

The Semantics of Divine *Esse* in Boethius

I. *Status quaestionis*

I.A. *Statement of the thesis*

In *De trinitate*, c.2, Boethius identifies God with being itself (*esse ipsum*). Speaking of the subject of divine studies, he says, we must “inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image, and which is being itself [*esse ipsum*] and from which being is [*ex qua esse est*].”¹

Similarly, in *De hebdomadibus*, he first characterizes a simple thing as what has its being (*esse suum*) and that which is (*id quod est*) as one,² and later makes clear that God alone is simple.³

This paper aims to explain these two identifications of God with *esse* as Boethius’s appropriation of the exegesis of the divine name in *Exodus* 3:14–15 (“*qui est*”) found in the hero

¹ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.2 (Loeb ed., 8:19–21). Citations to Boethius are to the following editions: *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis ΠΕΡΙ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΙΑΣ [=In PH]*, ed. Carolus Meiser, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1877); *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta [=In Isag.]*, ed. Samuel Brandt, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 48 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1906); *In Categorias Aristotelis libri quatuor [=In Cat.]*, in *Opera omnia*, ed. J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina [=PL] 64 (Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1891); *Theological Tractates*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), including *Quomodo trinitas unus Deus ac non tres Dii [=De trin.]*, *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint... [=De hebd.]*, *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium [=CEut.]*, *De fide catholica [=De fide]*, *De consolatione philosophiae [=CP]*. Citations of Augustine and Hilary of Poitiers are to the Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina [=CCL] editions (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–). Citations to Aristotle are to *Analytica priora [=APr.]*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949; rev. ed., 1957) (Latin text: trans. Boethius, ed. Laurentius Minio-Paluello, AL 3/1 [Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962]; English text: trans. Gisela Striker [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009]); *Topica [=Top.]*, ed., W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) (Latin text: trans. Boethius, ed. Laurentius Minio-Paluello, AL 3/1 [Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969]); *Metaphysics [=Metaph.]*, ed. with commentary by W. D. Ross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924; repr. 1975); *Physics [=Phys.]*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936; repr. 1998). Citations of Thomas Aquinas are to *Opera Omnia [=Leon.]* (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1882–); *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio [=In Metaph.]*, ed. M. R. Cathala and Raymundi Spiazzi, 3rd ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1977); *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum [=In Sent.]*, ed. Pierre Mandonnet and Maria Fabianus Moos, 4 vols. (Paris: Sumptibus P. Lethielleux, 1929). To facilitate cross-references, I employ running numbered block quotations below. All translations from the Latin are my own unless otherwise noted. Since the purpose of this paper is to highlight Boethius’s idiom, I often prefer awkwardly literal translations that better reflect the Latin grammar than more natural English alternatives. Cf. the apologia for “offensive barbarisms” in Lambert Marie de Rijk, *Semantics and Ontology [=SaO]*, 2 vols., A Series of Studies on Ancient Philosophy 91 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1:xvii–xviii.

² Boethius, *De hebd.* (Loeb ed., 42:45–48).

³ Boethius, *De hebd.*: “Quae quoniam non sunt simplicia, nec esse omnino poterant, nisi ea id quod solum bonum est esse voluisset” (Loeb ed., 46:117–19).

of the Arian crisis, Hilary of Poitiers, and Augustine.⁴ More generally, I argue that it is a mistake to ask what thing or metaphysical principle is named by “*esse*.” “*Esse*,” in these authors, should not be investigated as a name, but as an idiom based on and partly overlapping the Latin idiom for indirect speech according to which “*esse*” is used to speak about what is signified in direct speech by “*is*.” Put differently, Boethius, like his predecessors, uses the word “*esse*” roughly for “whatever belongs” to a thing, “what is predicated” of it, or a thing’s “attributes”—in a word, its *being* something or another. Committed to Aristotle’s theory of the categories, he maintains that there are, universally speaking, ten kinds of things that are predicated: substance, quantity, quality, and so on.⁵ Said alone or with a possessive noun, “*esse*” tends to be used for what is predicated of a thing simply speaking or without qualification—namely, its “substance” (*substantia*) in the sense of its what-it-is-to-be (*quod est esse*), which is signified by its definition. “*Esse*” is applied to God in a modified version of substantial predication.

⁴ Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, eds., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgata Versionem*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 2007), 79. For various interpretations of Augustine’s exegesis of *Exodus* 3:14, see Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages [=HCPMA]* (New York: Random House, 1955), 71; Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L.E.M. Lynch (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2020), 30 (an interpretation I argue against below in Section III.C); Émilie Zum Brunn, “L’exégèse Augustinienne de ‘*Ego sum qui sum*’ et La ‘*Metaphysique de l’Exode*,” in *Dieu et l’être: Exégèse d’Exode 3,14 et de Coran 20,11–24*, ed. Centre d’études des religions du livre (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), 141–64; Émilie Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine: Being and Nothingness*, trans. Ruth Namad (New York: Paragon House, 1988) (both of which provide the most comprehensive survey of Augustine’s texts on the matter available); Andrea Saner, “*Too Much to Grasp*”: *Exodus 3:13-15 and the Reality of God*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements* 11 (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 59–106 (which rightly recognizes the apophatic aspect of Augustine’s exegesis and makes the interesting case—which cannot be evaluated here—that his exegesis is a model for understanding the correct historical sense of the biblical text). The secondary literature on Hilary is sparse and his understanding of “*esse*” is almost entirely overlooked. For an overview of Hilary’s Trinitarian theology, see Carl Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity: From De fide to De trinitate*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mark Weedman, *The Trinitarian Theology of Hilary of Poitiers*, *Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language* 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2007). For a preliminary study of Hilary’s reception as an orthodox thinker, see Kevin Madigan, “On the High-Medieval Reception of Hilary of Poitiers’s Anti-‘Arian’ Opinion: A Case Study of Discontinuity in Christian Thought,” *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 2 (1998): 213–29. For Boethius’s debt to Hilary on the related topic of the meaning of “*subsistentia*,” see Claudio Moreschini, “*Subsistentia* According to Boethius,” in *Boethius as a Paradigm of Late Ancient Thought*, ed. Thomas Böhm, Thomas Jürgasch, and Andreas Kirchner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 83–100.

⁵ Cf. Boethius, *De trin.*, c.4: “Decem omnino praedicamenta traduntur quae de rebus omnibus universaliter praedicantur, id est substantia, qualitas, quantitas, ad aliquid, ubi, quando, habere, situm esse, facere, pati” (Loeb ed., 16:1–4).

To illustrate Boethius’s basic idiomatic use of “*esse*,” we may take a famous passage from *De trinitate*, c.2 (to which we will return in greater detail below) in which Boethius introduces and explains the axiom “every being is from form” (*omne esse ex forma est*).

(I.1) For every being is from form [*Omne namque esse ex forma est*]. For a statue is not called the representation of an animal by bronze, which is matter, but by the form, which is impressed in it. Bronze itself is not said [*dicitur*] [to be] by earth, which is its matter, but by the form [*figuram*] of bronze ... Nothing therefore is said to be [*esse dicitur*] except by its own form.⁶

Here, although Boethius starts by saying that *esse* is from form, he illustrates this not by describing existence coming from form, but by describing, in indirect speech, some predication coming from form—something being said to be (*esse dicitur*) on account of form. In the example, the form in question is the abstractly signified shape inherent in bronze, and what is said to be (*esse dicitur*) on account of this form is the statue’s definition or, rather, what the definition signifies—namely, the statue’s what-it-was-to-be (*quod est esse*; τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), its *being a representation of an animal*, which is signified by the indicative verb “is” in direct speech. As we’ll see, this matches what Boethius says elsewhere about the “*esse*” of a thing. Simply speaking: *esse* is a thing’s “substance” (*substantia*)⁷ or “what-it-was-to-be,” which is signified by its definition. This is not because the infinitive verb, “*esse*,” means “substance,” but because it is an idiom for what is signified by the indicative verb “is,” and Boethius takes that verb to signify the ten categories, the first of which is substance, in an ordered equivocal way.

I begin, in Section I, by looking at the inadequacy of various attempts since around the middle of the twentieth century to read modern notions of “existence” into Boethius’s words “to

⁶ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.2 (Loeb ed., 8–10:21–29).

⁷ There is a persistent ambiguity between primary substance, secondary substance, and *quod est esse* in Boethius’s use of “*substantia*” in most contexts. To try to totally disambiguate his usage on any given occasion verges on an act of independent philosophizing, not a historically faithful rendering of his own thought. Nevertheless, in most cases where “*esse*” is used for *substantia*, it is understood as the substance *of a thing*—as what a thing is (*quid est*)—not as an ultimate substratum. Thus, it is best understood as “essence” in roughly the way later medieval authors, like Aquinas, use that word, which Boethius himself tends to avoid.

be” (*esse*) and “is” (*est*). If there is anything like “existence” in Boethius’s thought, it is “substance” in the sense of a thing’s “what” (*quod est esse*), but, if this is what we mean when we attribute “existence” to Boethius, it would, perhaps, be less confusing simply not to attribute the notion of existence to Boethius at all. Section II sketches Boethius basic ontology—his conception of what there is—as a necessary background for understanding the texts where he employs “*esse*,” quoted later in this paper. Section III offers a revised interpretation of the word “*esse*” in Boethius’s theological tractates in accordance with the basic idiom I have just described. It begins (Section III.A) with an analysis of “*esse*” as used for substance and its extension to the other categories on the grounds that even accidents, in a derivative sense, have a “substance,” “nature,” or “what-it-is-to-be” (*quod est esse*). Section III.B applies this notion of “*esse*” as a thing’s substance to the doctrine found in *De trinitate*, c.2 and *De hebdomadibus* that God is “his being” (*esse suum*). In Section III.C, I show that the same basic idiom was used and expanded by Hilary and Augustine, when interpreting *Exodus* 3:14, to express God’s simple precontainment of all there is; I argue that this is how Boethius intends us to understand the claim in *De trinitate*, c.2, that God not only is “his being” (*esse suum*), but also “being itself” (*esse ipsum*).

I.B. “Esse” in the theological tractates

For most of the twentieth century, the debate about what Boethius meant by “*esse*” mostly focused on these theological texts in which God is identified with *esse*, which were read through the lens of the Neo-scholastic debate between Thomists and Suarezians about the “real distinction” between “existence” and essence or form.⁸ Étienne Gilson’s fluctuating opinions

⁸ For a survey of interpretations of Boethian “*esse*,” see James Collins, “Progress and Problems in the Reassessment of Boethius,” *The Modern Schoolman* 23, no. 1 (1945): 1–23; Peter O’Reilly, “Sancti Thomae de Aquino expositio

illustrate the framework within which these debates were conducted. Armand Maurer recounts how when Anton Pegis showed Gilson the passage from Boethius's *In Isagoge* in which the latter stated that the being of a thing (*esse rei*) was “nothing else than the definition” (*Nihil aliud nisi definitio*), “Gilson was ecstatic and exclaimed, ‘Now we know what Boethius means by *esse!*’”⁹ Whereas Gilson had once said, “By *esse* here he [=Boethius] undoubtedly means existence” and identified Boethian existence with God himself, he would later identify Boethian “*esse*” with “the form” of a substance, oddly assuming an equivalency between definition and form.¹⁰

super librum Boetii ‘De hebdomadibus’: An Edition and a Study” (PhD diss., The University of Toronto, 1960), esp. 276–34; Gerard Casey, “An Explication of the *de Hebdomadibus* of Boethius in the Light of St. Thomas’s Commentary,” *The Thomist* 51, no. 3 (1987): 419–34, at 428–30; Ralph McInerny, *Boethius and Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 161–98 (McInerny does not himself fall under the criticism above); Stephen Brock, “Harmonizing Plato and Aristotle on *Esse*: Thomas Aquinas and the *De Hebdomadibus*,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 3 (2007): 465–94, at 470–75 (Brock does not offer his own alternative to the interpretations of Boethius he surveys, but intends only to make a point about Aquinas’s commentary).

⁹ Armand Maurer, appendix 1 to *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, by Étienne Gilson, trans. Laurence Shook and Armand Maurer, 6th ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002), 429.

¹⁰ Gilson, *Thomism*, 91; Gilson, *HCPMA*, 105. Janice Schultz and Edward Synan follow Gilson’s later line of thinking in their introduction to *An Exposition of the “On the Hebdomads” of Boethius* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 1–11. In a similar vein, Sylvain Roudaut’s recent study of the Boethian axiom “every being is from form” (*omne esse ex forma est*) negatively appraises the clarity of Boethius in terms of categories borrowed from twentieth-century expositions of St. Thomas: “it is not entirely clear,” he says, “whether that form, in Boethius’ axiom, assumes a role of existential actualization in top of its essential determination.” Sylvain Roudaut, “*Forma dat esse*: Tracking the Rise and Fall of Formal Causality,” *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis* 23, no. 2 (2020): 423–46, at 425.

This debate about Boethius’s theological use of “*esse*” has stagnated¹¹ since Pierre Hadot argued, in his groundbreaking and well-received studies,¹² for Boethius’s dependence on late Neoplatonic sources. On one level, these studies support Gilson’s earlier view that, when Boethius identifies God with *esse*, he means existence.¹³ Drawing on Neoplatonic sources, like Porphyry and Marius Victorinus, Hadot argues that, when Boethius identifies God with *esse*, he is, as it were, identifying him with the first predicate, “is” or “to exist,” which is more common than all genera and species, and which is separate—unreceived in any subject and unlimited by any object. Thus, as with Gilson’s earlier view, the “*esse*” identified with God is interpreted as “existence” (*existentia*; ὑπαρξις). But the noun “*ex(s)istentia*” (ὑπαρξις) and the verb “*ex(s)istere*” (ὑπάρχειν) are themselves now understood in a Neoplatonic way, which should lead us, at a minimum, to question whether contemporary understandings of the words, “existence” and “to exist”—either as the particular quantifier (*à la* Frege and Russell) or as an act of non-

¹¹ It is common for more recent authors writing on Boethius’s theological tractates to give at most cursory attention to the question of what Boethius means by “*esse*” and then to employ forms of the word “existence” inconsistently and without explanation in their glosses or translations of Boethius’s text. John Marenbon’s book *Boethius* (Great Medieval Thinkers [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]), is illustrative of this phenomenon. When commenting on the axiom in *De hebdomadibus* that everything simple has *esse* and *id quod est* as one, he agrees with Gilson’s later view that “*esse*” signifies form: “On the most plausible interpretation, *esse* here means the immanent form that makes a thing the sort of thing it is” (89). Despite identifying “*esse*” with form in this one place, he translates “*esse*” in key passages later in the same treatise and in *De trinitate*, c.2 with words derived from “existence.” Not only is this “existence” left undefined, its presence as a translation of “*esse*” obscures any potential logical connection between “*esse*” in Boethius’s axiom about simple things, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the rest of the *De hebdomadibus* treatise where Boethius is presumably drawing conclusions from the axioms he lays down at the start. See also Moreschini, “*Subsistentia*,” esp. 88n18, 91, 92, 95, and 96n41; Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) (who takes the unusual route of translating “*id quod est*” in *De hebdomadibus* as “existence,” but then, confusingly, seems to translate the “simple being” [*esse*] received by *id quod est* as existence as well; p. 209: “He begins from the distinction between simple being (*esse*) and existence (*id quod est*). Being in itself, as an abstract concept, is prior to existence. Existence (*quod est*) is and exists as soon as it has received the form of being ... Simple being ... cannot participate in anything higher than itself. But granted existence, then participation is possible”).

