘persona’* (or the Latin plural *‘personae’*) for this distinct medieval sense. And when I refer to **God**, I capitalize the terms. Hence, in sum:

Persona = the concept in its Trinitarian sense, predicated of a divine Persona
Person = the concept in its *modern* sense, predicated of God

persona = the concept in its medieval sense, predicated of humans
person = the concept in its modern sense, predicated of human beings

Equipped with these terminological distinctions, we can express the mono-personal or *‘single-perfect-Mind’* view without a blatant contradiction:

Three Persons are one Person —involves a contradiction
Three Personae are one Person —involves no contradiction

This last sentence involves no contradiction because the concepts are *not* univocal: they have a different sense, just like *‘persona’* and *‘person’* said of humans. In the following chapter, I will show that Christ is a human *person* without a human *persona*—the famous *anhypostatic* union of the Word with the individual human nature.

[...note the author’s **“Christ is a human person without a human persona”** and so the following chapter is not part of this excerpt obviously, but, it is certainly an interesting item to follow up on...]

An Illustration of the Mono-Personal View

I once developed an illustration of the mono-personal view of the Trinity for the communities I served. Imagine, Malcolm had a lovely daughter named Ann. However, Ann got leukemia when she was four years old. It turned out that her father Malcolm was the only relative with exactly the right bone marrow for a transplant. So Malcolm gave part of his marrow to save the life of his daughter. Luckily, she recovered. While further maturing, Ann always felt that her father was a beautiful person: she sensed his love in everything he did—not least of course that he gave his bone marrow for her—and she just wanted to become as good a person as he. This little story provides us with a helpful image of the Trinity: Malcolm acts in three distinct ways on the life of his daughter. He begets her, saves her, and inspires her. Nevertheless, he is the same person, one and the same Malcolm. Just like that, God acts in three distinguishable ways on his creatures—the ‘*economic*’ level: He creates them, redeems them and inspires them. Nevertheless, He is one and the same God.

Hence, this story resembles the mono-personal Augustinian view: just like Malcolm is one person, the Trinitarian God is one Person (constituted by three Personae).

Someone acquainted with Trinitarian theology would perhaps remark that this story echoes a view called ‘**modalism**’: the view that the three Personae eventually do not differ. Reminiscent of the classic meaning of ‘persona’ as a mask in a play, modalism holds that the Personae are just three different modes in which the one God acts ‘**ad extra**,’ acts ‘economically,’ but apart from this external activity his three-ness is illusory. The Triad is but a mask. Essentially, the Father and Son are just names for one and the same Godhead. Hence, the protagonists of modalism were willing to defend that you could equally say that the Father became flesh and suffered on the cross. This consequence of modalism was always marked as heretic. **But the view defended here clearly steers clear from modalism**, because in the Augustinian ‘single-perfect-Mind’ view the three Personae really differ. Let us examine this in more detail.

The Three Personae and the Two Internal Productions

As already discussed, I speak of the triad of *origin*, *knowledge*, and *love* as an image of the Trinity. The origin somehow *produces* the latter two, knowledge and love. We thus arrive at another central concept in Trinitarian thought, the ‘**internal productions**.’ There are two kinds of internal productions: to **beget** and to **proceed**. As the Athanasian Creed puts it:

‘The Father is made of none; neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created, but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.’

But what exactly is the difference between these two productions ‘*begotten*’ and ‘*proceeded*’? We therefore observe the human mind as an image of the Trinity. In a human mind, one could distinguish two and only two essential internal productions: a fountain produces *thoughts* and the same fountain, while using these thoughts, produces *acts*. Or, to put it differently, a mind is characterized by *knowing* and *willing*—or loving. In the Godhead, there are two internal productions too: an origin produces all the divine *thoughts*, and the same source, using these thoughts, produces all the divine *acts*.

