

# OUSIA: ESSENCE OU SUBSTANCE?

Définitions et traductions d'un concept clef  
dans la pensée antique et médiévale

Numéro double coordonné par Anca Vasiliu

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POLIROM

The problem is far from being solved with the admission of a «simple» contradiction between *In Categoriais* and *Contra Eutychen*, because *substantia*, unlike *essentia*, seems to have a wide range of meanings for Boethius. His logical and rhetorical works like *De divisione*, *De differentiis topicis* and *Commentaria in Topica Ciceronis* grant that *substantia* means *diffinitio*, which takes us back to the *essentia* meaning. Boethius could not be clearer than in the following text of the *In Topica Ciceronis*:

Diffinitio enim est oratio substantiam uniuscujusque significans; quod si ab unaquaque re propria substantia non recedit, ne diffinitio quidem recedit, est ergo diffinitio in ipso termino de quo agitur, quae definitio totum terminum necesse est comprehendat, neque enim partem substantiae, sed totius termini substantiam monstrat<sup>30</sup>.

The *De arithmetica* offers, as usual, a divergent doctrine: here the *substantia*, designated as *immobilis* and *immutabilis*, is often considered in conjunction with *natura*. We have already seen a part of the Prologue, with its difficult definition of *essentia*; but what precedes it also creates problems with the *substantia* concept, here presumably conceived in a Platonic sense.

Est enim sapientia, rerum quae sunt suique immutabilem substantiam sortiuntur, comprehensio veritatis. Esse autem illa dicimus, quae nec intentione crescunt, nec retractione minuuntur, nec variationibus permutantur, sed in propria semper vi, suae se naturae subsidiis nixa custodiunt. Haec autem sunt qualitates, quantitates, formae, magnitudines, parvitates, aequalitates, habitudines, actus, dispositiones, loca, tempora, et quidquid adunatum quodammodo corporibus invenitur. Quae ipsa quidem natura incorporea sunt, et immutabilis substantiae ratione vigentia, participatione vero corporis permutantur, et tactu variabilis rei, in vertibilem inconstantiam transeunt<sup>31</sup>.

To further complicate matters, as already stated, in other texts *substantia* means exactly what Boethius elsewhere indicates as *essentia*. This happens again in the *De arithmetica*: in the second book we read that the *substantiae* consist of «ex ea quae propriae suaeque semper habitudinis est, nec ullo modo permutatur»<sup>32</sup>; and in some crucial passages of the *Consolatio philosophiae*, in the tenth prose section of the third book, for example, which explains

30. Severinus Boethius, *Commentaria in Topica Ciceronis*, I, PL 64, 1059B. We can further read this assertion from the *De topicis differentiis*: «Diffinitio enim substantiam monstrat, et substantiae integra demonstratio diffinitio est» (Severinus Boethius, *De topicis differentiis*, II, 5, ed. Z. Nikitas, Athens/Paris/Bruxelles, The Academy of Athens/Vrin/Éditions Ousia, 1990, p. 29, 10-11).

31. Severinus Boethius, *De arithmetica*, I, 1, ed. Friedlein cit., p. 7, 26 – 8, 11.

32. *Ibid.*, II, 31, p. 123, 1-3.

the famous chant *O qui perpetua*, the *substantia Dei* is identified with the *summum bonum*.

– Sed quaeso, inquit, te, vide, quam id sancte atque inviolabiliter probes, quod boni summi summum Deum diximus esse plenissimum. – Quonam, inquam, modo? – Ne hunc rerum omnium patrem illud summum bonum quo plenus esse perhibetur vel extrinsecus accepisse vel ita naturaliter habere praesumas quasi habentis Dei habitaeque beatitudinis diversam cogites esse substantiam. Nam si extrinsecus acceptum putes, praestantius id quod dederit ab eo quod acceperit existimare possis; sed hunc esse rerum omnium praecellentissimum dignissime confitemur. Quod si natura quidem inest sed est ratione diversum, cum de rerum principe loquamur Deo, fingat qui potest quis haec diversa coniunxerit. Postremo, quod a qualibet te diversum est, id non est illud a quo intelligitur esse diversum; quare quod a summo bono diversum est sui natura, id summum bonum non est; quod nefas est de Deo cogitare, quo nihil constat esse praestantius. Omnino enim nullius rei natura suo principio melior poterit existere; quare quod omnium principium sit, id etiam sui substantia summum esse bonum verissima ratione concluderim. – Rectissime, inquam<sup>33</sup>.

