

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Consubstantiality’ as a philosophical-theological problem: Victorinus’ hylomorphic model of God and his ‘correction’ by Augustine

Sarah Byers*

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA

*Corresponding author. Email: sarah.byers@bc.edu

Abstract

This article expands our knowledge of the historical-philosophical process by which the dominant metaphysical account of the Christian God became ascendant. It demonstrates that Marius Victorinus proposed a peculiar model of ‘consubstantiality’ that utilised a notion of ‘existence’ indebted to the Aristotelian concept of ‘prime matter’. Victorinus employed this to argue that God is a unity composed of Father and Son. The article critically evaluates this model. It then argues that Augustine noticed one of the model’s philosophical liabilities but did not publicly name Victorinus when he rejected it, thereby exemplifying the New Testament practice of *private* ‘rebuke’ (ἐλέγχειν).

Keywords: Augustine; fraternal correction; Marius Victorinus; philosophical theology; Trinity

Marius Victorinus, the fourth-century rhetor, Neoplatonic philosopher and theologian, played a pivotal role in the historical-philosophical process by which the dominant metaphysical account of the Christian God became ascendant. His crucial influence has only recently begun to be fully appreciated. There are two chief reasons for this: his treatises on Arianism are philosophically difficult and he was overshadowed by Augustine.

Though Victorinus was fluent in Greek and Latin, he wrote in Latin,¹ and his *explicit* reception by the most important Latin theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries was mixed. Jerome complained that his treatises about Arianism were obscure and could only be understood by those learned in ‘dialectic’ (philosophy).² Ambrose never mentioned him, despite the fact that he at least knew of him through Simplicianus. Augustine named Victorinus as a translator of (Neo)Platonic texts and described his

¹Though sprinkled with Greek terms; see e.g. notes 8, 9, 21, 39, 45 below.

²*Vir. ill.* 101: ‘Victorinus, an African by birth, taught rhetoric in Rome under the emperor Constantius [II], and in extreme old age converted to faith in Christ. He wrote very obscure books “against Arius” in the mode of philosophical argumentation; they cannot be understood except by those who are learned [in philosophy]. He also wrote commentaries on the Apostle [Paul].’ (*uictorinus, natione afer, romae sub constantio principe rhetoricam docuit et in extrema senectute christi se tradens fidei scripsit aduersus arium libros more dialectico ualde obscuros, qui nisi ab eruditis non intelleguntur, et commentarios in apostolum*; translation mine.)

celebrity conversion in *Confessions*, 8.2.4–5; yet he did not cite him in his *On the Trinity*.

Jerome was right: in order to understand Victorinus' trinitarian theology, one needs to know the conceptual schemata he presupposes and this requires knowing quite a lot of ancient philosophy. Augustine's *On the Trinity*, though still challenging, was written in a more accessible way, and it became the bedrock and starting point for all subsequent Western trinitarian theology. Victorinus therefore never achieved much recognition as an important player.

This began to change in the twentieth century, when Hadot and others started to explore the possibility that Augustine uses Victorinus' *ideas*, even though he does not credit them.³ It is typical, of course, for ancient and medieval authors to borrow insights from earlier authors without citing them. What had prevented the recognition in this case was the need for interdisciplinary work in classical languages, philosophy and theology in the interpretation of Victorinus. That is necessary if we are to recognise when Augustine is adopting or adapting Victorinus' trinitarianism. Indeed, despite the recent progress in recognising Augustine's debt to him, Victorinus' importance still tends to be underappreciated.

My purpose here is to present an important case of this indebtedness. I will demonstrate that Victorinus proposed a peculiar model of the 'consubstantiality' of the divine Word or Son to the Father⁴ by utilising a notion of 'existence' indebted to the Aristotelian concept of 'prime matter'⁵ in order to argue that God is a unity composed of Father and Son.⁶ The fact that Victorinus' 'existence-as-such' (*existentia, solum esse*, rendering ὑπαρξις, τὸ εἶναι μόνον) is actually a gloss on 'prime matter' (ἡ πρώτη ὕλη) has not yet been pointed out by modern commentators on Victorinus. Consequently, the somewhat startling way that he uses this conception in his trinitarian metaphysics is in need of elaboration. I will then critically evaluate his model, pointing out two objections that could be raised against it on metaphysical grounds. Lastly, I will show that Augustine has noticed one of the model's philosophical liabilities but that he does not publicly name Victorinus when he rejects it in his *On the Trinity*, thereby exemplifying the New Testament practice of *private* 'rebuke' (ἐλέγχειν; see Matt 18:15; cf. Lev 19:17).

³See note 50 below.

⁴The claim that the Son is 'consubstantial' (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father is from the Council of Nicaea I in the year 325. For the text see Heinrich Joseph Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 43rd edn, ed. P. Hünermann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 2010), §§125–6.

