

Being and Ontology in Augustine's *De Trinitate*

CENTRAL TO *DE TRINITATE* is the question of how one is to speak about God, and Augustine deliberates at length as to what are the language and terms which are appropriate when speaking and thinking about God. Augustine spends a good deal of time wrestling with how one can speak of the Triune God. Augustine's deliberations take him through a discussion of the Latin terms *substantia*, *essentia*, *persona*, and the Greek terms οὐσία and ὑπόστασις (and briefly, φύσις). Augustine has had numerous detractors regarding his construal of the Trinity, and we should begin by noting that Gunton is not a maverick or a loose cannon when he voices his consternation with Augustine. Many others have expressed similar concerns. G. L. Prestige, among others, contends that the Cappadocians had a fundamentally different metaphysic from that of Augustine, and this difference is seen in their respective construals of the Trinity. Prestige writes, for example, "Neither the Latin language, nor the ordinary Latin intellect, was capable of the subtlety of the conception which approved itself to the Greek theologians."¹ Eugene Webb also posits a dichotomy between East and West. Webb contends that "Greek trinitarian thinking, of which Augustine was largely ignorant" opened up the possibility for human understanding of the Triune God, which is mediated through participating in the life of the Son and Spirit.² However, for Augustine, such knowledge of God was impossible, and Augustine could simply offer that

1. Cf. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 235 (see also 157–78).

2. Webb, "Augustine's new Trinity," 191–212.

“one can only speculate abstractly about the meaning of the trinitarian doctrine,” and one can believe in the Triune on the sole basis of church tradition.³ Webb also contends that Augustine’s metaphors for the Trinity simply did not work, and this failure was a nagging source of anxiety for Augustine.⁴ Webb even suggests that the religious persecution and coercion in the West might be traced to this “anxiety” which Augustine’s trinitarian metaphors bequeathed to the West.⁵

T. R. Martland likewise wishes to affirm a significant theological chasm between East and West, in particular between the Cappadocians and Augustine.⁶ In a sentence which could serve as a perfect summary of the general trend to drive a wedge between the Cappadocians and Augustine Martland writes, “Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity contributed to a fuller understanding of what the Christian means when he asserts that God is one, but the cost of this contribution was a failure to take seriously the Christian assertion that God of His nature is a multiple.”⁷ Augustine’s “trinitarian thought introduced the West to the primary concern with unity.”⁸ Summarizing the key difference between Augustine and the Cappadocians, Martland writes, “Whereas the Cappadocians knew God as three persons before they knew Him as one God, Augustine knows Him as one God before he knows Him as three persons.”⁹ Martland’s concerns are very similar to those of Gunton’s, particularly with Martland’s concerns that Augustine ultimately makes the Trinity superfluous: “Augustine’s strong defense of the unity of God and of the absolute equality of the persons tends to reduce the doctrine of the Trinity to an irrelevancy and to unintelligibility.”¹⁰ Indeed, Augustine’s “preoccupation with the unity of God has reduced the doctrine of the Trinity to a meaningless dogma which is accepted solely on the grounds of authority.”¹¹ Martland laments that with Augustine, it “is as if the Western church knowingly and

3. *Ibid.*, 204.

4. *Ibid.*, 206–8.

5. *Ibid.*, 208.

6. Martland, “Study of Cappadocian and Augustinian Trinitarian Methodology,” 252–63.

7. *Ibid.*, 252.

8. *Ibid.*, 256.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 257.