We could at least expect stable coherence in the theological theory of Boethius, and take for granted that he «respects», in the other *Opuscula sacra*, the terminological equivalencies that he establishes in the *Contra Eutychen*; however, at first glance, this is also not true. The second chapter of the *De Trinitate* affirms that the substance of God is his form, because he lacks matter<sup>34</sup>. From the expressions used in the fourth chapter, we can be sure that in this work Boethius means *substantia* as the first Aristotelian category – and not, of course, in the meaning of *ὑπόστασις*, which is, as already stated, simply a peculiar type of substance, i.e. a *persona*<sup>35</sup>. The second tractate, which mentions *substantiae* even in its title, multiplies the problems. Here Boethius says that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each a *substantia*, and this is still acceptable, even if he should have used the more specific *ὑπόστασις* or *persona*; but he also declares that God is a *substantia*, and that this *substantia* is the *deitas*, the sum of the characteristics which together can be predicated of the three *personae*. Therefore, here he calls *substantia* what in the *Contra Eutychen* he called *essentia* or, at least, *subsistentia*: this misuse is exceptionally egregious

33. Severinus Boethius, *Consolatio philosophiae*, III, X, ed. C. Moreschini, p. 82, 37 – 83, 59.

34. See Severinus Boethius, *De sancta Trinitate*, ed. C. Moreschini, 2, p. 170, 92-94: «Sed divina substantia sine materia forma est atque ideo unum est, et est id quod est: reliqua enim non sunt id quod sunt».

35. See *ibid.*, 4, p. 173, 174-177: «Decem omnino praedicamenta traduntur, quae de rebus omnibus universaliter praedicantur, id est substantia, qualitas, quantitas, ad aliquid, ubi, quando, habere, situm esse, facere, pati».

because the *Utrum Pater et Filius* was surely written after the *Contra Eutychen*, and here Boethius should have used the terminology he himself created.

Si igitur interrogem, an qui dicitur «Pater» substantia sit, responderetur esse substantia. Quod si quaeram, an Filius substantia sit, idem dicitur. Spiritum quoque sanctum substantiam esse nemo dubitaverit. Sed cum rursus colligo Patrem Filium Spiritum sanctum, non plures sed una occurrit esse substantia. Una igitur substantia trium nec separari ullo modo aut disiungi potest nec velut partibus in unum coniuncta est, sed est una simpliciter. Quaecumque igitur de divina substantia praedicantur, ea tribus oportet esse communia; idque signi erit, quae sint quae de divinitatis substantia praedicentur, quod quaecumque hoc modo dicuntur, de singulis in unum collectis tribus singulariter praedicabuntur. Hoc modo si dicimus: «Pater Deus est, Filius Deus est, Spiritus sanctus Deus est», Pater Filius ac Spiritus sanctus unus Deus. Si igitur eorum una deitas una substantia est, licet Dei nomen de divinitate substantialiter praedicari<sup>36</sup>.

The uncertainties continue in the other *Opuscula*. In the *De hebdomadibus* the substance is «aliquid esse», i.e. a specified being which can possess some structural components<sup>37</sup>; but in the *De fide catholica* Boethius returns to the *essentia* meaning, declaring, precisely while contradicting Eutyches and Nestorius, that Christ participated in the *humana substantia*<sup>38</sup>. Even the first chapter of the *Contra Eutychen* establishes a parallel between *substantia* and *natura*. This is only one of the three definitions of *natura* that Boethius offers in this work, and not the one he uses in the subsequent discussion; we must also consider that the first chapter is a philosophical inquiry and not a series of established philosophical declarations, yet we cannot completely ignore this definition.

«Natura est vel quod facere vel quod pati possit». «Pati» quidem ac «facere», ut omnia corporea atque corporeorum anima: haec enim in corpore et a corpore et facit et patitur; «facere» vero tantum, ut Deus caeteraque divina. Habes igitur definitionem eius quoque significationis naturae, quae tantum substantiis applicatur. Qua in re substantiae quoque est reddita definitio. Nam si nomen naturae substantiam monstrat, cum naturam descripsimus substantiae quoque est assignata descriptio<sup>39</sup>.