⁵Aristotle's *Metaph.* 7.3 was used as a proof-text for prime matter in late antiquity, notably by the Greek Neoplatonists. Currently the question of whether Aristotle was committed to a concept of 'prime matter' is controversial among some scholars, but in late antiquity it was not. Cf. Richard Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600 AD: A Sourcebook* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), vol. 2, p. 253. See further note 21 below.

⁶Victorinus also has other models of consubstantiality, using a different sense of 'consubstantial'; see notes 45, 47 below. The reason for multiple models is the ambiguity of meaning in the term ὁμοούσιος in the fourth century generally owing to different senses of 'substance' (ὄνεια and related terms) in philosophical and theological discourse. On this see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 168–9; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 86–104.

Substance versus existence: Victorinus' engagement with the Aristotelian commentary tradition

Although Marius Victorinus is recognised as belonging to the commentary tradition on Aristotle owing to his work on the *Categories*,⁷ there has been to date virtually no investigation of his engagement with Aristotle's metaphysics. As it happens, this bilingual North African is important for the way that he transmits a number of terms for 'being' from Greek to Latin,⁸ some of which have an Aristotelian provenance, and for his remarkable nomenclature of 'existence' for the concept of matter as such, that is, for the ultimate substrate of composed entities in the Aristotelian schema.⁹

There are two passages in Victorinus' treatise *Against Arius*, only the first of which Hadot noted as conceptually dependent upon Aristotle,¹⁰ whose intellectual patrimony is precisely the analyses of substance found in Aristotle's *Categories* and *Metaphysics*. These are *Against Arius* IA.30, lines 18–26, and 2.4, lines 17–19. In IA.30, Victorinus presents the following general definition of 'substance':

⁷Cassiodorus appears to assert at *Inst.* 2.3.18 that Victorinus himself translated Aristotle's *Cat.* into Latin and wrote an eight-book commentary on it. On the uncertainty of the manuscript tradition here, however, see Pierre Hadot, *Marius Victorinus: Recherches sur sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1971), pp. 112, 187; Jonathan Barnes, 'Les catégories et les *Catégories*', in O. Bruun and L. Corti (eds), *Les Catégories et leur histoire* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 2005), pp. 64–5; and the response of Josef Lössl, 'Augustine's Use of Aristotle's *Categories*', in E. Bermon and G. O'Daly (eds), *Le De Trinitate de saint Augustin: Exégèse, logique et noétique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 2012), pp. 103, 109, to Anthony Kenny, 'Les catégories chez les Pères de l'Église latins', in Bruun and Corti, *Les Catégories et leur histoire*, pp. 121–33.

⁸*Subiectum* (cf. ὑποκείμενον), *substantia* (οὐσία), *praeexistens subsistentia* (which would be ὑπόστασις προϋπάρχουσα), *subiectum et principale* (rendering τὸ ὑποκείμενον πρῶτον, τὸ ἔσχατον), *existentia* (rendering ὑπαρξίς), *solum esse* (presumably τὸ εἶναι μόνον, the phrase used by Damascius in a passage that runs parallel to one of Victorinus').

⁹Gerald Boersma, *Augustine's Early Theology of Image* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 56, writes that Victorinus received the notion that material substances are composed of form and matter from Aristotle's *Cat.*; however, Aristotle does not mention matter in the *Cat.* Furthermore, the term ὄν does not typically mean 'existence' or 'existent' in Victorinus, *pace* Boersma and similarly the translation of Mary T. Clark *Marius Victorinus: Theological Treatises on the Trinity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), *passim*. Rather, it means that which always stays the same. The term is of Platonic provenance and is used as a term of art for transcendent Form (ἰδέα, εἶδος). For Victorinus' and Augustine's use of this term, see Sarah Catherine Byers, 'Love, Will, and the Intellectual Ascents', in Tarmo Toom (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's 'Confessions'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2020), pp. 154–74, esp. pp. 169–70.

Werner Beierwaltes, 'Substantia und Subsistentia bei Marius Victorinus', in F. Romano and D. P. Taormina (eds), *Hyparxis e Hypostasis nel Neoplatonismo* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1994), p. 49, rightly notes that in using the terminology of 'substance' Victorinus does not mean to describe God as a physical substance. However, Victorinus is not doing something new in using the term *subiectum* (cf. ὑποκείμενον) to refer to a completely unqualified (Beierwaltes, 'absoluten') ground; cf. Aristotle's use of ὑποκείμενον in *Metaph.* 1017b24, 1029a1 and 1029a20–6. What is new in relation to Aristotle is Victorinus' claim that, in God, the Father is analogous to matter.

