

Boethius

On the Holy Trinity (*De Trinitate*)

Translated by
Erik C. Kenyon

On the Holy Trinity¹

Boethius to his Lord and Father Symmachus

I was eager to offer and communicate to you this long pondered question, shaped by arguments and set down in writing –as much as divine light has deemed my mind’s
 5 flicker worthy to the task– since I am as much desirous of your judgment as I am excited about our discovery. I commend my reflections to writing whenever I communicate what is in my mind on this topic, both because of the difficulty of the subject itself and for the fact that it can be understood by few people, namely you alone. For we are not excited by the boast of fame and the empty flatteries of the mob, but if there <166.10> is any external
 10 reward, it can only hope to be a judgment akin to the subject. Wherever I cast my eyes down from the sight of you, there appears here base sloth and clever envy there, so that one seems to bring scorn upon theological writings, if he casts them before such remarkable specimens of humanity to be trampled rather than understood. Therefore I rein in my pen with brevity, and I veil in significations of new words thing drawn from my
 15 private studies of Philosophy, so that they speak only to me and to you, if you should ever turn your eyes to them, that is; and I have thus <166.20> driven others away, as much as they not only have been unable to grasp these matters intellectually but also seem unworthy even of reading them. To be sure, it is right for us to investigate as far as the gaze of human reason has the strength to ascend the high places of divinity. For there
 20 is a single boundary, so to speak, set for other arts, up to which the way of reason can proceed. For Medicine does not always bring health to the sick, but there will be no blame for the doctor who omits none of those things which ought to have been done, and the same holds for other arts. But seeing how the present inquiry is even more difficult, pardon ought to be given all the more freely. But it is for you <167.30> to investigate
 25 whether the seeds of arguments, coming to me from the writings of blessed Augustine, have yielded up any fruit. Let us then make a beginning on the question proposed.

I

Many usurp the dignity of the Christian religion, but this faith alone flourishes best which is called catholic and universal, both because of the maxims of its universal
 30 principals, by which the authority of the same religion is understood, and because its cultivation has spread through nearly all the ends of the earth. This is its statement on <167.40> the unity of the Trinity: “Father,” they say, “is God; Son is God; Holy Ghost is God.” Therefore Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one, not three Gods. The explanatory cause of this conjunction is lack of difference. For difference attends people who augment or diminish, e.g. the Arians who by varying the Trinity by degrees of merit pull it
 35 apart and scatter it into plurality. For otherness is the source of plurality, since without otherness the essence of plurality cannot be understood. And the diversity of three or however many things consists in either genus, species or number; for <167.50> as many

¹ Based on the Latin of C. Moreschini’s 2000 edition, *De Consolatione Philosophiae : Opuscula Theologica*. Munich.

times as ‘same’ is said, ‘diverse’ is also predicated. But same is said in three ways:

- 40 1. In respect to genus, e.g. man and horse are the same, because their genus, animal, is the same;
2. In respect to species, e.g. Cato and Cicero are the same, because their species, human, is the same;
- 45 3. In respect to number, e.g. Tullius is the same as Cicero, because he is one in number.²

Thus ‘different’ is said in respect to either genus, species or number. But it is variety among accidents that produces difference in respect to number. For three men differ neither in genus nor species, but in their accidents; for even if we mentally separate all accidents from them, there is still a different <168.60> location for each and all of them, which we can in no way imagine to be one: for two bodies will not occupy one location; 50 and location is an accident. Therefore these three men are many in respect to number, since they become many by their accidents.

II

Come then, let us begin and investigate each point as it can be understood and 55 grasped: for, as it seems wonderfully stated, it is the mark of an educated person to attempt to grasp each thing as it is, and thus to hold a belief about it.

