

The Iconic Meaning of Hypostasis: Notes on a Definition of Icon

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The notion *hypostasis* (—literally from ancient Greek, “sub-stand”, an underlying reality or substance) performs a regulative function for iconic syntax, which is why the iconic image is built in order to uncover the *hypostatic identity* of image (visible) and prototype (invisible). Eastern patristics has not lost the distinction between two ontological principles, both existing indispensable to one another—nature (essence) and hypostasis. In brief, this duo means: hypostasis transcends nature and nature is obeyed to hypostasis, and in the same time no depersonalized nature is possible. Here we are going to concern this dialectics from an iconographic viewpoint.

1. A Being Otherwise than Individual Nature

The analytic historian of philosophy Alain de Libera argues the Heideggerian thesis on “oblivion of being” in order to explain a more important blind spot in history of ontology. Neither scholasticism nor modern philosophy has completely forgotten the question of being, but actually there has been a blind spot in history of ontology. Alain de Libera called this blind spot by the allusion “oblivion of hypostasis”¹. Likewise, Toma’s twofold ontology did not skip the question of being, and Schelling devoted his latest works on philosophy of existence. Opposing to Hegel’s essentialist ontology, Schelling introduced in his late works the concept “history of being” establishing the statement that the Olympian history of gods was a point of departure for a history of being, a statement foregoing the Heideggerian thesis.² Thence, de Libera concludes, there has not been an oblivion of being but an oblivion of hypostasis.

In ancient use “hypostasis” is one of names of the eternal essence. Chalcedonian Christology confirms a being otherwise than essence and nature. In a widely spread use it is synonymous with personality, face and image. I mean the purpose of this new notion is to bring together visible and invisible, bodily and spiritual, image and prototype, and in fact humanity and Divine. The hypostasis is a personal initiation by which man is able to ascend to God, and transform his own human nature, while in the same time God descends in a human nature, in an image of creation.

Edward Zeller in his *Platonic Studies* comprehended Platonic as a hypostasized notion: “...hier wird das Eins nicht mehr als Begriff, sondern als Ding behandelt”³. What does “hypostasized” mean in his interpretation? The hypostasized is said to be a mental process of turning or prescribing a notion into being. From his viewpoint, the most similar words to “hypostatization” are the notions “reification” and “individualization”. Often an individual nature is a misleading grasp as hypostasis, but the individual nature is the given or involuntary inherited, what comes into appearance without personal motion. However, reducing hypostasis to individual means the first one to be induced from the category *genus* as we found in the ontological “Porphyrian tree”. The genuine Christological meaning of hypostasis reveals the being, existence and essence, by a *face*. Hypostasis is the Face that is able to bring into being the essences, it is otherwise than essence, nature, genus etc. When hypostasis was reduced to individual one the face was defaced and was mixed with the *individual nature*. Vice versa, the face is a sign for a spiritual over-individual being, outside of logical genus–species distinction rules. Zeller’s reading of “hypostatization” just gives us evidence for the lost meaning of the Patristic notion “hypostasis”.

The reason of Monophysites’ misunderstanding of hypostasis comes from an indistinguishability between hypostasis and individual nature, because they were convinced that the nature was not separated from hypostasis. Thence the individual is nothing other but nature, or, more precisely, it is just an individual nature.

From etymological viewpoint, in Latin “hypostasis” was translated by *persona* which means a “theatric mask” (from the ancient-Greek *prosopon*), a synonymy that leads away from the genuine Christological meaning of hypostasis. On the other hand, neither the Latin translation of hypostasis as *persona* by Boethius did shed light on the independence of hypostasis from the individual nature. Boethius was aware of the lack of lexical capacity in Latin language for a more relevant semantic equivalent of the Greek word “hypostasis”. As the irrelevance of *persona* has been forgotten after Boethius, the controversial issues about the translation of hypostasis have remained.

2. St. John of Damascus on Hypostatic Identity: A Notion of Iconic Transfer

In his eminent work *Theology of Beauty*, the Russian Orthodox Christian theologian Paul Evdokimov claims the hypostasis is a hidden beholder behind the iconic surface. He reminds us how the Fathers were consolidated about the point that we see in icon of Christ is neither human nature, nor Devine nature, but His Personality or Hypostasis.⁴ In fact we see the both in one face. The main premise of his statement stems from a conclusion given by St. John of Damascus in his *Philosophic Chapters*: the icon is a hypostatic identity between an image and its prototype. Among the pages of *Philosophic Chapters*, there is a