¹² Cf. Alain de Libera, “L’onto-théo-logique de Boèce: Doctrine des catégories et théorie de la prédication dans le de Trinitate,” in *Les Catégories et leur histoire*, ed. O. Bruun and L. Corti (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 176, who says that Hadot’s Porphyrian thesis “has received a definitive demonstration” by subsequent research into Porphyry’s texts; see also McNerny, *Boethius and Aquinas*, 185–91.

¹³ Pierre Hadot, “La distinction de l’être et de l’étant dans le *De hebdomadibus* de Boèce,” in *Die Metaphysik im Mittelalter*, *Miscellanea mediaevalia* 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963), 147–53; Pierre Hadot, “*Forma essendi*: Interprétation philologique et interprétation philosophique d’une formule de Boèce,” *Les études classiques* 38 (1970): 143–56.

predicative positing (*à la* Brentano and the Herbartian school)—helpfully clarify their late antique cognates, which Boethius, in any case, avoided using, preferring to translate ὑπάρχειν as “*in esse*” (being in; belonging to).

As Charles Kahn has shown, the verb ὑπάρχειν—the etymological parent of our verb “to exist”—was first used as a technical term in philosophy by Aristotle in a construction with a dative of possession in order to express “the attributive relation which is normally expressed in grammatical form by the copula. Instead of ‘A is B’ Aristotle prefers to say τὸ Β τῷ Α ὑπάρχει ‘B belongs to A’ (*Pr. An.* 25^a15 and throughout).”¹⁴ This technical use treated ὑπάρχειν as equivalent to “to predicate” (κατηγορεῖσθαι) and, with inverted syntax, to “to be” (εἶναι) as well.¹⁵ Thus, “to belong” or “to be predicated” (and not “to exist”) are the usual translations of ὑπάρχειν in English editions of Aristotle’s works. While this historical fact about the use of the Greek and Latin verbs ὑπάρχειν (*existere*), κατηγορεῖσθαι (*praedicare*), and εἶναι (*esse*) is generally accepted and uncontroversial, its implications for the substantives corresponding to these verbs—τὸ ὄν or “*ens*” (being), ὑπαρξίς or “*existentia*” (existence), and κατηγορία or “*praedicamentum*” (category, thing predicated)¹⁶—is often overlooked: namely, that ὑπαρξίς or

¹⁴ Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 56. For a lengthier and more recent study of this construction, see Allan Bäck, *Aristotle’s Theory of Predication [=ATP]* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 124–31. See also Jan Łukasiewicz, *Aristotle’s Syllogistic: From the Standpoint of Modern Formal Logic*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 3; Gisela Striker, introduction to *APr.*, xiii.

¹⁵ Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 56: “Since ‘what belongs to a thing’ includes not only its accidents but also essential or substantial attributes in the first category, ὑπάρχειν is said in as many ways as εἶναι, i.e. in as many ways as there are categories or combinations of categories (*Pr. An.* 48^b2–4, 49^a6–9). As we have seen, this use of ὑπάρχειν as equivalent in meaning to predicative εἶναι but of converse form is paralleled by κατηγορεῖσθαι (τὸ Β κατὰ τοῦ Α).” See esp. Aristotle, *APr.* I, c.36, 48^b2–5: “‘To belong’ [ὑπάρχειν; *in esse*] signifies in as many ways as ‘to be’ [εἶναι; *esse*] is said, or as ‘it is true to say’ [ἀληθὲς εἰπεῖν; *verum dicere*] the same thing” (trans. Striker; for my Greek and Latin interpolations, see Ross ed., 36; AL 3/1.77:7–9); c.37, 49^a6–9: “That this belongs [ὑπάρχειν; *in esse*] to that or that this is true of that must be taken in as many ways as the predications [κατηγορία; *praedicamenta*] have been divided, and these either in some respect or without qualification [ἀπλῶς; *simpliciter*]” (trans. Striker; for my Greek and Latin interpolations, see Ross ed., 37; AL 3/1.79:11–13).

¹⁶ On “predicate” and “predication” as translations of κατηγορία, see de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:365–66, I:368n32 (conceding “predicate” as a translation, but preferring “predication”); Bäck, *ATP*, 132 (“‘category’ (‘κατηγορία’) means ‘predication’”), 135 (where listing “things that are equivalent, in signification,” he includes the phrases “the categories,” “predicates,” “the figures of predication,” “be (or being) *per se*,” and “things like names and verbs”); 143 (“The controversy over whether the categories classify real things, expressions, or some hybrid has little

“*existentia*,” in the Aristotelian commentators or Neoplatonists who used these words, means “category,” “predicate,” or “what is predicated of a thing,” not “existence” in any recognizably modern sense of the word.¹⁷ Thus, if Hadot is right that by identifying God with *esse*, Boethius was following the Neoplatonists who identified God with *existentia*, this would not mean he was identifying God with “existence” in any modern sense of the word, but with predicates generally or the ten categories, taken collectively and taken as unreceived in any subject participating such predicates.¹⁸ As we’ll see, this is rather close to the mark even though, at this point, it obviously needs heavy clarification.

I.C. “Esse” in Boethius’s logical works

Where the significance of “*esse*” for Boethius has continued to be investigated in-depth since Hadot’s work is in the study of ancient and medieval semantics, where both his identification of God with *esse* as well as his theological tractates are generally ignored.¹⁹ But

importance,” given that, in Aristotle’s ideal, protocol language, “expressions and real things have an isomorphic, one-to-one correspondence”; cf. *SaO*, 1:360n11); Christos Evangeliou, *Aristotle’s Categories and Porphyry*, ed. W. J. Verdenius and J. C. M. Van Winden, 2nd ed., *Philosophia antiqua* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), esp. 7, 24–26. De Rijk argues that these translations of *κατηγορία* should be understood not in a syntactic way as if only what occupies the predicate position in a sentence is a category, but semantically with the “focal meaning of ‘naming’, ‘appellation’, ‘designation’—or, if you like, ‘non-statemental predication’” (*SaO*, 1:368). My understanding of the “categories” in Boethius is closer to that of de Rijk than Bäck, for whom the categories are not the various “meanings of ‘being,’” but the objects that have being or the subjects of existence (cf. *ATP*, 59–60, 96–97).

¹⁷ Interestingly, this view survived alongside more recent understandings of “existence” in John Stuart Mill’s logic; see John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, 2 vols. (London: John W. Parker, 1843), I, ch.3, 59–60 (where he equates “an enumeration of the Existences, as the basis of Logic,” with the determination of the “highest Predicates,” which were, for Aristotle, the ten categories); 102 (“This, until a better can be suggested, must serve us as a substitute for the abortive Classification of Existences, termed the Categories of Aristotle”).

¹⁸ Cf. Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 59 (who says that, for the Latin Neoplatonists, “*existentia*” “is a learned invention, designed to render *ὑπαρξίς* in metaphysical texts where the latter term is distinguished from *οὐσία* (*substantia*) as the more general concept, sheer being, without categorial determination, while *οὐσία* represents some determinate form of being, like ‘substance’ in the first Aristotelian category”).

¹⁹ An important exception is in de Rijk’s essay, “On Boethius’s Notion of Being: A Chapter of Boethian Semantics,” in *Through Language to Reality: Studies in Medieval Semantics and Metaphysics*, ed. E. P. Bos (Northampton: Variorum Reprints, 1989), 1–29. See also Paul Thom, “Boethius,” in *The Logic of the Trinity: Augustine to Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 42–61; de Libera, “L’onto-théo-logique de Boèce,” 175–222 (both of which stand out in considering the overlap between Boethius’s semantics of predication and his theology, though

here, as in the literature on his theological tractates, forms of the word “existence” are habitually employed to gloss Boethius’s verb “be,” with little attention given to what this word is supposed to mean for Boethius. Largely thanks to the work of Charles Kahn and Jaakko Hintikka over the last half century, the once-standard practice of reading Aristotle and the late-ancient Aristotelian commentators through the procrustean bed of the Frege-Russell trichotomous sense of “is”—“identity” ($x = y$); “the relation of subject and predicate” (Fx); and existence, understood as a particular quantifier or second-order attribute of instantiation ($\exists x$)²⁰—is now generally recognized as anachronistic.²¹ If not Frege’s, what notion of “existence” *can* be helpfully attributed to Boethius?

neither is directly concerned with what he means by “*esse*”). For recent studies of Boethius’s semantics of predication and “be,” see esp. Taki Suto, *Boethius on Mind, Grammar and Logic: A Study of Boethius’ Commentaries on Peri Hermeneias* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Irène Rosier-Catach, “Sur le verbe substantif, la prédication et la consignification: Peri Hermeneias 16b20–25 dans les traductions et commentaires en Latin,” in *Interpréter le De Interpretatione*, ed. Suzanne Husson, Bibliothèque d’histoire de la philosophie (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 97–131; de Rijk, *SaO*, esp. I:215–48; Bäck, *ATP*, 284–91.

²⁰ Cf. Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1920), 171–72 (from whom I’ve taken the portions in quotation marks); Gottlob Frege, “On Concept and Object,” in *Translations from Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, trans. Peter Geach and Max Black, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 43–44. Frege also distinguished “existence” into two senses: the actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) sense and the quantitative “there-is” (*es-gibt*) sense. Gottlob Frege, *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, ed. and trans. Philip Ebert and Marcus Rossberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), xxv; cf. Peter Geach, “Form and Existence” and “What Actually Exists,” in *God and the Soul*, 2nd ed. (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1969), 53–64 and 65, respectively; Peter Geach, “Aquinas,” in *Three Philosophers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961), 88–91; Giovanni Ventimiglia, *Aquinas after Frege* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 34–55. Russell and Whitehead, in the *Principia mathematica*, hold, besides the existentially quantified variable ($\exists x$), two quantitative definitions of existence, one belonging to individuals, $E!$ (according to which one and only one individual matches a definite description), and one to classes, $\exists!$ (according to which they are not empty). Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia mathematica*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 182 (14.02); 229 (24.03–24.04); cf. Bäck, *ATP*, 8n17.

²¹ For this history in Aristotle scholarship, see Simo Knuutila and Jaakko Hintikka, introduction to *Logic of Being*, ix–xvi (from whom I have borrowed the procrustean-bed metaphor and who also note parallel developments in scholarship on Plato). See Charles Kahn, *Essays on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) (an anthology); Charles Kahn, *The Verb Be in Ancient Greek* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1973); Jaakko Hintikka, “‘Is’, Semantical Games, and Semantical Relativity,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, no. 1 (1979): 433–68; Jaakko Hintikka, “The Varieties of Being in Aristotle,” in *The Logic of Being*, ed. Simo Knuutila and Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1986), 81–114; Jaakko Hintikka, “On Aristotle’s Notion of Existence,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 4 (1999): 779–805. On the Frege-Russell trichotomy and quantitative notion of existence, see Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 40, 64, and 111n4; Bäck, *ATP*, 4–10; 47n44; 310–19 (esp. 312–13); de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:24; 1:25, 1:91.

Lambert Marie de Rijk—who is uniquely attentive to the question of what “existence” means when attributed to Aristotle and his commentators—claims that the focal meaning of “be” comes not from its signifying any concept or predicable notion, but from its being a sentential operator, which, when applied to a nominal formation, “posits” the subject itself into the world (the “existential” or “hyparchic” use of “be”), but, when applied to a that-clause or participial phrase, asserts its truth (the “veridical” use of “be”).²² He attributes this notion of “is” and existence to Boethius—though he also holds Boethius responsible for introducing, in the latter part of his career, a “copulative” understanding of “is” that he takes to be a corruption of Aristotle’s thought.²³ De Rijk’s notion of “be” in Aristotle and his commentators as an insignificant operator for positing something as existing in the world is principally based on the exegetical arguments of Charles Kahn and Mohan Matthen.²⁴ In his early essay on “be” in Hellenic thought, Kahn argued that there was no distinct concept of existence in Greek thought, and that the basic sense of “be” in philosophical Greek was not existential, but instead what he calls the “veridical sense” (“is true”; “is the case”), which he identified with the being in the sense of the truth of a proposition—the third entry in Aristotle’s list of the ways of saying

²² De Rijk, *SaO*, 1:33–37.

²³ See de Rijk, “Boethius’s Notion of Being,” 13 (“the phrases ‘no substance’ and ‘no underlying thing’ here must concern existence in the external world. Therefore, *substantia* and *res subiecta* seem to be intended here to stand for physical occurrence. . . . This may suggest that in Boethius’s view *esse* (‘be’) equals ‘exist in the outside world’, a truly Aristotelian view, to be sure. On this interpretation, ‘substance’ and ‘be’ as well would be taken as having to do with existence in the outside world”); de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:235–38 (where Boethius’s supposed transition from thinking of “be” as an assertoric operator to a copula is discussed).

²⁴ De Rijk’s language of non-predicative “positing,” however, seems to come primarily from Gilson’s *Being and Some Philosophers* (2nd ed. [Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1952]). See esp. de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:37n104. De Rijk paraphrases Gilson positively for saying: “that in its existential use the verb ‘be’ is the verb *par excellence*, not because it affirms some attribute of a subject, but because it posits the subject itself, as agent of what he calls ‘the primary act of existence’, and hence as a possible subject-substrate to the secondary acts signified by other (adjectival) verbs.” The similar language of “posing” is also found in Kahn, who might himself be inspired by Gilson, but only explicitly associates this language with Heidegger—an association that seems to cause him embarrassment. Kahn, *Verb ‘Be’ in Ancient Greek*, 314n76. Kahn acknowledges that this language is metaphorical but struggles to give it a non-metaphorical explanation. On Gilson’s positive view of Heidegger on “the act-of-existing,” see Laurence Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 227–28; Ventimiglia, *Aquinas after Frege*, 11 (cf. pp. 22–24).

“being” in *Metaphysics* Δ, c.7. He supports his claim that this is the basic sense of “is” by citing *Metaphysics* Θ, c.10, 1051b1, where Aristotle appears to call truth the most proper sense of “being.”²⁵ This obscure text, however, is probably corrupt and, even if it is not, can be read differently.²⁶

In his 1983 essay, which de Rijk calls “epoch-making,”²⁷ Mohan Matthen distinguished between so-called “monadic” (e.g., “A centaur is”) and “dyadic” (e.g., “Corsicus is artistic”) uses of “be” in Aristotle, and argued that the latter can be transformed into monadic uses attached to a predicative (or, better, attributive)²⁸ complex (e.g., “Artistic-Corsicus is”).²⁹ In *On Interpretation*, c. 3, 16b24–25, Aristotle remarks that “by itself it [=“is” or “being”] is nothing, but it consignifies some combination which cannot be thought of without the components.”³⁰ Matthen argued from this that “is” has the same basic, insignificant, and syncategorematic function in propositions, like “SP is” and “S is,” which is not to predicate something, but to assert the truth or existence of some content.³¹ Thanks to Matthen’s argument, de Rijk and, later, Charles Kahn combined Kahn’s “veridical” sense of “be” with a “hyparchic”-“existential” sense of “be” to form a single basic veridical-existential use of “be,” which varies in nuance depending

²⁵ Cf. Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 23; see also 8, 25, 68, 75n1, 76.

²⁶ Ross, *Commentary in Metaphysics*, 2:274–75: “Being as truth and not-being as falsity are elsewhere treated as emphatically not the primary or strictest senses of being and not-being ... but as ... presupposing being in the primary sense, that in which it is subdivided into the categories ... The words [κυριώτατα ὄν] are probably a gloss or should go after μέν in a34. It will be seen that there is a good deal of divergence among the manuscripts on this point”; C. D. C. Reeve, *Notes in Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016), 479.

²⁷ See de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:81; cf. Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 124n26.

²⁸ De Rijk, *SaO*, 1:83 prefers “attributive complexes” to Matthen’s “predicative complexes” since they lack actual predication.

