

St Augustine on the Trinity—III

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'Parsons are all liars'. This was the opinion of a sergeant in a military training establishment who taught me how to ride a motor bicycle, long before I ever dreamt I would enter the parsonic ranks myself. The sergeant spoke in praise, not blame. For it was also his duty to instruct cadets in the art of expounding the mechanisms of the objects they rode, and it was his view that if parsons could speak fluently for forty minutes on stuff they could not possibly prove—and that was what he meant by saying they were liars—then cadets ought to be able to speak for five minutes, in the classical military 'lecturette', on the hard facts of the internal combustion engine.

Readers of our last article¹ on this subject might have felt, perhaps, that St Augustine eminently deserves to be damned by that sergeant's praise. He was, we saw, talking about talking about the Trinity. This would seem to show up the ultimate unreality of theology; nothing but words, words, words. And it will be more words, words, words, in this article too. But there are facts at the bottom of them, data which faith can observe, though to that sceptical sergeant they would seem but wind.

The fundamental principle of trinitarian theology, as we also saw, is the distinction between substance words and relationship words; substance words like 'God', relationship words like 'Father' and 'Son'. But when we come to apply this distinction minutely to the data, which are the words used about the divine Trinity by scripture and by the Church—and these are the inescapable facts of faith—we run into considerable complications. Let us consider three sets of such complications, those involved in using the word 'person', in talking about the Holy Ghost, and in appropriating certain non-relationship words to one or other of the divine persons.

1. We say, then, that Father, Son and Holy Ghost are three persons (three substances if we are Greek), one God or one essence. Perhaps 'person' is related to 'God' or 'essence' as the name of a species to that of a genus; as for example, horse, cow, and rabbit are the names of three species of the common genus animal. But this clearly will not

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work. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are three men, 'man' being the name of the species. But they are also three animals, three things. So if this is the relationship of the names 'person' and 'essence' or 'God', then Father, Son and Holy Ghost, as well as being three persons, and indeed because they are three persons, will also be three essences and three Gods. If you say that we have to call them one God, one essence, because of their *ineffabilis conjunctio*, their inseparable and incomprehensible union, this could be as good a reason for calling them one person.

But Scripture forbids us to say three Gods: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God' (Deut. 64; cf. I Cor. 8. 5f). On the other hand it neither bids nor forbids us to say one person or three persons. 'Person' is a conveniently non-biblical word which scripture by its silence leaves us free to use as required. But the same is true of 'essence'. Why then are we committed to one essence, three persons? We must confess, says Augustine, that these words 'were brought forth by necessity, the necessity of copious disputation against the wiles or the errors of heretics. Now when human inarticulateness tried to express what it held about the Lord God by faith, it shrank from saying three essences, as it would sound like introducing diversity into that supreme equality' (VII, 4 (9)). This suggests, incidentally, that in Augustine's day the word 'essence' bore a connotation of 'grade' or 'degree', such that it would have sounded contradictory to talk about three equal essences.

Again, one could not abstain from saying three somethings, because that would have meant adhering to the heresy of Sabellius, who denied any real distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. 'So human inarticulateness searched about for what it could say there are three of; and it said three persons or three substances, not because it wished diversity to be understood of the divine, but because it did not wish singularity to be understood of it'. (*ibid.*)

But substance means that which subsists; and if to subsist is the same as to be, we cannot say three substances of God any more than we can say three essences or three Gods. For with God, to be God and simply to be are identical; and so is to subsist, if to subsist is the same as to be. If on the other hand to subsist is not the same as to be, it must mean a relationship act, like to beget or to be born. But this is absurd, as it means that substance is not a substance word but a relationship word.

