

INHERENCE AND DENOMINATION IN THE TRINITY

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Abstract. The present paper describes an ‘ontological square’ mapping possible ways of combining the domains and converse domains of the relations of inherence and denomination. In the context of expounding and extending medieval appropriations of elements drawn from Aristotle’s *Categories* for theological purposes, the paper uses this square to examine different ways of defining Substance-terms and Accident-terms by reference to inherence and denomination within the constraints imposed by the doctrine of the Trinity. These different approaches are related to particular texts of thinkers including Bonaventure and Gilbert of Poitiers.

Given that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches a mystery that demands faith on the part of believers, it can be surprising that in the hands of certain medieval philosophers the Trinity becomes a logical puzzle, a puzzle how to reconcile the doctrine with certain tenets of Aristotelian philosophy. However, this development did not necessitate abandoning the requisite attitude of faith; it just meant that the faith of those who pursued this type of investigation was illuminated (or alternatively, encumbered) by philosophical theory.

I. BACKGROUND

A key component of the philosophical background to the logical puzzle of the Trinity can be found in the account of the various types of terms given in Aristotle’s *Categories*. A privileged class of terms (let us say *per*

se terms) divides into substance-terms and accident-terms. Beyond that class there are denominatives. The terms so classified are not construed as totally unmediated by language and thought; rather, they are construed as already having a certain conceptual content. Thus the terms *man* and *the one approaching* are different terms, and different types of term, even though in some context they stand for the same being.

I take it that terms are picked out by abstract or concrete nominal expressions. But I make no assumptions about the ontological status of terms – whether they are mental or linguistic items, or whether they are objective entities. I do assume that various relations hold among terms, including relations of inherence and denomination. But when we say things like ‘*Colour* inheres in *body*’ or ‘*Coloured* is denominated from *colour*’, the truth of what we say is not dependent on the actual existence of colours, coloured things or bodies.

Different configurations of inherence and denomination, discernible in the text of the *Categories*, give us necessary conditions for being a substance-term, and also for being an accident-term.¹

Three necessary conditions for a term *A* being a substance-term are:

(1) *A* does not inhere in any term as subject. This is a necessary condition of being a substance term, but it is not sufficient because it also applies to terms like *rational* that differentiate one species from another but do not themselves characterise a substance.²

(2) A second necessary condition is that *A* has accident-terms inhering in it.³ Aristotle calls this feature the most characteristic mark of substances.

(3) A third necessary condition is not stated explicitly but may be conjectured as assumed in the text. It is noticeable that a differentia term such as *rational* is denominated from an abstract term, in this case the quality-term *rationality*, whereas we do not find any abstract terms in the *Categories* from which substance-terms are denominated. While *man* is a substance-term, no term *humanity* is mentioned. It seems then that a third necessary condition of substance-terms is that they are not denominated from any term.

(4) Finally, it is clear that a substance term does not denominate anything. It seems then that we have three classes of terms as shown in Figure 1.

¹ Paul Thom, *The Logic of the Trinity: Augustine to Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 13ff.

² Aristotle, *Categories* 5, 2b21.

³ Aristotle, *Categories* 5, 4a10.

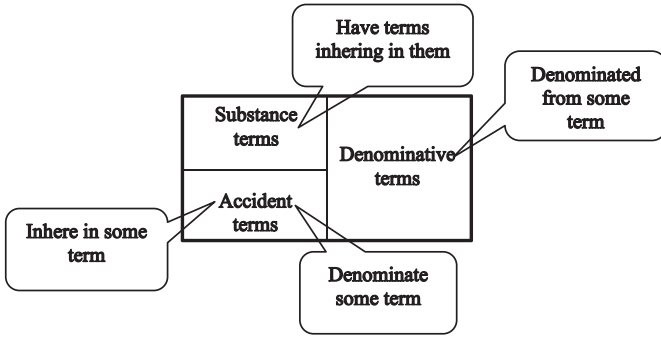


Figure 1. Types of term in the *Categories*

In distinguishing these three types of term, we have appealed to *four* relative states in which a term *A* can find itself: (1) *A* inheres in some term, (2) *A* is inhered in by some term, (3) *A* denominates some term, and (4) *A* is denominated by some term. Each of these states can be present or absent in a given term. So there are in principle not 3, but 16 types of term – each one of which is characterised by the presence or absence of each one of the four relative states. These types of term are shown in Figure 2, together with the locations of the types of term recognised in the *Categories*.