In the second chapter, Boethius uses the Porphyrian tree to classify every type of substance, illustrating that he is using the word here in its predominant

36. Severinus Boethius, *Utrum Pater et Filius*, ed. C. Moreschini, p. 182, 5 – 183, 22.

37. Severinus Boethius, *De hebdomadibus*, ed. C. Moreschini, p. 188, 35-36: «Diversum tantum esse aliquid et esse aliquid in eo quod est; illic enim accidens hic substantia significatur».

38. Severinus Boethius, *De fide catholica*, ed. C. Moreschini, p. 203, 197-203.

39. Severinus Boethius, *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, 1, ed. C. Moreschini, p. 210, 81-90.

sense, i.e. as «basilar subject»<sup>40</sup>. And we then come to chapter three, which we have already analysed in part. The discussion starts with the well-known Boethian definition of person («Reperta personae est definitio: "naturae rationalis individua substantia"»), which Boethius comments on as follows: «Sed nos hac definitione eam quam Graeci ὑπόστασιν dicunt terminavimus»<sup>41</sup>. Shortly after that, he declares more clearly that we can consider ὑπόστασις and *persona* as equivalent, as we have seen in our first text; and finally, he specifies that the word ὑπόστασις is used by the Greeks to denote the noblest substances, but that the Latins can use *substantia* in a more general way.

Quare autem de inrationabilibus animalibus Graecus ὑπόστασιν non dicat, sicut nos de eisdem nomen substantiae praedicamus, haec ratio est, quoniam nomen hoc melioribus applicatum est, ut aliqua id quod est excellentius, tametsi non descriptione naturae secundum id quod ὑφίστασθαι atque substare est, at certe ὑπεστάστωσιν vel substantiae vocabulis discerneretur<sup>42</sup>.

Let us try to summarise all of this information to determine the answer to these two questions: 1. What does Boethius mean when he uses the expressions *essentia* and *substantia*?; and 2. Does Boethius use those words coherently?

Regarding *essentia*, the picture seems relatively clear: with this Latin word Boethius means the οὐσία as τί ἦν εἶναι, the «essence of a being», its metaphysical core which characterises it and distinguishes it from another being. Besides this Aristotelian acceptance, he also considers the Platonic perspective and includes in his meaning of *essentia* the idea of «authentic and intelligible form of beings»; otherwise, it would be difficult to justify why *Deus* and *homo* are *essentiae* «quoniam sunt». Therefore, the Latin *essentia* can be seen as a rightful translation of the original Greek term. This sense is coherent except for the *De arithmetica*, a work theoretically divergent from the others, where the theories of Nicomachus and the Neo-Pythagorean contexts are most certainly prominent.

Regarding *substantia*, the situation is, in fact, more indefinite: with this Latin word Boethius fundamentally means the οὐσία as «basilar subject», or «substrate». In the *Contra Eutychen* he considers himself authorized, thanks to the insufficiencies of the Latin language, to use this term to indicate both «generic substrate» and «rational substrate», which means *persona* and which also authorizes one to use the word ὑπόστασις. In these terms, the same translation of *substantia* for both οὐσία and ὑπόστασις which has worried some scholars is not particularly relevant: it is merely, to quote the title of this article, «a matter of terminology», a terminology which does not yet fully exist and which

40. See *ibid.*, 2, p. 213, 130 – 214, 166.

41. *Ibid.*, 3, p. 214, 170-172.

42. *Ibid.*, 3, p. 217, 235 – 218, 241.



sometimes forces Boethius into compromises and concessions that seem not to refer to the core of his metaphysical system (note that this admission can also justify the double use of *substantia* in the *Utrum Pater et Filius*).

The «real» problem comes when we observe that Boethius also uses *substantia* with the meaning of  $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\ \tilde{\eta}\nu\ \epsilon\lambda\upsilon\alpha\iota$ , and even in cases when he could easily use *essentia* for this purpose. We have seen, therefore, that with *substantia* he also means *natura*, *definitio* and, indeed, essence, even in the same writings where he uses *essentia*. This is indeed a contradiction; however, we can try to find reasons to explain it and, at least partially, justify it.