²⁹ Mohan Matthen, “Greek Ontology and the ‘Is’ of Truth,” *Phronesis* 28, no. 2 (1983): 113–35, esp. 124–25. This procedure is clearly reminiscent of Brentano’s transformation of categorical (i.e., predicative) propositions into existential ones with a complex subject, but Matthen does not evidence direct debt to Brentano. Cf. Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. Oskar Kraus and Linda McAlister, trans. Antos Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister (London: Routledge, 1995), 165–66.

³⁰ Quoted by Matthen, “Greek Ontology,” 121.

³¹ Matthen, “Greek Ontology,” esp. 125: “I propose therefore that Aristotle be taken not as saying that there is a use of ‘is’ that means ‘is true’; just that truth, which is applied to propositions, can be analysed in terms of existence applied to another sort of thing”; 133–34n21 (where he denies that “is” “denote[s] a predicable” and has “cognitive content”).

on whether what is “posited” is a simple content (e.g., “Socrates”) or a complex one (e.g., “that-Socrates-is-white”).³²

The problem is that to interpret Aristotle and his late-ancient commentators, like Boethius, according to this “thetic” notion of “be” as a syncategorematic operator asserting or positing content in the world is, in effect, to replace the anachronistic framework of Fregean semantics with that of Frege’s near contemporaries, Franz Brentano.³³ That, in judgment, besides the “synthetic” (or composing / predicating) operation mentioned by Aristotle, there is another “absolute positing” operation necessary for existential judgments was first suggested by Kant to account for Hume’s claim that “existence” is not an idea or predicate.³⁴ Inspired by Kant’s innovation, Fichte and his students in the Herbartian school were the first to develop a logic to accommodate non-predicative judgments—associated by them with “existential” judgments—in which the only operation is the “thetic” (vs. “synthetic” / “com-positive”) one of (absolute) positing.³⁵ Brentano, then, reduced all propositions to such thetic propositions by converting the subject-predicate structure of categorical propositions into one in which a composite subject is

³² Cf. Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 3–4 (“Asserting existence will mean positing a subject for predication, something to talk about”), 10 (“What I have previously described as existential and veridical uses can thus be more accurately seen as special cases of the semantic extralinguistic functions of the verb”), 124 (“if we think of the obtaining of states of affairs as a particular mode of existence, we can classify the veridical use as a special case of the existential verb”) (for the description of “be” as a semantic “operator,” see 77–78, 88, 116, 124–25, 128–29, 152n12); de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:33–37 (on “is” as an operator that can be rendered as “Is true,” see also I:84).

³³ Elsewhere, I have argued at much greater length that Gilson’s existential semantics in *Being and Some Philosophers* (which, as noted in fn. 24, inspired de Rijk’s thetic reading of Aristotle), arose out of the nineteenth-century thetic tradition, and especially the semantic theory of Brentano; see Elliot Polsky, “The Modern Semantic Principles Behind Gilson’s Existential Interpretation of Aquinas [Parts 1–2],” *Studia Gilsoniana*, forthcoming. It should be noted that though Gilson, de Rijk, and Kahn all use the language of “positing,” the classification of their systems as “thetic” is my own, borrowing the terminology of Wayne Martin in *Theories of Judgment: Psychology, Logic, Phenomenology*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. and trans. by David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 117 (2:72) (existence is not an idea); 119 (2:73) (“absolute positing” distinguished from “relative positing” / predicating); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pt.2, div.2, bk.2, ch.3, sect.4, 567 (A596/B624–A599/B627). For discussion, see Jaakko Hintikka, “Kant on Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument,” *Dialectica* 35, no. 1–2 (1981): 127–46, esp. 137–38; Martin, *Theories of Judgment*, 42–55; Polsky, “Modern Semantics [Part 1].”

³⁵ On this development, see Martin, *Theories of Judgment*, 55–62.

asserted to exist or to be true, thereby conflating the act of asserting a propositional content's truth with that of signifying existence.³⁶ Recognizing that simple ideas cannot be asserted as true, Frege rejected Brentano's conflation of the judgment's assertion function with the notion of existence and offered his own—now more famous—quantitative definition of existence.³⁷

While it is possible that these mostly nineteenth-century developments away from what was thought to be the traditional Aristotelian view of judgment were, in fact, a chance rediscovery of his genuine thought, this seems unlikely. In any case, Boethius explicitly rejects the nearest ancient analogate to de Rijk and Matthen's reading of *On Interpretation*, c. 3, 16b24–25, according to which “is” is an insignificant operator. In both his long and short commentaries on the text, he explicitly maintains that Aristotle's remark should not be taken to mean that “is” is insignificant, full stop, but only that it does not signify anything true or false. In the long commentary, he says: “It is nothing, not since it signifies nothing, but since it manifests nothing true or false, when said alone. For when it is conjoined, then it makes an enunciation, but simply by the verb being said, no signification of the true or the false occurs.”³⁸ In the short commentary, he says: “Said simply by itself ‘is’ is nothing—not that it signifies nothing at all [*omnino nihil*], but that it has nothing either of truth or falsehood; in other words, it is not

³⁶ On Brentano on existential judgment, see Martin, *Theories of Judgment*, 63–73; Uriah Kriegel, “Brentano on Judgment,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Franz Brentano and the Brentano School*, ed. Uriah Kriegel, Routledge Handbooks in Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2017), 103–9; Hynek Janoušek, “Judgmental Force and Assertion in Brentano and Early Husserl,” *Studia Phaenomenologica* 15 (2015): 105–28 (for Brentano's evolving thought on the structure of composite existential judgments).

³⁷ Frege, *Begriffsschrift*, in *Translations from Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, 2. For a defense of Frege against Brentano and Gilson, see Peter Geach, “Assertion,” in *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 263–65. Frege and Brentano agree in distinguishing the assertion of truth from the act of predicating. On the origin of this distinction, see Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Martin Heim, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 35–36; Richard Cobb-Stevens, *Husserl and Analytic Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 102–22.

³⁸ Boethius, *In I PH²*, c.3 (Meiser ed., 2.78:8–13).

‘nothing’ with regard to signification [*ad significationem*], but with regard to the signification of truth and falsehood [*ad veritatis falsitatisque significationem*].”³⁹

The most recent extended study of how Boethius understands 16b20–25 is that of Taki Suto.⁴⁰ She argues that, in his commentary on this text, Boethius endorses the understanding of “is” that he himself attributes to Porphyry. As she understands the view he attributes to Porphyry, there are two senses of “is” corresponding to the constructions, “S is P” and “S is.” In the first case, “is” is an insignificant conjunction, but in the second case—about which, according to her, Boethius is speaking, when he says “is” signifies something—the something in question is “existence.”⁴¹ She does not clarify what “existence” means here. It evidently cannot mean what de Rijk and the late Kahn mean by “existence” since, for them, existence is not something a predicate signifies, but something asserted using an insignificant operator. In any case, Boethius does not use the Latin cognate for Suto’s word “existence.” Nor does he attribute to Porphyry the view that there are two senses of “is.”⁴² Moreover, regardless of how one interprets the view he attributes to Porphyry, he clearly rejects this view. Let us take these points in turn.

Concerning Porphyry’s view, he relates that Porphyry draws a distinction between two syntactical forms, “Socrates is” and “Socrates is a philosopher,” precisely in order to show that, in both cases, “is” is used in the same way—namely, as an insignificant conjunction, joining the subject “Socrates,” in the first case, to “those that are” (*quae sunt*) and, in the second, to philosophy. There is no reason to take the phrase “those that are” (*quae sunt*) as a circumlocution

³⁹ Boethius, *In I PH¹*, c.3 (Meiser ed., 65:20–24).

⁴⁰ Suto, *Boethius*, 187–222. Suto’s chapter is framed as a rebuttal of de Rijk’s accusation that Boethius, under the influence of Ammonius, introduced the subject-copula-predicate analysis of judgment into logic.

⁴¹ Suto, *Boethius*, 207, 218.

⁴² For Boethius’s summary of Porphyry, see Boethius, *In I PH²*, c.3 (Meiser ed., 2.77:13–78:5).

for “existence” in a modern sense. Rather, we can understand it, more accurately, as “things in one of the ten categories” or “things that have a nature.” This would fit better with Boethius’s usage elsewhere. For example, where modern philosophers would say that a goatstag “doesn’t exist” or “has no existence,” Boethius, instead, says, “there is altogether no substance [*substantia*] for it in things.”⁴³ Likewise, to express the dependence of the last nine categories on substance, he does not appeal to quantifiers or presence in the world, but to the possession of a nature: Apart from primary substance, no accident would “hold together in its own nature [*in propriis natura non potest consistere*].”⁴⁴ For Boethius, “to be” simply—or, if one insists, “to exist”—is to have a nature, definition, or “substance” (*substantia*). This is why, as we’ll see below, Boethius treats the notion of “those that are” (*quae sunt*) as coextensive with the broad notion of “nature” used for all that can be “defined” (things in the categories) or that are somehow knowable (God and matter).⁴⁵

However one understands the phrase “those that are” (*quae sunt*), which Boethius attributes to Porphyry, it remains that, in both his commentaries, he explicitly rejects the

⁴³ Boethius, *In I PH²*, c.1 (Meiser ed., 50:1–17); de Rijk glosses this remark by saying what Boethius means is that the goatstag does not “exist in the outside world” (de Rijk, “Boethius’s Notion of Being,” 13), but he gives no reason why we should appeal to the metaphorical notion of being “in the world” to understand Boethius’s remark, which is made in the precise technical vocabulary of Aristotle: *substantia*. A detailed consideration of how Boethius handles affirmations about non-beings, like Sulla, Homer, and the goatstag, is beyond the scope of the present paper. We should note, however, that he seems to rule out ordinary affirmative predication about them and to allow this only insofar as they are in thought (*opinabile*). Cf. Boethius, *In I PH²*, c.1 (Meiser ed., 45:11–13) (where, as Ebbesen noted [see below], there is a lacuna in the text, but Boethius implies nothing positive can be affirmed of non-beings); *In V PH²*, c.11 (Meiser ed., 376:9–15) (where Boethius seems to appeal to being in thought [*opinabile*] to explain the truth of the proposition, “Homer is a poet”: Homer is a poet in thought in virtue of his surviving effects—his poetic works—just as a dead father “lives,” not in himself [*per se*] not in thought in virtue of his surviving effects—his children). For secondary literature on Boethius on predication about non-beings, see Sten Ebbesen, “The Chimera’s Diary,” in *The Logic of Being*, esp. 120; Suto, *Boethius*, 37–41, 104–5, 230; Lambert-Marie de Rijk, “The Logic of Indefinite Names in Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus and Radulphus Brito,” in *Aristotle’s Peri Hermeneias in the Latin Middle Ages: Essays on the Commentary Tradition*, ed. Henricus Antonius Giovanni Braakhuis and Corneille Henri Kneepkens, Artistarium, Supplementa (Groningen: Ingenium Publishers, 2003), 207–33; Richard Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600AD: A Sourcebook*, vol. 3, *Logic & Metaphysics* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 283–92; Bäck, *ATP*, 284–86; Christopher Martin, “The Logic of Negation in Boethius,” *Phronesis* 36, no. 3 (1991): 277–304.

⁴⁴ Boethius, *In I Cat.* (PL 64.181D–82A).

⁴⁵ Cf. Boethius, *CEut.*, c.1 (Loeb ed., 76–78:5–11).

interpretation of the text—associated with Porphyry in the long commentary—according to which “is” signifies nothing absolutely (*omnino nihil*); instead, he advances the alternative reading that it “is nothing” only in the sense that it is nothing true or false.⁴⁶ Neither commentary is terribly helpful for clarifying for what he takes “is” predicated alone to signify; all they are clear about is that it signifies something. For a positive account of what he means by “*esse*,” we must turn to his other works, especially his theological tractates. But first, we must say something about his general ontology.

II. What There Is for Boethius

Boethius’s early⁴⁷ *Contra Eutychen* provides the clearest account of his ontology in the Quinean sense of what things there are (*quae sunt*), a notion Boethius treats as coextensive with “nature,” taken broadly for whatever can be “defined” or “grasped by the intellect in some way,” which includes everything from substances to accidents, from matter to God.⁴⁸ Boethius uses “substance” in at least four ways, three of which are explained explicitly in *Contra Eutychen*. In one way, it is used according to its etymology for what “stands under” (*substat*) accidents, providing their foundation (*subministrat*).⁴⁹ Since God has no accidents, this cannot be applied to

⁴⁶ Suto thinks that he embraces Porphyry’s view on two grounds. First, in his short commentary, he, like Porphyry, distinguishes between sentences of the form, “S is P” and “S is.” Suto, *Boethius*, 211. But Suto overlooks the fact that Boethius’s distinction between “is” in “Man is” and “Man is animal” in the short commentary is not ordered to distinguishing two senses of “is,” one of which is insignificant, but instead to showing (*ostendit*) that, regardless of how “is” is used, it does not signify anything true or false. See Boethius, *In I PH*¹, c.3 (Meiser ed., 65:20–26). The distinction is made precisely to reject the view that “is” signifies “nothing at all” (*omnino nihil*) in favor of the alternative view that “is” merely signifies nothing true or false. Suto’s second grounds for believing that Boethius endorses Porphyry’s understanding of “is” is that, in the long commentary, he never explicitly objects to Porphyry’s view. Suto, *Boethius*, 210–12, esp. n92. This is not quite accurate. Boethius prefaces his whole commentary on 16b20–25 as a criticism of Porphyry, whom he accuses of reading Stoic notions into Aristotle’s text. Boethius, *In I PH*², c.3 (Meiser ed., 71:13–18). As he proceeds to comment on the various controversial points in Aristotle’s text, he makes repeated use of the phrase “*vel certe...*” to signal the commencement of his own view in contradistinction from the views of other authors, including Porphyry. Boethius, *In I PH*², c.3 (Meiser ed., 78:8; cf. 76:15).

⁴⁷ For the dating of Boethius’s works, see chart 2 in Suto, *Boethius*.

⁴⁸ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.1 (Loeb ed., 78:8–19).

⁴⁹ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.3 (Loeb ed., 88:42–49).

him. In a second way, “substance” names an individual of a rational nature or person, the etymological implication of “standing under accidents” being ignored.⁵⁰ Third, God himself can be called a “substance” according to a unique appropriation of the etymology of the word:

(II.1) Except that ecclesiastical usage excludes speaking of three substances in God, it may seem reasonable to predicate “substance” [*substantia*] of God, not that he himself is put under [*supponeretur*] the rest of things as a subject, but because he was before [*preesset*] all so that as a principle is under [*subesset*] things, while he serves as foundation [*subministrat*], οὐσιῶσθαι or to subsist belongs to them all.⁵¹

Besides these three senses of “substance,” we find a fourth sense in Boethius’s works. Jerome states in his letter to Pope Damasus that no learned person “understands [*nouit*] anything by *hypostasis* except *ousia*.”⁵² Here, ὑπόστασις or “substance” signifies not an individual subject or person, but an essence (οὐσία). As we’ll see in *De trinitate*, Boethius predicates “*substantia*” of God not in the sense that he stands under accidents, is a person, or is creator, but in the sense that he has or is an essence or οὐσία.⁵³ Apparently taking “substance” in the sense of essence or οὐσία, Boethius, in *Contra Eutychen*, c.2, presents a taxonomy of all substances, including God:

(II.2) But of substances some are corporeal things, some incorporeals. Now, corporeal things are living or not. Among the living, some are sensible, some not. Among the sensible, some are rational, others irrational. Likewise, among incorporeals, some are rational, some not, as the souls [*uitae*] of sheep. Among the rational, some are immutable and impassible by nature, as God; others are by creation mutable and passible, unless they are transformed by grace of substance to impassible firmness, as angels and souls [*animae*].⁵⁴

So, God is distinguished from the other rational substances by his natural immutability. But in c.7, we find out that created incorporeal substances are not capable of change with regard to substance since they lack a material substrate.