¹⁰Moreover, the Aristotle text cited by Hadot in *Marius Victorinus: Traités Théologiques sur la Trinité* (SC 68), ed. Paul Henry, trans. Pierre Hadot, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1960) and *Marii Victorini Opera: Opera Theologica* (CSEL 83.1), ed. P. Henry and P. Hadot (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1971) for *Adv. Ar.* IA.30 is arguably not the most relevant passage; see note 14 below.

What do we say that substance is? As the sages and the ancients defined it: '(1) That which is subject, (2) that which is something, (3) that which is not existing in another.' And they differentiate between existence and substance; indeed they define (4) 'existence' and 'existentiality' as pre-existing subsistence without (5) accidents, because they [= (4) existence, existentiality] will subsist purely and only in [= in the condition of] that which is to-be solely; but they define (6) 'substance' as a subject with all its accidents inseparably existing within it.¹¹

In the first sentence, Victorinus is obviously presenting a theory of substance derived from Aristotle, the ancient philosopher who famously described the same referent, primary substance, in these three ways.¹² For Aristotle, an individual, which is a substance (οὐσία) in the primary sense of the term, is (1) a subject (ὑποκείμενον) of predicates.¹³ It is (2) a 'that which is something' (τὸ τί; cf. Victorinus' *quod est aliquid*). That is, it is an individual entity that exists as some kind of thing (has an εἶδος because it is formed/organised matter).¹⁴ And a primary substance (3) is not *in* a subject, but exists in its own right.¹⁵

More interesting is Victorinus' ensuing distinction between existence as such and substance: 'And they [namely, the ancients and sages] differentiate between existence and substance ...' Victorinus is analysing primary substance into its constitutive parts. These are: (4) 'pre-existing subsistence', which he says is equivalent to existence *per se* and 'to-be solely'; (5) specifications; and (6) the individual entity composed of the two, namely the primary 'substance'.

The 'specifications' are alluded to as 'accidents' here, but this must be meant to include essential specifications, that is, substantial form, as well as accidents properly so called (συμβαίνοντα), that is, changeable details. For primary substance is the subject of accidents properly so called; but Victorinus cannot mean that existence/pre-existing subsistence is primary substance, for he is here contrasting it with primary substance. So existence/pre-existing subsistence must refer to the substrate of the primary substance, that is, the substrate for the form, in composition with which it comprises a subject of accidents in the proper sense. (Damascius' parallel formulation has 'other things' (τὰ ἄλλα) where Victorinus has *accidentia*, which reinforces the point that Victorinus is using the term 'accidents' in the same way that Neoplatonic authors use the term 'other things' for all kinds of properties.¹⁶)

¹¹Victorinus, *Against Arius* [hereafter AA] 1A.30, lines 18–26. *Quid dicimus esse substantiam? Sicuti sapientes et antiqui definirunt: quod subiectum, quod est aliquid, quod est in alio non esse. Et dant differentiam existentiae et substantiae; existentiam quidem et existentialitatem praeexistentem subsistentiam sine accidentibus, puris et solis ipsis quae sunt in eo quod est solum esse, quod subsistent; substantiam autem subiectum cum his omnibus quae sunt accidentia in ipsa inseparabiliter existentibus.* Cf. *Cand.* 1.2.21 and 1.2.18. Translations of Victorinus here and following are from Mary T. Clark, sometimes amended.

¹²Regarding AA 1A.30, lines 19–20, Hadot, *Traitées théologiques sur la Trinité* (SC 68), vol. 1, p. 274, and *Marii Victorini Opera* (CSEL 83.1), p. 107, cited Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.1.3, ll. 12–14; Aristotle, *Cat.* 5, 3a7 and 3b10; and *Metaph.* 7.3, 1028b35. However, Victorinus' *quod est aliquid* (Plotinus τὸ τί) has more in common with Aristotle, *Cat.* 1a, line 27 and 2b, line 13.

¹³Aristotle, *Cat.* 2 *passim*, *Cat.* 5 *passim*, *Metaph.* 7.3, 1029 a1–5.

¹⁴Aristotle, *An.* 2.1, 412a6–a11; *Metaph.* 7.13, 1038b1–7. Referenced by Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.1.3, l. 12 (τὸ τί, cf. Victorinus, *aliquid*). Cf. Victorinus, AA 4.10, line 49–AA 4.11, line 5.

¹⁵Aristotle, *Cat.* 2, 1b1–5, *Cat.* 5, 2a11–17; cf. *Cat.* 5, 3a 5–10.

¹⁶E.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.3.4, ll. 1–7; Damascius, *Prim. prin.* 120 (*Traité des premiers principes*, ed. Leendert Gerrit Westerlink, trans. Joseph Combès (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991), 3:152, ll. 13–16 = Ruelle I 312).

