

The Semantics of Divine *Esse* in Boethius

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I. *Status quaestionis*

I.A. Statement of the Thesis

In chapter 2 of *De Trinitate*, Boethius identifies God with being itself (*esse ipsum*). Speaking of the subject of divine studies, he says, we must “inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image, and which is being itself [*esse ipsum*] and from which being is [*ex qua esse est*].”¹ Similarly, in *De*

¹ Boethius, *De trin.*, c.2 (Loeb Classical Library [LCL] 74:19–21). Citations to Boethius are to the following editions: *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis IIEPI EPMHNELAS* [*In PH*], ed. Carolus Meiser, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1877); *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta* [*In Isag.*], ed. Samuel Brandt, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latino-rum* [CSEL] 48; *In Categorias Aristotelis libri quatuor* [*In cat.*], in *Patrologia Latina* [PL] 64; *Theological Tractates*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, S. J. Tester, LCL 74, including *Quomodo Trinitas unus Deus ac non tres Dii* [*De Trin.*], *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint. . .* [*De hebdomadibus*], *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* [*CEut.*], *De fide catholica* [*De fide*], and *De consolatione philosophiae* [*CP*]. Citations of Augustine and Hilary of Poitiers are to the *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* [CCL] editions. Citations to Aristotle are to *Analytica priora* [*APr.*], ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949 [rev. ed., 1957]) [Latin: trans. Boethius, ed. Laurentius Minio-Paluello, *Aristoteles Latinus* [AL] 3/1 (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962); English: trans. Gisela Striker (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009)]; *Topica* [*Top.*], ed., W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) [Latin: trans. Boethius, ed. Laurentius Minio-Paluello, AL 3/1 (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969)]; *Metaphysics*, ed. with commentary by W. D. Ross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924 [repr. 1975]); *Physics*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936 [repr. 1998]). Citations of Thomas Aquinas are to the Leonine edition, except *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio* [*In metaphys.*], ed. M. R. Cathala and Raymundi Spiazzi, 3rd ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1977), and *Scriptum*

hebdomadibus, he first characterizes a simple thing as what has its being (*esse suum*) and that which is (*id quod est*) as one,² and later makes clear that God alone is simple.³

This paper aims to explain these two identifications of God with *esse* as Boethius's appropriation of the exegesis of the divine name in Exod 3:14–15 (*qui est*) found in the hero of the Arian crisis, Hilary of Poitiers, and Augustine.⁴ More generally, I argue that it is a mistake to ask what thing

super libros Sententiarum [*In sent.*], ed. Pierre Mandonnet and Maria Fabianus Moos, 4 vols. (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929). To facilitate cross-references, I employ running numbered block quotations using Roman and Arabic numerals together (e.g., I.1), as opposed to my subheadings using Roman with letters (e.g., I.A), although they fall under the same main sections (I–IV). All translations from the Latin are my own unless otherwise stated in note (English editions given above are for further resource). Since the purpose of this paper is to highlight Boethius's idiom, I often prefer awkwardly literal translations that better reflect the Latin grammar than more natural English alternatives; for a more thorough defense of this choice, see the apologia for “offensive barbarisms” in Lambert Marie de Rijk, *Semantics and Ontology* [*SaO*], 2 vols., *A Series of Studies on Ancient Philosophy* 91 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1:xvii–xviii.

² Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:42 [Ins. 45–48]).

³ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:46 [Ins. 117–19]).

⁴ *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgata Versionem*, ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 2007), 79. For various interpretations of Augustine's exegesis of Exod 3:14, see Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* [*HCPMA*] (New York: Random House, 1955), 71; Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2020), 30 (on Gilson's interpretation, see section III.C below); Émilie Zum Brunn, “L'exégèse Augustinienne de ‘Ego sum qui sum’ et La ‘Metaphysique de l'Exode,’” in *Dieu et l'être: Exégèse d'Exode 3,14 et de Coran 20,11–24*, ed. Centre d'études des religions du livre (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), 141–64; Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine: Being and Nothingness*, trans. Ruth Namad (New York: Paragon House, 1988) (Brunn provides the most comprehensive survey of Augustine's texts on the matter available); Andrea Saner, “Too Much to Grasp”: *Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements* 11 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 59–106 (which rightly recognizes the apophatic aspect of Augustine's exegesis and makes the interesting case—which cannot be evaluated here—that his exegesis is a model for understanding the correct literal sense of the biblical text). The secondary literature on Hilary is sparse and his understanding of *esse* is almost entirely overlooked. For an overview of Hilary's Trinitarian theology, see Carl Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity: From De fide to De trinitate*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mark Weedman, *The Trinitarian Theology of Hilary of Poitiers*, *Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language* 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2007). For a preliminary study of Hilary's reception as an orthodox thinker, see Kevin Madigan, “On the High-Medieval Reception of Hilary of Poitiers's Anti-'Arian' Opinion: A Case Study of Discontinuity in Christian Thought,” *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 2 (1998): 213–29. For Boethius's debt to Hilary on the related topic of the meaning of

or metaphysical principle is named by *esse*. In these authors, *esse* should be investigated not as a name, but as an idiom based on and partly overlapping the Latin idiom for indirect speech according to which *esse* is used to speak about what is signified in direct speech by “is.” Put differently, Boethius, like his predecessors, uses the word *esse* roughly for whatever belongs to a thing, what is predicated of it, or a thing’s attributes—in a word, its *being* something or another. Committed to Aristotle’s theory of the categories, he maintains that there are, universally speaking, ten kinds of things that are predicated: substance, quantity, quality, and so on.⁵ Said alone or with a possessive noun, *esse* tends to be used for what is predicated of a thing simply speaking or without qualification—namely, its substance (*substantia*) in the sense of its what-it-is-to-be (*quod est esse*), which is signified by its definition. *Esse* is applied to God in a modified version of substantial predication.

To illustrate Boethius’s basic idiomatic use of *esse*, we may take a famous passage from *De Trin.* 2 (to which we will return in greater detail below) in which Boethius introduces and explains the axiom “every being is from form.”

(I.1) For every being is from form [Omne namque esse ex forma est].
For a statue is not called the representation of an animal by bronze, which is matter, but by the form, which is impressed in it. Bronze itself is not said [dicitur] [to be] by earth, which is its matter, but by the form [figuram] of bronze. . . . Nothing therefore is said to be [esse dicitur] except by its own form.⁶

Here, although Boethius starts by saying that *esse* is from form, he illustrates this not by describing existence coming from form, but by describing, in indirect speech, some predication coming from form—something being said to be (*esse dicitur*) on account of form. In the example, the form in question is the abstractly signified shape inherent in bronze, and what is said to be (*dicitur*) on account of this form is the statue’s definition, or rather what the

subsistentia, see Claudio Moreschini, “*Subsistentia* According to Boethius,” in *Boethius as a Paradigm of Late Ancient Thought*, ed. Thomas Böhm, Thomas Jürgasch, and Andreas Kirchner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 83–100.

⁵ See Boethius, *De Trin.* 4 (LCL 74:16 [lns. 1–4]).

⁶ Boethius, *De Trin.* 2: “Omne namque esse ex forma est. Statua enim non secundum aes quod est materia, sed secundum formam qua in eo insignita est effigies animalis dicitur, ipsumque aes non secundum terram quod est eius materia, sed dicitur secundum aeris figuram. . . . Nihil igitur secundum materiam esse dicitur sed secundum propriam formam” (LCL 74:8–10 [lns. 21–29]).

definition signifies—namely, the statue’s what-it-was-to-be (*quod est esse*; τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), its *being a representation of an animal*, which is signified by the indicative verb “is” in direct speech. As we’ll see, this matches what Boethius says elsewhere about the *esse* of a thing. Simply speaking: *esse* is a thing’s “substance” (*substantia*)⁷ or its “what-it-was-to-be,” which is signified by its definition. This is not because the verb *esse* as an infinitive *means* “substance,” as “garment” means “clothing,” but instead because Boethius uses *esse* idiomatically for what is signified by the indicative verb “is,” and he assumes that “is” signifies the ten categories, the first of which is substance, in an ordered equivocal way. This article will explore the way in which this basic idiomatic use of *esse* makes sense of Boethius’s identification of God with *esse*.

I begin in I.B and I.C below by looking at the inadequacy of various attempts since around the middle of the twentieth century to read modern notions of “existence” into Boethius’s words “to be” (*esse*) and “is” (*est*). If there is anything like “existence” in Boethius’s thought, it is “substance” in the sense of a thing’s “what” (*quod est esse*), but if this is what we mean when we attribute “existence” to Boethius, it would perhaps be less confusing simply not to attribute the notion of existence to Boethius at all.⁸ Section II sketches Boethius’s basic ontology—his conception of what there is—as a necessary background for understanding the texts where he employs *esse*, discussed later in this essay. Section III offers a revised interpretation of the word *esse* in Boethius’s theological tractates in accordance with the basic idiom I have just described. It begins (III.A) with an analysis of *esse* as used for substance and its extension to the other categories on the grounds that even accidents, in a derivative sense, have a “substance,” “nature,” or “what-it-is-to-be” (*quod est esse*). Section III.B applies this notion of *esse* as a thing’s substance to the doctrine, found in *De Trin.* 4 and *De hebdomadibus*, that God is “his being” (*esse suum*). In III.C, I show that the same basic idiom was used and expanded by Hilary and Augustine, when interpreting Exod 3:14, to express

⁷ There is a persistent ambiguity between primary substance, secondary substance, and *quod est esse* in Boethius’s use of *substantia* in most contexts. To try to totally disambiguate his usage on any given occasion would be eisegesis, not exegesis. Nevertheless, in most cases where *esse* is used for *substantia*, it is understood as the substance of a thing—as what a thing is (*quid est*)—not as an ultimate substratum. Thus, it is best understood as *essentia* (essence) in roughly the way later medieval authors like Aquinas use that word, which Boethius himself tends to avoid.

⁸ For an excellent revisionist study of the meaning of *existere* in Boethius, the findings of which complement the present essay’s interpretation of *esse*, see Michael Wiitala, “Being and Existence in the Consolation of Philosophy,” in *Boethius’ ‘Consolation of Philosophy’: A Critical Guide*, ed. Michael Wiitala, Cambridge Critical Guides (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 169–85.

God's simple precontainment of all there is; I argue that this is how Boethius intends us to understand the claim in *De Trin.* 2, that God is not only his being (*esse suum*), but also being itself (*esse ipsum*).

I.B. Esse in the Theological Tractates

For most of the twentieth century, the debate about what Boethius meant by *esse* mostly focused on his theological texts, which identify God with *esse*. These texts were read through the lens of the Neoscholastic debate between Thomists and Suarezians about the "real distinction" between "existence" and essence or form.⁹ Étienne Gilson's fluctuating opinions illustrate the framework within which these debates were conducted. Armand Maurer recounts how, when Anton Pegis showed Gilson the passage from Boethius's *In Isagoge* in which the latter stated that the being of a thing (*esse rei*) was "nothing else than the definition" (*nihil aliud nisi definitio*), "Gilson was ecstatic and exclaimed, 'Now we know what Boethius means by *esse*!'"¹⁰ Whereas Gilson had once said, "By *esse* here [Boethius] undoubtedly means existence" and identified Boethian existence with God himself, he would later identify Boethian *esse* with "the form" of a substance, assuming an equivalency between definition and form.¹¹

⁹ For a survey of interpretations of Boethian *esse*, see James Collins, "Progress and Problems in the Reassessment of Boethius," *Modern Schoolman* 23, no. 1 (1945): 1–23; Peter O'Reilly, "*Sancti Thomae de Aquino expositio super librum Boetii 'De hebdomadibus'*: An Edition and a Study" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1960), esp. 276–34; Gerard Casey, "An Explication of the *de Hebdomadibus* of Boethius in the Light of St. Thomas's Commentary," *Thomist* 51, no. 3 (1987): 419–34, at 428–30; Ralph McInerny, *Boethius and Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 161–98 (McInerny does not himself fall under the criticism above); Stephen Brock, "Harmonizing Plato and Aristotle on *Esse*: Thomas Aquinas and the *De Hebdomadibus*," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5, no. 3 (2007): 465–94, at 470–75 (Brock's article does not aim to give an alternative interpretation of Boethius to the ones surveyed, but is intended to make a point about Aquinas as Boethian commentator).

¹⁰ Armand Maurer, appendix 1 to Étienne Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence Shook and Armand Maurer, 6th ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002), 429.

¹¹ Gilson, *Thomism*, 91; Gilson, *HCPMA*, 105. Janice Schultz and Edward Synan follow Gilson's later line of thinking in their introduction to *An Exposition of the "On the Hebdomads" of Boethius* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), l–li. In a similar vein, Sylvain Roudaut's recent study of the Boethian axiom "every being is from form" ("omne esse ex forma est") negatively appraises the clarity of Boethius in terms of categories borrowed from twentieth-century expositions of St. Thomas: "It is not entirely clear whether that form, in Boethius' axiom, assumes a role of existential actualization in top of its essential determination." Sylvain Roudaut,

This debate about Boethius's theological use of "esse" has stagnated¹² since Pierre Hadot argued, in his groundbreaking and well-received studies,¹³ for Boethius's dependence on late Neoplatonic sources. On one level, these studies support Gilson's earlier view that, when Boethius identifies God with *esse*, he means existence.¹⁴ Drawing on Neoplatonic sources like Porphyry and Marius Victorinus, Hadot argues that, when Boethius identifies God with *esse*, he is, as it were, identifying him with the first predicate, "is" or

"Forma dat esse: Tracking the Rise and Fall of Formal Causality," *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis* 23, no. 2 (2020): 423–46, at 425.

- ¹² It is common for more recent authors writing on Boethius's theological tractates to give at most cursory attention to the question of what Boethius means by *esse* and then to employ forms of the word "existence" without explanation in their glosses or translations of Boethius's text. John Marenbon's book *Boethius*, Great Medieval Thinkers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), is illustrative. When commenting on the axiom in *De hebdomadibus* that everything simple has *esse* and *id quod est* as one, he agrees with Gilson's later view that *esse* signifies form: "On the most plausible interpretation, *esse* here means the immanent form that makes a thing the sort of thing it is" (89). Despite identifying *esse* with form in this one place, he translates *esse* in key passages later in the same treatise and in *De Trin.* 2 with words derived from "existence." Not only is this "existence" left undefined, but its presence as a translation of *esse* obscures any potential logical connection between *esse* in Boethius's axiom about simple things, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the rest of the *De hebdomadibus* treatise where Boethius is presumably drawing conclusions from the axioms he lays down at the start. Henry Chadwick takes the unusual route of translating *id quod est* in *De hebdomadibus* as "existence"; in *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 209: "He begins from the distinction between simple being (*esse*) and existence (*id quod est*). Being in itself, as an abstract concept, is prior to existence. Existence (*quod est*) is and exists as soon as it has received the form of being. . . . Simple being . . . cannot participate in anything higher than itself. But granted existence, then participation is possible." See also Moreschini, "Subsistentia," esp. 88n18, 91, 92, 95, and 96n41.
- ¹³ See Alain de Libera, "L'onto-théo-logique de Boèce: Doctrine des catégories et théorie de la prédication dans le de Trinitate," in *Les Catégories et leur histoire*, ed. O. Bruun and L. Corti (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 176, who says that Hadot's Porphyrian thesis "has received a definitive demonstration" by subsequent research into Porphyry's texts. See also David Bradshaw, "Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being," *Review of Metaphysics* 53, no. 2 (1999): 383–401 (which develops Hadot's Neoplatonic reading of Boethius to advance a theory about the Boethian origin of the "act of being" in Aquinas); McInerney, *Boethius and Aquinas*, 185–91 (which, despite criticisms of Hadot, is generally positive toward him).
- ¹⁴ Pierre Hadot, "La distinction de l'être et de l'étant dans le De Hebdomadibus de Boèce," in *Die Metaphysik im Mittelalter*, Miscellanea mediaevalia 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963), 147–53; Pierre Hadot, "Forma essendi: Interprétation philologique et interprétation philosophique d'une formule de Boèce," *Les études classiques* 38 (1970): 143–56.