		Not denominated		Denominated		
		Not denominating	Denominating	Not denominating	Denominating	
Not inhered in	Not inhering			Denominative		A
Inhered in		Substance				B
Not inhered in	Inhering		Accident			C
Inhered in						D
		1	2	3	4	

Note: Arrows in the original diagram indicate 'inheres in' from Substance to Accident and 'denominates' from Accident to Denominative.

Figure 2. The ontology of the *Categories*

Other ontologies based on notions of denomination and inherence ought to be able similarly to locate the types of term they recognise.

The class of substance-terms in the *Categories* can be characterised by the following configuration of inherence and denomination: these terms are inhered in, they don't inhere, they are not denominated, and they don't denominate.

Accident-terms share one of these characteristics: they are not denominated. We do not find second-order terms like *Rationality-ness* in the *Categories*. But in respect of the other three characteristics, what substance-terms possess accident-terms lack. Thus accident-terms inhere in some term, they are not inhered in by any term, and they denominate.

Before we proceed it will be useful to make some observations about the ways in which terms figuring in the ontology of the *Categories* are inter-related by inherence and denomination.

- (1) Every term enters into either a relation of inherence or a relation of denomination.
- (2) What denominates something inheres in something.
- (3) Denomination is irreflexive.
- (4) What is denominated is not inhered in.

These observations can be spelt out as follows. Firstly, if we consider only substance-terms, accident-terms and denominatives, it is apparent that substance-terms are inhered in, accident-terms inhere, denominatives are denominated; so in each case the term in question stands towards something in a relation of inherence or a relation of denomination or the converses of these relations.

Secondly, confining consideration again to substance-terms, accident-terms and denominatives, we observe that only accident-terms denominate, and only accident-terms inhere; thus what denominates something inheres in something.

On observation 3, it might be thought that the irreflexivity of denomination is clear from the fact that when Aristotle introduces this relation he notes a linguistic difference between the denominating term and its denominative.⁴ But on the other hand, it might be argued that this linguistic difference is accidental to the *ontological* relation between denominating and denominated, and that consequently it cannot be a sound basis for concluding that the relevant ontological denomination is irreflexive. There is, however, another, ontological, argument that can

⁴ *Categories* 1, 1a12.

be appealed to. Aristotle conceives of the denominated term as being *derived* from the denominating term; and under this aspect it seems that the relation must be irreflexive – at least, this is so if a term cannot be derived from itself.

Regarding observation 4, it can be argued that (a) only denominatives are denominated (and denominatives are not substance-terms), and (b) only substance-terms are inhered in (to be inhered in is the mark of substance). Against this reasoning it might be argued that sometimes an accident-term inheres in another accident-term. For example, my pallor may change in its relational accidents, by spreading more widely over the surface of my face. If accident-terms can have accident-terms inhering in them, then it is not true that only substance-terms are inhered in. However, it remains true that only substance-terms or accident-terms are inhered in, and that denominatives are neither substance-terms nor accident-terms.

These observations correspond to various possible states of our table. Observation 1 would be reflected in a table that has no terms in cell 1A. Observation 2 would be reflected in a table where there are no terms in cells 2A, 2B, 4A or 4B. Observation 3 does not require that there will be no terms in column 4 – but that any term in that column (a term that both denominates and is denominated) must denominate and be denominated in respect of two different terms. Observation 4 requires that there will be no terms in cells 3A, 3C, 4A and 4C. Thus there is some overlap between what is excluded by observations 2-4.

II. THE TERM *GOD*

In applying this kind of framework to the divine realm, the constraints imposed by the faith (in a broad sense that includes the teachings of the Church Fathers and Councils) are that among terms applying to the Godhead there be only one substance-term, no accident-terms, and that the Godhead exhibits simplicity. More specifically, *God* must be a substance-term, nothing else applying to the Godhead can be a substance-term, *God* must not inhere as an accident in anything, and nothing can inhere in *God* as an accident. The notion of divine simplicity can be interpreted in more than one way.⁵ On one interpretation, it excludes

⁵ Paul Thom, 'Shades of Simplicity', in Anselm Ramelow (ed.), *God* (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2013), pp. 323-340.

any denomination within the Godhead. On another reading, it allows for denomination provided that this does not entail any dependency.⁶ Other constraints include logical consistency and interpretive sense and comprehensiveness. In some developments the account will seek to give an ontological grounding for all the relevant predications. The aims of the present investigation are more modest: I will confine attention to logical coherence. I will examine three different ways of introducing *God* into our framework.