11. *Ibid.*, 262–63.

willingly turned from an understanding of the doctrine as a necessary formula to capture the implications of empirical Christian encounters, to an understanding of the doctrine as a dogma, a *mysterious nonsense* (beyond-sense?), acceptance of which marks the faithful off from the unfaithful.¹² Ultimately, concludes Martland, the Western Church chose authority over reason.¹³

Others are more skeptical of affirming thoroughly different conceptions between East and West. Michel René Barnes, for example, summarizes the common conception of an East/West dichotomy as follows: “Greek theology begins with the reality of the distinct persons while Latin theology begins with the reality of the divine nature.”¹⁴ However, Barnes contends that this way of construing the differences between East and West is relatively new. Indeed, “only theologians of the last one hundred years have ever thought it was true,” and this is due largely to the influence of Theodore de Régnon’s *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité*.¹⁵ Barnes contends that “it is de Régnon who invented the Greek/Latin paradigm, geometrical diagrams and all.”¹⁶ According to Barnes, the systematician’s penchant for “grand, architectonic narrative forms,” combined with reduced attention to primary texts and a love for the centrality of *ideas*, not *doctrines*, in history, has led to a thorough misreading and misunderstanding of Augustine’s trinitarian theology.¹⁷

Rowan Williams warns that this tendency to characterize Augustine as emphasizing the one timeless essence to the detriment of the three persons is misguided.¹⁸ Williams contends that a full understanding of what Augustine is doing in *De Trinitate* would help commentators avoid picturing Augustine as committed to one, timeless, abstract essence. Williams writes, “What should be particularly noted is that Augustine, so far from separating the divine substance from the life of the divine persons, defines that substance in such a way that God cannot be other than relational, trinitarian.”¹⁹ As Williams sees it, “The divine essence is

12. *Ibid.*, 263.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Barnes, “Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” 237.

15. *Ibid.* De Régnon, *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité*.

16. Barnes, “Augustine, Trinity, and Contemporary Theology,” 238.

17. *Ibid.*, 237–50.

18. Williams, “*Sapientia* and the Trinity,” 317–32.

19. *Ibid.*, 325.

not an abstract principle of unity, nor a 'causal' factor over and above the hypostases; to be God at all is to be desirous of and active in *giving* the divine life." He continues, "That is the essence, the definition of God for our purposes; there is no 'divinity' not constituted by the act of *caritas*, and thus no divinity that can adequately be conceived apart from the trinity of persons."²⁰ Williams also contends that it is simply inaccurate to say that in Augustine the divine essence somehow is anterior to, or underlies the three persons. Williams writes, "we have noted that the divine persons do not 'possess' the divine essence, but are what it is."²¹ Williams is adamant that the three persons are *not* subordinated to the divine essence in *De Trinitate*. He notes, "There can therefore be no question of any subordination of trinitarian plurality to a unity of essence."²²

Lewis Ayres is also skeptical of construals of Augustine which summarize his trinitarian thought by saying that Augustine emphasized unity over plurality. On the idea that Augustine posited a divine "essence" which undergird the three persons, Ayres writes, "Whatever faults one finds theologically with Augustine's thought it really is time that ascribing such a simplistic style of doctrine to Augustine ceased."²³ Ayres argues that Augustine's use of such terminology as *essentia* and *substantia* is more complicated than is often admitted, and this complexity is rarely taken into account by those construals which simply contend that Augustine "emphasized" the unity of God over against the plurality.²⁴

Edmund Hill, who is generally quite favorable to Augustine's construal of the Trinity, also posits that the simple divide between "East" and "West" is an inaccurate and unhelpful schema. He writes, "Augustine and Ambrose wrote in Latin, Athanasius and Basil and John Chrysostom in Greek. But to cast over them the shadow of this modern stereotype is simply to overlook the fact which was of paramount importance in the fourth and fifth centuries—that Athanasius stood in the Alexandrian or Egyptian tradition, Ambrose in the North Italian, Augustine in the African, Basil in the Cappadocian and John Chrysostom in the Syrian." He continues, "It

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 328.

22. *Ibid.*, 330.

23. Ayres, "Augustine, the Trinity and Modernity," 130. Cf. *idem*, "Fundamental Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology"; *idem*, "Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God."