little bit devoted to explanation of the definition aforementioned. The essence of a depiction he explains in XVI chapter of *Philosophic Chapters* where Damascene says: “a depiction of man adopts the name of man, but the definition (ὄνομα) of man it does not adopt”⁵. This statement repeats the said by Damascene in *Homilies*: the icon is an identity by hypostasis (by name) between image (depiction) and prototype (definition). The dialectics of hypostatic identity between image and prototype presupposes the image is a visible prototype, and the prototype is an inexhaustible origin of each image-making. Or when an iconographer draws an icon he intends to reach contemplatively the prototype. If the prototype is a saint person then iconographer depicts not only a historical, but an eschatological person, a person consecrated in the Kingdom of Heaven. In such a way the prototype cannot be conveyed in the image exhaustively.

The chapter XVI from *Philosophic Chapters* expands the application of philosophical logics, despite of its pagan roots, as a strict language for description of dogmatic truths. The ontological interpretation by Damascus is based on a main altering of the basic structure of Aristotle’s metaphysics. He replaced the primary substance with hypostasis and this move resulted in the ontological distinction essence–hypostasis⁶. How did he define hypostasis? The first resemblance with Aristotle’s *ἰδέα* is that hypostasis exists independently and by a particular way, where particular means not “a part of” but a wholeness. He counts to the set of words similar to hypostasis the names “individual” and “face”. They are called by Damascus “synonymous definitions” of hypostasis. The last ones *vis-a-vis* homonymous definitions perform the logical function of “reversibility”, i.e. when the definition includes features essentially determining the existence of subject. The homonymous definition that Damascus offered says hypostasis is “something differentiated by number”. The hypostases are the existing ones in which being essence and existence are indispensable to one another. Every hypostasis is something individual as far as it possesses a “most generous genus” or “essential aspectual difference” and accidental features along. Individual properties carry out a distinction among the variety of hypostases. And something crucial that Damascus adds: “we are not able to perceive the very hypostasis, we receive the hypostasis in Peter, Paul etc.”⁷

According to St. John of Damascus, as far as hypostasis is an individual or particular being its meaning is approachable to the logical consideration. Besides the individuals there are abstract objects as genus, species, accompanying properties (accidents) which being is intelligible (conceivable object). As it was shown above, if we take into consideration the logical structure of hypostasis as an individual being, we would reduce its genuine being to a cluster composed of unique accidental properties. To get rid of this situation, Damascene claims the accidental properties that belong to hypostasis cannot be quantified, because they “do not disclose neither what the subject is, nor how it is, but who it is”⁸.

In St. Maximus we find a more definite distinction between hypostasis and nature as he confirms the irreducibility of hypostasis to nature more strictly than Damascene did, in theological and ontological aspects. In his terms there are “logos of hypostasis” and “logos of nature” – both ontological principles.⁹

The announcement of the seventh Ecumenical Council (known as O *ecumenicum*) affirms that the veneration of an image is transferred on the prototype. Damascene’s definition of icon just reconsidered and broadened this statement giving a logical explanation of its meaning. One of his contributions to the theology of icon consists in shedding light on how the transfer takes place. Damascene responses that the transfer is provided by a hypostatic identity of image and prototype. *An iconic identity is available only if there is not an assimilation of essence by the substratum of image*. If this condition is outstanding the veneration of image falls into idolatry: a lack of ontological distinction between image and prototype. Then the image becomes substratum of divine properties.

There is an argument else in the examination of iconic transfer. It stems from the theological teaching of energy (ἐνέργεια) in Eastern tradition of Orthodox Church. The notion *ἐνέργεια* was philosophically used in Aristotle’s metaphysics and later it was unfolded by Neoplatonism. Energy is a *process* of realization of *ἰδέα* as an actuality or temporal activity. It contains the form or the *eidos* into itself throughout the whole process of actualization of essence because *ἰδέα* is the holder of the existential purpose of a thing. The realized *ἰδέα* equals to *ἐνέργεια* and the realized *ἐνέργεια* equals to *entelechy* (ἐντελέχεια). The notion *ἐνέργεια* was introduced in Patristics as well and reveals a transitive meaning relevant for an iconic transfer as far as an image takes part in the energies belonging to the prototype. The concept of *ἐνέργεια* there is of utmost significance for Damascene’s definition of icon because it makes the transition between image and prototype meaningfully clear and accomplished: the image is actualization of the prototype, and makes the invisible comprehensible by the senses.

