

WHAT IS “PERSONALITY”? AN UNDEREXAMINED PARAGRAPH IN SPINOZA

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In Spinoza’s *Cogitata Metaphysica* (known in English as the *Metaphysical Thoughts*) we read the following paragraph:

The will of God, by which He chooses to love Himself, follows necessarily from His understanding, by which He knows Himself. But we do not know how His essence and His understanding, by which he knows Himself, differ from His will, by which he chooses to love Himself. Nor does the term *personality*, which the theologians use to explain this, escape our notice. Although we are not ignorant of the term, we are ignorant of its significance, and unable to form any clear and distinct concept of its content. Nevertheless, we consistently believe in the beatific vision of God, which is promised to faithful ones that this would be revealed to them.¹

Spinoza may disavow any knowledge of what the theologians mean by the word *personalitas*, but that leaves us with the question: What does it mean? Or, more precisely, what is the theologians’ use of the word of which Spinoza disavows any knowledge?

Surprisingly, this question has received virtually no attention. Writers do suggest answers, but seemingly without awareness that there is a disputed question here. In particular, there are two basic answers. Most present one answer or the other; at least one person advocates both. But in every case, there is little or no argumentation supporting the proposed answer. The issue is of some importance, for our interpretation of the paragraph depends on the meaning given to the word in question.

The two answers are as follows: *Personalitas* may mean “the condition of being a person” or “the characteristics that are distinctive

of persons,” as opposed to animals or inanimate objects. We might now say “personhood.” On this interpretation, the question is whether God is a Person, or whether there is only an impersonal God. This is the meaning given to the word by Harry Austryn Wolfson, Nancy Levene, H. H. Britan, Marilena Chauí (in one publication), Clement Webb, E. E. Harris.²

The other answer is that *personalitas* refers to the characteristics that distinguish one Person of the Holy Trinity from the others. This is the answer advocated by Carlos Fraenkel and Yitzhak Melamed.³

The only writer who shows an awareness that there are two possible answers seems to be the above-mentioned Marilena Chauí, who refers both of them in a subsequent publication.⁴ But even here we find only a passing mention in an endnote. Her discussion in that note, brief though it is, at least addresses the issue. She cites one relevant source for the Trinitarian interpretation, namely, Augustine’s *De Trinitate*. However, with regard to the concept of personality as personhood, she notes (quite correctly) that Spinoza elsewhere denies the personhood of God, and she then merely reads that denial into the paragraph in question.

In considering this issue, we have one other text that needs to be taken into consideration: In Letter 12A, Spinoza writes to Lodewijk Meijer, “Finally, it eludes me what the theologians mean by the word ‘personalitas,’ but I am aware of the meaning attached to

2 Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 329-330; Levene, *Spinoza’s Revelation*, 97-98; Britan, “Introduction,” xxxv-xxvi; Chauí, “Ser Parte e Ter Parte,” 83; Webb, *God and Personality*, 70; Harris, *Salvation from Despair*, 380.

3 Fraenkel, “Could Spinoza Have Presented [...]?” 22 n.49; “Christus Secundum Spiritum,” 146).

4 Chauí, “A instituição do campo político,” 320-321, n. 20. I thank Professor Chauí for directing me to this passage.

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1 Spinoza, *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Part 2, Chapter 8, Paragraph 1; *Complete Works*, 200.

it by philologists.”⁵ The word ‘philologists’ here translates the Latin *critici*, a synonym of *philologi* and *grammatici*. One of their functions is “*glossarum explicatio*,” i.e., the explanation of unusual words.⁶

In this paper I will argue that the second meaning is the correct one: Spinoza is talking about *personality* in the specifically theological sense of *the state of being a person of the Holy Trinity*. I argue first, negatively, that there are good reasons to reject the interpretation of personality as personhood. Secondly, there are good reasons to support the Trinitarian sense of “personality.”

Why should we care about this point? Aside from the intrinsic interest in understanding what Spinoza wrote, my proposed answer is, I suggest, indicative of Spinoza’s interest in and knowledge of Christianity, down to what one might consider a fine point of Christology.

As for the negative, Spinoza says quite clearly that he knows what philologists mean by the term. That would be the ordinary meaning of the term—that is, what we might now call “personhood.” There is nothing particularly theological about this concept, although theologians (along with everyone else) may make use of it. So “personhood” cannot be the meaning at issue here. This simple argument, brief though it is, seems to be fairly conclusive, as far as it goes.