Perhaps we can get out of this dilemma by saying that to subsist cannot *properly* be said of God at all. It is said properly of that which underlies, is the subject of, qualities, quantity, and other adjuncts or

accidents, as the substance Tom underlies or subsists in the quantity of 15 stone and 6 feet 3 inches, and the qualities of fair, dumb, and good-natured. God, as we have seen in the last article, has no accidents because nothing happens to him. So to say that he subsists, or to call him substance, whether one or three, is to use these words improperly. There is nothing, of course, illegitimate or improper about using words improperly of God or anything else. It means that one is in fact only applying half the word, as it were. But even granted that the word 'substance' and the word 'subsist' are improperly used of God, the fact remains they are substance words, not relationship words, and therefore, it would seem, scarcely suitable for designating the divine Three, who are only distinguished from each other as corresponding relationships. One up for the Latins, then, who talk about three persons, over the Greeks, who talk about three substances.

But is it? Very similar difficulties arise with the word 'person'. 'For with God, to be and to be person (the equivalent in this case of "to subsist" in the former case) are not different but absolutely identical. For if "to be" is said of the subject with reference to itself (i.e., if it is a substance attribution), but "to be person" is said with reference to another (i.e., if it is a relationship attribution), it means that we are calling Father, Son, and Holy Ghost three persons in the same way as we call A, B, and C three friends' (VII, 6 (11)). If this is so, an absurd situation arises; for calling them three friends is a sort of shorthand for saying that A is the friend of B and C, B is the friend of A and C, etc. But calling Father, Son and Holy Ghost three persons is presumably not a sort of shorthand for saying that the Father is the person of the Son and the Holy Ghost, etc. 'Person' is thus as much a substance word as 'substance' and the Latins are in no way more blessed in their terminology than the Greeks.

St Augustine then tries treating 'person' as a word like 'individual'—which is what it is in ordinary non-theological contexts—and 'essence' as a word like 'nature', which in any case was the good old Latin word for such topics before the rather new-fangled vocabulary of 'essence' and 'substance' and so forth was introduced. This seems to work; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are three individuals, whether you call them men or animals. But they are not three natures: they have one common nature. So with God; Father, Son and Holy Ghost are three persons, but not three natures; the divine nature is common to all three.

But extremely important qualifications are necessary; when you have three individual objects of the same nature, for example, three

rings all of gold, the nature they have in common, the gold, is what they are made out of. But the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are not made out of God, or of the divine nature. Even if we take a less material instance than three gold rings, and choose three men who have one common human nature; we do not indeed say that they are made out of human nature, but neither do we say that they or any one of them *are* human nature. They are men, each one of them is a man, but none of them singly is Man, nor do they add up to Man, taken together.

But at least they do add up, taken together, to more than one of them by himself, just like the three gold rings. This is not the case with the three divine persons. They do not add up to God. All three together are God, each one severally is God. They do not share the divine nature between them; each one of them, considered severally, is the divine nature, all three together are the divine nature. To safeguard this unity, not to say identity, of nature and person, and to avoid any quantitative or material idea of the divine, St Augustine wholly rejects the use of the word *triplex* for the Trinity. As he understood Latin, it would necessarily signify that Father, Son and Holy Ghost together came to three times as much as Father, Son, or Holy Ghost taken severally.

But it is worth observing that the wrongness of the Latin *triplex* as a word for the Trinity does not necessarily pass to the English word 'triple', still less to the English 'threefold'. What we have to exclude is any necessary echo of the multiplication table. In my opinion, this would rule out 'triple', because it does in fact have the same meaning as *triplex*. But it does not rule out, I consider, 'threefold'. The slightly archaic flavour of the word frees it from the clutches of the primary school arithmetic lesson; it is an adequate English equivalent for the Latin distributive *trinus*, a form which English lacks. After all the German word for the Trinity is *Dreifaltigkeit*, which is literally 'Three-foldhood'.

On such a negative note—what talking about three persons (or substances) does not mean—St Augustine leaves his discussion of these terms. And this is as it should be; whatever we say about God, we have to be sensitive to what we do *not* mean by what we say, and what we do *not* want others to understand by it.

2. 'Person', whose intricacies we have so far been investigating, turns out not to be a straightforward relationship word, even though we use it of the divine Three who are distinguishable only in terms of their mutual relationships. But it will be remembered that it is a word

for talking about talking about the Trinity. To have difficulties with our categories at this rarified remove from our subject is only to be expected.