“to exist,” which is more common than all genera and species, and which is separate—unreceived in any subject and unlimited by any object. Thus, as with Gilson’s earlier view, the *esse* identified with God is interpreted as “existence” (*existentia*; ὑπαρξίς). But the noun *ex[s]istentia* (ὑπαρξις) and the verb *ex[s]istere* (ὑπάρχειν) are themselves now understood in a Neoplatonic way, which should lead us, at a minimum, to question whether contemporary understandings of the words “existence” and “to exist”—either as the particular quantifier (à la Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell) or as an act of non-predicative positing (à la Franz Brentano and the Herbartian school)—helpfully clarify their late antique cognates, which Boethius, in any case, avoided using, preferring to translate ὑπάρχειν as *inesse* (being in; belonging to).¹⁵

As Charles Kahn has shown, the verb ὑπάρχειν—the etymological parent of our verb “to exist”—was first used as a technical term in philosophy by Aristotle in a construction with a dative of possession to express “the attributive relation which is normally expressed in grammatical form by the copula. Instead of ‘A is B’ Aristotle prefers to say τὸ B τῷ A ὑπάρχει ‘B belongs to A’ (*Pr. An.* 25^a15 and throughout).”¹⁶ This technical use treated ὑπάρχειν as equivalent to “to predicate” (κατηγορεῖσθαι), as well as, with inverted syntax, to “to be” (εἶναι).¹⁷ Thus, “to belong” or “to be predicated” (and not “to exist”) are the usual translations of ὑπάρχειν in English editions of Aristotle’s works. While this historical fact about the use of the Greek and Latin verbs ὑπάρχειν (*existere*), κατηγορεῖσθαι (*praedicare*), and εἶναι (*esse*) is

¹⁵ On what Boethius does mean when he uses the Latin cognate for “to exist,” see Wiitala, “Being and Existence.”

¹⁶ Charles Kahn, *Essays on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56. For a lengthier and more recent study of this construction, see Allan Bäck, *Aristotle’s Theory of Predication [ATP]* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 124–31. See also Jan Łukasiewicz, *Aristotle’s Syllogistic: From the Standpoint of Modern Formal Logic*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 3; Striker, introduction to *APr.*, xiii.

¹⁷ Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 56: “Since ‘what belongs to a thing’ includes not only its accidents but also essential or substantial attributes in the first category, ὑπάρχειν is said in as many ways as εἶναι, i.e. in as many ways as there are categories or combinations of categories (*Pr. An.* 48^b2–4, 49^a6–9). As we have seen, this use of ὑπάρχειν as equivalent in meaning to predicative εἶναι but of converse form is paralleled by κατηγορεῖσθαι (τὸ B κατὰ τοῦ A).” See esp. Aristotle, *APr.* 1.36.48b2–5: “‘To belong’ [ὑπάρχειν; inesse] signifies in as many ways as ‘to be’ [εἶναι; esse] is said, or as ‘it is true to say’ [ἀληθὲς εἰπεῖν; verum dicere] the same thing” (trans. Striker; for my Greek and Latin interpolations, see Ross ed., 36; *AL* 3/1:77 [Ins. 7–9]). See also 1.37.49a6–9: “That this belongs [ὑπάρχειν; inesse] to that or that this is true of that must be taken in as many ways as the predications [κατηγορίαι; praedicamenta] have been divided, and these either in some respect or without qualification [ἀπλῶς; simpliciter]” (trans. Striker; for my Greek and Latin interpolations, see Ross ed., 37; *AL* 3/1:79 [Ins. 11–13]).

generally accepted and uncontroversial, its implications for the substantives corresponding to these verbs—τὸ ὄν or *ens* (“being”), ὑπαρξίς or *existentia* (“existence”), and κατηγορία or *praedicamentum* (“category”; “thing predicated”)¹⁸—are often overlooked: namely, that ὑπαρξίς or *existentia*, in the Aristotelian commentators or Neoplatonists who used these words, means “category,” “predicate,” or “what is predicated of a thing,” not “existence” in any recognizably modern sense of the word.¹⁹ Thus, if Hadot is right that, by identifying God with *esse*, Boethius was following the Neoplatonists who identified God with *existentia*, this would not mean he was identifying God with “existence” in any straightforward modern sense of the word, but with predicates generally or the ten categories, taken collectively and taken as un-received in any subject participating such predicates.²⁰ Put differently,

¹⁸ On “predicate” and “predication” as translations of κατηγορία, see de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:365–66, 1:368n32 (conceding “predicate” as a translation, but preferring “predication”); Bäck, *ATP*, 132 (“category” (‘κατηγορία’) means ‘predication’), 135 (where listing “things that are equivalent, in signification,” he includes the phrases “the categories,” “predicates,” “the figures of predication,” “be (or being) *per se*,” and “things like names and verbs”); 143 (“The controversy over whether the categories classify real things, expressions, or some hybrid has little importance,” given that, in Aristotle’s ideal, protocol language, “expressions and real things have an isomorphic, one-to-one correspondence”; cf. de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:360n11); Christos Evangeliou, *Aristotle’s Categories and Porphyry*, ed. W. J. Verdenius and J. C. M. Van Winden, 2nd ed., *Philosophia antiqua* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), esp. 7, 24–26. De Rijk argues that these translations of κατηγορία should be understood not in a syntactic way, as if only what occupies the predicate position in a sentence is a category, but semantically, with the “focal meaning of ‘naming,’ ‘appellation,’ ‘designation’—or, if you like, ‘non-statemental predication’” (*SaO*, 1:368). My understanding of the “categories” in Boethius is closer to that of de Rijk than that of Bäck, for whom the categories are not the various “meanings of ‘being,’” but the objects that have being or the subjects of existence (see *ATP*, 59–60, 96–97). I depart from de Rijk, however, in preferring “predicate” to “predication” as a translation of κατηγορία. “Predication” seems to me to name the mental act itself of predicating, not the thing—substance, quality, quantity, etc.—attributable to a subject via that mental act.

¹⁹ Interestingly, this view survived alongside more recent understandings of “existence” in John Stuart Mill’s logic; see John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, 2 vols. (London: John W. Parker, 1843), ch. 3, esp. 1:59–60 (where he equates “an enumeration of the Existences, as the basis of Logic,” with the determination of the “highest Predicates,” which were, for Aristotle, the ten categories) and 1:102 (“This, until a better can be suggested, must serve us as a substitute for the abortive Classification of Existences, termed the Categories of Aristotle”).

²⁰ While Kahn does not reach precisely this conclusion, he notes that, for the Latin Neoplatonists, *existentia* “is a learned invention, designed to render ὑπαρξίς in meta-physical texts where the latter term is distinguished from οὐσία [substantia] as the more general concept, sheer being, without categorial determination, while οὐσία represents

he was identifying God with a maximally indefinite or common predicate, un-received in any subject. Such an identification will, at this point, undoubtedly seem very strange. As we will see, however, the implications of Hadot's theory are rather close to the mark. Yet, that this is the case can be better appreciated if we leave the misleading English word "existence" out of our interpretation of Boethius's *esse*.

I.C. *Esse in Boethius's Logical Works*

The place where the significance of *esse* for Boethius has continued to be investigated in depth since Hadot's work is in the study of ancient and medieval semantics, where both his identification of God with *esse* and as his theological tractates are generally ignored.²¹ But here, as in the literature on his theological tractates, forms of the word "existence" are habitually employed to gloss Boethius's verb "be," with little attention given to what this word is supposed to mean for Boethius. Largely thanks to the work of Kahn and Jaakko Hintikka over the last half century, the once-standard practice of reading Aristotle and the late-ancient Aristotelian commentators through the procrustean bed of the Frege-Russell trichotomous sense of "is" — "identity" ($x = y$); "the relation of subject and predicate" (Fx); and "existence" understood as a particular quantifier or second-order attribute of instantiation ($\exists x$)²² — is now generally recognized

some determinate form of being, like 'substance' in the first Aristotelian category" (Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 59).

²¹ An important exception is in de Rijk's essay "On Boethius's Notion of Being: A Chapter of Boethian Semantics," in *Through Language to Reality: Studies in Medieval Semantics and Metaphysics*, ed. E. P. Bos (Northampton, UK: Variorum Reprints, 1989), 1–29. See also Paul Thom, "Boethius," in *The Logic of the Trinity: Augustine to Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 42–61, and de Libera, "L'onto-théo-logique de Boèce," 175–222 (both of which stand out in considering the overlap between Boethius's semantics of predication and his theology, though neither is directly concerned with what he means by *esse*). For recent studies of Boethius's semantics of predication and "be," see esp. Taki Suto, *Boethius on Mind, Grammar and Logic: A Study of Boethius' Commentaries on Peri Hermeneias* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Irène Rosier-Catach, "Sur le verbe substantif, la prédication et la consignification: Peri Hermeneias 16b20–25 dans les traductions et commentaires en Latin," in *Interpréter le De Interpretatione*, ed. Suzanne Husson (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 97–131; de Rijk, *SaO*, esp. 1:215–48; Bäck, *ATP*, 284–91.

²² See Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1920), 171–72 (from whom I've taken the portions in quotation marks); Gottlob Frege, "On Concept and Object," in *Translations from Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, trans. Peter Geach and Max Black, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 43–44. Frege also recognizes an actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) sense

as anachronistic.²³ If not Frege's, then what notion of "existence" *can* be helpfully attributed to Boethius?

Lambert Marie de Rijk—who is uniquely attentive to the question of what "existence" means when attributed to Aristotle and his commentators—claims that the focal meaning of "be" in Aristotle comes not from its signifying any concept or predicable notion, but from its being a sentential operator, which, when applied to a nominal formation, "posits" the subject itself into the world (the "existential" or "hyparchic" use of "be"), but when applied to an appositive or relative clause (introduced by *quod*/ "that") or participial phrase, asserts its truth (the "veridical" use of "be").²⁴ He attributes this notion of "is" and existence to Boethius—though he also holds Boethius responsible for introducing, later in his career, a "copulative" understanding of "is" that he takes to be a corruption of Aristotle's thought.²⁵ De Rijk's notion of "be" in Aristotle and his commentators as an insignificant operator for positing something as existing in the world is principally based

of "existence" distinct from the quantitative, "there-is" sense (*Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, ed. and trans. Philip Ebert and Marcus Rossberg [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016], xxv; cf. Peter Geach, "Form and Existence" and "What Actually Exists," in *God and the Soul*, 2nd ed. [South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1969], 53–64 and 65 [respectively]; Geach, "Aquinas," in *Three Philosophers* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961], 88–91; Giovanni Ventimiglia, *Aquinas after Frege* [Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020], 34–55).

²³ For this development in Aristotle scholarship, see Simo Knuuttila and Jaakko Hintikka, introduction to their edited volume *The Logic of Being* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1986), ix–xvi (from whom I have borrowed the procrustean-bed metaphor and who also note parallel developments in scholarship on Plato). For some of the key contributions to this development, see Kahn's *Essays on Being*; Kahn, *The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973); Jaakko Hintikka, "'Is', Semantical Games, and Semantical Relativity," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, no. 1 (1979): 433–68; Hintikka, "The Varieties of Being in Aristotle," in *Logic of Being*, 81–114; Hintikka, "On Aristotle's Notion of Existence," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 4 (1999): 779–805. On the applicability of the Frege-Russell trichotomy and quantitative notion of existence to Aristotelian semantics, see Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 40, 64, and 111n4; Bäck, *ATP*, 4–10, 47n44, 310–19 (esp. 312–13); de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:24, 1:25, 1:91.

²⁴ De Rijk, *SaO*, 1:33–37.

²⁵ See de Rijk, "Boethius's Notion of Being," 13 ("The phrases 'no substance' and 'no underlying thing' here must concern existence in the external world. Therefore, *substantia* and *res subiecta* seem to be intended here to stand for physical occurrence. . . . This may suggest that in Boethius's view *esse* ('be') equals 'exist in the outside world,' a truly Aristotelian view, to be sure. On this interpretation, 'substance' and 'be' as well would be taken as having to do with existence in the outside world"); de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:235–38 (where Boethius's purported transition from thinking of "be" as an assertoric operator to a copula is discussed).

on the exegetical arguments of Kahn and Mohan Matthen.²⁶ In his early essay on “be” in Hellenic thought, Kahn argued that there was no distinct concept of existence in Greek thought, and that the basic sense of “be” in philosophical Greek was not existential, but instead what he calls the “veridical sense” (“is true”; “is the case”), which he identified with the being in the sense of the truth of a proposition—the third entry in Aristotle’s list of the ways of saying “being” in *Metaphysics* 5.7. He supports his claim that this is the basic sense of “is” by citing *Metaphysics* 9.10.1051b1, where Aristotle appears to call truth the most proper sense of “being.”²⁷ This obscure text, however, is probably corrupt, and even if it is not, can be read differently.²⁸

In his 1983 essay, which de Rijk calls “epoch-making,”²⁹ Matthen distinguishes between so-called “monadic” (e.g., “a centaur *is*”) and “dyadic” (e.g., “Corsicus *is* artistic”) uses of “be” in Aristotle, and argues that the latter can be transformed into monadic uses attached to a predicative (or, better, attributive)³⁰ complex (e.g., “Artistic-Corsicus *is*”).³¹ In *On Interpretation*

²⁶ De Rijk’s language of non-predicative “positing,” however, seems to come primarily from Gilson’s *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1952). See esp. de Rijk, *SAO*, 1:37n104, where Gilson is paraphrased favorably as saying that “in its existential use the verb ‘be’ is the verb *par excellence*, not because it affirms some attribute of a subject, but because it posits the subject itself, as agent of what he calls ‘the primary act of existence,’ and hence as a possible subject-substrate to the secondary acts signified by other (adjectival) verbs.” The similar language of “posing” is found in Kahn, who might himself be inspired by Gilson, but explicitly associates this language only with Heidegger—an association that seems to cause him embarrassment (*Verb ‘Be’ in Ancient Greek*, 314n76). Kahn acknowledges that this “posing” language is metaphorical but struggles to give it a non-metaphorical explanation. On Gilson’s positive view of Heidegger on “the act-of-existing,” see Laurence Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 227–28; Ventimiglia, *Aquinas after Frege*, 11 (cf. 22–24).

²⁷ See Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 23; see also 8, 25, 68, 75n1, 76.

²⁸ Ross, commentary in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2:274–75: “Being as truth and not-being as falsity are elsewhere treated as emphatically not the primary or strictest senses of being and not-being, . . . but as . . . presupposing being in the primary sense, that in which it is subdivided into the categories. . . . The words [κυριώτατα ὄν] are probably a gloss or should go after μέν in a34. It will be seen that there is a good deal of divergence among the manuscripts on this point.” See also C. D. C. Reeve, note in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016), 479.

²⁹ See de Rijk, *SAO*, 1:81; cf. Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 124n26.

³⁰ De Rijk prefers “attributive complexes” to Matthen’s “predicative complexes,” since they lack actual predication (*SAO*, 1:83).

³¹ Mohan Matthen, “Greek Ontology and the ‘Is’ of Truth,” *Phronesis* 28, no. 2 (1983): 113–35, esp. 124–25. This procedure is clearly reminiscent of Franz Brentano’s transformation of categorical (i.e., predicative) propositions into existential ones with a

3.16b24–25, Aristotle remarks that “by itself it [“is” or “being”] is nothing, but it consignifies some combination which cannot be thought of without the components.”³² Matthen argues from this that “is” has the same basic, insignificant, and syncategorematic function in propositions of the forms “SP is” and “S is”; this function is not that of predicating something, but of asserting the truth or existence of some content.³³ Thanks to Matthen’s argument, de Rijk—who was later generally followed by Kahn—combined Kahn’s “veridical” sense of “be” with a “hyparchic”-“existential” sense of “be” inspired by Matthen to form a single basic veridical-existential use of “be,” which varies in nuance depending on whether what is “posited” is a simple content (e.g., “Socrates”: “Socrates *is* [exists]”) or a complex one (e.g., “that-Socrates-is-white”: “That-Socrates-is-white *is* [is the case]”).³⁴ Thus, whereas Kahn had initially argued that the basic sense of “is” in Aristotle was veridical, as opposed to existential, de Rijk’s synthesis of Matthen’s non-predicative existential sense of “is” with Kahn’s veridical sense opens the door for the basic sense of “is” in Aristotle to once again be viewed as existential.