There are three speculative divisions:

- 60 1. Physics deals with that which is in motion and not abstract ἀνυπεξάρετος (for it handles the forms <168.70> of bodies involving matter, which forms are not able to be actuality separated from bodies; and these bodies are in motion, for when earth is carried downward and fire up, the form joined with matter has motion as well);
- 65 2. Mathematics deals with that which is not in motion and not abstract (for this ponders forms of bodies without matter, and thus without motion; but these forms, since they are in matter, cannot [actually] be separated from bodies);
3. Theology deals with the abstract, which lacks motion and is separable (for the substance of God lacks both matter and motion).

It is fitting to engage in Physics rationally, in Mathematics in a disciplined manner, and in divine matters <169.80> intellectually; it is also fitting not to be drawn aside towards 70 images, but rather to contemplate that form which is truly form and not image, and which is being itself as well as that from which being is. For every being is from form. And a statue is not called an effigy of an animal according to bronze, which is its matter, but according to the form which has been impressed into the bronze; further, the bronze itself is called ‘bronze,’ not according to the earth which is its matter, but according to the figure of bronze. And the earth itself is so called not κατὰ τὴν ὕλην [according to its 75 formless matter], but according to dryness and heaviness, which are its forms. Therefore

² Boethius assumes that his reader knows the full name of the orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero.

nothing is said to be <170.90> according to its matter, but according to its peculiar form.

But divine substance is form without matter, and it is therefore one, and it is what it is: but other things are not what they are. For every single thing has its particular being from those things from which it is, i.e. from its conjoined parts; it is one thing and another, i.e. the parts of its own composition, but it is not either one thing or the other simply, e.g. when an earthly man consists of soul and body, he is a body and a soul, not a body or a soul in part; therefore he is not what he is. <170.100> But that which is not from one thing and another, but is entirely one, such a thing truly is what it is; and it is most beautiful and strong, for it depends on nothing. Therefore this thing is truly one, in which there is no number and nothing in itself other than that which it is. And it cannot become a subject, for it is form, and forms cannot be subjects. Now other forms are subjects to accidents, e.g. humanity, which does not admit of accidents in virtue of that which it is, but because there is matter subjected to it; for when matter that is subject to humanity acquires any accident, <170.110> humanity itself seems to be accepting this accident. Yet form which is without matter cannot be a subject, and it cannot be in matter either: for [in such a case] it would not be a form, but an image. For from these forms which are outside of matter have come those forms which are in matter and which produce a body. And we are sloppy when we call those in bodies 'forms,' when they are really images: for images take on the appearance of these forms which are not established in matter. In conclusion, there is no diversity in such a case [as God], no plurality from diversity, no multitude arising from accidents and therefore no <171.120> number.

III

But God differs from no God, neither are [Gods] separate in accidents or in substantial differences which have been posited in a subject. But where there is no difference, there is no plurality at all, therefore no [plural] number, and thus unity alone. For even though 'God' is thrice repeated when Father, Son and Holy Ghost are named, the three unities do not produce a plurality of number in respect to that which they truly are, if we turn to countable things and not to the number itself. For in the latter case, the repetition of unities produces a plural number. But in <171.130> the number which corresponds to countable things, the repetition of unities and the resultant plurality in no way produce a numerical diversity of countable things. For number is of two varieties: the one by which we count, the other which corresponds to countable things. Moreover a thing is one, but unity is that by which we call a thing one. Again there are two in the realm of things, e.g. men and stones; but duality is nothing but that by which there are two men or two stones. And the same hold for other numbers. When it comes to the number by which we count, therefore, the repetition of unities produces plurality; but when it comes to the number of things, <172.140> the repetition of unities does not produce plurality. For instance, if I were to say concerning the same thing, 'one sword, one blade, one brand,' - since one sword can be known by so many terms- this is an iteration of unities, not an enumeration. For instance, if we were to say, 'brand, blade, sword,' this is, so to speak, a repetition of the same thing, not an enumeration of different things. Or if I were to say, 'sun, sun, sun,' I would not have produced three suns, but I would have predicated of one sun so many times.