But we also encounter them when we come to some of the direct trinitarian words, words furnished us by revelation in the scriptures for talking about God with. There is no difficulty about the two corresponding names 'Father' and 'Son'. They are manifest relationship words, each of which implies the other. They demand real distinction between the ones they designate. The name 'Word' is also an appropriate relationship word for designating one of the persons, since it implies an Utterer of the Word as the other term of the relationship. It makes no difference that the Father is not actually named the Utterer in scripture, or in Christian devotion or very much even in theology; the implication is there in the name 'Word'. The same is true of 'Image' which is another name for the Son (2 Cor. 4. 4; Col. 1. 15); it implies that which it is an image of, its exemplar.

But it is a different matter when we come to naming the Holy Ghost—from now on I will confine myself to the expression 'Holy Spirit'. Neither of these words of themselves imply relationship with another. 'Holy Spirit' would make a perfectly suitable substance name for the one God. God is holy—see the scriptures *passim*—and God is spirit—see Jn. 4. 24. None the less this name is used as relationship name, for the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. Indeed, if one might venture a mild criticism of St Augustine here, 'Spirit' is used of God in the Bible as a relationship word countless times—in such expressions as 'the spirit of the Lord'—but as a substance word, so far as I know, only once, in that verse of John 4. When we recollect that the word in its primary signification means 'breath', there seems to be no reason why we should not call it as proper a relationship as 'Word'; as a word implies an utterer, so a breath implies a breather. The spirit of God is the divine breath—and all that that figure implies of *élan* and vitality and force—just as the word of God is the divine utterance, and all that that implies of revelation and light and law. In the Old Testament these expressions describe God as manifesting himself in different ways; in the New they come to be used to name the distinct divine realities thereby finally manifested within God. In both cases, simply as a matter of language, they are both relationship words. But Augustine treated the word 'spirit' as primarily a metaphysical word, meaning non-material being. As such it is a substance word, and applicable without distinction to all three persons.

Starting from this presupposition, we have to explain how the name 'Spirit' came to be applied as a proper name to the third person of the Trinity. This means looking for a name that is proper in its own right to the Holy Spirit. St Augustine finds it in the name 'gift', which manifests the relationship that distinguishes the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. For he is the gift of the Father because 'he proceeds from the Father' (Jn. 15. 26); and he is the gift of the Son, because of such a text as this one from St Paul: 'He who does not have the Spirit of Christ is none of his' (Rom. 8. 9). Now the corresponding relationship term for 'gift' is 'giver'. The giver of this gift is the Father and the Son together. So the Holy Spirit is a certain *ineffabilis communio* of Father and Son; a manifestation of their unity by being the joint gift of them both. Hence the appropriateness, Augustine surmises, of calling him by a name, 'Holy Spirit', in which both of them can share.

When Augustine calls the Holy Spirit a sort of 'communion of Father and Son', he does not mean that he is the link uniting the two, the relationship between two related terms; that he is the gift, the Father the giver, the Son the recipient. He is the joint gift of both; he proceeds from Father and Son, as Augustine goes on to argue, as from one principle or source. So he is their 'communion' in that he is the manifestation and the issue of that unity. This emerges from a discussion of this name 'source'. It is pre-eminently a name for the Father, who is the source of the Son by way of generation. He is also the source of the Spirit, who proceeds from him. If he is the source of each, why is not each called Son? The only answer we can give is that 'the Spirit came forth from the Father not as born, but as given' (V, 14 (15)). This being so, we must recall that the Son also gives the Spirit; so both Father and Son are the source of the Holy Spirit; not two sources but one. 'For just as Father and Son are one God, and with reference to creation one creator and one Lord, so with reference to the Holy Spirit they are one source. With reference to creation, of course, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one source, as they are one creator and one Lord' (*ibid.*). This passage is of great doctrinal importance, and lies behind the introduction of the *Filioque* into the Latin version of the Nicene creed some centuries later, which was to be such a bone of contention with the Greeks after the schism between East and West.

