



The hypostasis-person in philosophy and theology

A great deal of discussion about the person-hypostasis is going on today. Different interpretations are being given according to the outlook and views of each interpreter and there is a superabundance of analyses.

In the preceding chapter I presented the teaching of the holy Fathers about the person. In fact the holy Fathers used the term 'person-hypostasis' for God, with the aim of overturning the heretical views of Sabellios and other heretics, who used the term more to mean the mask. It should be pointed out particularly that the holy Fathers speak more of the hypostasis, which in any case is identified with the person.

According to Theodoros of Raith, "a hypostasis is something subsistent and essential in which the sum total of accidents subsists as within a single underlying thing and energy"¹. The term 'hypostasis' is derived "from the verb to subsist and to exist and underlie altogether"². While essence denotes only being, hypostasis denotes "both how

1. Athanasiou Nika: Theodore of Raith. Athens 1981, p. 212

2. Ibid. p. 210

something has and what sort it is”³. What we say about hypostasis is true also of person, because hypostasis is identical with person. According to St. John of Damaskos, “the holy Fathers used the term ‘hypostasis’ and ‘person’ and ‘individual’ for the same thing, namely, that which by its own subsistence subsists of itself from essence and accidents, and is numerically different”⁴. The hypostasis-person is an essence with distinctive features, since essence does not subsist without hypostasis nor hypostasis without essence. Thus the essence is what is common to all the hypostases having the same essence, while the hypostasis-person is the particular. For example, we can say that all people have common features, because they are people, but the concrete person has particular features, particular accidents which characterise him, and this is called a ‘hypostasis’.

We shall come back to analysing these topics later, when we look at the teaching of the Church about the person-hypostasis. But here we want to emphasise that many people in our time do not understand the teaching of the holy Fathers of the Church about the person, because they confuse it with the teachings of the philosophers. There are philosophers and psychologists who speak of person and personality, but they mean very different things. Here the saying of St. Gregory Palamas applies: “And if any of the Fathers says the same thing as those outside, it is true only of the words, but the meanings are far apart”⁵.

The confusion was created by the fact that in ancient

3. Ibid.

4. John of Damaskos: *Philosophical chapters*, chapter 43, FC vol. 37, p. 68

5. Gregory Palamas: *Triads*, 1,1,11

times the person was a cover of the being, it was connected with the mask which the actor wore in the theatre to perform a certain role. The Fathers, however, associated the person closely with the hypostasis, giving another content to the term 'person'. We must also note that even today the philosophers and philosophisers give a different meaning to the person-hypostasis from that which it has in the Orthodox Church, and therefore terrible confusion is created in the use of these terms.

What follows will help us to look at the contemporary conceptions of the person and to see how these views relate to the teaching of the holy Fathers. We need to think seriously and ecclesiastically about this subject. And of course, as we know, it is a very serious one, because this is the perspective from which we can solve all the social and personal problems.

1. The person according to philosophy

Although 'prosopon' (person) exists as a term in ancient Greek thought, it is not associated with permanence. Ancient Greek thought in its essence is "a-personal". "In its Platonic variation, everything concrete and 'individual' is ultimately referred to the abstract idea which constitutes its ground and final justification"⁶. In Platonic thought the person is an ontologically impossible concept, because the soul through reincarnation, by which it can return to life in a different being, is not permanently connected with one specific "individual"⁷. According to Aristotle, the idea of the person is ontologically impossible, precisely because

6. John D. Zizioulas: *Being as communion*. London, 1985, p. 27f

7. *Ibid.* p. 28

"a man is a concrete individuality but only endures for as long as his psychosomatic union endures - death dissolves the concrete 'individuality' completely and definitively"⁸. Thus the soul's return to the world of ideas and its absorption by that world, as well as the elimination of the body, as Platonism teaches, and the breakdown of the psychosomatic composition by death, which characterises Aristotelianism, create monstrous problems for the ontology of the person. The person as a hypostasis is impossible in ancient philosophy.

"Thus ancient Greek thought proves incapable of making a synthesis between permanence and 'individuality' and of creating a true ontology of the person as an absolute concept"⁹. Therefore, as we said before, the holy Fathers assigned a different significance and meaning to the 'person', associating it with the hypostasis. Furthermore, in the Church, through the sacraments and the ascetic life, man transcends death, which is nevertheless a challenge to the person. This is why we cannot base the teaching about the person as a hypostasis on ancient Greek philosophy.