⁵⁰ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.3 (Loeb ed., 88–90:62–78).

⁵¹ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.3 (Loeb ed., 90:95–101).

⁵² Jerome, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi epistulae*, pars I, ed. Isidore Hilberg, *Corpus scriptorium ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 54 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1910), XV.4, p.65, lns.9–11: “tota saecularium litterarum schola nihil aliud hypostasim nisi usian nouit.”

⁵³ Cf. Augustine, *De trin.* VII, c.5 (CCL 50.260–61:1–26).

⁵⁴ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.2 (Loeb ed., 82:18–28).

(II.3) For the nature of incorporeal substance is based on no foundation of matter, but there is no body to which matter is not subjected ... Some things rely upon a foundation of matter (i.e., body); others (i.e., incorporeals) do not need a subject of matter at all ... It thus cannot happen that a body be changed into an incorporeal species, nor can it happen that incorporeals be changed by a mutual intermixture. For where there is no common matter, neither is conversion and transformation possible. But there is no matter in incorporeal things. Thus, they cannot, in turn, be changed in themselves [*in se*]. But the soul and God are rightly believed to be incorporeal substances. Thus, the human soul is not transformed into the divinity by which it is assumed.⁵⁵

Here, Boethius explicitly includes the human soul among the incorporeal substances, which lack a material substrate, and since he earlier (II.2) classed the human soul with the angels, we can assume they too are intended here. If, due to their lack of matter, these created incorporeal things are not changeable in themselves and yet they are changeable, then they are so only in their accidents. Augustine took a similar route when he based God's unique immutability on his lack of accidents or *per accidens* predicates,⁵⁶ and contrasted God's immutable simplicity with the mutable complexity of the human soul on the grounds that, although the human soul cannot lose its life,⁵⁷ and is simpler than a body, nevertheless, it is changeable with regard to its various operations and affections (i.e., accidents).⁵⁸

While *Contra Eutychem* provides the clearest account of Boethius's ontology, *De trinitate* provides his clearest account of the causes of distinction among things. In c.1, he notes that "The diversity of three things or any amount [of things] consists in genus, in species, or in number."⁵⁹

(II.4) But in number, a variety of accidents produces difference [*differentiam*]. For three men differ [*distant*] neither in genus nor species, but by accidents; for if by the soul we separated all accidents from them, nevertheless, place is totally diverse so that we cannot in any way imagine it as one. For two bodies cannot obtain the same place, which is an accident.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.7 (Loeb ed., 110:56–74).

⁵⁶ Augustine, *De trin.* V, c.2 (CCL 50.208:7–11); Augustine, *De trin.* V, c.5: "In deo autem nihil quidem secundum accidens dicitur quia nihil in eo mutabile est." (CCL 50.210:1–2).

⁵⁷ Augustine, *De trin.* V, c.4 (CCL 50.209–10:16–23).

⁵⁸ Augustine, *De trin.* VI, c.6 (CCL 50.236–37).

⁵⁹ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.1 (Loeb ed., 6:15–17).

⁶⁰ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.1 (Loeb ed., 6:24–30).

Boethius seems to identify accidental plurality within a species with spatial plurality; at least, he gives no example of two things of the same species differing in number by any accident other than place. When it comes to the diversification of incorporeal things, which are not in place, he says:

(II.5) It is a canon of absolute truth that diversity [*distantias*] in incorporeal things is produced by difference, not place.⁶¹

Since he opposes difference to diversity by place, which he previously associated with numerical “difference” within a species caused by accidents, he evidently intends the word, here, to indicate substantial (i.e., specific) difference, not numerical difference. Thus, incorporeal things are said to be diverse by substantial difference and must each numerically belong to distinct species.⁶² This is why, whereas the Catholic truth teaches that the Trinity is one God, the cause of whose unity is “indifference” (*indifferentia*), the Arians divide the Trinity into plurality according to rank (*gradibus meritorum*).⁶³ Assuming the Arians see all three gods as incorporeal, they must belong to different species and, thus, be unequally ranked. For Boethius, in contrast,

⁶¹ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.5 (Loeb ed., 26:40–42). Partly borrowing from Loeb translation.

⁶² This is close to Aquinas’s view inasmuch as it entails only one individual per incorporeal species (Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, d.3, q.1, a.4; *De ente*, c.4 [43.376:79–89; 377:173–77]), but it differs by using place rather than quantified matter to explain numerical diversity (Aquinas, *In De trin.*, q.4, a.4 [Leon. ed., 50.132]). Aquinas’s theory helps him accommodate the miraculous collocation of bodies (Aquinas, *In De trin.*, q.4, a.3, ad1 [Leon. ed., 50.129–30:208–30]). On medieval theories of individuation in angels, see Giorgio Pini, “The Individuation of Angels from Bonaventure to Duns Scotus,” in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 79–116. Richard Sorabj has shown that the interpenetration of bodies was a live debate in late antiquity with Stoics pointing to soaked papyri to prove interpenetration; Plotinus followed Aristotle in rejecting it, leading to Neoplatonic debates about the precise reason why bodies cannot interpenetrate (because of extension itself, matter, or qualities) and about possible exceptions to this rule, such as in the mixture of the elements; see *Matter, Space, and Motion: Theories in Antiquity and Their Sequel* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 107–19. The Stoic view was resurrected in a Christian context as an analogy for the two natures of Christ. Sorabj, *Matter, Space, and Motion*, 120–21. It is noteworthy that Boethius’s analogy for Christ’s two natures—that of a crown composed of gold and jewels—does not require the interpenetration of bodies, but only their conjunction; moreover, he clearly thinks that in mixtures out of the elements, the elements do not remain in their proper nature. Boethius, *CEut.*, c.7 (Loeb ed., 114–15:1–23). Boethius’s careful evaluation of the mixture of elements and bejeweled crown analogies in *Contra Eutychen* suggests he was aware of ongoing debates and sided with Plotinus and Aristotle against the Stoics.

⁶³ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.1 (Loeb ed., 6:9–13).

(II.6) God differs from God in no way; they differ neither by accidental nor substantial differences posited in a subject. But where there is no difference, there is altogether no plurality, nor for this reason number. Therefore, unity alone.⁶⁴

So, for Boethius, incorporeal things differ by substantial differences which put them in a gradation of species, but corporeal things, like men, differ by the accidental difference of place so that they can be numerically multiplied within the same species. The Trinitarian persons constitute one substance because they do not differ in either way.

This background is necessary for understanding *De trinitate*, c.2, a text frequently cited for Boethius's understanding of divine simplicity, but rarely explained within its dialectical context. As usually interpreted, this passage entails something like a theory of universal hylomorphism in which everything besides God must have matter to have accidents.⁶⁵ Since this passage, I maintain, has been read out of context, we must quote it at length.

(II.7) In divine studies, we must proceed intellectually and must not be dispersed into imaginations, but must rather inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image, and which is being itself [*esse ipsum*] and from which being is [*ex qua esse est*]. For every being is from form [*Omne namque esse ex forma est*]. For a statue is not called the representation of an animal by bronze, which is matter, but by the form, which is impressed in it. Bronze itself is not said [*dicitur*] [to be] by earth, which is its matter, but

⁶⁴ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.3 (Loeb ed., 12:1–4).

⁶⁵ Odon Lottin's classic study shows that, as far as the history of medieval thought is concerned, the doctrine of universal hylomorphism was a thirteenth-century novelty, not traditional. "La composition hylémorphique des substances spirituelles: Les débuts de la controverse," *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 34, no. 33 (1932): 21–41. Nevertheless, it is common to attribute something like universal hylomorphism to Augustine. See Arthur Hilary Armstrong, "Spiritual or Intelligible Matter in Plotinus and St. Augustine," in *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Variorum, 1979), 277–83 (who says Augustine was influenced by Plotinus); Brendan Case, "Seraphicus *Supra Angelicum*: Universal Hylomorphism and Angelic Mutability," *Franciscan Studies* 78 (2020): 19–50 (who makes the important distinction between using universal hylomorphism to distinguish God from creatures, which he concedes is unnecessary, and using it to account for the mutability of creatures, which he thinks is necessary; the notion that matter is needed to account for the potency to underly accidents is implicit in Richard Cross's paraphrase of *De trinitate*, c.2, in Richard Cross, "Form and Universal in Boethius," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 3 [2012]: 453: "since forms are actualities, lacking the passive capacity to receive accidental modifications: matter supplies the relevant capacity, and matter is absent from pure forms"); Michael Sullivan, "The Debate over Spiritual Matter in the Late Thirteenth Century: Gonsalvus Hispanus and the Franciscan Tradition from Bonaventure to Scotus" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2010), 15–22; Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 286, 288n12. Claims about Augustine's ontology are beyond the scope of this paper, but it should at least be noted that I do not agree with these authors, who I think confuse (1) the analogy of incorporeal substances themselves to matter with respect to their psychic operations with (2) the claim that, in their very nature, spiritual substances are composed of matter and form. Cf. Aquinas, *De spiritualibus*, a.1, ad4 (Leon. ed., 24/2.15:447–65).

by the form [*figuram*] of bronze ... Nothing therefore is said to be [*esse dicitur*] except by its own form [*propriam formam*]. But the divine substance is form without matter and for this reason is one and that which it is [*id quod est*]. The rest are not that which they are [*id quod sunt*]. For everything has its being [*esse*] from those out of which it is—that is, from its parts—and it is a *this* and a *that* ... but not *this* or *that* singularly, as since earthly man consists of soul and body, he is body and soul, not either body or soul in part. He is not, therefore, what he is [*id quod est*] ... That truly would be one in which there is no number nor in which there is anything else besides [*praeterquam*] that which it is [*id quod est*]. For neither could it become a subject; for forms cannot be subjects. For other forms, like humanity [*humanitas*], are subject to accidents, not such that it receives accidents in that which it itself is, but insofar as matter is subject to it. For while matter subjected to humanity receives some accident, humanity itself seems to receive this. But a form which is without matter cannot be subject nor be in matter for neither would it be a form, but an image ... There is in it, then, no diversity—no plurality from diversity nor multiplicity from accidents—and, for this reason, neither is there number. [Chapter 3] But God differs from God in no way; they differ neither by accidental nor substantial differences posited in a subject. But where there is no difference, there is altogether no plurality, nor for this reason number. Therefore, unity alone.⁶⁶

On the face of it, this passage is in direct contradiction to *Contra Eutychen*'s claim about the immateriality of created incorporeal substances, like the human soul. Commenting on this passage, Henry Chadwick rightly identifies the phrase "*id quod est*" with essence (read τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) and states that Boethius's intent is, in part, to identify God with what is truly form.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, he complains that "Boethius does not show how God as pure form is distinguished from other forms in which there is no material element."⁶⁸ He connects this to "a certain hesitancy and mistiness" on Boethius's part with regard to choosing between Plato, for whom, "all forms have being apart from matter," and Aristotle, for whom, "universals have being solely as instantiated in the particulars that compose them."⁶⁹ In a similar vein, Schultz and Synan see a tension between this passage's claim that forms cannot be subject, on the one hand, and the fact, on the other hand, that "Boethius believed in angels."⁷⁰ They offer no solution to the problem

⁶⁶ Boethius, *De trin.*, cc.2–3 (Loeb ed., 8–12).

⁶⁷ Chadwick, *Boethius*, 215.

⁶⁸ Chadwick, *Boethius*, 215.

⁶⁹ Chadwick, *Boethius*, 215.

⁷⁰ Schultz and Synan, "Introduction," xlvii–xlvi.

except to say that Boethius's metaphysics, without the help of Aquinas's "act of *esse*," was unable to distinguish created immaterial forms from God or to explain how forms could have accidents.

No such mistiness or inconsistency need be attributed to Boethius, however, if we consider the dialectical context of *De trinitate*, c.2. The context is the challenge of explaining the Catholic doctrine that the Trinity of persons is only numerically one God while rejecting the Arian doctrine of an order of three unequal gods. As we saw above, for Boethius, (II.5) incorporeals are distinguished by (substantial) difference. Thus, as I argued above, they cannot be numerically multiplied within a species, but must be unequally ranked as the Arians believed about the Trinity. On the other hand, (II.4) corporeal things can be numerically multiplied within a species by the accident of being in distinct places. These two ways of multiplying God are rejected in cc.1–2, respectively. In c.1, he rejects the Arian hierarchy of unequal gods on the grounds it is contrary to Catholic truth. This, however, implies that the Trinitarian persons are equal and, accordingly, related in the way Cicero and Cato are related to the human species. In c.1, Boethius describes how Cicero and Cato are numerically multiplied in the same species by the accident of place, but does not explain why this cannot apply to God. This task is left until c.2, where, as we've seen, he concludes his discussion by saying: "There is in it [a form outside of matter], then, no diversity—no plurality from diversity nor multiplicity from accidents—and, for this reason, neither is there number." Now, the chapter begins by discussing the methods of the various disciplines and noting that, in the divine discipline, "we must proceed intellectually and must not be dispersed into imaginations, but must rather inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image." So, only the forms in matter, which are not true forms, but images, are capable of being numerically multiplied within a species by accidents, as the form of humanity in

Cicero and Cato. But in theology, where we treat of the Trinity, we must look to a form, which is true form, and not an image (a form in matter). Thus, the Trinity of persons cannot multiply the equally possessed nature of God as Cato and Cicero numerically multiply the species of man. As if to summarize the teaching of cc.1–2, respectively, c.3 opens by saying: “But God differs from God in no way; they differ [c.2] neither by accidental [c.1] nor substantial differences posited in a subject. But where there is no difference, there is altogether no plurality, nor for this reason number. Therefore, unity alone.”

So, c.2 must not be read—as Chadwick and Schultz and Synan tacitly do—as an independent treatise on divine simplicity. On the contrary, as an integral part of a larger treatise, it serves a limited dialectical purpose—namely, to contrast the divine form in three persons to the form of earthly man in Cato and Cicero (i.e., to images). How God’s simplicity differs from that of incorporeal angels, which are multiplied by substantial difference, is entirely irrelevant to the chapter. There is, in conclusion, no reason to question Boethius’s lasting adherence to the immateriality of angels and the soul.

III. God as *Esse suum* and *Esse ipsum*

III.A. “*Esse*” as *Substance*

Now that we have sketched Boethius’s basic ontology—his account of what sorts of things there are—we can begin to investigate what he means by “*esse*” when he identifies God with “his being” or “being itself.” The claim that God is “his being,” as we’ll see, shows up not only in *De hebdomadibus*, as is well known, but also in *De trinitate*, c.4. In these passages, I will argue, “*esse*” is used for the substance or whatness of a thing. To explain the rationale for this usage, let us first look at a few passages in which it occurs outside *De trinitate*, c.4 and *De*

hebdomadibus. Next, we'll look at *De trinitate*, c.4 and *De hebdomadibus* themselves. Finally, we'll turn to the claim God is “being itself” (*esse ipsum*).