Augustine was led to formulate this doctrine of the Holy Spirit proceeding from Father and Son as from one principle or source by his consideration of the name 'Gift' as the key relationship word for the Holy Spirit. It is indeed a proper name of the Holy Spirit, and a

scriptural one (see Jn. 4. 10; Acts 2. 38; Rom. 5. 5). But it has the disadvantage that it involves reference to creatures; for it is creatures that are the recipients of the gift that is the Holy Spirit. The question then arises, was the Holy Spirit the gift of God, the gift of Father and Son, before there were any creatures for him to be given to? You can distinguish, says Augustine, between *donum* and *donatum*, gift and something given. From eternity the Holy Ghost is the divine gift—the gift as giveable; but he is only the gift as given from the point in time when there was first a creature for him to be given to. The same problem arises with such appellations of God as ‘Lord’ and ‘Creator’. He states the very important principle about all such words which signify a relationship between God and us, that such relationship is a real qualification of us, a real accident implying a real becoming or change in us; but not implying any change, any becoming whatsoever in God. ‘O Lord, thou hast become our refuge’, says Ps. 89 (90). 1; but he hasn’t really. God has not become anything; it is we who have become something by taking refuge in God. So too there is no change, no new experience for the Holy Ghost when he is given to us. He remains the selfsame, while it is we who change and have the new experience (V, 16 (17)).

None the less a word which states a relationship between God and creatures, whether potential or actual, cannot be the best or key word to characterize the relationship within the godhead by which the Holy Spirit is distinguished from Father and Son. It does not really tell us the difference between the way in which the Spirit proceeds and in which the Son proceeds. It is all very well to say he proceeds not as born, but as given; but the Son also has been given to us, as we tell ourselves in the great Christmas text of Is. 9. 6. Augustine does not discuss this text, but the question why we cannot also call the Spirit Son of God continues to haunt him throughout the *De Trinitate*. It is one of the main-springs of his examination of the image of the Trinity in man in bks IX–XV, where he is attempting to grasp the eternal processions in the godhead through their pale reflection in the human soul. But at this stage of the work he looks no further for a solution to the language problem involved.

St Thomas was to find it by turning back from the name ‘Gift’ which is a secondary name of the Holy Spirit, and taking up again the name ‘Spirit’, in the basic sense we have already noted of ‘breath’. It is by *spiratio* that the Spirit proceeds, by being breathed forth, just as the Word proceeds by being uttered or spoken. This may well seem to be

mere playing with words; it is indeed no more than a verbal solution to a language problem. But it is important to get all the words we have to play with into their right place and order. This solution still does not tell us why the utterance of the Word can also be called the generation of the Son, while the breathing forth of the Spirit cannot. But it suggests that an answer to that question is more likely to be found by comparing the ideas of utterance and breathing forth than by scrutinizing the idea of giving.

3. There remains another class of words which scripture applies to one or other of the divine persons, and which yet can scarcely be regarded as their proper names, even in the rather strained sense in which biblical usage has made 'Spirit' a proper name of the Holy Spirit. There is one text which St Augustine discusses at great length, 'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1. 24). Within this text he confines his attention almost exclusively to the phrase 'the wisdom of God'. But this is a prime example of what has come to be called the appropriation of names to the persons, and what we can observe about the name 'Wisdom' appropriated to the Son will apply to other such names appropriated to any of the persons.

This text of St Paul's became problematic as a result of its being used by Catholics in a crude but effective apologetic argument against the Arians about a century before Augustine's time. The early Arians of that period had a formula to describe their doctrine. 'There was a time when he (the Son) was not'. This the Catholics countered by saying 'If the Son of God is God's power and wisdom, and God was never without power and wisdom, then the Son is coeternal with the Father; to say that God at some time did not have power or wisdom is just lunacy; so there was not a time when the Son was not' (VI, 1). Whether this argument was responsible or not, at any rate the later Arians abandoned this formula.