This leaves us with the positive task of finding a possible usage of the word *personalitas* that is unique to the theologians. And there is, indeed, such a usage. Thomas Aquinas describes it in his *Disputed Questions on Power*. Aquinas writes, “The fact that *person* designates one thing in God and another in man must be referred to a difference in suppositivity rather than in the signification of the word *person*: and equivocation arises from a difference in signification but not in suppositivity.”⁷ In

5 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 792.

6 Lehrs, *De Vocabulis Philologos, Grammatikos, Kritikos*, 1,11.

7 “[H]oc quod persona aliud significat in Deo et homine, pertinet ad diversitatem suppositionis magis quam ad diversam significationem huius communis, quod est persona. Diversa autem suppositio non facit aequivocationem, sed diversa significatio.” Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, Q. 9, Article 4, repl. obj. 6 [vol. 3, 217]; Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*.

particular, *person* as applied to God refers to a kind of relation, whereas when applied to human beings and angels, it refers to something absolute.⁸ These relations within God, Aquinas says, are called by some *personalities*.⁹ Here we have, clearly stated, the difference between the philologists’ and the theologians’ usages of the word *personalitas*.

This usage of the word *personalitas* is abundant in Roman Catholic writers, as may be easily seen from an internet database search,¹⁰ but it is found also among the Protestant writers of Spinoza’s time and place, whose version of Christianity is the principal one that Spinoza had to deal with. For example, Johannes Hoornbeek, professor of theology at the Universities of Leiden and Utrecht, writes:

We know that God is one in essence and one in name [...]. The persons are distinguished from [God’s] essence not as distinct things or entities, but by personality, that is to say¹¹ the manner of subsisting, *τρόπῳ ὑπάρξεως*, with the invariable unity and identity of essence remaining unchanged.¹²

Dutch Protestant writers of Spinoza’s time also note the distinction between the meaning of “person” as applied to God and to creatures. Paul Voet, son of the famous theologian Gijsbert Voet, for example, provides an extensive discussion of the point in his *Philosophia Naturalis Reformata*.¹³ Antonius Walaeus, citing

8 Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, Q. 9, Article 4, obj. 6 (vol. 3, 111).

9 Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, Q. 8, Article 4, answer (vol. 3, 92).

10 If searching digitized texts from the seventeenth century and before, which make use of the long ‘S,’ one must often use the form *perfonalitas* and its derivative forms as a search term.

11 Reading *seu* in place of *ceu*. I thank Mark Reynolds for this suggestion. The reading found in the text yields no intelligible meaning.

12 Hoornbeek, *Pro Convincendis et Convertendis Judaeis*, 401. Cf. Hoornbeek, *Institutiones Theologicae*, 718, §§28-30: “Having considered God’s essence, we now turn also to the persons, which are three, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, which are of one and the same essence, being distinguished only by personalities.” See also, among other Protestant writers of Spinoza’s time and place, Maccovius, *Loci Communes Theologici*, 243; P. Voet, *Theologia Naturalis Reformata*, 117-118; D. Voet, *Compendium Pneumaticae*, 46-47, 175-176; Desmarets, *Dissertatio Theologica*, 366-367.

13 P. Voet, *Philosophia Naturalis*, 57-61, 124-125.

Augustine, is perhaps closest to Spinoza. He writes that the term *personality*, as applied to God, cannot truly be understood.¹⁴ Walaeus is willing to use the word anyway; Spinoza is not.

The points brought up by Spinoza in this paragraph of the *Cogitata Metaphysica* have their home in a theory of the Trinity propounded by St. Thomas Aquinas, followed by many others. The idea is that God understands himself, and in understanding himself he has an internal Word – the object of His knowledge. God as Knower is the Father; God as Known is the Son. The operation of God’s will leads him to love Himself – sometimes it is said that the love is between the Father and Son – and this love is the Holy Spirit. These two aspects of the origin of the persons are called the *processions*. This explanation of the Trinity is, one must note, in no way intended as a proof or rational argument for the conclusion that there is such a Trinity. The Trinity can be known only by faith; in theological terms, it is a *mystery*.¹⁵ The account in terms of understanding and love merely gives us a way of conceiving that which can be known only by faith. Indeed, if we were to use natural reason, there would be no reason to stop at two internal operations: we could say that God not only knows and loves Himself, but that He requests things of Himself, proposes things to Himself, prays to Himself.¹⁶ Each of these self-relations would result in a different “Person,” and there would be not just a Trinity but an infinity of Persons.