Now, as we already saw (I.1), in Boethius's famous axiom that *esse* comes from form in *De trinitate*, c.2, he uses “*esse*” in indirect speech to speak about what is predicated of a subject through the verb “is”—what a thing is said to be (*dicitur esse*). In his example, this “*esse*” turns out to be the definition of the statue—its being a representation of an animal—which is predicated of it in virtue of its form or shape. It is not a mere coincidence that “*esse*” in his example stands for the definition predicated of a thing. In Book 4 of his long commentary on the *Isagoge*, c.14, Boethius identifies the “being of a thing” (*esse rei*) with its definition or, rather, what its definition signifies—namely, its what-it-is-to-be (*quod est esse*):

(III.1) But what is the being [*esse*] of a thing? It is nothing else than the definition [*definitio*]; for if anyone asks of a thing, “What is it?” he who wishes to show what it is to be [*quod est esse*] states the definition [*definitionem*].⁷¹

A similar identification occurs in *De hebdomadibus*:

(III.2) Just being something [*esse aliquid*] and being something with regard to what it is [*esse aliquid in eo quod est*] are diverse; for by the one accident, by the other substance is signified. Everything that is participates in that which it is to be [*eo quod est esse*] that it be, but participates something else that it be something [*aliquid sit*].⁷²

⁷¹ Boethius, *In IV Isag.*², c. 14: “quid est autem esse rei? nihil est aliud nisi definitio. uni cuique enim rei interrogatae ‘quid est?’ si quis quod est esse monstrare uouerit, definitionem dicit” (Brandt ed., 273:13–15).

⁷² Boethius, *De hebd.* (Loeb ed., 40–42:38–44). Commenting on Boethius's treatise, Aquinas famously distinguishes three modes of participation: (1) that of something more particular in something more universal, as man in animal or Socrates in man; (2) that of a subject in an accident or material form; and (3) that of an effect in its cause as air participates the light of the Sun. Aquinas, *In De hebd.*, c.2 (Leon. ed., 50.271:71–85). There is a tendency to assume Aquinas imposes this threefold distinction unnaturally on Boethius's text. Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo san Tommaso d'Aquino*, Opere Complete 3 (Segni: Editrice del Verbo Incarnato, 2005), 33; Rudi te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 8–15. But a closer examination of Boethius's *oeuvre* reveals that Aquinas is describing the diversity within Boethius's actual usage. In his commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, Boethius employs the Platonic language of participation for the Aristotelian notions of essential and accidental predication. For example, speaking of what Aquinas would call the first mode of participation, he says (Boethius, *In II Isag.*², c.29): “... semper omnia quae participant specie, aequaliter participant; aequaliter enim et Socrates et Cicero et Plato homines sunt” (Brandt ed., 129:8–10). Likewise, describing what Aquinas would call the second mode of participation, he says (Boethius, *In II Isag.*², c.29): “at uero illa quae participant accidenti, etiamsi inseparabile accidens sit, tamen non aequaliter participant” (Brandt ed., 129:10–12); cf. Boethius, *In II Isag.*², c.31: “deinde omne proprium aequaliter se his rebus quae sub se fuerint dat et ab his aequaliter participatur — Socrates enim et Cicero et Vergilius aequaliter et resibili participant et aequaliter risibiles sunt” (Brandt ed., 131:9–13). The same Platonic language for Aristotelian notions recurs in Boethius's theological works.

Here, “*quod est*” and “*quod est esse*” seem to be translations of Aristotle’s τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, which Boethius associates simultaneously with the signification of substance (in the sense of essence) and the predication of “is” (*sit*) without addition. The predication of accident, in contrast, is associated with something added to the bare predicate “*sit*”—namely, “*aliquid*,” which stands indefinitely for whatever that added determination might be. From the assumption that “is” predicated alone predicates substance (=τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) and the idiom of indirect speech according to which we signify what is predicated by “is” with the infinitive form “*esse*,” it becomes appropriate to speak of the substance (=τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) of a thing using the unqualified infinitive “*esse*” or else this same infinitive combined with a possessive noun in the dative or genitive case, standing for the subject of which “is” is predicated unqualifiedly. The resulting idiom (dative / genitive + infinitive) is not equivalent to the Latin idiom for indirect speech (accusative + infinitive), but it is not correctly understood except in reference to indirect speech and the assumption that “is” said alone predicates what belongs to a thing without addition—namely, its essence.

E.g., Boethius, *De fide*: “...nec humanum corpus quod Christus induerat de humanae substantiae participatione uenisse” (Loeb ed., 66:212–13) (essential participation); Boethius, *CP IV*: “Quid si eidem misero qui cunctis careat bonis, praeter ea quibus miser est malum aliud fuerit adnexum, nonne multo infelicioer eo censendus est cuius infortunium boni participatione releuatur?” (Loeb ed., 326:57–60) (accidental participation). Aquinas’s third mode of participation is the least evidently discerned in Boethius’s works, but seems to reflect his usage in such passages as Boethius, *CP III*: “Omnis igitur beatus deus, sed natura quidem unus; participatione uero nihil prohibet esse quam plurimos” (Loeb ed., 272:88–90); Boethius, *De fide*: “quos licet meritum naturae damnaret, future tamen sacramenti et longe postmodum proferendi faciendo participes perditam uoluit reparare naturam” (Loeb ed. 60:123–26). The fact that, in at least the first two ways Boethius uses “participation,” “participation” simply signifies the subject-predicate relation expressed by “is” (*esse*) seems to have important implication for the perennial debate among Thomists as to which of the three modes of participation is “the” participation in *esse*. On this debate, see, e.g., Jason Mitchell, “Aquinas on *Esse Commune* and the First Mode of Participation,” *The Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018): 543–72; Daniel De Haan, “Aquinas on *Actus Essendi* and the Second Mode of Participation,” *The Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018): 573–609; Greg Doolan, “Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation,” *The Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018): 611–42 (who collectively argue that each of the three modes of participation is a participation in a different sense of “*esse*”: *esse commune*, *actus essendi*, *esse subsistens*); te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 79 (who argues a being participates *esse* in a “tacitly introduced” fourth way); McNerny, *Boethius and Aquinas*, 205 (who argues a being participates *esse* in the second way); John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), esp. 103–9 (who argues a being participates *esse* in the third way).

This usage comes from both Aristotelian and earlier patristic usage, a fact this paper has only the space to point out, not analyze. In *Metaphysics Z*, c.6, Aristotle uses Σωκράτει εἶναι (Socrates’s being; the to-be of Socrates) to signify Socrates’s what-it-was-to-be (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) and τὸ λευκῶ εἶναι (the being of white; the to-be of white) to signify the substance (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) of white.⁷³ Hilary of Poitiers, in his *De trinitate* II, c.6, says: “Moreover, his [the Father’s] being [*eius esse*] is in himself, not assuming [*sumens*] from another what he is [*quod est*], but obtaining that which he is [*id quod est*] out of himself and in himself.”⁷⁴ Modern readers might expect Hilary to say that the Father’s *esse* is in himself because he does not receive his existence from another, but Hilary evidently takes “*esse*” and “*id quod est*” as interchangeable notions. In VII, c.11, he will use “*quod Deus est*” as equivalent to God’s “nature” or “substance.” Likewise, in Augustine’s *De trinitate* VII, c.5, we find the *esse* of a body (*ei esse*) identified with “being a body” (*corpus esse*) and contrasted with its accidentally being this color or shape (*esse ... ille color vel illa forma*), from which we can conclude he takes the possessive-noun-plus-*esse* construction as signifying the nature of a body.⁷⁵ In the same passage, Augustine counterfactually opposes God’s *esse* with “whatever is not incongruously said of him,” such as “great, omnipotent, and good,” on the supposition he later denies that God stands under things as a substance to what is in it.⁷⁶ By implication, God’s “*esse*” must mean what is said of him not as something in a subject as an accident, but as what he the subject is—as *esse corpus* is what is said of a body as what it is.

Now, according to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics Z*, c.4, “definition” and “what it is” are said in many ways since they apply simply (ἀπλῶς) to the first category, substance (οὐσία), but in a

⁷³ Aristotle, *Metaphysica Z*, c.6, 1031a27, 1032a8.

⁷⁴ Hilary, *De trin.* II, c.6 (CCL 62.42:5–8).

⁷⁵ Augustine, *De trin.* VII, c.5 (CCL 50.260:1–26).

⁷⁶ Augustine, *De trin.* VII, c.5 (CCL 50.260:9–13).

derivative way to the other accidental categories inasmuch as we can also ask of them what they are and define them as additions to substance.⁷⁷ Thus, in a single passage in the *Topics*, Aristotle can refer to the first category as “what it is” (τί ἐστί; *quid est*) and apply the very same phrase to all the categories. Moreover, here again, we find the whatness of a thing referred to using the word “esse” in indirect speech. In Boethius’s translation, the text reads:

(III.3) After this, one must determine the genera of the predications [κατηγοριῶν; *praedicamentorum*] ... These are ten in number: What-it-is [τί ἐστί; *quid est*], what-kind, how-much, relative, where, when, to be positioned, to have, to make, to suffer. For accident, genus, property, and definition will always be in one of these predications. ... It is manifest from them since “that which it is” [τὸ τί ἐστί; *qui quid est*] signifies sometimes substance [οὐσίαν; *substantiam*], but sometimes what-kind, and other times something from among the other predications. For when someone says about a given man that he is either a man [ἄνθρωπον εἶναι; *hominem esse*] or an animal, he says both what it is [τί ἐστί; *quid est*] and signifies substance; but when he says about a given color that it is either white [λευκὸν εἶναι; *album esse*] or a color, he says what it is [τί ἐστί; *quid est*] and signifies what-kind. ... And the same goes for the other [categories]: For concerning these, regardless of whether the same [thing itself] or its genus is said of it, one signifies what it is [*quid est*]. But when [any one is said] of another [category], one does not signify what it is, but how-much or what-kind or one of the other predications.⁷⁸

Here, we see a thing’s being said in indirect speech *to be* something specific or generic (*hominem esse vel animal; album esse vel colorem*) identified with the signification of its whatness (*quid est*). This is applied not only to the first category, but to all the categories, about each of which we can say what it is (*quid est*), by assigning it a genus or definition. Yet, we also see that the first category, substance, is itself designated here by this phrase, which is common to all the categories: *quid est*. This leads Michael Frede to question whether substance is a category

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Metaph.* Z, c.4, 1030a18–27 (Ross ed.).

⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Top.* I, c.9, 103b20–39: “Post haec autem oportet terminare genera praedicamentorum ... Sunt autem haec numero decem, quid est, quale, quantum, ad aliquid, ubi quando, situm esse, habere, facere, pati. Semper enim accidens et genus et proprium et diffinitio in uno horum praedicamentorum erit ... Manifestum autem ex eisdem quoniam qui quid est significat quandoque quidem substantiam significat, quandoque autem quale, quandoque vero aliquod aliorum praedicamentorum. Nam quando posito homine dixerit quod positum est hominem esse vel animal, et quid est dicit et substantiam significat; quando vero colore albo posito dixerit quod positum est album esse vel colorem, quid est dicit et quale significat. ... Similiter autem et in aliis; unumquodque enim talium, sive idem de eodem dicatur sive genus de hoc, quid est significat. Quando autem de alio, non quid est significat, sed quantum aut quale aut aliquod aliorum praedicamentorum” (AL 14:13–15:9; for my Greek interpolations, see Ross ed.).

at all for Aristotle until his later works.⁷⁹ This is unnecessary. In *Metaphysics Z*, c.4, Aristotle himself provides the means of understanding this usage. “What it is” (*quid est*) and “definition” are said in many ways because whereas a substance has a definition and whatness in itself, accidents have one *in* and *by addition to* some substance. Accordingly, even though Boethius says that “*esse*” or “is,” said alone, signifies a thing’s “substance” in the sense of its “what it is,” he can without contradiction speak of “*esse*” without qualification being “predicated of” all ten categories, not just the first one. After all, not only the first category, but also the others have definitions, the latter in some derivative sense.

(III.4) The “being” [*ens*] that is predicated [*dicitur*] is not predicated [*dicitur*] univocally (i.e., as a genus), but equivocally (i.e., as a vocal sound signifying many things) since, although it is said of all the categories, there is, nevertheless, no definition discoverable of it which can be applied to all categories ... For of one thing, there cannot be two genera except insofar as one is subordinated to the other ... If, then, “being” [*ens*] is predicated of all the categories, “one” also is predicated. For substance is one, quality is one, quantity is one, and so on with the rest [*ceteraque ad hunc modum*]. If, then, since “being” [*esse*] is predicated of all, it would be the genus of all and “one,” since it is predicated of all, would be the genus of all, but neither “one” nor “being,” as was demonstrated, has preference over the other. The two, then, are genera equally predicated of the same things, which cannot happen.⁸⁰

So, “*esse*” is predicated equivocally of all ten categories. Given that, in the same work, Boethius identifies the “*esse*” of a thing with its definition or what-it-is-to-be (III.1), this is presumably what he means here. If that is the case, his teaching is perfectly consistent with that of Aristotle for whom “definition” or “what-it-is” belongs simply to the first category, but in a qualified way to the other ones.

⁷⁹ Michael Frede, “Categories in Aristotle,” in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 29–48, at 38–45. See also Bäck, *ATP*, esp. 71n17 (who gives a developmental explanation of this text); de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:367–68 (who notes that, not only τί ἐστί, but οὐσία also can be treated as common to the various categories; that “Frede’s arguments are far from convincing”; and that the *Metaphysics Z*’s “acceptance ... of the ‘category’ of substance,” in comparison to the *Topics*, does not reflect “a radical change of his view of οὐσία as is imputed to him by Frede”).

⁸⁰ Boethius, *In III Isag.*², c.7 (Brandt ed., 223:19–224:17). All ten categories are explicitly listed in Brandt ed., 222:12–13.

In sum, for Boethius, “*esse*” is used idiomatically—after the manner of indirect speech—to signify what is predicated of a thing by “is.” But what is predicated of anything simply speaking or absolutely is its essential predicates—its substance or what-it-is-to-be (*quod est esse*). Thus, “*esse*” can be used—especially with a possessive noun—to speak about the substance or whatness of a thing. In speaking in this way, Boethius is following a practice with antecedents in Aristotle, Hilary, and Augustine. Since, however, all ten categories have a “whatness” or “definition” in an ordered equivocal way, “*ens*” or “*esse*” can be predicated of each of them.

III.B. God as “*Esse suum*”

In *De trinitate*, c.4, Boethius follows Aristotle in saying that there are, universally speaking, ten predicaments, which can be predicated of any given thing; some predicate substance, some accidents.⁸¹ Though we can say all ten categories of God, nevertheless, he says, they are all changed (*mutantur*) when predicated of God.⁸²

(III.5) For when we predicate [*dicimus*] “God,” indeed we seem to signify substance, but [instead] that which is beyond substance [*ultra substantiam*]. And when [we predicate] “just” [of God, we] indeed [seem to signify] a quality; yet it is not an accident, but a substance—rather, beyond substance. For it is not the case that what is [*quod est*] and what the just is [*quod iustus est*] are diverse, but God’s being [*esse deo*] and the just’s [*iusto*] are the same. Likewise, when we predicate “great or the greatest,” we indeed seem to signify quantity, but rather what is a substance that is such as we say to be beyond substance. For God’s being [*esse deo*] is the same as the great thing’s [*magno*]. For it was shown above, concerning his form, there is no plurality since he is form and truly one. But these categories are such that in that in which they are they bring it about that the

⁸¹ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.4 (Loeb ed., 16:1–7). For the best study of Boethius’s theological predication theory and its sources in the commentary tradition and Augustine, see de Libera, “L’onto-théo-logique,” 175–222 (who sees Boethius’s theory of God as beyond-substantial as his principal innovation compared to Augustine). See also Thom, “Boethius,” 42–61. I think de Libera overstates the distance between Augustine and Boethius here. It is true that Boethius drops Augustine’s appeal to metaphor to explain the application of the categories to God and that, in Augustine, we do not find the explicit language of beyond-substantial predication. Nevertheless, what Boethius means by such predication—God’s not only being what is predicated of him substantially, but being nothing besides this—is already present in Augustine.