But also modern philosophy, from Descartes on, referring to the person, associates it with its ethical and psychological meaning. Let us take Kant, for example, who says that the person is manifested when his acts are independent of the reality of the laws of nature. Max Scheler moves in this context. "He sees the person in the independence of man's actions, as opposed to the mechanism of nature, and in his personal responsibility. According to Nikolai Hartmann "Man acts as a person in accordance with the commands of his ethical hypostasis, commands

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid. p. 29

in which the spiritual values of life are embodied". Likewise, according to the philosopher Immanuel Hermann Fichte, conscience and freedom are cardinal marks of man's personality. Also other philosophers speak of the person; some of them, influenced by western theology, characterise the person in relation to God and refer to perfection of the person¹⁰. In general we must say that those in the West who speak about the 'person' interpret it in the framework of psychology, because they associate it with consciousness. According to them, a person is one who possesses consciousness and self-knowledge. Therefore western personalism differs radically from the Church's teaching about the person.

We must say that even those philosophers who associate the person with movement towards God and with the person's rebirth, nevertheless belong to western theology, which is a prisoner of metaphysics. For just this reason the teaching of the western theologising philosophers differs distinctly from the teaching of the holy Fathers, which has no room for Hellenic ontology and western metaphysics.

Also among the great contemporary philosophers concerned with the person-hypostasis is Martin Heidegger, to whom we shall make particular reference and present his views more extensively, judging them from an orthodox point of view. Because Heidegger criticises western ontology, and also approaches the teaching of the Fathers of the Church at several points, he is respected by contemporary theologians. We are not going to analyse all of Heidegger's theses, but mainly those which interest us on the subject that we are developing here.

10. See Mark Siotos: *The Christian teaching about man as person*. Athens 1984, p. 129f (Greek)

Heidegger was born in 1889 in Messkirch in Baden and studied theology, philosophy, and historical and natural sciences. In 1923 he was made professor of philosophy at Marburg. A blot on his life was that for ten months he was enrolled in the Nazi party, for which he was later indicted and lost his seat at the University. This, of course also shows the relationship which exists between ontology and political totalitarianism¹¹.

His classic work, which established him in the philosophical world, was "Being and time". It was published in 1927 and was concerned with the meaning of being. Heidegger is not an existential philosopher, but a philosopher of the meaning of being. In one of his statements he writes: "I must repeat that my philosophical tendencies cannot be classified as a 'philosophy of existence'. The problem which concerns me is not that of human existence, but it is the problem of Being in its wholeness and as such"¹². He tries to define what being is, what it means. Philosophy until then was asking the question what a being is, whereas he was putting the question of the meaning of being¹³.

Those who have been occupied with Heidegger's work have discovered that there are two great periods in his philosophical thought. In the first period he approaches being "in the light of human existence", while in the second period of his thought he does exactly the opposite, that is to say, he proceeds from being to man. In the first case he uses the "typical scholastical-metaphysical lan-

11. See Christos Malevitsis's epilogue to Heidegger's Introduction to metaphysics. Dodoni, 1973, p. 255-257 (Gk)

12. Ibid. p. 258 (Epilogue)

13. Ibid. p. 270

guage of the tradition", while in the second he mainly uses the poetical, mystical, apophatic. The metaphysical language proceeds up to a point, and from there on it has to be transformed¹⁴.

At the beginning of his book "Introduction to Metaphysics" he analyses exhaustively the basic questions of metaphysics: "Why are there beings and not nothing?" All the philosophers are trying to give an answer to this basic and fundamental question. Heidegger, analysing this question more deeply, says that the thought leads to another, more basic question: "what is this being?"¹⁵. To answer the question "what is being" leads to perplexity, because it approaches the incomprehensible¹⁶. Interpreting the word "be" grammatically and etymologically, he says that it is not the third person of "to be", but the infinitive, which does not mean "is", but "to be", just as to eat does not mean that someone is eating, but to eat¹⁷. Speaking about man, he examines the subject of who is man and not what is man¹⁸. At this point one can see Heidegger's originality and how he differs from metaphysics.

In order to demonstrate the relationship between Being and beings, Heidegger uses two German words: 'sein' and 'da-sein'. The students of Heidegger, interpreting these two words, especially the second, within the perspective of all his philosophical thinking, give them different translations. Sein points to being, and Christos Malevitsis calls da-sein "being present", that is to say the form of being which lives

14. Ibid. p. 267.

15. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, chapter 1

16. Ibid. chapter 2, p. 73f

17. Ibid. p. 260. Epilogue

18. Ibid.

in the world, and elsewhere he translates it as "man". Constantine Georgoulis translates it as "human hypostasis", and Yannis Tzavaras puts it as "to be here". I personally believe that *da-sein* is better rendered by the term *hypostasis*, because, as Christos Malevitsis also maintains, in the German language the word *da-sein* means existence, presence, and the related verb means I exist, I am present¹⁹.