24. *Ibid.*

was these *local* traditions that counted then, not the later crude divide between Greek and Latin, East and West. They influenced each other, of course, but not just the Greek-speaking Churches on one side and the Latin on the other.²⁵ Interestingly, Edmund Hill, who argues persuasively for the basic legitimacy and coherency of Augustine's trinitarian theology, nonetheless argues that the West after Augustine does show certain tendencies which are inimical to a sound doctrine of the Trinity. Hill contrasts two groups: "economic" theologians and "transcendental" theologians (Hill uses "transcendental" instead of "immanent"—although he considers them to be synonyms—because "immanent" in other contexts means something like "close" or "near," which is not what is intended by immanent in a trinitarian context). Economic theologians emphasized the Trinity in its relation to creation and redemption (the economy) (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Novatian). Transcendental theologians emphasized who God is apart from creation and redemption, as in God in his eternal relations "in and of himself" (e.g., the Cappadocians and Augustine). The tendency which Hill laments is an inference which is often drawn from Augustine's axiom that the outward works of the Trinity are undivided (*opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*). The inference is that if the outward works of the Trinity are undivided, then we human creatures do not actually relate to the *persons* of the Trinity, but simply to the one undifferentiated God. Hill concedes how one could make the inference, but contends that it is an unnecessary, and ultimately harmful inference, because it really does sever the Triune God from real relationships with human creatures.²⁶

Having surveyed key options in contemporary reflection on Augustine, particularly related to the question of ontology, we turn to Augustine himself to exposit his own writings on these issues. With particular attention to *De Trinitate*, we will seek to come to terms with Augustine's own position on the question of ontology. What is Augustine's teaching, especially in *De Trinitate* on key concepts such as substance, essence, persons and relations? Gunton contends that Augustine falls short of the theological sophistication and advances of the Cappadocians, and as we have mentioned above, Gunton is not alone in this claim. Others such as Robert Jenson and John Zizioulas are equally displeased with

25. Hill, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 116.

26. *Ibid.*, 95–96.

Augustine and pleased with the Cappadocians. As we approach the theme of ontology, we should note that this chapter will not attempt to be a full-fledged treatment of the metaphysics of Augustine. Such an effort deserves a monograph of its own, and others have attempted such a task.²⁷ Rather, we will concentrate on the doctrine of God, particularly the questions of essence, substance, persons and relations, as seen in *De Trinitate*.

Ontology and Relationship

In our exposition of Gunton we saw that Gunton believes that Augustine failed to articulate a truly Christian ontology. The Cappadocians saw relationship as that which *constitutes* being, while Augustine saw relationship as something which is *predicated* about being. Additionally, Gunton contends that the Cappadocians gave full weight to three real persons, while Augustine failed, due to his overemphasis on unity, to give full weight to the reality of the three persons. Augustine errs gravely in failing to appropriate the Cappadocians' ontology. With Gunton's main criticisms in view, let us turn to Augustine.

Edmund Hill offers a helpful introduction to our theme. Hill correctly points to the difficulty of speaking of one and three. He writes, "The trouble is, once again—the absolute simplicity of God. God does not have distinct and distinguishable attributes; he *is* all his attributes, and his attributes, and his attributes *are* the divine substance or being. Thus in God these attributes are not really distinct from one another; they are only distinct in our minds, in our manner of thinking and talking about God."²⁸

As we have seen in our exposition of Gunton, Gunton contends that Augustine emphasizes the one, timeless essence of God to the detriment of the three persons. The one essence or being or nature is so emphasized that the three persons ultimately become superfluous.

It is appropriate for us to plumb Augustine's thought on the being or nature of God. If Augustine's theology could be summarized in one word (a perilous attempt), a possible contender would be "theocentric." Vernon J. Bourke notes, "No reader of the *Soliloquies* and the *Confessiones* will have to be reminded that Augustine's thought is completely theocentric. Whatever may be his other interests, Augustine's chief concern is about

27. Cf. Anderson, *St. Augustine and Being*; Bourke, *Augustine's View of Reality*.

28. Hill, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 61.

God.”²⁹ Augustine’s theology is radically God-centered, and thus it is no surprise that Augustine expends great effort in *De Trinitate* trying grapple with the nature of God. To grapple with the nature of God is ultimately to engage in metaphysics, and it is little wonder that in Joseph Stephen O’Leary’s attempt to “overcome metaphysics,” he devotes an entire chapter to “overcoming Augustine.”³⁰ Vernon Bourke could note in 1964 that there was no thorough study of the metaphysics of Augustine, and this lacuna exists somewhat still today.³¹ This chapter will not fill this gap, but it is hoped that we will at least contribute to an understanding the basic metaphysical structure which informed Augustine’s thought on the being of God as found in *De Trinitate*.