But the argument assumes that just as the wisdom of Solomon is the wisdom by which Solomon is wise, so the wisdom of God, which is the Son, is the wisdom by which God is wise. So it would follow that the Father would not be wise, unless he had begotten the Son, his wisdom, by whom he is wise. But if this is the case with the attribute of wisdom, why not also with that of greatness, goodness, omnipotence—why not also with God's very godhood? If this line is followed it means that all the substance words used of God become relationship words, and the Son is the godhood, the goodness, the greatness and so on of the Father; which is absurd, because relationships

imply substances which they relate to each other.

It remains to say then that the Father also is wisdom, and any other attribute which can be said of God as a substance word. When we call Christ the wisdom of God, we mean that he is wisdom from wisdom, just as he is named in the creed God from God, light from light.

Why then does scripture hardly ever talk of the divine wisdom without presenting it as begotten or created? This is the habit of the Old Testament wisdom books, e.g. in Prov. 8. 22 ff; Wisd. 7. 25; Eccli. 24. 5, as well as of our text from St Paul. St Augustine answers that it is precisely as a means of revelation that scripture so talks of wisdom. The theme of wisdom is developed in the Bible in such a way that, after the revelation of the Son, all that is said of wisdom can be applied to the Son, as by St Paul, in order to tell us something about him and his saving work; it is because that wisdom 'was to be commended to us for our imitation', and because 'it is by the Son, that is by his Word, that the Father reveals' (VII, 3 (4)), and to reveal or manifest the truth is naturally a function of wisdom. 'It is not therefore surprising that scripture should speak of the Son when it speaks of wisdom, for the sake of the model given us by the image equal to the Father, on which to re-fashion ourselves to the image of God; for we follow the Son by living wisely' (*ibid.* (5)).

Thus all three persons are wisdom, and power, and goodness, just as all three are God, both severally and jointly. But wisdom has a certain affinity or appropriateness to the Son, who is the revealing Word and the exemplar Image of the Father. So too with a name like love. God is love, all three persons both severally and jointly. But love has a certain appropriateness to the Holy Spirit, as being, in accordance with what we have seen, a certain *ineffabilis communio* of the Father and the Son, and as being God's gift to us, since to give is the primary expression of love. The very name 'God' is very often appropriated in the New Testament to the person of the Father, standing obviously enough for the Father in phrases where Christ is called the Son of God, or the wisdom of God and so on, but also in a great many other cases which are less obvious. This manner of speech has been taken over by the liturgy; thus in the prayers of the mass, it is the Father who is usually addressed ('through Jesus Christ *thy* Son our Lord'), and addressed simply as 'God'. In a similar fashion the name 'Lord' gets appropriated very commonly in both New Testament and liturgy to the Son incarnate. To appropriate the name 'God' to the Father does not mean that he is considered more divine than the Son and the Holy

Ghost; but it is a suitable appropriation, because they derive their absolutely coequal godhead from the Father, who is the source without source, the origin without origin, the principle from whom deity unfolds both eternally and in his revelation to man. Likewise 'Lord' is suitably appropriated to Christ, not because he is more lordly than the Father or the Holy Ghost, but because he exercises the divine lordship more manifestly—it has been given him by the Father—and also because this is a means of emphasizing his coequal divinity with the Father. Like 'Son of God', it is both a messianic title, stating that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, and then by a sort of revelational force in the expressions themselves, a divine title, stating that Jesus the Christ is the Son, the Lord God of Israel.

But this is going beyond the discussion Augustine undertakes, applying to other names the principle he works out with reference to 'Wisdom'. The point to emphasize is that appropriation is a scriptural technique of *revelation*. In considering it, we have begun to go behind the formidable façade of verbal intricacies which trinitarian doctrine presents, to the divine thing itself, the mystery which is the object of our faith. The heart of the mystery lies in the eternal processions, those goings-forth immanent within the godhead which constitute the divine persons as really distinct relationships. It is no casual accident that in the passage last quoted from St Augustine he mentions the image of God in man. Towards the end of bk VII he alludes more and more often to this idea. For it is through the image of God in man that he intends, in the second half of his great work, to explore and attempt to comprehend the divine processions. He is passing beyond the dry and necessarily superficial patch of linguistic analysis.