So according to Heidegger there is a real relationship between being and the human hypostasis. "Man does not exist on the one hand and the being on the other; these two do not have independent meanings. Classical metaphysics made this separation, and with the abolition of metaphysics this separation should also be abolished. The being is neither a concept nor an object; no one can understand it, because it is its own source. But neither is man the 'rational animal' of metaphysics. Being belongs to man, and man belongs to being. Being calls to man, and man answers being. Being is this call; and man is this answer"²⁰.

In his book "Being and time" Heidegger explores the meaning of being. At one point in his book, referring to the inquiry into the meaning of being, which has been lost and fallen into oblivion, he points out that two partial questions must be answered. One question is: what realm of reality should be investigated in order to find the meaning of being? And the other is: what is the method that will further this investigation?

With reference to the first question he maintains that in order to find the meaning of being, one must investigate the human hypostasis. The human hypostasis has the ca-

19. Cf. Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1967 p. 27, note 1.

20. Christos Malevitsis, *op. cit.* p. 269

capacity to acquire knowledge that it exists, and at the same time also to be aware of the being of the other beings, that is to say, that they too exist, in an essentially different way. Here, in other words, we have the characteristic features of the human hypostasis, which are self-knowledge and otherness. With these two characteristics Heidegger stresses the other ontological essence of human existence as well, which is "to be taken out of oneself". In the human hypostasis the presence of being supervenes. Thus in studying the human hypostasis by the principles which he uses, we can see what is the meaning of being.

To the second question, relating to the method which we should employ for ontological analysis he says that it is the "phenomenological method". In analysing this method, he elucidates the terms "phenomenon" and "logos". According to Heidegger, the "phenomenon" "is that fact through which being is revealed", that is to say the revelation and manifestation of being in its true form. The "logos" is "expressing an opinion". Therefore the phenomenological method by which one answers the question of the meaning of being, constitutes "expressing or displaying the phenomena"²¹.

So it is obvious from what we have said previously that there is a relationship between being (Sein) and hypostasis (Dasein) and that through the hypostasis we can acquire knowledge of the meaning of the being, which lies within the human hypostasis. This view which Heidegger had approaches the teaching of the holy Fathers concerning man in the image and that man is a hypostasis, a person.

Heidegger differs from other existentialist philosophers in that, whereas they look at man substantially, he looks at

21. Constantine Georgoulis: *The encyclopedia Helios*, vol. 18, p. 504

him existentially. There is just as great a difference between substantial and existential as there is between ontic and ontological. "The ontic relates to what man is in his worldliness, while ontological relates to his bond with Being". When we speak of a substantial problem we mean the problem which is related to this existence of man in itself, whereas when we speak of an existential problem, we are referring to man's relationship, reference and progress towards Being. The ontological and the existential certainly have reference and movement, while the substantial and ontic confine human existence within its narrow limits²².

Analysing the human hypostasis, Heidegger says that care, which is differentiated into worldly care - when man comes in touch with the things which exist - and human care - when he comes in touch with the other man - makes up the being of man. This care which constitutes man's being is made up of three structural elements. One is "abandonment". Man feels that he is in the world, he does not know where he was before, he does not know where he is going, no one consulted him about choosing this life of his in the world. We can call this element self-knowledge. The second element is "ecstasis", which indicates that man "is always coming out towards the world, always going forth from himself". And the third structural element of concern is "presentness", which can be conveyed as otherness, which means that it is accepted that his being lives close to other beings, different from himself. "Existence is always with others; first one knows the others (the thou), and then oneself (the ego)". Knowledge of these structural elements leads man to the dread which will bring him to

22. See Chr. Malevitsis, *op. cit.* p. 259

nothingness. Thus, "beneath the experience of dread it will be seen how the things which exist will be able also not to exist. For even existence will be able not to exist. Even if it exists it will not exist for ever; its end is always immanent. Existence will understand that to exist is "to exist-towards death"²³. Deliverance from death is the deliverance of existence from dread.

Heidegger's philosophy of the meaning of being and of human existence is very important and interesting from the theological point of view. It interests us because Heidegger made a great revolution and a great criticism of the philosophical thought and metaphysics of antiquity as well as of his time. Philosophical metaphysics in reality regards man as an autonomous being, and what is most important, it exhausts the truth in human thought. It considers that it is only through reason that we can sketch Being. Heidegger proved that the truth is not exhausted in thought and conjecture alone, but it moves beyond that. Thus he gave priority to existence, which is by no means fully expressed in reason, but in its movement towards communion with Being.