‘Pre-existing subsistence’, then, means ultimate substrate, what is underlying any kind of specifications that make matter be a particular primary substance. Victorinus’ Latin phrase *praeexistens subsistentia* would in Greek be ὑπόστασις προϋπάρχουσα, but his *prae* is evidently not temporal but metaphysical – a foreground or substrate for properties.

Notice that it is being implied here that ‘existence’ or ‘to-be solely’ is another way of describing *matter*. For Victorinus here calls this substrate ‘existence’ or ‘to-be solely.’ And Victorinus’ threefold schema (categories 4, 5, 6 above) correlates to Aristotle’s threefold distinction (in *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*) between (a) matter, (b) form and (c) the composition of both, the primary substance.

This reading of *Against Arius*, IA.30, lines 18–26, is confirmed by the conceptually parallel passage *Against Arius*, 2.4, lines 17–19, and others, in which the epithet ‘pure to-be’ occurs again. We are told that it is that which is formed, and is the primary and ultimate subject. Victorinus says: ‘it is one thing to be a form and another thing to be formed. But that which is formed is to-be; the form is that which makes known [=intelligible] the to-be.’¹⁷ Again, he notes that Greek words for ‘being’ (ὄν, οὐσία, ὑπόστασις), are used homonymously, to name alternately (a) the ultimate subject (*subiectum et principale*) or ‘primary to-be’ (*esse principale, esse primum et solum, esse purum*) alone without form, (b) form or (c) the two together.¹⁸ Thus what in *Against Arius*, IA.30 is called ‘pre-existing subsistence’, ‘existence’ and ‘to-be solely’ is in *Against Arius*, 2.4 named the ‘ultimate subject’, ‘primary to-be’ and ‘pure to-be’. In the 2.4 passages Victorinus’ Latin ‘ultimate subject’ has recognisable verbal parallels to Aristotle’s accounts of ultimate substrate in *Metaphysics*, 7.3, 8.4 and 9.7, wherein ultimate substrate is said to be ultimate (or ‘first’/‘prime’) matter.¹⁹ So, Victorinus’ language of ‘existence’ and ‘to-be solely’ rather clearly refers to ultimate substrate, completely undetermined matter.

What we have here in Victorinus’ *Against Arius*, then, is the notion that *matter as such is nothing but existence*. This claim was not made by Aristotle himself and so must be attributable to the ‘sages’ alluded to by Victorinus.²⁰ The rationale behind it is apparently that being (οὐσία) in the sense of ultimate matter/substrate is ‘being’ stripped of all its properties, and hence is mere existence (Victorinus: *existentia*, which would be ὑπαρξίς) or to-be solely (Victorinus’ *esse solum*, which would be τὸ εἶναι μόνον).²¹

¹⁷Victorinus, AA 2.4, lines 17–19. Cf. AA IA.34, lines 23–33, AA 3.2, lines 15–27 with AA IA.32, and passages cited in Section 2.

¹⁸Victorinus, AA 2.4 *passim*, esp. lines 42–5 and 24 and 29.

¹⁹Aristotle, *Metaph.* 8.4 1044a15–24 (τὸ πρότον (compare Victorinus *principale*) = ἡ ὅλη αὐτὴ ὡς ἀρχή, ἡ πρώτη ὅλη); *Metaph.* 7.3, 1029a1–3, 1029a24 (τὸ ὑποκειμενον πρότον, τὸ ἔσχατον, compare Victorinus *subiectum et principale*); *Metaph.* 9.7 1049a24–35 (τὸ ἔσχατον, τὸ ὑποκειμενον; cf. Victorinus *subiectum et principale*); *An. gen.* 729a32.

²⁰According to the late ancient custom, Victorinus’ plurals ‘ancients’ and ‘sages’ do not necessarily literally refer to *multiple* figures of each or either designation.

²¹With *existentia*, Victorinus must be rendering ὑπαρξίς, because later in the same work he gives ὑπαρκτότητα as the Greek for *existentia* (AA 3.7). David Bradshaw, ‘Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being’, *Review of Metaphysics* 53/2 (1999), p. 384, n. 4, rejects Charles Kahn’s taking Victorinus’ *existentia/esse solum* as a reference to ὑπαρξίς, on the grounds that Victorinus in a different passage (AA 2.4, lines 23–4) says that ὑπαρξίς is equivalent to ὄν and signifies ‘esse with form’. (See Charles Kahn, ‘On the Terminology for Copula and Existence’, in S. Stern (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), p. 155.) However, AA 2.4, lines 23–4, is