A *prima facie* difficulty with this interpretation of “be” as a non-predicative, veridical-existential operator is that it seems to replace the anachronism of reading Frege into Aristotelian semantics with that of reading his near contemporary, Brentano, into them. Brentano’s existential semantics, which arose out of Kantian innovations, heavily influenced Gilson’s existential interpretation of Thomas Aquinas’s theory of judgment, which de Rijk, in turn, cites as one of the sources for his own non-predicative,

complex subject (see *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. Oskar Kraus and Linda McAlister, trans. Antos Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister [London: Routledge, 1995], 165–66), but Matthen does not evidence direct debt to Brentano.

³² Quoted by Matthen, “Greek Ontology,” 121.

³³ Matthen, “Greek Ontology,” esp. 125: “I propose therefore that Aristotle be taken not as saying that there is a use of ‘is’ that *means* ‘is true’; just that truth, which is applied to propositions, can be analysed in terms of existence applied to another sort of thing.” See also 133n21 (where he denies that “is” “denote[s] a predicable” and has “cognitive content”).

³⁴ De Rijk, *SaO*, 1:33–37 (on “is” as an operator that can be rendered as “is true”; see also 1:84). Cf. Kahn, *Essays on Being*, 3–4 (“Asserting existence will mean positing a subject for predication, something to talk about”), 10 (“What I have previously described as existential and veridical uses can thus be more accurately seen as special cases of the semantic extralinguistic functions of the verb”), 124 (“if we think of the obtaining of states of affairs as a particular mode of existence, we can classify the veridical use as a special case of the existential verb”). For Kahn’s description of “be” as a semantic “operator,” see *Essays on Being*, 77–78, 88, 116, 124–25, 128–29, 152n12.

existential-positing reading of “is” in Aristotle.³⁵ To account for Hume’s claim that “existence” is not an idea or predicate, Kant added to the traditional Aristotelian “synthetic” (i.e., composing/predicating) operation of judgment a second operation of “absolute positing” by which we judge that things actually exist.³⁶ Inspired by Kant’s innovation, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and his students in the Herbartian school were the first to develop a logic to accommodate wholly non-predicative judgments—associated by them with “existential” judgments—in which the only operation is the “thetic” (vs. “syn-thetic”/“com-positive”) one of (absolute) positing.³⁷ Brentano, then, reduced all propositions to such thetic-existential propositions by converting the subject–predicate structure of categorical propositions into one in which a composite subject is asserted to exist or to be true, thereby conflating the act of asserting a propositional content’s truth with that of signifying existence.³⁸ Arguing, tacitly contra Brentano, that it makes no sense for simple

³⁵ For de Rijk’s debt to Gilson, see note 26 above. For a more detailed account of the historical development sketched in this paragraph from Kant to Brentano and Frege, see Elliot Polsky, “The Modern Semantic Principles behind Gilson’s Existential Interpretation of Aquinas (Part 1),” *Studia Gilsoniana* 13, no. 2 (2024): 303–37; Wayne Martin, *Theories of Judgment: Psychology, Logic, Phenomenology*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For Gilson’s debt to Brentano, see Polsky, “The Modern Semantic Principles Behind Gilson’s Existential Interpretation of Aquinas (Part 2),” *Studia Gilsoniana* (forthcoming). It should be noted that, though Gilson, de Rijk, and Kahn all use the language of “positing” or “posing,” the classification of their systems as “thetic” (vs. “syn-thetic,” “com-positing,” “predicative”) is my own application of Martin’s terminology in *Theories of Judgment*. For an explanation of this terminology, see esp. 43–45, 52–53.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, “The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God,” in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. and trans. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 117 (2:72 in the Academy edition) (existence is not an idea); 119 (2:73 in the Academy edition) (“absolute positing” distinguished from “relative positing” / predicating); Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pt. 2, div. 2, bk. 2, ch. 3, sect. 4, 567 (A596/B624–A599/B627). For discussion, see Jaakko Hintikka, “Kant on Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument,” *Dialectica* 35, no. 1–2 (1981): 127–46, esp. 137–38; Martin, *Theories of Judgment*, 42–55; Polsky, “Modern Semantics (Part 1),” 311–15.

³⁷ On this development, see Martin, *Theories of Judgment*, 55–62; Polsky, “Modern Semantics (Part 1),” 315–19.

³⁸ On Brentano on existential judgment, see Martin, *Theories of Judgment*, 63–73; Uriah Kriegel, “Brentano on Judgment,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Franz Brentano and the Brentano School*, ed. Uriah Kriegel, Routledge Handbooks in Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2017), 103–9; Hynek Janoušek, “Judgmental Force and Assertion in Brentano and Early Husserl,” *Studia Phaenomenologica* 15 (2015): 105–28 (for

ideas to be asserted as true, Frege abandoned Brentano's conflation of the judgment's assertion function with the notion of existence and substituted his own, now more famous, quantitative definition of existence.³⁹

While it is possible that these mostly nineteenth-century developments away from what was thought to be the traditional Aristotelian view of judgment were, in fact, a chance rediscovery of a genuinely Aristotelian doctrine, this seems unlikely. In any case, Boethius explicitly rejects the nearest ancient analogate to de Rijk and Matthen's reading of *On Interp.* 3.16b24–25, according to which "is" is an insignificant operator. In both his long and short commentaries on this text, he explicitly maintains that Aristotle's passage should not be taken to mean that "is" is insignificant, full stop, but only that it does not signify anything true or false. In the long commentary, he says: "It is 'nothing,' not since it signifies nothing, but since it manifests nothing true or false, when said alone. For when it is conjoined, then it makes an enunciation, but simply by the verb being said, no signification of the true or the false occurs."⁴⁰ In the short commentary, he says: "Said simply by itself 'is' is nothing—not that it signifies nothing at all [omnino nihil], but that it has nothing of either truth or falsehood; in other words, it is 'nothing' not with regard to signification [ad significationem], but with regard to the signification of truth and falsehood [ad veritatis falsitatisque significationem]."⁴¹

The most recent extended study of how Boethius understands *On Interp.* 3.16b20–25 is that of Taki Suto.⁴² She argues that, in his commentary on this

Brentano's evolving thought on the structure of composite existential judgments); Polsky, "Modern Semantics (Part 1)," 319–23.

³⁹ See Frege, *Begriffsschrift*, in *Translations from Philosophical Writings*, 2; Peter Geach, "Assertion," in *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 263–65; Polsky, "Modern Semantics (Part 1)," 323–27. Frege and Brentano agree in distinguishing the assertion of truth from the act of predicating. On the origin of this distinction, and its absence from Aristotle, see Richard Cobb-Stevens, *Husserl and Analytic Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 102–22.

⁴⁰ Boethius, *In I PH*, ch. 3 (Meiser ed., 2:78 [Ins. 8–13]) —(superscript numbers for this commentary and *In Isag.* indicate which of his multiple commentaries on the work is meant).

⁴¹ Boethius, *In I PH*, ch. 3 (Meiser ed., 1:65, [Ins. 20–24]).

⁴² Suto, *Boethius*, 187–222. Suto's chapter is framed as a rebuttal of de Rijk's accusation that Boethius, in his later thought, under the influence of Ammonius, introduced the subject–copula–predicate analysis of judgment into logic (de Rijk, *SaO*, 1:235–38). De Rijk's contention about Boethius's changing views on "is" in his logical works cannot be addressed in this essay. It suffices to note that I am not convinced by de Rijk's evidence that *In I PH* expresses a doctrine distinct from Boethius's other logical works. In this respect, I agree with Suto, though for different reasons.

text, Boethius endorses the understanding of “is” that he himself attributes to Porphyry. As she understands the view he attributes to Porphyry, there are two senses of “is” corresponding to the constructions “S is P” and “S is.” In the first case, “is” is an insignificant conjunction, but in the second case—about which, according to her, Boethius is speaking when he says “is” signifies something—the something in question is “existence.”⁴³ She does not clarify what “existence” means here. It evidently cannot mean what de Rijk and the late Kahn mean by “existence,” since existence is for them not something a predicate signifies, but something asserted using an insignificant operator. In any case, Boethius does not use the Latin cognate for Suto’s word “existence” to describe the significance of “is.” Nor does he attribute to Porphyry the view that there are two senses of “is.”⁴⁴ Moreover, regardless of how one interprets the view he attributes to Porphyry, contrary to what Suto says, he rejects the view he attributes to Porphyry. Let us take these points in turn.

Concerning Porphyry’s view, he relates that Porphyry draws a distinction between two syntactical forms, “Socrates is” and “Socrates is a philosopher,” precisely in order to show that, in *both* cases, “is” is used in the same way—namely, as an insignificant conjunction, joining the subject to a predicate; “Socrates” is joined in the first case to “those that are” (*quae sunt*), and in the second to philosophy. There is no reason to take the phrase “those that are” (*quae sunt*) as a circumlocution for “existence” in a modern sense. Rather, we can understand it, more accurately, as “things in one of the ten categories” or “things that have a nature.” This would fit better with Boethius’s usage elsewhere. For example, where modern philosophers would say that a goat-stag “doesn’t exist” or “has no existence,” Boethius instead says, “there is altogether no substance [substantia] for it in things.”⁴⁵ Likewise, to express

⁴³ Suto, *Boethius*, 207, 218.

⁴⁴ For Boethius’s summary of Porphyry, see Boethius, *In I PH²*, ch. 3 (Meiser ed., 2:77 [ln. 13] – 78 [ln. 5]).

⁴⁵ Boethius, *In I PH²*, ch. 1 (Meiser ed., 2:50 [lns. 1–17]); de Rijk glosses this remark by saying that what Boethius means is that the goat-stag does not “exist in the outside world” (“Boethius’s Notion of Being,” 13), but he gives no reason why we should appeal to the metaphorical notion of being “in the world” to understand Boethius’s remark, which is made in the precise technical vocabulary of Aristotle: *substantia*. A detailed consideration of how Boethius handles affirmations about non-beings, like Sulla, Homer, and the goat-stag, is beyond the scope of the present piece. We should note, however, that he seems to rule out ordinary affirmative predication about them. See Boethius, *In I PH²*, ch. 1 (Meiser ed., 2:45 [lns. 11–13]) (where, as Ebbesen noted [see below], there is a lacuna in the text, but Boethius implies nothing positive can be affirmed of non-beings). The affirmative predications he does allow about non-beings, such as Homer, seem to be allowed only insofar as these non-beings are in thought

the dependence of the last nine categories on substance, he does not appeal to quantifiers or presence in the world, but to the possession of a nature: Apart from primary substance, no accident would “hold together in its own nature [in propriis natura non potest consistere].”⁴⁶ For Boethius, “to be” simply—or, if one insists, “to exist”—is to have a nature, definition, or “substance” (*substantia*). This is why, as we’ll see below, Boethius treats the notion of “those that are” (*quae sunt*) as coextensive with the broad notion of “nature” used for all that can be “defined” (things in the categories) or known in some way (God and matter).⁴⁷

However one understands the phrase “those that are” (*quae sunt*), which Boethius attributes to Porphyry, it remains that, in both his commentaries (pace Suto), he explicitly rejects the interpretation of the text—associated with Porphyry in the long commentary—according to which “is” signifies nothing absolutely (*omnino nihil*); instead, he advances the alternative reading that it “is nothing” only in the sense that it is nothing true or false.⁴⁸

(*opinabile*) through their effects. Homer is a poet in thought in virtue of his surviving effects—his poetic works—just as a dead father “lives” not in himself [*per se*], but in thought in virtue of his surviving effects—his children. Cf. Boethius, *In V PH*, ch. 11 (Meiser ed., 2:376 [lns. 9–15]). For the logic of non-beings in Boethius, see Sten Ebbesen, “The Chimera’s Diary,” in Knuuttila and Hintikka, *Logic of Being*, esp. 120; Suto, *Boethius*, 37–41, 104–5, 230; Lambert-Marie de Rijk, “The Logic of Indefinite Names in Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus and Radulphus Brito,” in *Aristotle’s Peri Hermeneias in the Latin Middle Ages: Essays on the Commentary Tradition*, ed. Henricus Antonius Giovanni Braakhuis and Corneille Henri Kneepkens, Artistarium, Supplementa (Groningen: Ingenium, 2003), 207–33; Richard Sorabj, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600AD: A Sourcebook*, vol. 3, *Logic & Metaphysics* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 283–92; Bäck, *ATP*, 284–86; Christopher Martin, “The Logic of Negation in Boethius,” *Phronesis* 36, no. 3 (1991): 277–304.

⁴⁶ Boethius, *In I cat.* (PL 64:181D–82A).

⁴⁷ Cf. Boethius, *CEut.*, ch. 1 (LCL 74:76–78 [lns. 5–11]).

⁴⁸ Suto thinks that he embraces Porphyry’s view on two grounds. First, in his short commentary, he, like Porphyry, distinguishes between sentences of the form, “S is P” and “S is” (*Boethius*, 211). But Suto overlooks the fact that Boethius’s distinction between “is” in “Man is” and “Man is animal” in the short commentary is not ordered to distinguishing two senses of “is,” one of which is insignificant, but instead to showing (*ostendit*) that, regardless of how “is” is used, it does not signify anything true or false; see *In I PH*, ch. 3 (Meiser ed., 1:65 [lns. 20–26]). The distinction is made precisely to reject the view that “is” signifies “nothing at all” (*omnino nihil*) in favor of the alternative view that “is” merely signifies nothing true or false. Suto’s second grounds for believing that Boethius endorses Porphyry’s understanding of “is” is that, in the long commentary, he never explicitly objects to Porphyry’s view (*Boethius*, 210–12, esp. n92). This is not quite accurate. Boethius prefaces his whole commentary on 16b20–25 as a criticism of Porphyry, whom he accuses of reading Stoic notions into Aristotle’s

Neither commentary is terribly helpful for clarifying what he takes “is” predicated alone to signify; all they are clear about is that it signifies something. For a positive account of what he means by *esse*, we must turn to his other works, especially his theological tractates.

In summary, we want to know what it means for Boethius to identify God with *esse*. Hadot’s argument that Boethius’s *esse* corresponds to the Neoplatonic notion of *existentia* has been well received. But even if it is correct, the differences between the Neoplatonic notion of *existentia* and its modern cognates leave us uncertain whether the *esse* identified by Boethius with God is “existence” in a recognizably modern sense. The once-widespread practice of attributing the Fregean, quantitative definition of “existence” to Aristotelian authors has been generally abandoned. In its place, some leading scholars have attributed to Aristotelian authors, including Boethius, a non-predicative, thetic notion of “existence,” much like that found in Brentano. Matthen’s seminal contribution to this development in modern scholarship was based primarily on his novel reading of *On Interp.* 3.16b24–25. According to de Rijk’s thetic rereading of Aristotle and Boethius that comes out of Matthen’s work, “is” is an insignificant assertoric operator that posits the existence or the truth of the subject or attributive complex to which it is joined. While the brief comments above about Boethius’s logical works have been more suggestive than exhaustive, they should make us hesitant to interpret Boethius’s *esse* in light of such thetic notions of “existence.” Boethius is aware of Porphyry’s interpretation of “is” as an insignificant operator and rejects such an interpretation of “is” in both of his commentaries on *On Interp.* 3.16b24–25. While this essay cannot address the consistency of this rejection with what he says in his other logical works, our findings so far at least highlight the difficulty of using the modern word “existence” in our interpretation of Boethius. The remainder of this article offers an alternative way to read Boethius’s *esse* in the theological tractates, one that avoids the modern word “existence.” To frame this alternative reading, we need to say something first about Boethius’s ontology.

text; see *In I PH²*, ch. 3 (Meiser ed., 2:71 [lns. 13–18]). As he proceeds to comment on the various controversial points in Aristotle’s text, he makes repeated use of the phrase *vel certe* to signal the commencement of his own view in contradistinction from the alternative views of other authors he has just summarized, including Porphyry; see *In I PH²*, ch. 3 (Meiser ed., 2:78 [ln. 8]; cf. 2:76 [ln. 15]).