Vernon Bourke points out that for Augustine “metaphysics” has a thoroughly theocentric focus. Augustine’s metaphysics is of a different type from Aristotle’s. As Bourke notes, “In the cognitive sense, Augustinian *ratio* has little to do with discursive and demonstrative reasoning in the Aristotelian sense. Reason is the gaze of the mind upon its appropriate objects.”³² This concept of reason is essential to an understanding of *De Trinitate*, for in *De Trinitate* Augustine’s purpose is to plumb how it is that we human sinners can ever come to gaze upon God. Our ultimate goal is simply to gaze upon God, and this gazing is a “higher” act than all the “discursive and demonstrative reasoning” which leads up to the point when the believer gazes upon God.

Augustine and Aristotle

In discussing Augustine’s metaphysics, we should note, with Vernon Bourke, that “Augustine was much limited by the nature of his education

29. Bourke, *Augustine’s Question of Wisdom*, 203.

30. Cf. the chapter, “Overcoming Augustine” in Joseph Stephen O’Leary’s *Questioning Back*, 165–202. O’Leary posits that genuine Christian faith, if it is to remain so must overcome metaphysics. Following Derrida, O’Leary calls for a rejection of logocentrism and metaphysics in general. O’Leary writes (225), “As faith builds on these latter foundations [i.e., of “peace, justice, and freedom”] it must reshape the meaning of tradition in accord with them, in a counter-metaphysical reading which frees faith from the morose, introspective provincialism characteristic of the metaphysical theology which is still dominant.” Anything less will fail to bring about “the integral liberation of faith from its imprisonment in representations which have become idolatrous.”

31. Bourke, *Augustine’s View of Reality*, x.

32. *Ibid.*, 2.

and by the conditions of the Latin language in his time.”³³ However, the fact that Augustine was not well versed in the niceties of the discipline of metaphysics should not be taken to mean that Augustine somehow did not think or reason in terms of metaphysics. What is particularly interesting to us is the extent to which Augustine proffered a trinitarian metaphysic, or what might be called a trinitarianly informed metaphysic.³⁴

It is also important to take a brief look at possible precursors to Augustine's own metaphysics. Since Gunton contends that Augustine is caught in the stranglehold or Aristotelian logic, it is worth looking, at least briefly, at Aristotle, and attempt to ask if Augustine is indeed “Aristotelian” in his metaphysics.³⁵ Augustine was familiar with Aristotle's *Categories*, as Augustine makes clear in the *Confessiones*.³⁶ Augustine says about Aristotle's *Categories*, “The book seemed to me an extremely clear statement about substances, such as man, and what are in them, such as a man's shape, what is his quality of stature, how many feet, and his relatedness.”³⁷ Augustine also writes that he tried to speak of and construe God in terms of the ten categories: “Thinking that absolutely everything that exists is comprehended under the ten categories, I tried to conceive you also, my God, wonderfully simple and immutable, as if you too were a subject of

33. *Ibid.*, 14.

34. *Ibid.*, 20ff.

35. Edward Booth's doctoral dissertation traces out Augustine's doctrine of “knowledge of oneself” as it relates to Aristotle and neo-Platonism. Booth's work has been published in a lengthy series of articles titled: “St. Augustine's *notitia sui* Related to Aristotle and the Early Platonists.” Particularly helpful for our purposes here is the section “From Aristotle to Augustine,” in *Augustiniana* 27, 70–104. Booth is more sympathetic to seeing certain continuities, rather than discontinuities, between Aristotle and Augustine. Booth, 82, writes, “if there is some truth in the statement that ‘Aristotle and Augustine are both rivals who contend with each other in the learning and mentality of the following centuries,’ it was because their followers did not perceive what they had in common.” Booth is quoting Adolf Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 4th ed. (Tübingen, 1910), 106.