These details relevant to this concept of the Trinity are put forward by Thomas in many places.¹⁷ Catholics were thus naturally aware of this way of thinking about the Trinity, but Protestants took note of it as well. A very clear statement of it is found in Antonius Walaeus’ *Enchiridion Religionis Reformatae*, a prominent theological textbook.¹⁸ On a more popular level, the same line of reasoning can be found in a didactic poem by Joost van den Vondel,

often called the Shakespeare of Holland.¹⁹ The Vondel connection is particularly important, because Vondel’s poetic account is referenced by Spinoza’s friend, Jarig Jelles, in his *Confession of the Universal Christian Faith*, a book that Spinoza knew and (apparently) approved of.²⁰ Spinoza in any case would probably have learned of this theory of the Trinity from members of the Amsterdam Jewish community, many of whom had lived double lives as Conversos in Portugal and were thus educated in Roman Catholic theology.

It seems clear, then, that Spinoza is talking about this concept of the Trinity, based on God’s self-knowledge and self-love, and the concept of *personalitas* by which the Persons are said to be distinguished.

There is one further reason to reject the personhood interpretation and accept the Trinitarian interpretation. Those who argue in favor of the former view point out the distinctness of intellect and will in persons, something indeed not present in Spinoza’s God.²¹ However, the paragraph in the *Cogitata Metaphysica* emphasizes the distinctness of understanding, intellect, and *essence* in God. Essence seems not to be in play in the personhood interpretation. It is, however, very much in play in the Trinitarian interpretation.²²

What then of the wry remarks with which Spinoza concludes the paragraph? Spinoza says he can form no clear and distinct concept of *personalitas*. That is hardly a surprise: the concept is part of the mystery of the Trinity, and a mystery is something that transcends human

14 Walaeus, *Enchiridion Religionis Reformatae*, 236.

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.32.1, Answer.

16 On God’s prayer, see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, p. 7a.

17 For example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.27.3, Answer; Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, ch. 37 and 52.

18 Walaeus, *Enchiridion Religionis Reformatae*, 30.

19 Vondel, *Bespiegelingen*, 748.

20 Jelles, *Belydenisse*, 48 (pp. 26-27 of the first ed.); Spinoza, Ep. 48B. The editor of the first edition of the *Belydenisse* transcribes the relevant verses of Vondel’s *Bespiegelingen* on pp. 165-166. On Spinoza’s approval of this work of Jelles, see the editorial notes to Ep. 48A and Ep. 48B in Spinoza, *The Letters*, 252 n. 245 and 255 n. 248. Spinoza’s statement – ambiguous in itself – that Jelles need make no changes is actually in response to Jelles’ question as to whether the *Belydenisse* (“Confession”) agrees with the truth of the matter. In suggesting no changes, Spinoza would therefore appear to commit himself to the view that the *Belydenisse* does agree with the truth.

21 See the above-cited passages from Wolfson, Levene, Britan, et al.

22 See, for example, the quotation from Hoornbeek’s *Pro Convincendis et Convertendis Judaeis* presented above.

understanding and can be known only by faith—in other words, for Spinoza, it is something that cannot be known at all.

The reference to the “beatific vision” clinches the points just made. The beatific vision is indeed, as Spinoza says, the vision of God that will be granted to those who die free of mortal sin. In this state they will “see the divine essence by intuitive vision [...] with no mediating creature, serving in the capacity of an object seen, but divine essence immediately revealing itself plainly, clearly, and openly, to them.”²³ The particular promise mentioned by Spinoza was made by Pope Eugenius IV in the Papal Bull “Laetentur Coeli” of 1439, where it is stated that those who die without mortal sin will “see clearly the one and triune God Himself, just as He is [...]” (Denzinger, *Sources* §693). This view is confirmed by Reformed theologians as well, though they differ in detail.²⁴ We don’t need a beatific vision to understand what is meant by calling God a person, as opposed to impersonal: most would say that that is a clear concept of natural theology. We do need a beatific vision to pierce through the cloud of mystery and perceive clearly the nature of the Trinity.