According to Scotus, we cannot reduce the will to an intellectual phenomenon, because the will has a two-way capacity (chapter 5). It can avow or not avow an object, whereas the intellect is produced ‘naturally’: there is only a one-way relation to its natural goal. The intellect just knows its object, yet the will is capable of avowing an object or not, choosing it or not: a two-way capacity. Therefore, the two productions traditionally called ‘begetting’ and ‘proceeding’ are really distinct. To sum up: these are the uniquely identifying properties of the *Personae*:

<i>Father,</i>	<i>Son, Word,</i>	<i>Holy Spirit</i>
made of none,	begotten,	proceeded
origin,	knowing,	loving
origin,	thought,	act
origin,	one-way,	two-way capacity

These three together constitute the one divine perfect Mind, the triune God. Because of the distinctness of the productions, modalism is ruled out. Incidentally, equipped with these distinctions, it is possible to give a purely logical answer to a vexed issue between East and West: the *‘filioque.’*

Do the Father *and* the Son (*filioque*) produce the Spirit? On a strictly logical level and presupposing this view of the *Personae*, the answer must be affirmative: loving an object presupposes knowing it. Hence indeed ‘*filioque.*’ Regrettably, however, an analytic topic like this became wound up with issues of church polity.

What is the object of these divine thoughts and acts? First of all, God himself: God knows and loves himself. And He does so rightly: this love is most perfect and beautiful. Social trinitarianism is critical of this eminence of divine self-love; I will return to this topic in due course. And, secondly, God knows and wills and thus creates all external things. The Dutch theologian and Victorine scholar Nico den Bok put all this very succinctly like this:

The Father is God as He is the origin of all there is, firstly of his own ideas. And of all what He can create and do on the basis of that.

The Son is God as He knows himself and the whole creation. And then also God as He makes himself known in creation by assuming a human face and redeeming humanity.

The Spirit is God in his fervent will towards the good that He acknowledges and chooses, God in his love for himself and his creation. A love, which He then also pours out into creation, in the hearts of men.

This quotation brings out that it is three times one and the same God, just like in my story of Malcolm: the three Personae share in the *same* divine essence and each is God—though God in a different mode, three participial modes of divine existence: the originating mode, the knowing // revealing mode, and the fulfilling mode. But these three different participial exemplifications of God's existence cannot be compared to just roles 'ad extra,' they are not just masks towards his creation, there is also an **essential** Trinitarian aspect. For two really distinct productions constitute the indelibly **distinct** features of the three Personae.

An important objection at this point is that the language of 'production' seems to entail subordination. The concept of 'production' seems to lead us towards Neo-Platonism or Arianism, the view that the Son is not of the same essence as the Father: He is not 'consubstantial' but ontologically subordinated. This was exactly what the protagonists of modalism feared. However, these two divine internal productions are *eternal*: 'there was no time that the Son was not.' Due to this *co-eternal* aspect, any form of Neo-Platonic *subordination* between the *Personae* is *ruled out*, for there is an eternal production and all three Personae share the same divine essence. Quoting Bonaventure again: 'memory, understanding and will are **consubstantial, coequal** and **coeval**.'

Further Refinement of the Concept of Persona

The concept of Persona is a key concept in Christology, for it is the second Persona of the Trinity, the Word, that assumes the human nature and the human nature itself has no human persona. So what is a Persona—or a persona—more exactly? We already know that it is seen as the ‘hypostasis’ or ‘supposit’ of a rational nature. But this term ‘supposit’ was in need of further clarification. According to Scotus, a supposit connotes *incommunicability*. Consequently, the Personae, as suppositis of rational nature, are marked by ‘incommunicability.’ However, this incommunicability is difficult to pin down.

Let me start by clarifying the positive term: communicability.

A nature like ‘being human’ is communicable to numerous entities: all those individuals share in the same nature. Likewise, the divine essence is communicable, for it is communicated to the three Personae: they all share in the one divine nature. Now the concept of ‘Persona’ is defined by the *denial* of this, by *incommunicability*. Thus, it is attributed, and attributable, to only one. Hence, it closely resembles an individual property like ‘being Daniel,’ which is also attributable to only one, namely Daniel. Accordingly, the Persona of ‘being the Father’ is attributed, and attributable, to only one, namely the Father. Next, a supposit implies independence. So a supposit of a rational nature, a Persona, cannot depend on something else, it cannot be sustained by something else. This last aspect will be further clarified within the context of the incarnation (chap. 2.5).

In sum, one can say that, broadly speaking, the medieval tradition conceived the divine Personae as *incommunicable, independent modes of being of the divine rational essence*: the one Godhead as originating, as knowing and as loving; Father, Word, and Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate that especially this aspect of *independence* of the concept of Persona—and persona—fits neatly into the analysis of the Word’s anhypostatic assumption of the human nature.

End Excerpt.

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