36. Cf. *Confessiones* IV.16.28, where Augustine writes, “What good did it do me that at about the age of twenty there came into my hands a work of Aristotle which they call the *Ten Categories*? My teacher in rhetoric at Carthage, and others too who were reputed to be learned men, used to speak of this work with their cheeks puffed out with conceit, and at the very name I gasped with suspense as if about to read something great and divine. Yet I read it without any expositor and understood it.” Marius Victorinus had translated *Categories* into Latin, and this is likely what Augustine had read. See Henry Chadwick's comment in his translation of *Confessiones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69 n. 33.

37. *Confessiones* IV.16.28.

which magnitude and beauty are attributes. I thought them to be in you as if in a subject, as in the case of a physical body, whereas you yourself are your own magnitude and your own beauty. By contrast a body is not great and beautiful by being body; if it were less great or less beautiful, it would nevertheless still be body.”³⁸ However, Augustine repudiates this understanding, and concludes that this Aristotelian scheme was simply a lie: “My conception of you was a lie, not truth, the figments of my misery, not the permanent solidity of your supreme bliss. You had commanded and it so came about in me, that the soil would bring forth thorns and brambles for me, and that with toil I should gain my bread (Gen 3:18).”³⁹ Augustine’s familiarity with Aristotle’s categories is also seen in *De Trinitate*, where he quickly runs through all the categories.⁴⁰ We will look at Augustine’s teaching on substance and essence below, and only then will we be able to determine the extent to which Augustine was Aristotelian.

We are introduced to Aristotle’s metaphysics in *Categories*, but other key works are *Metaphysics* and *On Interpretation*. We will not offer an exhaustive treatment of Aristotle’s metaphysics. Rather, we simply outline key themes in Aristotle, particularly those key themes which relate in some way to our treatment of Augustine. Aristotle contended that there were ten categories which can be used to signify things: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, affection.⁴¹ At times Aristotle mentions other categories, or slightly changes this list, but this list is representative of Aristotle’s scheme. These categories refer to *things* themselves, and not simply terms or signs for things.⁴² They are, in Lloyd’s words, “the ultimate classes into which whatever exists or is real may be said to fall.”⁴³ These categories are not “universals” in the platonic sense, for Plato’s doctrine of forms appears to be the foil in the background of Aristotle’s categories. Lloyd writes that for Plato “the particular objects of the world of everyday experience certainly ‘share’ in the Forms and are not totally non-existent: but what is ‘really real’ is the Form in its pure state.” However, for Aristotle in the *Categories*, “‘substance’ is a term applied pri-

38. *Ibid.*, IV.16.29.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *De Trinitate* V. 7, 8.

41. Besides Aristotle’s *Categories* themselves, helpful secondary literature is Lloyd, *Aristotle*, 111–32; Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 31–39.

42. Cf. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 57; Lloyd, *Aristotle*, 113.

43. Lloyd, *Aristotle*, 114.

marily to the concrete individual object, the complex of form and matter, this table, this chair, Socrates, this specimen of dogfish and so on.”⁴⁴ The categories are concrete realities, not atemporal or eternal forms.⁴⁵ Thus, as Lloyd summarizes, “qualities . . . cannot exist by themselves, that is apart from the individual substances that have the qualities.”⁴⁶

In his *Categories* Aristotle distinguishes between “primary” and “secondary” substances. A “primary substance” (πρώτη οὐσία) or in Stead’s words, “*what is most properly called ousia*,” is this particular man, or that particular man. On the other hand, “secondary substances” (δευτεραι οὐσῖαι) are the species “man,” or the broader genus “animal.”⁴⁷ Thus, the particular man himself is οὐσία in a primary sense, whereas more general groupings like “man” (species) or “animal” (genus) are only οὐσία in a secondary sense. Stead helpfully summarizes this point: “individuals *exist* in their own right whereas universals in some sense depend upon them; or even that the individual exists in the true sense of the word, whereas ὁ ἄνθρωπος, Man, exists only in the secondary sense that instances of it exist.”⁴⁸