II. What There Is for Boethius

Boethius's early⁴⁹ *Contra Eutychen* provides the clearest account of his ontology in the Quinean sense of what things there are. Boethius treats the notion of those things that are (*quae sunt*) as coextensive with that of "nature," taken broadly for whatever can be "defined" or "grasped by the intellect in some way," which includes everything from substances to accidents, from matter to God.⁵⁰ Boethius uses "substance" in at least four ways, three of which are explained explicitly in *Contra Eutychen*. In one way, it is used according to its etymology for what "stands under" (*substat*) accidents, providing their foundation (*subministrat*).⁵¹ Since God has no accidents, this cannot be applied to him. In a second way, "substance" names an individual of a rational nature or person, the etymological implication of "standing under accidents" being ignored.⁵² Third, God himself can be called a "substance" according to a unique appropriation of the etymology of the word:

(II.1) Except that ecclesiastical usage excludes speaking of three substances in God, it may seem reasonable to predicate "substance" [substantia] of God, not that he himself is put under [supponeretur] the rest of things as a subject, but because he was before [preesset] all so that, as a principle is under [subesset] things, while he serves as foundation [subministrat], οὐσιῶσθαι or to subsist belongs to them all.⁵³

Besides these three senses of "substance," we find a fourth sense in Boethius's works. Jerome states in his letter to Pope Damasus that no learned person "understands anything by *hypostasis* except *ousia*."⁵⁴ Here, ὑπόστασις or "substance" signifies not an individual subject or person, but an essence (οὐσία). As we will see in *De Trinitate*, Boethius predicates *substantia* of God not in the sense that he stands under accidents, is a person, or is creator, but in the sense that he has or is an essence (οὐσία).⁵⁵ Apparently taking

⁴⁹ For the dating of Boethius's works, see chart 2 in Suto, *Boethius*.

⁵⁰ Boethius, *CEut.* 1 (LCL 74:78 [Ins. 8–19]).

⁵¹ Boethius, *CEut.* 3 (LCL 74:88 [Ins. 42–49]).

⁵² Boethius, *CEut.* 3 (LCL 74:88–90 [Ins. 62–78]).

⁵³ Boethius, *CEut.* 3 (LCL 74:90 [Ins. 95–101]).

⁵⁴ Jerome, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi epistulae* I, Epistle 14, no. 4: "Tota saecularium litterarum schola nihil aliud hypostasini nisi usian nouit" (*CSEL* 54:65 [Ins. 9–11]).

⁵⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5 (*CCL* 50:260–61 [Ins. 1–26]).

“substance” in the sense of essence or οὐσία, Boethius, in *Contra Eutychen* 2, presents a taxonomy of all substances, including God:

(II.2) But of substances some are corporeal things, some incorporeals. Now, corporeal things are living or not. Among the living, some are sensible, some not. Among the sensible, some are rational, others irrational. Likewise, among incorporeals, some are rational, some not, as the souls [uitae] of sheep. Among the rational, some are immutable and impassible by nature, as God; others are by creation mutable and passible, unless they are transformed by grace of substance to impassible firmness, as angels and souls [animae].⁵⁶

So, God is distinguished from the other rational substances by his natural immutability.

But in chapter 7, we find out that created incorporeal substances are not capable of change with regard to substance since they lack a material substrate.

(II.3) For the nature of incorporeal substance is based on no foundation of matter, but there is no body to which matter is not subjected. . . . Some things rely upon a foundation of matter (i.e., body); others (i.e., incorporeals) do not need a subject of matter at all. . . . It thus cannot happen that a body is changed into an incorporeal species, nor can it happen that incorporeals are changed by a mutual intermixture. For, where there is no common matter, neither is conversion and transformation possible. But there is no matter in incorporeal things. Thus, they cannot, in turn, be changed in themselves [in se]. But the soul and God are rightly believed to be incorporeal substances. Thus, the human soul is not transformed into the divinity by which it is assumed.⁵⁷

Here, Boethius explicitly includes the human soul among the incorporeal substances, which lack a material substrate, and since he earlier (quote in II.2 above) classed the human soul with the angels, we can assume they too are intended here. If, due to their lack of matter, these created incorporeal things are not changeable in themselves and yet they are changeable, then they are so only in their accidents. Augustine took a similar route when he

⁵⁶ Boethius, *CEut.* 2 (LCL 74:82 [Ins. 18–28]).

⁵⁷ Boethius, *CEut.* 7 (LCL 74:110 [Ins. 56–74]).

based God's unique immutability on his lack of accidents or *per accidens* predicates,⁵⁸ and contrasted God's immutable simplicity with the mutable complexity of the human soul on the grounds that, although the human soul cannot lose its life⁵⁹ and is simpler than a body, nevertheless it is changeable with regard to its various operations and affections (i.e., accidents).⁶⁰

While *Contra Eutychen* provides the clearest account of Boethius's ontology, *De Trinitate* provides his clearest account of the causes of distinction among things. In chapter 1, he notes: "The diversity of three things or any amount [of things] consists in genus, in species, or in number."⁶¹

(II.4) But in number, a variety of accidents produces difference [differentiam]. For three men differ [distant] neither in genus nor species, but by accidents; for if by the soul we separated all accidents from them, nevertheless, place is totally diverse so that we cannot in any way imagine it as one. For two bodies cannot obtain the same place, which is an accident.⁶²

Boethius seems to identify accidental plurality within a species with spatial plurality; or at least he gives no example of two things of the same species differing in number by any accident other than place.

When it comes to the diversification of incorporeal things, which are not in place, he says:

(II.5) It is a canon of absolute truth that diversity [distantias] in incorporeal things is produced by difference, not place.⁶³

Since he opposes difference to diversity by place, which he previously associated with the numerical "difference" within a species caused by accidents, he evidently intends "difference" here to indicate substantial (i.e., specific) difference, not numerical or accidental difference. Thus, incorporeal things

⁵⁸ Augustine, *De Trin.* 5.2 (CCL 50:208 [Ins. 7–11]); see also 5.5: "But in God nothing is said by accident since nothing is changeable in him"—"In deo autem nihil quidem secundum accidens dicitur quia nihil in eo mutabile est" (CCL 50:210 [Ins. 1–2]).

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De Trin.* 5.4 (CCL 50:209–10 [Ins. 16–23]).

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De Trin.* 6.6 (CCL 50:236–37).

⁶¹ Boethius, *De Trin.* 1 (LCL 74:6 [Ins. 15–17]).

⁶² Boethius, *De Trin.* 1 (LCL 74:6 [Ins. 24–30]).

⁶³ Boethius, *De Trin.* 5 (LCL 74:26 [Ins. 40–42]). Partly borrowing from Loeb translation.

are said to be diverse by substantial difference and must each numerically belong to distinct species.⁶⁴

This is why, whereas the Catholic truth teaches that the Trinity is one God, the cause of whose unity is “indifference” (*indifferentia*), the Arians divide the Trinity into plurality according to rank (*gradibus meritorum*).⁶⁵ Assuming the Arians see all three gods as incorporeal, they must belong to different species, and thus be unequally ranked. For Boethius, in contrast,

(II.6) God differs from God in no way; they differ neither by accidental nor substantial differences posited in a subject. But where there is no difference, there is altogether no plurality, nor for this reason number. Therefore, unity alone.⁶⁶

So, for Boethius, incorporeal things differ by substantial differences which put them in a gradation of species, but corporeal things like men differ by the accidental difference of place so that they can be numerically multiplied within the same species. The Trinitarian persons constitute one substance because they do not differ in either way.

⁶⁴ This is close to Aquinas’s view inasmuch as it entails only one individual per incorporeal species—*In II sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 4; *De ente*. 4 (Leonine 43:376 [Ins. 79–89]; 43:377 [Ins. 173–77])—but it differs by using place rather than quantified matter to explain numerical diversity (Aquinas, *In de Trin.*, q. 4, a. 4 [Leonine 50:132]). Aquinas’s theory helps him accommodate the miraculous colocation of bodies, see *In de Trin.*, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1 (Leonine 50:129–30 [Ins. 208–30]). On medieval theories of individuation in angels, see Giorgio Pini, “The Individuation of Angels from Bonaventure to Duns Scotus,” in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 79–116. Richard Sorabj has shown that the interpenetration of bodies was a live debate in late antiquity, with Stoics pointing to soaked papyri to prove interpenetration; Plotinus followed Aristotle in rejecting it, leading to Neoplatonic debates about the precise reason why bodies cannot interpenetrate (because of extension itself, matter, or qualities) and about possible exceptions to this rule, such as in the mixture of the elements (*Matter, Space, and Motion: Theories in Antiquity and Their Sequel* [London: Duckworth, 1988]), 107–19). The Stoic view was resurrected in a Christian context as an analogy for the two natures of Christ (120–21). It is noteworthy that Boethius’s analogy for Christ’s two natures—that of a crown composed of gold and jewels—does not require the interpenetration of bodies, but only their conjunction; moreover, he clearly thinks that, in mixtures of the elements, the elements do not remain in their proper nature; see *CEut.* 7 (LCL 74:114–15 [Ins. 1–23]). Boethius’s careful evaluation of the mixture of elements and bejeweled crown analogies in *Contra Eutychen* suggests he was aware of ongoing debates and sided with Plotinus and Aristotle against the Stoics.

⁶⁵ Boethius, *De Trin.* 1 (LCL 74:6 [Ins. 9–13]).

⁶⁶ Boethius, *De Trin.* 3 (LCL 74:12 [Ins. 1–4]).

This background is necessary for understanding *De Trin.* 2, a text frequently cited for Boethius's understanding of divine simplicity but rarely explained within its dialectical context. As usually interpreted, this passage entails something like a theory of universal hylomorphism in which everything besides God must have matter to have accidents.⁶⁷ Since this passage, I maintain, has been read out of context, we must quote it at length.

(II.7) Concerning divine things, we must proceed intellectually and must not be dispersed into imaginations, but must rather inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image, and which is being itself [esse ipsum] and from which being is [ex qua esse est]. For every being is from form [Omne namque esse ex forma est]. For a statue is not called the representation of an animal by bronze, which is matter, but by the form, which is impressed in it. Bronze itself is not said [dicitur] [to be] by earth, which is its matter, but by the form [figuram] of bronze. . . . Nothing therefore is said to be [esse dicitur] except by its own form [proprium formam]. But the divine substance is form

⁶⁷ Odon Lottin's classic study shows that, as far as the history of medieval thought is concerned, the doctrine of universal hylomorphism was a thirteenth-century novelty, not traditional ("La composition hylémorphique des substances spirituelles: Les débuts de la controverse," *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 34, no. 33 [1932]: 21–41). Nevertheless, it is common to attribute something like universal hylomorphism to Augustine. See Arthur Hilary Armstrong, "Spiritual or Intelligible Matter in Plotinus and St. Augustine," in *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Variorum, 1979), 277–83 (who says Augustine was influenced by Plotinus); Brendan Case, "*Seraphicus Supra Angelicum*: Universal Hylomorphism and Angelic Mutability," *Franciscan Studies* 78 (2020): 19–50 (who makes the important distinction between using universal hylomorphism to distinguish God from creatures, which he concedes is unnecessary, and using it to account for the mutability of creatures, which he thinks is necessary; the notion that matter is needed to account for the potency to underlie accidents is implicit in Richard Cross's paraphrase of *De Trin.* 2 in "Form and Universal in Boethius," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 3 [2012]: 453: "Forms are actualities, lacking the passive capacity to receive accidental modifications: matter supplies the relevant capacity, and matter is absent from pure forms"). See also Michael Sullivan, "The Debate over Spiritual Matter in the Late Thirteenth Century: Gonsalvus Hispanus and the Franciscan Tradition from Bonaventure to Scotus" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2010), 15–22; Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 286, 288n12. Claims about Augustine's ontology are beyond the scope of this essay, but it should at least be noted that I do not agree with these authors, who I think confuse (1) the analogy of incorporeal substances themselves to matter with respect to their psychic operations and affections with (2) the claim that, in their very nature, spiritual substances are composed of matter and form. See Aquinas, *De spiritualibus*, a. 1, ad 4 (Leonine 24/2:15 [lms. 447–65]).

without matter and for this reason is one and that which it is [id quod est]. The rest are not that which they are [id quod sunt]. For everything has its being [esse] from those out of which it is—that is, from its parts—and it is a *this* and a *that*, . . . but not *this* or *that* singularly, as since earthly man consists of soul and body, he is body and soul, not either body or soul in part. He is not, therefore, what he is [id quod est]. . . . That truly would be one in which there is no number nor in which there is anything else besides [praeterquam] that which it is [id quod est]. For neither could it become a subject; for forms cannot be subjects. For other forms, like humanity [humanitas], are subject to accidents, not such that it receives accidents in that which it itself is, but insofar as matter is subject to it. For while matter subjected to humanity receives some accident, humanity itself seems to receive this. But a form which is without matter cannot be subject nor be in matter, for neither would it be a form, but an image. . . . There is in it, then, no diversity—no plurality from diversity nor multiplicity from accidents—and, for this reason, neither is there number. [Chapter 3] But God differs from God in no way; they differ neither by accidental nor substantial differences posited in a subject. But where there is no difference, there is altogether no plurality, nor for this reason number. Therefore, unity alone.⁶⁸

On the face of it, this passage is in direct contradiction to *Contra Eutychem*'s claim about the immateriality of created incorporeal substances, like the human soul. Commenting on this passage, Henry Chadwick rightly identifies the phrase *id quod est* with essence (read τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) and states that Boethius's intent is, in part, to identify God with what is truly form.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, he complains that "Boethius does not show how God as pure form is distinguished from other forms in which there is no material element."⁷⁰ He connects this to "a certain hesitancy and mistiness" on Boethius's part with regard to choosing between Plato, for whom "all forms have being apart from matter," and Aristotle, for whom "universals have being solely as instantiated in the particulars that compose them."⁷¹ In a similar vein, Janice Schultz and Edward Synan see a tension between this passage's claim that forms cannot be subject, on the one hand, and the fact, on the other hand,

⁶⁸ Boethius, *De Trin.* 2–3 (LCL 74:8–12).

⁶⁹ Chadwick, *Boethius*, 215.

⁷⁰ Chadwick, *Boethius*, 215.

⁷¹ Chadwick, *Boethius*, 215.

that “Boethius believed in angels.”⁷² They offer no solution to the problem except to say that Boethius’s metaphysics, without the help of Aquinas’s “act of *esse*,” was unable to distinguish created immaterial forms from God or to explain how forms could have accidents.

No such mistiness or inconsistency need be attributed to Boethius, however, if we consider the dialectical context of *De Trin.* 2. The context is the challenge of explaining the Catholic doctrine that the Trinity of persons is numerically one God and of rejecting the Arian doctrine of an order of three unequal gods. As we saw above, for Boethius, incorporeals are distinguished by (substantial) difference (II.5). Thus, as I argued above, they cannot be numerically multiplied within a species, but must be unequally ranked, as the Arians believed about the Trinity. On the other hand, corporeal things can be numerically multiplied within a species by the accident of being in distinct places (II.4). These two ways of multiplying God are rejected in chapters 1–2, respectively. In chapter 1, he rejects the Arian hierarchy of unequal gods on the grounds it is contrary to Catholic truth. If the Trinitarian persons are equal, however, this could imply that they are related in the way Cicero and Cato are related to the human species—that is, as numerically multiplied by the accident of place. This, no less than the Arian hierarchical account of the multiplicity in God, would undermine the unity of God. That the persons of the Trinity are not numerically multiplied by accidents is shown in chapter 2, where, as we’ve seen, he concludes his discussion by saying: “There is in [a form outside of matter], then, no diversity—no plurality from diversity nor multiplicity from accidents—and, for this reason, neither is there number.” Now, the chapter begins by discussing the methods of the various disciplines and noting that, concerning divine things (i.e., such as the persons of the Trinity), “we must proceed intellectually and must not be dispersed into imaginations, but must rather inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image.” So, only the forms in matter, which are not true forms, but images, are capable of being numerically multiplied within a species by accidents, as the form of humanity in Cicero and Cato. Thus, the persons of the Trinity, which share the divine form, which is a form that is outside matter, cannot be numerically multiplied by accidents. They are not three gods diversified by place. As if to summarize the teaching of the first two chapters, respectively, the third opens by saying: “But God differs from God in no way; they differ [ch. 2] neither by accidental [ch. 1] nor substantial differences posited in a subject. But where there is no

⁷² Schultz and Synan, “Introduction,” xlvii–xlvi.

difference, there is altogether no plurality, nor for this reason number. Therefore, unity alone.”