Precisely who was the ‘sage’ in the commentary tradition on Aristotle, referenced by Victorinus here, who first proposed that matter-as-such is bare existence? The evidence regarding ‘existence’ does not point to Porphyry.²² Porphyry did write a non-extant treatise *On Matter*; but the little that we know about his views on matter gives us no reason to suppose that he argued that matter was pure existence.²³ Again, the *Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s ‘Parmenides’*, which Hadot and others have taken to be authored by Porphyry, does not appear to have been the source for this doctrine that ultimate substrate is pure existence.²⁴ It does not identify ὑπαρξις and τὸ εἶναι μόνον with each other,²⁵ and although it does, like Victorinus, speak of a metaphysically prior thing ‘pre-existing’ a second, unlike Victorinus it explicitly denies that the ‘pre-existing’ one is a substrate for the second entity.²⁶ Damascius reports something that may help us, however. Recall that he preserves a parallel text to Victorinus’ *Against Arius*, IA.30, lines 18–26.²⁷ He also says that Iamblichus employed the distinction between existence (ὑπαρξις) and substance (οὐσία/εἶναι) ‘everywhere’ in his writings.²⁸ So perhaps a non-extant Aristotelian commentary by Iamblichus is the source for Victorinus’ notion that prime matter is pure existence.

The first divine principle as ‘existence’

For his part, Victorinus applies this analysis of substance that he inherited from the ‘ancients and sages’ to the case of God. While he holds that God is immutable and non-physical, he says that the analysis of substance into ultimate substrate (existence) and properties is a suitable way to explain how God the Son is ‘consubstantial’ (ὁμοούσιος) with God the Father.²⁹ What is interesting here in relation to the larger history of metaphysics is that Victorinus is *purposefully* employing the commentary tradition on Aristotle in order to distinguish his account of God from that of the Arians, and by implication that of his forerunning Neoplatonists as well.

anomalous; Victorinus’ normal usage is ὑπαρξις for simple existence, so Kahn is correct. There is not space here to explain the reason for the anomaly.

²²The term ὑπαρξις does not occur at all in the *Sent.* (so Gerald Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s ‘Parmenides’* (Bern: Verlag Paul Haupt, 1999), p. 64, n. 123), and the verb ὑπαρχειν occurs only once there, where it does indeed mean ‘exist’, but does not refer to substrate (*Sent.* 39). The commentary *ad Gedalium* (Riccardo Chiaradonna, Marwan Rashed, and David Sedley, ‘A Rediscovered *Categories* Commentary’, in Brad Inwood (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 44 (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 129–94) and shorter commentary on the *Cat.* do not identify substrate as pure existence, or use the term ὑπαρξις in this way.

²³Porphyry’s lost treatise is quoted in Simplicius’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Phys.* (Hermann Diels, *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (Berlin: Reimer, 1882), 9:231, line 5–232, line 24). Porphyry, who is explaining Moderatus, describes matter as pure quantity (ποσότης, line 15).

²⁴This is a commentary of unknown date from the Middle Platonic or Neoplatonic period. Pierre Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 102ff., believed that it was authored by Porphyry; but see also the essays in John Turner and Kevin Corrigan (eds.), *Plato’s ‘Parmenides’ and its Heritage*, 2 vols. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

²⁵As Andrew Smith, ‘Ἰπόστασις and ὑπαρξις in Porphyry’, in Romano and Taormina (eds.), *Hyparxis e Hypostasis nel Neoplatonismo*, pp. 40–1, notes in a different context.

²⁶See note 42.

²⁷Damascius, *Prim. prin.* 120 (Westerlink and Combés, 3:152, lines 13–16 = Ruelle I 312).

²⁸Damascius, *Prim. prin.* 61.

²⁹Victorinus, AA 2.4, *convenit Deo*.

Victorinus' strategy with this model of divine consubstantiality is to argue against the 'Arians' that the Father and Son are not two separate individual entities, the latter of which is created by and subordinate to the former, but instead constitute one single God, one primary substance.³⁰ Aristotle had insisted that matter and form are not separate in reality. Substrate only exists in primary substances, and the same is true of form. Victorinus similarly maintains that ultimate subject, or 'primary to-be', and form, 'are always together' in fact, even though they are distinguishable.³¹ He then assigns the role of substrate to the Father and form to the Son, arguing that the Son is 'inseparably in' the Father.³² The First Principle (the Father) is substrate distinct from form,³³ that is, pure existence, pure to-be.³⁴ The Logos, also known as the Son, is form.³⁵ The Father is bare 'to be' (*esse*) while the Son is 'to be thus' (*sic esse*).³⁶ More specifically, the Logos is the form of God, making the Godhead be the kind (Victorinus: *universalis, forma*; cf. Aristotle τὸ καθόλου, τὸ εἶδος) of thing it is and thereby giving it its intelligibility,³⁷ while also being the set of all the Forms, that is, the pattern for all creatures, as a Nicaeanised Neoplatonic Divine Intellect.³⁸ It is very clear here that Victorinus is not arguing merely that both the Father and Son have or participate in existence, though each 'is' in a different way or a different sense. Rather, he is claiming that in their combination they make up one substance, and that this is what 'consubstantial' means in reference to them. It means that there is only one God, equally composed of these two as substrate and form: they are each consubstantial for the other (ὁμοούσια).³⁹ An Aristotelian account of composed substance is thus pressed into service to defend the 'consubstantiality' of God.