On the question of “being” Aristotle’s position is that “‘being’ is used with reference to one thing and to a single nature. . . . [B]eing’ is used with reference to a single thing.”⁴⁹ While Aristotle affirms that “the term ‘being’ (τὸ ὄν) is used in various senses,” he still contends that it is used “with reference to one central idea (φύσιν) and one definite characteristic, and not as merely a common epithet.”⁵⁰ A few lines later Aristotle can write that “‘being’ (τὸ ὄν) is used in various senses, but always with reference to one principle (ἀρχήν).”⁵¹ Of the ten categories listed above, “being” is most often used with the category of “substance,” although it can be used of other categories as well.⁵² Aristotle writes, “Now of all these senses which ‘being’ (ὄντος) has, the primary sense is clearly the ‘what,’ (τί ἐστίν) which

44. *Ibid.*, 52.

45. *Ibid.*, 114–15.

46. *Ibid.*, 115.

47. *Categories*, 5; cf. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 57.

48. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 61.

49. *Ibid.*, 128.

50. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1003a, 34ff.

51. *Ibid.*, 1003b, 5–6.

52. *Ibid.*, 1028a 10ff.

denotes the substance (οὐσία).⁵³ Ultimately, notes Lloyd, “the root idea of substance is ‘the what it is to be a thing’ or the form.”⁵⁴

One of Aristotle’s chief concerns in *Metaphysics* is the question of “being.” It is curious that Aristotle has seemingly dropped the question of “primary substance” and “secondary substance” discussed in *Categories*. We see in *Metaphysics* Aristotle’s doctrine of matter and form, and we encounter key terms such as οὐσία, ὑποκείμενον, and εἶδος. Matter is generally the physical “stuff,” whereas form is that which makes something what it is, what gives something this, rather than that shape. Οὐσία can refer to the concrete whole (form and matter), or form, but is less often used to refer to matter. Ὑποκείμενον, on the other hand is often used for the concrete whole (form and matter) and matter, but rarely is used to refer to the form.⁵⁵ The term εἶδος, one of Aristotle’s “principal legacies from Platonism,” is particularly difficult to grasp, for while the term might seem to denote an affirmation of universals, Aristotle rejected the teaching of universals espoused by his former teacher.⁵⁶ Stead suggests that the primary understanding of εἶδος is “a geometrical shape or configuration.”⁵⁷ For Aristotle εἶδος can also mean “species,” although this is the less common meaning. Additionally, Aristotle seems to imply that εἶδος means something like “the shape or form characteristic of a species,” a conception which seems rather close to Plato’s conception of independent universals.⁵⁸

We should note at this point the important work by Michael Durrant on Aristotle’s doctrine of substance, and its possible influences on theological traditions both East and West.⁵⁹ Durrant presupposes in his study that “the doctrine that God is three persons in one substance”

53. Ibid., 1028a, 14ff.

54. Lloyd, *Aristotle*, 131.

55. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 72–73.

56. Ibid., 73.

57. Ibid., 74.

58. Indeed, Stead, *Divine Substance*, 76, concludes, “It is in the end impossible to give a consistent account of Aristotle’s views on the relationship of the εἶδος and the universal.”