⁸² Boethius, *De trin.*, c.4 (Loeb ed., 16:7–9).

thing itself is said to be [*esse ... dicitur*], dividedly indeed in the rest of things, but in God, conjointly or unitedly in the following way: For when we say [*dicimus*] “substance” (as man or God), it is said such that that of which it is said is the substance, as the substance man or God. But there is a difference [*distat*] since man is not himself wholly [*integre*] man and, by this fact, neither is he the substance; for what he is, he owes to others which are not man. But God is himself God by this; for he is nothing else than what he is, and through this he himself is God. Again “just,” which is quality, is said thusly so that it itself is that of which it is predicated—that is, if we say, “Just man or just God,” we claim that man himself or God is just [*hominem uel deum iustos esse proponimus*], but in a different way. For man is one thing, just another, but God himself is the same as what is just.⁸³

The intent of this passage is to illustrate that both substantial and accidental categories are changed (*mutantur*) when predicated of God so that each is predicated as beyond substance (*ultra substantiam*) rather than as substance or accident in the way these are said of creatures. When we predicate what seems to signify an accident of God (e.g., “great” or “just”), the predicate actually signifies God’s substance or beyond-substance. And when we predicate what seems to signify a substance of God (e.g., “God”), we don’t do so in the same way that we predicate substance of creatures because whereas a man is man in such a way that he is other things, such as big or just, besides man, God is simply God and nothing besides God.

This passage employs “*esse*” in two ways: first, in combination with a dative of possession (e.g., *esse deo ... [esse] iusto ... [esse] magno*); second, in indirect speech (e.g., “*iustus*” ... *praedicatur = hominem uel deum iustos esse proponimus*). The first of these is associated with *quod-est* phrases (e.g., *quod est; quod iustus est*) and, thus, seems to indicate the substance of a thing, which is expressed by a thing’s definition, according to the idiom described above. Now, as just noted, the second way “*esse*” is used in (III.5) is indirect speech. He explicitly does this with accidental predication: “*iustus*” ... *praedicatur = hominem uel deum iustos esse proponimus*. Nevertheless, he intends such examples to be compared to the sentences

⁸³ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.4 (Loeb ed., 16–18:14–41).

he describes, but does not explicitly state in which “God” and “man” are predicated of God and man respectively.⁸⁴ Accordingly, we have four sentences contained either explicitly or descriptively in the text, which we are supposed to compare.

1. A man is just.
2. God is just.
3. A man is human.
4. God is God.

In (1) “*esse*” is *esse aliquid*, not *esse* simply, which as we saw in (III.2) signifies accident—namely, the accidental quality of justice. In (2), although “*esse*” seems to signify an accident again, it actually signifies God’s substance or, rather, beyond-substance. What this beyond-substance consists in is made clear by Boethius’s comparison of (3) to (4). In (3) and (4), the predicate signifies the substance of the subject. According to the terminology of (III.2), this is the *esse aliquid in eo quod est*, which would have been signified indeterminately by “is” (*sit, est*) said without anything added. But whereas the predicate merely signifies substance in (3), in (4), it signifies beyond-substance—the difference being that, whereas it signifies the substance the subject is in (3), in (4), it signifies *that alone* which the subject is. If we may be permitted to go beyond Boethius’s vocabulary, in (3), the predicate and subject are substantially the same, but, in (4), they are altogether the same (*omnino idem*) so that the subject is only the predicate.⁸⁵

The account, in *De trinitate*, c.4 (III.5), of how qualitative and substantial predication about God is different than that about creatures is closely paralleled by the central argument of

⁸⁴ Though I have followed the convention of writing “God” with a capital “G” as a proper name when translating “*deus*,” Boethius probably intended “*deus*” as a common name, like “man” (*homo*), so that it would make sense in principle to speak of “every god,” “a god,” “the god.”

⁸⁵ For this language, see Aquinas, *In VII Metaph.*, l.5, 1378–79; Aquinas, *Quodlibet* II, q.2, a.2[4], ad1 (Leon. ed., 25/2.217:103–8); Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* I, c.10 (Leon. ed., 42.86:10–12, 17–24). Cf. Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 3, ad1, where Aquinas distinguishes how “substance” is predicated of God and of creatures by the fact that, for God, substance and predicate are the same (*idem*).

Boethius's treatise, *De hebdomadibus*. The treatise begins with a series of axioms, applied later on, the most controversial of which employs the phrase “*esse suum*.”

(III.6) Every simple has its being [*esse suum*] and that which is [*id quod est*] as one; in every composite, being [*esse*] and what itself is [*ipsum est*] are distinct.⁸⁶

Most modern interpreters assume Boethius uses “composite,” here, to refer to material substances, composed of matter and form.⁸⁷ Thus, the quasi-argument would be that, since “*esse*” is simple (form alone), no substance that is composed of matter and form can be *esse* itself, but must participate *esse*. But this makes little sense in the context of the treatise. As we've seen (Section II), Boethius admits created substances without matter, but in *De hebdomadibus*, he is quite clear that nothing that has its being from God is simple.⁸⁸ Pierre Hadot sees the complexity and simplicity opposed in *De hebdomadibus* differently than most previous readers—as a version of the Neoplatonic antinomy between what is more specific and determinate (composite) and what is more universal and indeterminate (simple), so that by an ascent through species to genera to being (*l'Étant*), one finally reaches the pure act of being (*l'Être*), unlimited by any object or subject.⁸⁹ Neither matter-form composition nor genus-

⁸⁶ Boethius, *De hebd.* (Loeb ed., 42:45–48).

⁸⁷ McInerney, *Boethius and Aquinas*, 214–16; te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 81; Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 162–63; Marenbon, *Boethius*, 99 (cf. Marenbon, *Boethius*, 80–81). See also Gilson, *HCPMA*, 104–5 (which initially treats Boethius's composition as that of accidents, but subsequently acts as if composites must be composed of matter and form); M.-D. Roland-Gosselin, *Le De ente et essentia de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), 142–45 (Roland-Gosselin speaks of “creatures” without distinction as material [p. 143], and sees the *quod est-esse* distinction found in creatures but not God as between primary substance and form [p. 145]; he sees accidents as adding another composition that depends on the prior composition of matter and form [p. 144]). Paul Thom, in contrast, identifies composition in Boethius's text with what results from either accidental or essential predication; see *Logic of the Trinity*, 47–48.

⁸⁸ Boethius, *De hebd.* (Loeb ed., 46:117–19).

⁸⁹ See esp. Hadot, “La distinction de l'être et de l'étant,” 151–52. While I think it is obvious that Boethius would have recognized composition resulting not only from accidental predication, but also from essential predication (e.g., the composition of animal with rational), I don't see evidence for the latter in Boethius's treatise itself. Thomas Aquinas's commentary seems to fold composition from essential predication into composition from accidental predication so that, while sticking only to Boethius's express intent to rule out a simple thing's having something outside its essence mixed in (*nichil aliud habet admixtum preter id quod est esse...*), he simultaneously excludes both superadded essential differences, which are outside the essence of the common notion they differentiate (...*impossibile est id quod est ipsum esse multiplicari per aliquid diuersificans*) as well as accidental differences (...*quod nullius accidentis sit susceptiuum*), which are what Boethius had principally in mind. Cf. Aquinas, *In De*

difference composition, however, is the sort that Boethius explicitly invokes in the body of his treatise.

The only sort of complexity and simplicity he employs in *De hebdomadibus* is that of qualities—like heaviness, roundness, and goodness—composed with each other and with a subject. In abstraction from God’s causality, he says, we could consider a creature being good in the way it is also round, heavy, etc., such that the quality of being good is distinct both from the creature’s other qualities and from the subject in which it is.⁹⁰ He rules out the possibility that a creature be good and nothing else—such as heavy and colored—on the grounds that such a creature would, then, not be a creature, but the first Good, who alone is “good alone and nothing else” (*tantum bonum aliudque nihil sit*).⁹¹ After demonstrating, by the fact that God wills the *esse* of creatures,⁹² that creatures are not only good by participation (in the way they are heavy and round), but that, like God, their very *esse* (i.e., their substance or *quod est esse*) is good, Boethius shows how God and creatures differ with regard to being good insofar as they are: “...[the creature’s] being [*esse*] itself is good, but it is not like him by which it is [i.e., God]. For he also is good insofar as he is [*in eo quod est*]; yet, he is nothing else besides [*praeterquam*] good.”⁹³ So, as for Augustine before him, God’s supreme simplicity consists in his lack of accidents and consequent total identity with what is predicated of him.⁹⁴ Even when the same quality is in God

hebd., c.2 (Leon. ed., 50.273:249–58). For more explicit cases of Aquinas subsuming the composition of logical parts (genus-difference) under accidental composition, see Aquinas, *Quodlibet* II, q.2, a.2[4], ad1 (Leon. ed., 25/2.217–18:110–16); Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* I, c.13 (Leon. ed., 43.372:184–90). Since *differentiae* are accidental to the genus and the genus to the *differentiae*, it would seem to follow that what cannot have accidents (Boethius’s sense of “the simple”) also cannot have definitional parts.

⁹⁰ Cf. Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (Loeb ed., 44–46:95–111; 48:134–42).

⁹¹ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (Loeb ed., 46:111–17).

⁹² Boethius’s reference to God’s will makes clear he is implicitly employing the axiom, “Similarity must be desired” (*similitudo uero appetenda est*), to draw his conclusion about the goodness of the *esse* of creatures. Cf. Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (Loeb ed., 42:49–50).

⁹³ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus*: “...idcirco ipsum esse bonum est nec est simile ei a quo est. Illud enim quoque modo sit bonum est in eo quod est; non enim aliud est praeterquam bonum” (Loeb ed., 48:134–36).

⁹⁴ Cf. Aquinas, *In De hebdomadibus*, c.2, who, among other things, rightly identifies the “*uere simplex*” with “*quod nullius accidentis sit susceptivum*” and “*ipse Deus*” (Leon. ed., 50.273:249–58).

and creatures, it is not in him in the same way: in him, it is beyond-substance (i.e., all that he is), but in creatures it is, at most, what they are essentially, not exclusively.

Though the axiom in (III.6) itself leaves open the possibility of many simple things, the rest of the treatise allows that God alone is simple, and his condition of simplicity consists in his lack of composition with accidents or various qualities. We are never told how we know that God alone is simple. This is not included in the axioms or demonstrated from them, but is an outside assumption. But given this outside assumption and the axiom about simple things, it follows that God is one with his *esse* (i.e., his *quod est esse*). Everything else, having accidents, is not entirely the same as its *esse*. The logic of this axiom is only verbally different from that of God's beyond-substantiality described in *De trinitate* (III.5) and implied in *Contra Eutychem* (II.2). Although we predicate substance of both God and man when we predicate "God" and "man" of them, there is a difference. Since man, thanks to his accidents, is something else besides his substance, there is a sense in which he is not even his own substance (man). In contrast, God is nothing else besides his substance and, for this reason, is his substance (God). Even in *De trinitate*, c.4, as we saw, Boethius used not only the word "substance," but also the word "*esse*" (said alone or with a possessive noun) to speak of the what-it-is ($\tau\acute{o} \tau\acute{i} \eta\tilde{\nu} \epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$) of a thing. Thus, we can express the doctrine of both *De trinitate*, c.4 and *De hebdomadibus* as that of the total identity, from lack of accidents, between God and *suum esse*.

III.C. God as esse ipsum

In Section III.A, we saw that "*esse*," said alone or with a possessive noun, is used by Boethius for the "substance" or "what-it-is-to-be" of a thing, signified by its definition, but that since the other categories besides substance have a definition or whatness in a derivative way

from the first, it follows that “*esse*” said alone can be predicated of these too, not just the first category. For instance, the “*esse*” of color is to be a quality since when someone asks, “What is color?” we answer that it is a quality. As I argued in Section III.B, when God is uniquely identified with “his being” in both *De trinitate*, c.4 and *De hebdomadibus*, the point is to establish the unique beyond-substantial mode of predication that belongs to God in virtue of his lack of accidents such that he not only is substantially what is predicated of him, but is entirely and nothing else besides what is signified by every predicate that is predicated of him. But Boethius speaks of God not only as “his being” (*esse suum*), but also as “being itself” (*esse ipsum*).

This occurs in *De trinitate*, c.2, a text we have now looked at from different perspectives, twice above ([I.1] and [II.7]). As I will argue, this passage names God “*esse*” using a new idiom derived from a combination of that which we found in (III.1–2) and (III.5–6), on the one hand, where “*esse*” signifies a thing’s substance or what it is, and (III.3–4), on the other, where “*esse*” is extended to all the categories insofar as they too, in a derivative way, have a whatness or definition. God is not only his own *esse* as we saw in (III.5–6), but is even “being itself” (*esse ipsum*). The crucial sentence in which this new idiomatic use of “*esse*” occurs is:

(III.7) In divine studies, we must proceed intellectually and must not be dispersed into imaginations, but must rather inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image, and which is being itself [*esse ipsum*] and from which being is [*ex qua esse est*].⁹⁵

Here, Boethius attributes to God four names or descriptions: (1) form, (2) truly form and not image, (3) *esse* itself, and (4) that from which *esse* is. As noted above, the dialectical purpose of *De trinitate*, c.2 is to show, against the Arians, that the Trinity is one God and, specifically, that God is not numerically multiplied by accidents in the way the form of man is multiplied.

⁹⁵ See (II.7).

In making this argument, Boethius clearly draws on the *De trinitate* II, c.6 of the great Latin saint of the Arian crisis, Hilary of Poitiers. To understand Boethius's own *De trinitate*, c.2, we need to see what Hilary says about divine *esse*. In *De trinitate* I, c.1, Hilary presents his happening across *Exodus* 3:14 as what culminated his intellectual journey from created things to the one God. He argues from this text that “*esse*” is what is most properly understood about God relative to our human capacities.

(III.8) I wondered at such an absolute signification of God, which utters an incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature through a discourse most apt to human understanding. For nothing else is more proper to God than that “being” [*esse*] be understood.⁹⁶

Hilary first defends the propriety of the name “*qui est*” on the grounds that it is a testimony to God's eternity—to the fact that the eternal God simply *is* (present tense) whereas all else *was* or *will be* in some respect.⁹⁷ Immediately after this argument, however, we find that what the name actually signifies is God's infinity (*infinitas*).

⁹⁶ Hilary, *De trin.* I, c.1: “Admiratus sum plane tam absolutam de Deo significationem, quae naturae diuinae inconpraehensibilem cognitionem aptissimo ad intellegentiam humanam sermon loqueretur. Non enim aliud proprium magis Deo quam esse intellegeretur” (CCL 62.5:6–10).