At the same time, Victorinus' claim that the Father has a kind of dependence upon the second principle differentiates him from earlier Neoplatonic or middle Platonic authors, of course. Plotinus' three divine realities are three individual divine entities, hierarchically arranged, and the One is not in any way related to or dependent upon the Divine Intellect, who is not dependent upon Soul. Similarly, although the *Anonymous Commentary on Plato's 'Parmenides'* calls the First One 'being alone' (τὸ εἶναι μόνον),⁴⁰ it explicitly denies that the One is substrate (ὑποκείμενον) for the Second One,⁴¹ and identifies the Second One, rather than the First, with existence (ὑπαρξίς).⁴²

One might ask here, what about the Holy Spirit? We must always remember that Victorinus' *Against Arius* is a reaction to the claim of Nicaea I that the Son is

³⁰So e.g. Victorinus, AA IA.34, lines 31–3; AA IA.29, lines 20–5; AA IA.30, lines 54–9; AA 3.7, line 3.

³¹Victorinus, AA 2.4 *passim*, esp. lines 42–5 and 24 and 29.

³²Victorinus, AA IA.22, lines 32–7; AA IA.30, lines 56–9; AA IA.34, lines 31–3; AA 2.4, lines 24 and 29; AA 3.7, lines 18–21. Cf. the analogy for the human soul as a composed substance (soul/animating stuff : mind :: matter : form), with the human soul compared to God, in AA IA.32, lines 21–8 and 30–2.

³³Victorinus, AA IA.29, lines 14–15; AA IA.34, lines 23–33; AA 1B, lines 23–6; AA 3.7, lines 16–21.

³⁴Victorinus, AA 1B.49, lines 23–6.

³⁵Victorinus, AA 1A.21, lines 38–9, AA 1A.22, line 34; AA 1A.29, line 16.

³⁶Victorinus, AA IA.29, lines 21–2; AA 4.19, lines 4–22.

³⁷E.g. Victorinus, AA 1A.29, line 17.

³⁸Victorinus, AA IA.22, lines 39–40; AA 3.7, line 18; AA 4.19, line 26.

³⁹ὁμοούσια: Victorinus, AA 1A.29, line 25.

⁴⁰Fragment II p. 4 Folio 94v line 8.

⁴¹Fragment V p. 11 Folio 93r lines 18–20.

⁴²Fragment VI p. 14 Folio 90r lines 15–26. Victorinus' account is, however, closer to Damascius' account of the third divine principle in *Prim. prin.* 61.

consubstantial with the Father. It is not until Augustine's *On the Trinity*, written after the Council of Constantinople in 381, that we get a major concern with the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity in a theological treatise in the Latin West. Victorinus does have another model, which is beyond the scope of this article, but which he apparently takes to be complementary to the substrate-form model that concerns us here. According to this other model, God wills to know himself, and this will is perfectly effective of his successfully knowing and so is essentially the same one act. It is the Son as willing-to-know and the Holy Spirit as knowing.⁴³

To return to the matter-form model: whatever can Victorinus mean by saying that an immaterial God has an ultimate substrate that functions the way that matter does in material substances? The idea is that God is pure spirit, that is, *the kind of stuff that God is, is immaterial reality*,⁴⁴ but that saying this is not yet saying what the nature of God is (that God is goodness, or an intelligent mind, for instance). God is an immaterial substance of a certain nature. There are other immaterial substances having other natures, such as angels and human souls. Hence these diverse things are the same in substrate (immateriality) while different in form (the form of divinity, or of angel, or of human being).

Two problems in the Victorine model of consubstantiality

As an attempt to defend divine 'consubstantiality', Victorinus' procedure here is atypical. The common reading of 'consubstantial' by pro-Nicene authors was that the relevant sense of 'substance' was nature (secondary substance) rather than entity (primary substance).⁴⁵

More importantly, on philosophical grounds Victorinus' model could be challenged by anyone committed to the proposition that God must be simple. If God is composed of substrate (pure existence) and form, then God is not simple. Of course, since it is axiomatic in classical metaphysics that simplicity is superior to multiplicity, this is an objection that any reader of Victorinus would be likely to raise. In fact, Victorinus himself is aware of the potential objection, and believes that he has disposed of it.⁴⁶ He explicitly protests that in dividing the Godhead up into substrate and form he has nevertheless not ascribed accidents (changeable details) to God,⁴⁷ nor asserted that God actually was temporally generated by the addition of form to matter and is thus *de facto* divisible.⁴⁸ But this response is inadequate: it is not merely accidents, or the fact of having come into being, that would rule out the simplicity of God. *Any* kind of components that *make up* God would render God non-simple.⁴⁹

⁴³Victorinus, AA IB.57–58, IA.16, lines 23–4.