St. Maximus claims hypostasis to be a unique being defining how the natural energies are used.¹⁰ Human faculties are established by nature; but how they are expressed or directed depends on the free will stemming from hypostatic being. Each *ἰδέα* belongs to some nature and the nature belongs to a hypostasis, but the appearance of natural faculties depends on *how* a person uses his natural faculties. In order a faculty to come into appearance, it is necessary for a person to use his nature properly, in accordance with the *ἰδέα* of the nature.

3. Florensky versus Panofsky: On Iconic Space

The classical studies of iconic space, *The Inversed Perspective* by Pavel Florensky and *Perspective as Symbolic Form* by Erwin Panofsky, both discussed controversial issues about the nature of iconic space. Florensky and Panofsky released their studies at the same year (1927) and gave approximately similar response to the question “How does the space in a painting make sense?”. Both contributed to the same extent for revealing the implicit meaning of a painting’s space. Florensky conducted an analysis of the non-linear, heterogeneous character of iconic space, and Panofsky explained the transcendental origin of central perspective in Renaissance paintings from a historical viewpoint.

The crucial point of departure caused a theoretical gap between them was the answer of a question: Does the Byzantine art rely on the Euclidian optics or not? According to Panofsky, Greek-Roman art is based on the Euclidian optics genuine principle because its space structure is “tectonic and corporal”.¹¹ He claims in the Byzantine art there is the

same optical basis for perception as in the Greek-Roman art. In opposite, the linear perspective, he adds, did not share the Euclidian principles of a space perceptively arranged, because the linear space is mathematically founded. The linear perspective is thought to be independently established from whatever corporal presence in it as a homogenous space, comparable with the Newtonian and Kantian one. Panofsky claims the Byzantine painting did not cease the link with tectonic space as it did not know the compressing of objects in depth. Depth was accomplished by a vanishing point. Barely Romanic art copes with the tectonic space introducing the plain space in depiction and reaches a new form of Medieval church painting. The rising of plane depiction became the reason that “turns the tectonic form into ornamental” and it initiates the total interruption with Hellenic tradition, a trend later developed from relief plastics.¹²

In accordance with Panofsky, Florensky admits the Kantian trait of the central linear perspective as far as it gives an *a priori* rule for producing form and size of each item in space. What Florensky means is that the central perspective is a pure spatial insight existing *a priori* or before each possible experience only if it is comprehended as a deliberately supposed mathematical matrix for contraction of objects in depth. According to Boris Raushenbach, the central perspective has a lot in common with Euclidian optics than Byzantine art has, due to in the optics objects in close plan are presented deformed in a similar to linear contraction way¹³. In terms of Florensky’s outlook, the Byzantine iconic space is arranged in a direction opposite to the linear perspective one, thence he called the iconic space architectonics “inverted perspective”.¹⁴ Despite of some features of axonometric projection that can be found in the Byzantine iconographic space, the leading principle of spatial syntax of icon is not based on Euclidian optics due to the inverted projection of size in close plan. What does it mean? Often in Byzantine icons an object disposed behind the others has a bigger size than the objects in front of us. Or when groups of people are presented, people behind others are large by size compared to those presented after them. In a strict sense, there is not any difference between close and deep plan.

The depth presented in the linear perspective by a deformation of objects is occupied in iconography by a transcendent background, covered by a golden light medium, interpreted as an eschatological symbol. By the golden background any aspect of an outer light source disappears, and it is not possible to depict any air phenomena. On the other hand, we can find in Byzantine icon a variety of points of view that rise the question how many beholders are there of the iconic image? A simple object as a chair, for example, can be presented from two or more points of view. A decision resulted in the statement that there is a multi-punctual perspective¹⁵. That means that God is who sees the world and the nature through the iconic surface. Therefore, to look at the icon means to face the hypostasis on the opposite side, or if it is seen by a hidden beholder behind the iconic surface, to face a Divine beholder. Then the icon is not a picture contemplated by me, but it makes me staying ahead Him. This state discloses a *reciprocity* of seeing following on from the inverted perspective which supposes that the orthogonal lines converge not on a pictorial horizon, but on a percipient looking at the icon. I take into account the inverted perspective as a spatial metaphor of hypostasis. As mentioned above, we have inherited by St. John of Damascus a definition of icon based on the notion of “hypostasis”: the icon