120 Therefore, if ‘God’ is predicated thrice of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, it does not
 follow that this triple predication produces a plural number. <172.150> For, as has been
 said, this is a threat to those who impose distance between these [three] according to their
 merits, but for Catholics, who [a] assign nothing in the way of difference, [b] consider the
 form itself to be as it is and [c] hold the opinion that His essence is not any other, it
 125 rightly seems to be a repetition of the same thing, rather than an enumeration of different
 things, when it is said, “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost and this Trin-
 ity are one God,” just as “blade and brand are one sword,” or “sun, sun and sun are one
 sun.”

But for now, let what has been said be a signification and <172.160> a demon-
 130 stration, by which it is shown that not every repetition of unities produces number and
 plurality. But it does not follow that “Father, Son and Holy Ghost” is said as though of
 some synonymous thing; for blade and brand are identical and the same, but Father, Son
 and Holy Ghost are indeed the same, but not identical. This matter will be looked into
 shortly. For to those asking, “is the Father identical to the Son?” they (i.e. Catholics) say,
 135 “not at all.” Again, to the question, “is the one the same as the other?” the answer is no.
 For there is not lack of difference amongst them in every respect, and thus number
 slipped in, which was brought about by <173.170> diversity of subjects, as was explained
 above. About this point we shall make a brief consideration, once we have said how each
 and every thing is predicated of God.

140

IV

There are in all ten traditional categories, which are universally predicated of all
 things: substance, quality, quantity, relation, location, time, condition, situation, active
 and passive. And these are such as their subjects will permit; for part of them refer to
 predicates in reference to the substance of other things, and part of them refer to
 145 <173.180> a number of accidents.

But when one applies these to divine predication, everything that can be predi-
 cated is changed. Relation is not at all able to be predicated, for the substance in question
 is not a true substance, but beyond substance; the same holds for quality and all the rest
 which can arise. That our understanding may be greater, examples are given as follows.

150 For when we say ‘God’ we indeed seem to signify a substance, but the sort that is
 beyond substance; yet when we say ‘just’ we indeed signify a quality: not an accident,
 <174.190> but rather a quality which is a substance, again of the beyond substance sort.
 For ‘to be’ is not one thing and ‘to be just’ something else, but indeed for God to be and
 to be just are the same. Likewise, when he is called ‘great’ or ‘best’ we seem to signify a
 155 quantity, one that is the same as a substance, of the sort we said was beyond substance;
 for to be God is the same as to be great. And concerning his form, it was demonstrated
 above how he is form and truly one and no plurality at all. But these categories are such
 that they make whatever they are in to be the same as that which they signify, in a diverse
 way for most things, <174.200> but for God in this linked and joined way; for when we
 160 say ‘substance,’ e.g. man or God, it [substance] is said as though that of which it is predi-
 cated is itself a substance, e.g. the substance man or the substance God. But there is a dif-
 ference, for a man is not simply and entirely man, and because of this, man is not [simply

and entirely] a substance either; for he owes that which he is to things other than man. But God is the same in this way [simply and entirely], for he is nothing other than what he is, and thus he is simply God. Again 'just,' which is a quality, is thus said as though it were the very thing of which it is predicated, i.e. if we say, "a man is just" or <174.210> "God is just," we declare a particular man or God to be just; but there is a difference, since a man and a just man are two things, but God is the same as that which is just. And again 'great' is said of man or God, as if a particular man were himself great or if God were great; but man is merely great, whereas God exists as greatness itself.

But the remaining categories are predicated neither of God nor of other things [in reference to substance]. For location can be predicated of either man or God: of a man, such as 'in the forum;' of God, such as 'everywhere,' but such that the thing spoken of is not the same as that which <175.220> is predicated of it. For man is not thus said to be in the forum in the way that he is said to be white or tall, nor is he encompassed and determined by some property by which he can be designated according to himself, but all that is pointed out by this predicate is that a thing has been described by other circumstances. But it is not so concerning God, for it seems to be said that he is everywhere, not because he is in every place (for he is unable to be in a place at all) but because every place is present to him insofar as it holds him, although he himself is not contained in any place; and therefore he is said to be nowhere in a place, for he is everywhere but not <175.230> in any place.