III. A GOD UNRELATED BY INHERENCE AND DENOMINATION

The *Categories* scheme as it stands is ill-suited to representing a theology in which there is a substance-term in which no accident-terms inhere. If accidents are defined as what inheres, such a theology requires that there be a substance-term in row A or row B. If the term *God* is not denominated from anything and nothing is denominated from *God* then this term must be in cell 1A. The term *God* thus does not stand to anything in a relation of inherence or a relation of denomination or in the converses of these relations. Such a term clearly satisfies the requirement of divine simplicity: at least it excludes any complexity that might be due to the relations of inherence and denomination.

The possibility of terms of type 1A is familiar to Aristotelians, though not because such terms form part of the *Categories* landscape. Negative terms like *Non-man* are of this type. To allow for such a term being a substance-term, the definition of substance-terms will have to be revised, dropping the requirement that a substance-term has something inhering in it.

The ontology of Aristotle's *Categories* gives us an initial set of links (consequences and incompatibilities) between being a substance-term and various configurations of inherence and denomination. The task of adapting this ontology to a set of theological requirements is similar to that of adapting a theory to accommodate recalcitrant data. One has to place an ordering on the initial set of links, which will determine which links can be abandoned ahead of others. The link with the weakest strength in a context requiring that there be a substance-term in which

⁶ Paul Thom, *The Logic of the Trinity: Augustine to Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

nothing inheres is the link between being a substance-term and being inhered in. If that link is broken, a substance-term can be redefined as one that (1) does not inhere, (2) is not denominated and (3) does not denominate. The first condition excludes rows C and D. The second condition excludes columns 3 and 4. The third condition excludes columns 2 and 4. The remaining cells are 1A and 1B. Created substance-terms belong in 1B, divine substance-terms in 1A.

		Not denominated		Denominated		
		Not denominating	Denominating	Not denominating	Denominating	
Not inhering	Not inhered in	God		Denominative		A
Inhering	Inhered in	Created substance				B
Not inhering	Not inhered in		Accident			C
Inhering	Inhered in					D
		1	2	3	4	

Note: Arrows in the original diagram indicate 'inheres in' from Accident to Created substance and 'denominates' from Accident to Denominative.

Figure 3. The *Categories* ontology plus divine substance

An accident-term can still be defined as one that inheres, is not inhered in, is not denominated, and denominates.

Redefining substance-terms in this way brings us into conflict with the first of our observations about the *Categories* ontology, viz. that every term enters into either the domain or the converse domain of either inherence or denomination. The term *God* now appears as an exception to this observation. But this should not worry a hypothetical theologian who wants to fit a term *God* into an ontology derived from the *Categories*. Aristotle’s theory of categories gives an account of substance-terms that admit of temporally alternating accident-terms – an account in terms of inherence, denomination, and a couple of other relations. It is not surprising that all of the terms that are recognised in his account enter into these relations in one way or another. Once the account is extended so as to allow for other types of term, this restriction can no longer be expected to hold.

IV. A SELF-RELATED GOD

Let us now suppose that we want to make *God* a term which does stand in one or other of our relations, but only in a reflexive way. This account again satisfies the demand for divine simplicity, at least in the sense that it excludes any multiplication of substance-terms in the Godhead. Some thinkers, among them Bonaventure, have thought of *God* in this way, claiming that *God* is a self-denominating term:

Since *quod est* as well as *quo est* are found among lower things, by reason of which we have both concrete and abstract signification (as when we say *man* and *humanity*), this is also our understanding in the divine realm, although we do not there understand these two to be different. Accordingly, we signify abstractly by the name *Deity* and concretely by the name *God*. And thereby we give Him a name by which we signify *quo est* (and this is the essence), as well as *quod est* (and this is the substance).⁷

The terms *God* and *divinity*, denominated and denominating, have the same signification. These terms now appear in cell 4A.