We may, then, at least provisionally conclude as proposed: Spinoza is referring in this paragraph to the Holy Trinity and the concept of *personalitas* invoked by theologians in an attempt to explain the distinctions between the Persons of the Trinity. There is, however, one last consideration that must give us pause. We have seen that Meijer did substantial editorial work on the *Cogitata Metaphysica*. It is possible that the paragraph on which we are focusing is one of those edited by Meijer, following Spinoza’s instructions in *Ep.* 12A? Spinoza there instructs Meijer that he should eliminate the statement, “the Son of God is the Father himself,” if it seems to him that it would give offence to the theologians. Meijer evidently did think so, for the statement does not occur in the *Cogitata Metaphysica* that was published. Instead

we find a more subtle statement to the much same effect. It may be, then, that it is Meijer, not Spinoza, who wrote the sentences we have been discussing. If Meijer did write the words in question, can we still attribute to Spinoza such a knowledge of Christian theology? I would answer that whether Spinoza or Meijer inserted the lines under discussion here, Spinoza would have known about. Surely an author as careful as Spinoza would make a point of knowing what was in his own book, even if he had to learn it was edited by Meijer. Spinoza in general showed considerable concern for the reception of his books and knew that he would have to defend controversial statements. So if Meijer did happen to write these lines, Spinoza would have all the more reason for making sure he understood them. Our conclusion, then, remains in place.

This conclusion sheds light on a related problem, the paradox that for Spinoza, God’s attributes are identical yet different. Orthodox Christians must explain how each of the Persons is God, and yet the Persons are distinct. Spinoza must in parallel manner explain how each of the Attributes is God, and yet the Attributes are distinct. Structurally, the two problems are one. Indeed, Spinoza must have known that the Medieval philosophical Hebrew word for “Person [of the Trinity]” is *to’ar*, which also the word for “attribute.”²⁵ These considerations

25 Implicit in Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:50 (ed. Shlomo Pines [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], p. 111): “If [...] someone believes that He is one, but possesses a certain number of essential attributes, he says in his words that He is one, but believes Him in his thought to be many. This resembles what the Christians say: namely, that He is one but also three, and that the three are one; explicit in Saadya Gaon, *Emunot ve-De’ot*, Bk. 3, ch. 5, p. 92; Ḥasdai Crescas, *Bitul Ṭkere ha-Notsrim*, chapter 3, p. 251, with commentary by Joseph ben Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov on pp. 268-270; Profiat Duran, *Ṭgeret ’Al Tehi ka-’Avotekha*, in *Melo Ḥofnayim*, ed. Abraham Geiger (Berlin: W. Wilzig, 1840), Hebrew section, p. 43; Joseph ben Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, Commentary to Profiat Duran, *Ṭgeret ’Al Tehi ka-’Avotekha*, in *Ṭgeret Ogeret*, ed. Isaac Akrish, 2nd ed. (Breslau, 1844): unpaginated, but the relevant passage begins on the page with the numeral 2 at the bottom; Profiat Duran, *Kelimat ha-Goyim*, 15; Leon Modena, *Magen va-Herev*, 21, 25. And see further references in Crescas, *Bitul*, p. 131, n. 1. Spinoza was surely acquainted with the above-cited passage from Maimonides. As for the other writers cited here, we cannot know if he read their works; they are adduced to show that the word *to’ar* was used as the translation of the word *person* [of the Trinity], a fact that Spinoza likely did know.

23 Pope Benedict XII, “Benedictus Deus” (1334), in Denzinger, *Sources* §530.

24 Walaeus, *Loci Communes*, 526-527; Polyander, *Synopsis*, Disputation 52, Theses 21-22. The *Synopsis* was a very popular and often reprinted textbook for Reformed theology students: see Belt, 148 and Werkgezelschap, *Projectbeschrijving*.

provide a bit of support for those who see in Spinozism a philosophized Christianity, or at least something approaching it.²⁶

Be that as it may, Spinoza’s serious interest in the details of Christian theology deserves our attention when it comes to interpreting his frequent though scattered statements on Christian topics.



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26 Jelles, ‘Voorreeden’, 3v – 4v; Klever, *Definitie van het Christendom*; Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 383-384; Hunter, *Radical Protestantism*; and see Lech Szczucki’s discussion of Christophorus Sandius in “Sandius,” 381.

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