⁴⁴E.g. Victorinus, AA IB.55, AA IA.31, lines 5–17.

⁴⁵On ὁμοειδής as the sense also intended by Athanasius, see Christopher Stead, 'The Significance of the *Homoousios*', in *Studia Patristica III* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), pp. 397–412, 404–11. Cf. ps-Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 8.3 τῆς φύσεως ὁμολογούντες as the correct understanding of ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρὶ. Augustine takes this as the normative meaning; e.g. *F. et symb.* 4.6 and *passim*; *Trin.* 7.6. Note that Victorinus in the context of his other models of God uses this other sense of 'consubstantial' (e.g. AA 2.10, line. 38, ὁμοειδές). Secondary literature up to this point has focused on this other sense, e.g. Matthias Baltes, *Marius Victorinus: Zur Philosophie in seinen theologischen Schriften* (Munich and Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2002), p. 77; Christoph Erismann, 'Identité et ressemblance: Marius Victorinus, théologien et lecteur d'Aristote', *Les Études philosophiques* 101/2 (2012), p. 186.

⁴⁶Victorinus, *Cand.* 1.2, lines 15–23, 1.3, lines 15–16.

⁴⁷Victorinus, AA IA 29, lines 18–21.

⁴⁸Victorinus, AA 3.11, lines 30ff.

⁴⁹On contemporary disagreements about matter and form as 'parts' of a substance, see Michael Loux, 'Aristotle on Matter, Form, and Ontological Strategy', *Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2005), pp. 81–123.

It should perhaps be emphasised that Neoplatonic ‘universal hylomorphism’ cannot free Victorinus of this difficulty. Universal hylomorphists hold that all *changeable* or *multiple* things have some kind of ‘matter’, whether corporeal or incorporeal. They make use of the ‘incorporeal matter’, to which Aristotle ascribes the plasticity of the rational creative imagination (in *Metaphysics*), to posit that the human soul, angels or *daimones*, and lesser deities have ‘spiritual’ (namely, non-three-dimensional) material, because these are subject to change and time. And Plotinus conceives of his second principle, Divine Intellect, as having intelligible ‘matter’ because it is the seat of the multiple intelligible Forms, each of which is a kind of goodness. But Victorinus says that he is committed to the claim that God is both unchangeable and simple. So assuming he means this, his God cannot be hylomorphic.

There is a second difficulty with Victorinus’ model: it reifies a privation. Immateriality is simply the absence of matter. Yet Victorinus wants to make it a substrate for form, and to say that this substrate is God the Father, who underlies the Son. But, of course, if we were to say ‘God is immaterial’ more precisely, we would say ‘God is only a nature (form) without any matter added to it’. The implication of this for Victorinus’ model will be that there simply is no Father, an unwelcome implication for him, to say the least.

Augustine’s delicate correction of Victorinus

The observations in the preceding sections allow us to recognise one way that Victorinus plays a pivotal role in the development of the Latin theology of the Trinity. We can now see that Augustine is alluding to this model of Victorinus when he mentions and rejects the suggestion that God could be considered a ‘subject’ in his *On the Trinity* 7.4–5.⁵⁰

Augustine betrays his use of Victorinus partly through his language, utilising the latter’s translation of the Greek ὑπόστασις, which is *subsistentia*, to signify the type of being that each of the trinitarian persons has. He says:

The word [substance, *substantia*] is rightly used for things which provide subjects for those things that are said to be in a subject (*subiectum*), like color or shape in a body. Thus body subsists, and is therefore substance; but those things are in the subsisting, in the subject or underlying body, and so they are not substances, but in substance. ... But if God subsists in such a way that he can properly be called substance, then something is in him as in its underlying subject, and he is not simple – he for whom it is the same thing to be as to be whatever else is said of him with reference to himself, such as great, omnipotent, good, and anything of that sort that is not unsuitably said of God. But *it is impious to say that God subsists to and underlies his goodness*, and that goodness is not his substance or rather his being, nor is God his goodness, but *that it is in him as in an*

⁵⁰Scholars have compared and contrasted the two authors, but to my knowledge have not noted this case that I present here. See Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp. 293–6; Nello Cipriani, ‘La presenza di Mario Vittorino nella riflessione trinitaria di S. Agostino’, *Augustinianum* 42/2 (2002), pp. 299, 307, 309, 310; Bradshaw, ‘Neoplatonic Origins’, p. 397; Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*, vol. 1, p. 477.

underlying subject. So it is clear that God is improperly called substance, in order to signify being by a more usual word.⁵¹

The target here is not merely anyone who misapplies the ‘subject’ discussed in Aristotle’s *Categories* to the case of God, for then his point would simply be that God is not a physical subject of accidents, which is the topic of that treatise.⁵² Augustine says he is concerned to argue instead that there is nothing in God that underlies God’s *essential attributes*, in other words, God’s form.