So, chapter 2 must not be read—as Chadwick and Schultz and Synan tacitly do—as an independent treatise on divine simplicity. On the contrary, as an integral part of a larger treatise, it serves a limited dialectical purpose—namely, to contrast the divine form in three persons to the form of earthly man in Cato and Cicero. How God’s simplicity differs from that of incorporeal angels, which are multiplied by substantial difference, is entirely irrelevant to the chapter. There is, in conclusion, no reason to question Boethius’s lasting adherence to the immateriality of angels and the soul. As we saw in *Contra Eutychen*, the distinguishing factor between God and other incorporeal substances (e.g., angels and souls) is not the possession of matter—since they all agree in lacking a material substrate—but the inability to change with regard to accidents.

III. God as *Esse Suum* and *Esse Ipsum*

III.A. *Esse as Substance*

Now that we have sketched Boethius’s basic ontology—his account of what sorts of things there are—we can begin to investigate what he means by *esse* when he identifies God with “his being” or “being itself.” The claim that God is “his being,” as we will see, shows up not only in *De hebdomadibus*, as is well known, but also in *De Trin.* 4. In these passages, I will argue, *esse* is used for the substance or whatness of a thing. To explain the rationale for this usage, let us first look at a few passages in which *esse* occurs outside *De Trin.* 4. Next, we’ll look at the identification of God with his *esse* in both that chapter and *De hebdomadibus*. Finally, we will turn to the claim God is “being itself” (*esse ipsum*).

Now, as we already saw (I.1 above), in Boethius’s famous axiom that *esse* comes from form in *De Trin.* 2, he uses *esse* in indirect speech to speak about what is predicated of a subject through the verb “is”—what a thing is said to be (*dicitur esse*). For instance, a statue is said to be (*dicitur*) the representation of an animal in virtue of its shape. Thus, the *esse* that follows from form is a thing’s substance—its being-what-it-is—such as a statue’s being-the-representation-of-an-animal. It is not a mere coincidence that *esse* in his example stands for the substance predicated of a thing. In book 4 of his long commentary on Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, specifically on chapter 14, Boethius identifies the “being of a thing” (*esse rei*) with its definition, or rather what its definition signifies—namely, its what-it-is-to-be (*quod est esse*):

(III.1) But what is the being [esse] of a thing? It is nothing else than the definition [definitio]; for if anyone asks of a thing, “What is it?” he who wishes to show what it is to be [quod est esse] states the definition [definitionem].⁷³

A similar identification occurs in *De hebdomadibus*:

(III.2) Just being something [esse aliquid] and being something with regard to what it is [esse aliquid in eo quod est] are diverse; for by the one accident, by the other substance is signified. Everything that is participates in that which it is to be [eo quod est esse] that it be, but participates something else that it be something [aliquid sit].⁷⁴

⁷³ Boethius, *In IV Isag.*², ch. 14: “Quid est autem esse rei? nihil est aliud nisi definitio. uni cuique enim rei interrogatae ‘quid est?’ si quis quod est esse monstrare uouerit, definitionem dicit” (*CSEL* 48:273 [Ins.13–15]).

⁷⁴ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:40–42 [Ins. 38–44]). Commenting on Boethius’s treatise, Aquinas famously distinguishes three modes of participation: (1) that of something more particular in something more universal, as man in animal or Socrates in man; (2) that of a subject in an accident or material form; and (3) that of an effect in its cause, as air participates the light of the Sun (*In De hebdomadibus* 2 (Leonine 50:271 [Ins.71–85]). There is a tendency to assume Aquinas imposes this threefold distinction unnaturally on Boethius’s text. E.g., see Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo san Tommaso d’Aquino*, Opere Complete 3 (Segni, Italy: Editrice del Verbo Incarnato, 2005), 33; Rudi te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 8–15. But a closer examination of Boethius’s *oeuvre* reveals that Aquinas is describing the diversity within Boethius’s actual usage. In his commentary on Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, Boethius employs the Platonic language of participation for the Aristotelian notions of essential and accidental predication. For example, speaking of what Aquinas would call the first mode of participation, Boethius says: “All that participate a species always participate equally; for Socrates, Cicero, and Plato are all equally men”—“. . . semper omnia quae participant specie, aequaliter participant; aequaliter enim et Socrates et Cicero et Plato homines sunt” (*In II Isag.*², ch. 29, in *CSEL* 48:129 [Ins. 8–10]). Likewise, describing what Aquinas would call the second mode of participation, he says: “Those that participate an accident, even if it is an inseparable accident, do not participate equally.”—“at uero illa quae participant accidenti, etiamsi inseparabile accidens sit, tamen non aequaliter participant” (ch. 29, in *CSEL* 48:129 [Ins. 10–12]). Cf. *In II Isag.*², ch. 31: “Every property gives itself equally to those things, which are under it, and by these, it is participated equally. For Socrates, Cicero, and Virgil both participate the ability to laugh equally and are equally able to laugh”—“deinde omne proprium aequaliter se his rebus quae sub se fuerint dat et ab his aequaliter participatur — Socrates enim et Cicero et Vergilius aequaliter et resibili participant et aequaliter risibiles sunt” (*CSEL* 48:131 [Ins. 9–13]). The same Platonic language for Aristotelian notions recurs in Boethius’s theological works. E.g., *De fide*: “... and that the human body that Christ had clothed himself in did not come

Here, *quod est* and *quod est esse* seem to be translations of Aristotle's τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, which Boethius associates simultaneously with the signification of substance (in the sense of essence) and the predication of "is" (*sit*) without addition. The predication of accident, in contrast, is associated with something added to the bare predicate *sit*—namely, *aliquid*, which stands indefinitely for whatever that added, accidental determination might be. From the assumption that "is" predicated alone predicates substance (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) and the idiom of indirect speech according to which we signify what is predicated by "is" with the infinitive form *esse*, it becomes appropriate to speak of the substance (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι) of a thing using the unqualified infinitive *esse*, or else this same infinitive combined with a possessive noun in the dative or genitive case, standing for the subject of which "is" is predicated unqualifiedly. The resulting idiom (dative/genitive + infinitive) is not equivalent to the Latin idiom for indirect speech (accusative + infinitive),

by participation in the human substance"—". . . nec humanum corpus quod Christus induerat de humanae substantiae participatione uenisse" (LCL 74:66 [Ins. 212–13]) (essential participation); *CP* IV: "Mustn't he be judged much more unhappy whose misfortune is revealed by a participation in the good"—"nonne multo infelicior eo censendum est cuius infortunium boni participatione releuatur?" (LCL 74:326 [Ins. 57–60]) (accidental participation). Aquinas's third mode of participation is the least evidently discerned in Boethius's works, but seems to reflect his usage in such passages as *CP* III: "Everything blessed is a god, but by nature, there is one; yet, nothing prevents there being many by participation"—"Omnis igitur beatus deus, sed natura quidem unus; participatione uero nihil prohibet esse quam plurimos" (LCL 74:272 [Ins. 88–90]); *De fide*: "Although the merit of nature damns, he wished to repair the lost nature by making them sharers in the future mystery that would long afterward be brought forth"—"quos licet meritum naturae damnaret, futuri tamen sacramenti et longe postmodum proferendi faciendo participes perditam uoluit reparare naturam" (LCL 74:60 [Ins. 123–26]). The fact that, in at least the first two ways Boethius uses "participation," "participation" simply signifies the subject–predicate relation expressed by "is" (*esse*) seems to have important implications for the perennial debate among Thomists as to which of the three modes of participation is "the" participation in *esse*. On this debate, see, e.g., Jason Mitchell, "Aquinas on *Esse Commune* and the First Mode of Participation," *Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018): 543–72; Daniel De Haan, "Aquinas on *Actus Essendi* and the Second Mode of Participation," *Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018): 573–609; Greg Doolan, "Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation," *Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018): 611–42 (who collectively argue that each of the three modes of participation is a participation in a different sense of *esse*: *esse commune*; *actus essendi*; *esse subsistens*); te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 79 (who argues a being participates *esse* in a "tacitly introduced" fourth way); McNerny, *Boethius and Aquinas*, 205 (who argues a being participates *esse* in the second way); John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), esp. 103–9 (who argues a being participates *esse* in the third way).

but it is not correctly understood except in reference to both indirect speech and the assumption that “is” said alone predicates what belongs to a thing without addition—namely, its substance.

This usage comes from both Aristotelian and earlier patristic usage, a fact this article has only the space to point out, not analyze. In *Metaphysics* 7.6, Aristotle uses *Σωκράτει εἶναι* (Socrates’s being; the to-be of Socrates) to signify Socrates’s what-it-was-to-be (*τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι*) and *τὸ λευκῷ εἶναι* (the being of white; the to-be of white) to signify the substance (*τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι*) of whiteness or a white thing.⁷⁵ Hilary, in his *De Trin.* 2.6, says, “Moreover, [the Father’s] being [eius esse] is in himself, not assuming [sumens] from another what he is [quod est], but obtaining that which he is [id quod est] out of himself and in himself.”⁷⁶ Modern readers might expect Hilary to say that the Father’s *esse* is in himself because he does not receive his existence from another, but Hilary evidently takes *esse* and *id quod est* as interchangeable notions. In 7.11, he will use *quod Deus est* as equivalent to God’s “nature” or “substance.” Likewise, in Augustine’s *De Trin.* 7.5, we find the *esse* of a body (*ei esse*) identified with “being a body” (*corpus esse*) and contrasted with a body’s accidentally being this color or shape (*esse . . . ille color vel illa forma*), from which we can conclude he takes the *esse* of a body as its essence or substance.⁷⁷ In the same passage, Augustine counterfactually opposes God’s *esse* with “whatever is not incongruously said of him,” such as “great, omnipotent, and good,” on the supposition he later denies that God stands under things as a substance to what is in it.⁷⁸ By implication, God’s *esse* must mean what is said of him not as something in a subject as an accident, but as what he the subject is—as *esse corpus* is what is said of a body as what it is, its essence.

Now, according to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 7.4, “definition” and “what it is” are said in many ways since they apply simply (*ἀπλῶς*) to the first category, substance (*οὐσία*), but in a derivative way to the other accidental categories inasmuch as we can also ask of them what they are and define them as additions to substance.⁷⁹ Thus, in a single passage in the *Topics*, Aristotle can refer to the first category as “what it is” (*τί ἐστι*; *quid est*) and apply the very same phrase to all the categories. Moreover, here again, we find the whatness of a thing referred to using the word *esse*. In Boethius’s translation, the text reads:

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 6.6.1031a27; 6.6.1032a8.

⁷⁶ Hilary, *De Trin.* 3.6 (CCL 62:42 [Ins. 5–8]).

⁷⁷ Augustine, *De Trin.* 7.5 (CCL 50:260 [Ins. 1–26]).

⁷⁸ Augustine, *De Trin.* 5.7 (CCL 50:260 [Ins. 9–13]).

⁷⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphys.* 7.4.1030a18–27 (Ross ed.).

(III.3) After this, one must determine the genera of the predication [κατηγοριῶν; praedicamentorum]. . . . These are ten in number: what-it-is [τί ἐστι; quid est], what-kind, how-much, relative, where, when, to be positioned, to have, to make, to suffer. For accident, genus, property, and definition will always be in one of these predication. . . . It is manifest from them since “that which it is” [τὸ τί ἐστι; qui quid est] signifies sometimes substance [οὐσίαν; substantiam], but sometimes what-kind, and other times something from among the other predication. For when he says about a given man that the one stated is either a man [ἄνθρωπον εἶναι; hominem esse] or an animal, he says both what it is [τί ἐστι; quid est] and signifies substance; but when about a given color, he says that the one stated is either white [λευκὸν εἶναι; album esse] or a color, he says what it is [τί ἐστι; quid est] and signifies what-kind. . . . And the same goes for the other [categories]: For concerning these, regardless of whether the same [thing itself] or its genus is said of it, one signifies what it is [quid est]. But when [any one is said] of another [category], one does not signify what it is, but how-much or what-kind or one of the other predication.⁸⁰

Here, we see a thing’s being said *to be* something specific or generic (*hominem esse vel animal; album esse vel colorem*) identified with the signification of its whatness (*quid est*).

This is applied not only to the first category, but to all the categories, about each of which, taken in the subject position, we can predicate what it is (*quid est*) by assigning it a genus or definition. Although each of the categories, in a way, has a *quid est* or definition, *quid est* (τί ἐστι) also uniquely characterizes the first category⁸¹—a phenomenon that, as we saw, Aristotle

⁸⁰ Aristotle, *Top.* 1.9.103b20–39: “Post haec autem oportet terminare genera praedicamentorum. . . . Sunt autem haec numero decem, quid est, quale, quantum, ad aliquid, ubi quando, situm esse, habere, facere, pati. Semper enim accidens et genus et proprium et diffinitio in uno horum praedicamentorum erit. . . . Manifestum autem ex eisdem quoniam qui quid est significat quandoque quidem substantiam significat, quandoque autem quale, quandoque vero aliquod aliorum praedicamentorum. Nam quando posito homine dixerit quod positum est hominem esse vel animal, et quid est dicit et substantiam significat; quando vero colore albo posito dixerit quod positum est album esse vel colorem, quid est dicit et quale significat. . . . Similiter autem et in aliis; unumquodque enim talium, sive idem de eodem dicatur sive genus de hoc, quid est significat. Quando autem de alio, non quid est significat, sed quantum aut quale aut aliquod aliorum praedicamentorum” (AL 3/1:14 [ln. 13]–15 [ln. 9]; for my Greek interpolations, see Ross ed.).

⁸¹ De Rijk notes that, not only τί ἐστι, but also οὐσία can be treated as common to the

explains in *Metaphysics* 7.4. Accordingly, even though Boethius says that *esse* or “is” said alone signifies a thing’s “substance” in the sense of its “what it is,” he can also without contradiction speak of *esse* without qualification being “predicated of” all ten categories, not just the first one. After all, not only the first category, but also the others have definitions or whatnesses.

(III.4) The “being” [ens] that is predicated [dicitur] is not predicated [dicitur] univocally (i.e., as a genus), but equivocally (i.e., as a vocal sound signifying many things) since, although it is said of all the categories, there is, nevertheless, no definition discoverable of it which can be applied to all categories. . . . For of one thing, there cannot be two genera except insofar as one is subordinated to the other. . . . If, then, “being” [ens] is predicated of all the categories, “one” also is predicated. For substance is one, quality is one, quantity is one, and so on with the rest [ceteraque ad hunc modum]. If, then, since “being” [esse] is predicated of all, it would be the genus of all and “one,” since it is predicated of all, would be the genus of all, but neither “one” nor “being,” as was demonstrated, has preference over the other. The two, then, are genera equally predicated of the same things, which cannot happen.⁸²

So, *esse* is predicated equivocally of all ten categories. Given that, in the same work, Boethius identifies the *esse* of a thing with its definition or what-it-is-to-be (III.1), this is presumably what he means here. If that is the case, his teaching is perfectly consistent with that of Aristotle, for whom “definition” or “what-it-is” belongs simply to the first category, but in a qualified way to the other ones.

In sum, for Boethius, *esse* is used idiomatically—in a manner analogous to indirect speech—to signify what is predicated of a thing by “is.” But what is predicated of anything simply speaking or absolutely is its essential predicates—its substance or what-it-is-to-be (*quod est esse*). Thus, *esse* can be used—especially with a possessive noun—to speak about the substance or whatness of a thing. In speaking in this way, Boethius is following a practice with antecedents in Aristotle, Hilary, and Augustine. Since, however, all ten

various categories (*SaO*, 1:367–68). He makes this point against Michael Frede, for whom *Metaphys.* 7’s “acceptance . . . of the ‘category’ of substance,” in comparison to the *Topics*, reflects “a radical change of his view of οὐσία” (“Categories in Aristotle,” in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 29–48, at 38–45; cf. Bäck, *ATP*, esp. 7, ln. 17).