59. Durrant, *Theology and Intelligibility*. Durrant’s work contains a short summary statement on the title page (although this does not appear to be a subtitle): “An examination of the proposition that God is the last end of rational creatures and the doctrine that God is Three Persons in one Substance (The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity).”

is a fair statement of the orthodox, historic doctrine of the Trinity.⁶⁰ Durrant concludes that this “Trinitarian formula is an impossible one and hence that the doctrine of the Trinity is an impossible one.”⁶¹ Durrant argues that the Greek Fathers fundamentally misunderstood the notion of οὐσία that they received. Certain scholars in this field have made things worse, for they have introduced “a misguided, indeed impossible concept of ‘substance’ in their appreciation of those writings of the Greek Fathers which they regard as central to the doctrine of the Trinity.”⁶² Durrant appears to presuppose that if later thinkers use οὐσία in a way different from Aristotle, such thinkers have erred.⁶³ Durrant also argues that “scholars in this field are also open to the charge of perpetrating an unintelligible concept of ὑπόστασις.”⁶⁴ Ultimately, by the time of Augustine such key terms and concepts as οὐσία and ὑπόστασις have been so thoroughly muddled that Durrant can conclude the following: “the backcloth against which St. Augustine’s discussion of God as substance and his subsequent discussions of correlative notions is set is a patchwork of confusion.”⁶⁵ Augustine’s use of such terms as *substantia* and *essentia*, as well as his use of terminology like “of the same substance,” “in the same substance,” “in one substance,” and Augustine’s construal of the three *persons* of the Trinity all fail.⁶⁶ Particularly important for us here is Durrant’s contention that Augustine’s use of “substance” as applied to God is nonsensical.⁶⁷ Augustine, like the Greek Fathers, muddles and confuses Aristotle’s notion of substance. Durrant contends that a proper Aristotelian notion of substance *entails* accidents—i.e., a substance is not a substance without concomitant accidents. However, as Durrant correctly notes, Augustine claims that since God is unchangeable and simple, he has no accidents. Thus, Durrant claims that since for Augustine God has no accidents, he cannot be substance.⁶⁸ Indeed, notes Durrant, “The idea of an unchangeable substance, that is the idea

60. *Ibid.*, x.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*, xvi.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, xvii.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 112–25.

68. *Ibid.*, 121–22.

of a substance which cannot sensibly be spoken of as being subject to change . . . is a nonsensical one, hence to say that God is an unchangeable substance is itself nonsensical. I thus contend that, far from it being the case that St. Augustine has established an important truth, he has engrossed himself in a nonsense.”⁶⁹ Durrant appears to push his argument a bit hard and fails to deal adequately with the following objections: (1) it is irrelevant whether Augustine (or the Greek Fathers for that matter) use substance in an Aristotelian way. Augustine is under no mandate to do so, and what really matters is how he adopts and uses such terminology/concepts to his own ends and purposes; (2) Augustine is exploring how terms and concepts such as substance might apply to God, and as such Augustine is under no restriction to use the term in the same way it is used when being applied to the created order.

Let us state in summary the chief components of Aristotle’s ontology which concern us as we turn to Augustine. As we have seen, Aristotle deals at length with the concept of substance. Although we would like to find in Aristotle one, simple, consistent answer, Aristotle’s own position is not quite so easily ascertained. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to try and locate the key themes in Aristotle (or at least in his successors) which may have influenced Augustine. First, Aristotle held that being or substance was unchanging. In his more explicitly theological writings this theme would show up in his contention that God is the unmoved mover. Second, although Aristotle ultimately rejected his master’s (Plato’s) conception of Forms, Aristotle still affirmed that everything has an οὐσία (an “essence” or “substance”), and such “accidents” as quantities, qualities and relations attach to “substances.” While a “substance” does not (indeed cannot) change, without a thing ceasing to be that thing, “accidents,” such as quantities, qualities and relations can change. Christopher Stead notes, “Aristotle develops a distinction between a thing’s substance, namely what belongs to it in virtue of its definition, and ‘accidents,’ or predicates which do not necessarily and always attach to it.”⁷⁰ It is this ontology which Gunton sees in Augustine, and it is this ontological tradition which did not allow Augustine to appropriate the ontological advance and contribution of the Cappadocian Fathers. Thus, we must seek to determine more exactly Augustine’s relation to this Aristotelian tradition.

69. *Ibid.*, 122.

70. Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 36.