Time is predicated in the same way, as concerning man, "yesterday he came," or concerning God, "He always is." And he, whose yesterday arrival was mentioned, is said to be such, not as though this amounted to something, but merely that which has befallen him in respect to time is predicated. But the fact that it is said of God, "He always is," indeed signifies one thing, as if for all the past, "He was," in every present, -whatever that means- "He is," and for every future time, "He will be." But that which according to Philosophers can be said of Heaven and other immortal bodies cannot be said of <176.240> God in the same way. For he always is, since 'always' belongs to the present in a point of time, and there is so great a difference between the present of our affairs, which is now, and the present of divine affairs, because our 'now,' as though running time, produces a sempiternity, but the divine 'now,' being quite fixed, not moving itself and enduring, produces eternity; and if you were to attach 'always' to this name, you would make the course of our now into something continual and untiring and therefore perpetual, i.e. 'sempiternity.'

Again, situation or action is handled in the same way; for we say of a man, <176.250> "garbed he runs," but of God, "holding all things, he rules." Again in this case, nothing is said to be what either man or God is, but this predicate is given entirely to external things, which are in some way referred to something else. We more easily distinguish the difference of this predicate thus: a man or God is referred to in respect to substance, by which he is something, i.e. man or God; a just man is referred to in respect to a quality, by which he is evidently something, i.e. just; a great man in respect to quantity, by which he is something, i.e. great. But in other categories there is no such thing. <176.260> For when one says that someone is in the forum or everywhere, he refers to the category location, but not to that by which someone is something, as a man is just by justice. Likewise when I say that he runs, or he rules, or he is now, or he always is, the

man in question is of course referred to in respect to action or time (but not in the way by which a thing is something, such as a great thing by greatness) unless of course this divine 'always' sometimes can be called time. And finally, situation and passivity are not to be looked for in God, for they are not present.

Is it now clear what the difference is between categories? <177.270> Some point out what we might call the thing itself, while others show the circumstances of the thing; the former are predicated to show that the thing is something, the latter do not make that point, but rather apply in some way to something external. Therefore...

1. Let predicates which show that a thing is something be called
Predicates in respect to the thing itself.
2. Let predicates that are said of subjected things be called,
Accidents in respect to the thing itself.
- 220 3. But let that which is said of God, who is no subject, be called
*A predicate in respect to the substance of the thing itself.*³

V

Come now, let us look into relatives, for the sake of which we took up discussion of everything <177.280> that has been said; for those things that are clearly observed as existing from another's arrival least of all seem to produce predication according to themselves. Come then, as 'master' and 'slave' are relatives, let us see whether or not either stands as a predicate according to itself. If you should remove the slave, you will have removed the master as well; but it is not the same situation if you should remove whiteness that you will also remove the white thing, and the difference is that whiteness is accidental to the white thing, such that with whiteness removed, the white thing doubtless ceases as well, but in the case of the master, if you should remove the slave, the name by which the master is so called ceases, <178.290> yet the slave is not accidental to the master, as whiteness is to a white thing,⁴ but there is a certain force by which the slave is coerced. Because this force is lost when the slave has been removed, it is clear that it is not in and of itself accidental to the master, but [it is accidental to the master] through an accident which is in some way external to the slaves.

Therefore it cannot be said that any relative predicate augments, diminishes or changes the thing itself of which it is said. This predicate as a whole is not grounded in that which it is for a thing to be, but [a relative predicate] holds itself in that which somehow exists by comparison, not always relative to a different thing, but sometimes to <178.300> the same thing. Come, let someone stand. If I approach on his right, he will be 'left' in comparison to me, not because he is himself left, but because I will have ap-

³ Boethius uses the plurals *praedicationes* and *accidentia* for I and II but the singular *praedicatio* for III.