We can look at the great significance of Heidegger's philosophy from this angle. Classical metaphysics, in other words, "mistook truth as a symphony of thought and object", while for Heidegger "the truth is a fact of revelation and not of symphony"²⁴. He expressively emphasises that "thought is a response to the call of Being", thinking does not beget, "but it is there to the degree to which Being is present". So when man is not thinking about being, in reality he is not thinking"²⁵. In his book "Being and time"

23. Ibid. p. 263-267

24. Ibid. p. 270-271

25. Ibid. p. 272

Heidegger repeatedly criticises classical and modern metaphysics in relation to man and the hypostasis, but also as to what is Being²⁶.

Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamos notes that Heidegger represents an important stage in the progress of Western thought, especially in the liberation of ontology from an absolute "ontism" and from philosophical rationalism, though not in fact from the concept of consciousness and of the subject"²⁷. Heidegger in his way makes a radical criticism of the scholasticism of the West, which exhausts the truth in terms of logic. And this is very significant and interesting.

Nevertheless we cannot misguidedly connect Heidegger's philosophy with the theology of the Fathers of the Church, because there is a great difference between them. That is to say, we emphasise its importance for refuting Western metaphysics, but we must point out the differences. Otherwise we may distort the orthodox teaching. This is very important because we know that unless the writings of St. Dionysios the Areopagite are interpreted in the orthodox way, as St. Maximos the Confessor did, they can be seen as agnostic, as unfortunately scholastic theology saw them. The apophaticism of St. Dionysios the Areopagite, and of the Orthodox Church in general, has no relationship with the agnosticism of the West.

I consider very important the observation of the Reverend Metropolitan of Pergamos John Zizioulas that "the use of Heidegger in the interpretation of patristic theology runs into fundamental difficulties. As pointers to these one would

26. See in Martin Heidegger: *Being and time*. Blackwell, Oxford 1962, p. 72f and 126f

27. John D. Zizioulas: *Being and communion*, op. cit. p. 45

have to pose among others the following questions: (a) Is it possible to conceive of an ontology outside time in Heidegger, or of an ontology within time predicated of God in the Greek Fathers? (b) Is it possible for death to be an ontological concept in the Fathers, who regard it as the last enemy of being? (c) Is it possible to regard the concept of truth (a-letheia), in the sense of a manifestation and outgrowth from oblivion (lethe), as an inevitable attribute of the ontology predicated of God?"²⁸.

These questions are quite interesting and show the difference between Heidegger's philosophy and the theology of the holy Fathers of the Church concerning being and concerning the human hypostasis.

First it must be observed that Heidegger himself also pointed out the difference between theology and philosophy, and therefore a Christian philosophy is not valid. In his book "An introduction to metaphysics" he says "a faith that does not perpetually expose itself to the possibility of unfaith is no faith, but merely a convenience... a daring attempt to unfathom this unfathomable question by disclosing what it summons us to ask, to push our question to the very end, Where such an attempt occurs there is philosophy... This is neither faith nor questioning, but indifference". Taking this position as his starting-point he presents the difference between philosophy and theology. "Philosophy is this very foolishness (meaning to question constantly). A "Christian philosophy" is a round square and a misunderstanding. There is, to be sure, a thinking inquiring pondering of the world of Christian experience, i. e. of the world of faith. But this is theology... For the original Christian faith, philosophy is foolishness. 'I philosophise'

28. Ibid. p. 45

means I ask: 'Why are there essents rather than nothing?' Really to ask this question signifies: a daring attempt to fathom this unfathomable question by disclosing what it summons us to ask, to push our question to the very end. Where such an attempt occurs there is philosophy"²⁹.

Yet the theology of the Fathers cannot be linked to time, as Heidegger's ontology is. According to the Holy Fathers, God belongs to the eternal, the angels and saints belong to the ages and man belongs to time. The difference between time and ages is not very great, but the difference between the ages and eternity is enormous, as great as that between the uncreated and the created. To be sure, the economy of God, that is to say the incarnation, took place in time, but theology belongs to the eternal.

Likewise it is known from the teaching of the Fathers that death is not an ontological phenomenon, that is, it is not a structural element of the human hypostasis, but an intervention in the existence of man and the world. Decay and death are a parasite of nature. Death is an enemy of man, and in the end Christ will liberate us from this death. Thus we experience the transcendence of death by the life in Christ. God did not create the world negatively, but positively, that is, without death. Death is an intervention. This is why it is not an ontological phenomenon: that is to say it is not characteristic of the hypostasis.