⁸² Boethius, *In III Isag.*², ch.7 (*CSEL* 48:223 [ln. 19]–224 [ln. 17]; all ten categories are explicitly listed in *CSEL* 48:222 [lns. 12–13]).

categories have a whatness or definition in an ordered way, *ens* or *esse* can be predicated of each of them.

III.B. God as Esse Suum

In *De Trin.* 4, Boethius follows Aristotle in saying that there are, universally speaking, ten predicaments, which can be predicated of any given thing; some predicate substance, some accidents.⁸³ Though we can say all ten categories of God, nevertheless, he says, they are all changed (*mutantur*) when predicated of God.⁸⁴

(III.5) For when we predicate [dicimus] “God,” indeed we seem to signify substance, but [instead] that which is beyond substance [ultra substantiam]. And when [we predicate] “just” [of God, we] indeed [seem to signify] a quality; yet it is not an accident, but a substance—rather, beyond substance. For it is not the case that what is [quod est] and what the just is [quod iustus est] are diverse, but God’s being [esse deo] and the just’s [iusto] are the same. Likewise, when we predicate “great or the greatest,” we indeed seem to signify quantity, but rather what is a substance that is such as we say to be beyond substance. For God’s being [esse deo] is the same as the great thing’s [magno]. For it was shown above, concerning his form, there is no plurality since he is form and truly one. But these categories are such that in that in which they are they bring it about that the thing itself is said to be [esse . . . dicitur], dividedly indeed in the rest of things, but in God, conjointly or unitedly in the following way: For when we say [dicimus] “substance” (as man or God), it is said such that that of which it is said is the substance, as the substance man or God. But there is a difference [distat] since man is not himself wholly [integre] man and, by this fact, neither is he the substance; for what he is, he owes to others which are not man. But God is himself God by this; for he

⁸³ Boethius, *De Trin.* 4 (LCL 74:16 [Ins. 1–7]). For the best study of Boethius’s theological predication theory and its sources in the commentary tradition and Augustine, see de Libera, “L’onto-théo-logique,” 175–222 (who sees Boethius’s theory of God as beyond-substantial as his principal innovation compared with Augustine). See also Thom, “Boethius,” 42–61. I think de Libera overstates the distance between Augustine and Boethius here. It is true that Boethius drops Augustine’s appeal to metaphor to explain the application of the categories to God and that, in Augustine, we do not find the explicit language of beyond-substantial predication. Nevertheless, what Boethius means by such predication—God’s not only being what is predicated of him substantially, but being nothing besides this—is already present in Augustine.

⁸⁴ Boethius, *De Trin.* 4 (LCL 74:16 [Ins. 7–9]).

is nothing else than what he is, and through this he himself is God. Again “just,” which is quality, is said thusly so that it itself is that of which it is predicated—that is, if we say, “just man or just God,” we claim that man himself or God is just [*hominem uel deum iustos esse proponimus*], but in a different way. For man is one thing, just another, but God himself is the same as what is just.⁸⁵

The intent of this passage is to illustrate that both substantial and accidental categories are changed (*mutantur*) when predicated of God so that each is predicated as beyond substance (*ultra substantiam*) rather than as substance or accident in the way these are said of creatures. When we predicate what seems to signify an accident of God (e.g., “great” or “just”), the predicate actually signifies God’s substance or beyond-substance. And when we predicate what seems to signify a substance of God (e.g., “God”), we do not do so in the same way that we predicate substance of creatures because, whereas a man is man in such a way that he is other things, such as big or just, besides man, God is simply God and nothing besides God.

This passage employs *esse* in two ways: first, in combination with a dative of possession (e.g., *esse deo . . . [esse] iusto . . . [esse] magno*); second, in indirect speech (e.g., “*iustus . . . praedicatur*” = “*hominem uel deum iustos esse proponimus*”). The first of these is associated with *quod-est* phrases (e.g., *quod est; quod iustus est*) and, thus, seems to indicate the substance of a thing, which is expressed by a thing’s definition, according to the idiom described above. Now, as just noted, the second way *esse* is used in (III.5) is indirect speech. He explicitly does this with accidental predication: “*iustus . . . praedicatur*” = “*hominem uel deum iustos esse proponimus*.” Nevertheless, he intends such examples to be compared to the sentences he describes, but does not explicitly state in which “God” and “man” are predicated of God and man respectively. Accordingly, we have four sentences contained either explicitly or descriptively in the text, which we are supposed to compare.

1. A man is just.
2. God is just.⁸⁶
3. A man is human.

⁸⁵ Boethius, *De Trin.* 4 (LCL 74:16–18 [lns. 14–41]).

⁸⁶ Though I have followed the convention of writing “God” with a capital “G” as a proper name when translating “*deus*,” Boethius probably intended “*deus*” as a common name, like “man” (*homo*), so that it would make sense in principle to speak of “every god,” “a god,” “the god.” Thus, propositions (2) and (4) could also be rendered, “A god is just,” and “Some god is a god.”

4. God is God.

In (1) *esse* (“is”) is *esse aliquid*, not *esse* simply, which as we saw in (III.2) signifies accident—namely, the accidental quality of justice. In (2), although *esse* seems to signify an accident again, it actually signifies God’s substance or, rather, beyond-substance. What this beyond-substance consists in is made clear by Boethius’s comparison of (3) with (4). In (3) and (4), the predicate signifies the substance of the subject. According to the terminology of (III.2), this is the *esse aliquid in eo quod est*, which would have been signified indeterminately by “is” (*sit; est*) said without anything added. But whereas the predicate merely signifies substance in (3), in (4) it signifies beyond-substance—the difference being that, whereas it signifies the substance the subject is in (3), in (4) it signifies *that alone* which the subject is. If we may be permitted to go beyond Boethius’s vocabulary, in (3) the predicate and subject are only substantially the same, but in (4) they are entirely the same (*omnino idem*), such that the subject is nothing else than the predicate.⁸⁷

The account in *De Trin.* 4 (III.5) of how qualitative and substantial predication about God is different from that about creatures is closely paralleled by the central argument of Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus*. That treatise begins with a series of axioms, applied later on, the most controversial of which in modern scholarship employs the phrase *esse suum*.

(III.6) Every simple has its being [*esse suum*] and that which is [*id quod est*] as one; in every composite, being [*esse*] and what itself is [*ipsum est*] are distinct.⁸⁸

Most modern interpreters assume Boethius uses “composite” here to refer to material substances, composed of matter and form.⁸⁹ Thus, the quasi

⁸⁷ For this language, see Aquinas, *In VII metaphys.*, lec. 5, nos. 1378–79; *Quodlibet* II, q. 2, a. 2[4], ad 1 (Leonine 25/2:217 [Ins. 103–8]); *Compendium theologiae* [CT] I, ch.10 (Leonine 42:86 [Ins. 10–12, 17–24]). Cf. Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1, where Aquinas distinguishes how “substance” is predicated of God and of creatures by the fact that, for God, substance and predicate are the same (*idem*). On Aquinas’s thesis that God alone is “entirely the same” (*omnino idem*) as his substance or nature, see Elliot Polsky, “The Real Distinction Between Supposit and Nature in Angels in Thomas Aquinas,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (forthcoming).

⁸⁸ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:42 [Ins. 45–48]).

⁸⁹ McNerny, *Boethius and Aquinas*, 214–16; te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 81; Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 162–63; Marenbon, *Boethius*, 99 (cf. 80–81). See also Gilson, *HCPMA*, 104–5 (which initially treats Boethius’s composition as that

argument would be that, since *esse* is simple (form alone), no substance that is composed of matter and form can be *esse* itself, but must participate *esse*. But as we have seen in section II above, Boethius admits created substances without matter, but in *De hebdomadibus*, he is quite clear that nothing that has its being from God is simple.⁹⁰ So, Boethius's distinction between the simple and composite here should not be interpreted as a distinction between immaterial and material substances. Hadot reads the simple-composite distinction here differently from most modern scholars—namely, as a version of the Neoplatonic antinomy between what is more specific and determinate (composite) and what is more universal and indeterminate (simple); thus, by an ascent through species to genera to being (*l'Êtant*), one finally reaches the pure act of being (*l'Être*), unlimited by any object or subject.⁹¹ While I do not think Hadot's interpretation of the composite-simple dichotomy is opposed to Boethius's thought, I do not see evidence for it in the logic of Boethius's treatise.

The only sort of complexity and simplicity Boethius employs in *De*

of accidents, but subsequently acts as if composites must be composed of matter and form); M.-D. Roland-Gosselin, *Le De ente et essentia de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), 142–45 (Roland-Gosselin speaks of “creatures” without distinction as material [143], and sees the *quod est-esse* distinction found in creatures but not God as between primary substance and form [145]; he sees accidents as adding another composition that depends on the prior composition of matter and form [144]). Thom, in contrast, identifies composition in Boethius's text with what results from either accidental or essential predication (*Logic of the Trinity*, 47–48).

⁹⁰ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:46 [Ins. 117–19]).

⁹¹ See esp. Hadot, “La distinction,” 151–52. While I think it is obvious that Boethius would have recognized composition resulting not only from accidental predication, but also from essential predication (e.g., the composition of animal with rational), I don't see evidence for the latter in Boethius's treatise itself. Thomas Aquinas's commentary seems to fold composition from essential predication into composition from accidental predication so that, while sticking only to Boethius's express intent to rule out a simple thing's having something outside its essence mixed in (“nihil aliud habet admixtum preter id quod est esse...”), he simultaneously excludes both superadded essential differences, which are outside the essence of the common notion they differentiate (“... impossibile est id quod est ipsum esse multiplicari per aliquid diuersificans”), and accidental differences (“... quod nullius accidentis sit susceptium”), which are what Boethius had principally in mind. See Aquinas, *In de hebdomadibus* 2 (Leonine 50:273 [Ins. 249–58]). For more explicit cases of Aquinas subsuming the composition of logical parts (genus-difference) under accidental composition, see *Quodlibet* II, q. 2, a.2[4], ad 1 (Leonine 25/2:217–18 [Ins. 110–16]); *CT I*, ch.13 (Leonine 43:372 [Ins. 184–90]). Since *differentiae* are accidental to the genus and the genus to the *differentiae*, it would seem to follow that what cannot have accidents (Boethius's sense of “the simple”) also cannot have definitional parts.

hebdomadibus is that of qualities—like heaviness, roundness, and goodness—composed with each other and with a subject. In abstraction from God’s causality, he says, we could consider a creature being good in the way it is also round, heavy, and so on, such that the quality of being good is distinct both from the creature’s other qualities and from the subject in which it is.⁹² He rules out the possibility that a creature be good and nothing else—such as heavy and colored—on the grounds that such a creature would, then, not be a creature, but the first Good, who alone is “good alone and nothing else [tantum bonum aliudque nihil sit].”⁹³ After demonstrating, by the fact that God wills the *esse* of creatures,⁹⁴ that creatures are not only good by participation (in the way they are heavy and round), but that, like God, their very *esse* (i.e., their substance or *quod est esse*) is good, Boethius shows how God and creatures differ with regard to being good insofar as they are: “[The creature’s] being [esse] itself is good, but it is not like him by which it is [i.e., God]. For he also is good insofar as he is [in eo quod est]; yet, he is nothing else besides [praeterquam] good.”⁹⁵ So, as for Augustine before him, for Boethius God’s supreme simplicity consists in his lack of accidents and consequent total identity with what is predicated of him.⁹⁶ Even when the same quality is in God and creatures, it is not in him in the same way: in him, it is beyond-substance (i.e., all that he is), but in creatures it is, at most, what they are essentially, not exclusively.

Though the grammar of the axiom in (III.6) itself leaves open the possibility of many simple things, the rest of the treatise allows that God alone is simple, and his condition of simplicity consists in his lack of composition with accidents or various qualities. We are never told how we know that God alone is simple. This is not included in the axioms or demonstrated from them, but is an outside assumption. But, given this outside assumption and the axiom about simple things, it follows that God is one with his *esse* (i.e., his *quod est esse*). Everything else, having accidents, is not entirely the

⁹² Cf. Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:44–46 [Ins. 95–111]; 74:48 [Ins. 134–42]).

⁹³ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:46 [Ins. 111–17]).

⁹⁴ Boethius’s reference to God’s will makes clear he is implicitly employing the axiom “similarity must be desired” (“similitudo uero appetenda est”), to draw his conclusion about the goodness of the *esse* of creatures; see *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:42 [Ins. 49–50]).

⁹⁵ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus*: “Idcirco ipsum esse bonum est nec est simile ei a quo est. Illud enim quoque modo sit bonum est in eo quod est; non enim aliud est praeterquam bonum” (LCL 74:48 [Ins. 134–36]).

⁹⁶ See Aquinas, *In de hebd.* 2, who, among other things, rightly identifies the *uere simplex* with *quod nullius accidentis sit susceptium* and *ipse Deus* (Leonine 50:273 [Ins. 249–58]).

same as its *esse*. The logic of this axiom is only verbally different from that of God's beyond-substantiality described in *De Trinitate* (III.5) and implied in *Contra Eutychen* (II.2). Although we predicate substance of both God and man when we predicate "God" and "man" of them, there is a difference. Since man, thanks to his accidents, is something else besides his substance, there is a sense in which he is not even his own substance (man). In contrast, God is nothing else besides his substance and, for this reason, is his substance (God) in a unique way. Even in *De Trin.* 4, as we saw, Boethius used not only the word "substance," but also the unqualified word *esse* with a possessive noun to speak of the substance of a thing. Thus, we can express the doctrine of both *De Trin.* 4 and *De hebdomadibus* commonly as that of the total identity, from lack of accidents, between God and *suum esse*—the total identity of the divine subject with what is predicated of it in the manner of substance.

III.C. God as *Esse Ipsum*

In section III.A, we saw that *esse*, said alone or with a possessive noun, is used by Boethius for the "substance" or what-it-is-to-be of a thing, signified by its definition, but that since the other categories besides substance have a definition or whatness in a derivative way from the first, it follows that *esse* said alone can be predicated of these too, not just the first category. For instance, the *esse* of color is to be a quality, since when someone asks, "What is color?," we answer that it is a quality. As I argued in section III.B, when God is uniquely identified with "his being" in both *De Trin.* 4 and *De hebdomadibus*, the point is to establish the unique beyond-substantial mode of predication that belongs to God in virtue of his lack of accidents such that he not only is substantially what is predicated of him, but is entirely and nothing else besides what is signified by every predicate that is predicated of him. But Boethius speaks of God not only as "his being" (*esse suum*), but also as "being itself" (*esse ipsum*).

This occurs in *De Trin.* 2, a text we have now looked at from different perspectives, twice above (I.1 and II.7). As I will argue, this passage names God *esse* using a new idiom derived from a combination of that we found in (III.1–2) and (III.5–6), on the one hand, where *esse* signifies a thing's substance or what it is, and that we found in (III.3–4), on the other, where *esse* is extended to all the categories insofar as they too, in a derivative way, have a whatness or definition. God not only is his own *esse*, as we saw in (III.5–6), but is even "being itself" (*esse ipsum*). The crucial sentence in which this new idiomatic use of *esse* occurs is:

(III.7) Concerning divine things, we must proceed intellectually and must not be dispersed into imaginations, but must rather inspect the form itself, which is truly form, not image, and which is being itself [esse ipsum] and from which being is [ex qua esse est].⁹⁷

Here, Boethius attributes to God four names or descriptions: (1) form, (2) truly form and not image, (3) *esse* itself, and (4) that from which *esse* is. As noted above, the dialectical purpose of *De Trin.* 2 is to show, against the Arians, that the Trinity is one God, and specifically that God is not numerically multiplied by accidents in the way the form of man is multiplied.

In making this argument, Boethius clearly draws on 2.6 of the *De Trinitate* of Hilary, the great Latin saint of the Arian crisis. To understand Boethius's own *De Trin.* 2, we need to see what Hilary says about divine *esse*. In his *De Trin.* 1.1, Hilary presents his happening across Exod 3:14 as what culminated his intellectual journey from created things to the one God. He argues from this text that *esse* is what is most properly understood about God relative to our human capacities.

(III.8) I wondered at such an absolute signification of God, which utters an incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature through a discourse most apt to human understanding. For nothing else is more proper to God than that “being” [*esse*] be understood.⁹⁸

Hilary first defends the propriety of the name *qui est* on the grounds that it is a testimony to God's eternity—to the fact that the eternal God simply *is* (present tense), whereas all else *was* or *will be* in some respect.⁹⁹ Immediately

⁹⁷ See quote (II.7) above.