		Not denominated		Denominated		
		Not denominating	Denominating	Not denominating	Denominating	
Not inhered in	Not inhering			Accidental denominative	<i>God</i> , i.e. <i>divinity</i>	A
	Inhered in	Created substance				B
	Not inhered in		Accident			C
	Inhering					D
		1	2	3	4	

Note: Arrows in the original diagram indicate 'inference' from cell B to cell C, and 'denomination' from cell B to cell A.

Figure 4. A self-related *God*

⁷ Bonaventure, Sent. I d.23 a.1 q.3. ... cum in *communi* in inferioribus inveniatur *quod est et quo est*, ratione cuius significatur in concretionem et in abstractionem, ut dicatur *homo et humanitas*: sic in divinis intelligimus, quamvis non *intelligamus* in differentia illa duo. Ideo et in abstractionem *significamus* per hoc nomen *deitas*, et in concretionem per hoc nomen *Deus*. Et ideo imposuimus ei nomen, quo significaretur ipsum *quo est*, et hoc est essentia; et ipsum *quod est*, et hoc est substantia

In order for *God* to be counted as a substance-term in the same sense as non-divine substance-terms, the definition of a substance-term will have to be altered. This can be done by redefining a substance-term as satisfying the following three conditions. (1) It does not inhere, (2) it is inhered in iff it is not denominates, (3) it is denominates iff it denominates. The first condition rules out rows C and D. The second rules out 1A, 1C, 2A, 2C, 3B, 4B, 3D, 4D. The third condition rules out columns 2 and 3. The remainder is 1B and 4A. 1B is the profile of a created substance-term, 4A of a divine substance-term.

The definition, however, may be too wide because it includes everything falling into cell 4A, including terms that are denominates by something other than themselves. The difficulty can be met by replacing the third condition by the specification that the term is not denominates by anything other than itself.

A difficulty with this account arises from our earlier observation that there are no self-denominating terms in the *Categories*. Bonaventure is aware of this difficulty. In order to meet it he makes a distinction within the class of denominatives:

To compare one thing to another as informing it or denominating it, is not thereby to posit a diversity or distinction between them; for, Deity is compared in this way to God. To compare things as a principle and that of which it is the principle, is a different sort [of comparison]: this *is* to import a distinction.⁸

In other words, denomination has to be irreflexive if it is understood as treating the denominating term as a principle from which the denominates term flows. But if we remove this element from the notion of denomination, there is no objection to a term's being denominates from itself. The definition of accidents is unaffected.

A line of objection could be raised against Bonaventure's idea of isolating an element in the notion of denomination which renders the relation irreflexive, and by abstraction generating from the relation a transform of it which lacks that element. First of all, in order to be sure that the abstracted relation is not itself irreflexive, one would need to be sure that one had removed *all* elements that would render it irreflexive.

⁸ Bonaventure, *Sent.* 1.25.2: Quando aliquid comparatur ad aliud ut informans sive denominans, non ponitur propter hoc diversitas sive distinctio unius ad alterum; sic enim comparatur deitas ad Deum. Alio modo comparatur alterum sicut principium ad principiatum; et tunc de necessitate importatur distinctio.

A sound argument leading to the desired conclusion requires a universal premise. Bonaventure does not address this point; and it is not at all clear how he, or anyone, could do so. Secondly, even if by this kind of process one could arrive at a suitably abstracted description of a non-reflexive relation, that would not yet prove that the description was satisfiable. One would still need a consistency (satisfiability) proof for the description.

In any case, Bonaventure's specification of the content of the relation of denomination is too specific. Rather than being primarily a relation of what is principled to its principle, the relation of being denominated from what denominates it seems better described as that between something derivative and that from which it is derived. Given this, it's clear that the conclusion at which Bonaventure wishes to arrive can indeed be arrived at. Since mutual inter-derivability is a limiting case of derivability, and since denomination shorn of its linguistic marker is reducible to derivability, mutual denomination may be accepted as a limiting case of denomination. Derivability is a process of transformation in which each step is in accordance with a predetermined set of rules. If there is a single instance in which a rule is reversible, then the derivability relation is non-reflexive. That doesn't mean that all sub-relations of derivability are non-reflexive; but Bonaventure clearly thought that the specific kind of derivability that connects a denominated with a denominating term is non-reflexive.

Bonaventure and his contemporaries were happy to allow that a term for a created substance, such as *man*, had a corresponding abstract term *humanity* – even though such abstract terms do not figure in the *Categories*. A full account of his views would have to take that into account. However, my present objective is not to analyse Bonaventure's views, but to illustrate how our framework accounts for a term *God* as self-related by denomination.