Heidegger affirms that the word 'truth' (*aletheia*) is made up of the alpha privative and the word 'lethe' and points to appearing and emerging from oblivion. In his "Introduction to metaphysics" he writes about truth: "Truth is inherent in the essence of being. To be an essent means to come to light, to appear on the scene, to take one's place.

29. Martin Heidegger: *An introduction to metaphysics*, p. 7-8

to produce something. Nonbeing, on the other hand, means: to withdraw from appearing, from presence..."³⁰. But about God we cannot say that truth belongs to being and that manifestation is "a category of ontology", which means that its manifestation is necessary for its existence. We realise from the patristic tradition that the truth, such as love and justice, is not the essence of God, but His uncreated essential energies. God is not truth, since He is self-revealing from His oblivion, but He is truth according to His uncreated essential energy.

Apart from these points Heidegger's view of Being and of the human hypostasis is very significant, because with it he makes a criticism of all the personalistic systems of his time and presents the frames within which the human hypostasis should be examined.

The being present, the human hypostasis, is a manifestation of Being, and naturally the human hypostasis is marked by reference and movement towards Being. What follows will, I think, show just what the person-hypostasis is in the teaching of the Fathers of our Church. Philosophy, apart from the few correct pointers, is unable to come up to the full meaning and analysis of the person. This interpretation presupposes truth, that is to say revelation, manifestation, as it was given to the Fathers of the Church.

2. *The person in Western and Orthodox theology*

Many people today are speaking about the person. Some refer to it in the sense of the human person, which they consider very important for daily life, since people cannot be subjected to the mass, and others deny it or consider it a

30. Ibid. p. 136

heresy, because the Fathers did not speak of man as person.

Confusion is being created about the meaning of the person, because the problematics as well as the starting-point for discussing the subject differ in the West and the Orthodox East. In general we can observe that in the West the person is interpreted in philosophical and psychological frames of reference, while in Orthodoxy it is confronted theologically. This point is essential for the understanding of this serious subject, because if it is not confronted in this way, there will be confusions with many consequences. I should point out that the main topics in what follows are among the serious points made by the Reverend Metropolitan of Pergamos John Zizioulas. With penetration and sobriety he defines how the problems about the person differ for the Westerner and the Orthodox Christian.

In the West the person is spoken of within philosophical and mainly psychological presuppositions. In other words, the main characteristics of the person are considered to be self-knowledge, reasoning abilities and, chiefly, consciousness. When anyone succeeds in knowing himself and when he places himself in space and time, then, according to Westerners, he becomes a person and a personality. Some indeed reach the point of emphasising that the emergence of the erotic element, especially at the time of puberty, is what characterises the development of the personality of man.

Actually many contemporary psychological analyses connect the person and personality with self-knowledge and freedom. Unfortunately, many theologians of our time have been influenced by these ideas and think that when the holy Fathers speak of person, they mean what philosophy and psychology have in view.

The most dreadful thing is when such anthropocentric interpretations are also projected upon God. When we try to look at the Persons of the Holy Trinity with psychological interpretations, we distort the teaching of the holy Fathers of the Church. "Western theology has worked by the principle that the psychological experiences of the individual can be transposed to the existence of God"³¹. This means that in the West theology (the word about God) is interpreted from within the economy (from what God created and did). And in fact one observes that "the West always had the tendency to project into theology, into the word about God, the experiences of the reality of the economy"³².

We see this clearly in the teaching of St. Augustine, who had a great influence on Western theology, because the Franks used his teaching in order to connect it with the teaching of the holy Fathers of the Church.

St. Augustine, influenced by Platonism, tried to interpret the dogma concerning the Holy Trinity within Platonic anthropology. Using psychological interpretations, that is to say, starting from man, he characterised God as nous. Since God is nous, the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are characterised as mindfulness (Father), knowledge (Son) and love (Holy Spirit). Within this perspective the Holy Spirit is the link of love between the Father and the Son, and thus we come to the teaching of the 'filioque'³³.

Indeed we must note that even St. Gregory Palamas, speaking of the Holy Spirit, says: "a kind of ineffable yet

31. Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamos: *Western theology*. Phototyped notes, p. 23

32. *Ibid.* p. 17

33. Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamos: *Lessons in Christian dogmatics*, part 2, phototyped notes, p. 26-27 (Gk)