⁹⁸ Hilary, *De Trin.* 1.1: “Admiratus sum plane tam absolutam de Deo significationem, quae naturae diuinae inconpraehensibilem cognitionem aptissimo ad intelligentiam humanam sermon loqueretur. Non enim aliud proprium magis Deo quam esse intellegeretur” (CCL 62:5 [Ins. 6–10]).

⁹⁹ Commenting on this argument as paraphrased in Augustine, Gilson maintains that Augustine was persuaded by Neoplatonic metaphysics to think that “to be is ‘to be immutable’” (*Thomism*, 87; cf. *HCPMA*, 71). “What does ‘I am who am’ mean,” asks Gilson, “except ‘I cannot change?’” (*Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 30; cf. Suto, *Boethius*, 221n137). The Neoplatonic influence on Augustine's (and Hilary's) thought is certainly not in question. See, e.g., Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM, 2002), esp. 82–88, 90–93; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 79–107. Nevertheless, Gilson has entirely misinterpreted the argument from eternity or immutability, which is based on the scriptural text itself, not on some hypothesized Neoplatonic sense of

after this argument, however, we find that what the name actually signifies is God's infinity (*infinitas*).

(III.9a) The discourse of the one saying, "I am who am," seemed to have sufficed for the signification of infinity.¹⁰⁰

Though the Exodus text suffices to signify God's infinity, to draw out this attribute more fully, he adduces other passages in Scripture from which he can draw the conclusion that:

"be." It is clear, both from the internal structure of Exod 3:14–15 and from parallel scriptural texts, that the name "I am" was understood by the scriptural authors as a testimony to God's eternity or immutability. As Ellen van Wolde has shown from the Hebrew text of Exodus, God answers Moses's request for a name in two ways—"I am who am" / "he who is" (v. 14) and "the God of your ancestors" (v. 15a)—not one. These two answers are, then, summed up in v. 15b, using the Hebrew idiom *אני... אני* to pair "my name forever" with the name in v. 14 and "my remembrance for the generations" with the one in v. 15a. Wolde concludes the one name relates to "'being' in the cognitive domain of time" and the other to "human beings" and "a particular genealogical line" ("Not the Name Alone: A Linguistic Study of *Exodus* 3:14–15," *Vetus Testamentum* 71, no. 4–5 [2021]: 784–800). Though the Hebrew idiom *אני... אני* is imperceptible in some modern-language translations, the Latin "*hoc . . . hoc*" of the Vulgate preserves it nicely (v.15b): "*hoc nomen mihi est in aeternum et hoc memoriale meum in generationem et generatione.*" Outside biblical passages also suggest that *ego sum* / *qui est* was understood as evidence of God's eternity or immutability. Cf. Deut 32:29; Rev 1:4; John 8:58. See also Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23–53, esp. 23–30; Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), esp. 350; Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 129. Bauckham notes: "Formulae asserting existence [*sic*] in three tenses were also used of Greek gods or the supreme God of philosophy, and this usage may well have influenced the Jewish interpretation of the divine name" (*Revelation*, 28–29). We can conclude that Hilary (who is followed by Augustine) is not assuming on Neoplatonic grounds that "am" or "is" means eternity. Rather, he is assuming as a fact of the scriptural text that the "absolute signification" (i.e., predication) of "is" (*esse*) is a *testimony* to God's eternity, and he is seeking philosophical explanation for this fact. The explanation he provides is that God does not come to be or pass away in any respect. Only of God can an absolute predication of "*esse*," open to any further predicative determination, be predicated in the present tense. For everything else, there is some predicated notion (essential or accidental) that the subject *is* not, but *was* or *will be*.

¹⁰⁰ Hilary, *De Trin.* 1.6: "Et ad hanc quidem infinitatis significationem satis fecisse sermo dicentis: *Ego sum qui sum* uidebatur" (CCL 62:5 [Ins. 17–18]).

(III.9b) The whole itself, containing in itself both the internal and the external, neither would be infinite apart from all nor would all, in him who is infinite, not be.¹⁰¹

To understand how Hilary can connect the name *qui est* to God's infinity—his containing in himself all that he causes—we must keep in mind that, although in English “infinite” and “indefinite” have very different connotations, the Latin word *infinitas* has the sense of a privation of definition, of indefiniteness. But as we saw in (III.8), what the name *qui est* signifies is “an incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature.” The predicate *esse* (*est*) is the most indefinite predicate by which, potentially, anything may be predicated of a subject. The cognition or concept signified by *esse* as predicated of God in Exod 3:14 is not something comprehended, but is left indeterminate. If we may introduce a Fregean distinction into Hilary's analysis, the reference of the name *qui est* is the divine nature, but the sense of the name is something indeterminate, infinite, or incomprehensible. God signifies his infinity by the name *qui est* precisely because that name, while referring to or naming his nature, signifies nothing determinate about it.

Important clarification of what God's infinity consists in comes in Hilary's *De Trin.* 2.6, where God's infinity, once again associated with his *esse*, is now also connected with his absolute simplicity.

(III.10) The Father is that from which all that is is established [constitit]. . . . Moreover, his being [eius esse] is in himself, not assuming [sumens] from another what he is [quod est], but obtaining that which he is [id quod est] out of himself and in himself. [He is] infinite because he himself is not in anything, but all are in him. . . . Awaken your intellect to contemplate the whole [of God] with your mind; you grasp nothing. This whole has a remainder, but this remainder is ever in the whole. Therefore, neither the whole, of which there is a remainder, nor the rest is all that the whole is. The remainder is a portion, but everything is what the whole is. . . . So, he exceeds the realm of understanding outside of whom there is nothing and for whom it is the case that he is always as he always is. This truth is the mystery of God, this the name of the imperceptible nature in the Father.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Hilary, *De Trin.* 1.6: “Adque ita totus ipse intra extraque se continens neque infinitus abesset a cunctis, neque cuncta ei qui infinitus est non inessent” (CCL 62:6 [Ins. 26–28]).

¹⁰² Hilary, *De Trin.* 2.6 (CCL 62:42–43 [Ins. 1–21]).

Hilary opens this passage with two related claims about God the Father: He is the creator of all things, and he has his *esse* in himself. Next, he gives what is either an explanation of or argument for the claim that the Father's *esse* is in himself. While modern readers may expect him to explain this doctrine by noting that God does not receive existence from another, this is not what he says. Rather, he notes that God does not assume what he is (*quod est* / *id quod est*) from another, but has it from himself. As we have already noted, Hilary presumably intends the Father's *esse* to be the same as his *id quod est* after the manner of the Aristotelian idiom of using εἶναι with a possessive noun for the τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι of a thing. After a brief passage not wholly quoted above in which Hilary shows God contains not only all spaces by his infinity, but also all times by his eternity, Hilary turns to God's simplicity. This is presumably intended to remove the error of those who might think that, because God contains all things in time and place, he is therefore maximally divisible into innumerable parts—that is, infinite in spatiotemporal extension. Though God contains all things by his infinity, they are not contained in him as discrete parts. Hilary notes that we cannot even contemplate any part of God without contemplating the whole, nor contemplate the whole without every single part. Our words fail, he says, when we say God is “in himself” (*in seipso*) and thereby discriminate between “to have and to be had” (*habere . . . haberique*) or imply that “what is is other than that in which he is” (*alterum quod est alterum in quo est*).¹⁰³ Hilary concludes the discussion of God's simple infinity in (III.10) by connecting it back to God's name: “This truth is the mystery of God, this the name of the imperceptible nature in the Father.” Clearly, Hilary has in mind the name from Exod 3:14 that he previously said signifies an “incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature” in (III.8), and which he invoked implicitly at the start of (III.10) by saying the Father's *esse* is in himself.

For the purposes of this essay, the survival of Hilary's interpretation of Exod 3:14 in Augustine need only be pointed out, not analyzed. Paralleling Hilary's claim that Exod 3:14 signifies an incomprehensible cognition of the divine nature, Augustine seems to assume that in the passage God predicated of himself what he is (*quid est*), but delayed (*distulit*) specifying this *quid*, since man could not yet grasp it (*non posset capere*).¹⁰⁴ Also, just as Hilary implies that God is that from which all assume their essences (*id quod est*), Augustine, in the context of discussing Exod 3:14, maintains that God, as

¹⁰³ Hilary, *De Trin.* 2.7 (CCL 62:44 [lns. 9–11]).

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *In Ioannem*, tract. 38, no. 8 (CCL 36:341–42 [lns. 1–36]).

supreme essence, is the author of all essences (*essentia*) or natures (*natura*).¹⁰⁵ Finally, much like Hilary, Augustine connects God's causing all things to his containing them all while eschewing the notion he contains all in such a way as to be divided into parts.¹⁰⁶

Thus, in the intellectual milieu in which Boethius wrote *De Trin.* 2, Exod 3:14 was taken to name God by a predication of *esse* (*sum; est*), and this name was associated simultaneously with both his infinity (indefiniteness) by which he contained all things and his universal causality. The logical basis for these associations was that *esse*, on the one hand, is an idiom for a thing's *id quod est*, essence, or nature (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), and on the other hand that *esse* is the most indefinite predicate of all by which anything may be said of a subject. These two idiomatic uses of *esse* are retained by Boethius. As we saw in (III.1–2), Boethius sometimes uses *esse* for the substance of a thing. But as we saw in (III.4; cf. III.3), he also uses *esse* for the definition or substance of all ten categories. With this background in mind, let us return to the text of Boethius's *De Trin.* 2, quoted above partially in (I.1) and fully in (II.7). As noted above, he indicates that God is (1) a form itself, (2) truly form and not an image, (3) *esse ipsum*, and (4) that from which *esse* is.

(1) and (2) are readily interpretable from what we have already seen about this passage above (section II). "Form" should be understood in the sense of an abstract principle, like "humanity" or "shape," which can either be inherent in matter or outside of it and according to which the definition of a thing (e.g., a statue's being the representation of an animal) is predicated of it. Those forms in matter are more "images" than forms. As we have seen, Boethius implies that humanity is found not only in matter, but also outside of it—presumably, as a divine idea.¹⁰⁷ It is the form outside matter that is truly form. This is established about God when Boethius says, "the divine substance is form without matter."

(4) is clarified somewhat by a passage in *De hebdomadibus* in which

¹⁰⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 12.2 (CCL 48:357 [lns. 11–16]). Indeed, for Augustine, the act of creation proper to God, which he says Plato falsely attributed to lower gods, is that of giving the inner nature (*species intrinsecus*); see *De civ. Dei* 12.25–26 (CCL 48:381–82).

¹⁰⁶ See Augustine, *Confessiones* 1.3 (CCL 27:2).

¹⁰⁷ Cross has recently argued persuasively that Boethius's understanding of form, which has antecedents in Ammonius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Augustine, provides a threefold classification of forms or universals: transcendent forms, which are presumably divine ideas; immanent forms, caused by transcendent ones; and abstracted forms ("Form and Universal in Boethius," 439–58; cf. Gilson, *HCPMA*, 98–100, Marenbon, *Boethius*, 25, and Alain de Libera, *L'art des généralités: Théories de l'abstraction* [Paris: Aubier, 1999], 199–202).

Boethius calls God “that from which flows the being itself of all things [ipsum esse omnium rerum].”¹⁰⁸ Even more pertinently, in *Contra Eutychen*, Boethius states: “God is οὐσία and essence; for he is and he is most that from which the being of all things [omnium esse] proceeds.”¹⁰⁹ In the *De Trin.* 2 version, *esse* is not quantified with *omnium* like this, but he evidently means by the indefinite *esse* that God is the cause of all *esse*—that is, the creator—not the cause of just one *esse*. In the context of *De hebdomadibus*, *esse* is primarily intended for the substance or whatness of all things, since Boethius’s intention was to show by God’s willing this substance (*esse*) that the very *esse* of creatures was good and that they were not merely good by participating accidents. Likewise, the *esse* said to be from God in *De Trin.* 2 seems to be primarily the whatness of substances. Nevertheless, it is unlikely Boethius intended to restrict the *esse* that God causes exclusively to the first category. Thus, when Boethius says God is “that from which flows the being itself of all things” (*De hebdomadibus*) or “from which being is” (*De Trinitate*), he seems to be using *esse* according to the idiom found in (III.4), where all ten categories are called the *esse* of a thing according to priority and posteriority—first substance, then the rest.

At this point, we have explained in what sense God is called (1) form, (2) truly form and not image, and (4) that from which *esse* is. But how are we to understand his being named *esse ipsum*? We could take this merely in the sense in which *De hebdomadibus* said in (III.6) that every simple thing is its own being (*esse suum*)—that is, its own substance or τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι. But interpreting *esse ipsum* merely as *esse suum* or some particular *esse* would not allow for any logical connection between God’s (3) being *esse ipsum* and (4) his being source of all *esse*, but Boethius seems to view these as connected. A better interpretation of (3), which reveals his debt to Hilary and Augustine, is suggested by a passage in *Consolation of Philosophy* 4.6.

(III.11) The generation of all things and the progress of mutable natures and whatever in any way is moved is arranged in mode, cause, order, and form from the stability of the divine mind. This, in the citadel of its simplicity, stands governing the multifarious mode of composing things—which mode when seen in the purity of the divine intelligence is named “Providence,” but when referred to those which move and dispose, was called by the ancients “Fate.” . . . For Providence

¹⁰⁸ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus*: “Sed ipsum esse omnium rerum ex eo fluxit quod est primum bonum . . .” (LCL 74:46 [Ins. 124–25]).

¹⁰⁹ Boethius, *CEut.* 3: “Deus quoque et οὐσία est et essentia, est enim et maxime ipse est a quo omnium esse proficiscitur” (LCL 74:90 [Ins. 87–89]).

is the divine reason itself, constituted in the highest ruler of all, who directs all the rest; but Fate is a disposition inhering in mobile things by which Providence binds things in their orders. For Providence encompasses all alike, however diverse, however infinite. . . . The unfolding of the temporal order united in the foresight of the divine mind is Providence, but the same union distributed and unfolded in temporal things is called "Fate." Though these are diverse, the one depends on the other. For the order of fate proceeds from the simplicity of Providence.¹¹⁰

Here, although Boethius does not use the word *esse*, he connects the infinity embraced by God to his universal causality. God causes all things in their mode, cause, order, and form. The infinity of diverse things according to mode, cause, order, and form, then, is found in two ways: first, as encompassed simply in the divine mind; second, as Fate, inhering in an unfolded way in caused things themselves. As in Hilary and Augustine, for Boethius, God's universal causality is logically linked to his containing all things and, thereby, being infinite. In God, this infinity is simple, but in things, it is unfolded—that is, expressed in the diverse forms, modes, causes, and orders of things. The infinity of the divine mind is causally prior to the infinity of things, since Fate depends on Providence.

With this notion of the divine, simple, and infinite precontainment of all form (and mode, cause, and order) in mind, let us return to *De Trin.* 2 as quoted in (III.7): Immediately after calling God (1) form, (2) truly form, (3) *esse ipsum*, and (4) that from which *esse* is, he gives a premise flagged by the inference sign "for" (*nam*): "For every being is from form [Omne namque esse ex forma est]." We already saw about how this premise was understood. A statue is said to be (*esse dicitur*) the representation of an animal on account of its form or shape. In other words, the *esse* (i.e., definition or substance) of a thing is predicated of it on account of its form. But what God's form is, as we have now seen, is the one that creates all beings by giving them their form, mode, cause, and order—their inner form and accidents—and, therefore, precontains all forms in a higher and totally simple way. Since this infinite totality of form is that from which not merely any particular *esse* follows—as *being* a man or *being* a statue—but from which all *esse* follows, God, who precontains all such forms in a simple identity with his own form, is not any particular *esse*, but rather absolute being (*esse ipsum*). As we already saw Boethius explain in *De Trin.* 4 (III.5), implicitly applying the axiom *omne*

¹¹⁰ Boethius, *CP* 4.6 (LCL 74:340 [Ins. 22–44]).

esse ex forma est to God: “But these categories are such that in that in which they are they bring it about that the thing itself is said to be [*esse . . . dicitur*], dividedly indeed in the rest of things, but in God, conjointly or unitedly.” Whereas in creatures *esse omnium* or the word *esse* left completely indeterminate does not signify any one creature, but the whole diverse totality of what creatures are in an indefinite (infinite) way, these same words, as applied to God, signify what God is—his one and undivided substantial predicate—in an indefinite (infinite) way.