And the relevance of this to Victorinus’ model is clear. Victorinus often uses the term ‘substance’ (*substantia*) in the sense of ‘substrate’ when asserting that God the Father is the substrate underlying the Logos/Son/Form.⁵³ Keep in mind, too, that by the name ‘God’ Victorinus typically refers particularly to the Father. Victorinus is surely Augustine’s target, then, when he says: ‘it is impious to say that God subsists to and underlies his goodness, and that ... it is in him as in an underlying subject’.⁵⁴ And the conclusion of the passage is a round rejection of Victorinus’ model, which depends upon an attempt to gloss ‘consubstantial’ as ‘together comprising one primary substance’.

This is important not only for our understanding of the history of theology, but also for the precision it brings to our interpretation of Augustine. In this passage Augustine is not rejecting ‘ontotheological’ accounts of God in general.⁵⁵ Rather, he is denying that God (the Father) is a substance in the sense of a substrate, and that the Father and Son are one in the imperfect way that a compound is ‘one’. The Godhead does not have a substrate for its form; it simply is identical with its essential attribute of goodness.

Why does Augustine not name Victorinus here, if he believes the latter’s *Against Arius* contains such a danger to piety? The answer is not difficult to discern. Augustine’s default method when disagreeing with confreres is to assault their position but not their person, to the extent of not even naming them. Presumably the driving concern is that Christians should correct each other without publicly humiliating one another (cf. Matt 18:15). Moreover, the danger was slight, if Jerome’s complaint is indicative of the general reaction. Few people, apparently, were actually soldiering through Victorinus’ difficult treatise. Those who did were also likely also to read Augustine’s *On the Trinity*. And there they would find a clear correction.

⁵¹*Trin.* 7.5: *de his enim rebus recte intellegitur in quibus subiectis sunt ea quae in aliquo subiecto esse dicuntur sicut color aut forma in corpore. corpus enim subsistit et ideo substantia est; illa uero in subsistente atque in subiecto corpore, quae non substantiae sunt sed in substantia.. deus [pater] autem si subsistit ut substantia proprie dici possit, inest in eo aliquid tamquam in subiecto, et non est simplex cui hoc sit esse quod illi est quidquid aliquid de illo ad illum dicitur sicut magnus, omnipotens, bonus, et si quid huiusmodi de deo non incongrue dicitur. nefas est autem dicere ut subsistat et subsit deus bonitati suae atque illa bonitas non substantia sit uel potius essentia, neque ipse deus sit bonitas sua, sed in illo sit tamquam in subiecto. unde manifestum est deum abusiue substantiam uocari ut nomine usitatore intellegatur essentia.* For translations of *Trin.* I use *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), amended.

⁵²As in Augustine, *Conf.* 4.16.30.

⁵³E.g. Victorinus, AA IA.19, lines 29–38, lines 52–3; AA IA.21, lines 39–48; AA IA.22, lines 35–7; AA 24, lines 9–13; cf. AA IA.16, lines 18–28, AA IA.17, lines 32–4, AA IA.18, lines 52–7, AA 4.33, lines 29–42.

⁵⁴When he wants to refer to the Son or Holy Spirit, he typically calls them by their proper names, but not so with the Father, whom he usually simply calls God (presumably because he is the *first* principle).

⁵⁵See Jean-Luc Marion, ‘*Idipsum*: The Name of God According to Augustine’, in George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (eds), *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), pp. 184–5.

Conclusions

We have seen that the Arian controversy, which is the historical context for Victorinus' metaphysical treatises, was an occasion for him to develop his own trinitarian metaphysics. He participated in the tradition of commentary on Aristotle as well as that of Neoplatonic speculation about transcendent being. His particular model of 'consubstantiality' that we have just examined was important in the West even though it was rejected in what became the mainstream position. It sharpened Augustine's own speculations, the influence of which have been unmatched in the history of Western theology.

Cite this article: Byers S (2022). 'Consubstantiality' as a philosophical-theological problem: Victorinus' hylomorphic model of God and his 'correction' by Augustine. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75, 12–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930621000788>