1. First of all, we should obviously consider that this double meaning is still Aristotelian, so the ambiguity pre-exists Boethius himself. He tries to resolve it by proposing two different Latin words and, even if one of them, *essentia*, is used with parsimony, we cannot ignore his attempt to consign to the Western world a philosophical vocabulary that tries to avoid ambiguities regarding central metaphysical matters. He also falls into some contradictions, but he is surely neither the first nor the only one to do so. This initial defense of his choices should in itself be enough, but other explanations can be added.
2. We already referred to this observation regarding the chronology of Boethian works: from an early opus like the *De arithmetica*, which also strictly supports the ideas and references of Nicomachus, we cannot expect an «official stance» on profound ontological problems. Boethius takes his time to specify and clarify his metaphysics and we cannot «condemn» him for the sins of his youth.
3. For my purposes the older, yet still valid idea of Gilson, Courcelle and other scholars of the first half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup>, who maintain that Boethius is highly respectful of his sources and, especially when he directly comments on them, he follows them and their philosophical horizon to the end, is extremely useful. This methodology clearly does not imply simple and unintelligent dependence on the sources, but a rare capacity to fully and deeply understand a philosophical author «from the inside», from his perspective and his theoretical points of view. In the Boethian translation of and commentary on the *Categories*, *substantia* always means «basilar subject», and it could not be otherwise; however, in the works mostly related to Cicero, as the *Commentaria in Topica* or the *De differentiis topicis*, it can also mean «definition», because this is, following Cicero's less specific and less philosophical perspective, the primary meaning of  $\omega\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ . When he moves into a more Platonic context, as in

43. See, for example, É. Gilson, *La philosophie au Moyen Âge. Des origines patristiques à la fin du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., Paris, Payot, 1962, p. 141-145, with special focus on the problem of universals.

the *Consolatio*, he inclines toward defining *substantia* as «essence». Many fluctuations can easily be justified then, considering the sources and context of his writing.

4. It is also important to consider the matter Boethius is discussing: we know that he is extremely interested in the classification of knowledge, as the three *divisiones philosophiae* that we find in his works show. Therefore, we would expect him to use the same expressions and terms in a different way in both a philosophical context (i.e. in the logical comments) and in a theological one (in the *Opuscula sacra*). And if he shows more uncertainties in the latter, we already know the reason why, because Latin theology already had, at his time, its own uncertainties.
5. One final consideration before concluding: some discrepancies can be clarified if we consider the purpose of Boethian argumentations. The terminology used in the *Contra Eutyches*, which to some seems inadequate and contradictory, permits one to delineate an ontological context in which it is relatively easy for his inventor to defeat the heretics by showing that Christ has two *naturae*. For this reason, Boethius does not seem to consider all the implications that his terminological choices in this specific work could have in relation to his entire speculative production. But I suggest that this does not mean that he is a «philosophical opportunist», who is ready to change his mind and his thinking for different purposes; I would strongly argue that this capacity to dominate the words and the meanings of metaphysics without betraying or distorting them is the clearest sign of a great philosophical personality.

We can therefore conclude that Boethius' attempt to find Latin equivalents for Greek metaphysical vocabulary<sup>44</sup>; use this lexis in a coherent and stable metaphysical system; and clarify, from a theological-philosophical perspective, some of the major problems of the Christian religion – problems which are, in the most profound sense, *beyond* rational explanation – exposes him to inevitable terminological ambiguities (which are largely implicit in his sources), but must not discredit nor his philosophy nor the truth. Rather, they are slight, and not – forgive the pun – *substantial* contradictions.

44. In terms of Boethius' desire for lexical order, see Claudio Moreschini's interesting observations: C. Moreschini, *Filosofia pagana e teologia cristiana negli «Opuscula theologica» di Boezio*, in T. Kobusch, M. Erler (eds.), *Metaphysik und Religion. Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens. Akten des internationalen Kongresses (Würzburg, 13.-17. März 2001)*, München-Leipzig, K.G. Saur, 2002, p. 213-237, in particular p. 228-232.