To avoid confusion about Boethius’s reasoning in *De Trin.* 2, a few points of clarification are in order. First, although Boethius—like Hilary—does seem to draw a logical connection between God causing all being (*esse omnium; esse*) and his being *esse ipsum*, nevertheless, there is no evidence that this is because he adhered to the naïve principle that whatever a thing causes may be predicated of the cause itself. If that were the case, God could be called a tree or a stone, since he causes these. Rather, as we have now seen, the logical connection between God causing all being and his being called *esse ipsum* is implicitly mediated by two factors: first, the fact that being (*esse*) follows from form; and second, the fact that God causes the being (*esse*) of creatures through the mediation of their forms, which are images of (or participations in) the separate forms contained undividedly in the divine mind. Since *esse* follows from form and God contains in an undivided way all the forms of creatures on account of which creatures are said to be (*dicitur esse*), God is not said to be (*dicitur esse*) this or that, but rather *esse ipsum*. It is worth keeping in mind that, according to Hilary (III.8), this is a name for God proportioned to human understanding; it makes sense, then, that it is in a way intelligible by reference to created being.

Second, though Boethius—like Hilary and Augustine—sees God as containing all things, his parallel assertion of unqualified divine simplicity clearly excludes any pantheistic or panentheistic understanding of this doctrine in which either God is made up of the world or otherwise depends on the world as a substance on its accidents.¹¹¹ Just as Hilary (followed by Augustine) ruled out a pantheistic interpretation of divine infinity—which would treat God as an infinite body containing all things as parts of himself distinct from

¹¹¹ For an overview of these two umbrella doctrines in relation to the Catholic tradition, see E. R. Naughton and S. Sia, “Panentheism,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [NCE], 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 820: “[Panentheism] utilizes a real distinction between the essence of God and God’s existence, or considers God as having accidents really distinct from God’s nature. . . . Not only is the world dependent upon God, but God also is to some extent dependent upon the world”; see also E. R. Naughton, “Pantheism,” in *NCE*, 10:825–28.

each other and from the whole—by the assertion of God’s absolute simplicity in which everything in him is the same as everything else and as the whole, so too Boethius in (II.7) stated that God is not composed of *this* and *that*, but is that which he is (*id quod est*). In *Consolation of Philosophy* (III.11), he conveys the same point on a cosmic scale by contrasting God’s encompassing of all things in the “the citadel” of “simplicity” of the divine mind, on the one hand, with the “unfolding” of these diverse things in their “multifarious” modes of “composing” immanent in the things themselves. Although all being is in God as in its principle, it is not in him in the same way it is in creatures, but in a higher (i.e., simpler) way. This is illustrated by the quality of goodness, which is both in creatures and in God, but in diverse ways. As we have already seen, even though both God and creatures are good in their very *esse*, a creature’s goodness “is not like him by which it is [i.e., God]. For he . . . is good insofar as he is [in eo quod est]; yet, he is nothing else besides [*praeterquam*] good.”¹¹² As Boethius made clear in *Contra Eutychen* (II.1), although we can speak of God, in a way, as the “substance” of all things insofar as he is a principle of their subsistence and serves as their foundation (*subministrat*), nevertheless, this must not be taken as if “he himself is put under [supponeretur] the rest of things as a subject.”

It might be objected that the doctrine of divine simplicity, rather than exculpating Boethius of pantheism, exacerbates the charge. If all being is in God but, according to the Boethian doctrine of divine simplicity, everything in God is identical to God (i.e., is the whole substance of God), then all being (i.e., every created thing) is the whole substance of God. We can only speculate as to how Boethius would respond to such an argument, since he does not himself address it. What we can say with certainty is that, following Aristotle, he acknowledged several equivocal senses of “in,”¹¹³ and that later

¹¹² Boethius, *De hebdomadibus* (LCL 74:155 [lns. 134–36]).

¹¹³ On the equivocity of “in,” see Aristotle, *Phys.* 4.3.210a14–24 (Ross ed.); *Metaphys.* 5.23.1023a23–25 (Ross ed.); Boethius, *In I cat.*: “Something is said to be in another in nine ways . . . as the rule of the city is in the emperor . . . Thus, there are nine ways in which something is said to be in another, as [something is] in a place, as in a vase, as a part [is] in a whole, as the whole [is] in the parts, as the species [are] in a genus, as the genus [is] in the species, as [something is] in the end, [as the rule of cities is] in the emperors, [and] as form [is] in matter”—“Dicitur enim esse aliquid in aliquo novem modis . . . ut in imperatore esse regimen civitatis . . . Novem igitur modis aliquid in aliquo esse dicitur, ut in loco, ut in vase, ut pars in toto, ut totum in partibus, ut in genere species, ut in speciebus genus, ut in fine, ut in imperatores, ut in materia forma” (*PL* 64:169C–175B) (the use of “in” for how the order of a city is in the ruler is obviously closest to how he characterizes the precontainment of things “in” divine providence); Peter of Spain, *Tractatus, Called Afterwards Summule Logicales*,

theologians such as Aquinas used the equivocality of “in” to show that, even though all the effects of God are “in” God and everything “in” God is the divine essence itself, nevertheless, no creature is “in” the divine essence.¹¹⁴ Since creatures are “in” God only through their likenesses and not in their proper nature, from the fact that there is no diversity in God, it only follows that *the likenesses of creatures* in God are identical to God, not that creatures themselves are so.¹¹⁵ This is not problematic, since the divine essence itself is what is the supereminent likeness of each creature.¹¹⁶

IV. Conclusions

In section I, I noted that it is normal for those writing on Boethius in the secondary literature—even those who think his identification of God with *esse* is an identification of God with form—to attribute the notion of “existence” to Boethius in their glosses or translations of his text. There, I suggested the ambiguity inherent in this way of reading him: Are we attributing to him Frege’s particular quantifier? Are we attributing to him a notion of non-predicative positing or asserting (à la the Herbartian school, Brentano, Matthen, de Rijk, and the later Kahn)? I argued that there is reason to doubt that any of these notions of “existence” are to be found in Boethius. But if so, what does it mean to attribute this word to him when he himself hardly ever uses its Latin cognate?

Hadot’s great studies of Boethius provided strong evidence that, when Boethius identifies God with *esse*, his word *esse* should be taken in the sense of what his Neoplatonic forerunners called *existentia* (ὑπαρξίς); the point of this identification was to indicate God’s total simplicity—his being, as it

ed. Lambert Marie de Rijk (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972), III, c.2, 27:7–29:5; Lambert of Auxerre, *Logica (Summa Lamberti)*, ed. Franco Alessio, 1st ed., Sezione a cura dell’Istituto di Storia della Filosofia 19 (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1971), III, 66–67; Aquinas, *In IV phys.*, lec. 4, nos. 2–3 (Leonine 2:155); Aquinas, *In V metaphys.*, lec. 20, nos. 1080–84.

¹¹⁴ Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 3.

¹¹⁵ Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1; cf. ad 2 and Bonaventure, *In I sent.*, d. 36, a. 1, q. 3, resp., in *Opera Omnia*, vols. 1–4 of 10 (Florence: Ad claras aquas [Quaracchi], 1882–1889).

¹¹⁶ I am grateful to David Clemenson for highlighting some of the pantheistic and logical difficulties alluded to above, especially insofar as we attempt to translate what I have claimed is Boethius’s doctrine into standard logical notation. While the problem of how to formalize the inference from God as creator of all being to God as *esse ipsum* cannot be addressed here, it is hoped that the points of clarification sketched above provide sufficient guardrails for doing so.

were, a subsistent predicate uncomposed with any determining or narrowing subject or object. But, for Boethius's potential Neoplatonic sources, as Kahn pointed out, *existentia* (ὑπαρξις) had something to do with Aristotle's theory of the categories, with designating the categories collectively. My own argument is generally consistent with his view, but it spells out what precisely this means in terms of a broadly Aristotelian technical vocabulary, on the one hand, and a Latin patristic exegesis of Exod 3:14, on the other. As I have argued, Boethius's account of divine simplicity is not primarily one that negates the composition of general and determining notions in God, as in Hadot's reading (though, if asked, he would almost certainly deny that sort of composition as well [see quote II.6]), but one that negates the composition of substance and accident in God, paralleling the exegesis of Exod 3:14 given by Augustine. Moreover, whereas the Neoplatonic reading of Boethius's God treats his theology of God as *esse* as purely negative—as expressing the One's not being composed with anything else—the Hilarian-Augustinian exegesis of Exod 3:14 that Boethius seems to have embraced adds to this negative theology a cataphatic element: God's precontainment of all beings. *Qui est* is a name for the incomprehensible divine nature proportionate for human understanding not merely because it does not tell us anything determinate about God and expresses his utter lack of composition (apophatic aspect of divine name), but also because, by indeterminately (i.e., infinitely) including in its signification all that may be predicated whatsoever, it indicates God's infinite precontainment of all being (cataphatic aspect of divine name).

If there is anything in Boethius analogous to the modern way in which “existence” is used, it is the notion of “substance” in the sense of “what a thing is to be” (*quod est esse*)—that which is signified by its definition. When we say without qualification that something “is,” we mean that it participates its substance or whatness. God's bestowing of *esse* on all things through his will is understood primarily as his giving substance to them (*esse aliquid in eo quod est*) and secondarily as his giving them the accidents according to which they are in some additional way (*esse aliquid*).¹¹⁷ In this sense, it can be legitimate—if misleading—to translate *esse* in Boethius as “existence.” We should never, however, identify *esse* with form, since *esse* is what is predicated of a thing substantially or definitionally (e.g., a statue's being a representation of an animal) on account of form, not the form itself (e.g., a statue's shape). As I have noted above, none of this should be taken in the

¹¹⁷ See Moreschini, “*Subsistentia*,” 96n41: “In the other passages of Origen οὐσιώω has still more clearly the meaning of ‘to give substance,’ i.e. ‘to create.’” As noted above (note 105), for Augustine, to create is to cause the inner form of a thing, to give it a nature.

sense that *esse* is the name for some metaphysical principle or that it simply *means* substance; rather, the point is that *esse* is used idiomatically for what is predicated of a thing by “is,” but what is predicated of a thing simply is its substance or whatness (*quod est esse*)—its definitional predicates. Thus, *esse*, said alone or with a possessive noun, is used idiomatically to speak about a thing’s substance or whatness, considered as predicated. But *esse* said with qualification may be used to signify the accidents of a thing, since these are what is predicated of a thing secondarily, assuming the prior participation of substantial predicates.

An accurate reading of Boethius’s theological tractates is helpful for overcoming unnecessary tensions between modern scriptural exegesis and patristic theological doctrines. Joseph Ratzinger is representative of the mainstream of twentieth-century exegetes in the narrow sense that he emphasizes the dialectical character of the divine name in Exod 3:14—the way in which the name given to Moses is precisely the refusal to give a name.¹¹⁸ Like many scholars, Ratzinger opposes this reading with the “metaphysical” and “Platonic” readings of the text by the Church Fathers and Scholastics.¹¹⁹ While the reading of Boethius I have given above is certainly metaphysical, it is not so in the way that Ratzinger seems to be primarily rejecting. It does not identify the essence of God with some metaphysical principle hypothesized by one particular philosophical school, such as the Gilsonian act of existing. As I have interpreted Hilary, Augustine, and Boethius, they could readily assent to the common view today that the answer to Moses from the burning bush was precisely a refusal to give an answer—to say which specific god, nature, or even being was speaking. Rather than seeing God’s answer in the bush as identifying him with some particular philosophical concept or principle, like the act of existence or form, they interpreted the text on the basis of an everyday idiom. The name “He who is” (*Qui est*) names God’s substance in the sense that it denotes what he is, but the utter indeterminacy or infinity of the signification of the predicated *esse* (“is”) is proportioned to communicate to human reason the impossibility of determining or

¹¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, esp. 116–33; Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:143. Cf. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy (Gifford Lectures 1931–1932)*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 51: “In order to know what God is, Moses turns to God. He asks His name, and straightway comes the answer. . . . No hint of metaphysics, but God speaks, . . . and Exodus lays down the principle from which henceforth the whole of Christian philosophy will be suspended.” For a recent survey of twentieth-century interpretations of Exodus, see Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*, 13–58.

¹¹⁹ E.g., Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:349; cf. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, esp. 119, 130.

narrowing the one named to any one category of things, to any one kind of being, since he precontains all he creates and creates all that is—all that of which *esse* (“is”) can be said.

Of course, there are certain metaphysical commitments presupposed in this reading, which—though perhaps controversial for some philosophers of the last three centuries (Willard Van Orman Quine and David Hume, for example)—would have found wide acceptance by many classical and medieval philosophers and, I suspect, by many non-philosophers. It presupposes, for instance, a distinction between substance and accident—that is, between what is true of a thing essentially and non-essentially. It also presupposes a broad analogy between the creator God of Exodus and a craftsman or king who must, in some sense, have his effect “in” himself before carrying it out. For Boethius and Augustine, the Aristotelian categories are the concrete scheme for conceptualizing all that is—all God creates and precontains—but a commitment to these categories is not strictly essential to their basic interpretation of Exod 3:14. Hilary—whose exegesis of Exod 3:14, I have argued, lies behind both Augustine and Boethius’s identification of God with *esse*—does not make use of the ten categories in his account of God’s simple, infinite precontainment of all the things that are. Likewise, Boethius’s own account (III.11) of Providence’s simple precontainment of the diverse things unfolded in fate is not overtly made in terms of the categories, but in terms of form, mode, order, and so on.¹²⁰ Where we do seem to find a significant philosophical commitment presupposed in the patristic exegesis of Exod 3:14 is in the decision not to take the indefinite signification of “is” in a Parmenidean direction (so that only one thing is, whereas the world of diversity becomes non-being or mere appearance) or a pantheistic direction (so that all the things that are—either now or through time—are nothing else than modes or parts of God or aspects of his consciousness, à la Spinoza or Hegel). Hilary, Augustine, and Boethius’s decision not to give such alternative readings may reflect their being persuaded by Platonic arguments for

¹²⁰ Cf. Gilbert of Poitiers, *In CEut.* 3.61, in *The Commentaries on Boethius by Gilbert of Poitiers*, ed. Nikolaus Häring, Studies and Texts 13 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1966), 284 [lines 73–79]; Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 5, in *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus exposition* (Turin: Marietti, 1950), 263, 268, 273–74, where, again, God is called “being” on the grounds that he simply precontains all that is, but all that “is” is enumerated in a way that goes far beyond what falls properly within the ten categories. Gilbert is, here, commenting on Boethius’s passage quoted at (II.1) above—God’s serving to found (*subministrat*) all things—and he is clearly paraphrasing Pseudo-Dionysius even though he does not mention him by name.

the One's absolute simplicity and by a Hebrew-Christian commitment to genuine otherness of creatures from each other and from God.

The rereading of Boethius given in this article, therefore, significantly reduces the "metaphysical" baggage needed to understand his admittedly metaphysical claim that God is *esse ipsum*. As such, it lends support to the burgeoning trend among scriptural scholars¹²¹ to push back against the twentieth-century dichotomy between the authorial meaning of Scripture, on the one hand, and speculative metaphysical-theological doctrines, on the other.¹²²

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¹²¹ For recent defenses of a more metaphysical, Augustinian-inspired interpretation of Exodus, see Jonathan Platter, "Divine Simplicity and the Scripture: A Theological Reading of Exodus 3:14," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73 (2020): 295–306; Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*; Michael Allen, "Exodus 3 after the Hellenization Thesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009): 179–96. For more general defenses of reading traditional divine attributes into the literal sense of scriptural texts, see Janet Soskice, "Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is There a Metaphysics of Scripture?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 2 (2006): 149–62; Soskice, "The Gift of the Name: Moses and the Burning Bush," *Gregorianum* 79, no. 2 (1998): 231–46.

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