⁹⁷ Commenting on this argument as paraphrased in Augustine, Étienne Gilson maintains that Augustine was persuaded by Neoplatonic metaphysics to think that “to be is ‘to be immutable’” (Gilson, *Thomism*, 87; cf. Gilson, *HCPMA*, 71). “What does ‘I am who am’ mean,” asks Gilson, “except ‘I cannot change?’” (Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 30; cf. Suto, *Boethius*, 221n137). The Neoplatonic influence on Augustine's (and Hilary's) thought is certainly not in question. See, e.g., Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill, (London: SCM Press, 2002), esp. 82–88, 90–93; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 79–107. Nevertheless, Gilson has entirely misinterpreted the argument from eternity or immutability, which is based on the scriptural text itself, not on some hypothesized Neoplatonic sense of “be.” It is clear, both from the internal structure of *Exodus* 3:14–15 and from parallel scriptural texts, that the name “I am” was understood by the scriptural authors as a testimony to God's eternity or immutability. As Ellen van Wolde has shown from the Hebrew text of *Exodus*, God answers Moses's request for a name in two ways: “I am who am” / “he who is” (v.14) and “the God of your ancestors...” (v.15a), not one. These two answers are, then, summed up in v.15b, using the Hebrew idiom *אני...אני* to pair “my name forever” with the name in v.14 and “my remembrance for the generations” with the one in v.15a. Wolde concludes the one name relates to “being” in the cognitive domain of time” and the other to “human beings” and “a particular genealogical line.” Ellen van Wolde, “Not the Name Alone: A Linguistic Study of *Exodus* 3:14–15,” *Vetus Testamentum* 71, no. 4–5 (2021): 784–800. Though the Hebrew idiom *אני...אני* is imperceptible in some modern-language translations, the Latin “*hoc ... hoc*” of the Vulgate preserves it nicely (v.15b): “*hoc nomen mihi est in aeternum et hoc memoriale meum in generationem et generatione.*” Outside Biblical passages also suggest that “*ego sum*” / “*qui est*” was understood as evidence of God's eternity or immutability. Cf. *Deut* 32:29; *Rev* 1:4; *Jn* 8:58; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, *New Testament Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23–53, esp. 23–30; Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (San Francisco: Ignatius

(III.9a) [T]he discourse of the one saying, “I am who am” seemed to have sufficed for the signification of infinity.⁹⁸

Though the *Exodus* text suffices to signify God’s infinity, to draw out this attribute more fully, he adduces other passages in scripture from which he can draw the conclusion that:

(III.9b) ...the whole itself, containing in itself both the internal and the external, neither would be infinite apart from all nor would all, in him who is infinite, not be.⁹⁹

To understand how Hilary can connect the name “*qui est*” to God’s infinity—his containing in himself all that he causes—we must keep in mind that, although in English “infinite” and “indefinite” have very different connotations, the Latin word “*infinitas*” has the sense of a privation of definition, of indefiniteness. But as we saw in (III.8), what the name “*qui est*” signifies is “an incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature.” The predicate “*esse*” (*est*) is the most indefinite predicate by which, potentially, anything may be predicated of a subject. The cognition or concept signified by “*esse*” as predicated of God in *Exodus* 3:14 is not something comprehended, but is left indeterminate. If we may introduce a Fregean distinction into Hilary’s analysis, the reference of the name “*qui est*” is the divine nature, but the sense of the name is something indeterminate, infinite, or incomprehensible. God signifies his infinity by the name “*qui est*” precisely because that name, while referring to or naming his nature, signifies nothing determinate about it.

Press, 2007), esp. 350; Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 129. Richard Bauckham notes that “Formulae asserting existence [sic.] in three tenses were also used of Greek gods or the supreme God of philosophy, and this usage may well have influenced the Jewish interpretation of the divine name” (Bauckham, *Revelation*, 28–29). We can conclude that Hilary (who is followed by Augustine) is not assuming on Neoplatonic grounds that “am” or “is” means eternity. Rather, he is assuming as a fact of the scriptural text that the “absolute signification” (i.e., predication) of “is” (*esse*) is a *testimony* to God’s eternity, and he is seeking philosophical explanation for this fact. The explanation he provides is that God does not come to be or pass away in any respect. Only of God, can an absolute predication of “*esse*,” open to any further predicative determination, be predicated in the present tense. For everything else, there is some predicated notion (essential or accidental) that the subject *is* not, but *was* or *will be*.

⁹⁸ Hilary, *De trin.* I, c.6: “Et ad hanc quidem infinitatis significationem satis fecisse sermo dicentis: *Ego sum qui sum* uidebatur” (CCL 62.5:17–18).

⁹⁹ Hilary, *De trin.* I, c.6: “adque ita totus ipse intra extraque se continens neque infinitus abesset a cunctis, neque cuncta ei qui infinitus est non inessent” (CCL 62.6:26–28).

Important clarification of what God's infinity consists in comes in *De trinitate* II, c.6, where God's infinity, once again associated with his *esse*, is now also connected with his absolute simplicity.

(III.10) The Father is that from which all that is is established [*constitit*] ... Moreover, his being [*eius esse*] is in himself, not assuming [*sumens*] from another what he is [*quod est*], but obtaining that which he is [*id quod est*] out of himself and in himself. [He is] infinite because he himself is not in anything, but all are in him ... Awaken your intellect to contemplate the whole [of God] with your mind; you grasp nothing. This whole has a remainder, but this remainder is ever in the whole. Therefore, neither the whole, of which there is a remainder, nor the rest is all that the whole is. The remainder is a portion, but everything is what the whole is ... So, he exceeds the realm of understanding outside of whom there is nothing and for whom it is the case that he is always as he always is. This truth is the mystery of God, this the name of the imperceptible nature in the Father.¹⁰⁰

Hilary opens this passage with two related claims about God the Father: He is the creator of all things and he has his *esse* in himself. Next, he gives what is either an explanation of or argument for the claim that the Father's *esse* is in himself. While modern readers may expect him to explain this doctrine by noting that God does not receive existence from another, this is not what he says. Rather, he notes that God does not assume what he is (*quod est* / *id quod est*) from another, but has it from himself. As we've already noted, Hilary presumably intends the Father's "esse" to be the same as his "*id quod est*" after the manner of the Aristotelian idiom of using εἶναι with a possessive noun for the τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι of a thing. After a brief passage not wholly quoted above in which Hilary shows God not only contains all spaces by his infinity, but also all times by his eternity, Hilary turns to God's simplicity. This is presumably intended to remove the error of those who might think that, because God contains all things in time and place, he is, therefore, maximally divisible into innumerable parts—that is, infinite in spatiotemporal extension. Though God contains all things by his infinity, they are not contained in him as discrete parts. Hilary notes that we cannot even contemplate any part of God without

¹⁰⁰ Hilary, *De trin.* II, c.6 (CCL 62.42–43:1–21).

contemplating the whole, nor contemplate the whole without every single part. Our words fail, he says, when we say God is “in himself” (*in seipso*) and thereby discriminate between “to have and to be had” (*habere ... haberique*) or imply that “what is is other than that in which he is” (*alterum quod est alterum in quo est*).¹⁰¹ Hilary concludes the discussion of God’s simple infinity in (III.10) by connecting it back to God’s name: “This truth is the mystery of God, this the name of the imperceptible nature in the Father.” Clearly, Hilary has in mind the name from *Exodus* 3:14 that he previously said signifies an “incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature” in (III.8) and which he invoked implicitly at the start of (III.10) by saying the Father’s *esse* is in himself.

For the purposes of this paper, the survival of Hilary’s interpretation of *Exodus* 3:14 in Augustine need only be pointed out, not analyzed. Paralleling Hilary’s claim that *Exodus* 3:14 signifies an incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature, Augustine seems to assume that in the passage God predicated of himself what he is (*quid est*), but delayed (*distulit*) specifying this *quid* since man could not yet grasp it (*non posset capere*).¹⁰² Also just as Hilary implies that God is that from which all assume their essences (*id quod est*), Augustine, in the context of discussing *Exodus* 3:14, maintains that God, as supreme essence, is the author of all essences (*essentia*) or natures (*natura*).¹⁰³ Finally, much like Hilary, Augustine connects God’s causing all things to his containing them all while eschewing the notion he contains all in such a way as to be divided into parts.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Hilary, *De trin.* II, c.7 (CCL 62.44:9–11).

¹⁰² Augustine, *In Ioan.*, tr. 38, §8 (CCL 36.341–42:1–36).

¹⁰³ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XII, c.2 (CCL 48.357:11–16). Indeed, for Augustine, the act of creation proper to God, which he says Plato falsely attributed to lower gods, is that of giving the inner nature (*species intrinsecus*). Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XII, c.25–26 (CCL 48.381–82).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Conf.* I, c.3 (CCL 27.2).

Thus, in the intellectual milieu in which Boethius wrote *De trinitate*, c.2, *Exodus* 3:14 was taken to name God by a predication of “*esse*” (=sum, est), and this name was associated simultaneously with both his infinity (indefiniteness) by which he contained all things and his universal causality. The logical basis for these associations was that “*esse*,” on the one hand, is an idiom for a thing’s *id quod est*, essence, or nature (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), and, on the other hand, that “*esse*” is the most indefinite predicate of all by which anything may be said of a subject. These two idiomatic uses of “*esse*” are retained by Boethius. As we saw in (III.1–2), Boethius sometimes uses “*esse*” for the substance of a thing. But as we saw in (III.4; cf. III.3), he also uses “*esse*” for the definition or substance of all ten categories. With this background in mind, let us return to the text of Boethius’s *De trinitate*, c.2, quoted above partially in (I.1) and fully in (II.7). As noted above, he indicates that God is (1) a form itself, (2) truly form and not an image, (3) *esse ipsum*, and (4) that from which *esse* is.

(1)–(2) are readily interpretable from what we have already seen about this passage above (Section II). “Form” should be understood in the sense of an abstract principle, like “humanity” or “shape,” which can either be inherent in matter or outside of it and according to which the definition of a thing (e.g., a statue’s being the representation of an animal) is predicated of it. Those forms in matter are more “images” than forms. As we’ve seen, Boethius implies that humanity is found not only in matter, but also outside of it—presumably, as a divine idea.¹⁰⁵ It is the form outside matter that is truly form. This is established about God, when Boethius says “the divine substance is form without matter.”

¹⁰⁵ Richard Cross has recently argued persuasively that Boethius’s understanding of form, which has antecedents in Ammonius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Augustine, provides a threefold classification of forms or universals: transcendent forms, which are presumably divine ideas; immanent forms, caused by transcendent ones; and abstracted forms. Cross, “Form and Universal in Boethius,” 439–58. Cf. Gilson, *HCPMA*, 98–100; Marenbon, *Boethius*, 25; Alain de Libera, *L’art des généralités: Théories de l’abstraction* (Paris: Aubier, 1999), 199–202.

(4) is clarified somewhat by a passage in *De hebdomadibus* in which Boethius calls God “that from which flows the being itself of all things [*ipsum esse omnium rerum*].”¹⁰⁶ Even more pertinently, in *Contra Eutychen*, Boethius states: “God is οὐσία and essence; for he is and he is most that from which the being of all things [*omnium esse*] proceeds.”¹⁰⁷ In the *De trinitate*, c.2 version, “*esse*” is not quantified with “*omnium*” like this, but he evidently means by the indefinite “*esse*” that God is the cause of all *esse*—that is, the creator—not the cause of just one *esse*. In the context of *De hebdomadibus*, “*esse*” is primarily intended for the substance or whatness of all things since Boethius’s intention was to show by God’s willing this substance (*esse*) that the very *esse* of creatures was good and that they were not merely good by participating accidents. Likewise, the “*esse*” said to be from God in *De trinitate*, c.2 seems to be primarily the whatness of substances. Nevertheless, it is unlikely Boethius intended to restrict the *esse* that God causes exclusively to the first category. Thus, when Boethius says God is “that from which flows the being itself of all things” (*De hebdomadibus*) or “from which being is” (*De trinitate*), he seems to be using “*esse*” according to the idiom found in (III.4), where all ten categories are called the *esse* of a thing according to priority and posteriority—first substance, then the rest.

At this point, we have explained in what sense God is called (1) form, (2) truly form and not image, and (4) that from which *esse* is. But how are we to understand his being named “*esse ipsum*”? We could take this merely in the sense in which *De hebdomadibus* said (III.6) that every simple thing is its own being (*esse suum*)—that is, its own substance or τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι. But interpreting “*esse ipsum*” merely as “*esse suum*” or some particular *esse* would not allow for any

¹⁰⁶ Boethius, *De hebd.*: “Sed ipsum esse omnium rerum ex eo fluxit quod est primum bonum...” (Loeb ed., 46:124–25).

¹⁰⁷ Boethius, *CEut.*, c.3: “Deus quoque et οὐσία est et essentia, est enim et maxime ipse est a quo omnium esse proficiscitur” (Loeb ed., 90:87–89).

logical connection between God's (3) being *esse ipsum* and (4) his being source of all *esse*, but Boethius seems to view these as connected. A better interpretation of (3), which reveals his debt to Hilary and Augustine, is suggested by a passage in *Consolation of Philosophy IV*, c.6.

(III.11) The generation of all things and the progress of mutable natures and whatever in any way is moved is arranged in mode, cause, order, and form from the stability of the divine mind. This, in the citadel of its simplicity, stands governing the multifarious mode of composing things—which mode when seen in the purity of the divine intelligence is named “Providence,” but when referred to those which move and dispose, was called by the ancients “Fate.” ... For Providence is the divine reason itself, constituted in the highest ruler of all, who directs all the rest; but Fate is a disposition inhering in mobile things by which Providence binds things in their orders. For Providence encompasses all alike, however diverse, however infinite ... The unfolding of the temporal order united in the foresight of the divine mind is Providence, but the same union distributed and unfolded in temporal things is called “Fate.” Though these are diverse, the one depends on the other. For the order of fate proceeds from the simplicity of Providence.¹⁰⁸

Here, although Boethius does not use the word “*esse*,” he connects the infinity embraced by God to his universal causality. God causes all things in their mode, cause, order, and form. The infinity of diverse things according to mode, cause, order, and form, then, is found in two ways—first, as encompassed simply in the divine mind; second, as Fate, inhering in an unfolded way in caused things themselves. As in Hilary and Augustine, for Boethius, God's universal causality is logically linked to his containing all things and, thereby, being infinite. In God, this infinity is simple, but in things, it is unfolded—that is, expressed in the diverse forms, modes, causes, and orders of things. The infinity of the divine mind is causally prior to the infinity of things since Fate depends on Providence.

With this notion of the divine, simple, and infinite precontainment of all form (and mode, cause, and order) in mind, let us return to *De trinitate*, c.2 (III.7): Immediately after calling God (1) form, (2) truly form, (3) *esse ipsum*, and (4) that from which *esse* is, he gives a premise flagged by the inference sign “for” (*nam*): “For every being is from form” (*Omne namque esse*

¹⁰⁸ Boethius, *CP IV*, c.6 (Loeb ed., 340:22–44).

ex forma est). We already saw about how this premise was understood. A statue is said to be (*esse dicitur*) the representation of an animal on account of its form or shape. In other words, the *esse* (i.e., definition or substance) of a thing is predicated of it on account of its form. But what God's form is, as we've now seen, is the one that creates all beings by giving them their form, mode, cause, and order—their inner form and accidents—and, therefore, precontains all forms in a higher and totally simple way. Since this infinite totality of form is that from which not merely any particular *esse* follows—as *being* a man or *being* a statue—but from all *esse* follows, God who precontains all such forms in a simple identity with his own form is not any particular *esse*, but rather absolute being (*esse ipsum*). As we already saw Boethius explain in *De trinitate*, c.4 (III.5), implicitly applying the axiom *omne esse ex forma est* to God: “But these categories are such that in that in which they are they bring it about that the thing itself is said to be [*esse ... dicitur*], dividedly indeed in the rest of things, but in God, conjointly or unitedly.” Whereas in creatures “*esse omnium*” or the word “*esse*” left completely indeterminate does not signify any one creature, but the whole diverse totality of what creatures are in an indefinite (infinite) way, these same words, as applied to God, signify what God is—his one and undivided substantial predicate—in an indefinite (infinite) way.

To avoid confusion about Boethius's reasoning in *De trinitate*, c.2, a few points of clarification are in order. First, although Boethius—like Hilary—does seem to draw a logical connection between God causing all being (*esse omnium, esse*) and his being *esse ipsum*, nevertheless, there is no evidence that this is because he adhered to the naïve principle that whatever a thing causes may be predicated of the cause itself. If that were the case, God could be called a tree or a stone since he causes these. Rather, as we've now seen, the logical connection between God causing all being and his being called “*esse ipsum*,” is implicitly mediated by two

factors: first, the fact that being (*esse*) follows from form; and second, the fact that God causes the being (*esse*) of creatures through the mediation of their forms, which are images of (or participations in) the separate forms contained undividedly in the divine mind. Since *esse* follows from form and God contains in an undivided way all the forms of creatures on account of which creatures are said to be (*dicitur esse*), God is not said to be (*dicitur esse*) this or that, but rather *esse ipsum*. It is worth keeping in mind that, according to Hilary (III.8), this is a name for God proportioned to human understanding; it makes sense, then, that it is in a way intelligible by reference to created being.