⁴ *sed non accidit servus domino ut albedo albo...* There is neither article nor punctuation in Boethius' text to distinguish the predicates 'master' and 'slave' from particular instances of masters and slaves, e.g. Cato and his Greek Chef. I believe this passage to be above all about predicates, not particulars. Yet, the comparison between whiteness (a predicate) and a white thing (a particular) should very well be extended in this instance, giving us, "yet the predicate 'slave' is not accidental a particular master, as the predicate 'whiteness' is to a particular white thing..."

proached him on his right. Again, I approach on his left: he will likewise be to my right, not because he is 'right' in himself, as something might be white or tall, but because he becomes right by my approaching, and that which he is by me or from me is in no wise from him himself.

Therefore those things which do not produce a predicate in respect to a property of some thing, in that which it truly is, are able to alter or change nothing and can vary no <178.310> essence in any way. Thus if 'Father' and 'Son' are predicated in relation, and they differ in no respect but this relation alone, as was stated, and if this relation is predicated neither relative to that of which it is predicated, as though it were the same, nor according to the thing itself of which it is said, then this predicate does not produce a difference of things in that of which it is spoken, but indeed -if it can be said- it produces something that can scarcely be understood: a difference of persons. For there is wholly great truth to the rule that among incorporeal things distances are produced by differences, not by locations. Nor can it be said that anything is accidental to God, so that he becomes <179.320> the Father, for he never began to be the Father, but the production of the Son is by that which is indeed substantial to the Father, yet the predicate Father is a relative one. But if we are mindful of all the above statements about God, let us thus consider that God the Son certainly proceeds from God the Father and that God the Holy Ghost proceeds from both, and let us consider that these, since they are incorporeal, are in no way distant in respect to location. But since the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, yet God has no differences by which he differs from God, it results that God differs from none of them. But where differences are absent, plurality is absent, and where plurality is absent, unity is present. For nothing can <179.330> be born of God but God, and in numerable things, the repetition of unities, in all ways, does not create a plurality. Thus the unity of the three is properly established.

VI

Yet since no relative can be referred to itself,⁵ seeing how a predicate that is referred to itself lacks relation, the plurality of the Trinity was made by the fact that this is predication of relation, but the unity was preserved in that there is no difference of substance, workings or any predicate which is said in respect to the thing itself. Thus substance holds together unity, <180.340> while relation brings number to the Trinity: therefore those things which are brought forth in isolation and separately are of relation. For the Father is not the same as the Son, nor is the Holy Ghost the same as either of them. Yet God is the same as the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. He is the same as justice, goodness, greatness and all the things which can be predicated of Him Himself. Of course one must understand that a relative predicate is not *always* the sort to be predicated relative to something different, as a slave to a master, since they differ. For every equal thing is equal to an equal thing, and every similar thing is similar to a similar thing, and every same thing is <180.350> the same as that which is the same; and in the Trinity there is a similarity of the Father to the Son and of both to the Holy Ghost, just as there is a sameness of that which is the same to that as which it is the same. But if this phenomenon

⁵ We might add "in every respect."

285 cannot be found in all other things, this is the result of the difference known from transitory things. But it is best to be drawn off track by no image, to be kept straight with a simple comprehension, and to proceed by intellect, as far as it befits the intellect to go.

290 But enough has been said on the question posed. The precision of the question now awaits the T-square of your judgment; the authority of your pronouncement determines whether it has been gone over correctly or not. But if in accordance with <180.360> the most solid proposition of the fundament of our faith and with divine grace helping we display these fitting aids of arguments, may then the joy of this perfect work return to the place from which its completion came. But if it has been denied humanity to rise beyond itself, as much as ineptitude draws us down, my prayers will make good.