is a hypostatic identity between image and prototype. The hypostatic identity between image and prototype became a canonic rule in Byzantine iconography, as we shall see below. Panofsky called the linear perspective “unambiguous and uncontroversial space suggesting an endless extension”, and “a spatial code” as well.¹⁶ Thus, it appears a mathematical symbol of infinity leading to a transfinite nature, not a symbol of hypostatic being. On the other hand, this statement may properly be grasped as a vignette of Cartesian “*res extensa*”, but also means that the linear perspective secularizes iconography. Why? If the light golden medium presents a transcendent background of a sacral presence, the linear infinity presents absence of divine intervention. The linear perspective is an uncontroversial space where the otherness of this sensorial universe is excluded. As a symbolic form it is an endless set given as an optic network (*camera obscura*) that rules the way of producing the size and form of each member of the set. Objects in the linear space are quantified and deprived from their own being outside the mathematical matrix. The most significant consequence for the theology of icon is the statement that the linear perspective becomes a symbol of actual infinity as far as it is an illustration of Giordano Bruno’s thesis for the infinity of sensorial universe. Therefore, the central linear perspective becomes a pictorial counterpart of *the endless* sensorial universe and makes the ontological difference between creation and Creator vague. The visual spatial metaphors for a *transcendent* infinity: so-called “mandorla” and “nimbus”, are overshadowed by the mathematical symbol of actual infinity of sensorial universe—the linear perspective. Florensky claims the linear perspective is an optical illusion that insists on a reality where there is no way for Divine intervention. Panofsky claims the linear centralized space frees our senses. Their statements escalate in a contest between the transcendent infinity and the endless sensorial universe.

The linear perspective, says Sergey Averintsev, notes the transition in Renaissance culture from a thinking in substances into a thinking in functions (a thesis proclaimed by Ernst Cassirer as well): “it means, the item is symbolically presented, neither as genuinely being, nor as a self-closing *eidōs*, but as a sensorial visual presentation by a beholder, as induced by itself legally caused optical effect”.¹⁷

The icon has retained the mimetic character of Greek-Roman art as far as it imitates the prototype, not the nature. In icon, the nature is presented hypostasized, it is a created being, or its phenomena are signs of a Creator. In the Middle ages, the nature was placed between man and God, it was a *media* until the time of studying it, then gradually nature became an independent reality. The autonomy of nature in painting depends on how iconic space is arranged. When the items in painting are presented as an optical function, then they cannot be witnesses for a Creator. On its own, the central perspective expands the possibilities for the art of scenery in advance because it adopted the nature autonomous.

If we apply the regulative function of hypostasis considering Simon Ushakov’s innovation in composition and coloring of the seventeenth-century Russian iconography, we will find out the naturalistic features of his approach: the individual nature prevailed over hypostasis. Gradually he settled a portrait manner of face modelling, clothes lines following the bodily forms and skin color.¹⁸ Being dedicated to the natural coloring,

Ushakov highlights the priority of the nature more than the hypostatic upper-individual spiritual being. Thus he has taken iconography away from the leading rule of hypostatic identity between image and prototype because treated the prototype as an individual nature, or as accidental cluster of natural properties. The image became closer to the representative historic genre and the iconic transfer to the invisible prototype was removed. The naturalistic identity substituted the hypostatic identity. We have no longer to pay attention to the invisible but to the natural features represented an individual nature. When the hypostasis as the inner image was conceived as existing separately from individual nature, then the manner of Ushakov remained only a naturalistic identity between image and prototype. In such a way the ontological difference between image and prototype was diminished. The image became representative or it lost the intermediary *cult* function retained in the Byzantine iconography. The iconic meaning of hypostasis makes sense of cult ascending to the invisible.

Following the 82nd rule of Trullo Council, the notion “hypostatic identity” constraints the symbolic presentations in iconography because it requires a direct occurrence of the sacred image, not an image that presented a meaning indirectly related with its content. If we take into consideration the iconographic topics “Pentecost” and “Epiphany”, in the figures of the Holy Spirit “dove” and “fiery tongues” we are not able to apply the rule of hypostatic identity because they are symbols revealing the Glory of God, and not isomorphic depictions. That is why the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit does not correspond to any created kind or form. Besides traditional iconographic topics, an innovative topic named “The Holy Family” raises the question: How can we talk about “family” as far as Christ received human nature only from the Virgin, and thus show us new creation? The divine Hypostasis of the Father does not allow this compositional and thematic innovation in the theology of icon to be settled because He is a supernatural, bodiless and pure spiritual hypostasis.

Considering icon, the iconoclast’s statements are founded on the lack of discernibility between individual nature and hypostasis, and resist to an ontological difference between face and body. Making clear the difference between nature and hypostasis, Chalcedonian theology provided a division of image and material in iconography. The extending of ontological difference gives more clear comprehension that the veneration of the image is provided by the hypostatic identical prototype.

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