V. A GOD RELATED TO OTHERS

Let us turn to a third way of construing the term *God* – as entering into relations of inherence or denomination with other terms. Gilbert of Poitiers, who died in 1154, is a famous exponent of such a view. Gilbert holds that *God* and *divinity* have different significations and are connected by a non-reflexive relation of denomination. On the face of it, such a view conflicts with divine simplicity. But Gilbert has a response to this charge, which we will see presently.

Gilbert radically overhauls the conceptual scheme of the *Categories*. Instead of speaking of the relation of denomination he uses the opposition between *quo est* and *quod est* (or alternatively, that between a subsistence and a subsistent):

So he says BEING, i.e. the subsistence which is in a subsistent, IS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT-IS, i.e. the subsistent in which the subsistence is: for example, corporeality and body, humanity and man.⁹

Both types of term can stand for substances.

For not only a subsistent but also a subsistence is called 'substance' in that both stand under accidents, though for different reasons.¹⁰

Gilbert also has a novel way of conceiving of the Aristotelian relation of inherence. He understands inherence to be the relative product of two relations, the first of which relates an accident-term to a subsistence, while the second relates that subsistence to a subsistent. He calls the former relation accompaniment, the second being the relation of denomination. Thus, instead of saying that *colour* inheres in *body*, Gilbert wants to say that *colour* accompanies *corporeality* which denominates *body*.

He explains the relation of accompaniment as follows:

And we say that colour and line follow corporeality, rather than corporeality following colour and line. For they don't cause corporeality; it causes them. It is the very being of a body; but they *accompany* it in a body. So it exists at first, after which it is a body (for it is indeed their substance). They are accidents first of corporeality, and through it of body. For they stand under it – both corporeality (which they accompany) and body (in which they inhere).¹¹

⁹ Gilbert of Poitiers, *Expositio in Boecium librum De Bonorum Ebdomade* §35. Ait ergo: DIUERSUM EST ESSE i.e. subsistentia, que est in subsistente, ET ID QUOD EST i.e. subsistens in quo est subsistentia: ut corporalitas et corpus, humanitas et homo.

¹⁰ Gilbert of Poitiers, *Expositio in Boecium librum primum De Trinitate* 4 §99. Non enim subsistens tantum sed etiam subsistentia appellatur 'substantia' eo quod utraque accidentibus, diuersis tamen rationibus, substant.

¹¹ Gilbert of Poitiers, *Expositio in Boecium librum primum De Trinitate* 4 §26. Et dicimus quod non corporalitas colorem aut lineam sed color et linea corporalitatem secuntur. Non enim hec corporalitatis sed horum corporalitas causa est. Qua ratione illa corporis est esse: hec uero in eodem corpore illi adsunt. Ideo primum illa, deinde quod ea corpus est, uera ratione est horum substantia: hec uero primum corporalitatis et per eam corporis Taccidencia. His enim uere substat et corporalitas, cui assunt, et corpus cui insunt.

The language Gilbert uses here suggests that he views the relation of accompaniment as holding only when that which is accompanied provides a metaphysical substratum for that which accompanies.

As a result of his innovations, Gilbert is committed, even in conceptualising the created world, to terms of types 2B and 3B, neither of which is found in the *Categories*. 2B are not denominated but do denominate. 3B are denominated and do not denominate. 3B is how substance-terms appear in a language that admits abstract terms derived from them. 2B is how those abstract terms appear in such a language.

Gilbert treats *divinity* and *God* as being of types 2A and 3A. This treatment is perfectly analogous to his treatment of the abstracts of created substance-terms and the created substance-terms themselves. However, the created substance-term is inhered in while the divine one is not, and the abstract created substance-term is accompanied by something while the abstract divine one is.

For that by which He is – the essence (which in Greek is called *ousia*) – cannot be non-simple. Nor can something other in it accompany the same essence, by which it is. For God would not be simple if His essence were established from several essences, or if forms accompanied the same in it, of which either God Himself truly was (or His essence were with reason said to be) the subjected matter.¹²

Even though *God* is not the same as *Divinity*, there is nothing other than *Divinity* by which *God* is, and *Divinity* is only because *God* is from it.¹³ This is Gilbert's reinterpretation of what divine simplicity requires.