Second, though Boethius—like Hilary and Augustine—sees God as containing all things, his parallel assertion of unqualified divine simplicity clearly excludes any pantheistic or panentheistic understanding of this doctrine in which either God is made up of the world or otherwise depends on the world as a substance on its accidents.¹⁰⁹ Just as Hilary (followed by Augustine) ruled out a pantheistic interpretation of divine infinity—which would treat God as an infinite body containing all things as parts of himself distinct from each other and from the whole—by the assertion of God’s absolute simplicity in which everything in him is the same as everything else and as the whole, so too, Boethius in (II.7) stated that God is not composed of *this* and *that*, but is that which he is (*id quod est*). (III.11) conveys the same point on a cosmic scale by contrasting God’s encompassing of all things in the “the citadel” of “simplicity” of the divine mind, on the one hand, with the “unfolding” of these diverse things in their “multifarious” modes of “composing” immanent in the things themselves. Although all being is in God as in its

¹⁰⁹ For an overview of these two umbrella doctrines in relation to the Catholic tradition, see E.R. Naughton and S. Sia, “Panentheism,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [=NCE], 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 820: “[Panentheism] utilizes a real distinction between the essence of God and God's existence, or considers God as having accidents really distinct from God's nature. ... not only is the world dependent upon God, but God also is to some extent dependent upon the world”; E. R. Naughton, “Pantheism,” in *NCE*, 825–28.

principle, it is not in him in the same way it is in creatures, but in a higher (i.e., simpler) way. This is illustrated by the quality of goodness, which is both in creatures and in God, but in diverse ways. As we've already seen, even though both God and creatures are good in their very *esse*, a creature's goodness "is not like him by which it is [i.e., God]. For he ... is good insofar as he is [*in eo quod est*]; yet, he is nothing else besides [*praeterquam*] good."¹¹⁰ As Boethius made clear in *Contra Eutychen* (II.1), although we can speak of God, in a way, as the "substance" of all things insofar as he is a principle of their subsistence and serves as their foundation (*subministrat*), nevertheless, this must not be taken as if "he himself is put under [*supponeretur*] the rest of things as a subject."

It might be objected that the doctrine of divine simplicity, rather than exculpating Boethius of pantheism, exacerbates the charge. If all being is in God, but, according to the Boethian doctrine of divine simplicity, everything in God is identical to God (i.e., is the whole substance of God), then all being (i.e., every created thing) is the whole substance of God. We can only speculate as to how Boethius would respond to such an argument since he does not himself address it. What we can say with certainty is that, following Aristotle, he acknowledged several equivocal senses of "in,"¹¹¹ and that later theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, used the equivocity of "in" to show that even though all the effects of God are "in" God, and everything

¹¹⁰ Boethius, *De hebdomadis*. (Loeb ed., 155:134–36).

¹¹¹ On the equivocity of "in," see Aristotle, *Phys.* Δ, c.3, 210a14–24 (Ross ed.); Aristotle, *Metaph.* Δ, c.23, 1023a23–25 (Ross ed.); Boethius, *In Cat.* I: "Dicitur enim esse aliquid in aliquo novem modis ... ut in imperatore esse regimen civitatis ... Novem igitur modis aliquid in aliquo esse dicitur, ut in loco, ut in vase, ut pars in toto, ut totum in partibus, ut in genere species, ut in speciebus genus, ut in fine, ut in imperatores, ut in materia forma" (PL 64.169C–175B) (the use of "in" for how the order of a city is in the ruler is obviously closest to how he characterizes the precontainment of things "in" divine providence); Peter of Spain, *Tractatus, Called Afterwards Summule Logicales*, ed. Lambert Marie de Rijk (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972), III, c.2, 27:7–29:5; Lambert of Auxerre, *Logica (Summa Lamberti)*, ed. Franco Alessio, 1st ed., Sezione a cura dell' Instituto di Storia della Filosofia 19 (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1971), III, 66–67; Aquinas, *In IV Phys.*, l.4, 2–3 (Leon. ed., 2.155); Aquinas, *In V Metaph.*, l. 20, 1080–1084.

“in” God is the divine essence itself, nevertheless, no creature is “in” the divine essence.¹¹² Since creatures are only “in” God through their likeness and not in their proper nature, from the fact that there is no diversity in God, it only follows that *the likeness of creatures* is identical to God, not that creatures themselves are so.¹¹³ This is not problematic since the divine essence itself is what is the likeness of each creature.¹¹⁴

IV. Conclusions

In Section I, I noted that it is normal for those writing on Boethius in the secondary literature—even those who think his identification of God with “*esse*” is an identification of God with form—to attribute the notion of “existence” to Boethius in their glosses or translations of his text. There, I suggested the ambiguity inherent in this way of reading him: Are we attributing to him Frege’s particular quantifier? Are we attributing to him a notion of non-predicative positing or asserting (*à la* the Herbartian school, Brentano, Matthen, de Rijk, and the later Kahn)? It is implausible any of these notions of “existence” are to be found in Boethius, but if not, what does it mean to attribute this word to him when he himself hardly ever uses its Latin cognate?

¹¹² Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d.36, q.1, a.3: “hæc præpositio ‘in’, secundum quod diversis adjungitur, diversas habitudines notat; ut cum dicitur esse in toto, vel esse in loco, et hujusmodi. Et ideo sciendum, quod aliud est [1] esse in scientia Dei, [2] et aliud in Deo esse, [3] et aliud esse in essentia divina ... [1] omnia quæ Deus scit, et bona et mala, in scientia ejus esse dicuntur. ... [3] creaturæ non possunt dici in essentia divina esse, sed tantum personæ divinæ et proprietates et attributa. ... [2] illum omnia quæ a Deo sunt, in eo esse dicuntur, non autem mala, quæ ab ipso non sunt.”

¹¹³ Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d.36, q.1, a.3, ad1: “in Deo nihil est diversum ab ipso; unde et creaturæ, secundum hoc quod in Deo sunt, non sunt aliud a Deo: quia creaturæ in Deo sunt causatrix essentia, ut dicit Anselmus, loc. cit.; sunt enim in Deo per suam similitudinem: ipsa autem essentia divina similitudo est omnium eorum quæ a Deo sunt”; cf. ad2; Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, in *Opera Omnia*, vols. 1–4 of 10 (Florence: Ad claras aquas [Quaracchi], 1882–1889), I, d.36, a.1, q.1, resp.

¹¹⁴ I am grateful to David Clemenson for highlighting some of the pantheistic and logical difficulties alluded to above, especially insofar as we attempt to translate what I have claimed is Boethius’s doctrine into standard logical notation. While the problem of how to formalize the inference from God as creator of all being to God as *esse ipsum* cannot be addressed here, it is hoped that the points of clarification sketched above provide sufficient guardrails for doing so.

Hadot's great studies of Boethius provided strong evidence that when Boethius identifies God with "*esse*," his word "*esse*" should be taken in the sense of what his Neoplatonic forerunners called "*existentia*" (ὑπαρξις); the point of this identification was to indicate God's total simplicity—his being, as it were, a subsistent predicate uncomposed with any determining or narrowing subject or object. But for Boethius's potential Neoplatonic sources, as Kahn pointed out, "*existentia*" (ὑπαρξις) had something to do with Aristotle's theory of the categories, with designating the categories collectively. My own argument is generally consistent with his view, but it spells out what precisely this means in terms of a broadly Aristotelian technical vocabulary, on the one hand, and a Latin patristic exegesis of *Exodus* 3:14, on the other. As I have argued, Boethius's account of divine simplicity is not primarily one that negates the composition of general and determining notions in God as in Hadot's reading (though, if asked, he would almost certainly deny that sort of composition as well [cf. II.6]), but one that negates the composition of substance and accident in God, paralleling the exegesis of *Exodus* 3:14 given by Augustine. Moreover, whereas the Neoplatonic reading of Boethius's God treats his theology of God as *esse* as purely negative—as expressing the One's not being composed with anything else—the Hilarian-Augustinian exegesis of *Exodus* 3:14 that Boethius seems to have embraced adds to this negative theology a cataphatic element, God's precontainment of all beings. "*Qui est*" is a name for the incomprehensible divine nature proportionate for human understanding not merely because it doesn't tell us anything determinate about God and expresses his utter lack of composition (apophatic aspect of divine name), but also because, by indeterminately (i.e., infinitely) including in its signification all that may be predicated whatsoever, it indicates God's infinite precontainment of all being (cataphatic aspect of divine name).

If there is anything in Boethius analogous to the modern way in which “existence” is used, it is the notion of “substance” in the sense of “what a thing is to be” (*quod est esse*)—that which is signified by its definition. When we say something “is” without qualification, we mean that it participates its substance or whatness. God’s bestowing of *esse* on all things through his will is understood primarily as his giving substance to them (*esse aliquid in eo quod est*) and secondarily his giving them the accidents according to which they are in some way (*esse aliquid*).¹¹⁵ In this sense, it can be legitimate—if misleading—to translate “*esse*” in Boethius as “existence.” We should never, however, identify “*esse*” with form since “*esse*” is what is predicated of a thing substantially or definitionally (e.g., a statue’s being a representation of an animal) on account of form, not the form itself (e.g., a statue’s shape). As I’ve noted above, none of this should be taken in the sense that “*esse*” is the name for some metaphysical principle or that it simply *means* substance; rather, the point is that “*esse*” is used idiomatically for what is predicated of a thing by “is,” but what is predicated of a thing simply is its substance or whatness (*quod est esse*)—its definitional predicates. Thus, “*esse*,” said alone or with a possessive noun, is used idiomatically to speak about a thing’s substance or whatness, considered as predicated. But “*esse*” said with qualification may be used to signify the accidents of a thing since these are what is predicated of a thing secondarily, assuming the prior participation of substantial predicates.

An accurate reading of Boethius’s theological tractates is helpful for overcoming unnecessary tensions between modern scriptural exegesis and patristic theological doctrines. Joseph Ratzinger is representative of the mainstream of twentieth-century exegetes in the narrow sense that he emphasizes the dialectical character of the divine name in *Exodus* 3:14—the way in

¹¹⁵ Cf. Moreschini, “*Subsistentia*,” 96n41: “in the other passages of Origen οὐσιώω has still more clearly the meaning of ‘to give substance’, i.e. ‘to create.’” As noted above, for Augustine, to create is to cause the inner form of a thing, to give it a nature. See fn. 103.

which the name given to Moses is precisely the refusal to give a name.¹¹⁶ Like many scholars, Ratzinger opposes this reading with the “metaphysical” and “Platonic” readings of the text by the Church Fathers and scholastics.¹¹⁷ While the reading of Boethius I have given above is certainly metaphysical, it is not so in the way that Ratzinger seems to be primarily rejecting. It does not identify the essence of God with some metaphysical principle hypothesized by one particular philosophical school, such as the Gilsonian act of existing. As I have interpreted Hilary, Augustine, and Boethius, they could readily assent to the common view today that the answer to Moses from the burning bush was precisely a refusal to give an answer—to say which specific god, nature, or even being was speaking. Rather than seeing God’s answer in the bush as identifying him with some particular philosophical concept or principle, like the act of existence or form, they interpreted the text on the basis of an everyday idiom. The name “He who is” (*Qui est*) names God’s substance in the sense that it denotes what he is, but the utter indeterminacy or infinity of the signification of the attributive “*esse*” (“is”) is proportioned to communicate to human reason the impossibility of determining or narrowing the one named to any one category of things since he precontains all he creates and creates all that is—all of which “*esse*” (“is”) can be said.

Of course, there are certain metaphysical commitments presupposed in this reading, which—though perhaps controversial for some philosophers of the last three centuries (Quine and Hume, for example)—would have found wide acceptance by many classical and medieval philosophers and, I suspect, by many non-philosophers. It presupposes, for instance, a distinction

¹¹⁶ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, esp. 116–33; Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:143; cf. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy (Gifford Lectures 1931-1932)*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 51: “In order to know what God is, Moses turns to God. He asks His name, and straightway comes the answer ... No hint of metaphysics, but God speaks ... and Exodus lays down the principle from which henceforth the whole of Christian philosophy will be suspended.” For a recent survey of twentieth-century interpretations of *Exodus*, see Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*, 13–58.

¹¹⁷ E.g., Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:349; cf. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, esp. 119, 130.

between substance and accident—that is, between what is true of a thing definitionally and non-definitionally. It also presupposes a broad analogy between the creator God of *Exodus* and a craftsman or king who must, in some sense, have his effect “in” himself before carrying it out. For Boethius and Augustine, the Aristotelian categories are the concrete scheme for conceptualizing all that is—all God creates and precontains—but a commitment to these categories is not strictly essential to their basic interpretation of *Exodus* 3:14. Hilary—whose exegesis of *Exodus* 3:14, I have argued, lies behind both Augustine and Boethius’s identification of God with *esse*—does not make use of the ten categories in his account of God’s simple, infinite precontainment of all the things that are. Likewise, Boethius’s own account (III.11) of Providence’s simple precontainment of the diverse things unfolded in fate is not overtly made in terms of the categories, but in terms of form, mode, order, and so on.¹¹⁸ Where we do seem to find a significant philosophical commitment presupposed in the patristic exegesis of *Exodus* 3:14 is in the decision not to take the indefinite signification of “is” in a Parmenidean direction (so that only one thing is whereas the world of diversity becomes non-being or mere appearance) or a pantheistic direction (so that all the things that are—either now or through time—are nothing else than modes of God or aspects of his consciousness *à la* Spinoza or Hegel). Hilary, Augustine, and Boethius’s decision not to give such alternative readings may reflect their being persuaded by Platonic arguments for the One’s absolute simplicity and by a Hebrew-Christian commitment to genuine otherness of creatures from each other and from God.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Gilbert of Poitiers, *In CEut.*, in *The Commentaries on Boethius by Gilbert of Poitiers*, ed. Nikolaus Häring, Studies and Texts 13 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1966), c.3, no.61, 284:73–79; Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, in *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus exposition* (Turin-Rome: Marietti Editori, 1950), c.5, 263, 268, 273–74, where, again, God is called “being” on the grounds that he simply precontains all that is, but all that “is” is enumerated in a way that goes far beyond what falls properly within the ten categories. Gilbert is, here, commenting on Boethius’s (II.1)—God’s serving to found (*subministrat*) all things—and he is clearly paraphrasing Pseudo-Dionysius even though he does not mention him by name.

The rereading of Boethius given in this paper, therefore, significantly reduces the “metaphysical” baggage needed to understand his admittedly metaphysical claim that God is *esse ipsum*. As such, it lends support to the burgeoning trend among scriptural scholars¹¹⁹ to push back against the twentieth-century dichotomy between the authorial meaning of scripture, on the one hand, and speculative metaphysical-theological doctrines, on the other.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Cf. For recent defenses of a more metaphysical, Augustinian-inspired interpretation of *Exodus*, see Jonathan Platter, “Divine Simplicity and the Scripture: A Theological Reading of Exodus 3:14,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73 (2020): 295–306; Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*; Michael Allen, “Exodus 3 after the Hellenization Thesis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009): 179–96. For more general defenses of reading traditional divine attributes into the literal sense of scriptural texts, see Janet Soskice, “Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is There a Metaphysics of Scripture?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 2 (2006): 149–62; Janet Soskice, “The Gift of the Name: Moses and the Burning Bush,” *Gregorianum* 79, no. 2 (1998): 231–46.

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