We already know of terms that satisfy the profile of 3A, namely accidental denominatives. As for 2A, a term of this type must not inhere in anything nor have anything inhering in it, not be denominated by anything but must denominate something. In other words, such a term does not enter into inherence relations in any way, and enters into denomination relations only by denominating not by being denominated. There doesn't appear to be anything ruling out such a state

¹² Gilbert of Poitiers, *Expositio in Boecium librum primum De Trinitate* 2.37: Neque enim ea, qua ipse est, essentia – que Grece usia dicitur – potest esse non simplex. Neque in eo eidem essentiae adesse aliud aliquid potest quo ipse sit. Non enim Deus simplex esset si uel eius essentia constaret ex multis essentiis uel eidem adessent forme in illo quarum uel ipse Deus uere esset uel eius essentia ratione diceretur 'subiecta materia'.

¹³ Gilbert of Poitiers, *Expositio in Boecium librum primum De Trinitate* I,2,89. Non enim est a diuinitate aliud quo Deus sit. Nec est unde diuinitas ipsa sit nisi quod ea Deus est.

of affairs: the fact that *A* denominates *B* doesn't require that something should denominate *A* (we know this from the case of accident-terms). Nor of itself does it require that *A* should inhere in anything (it seems that any abstract term denominates, but privative abstract terms, such as *blindness*, do not inhere). Nor does *A*'s denominating something entail that something should inhere in *A* (again, in the case of accident-terms we know that they denominate, but do not have anything inhering in them – at least, this is true of accident-terms of the highest order).

On Gilbert's reckoning *God* turns out to be a denominative just like created accidental denominates such as *brave* (but different from created substance-terms). At first sight this seems unacceptable. However, even within the slender resources to which we have limited ourselves, we can draw a distinction between two types of denominative. Terms like *brave* are denominated from accident-terms, the term *God* is denominated from the non-accidental term *Divinity*. Or, confining ourselves to what can be expressed solely through inherence and denomination: *brave* is denominated from a 2C-term not from a 3A-term; with *God* it is the other way round.

Another apparent difficulty with Gilbert's idea of *God* is that this term is denominated but is not inhered in – contrary, so it seems, to one of our observations about the *Categories*, viz. the observation that in the *Categories* what denominates something inheres in something. But actually, the objection is misconceived. To say that what denominates something inheres in something is not to say that what denominates *A* inheres in *A*. And in the *Categories* what is denominated is never what is inhered in. The denomination relation connects what is abstract with what is concrete. The inherence relation connects what is abstract with a substance-term. So, even in the *Categories* it is not the case that every denominated term is inhered in. So, from the point of view of the *Categories* there is nothing untoward about *God* being denominated but not inhered in.

A third difficulty concerns Gilbert's construal of *divinity*. Contrary to what we observe in the *Categories*, this term denominates but does not inhere. Its failure to inhere follows, in Gilbert's view, from the fact that it is not an accident-term. However, the coextension of denominating and inhering terms that we observe in the *Categories* does not appear to be have a principled basis. If we assume that what inheres must be an accident-term, we can argue that what inheres must denominate. For, an accident-term must denominate: all accident-terms are abstract, and

thus can be made concrete, in which case they denominate some term. So there is a reason why what inheres must denominate. But there doesn't seem to be any reason why, conversely, what denominates must inhere. Rather, any term – even a term beyond the limits of what is considered in the *Categories* (e.g. terms for negations, privations, compounds, Platonic Forms) – so long as it is abstract, must denominate. But terms falling outside the range of what is considered in the *Categories* cannot inhere, because they are not accident-terms.

Gilbert's innovations necessitate a revision of the definition of substance-terms. A substance-term satisfies the following two conditions (which are the first and third of the three conditions defining substance-terms in a Bonaventure-style scheme). (1) It does not inhere, (2) it is denominated iff it denominates. The first condition excludes rows C and D. The second condition excludes columns 1 and 4. What remains are the cells 2A, 3A, 2B, 3B. These are the profiles respectively of the abstract and concrete expressions for divine substance-terms, and the abstract and concrete expressions for created substance-terms.

VI. WHAT DOES THIS TYPE OF ANALYSIS SHOW?

The type of analysis used in this paper may have a use in reconstructing the conceptual schemes that structure certain strands of medieval theological thought. It may even help in understanding the changes that are evident when one of these schemes gets supplanted by another.

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