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THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF JOHN DAMASCENE'S CONCEPT OF HYPOSTASIS¹

The notion of hypostasis is one of those basic notions which are significant for both philosophy and theology. The treatment of hypostasis by St. John of Damascus (650-749) should be considered an important contribution to the formation of Christian thought, in spite of the fact that his teaching is generally treated today as a compilation of Neo-platonic commentaries and patristic texts. Damascenus' works were (and still are) not only a handbook of orthodoxy for the Eastern Church. They were also extensively used in the West, from the 12th century², by such great philosophers as Peter Abelard, Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. John of Damascus emerges as the last Greek author accepted as an authority by Western Latin Christianity³.

John Damascene's concept of „hypostasis” was influenced and inspired by theological needs. The anthropological and Christological theses concerning being composed of different natures raise questions about the essence and structure of such *composita*. In the opinion of John Damascene, a problem lies in the wrong identification of nature with hypostasis⁴. Thus, one should search for the exact meanings of the above terms as well as for the

¹ This paper has been presented at the XVth International Conference on Patristic Studies (Oxford, August 2007). More detailed analyses on account of Damascenus' conception of hypostasis and its relation to such ontological notions as substance, nature, form and individual can be found in my paper *Hypostasis – the principle of individual existence in John Damascene*, which will be published in 2009 issue of „Journal of the Eastern Christian Studies”.

² The two parts of *Fount of Knowledge*, namely *Dialectica* and *Expositio*, were translated into Latin. Around 1150 *Expositio* was translated by Burgundio of Pisa and by the middle of twelfth century a partial translation by Cerebranus became available. Robert Grosseteste produced a translation of *Dialectica* around 1240.

³ Cf. M. Frede, *John of Damascus on Human Action, the Will, and Human Freedom*, in: *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, ed. K. Ierodiakonou, Oxford – New York 2002, 67-70.

⁴ Cf. *Expositio fidei* 47, 39-40, ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes Damaskos* (= Kotter), Bd. II, Berlin 1973, 112.

differences between them. Damascenus defines „nature” as a qualified substance, i.e. the substance of a certain kind, which is specified by the essential difference, such as rational or irrational, mortal or immortal⁵. In turn, a hypostasis is an entity, which first and foremost possesses existence in itself. What is more, it is the only type of entity, which *actually* subsists in itself and is discerned as a distinct individual due to its peculiar features⁶. Other kinds of entities, such as substance and nature, do not exist independently, but subsist in hypostases⁷. This interpretation of hypostasis will allow John Damascene to define it as the principle of existence and the union of natures in one individual entity.

According to John of Damascus, since essential differences constitute substance and assure the existence of species, it is impossible for an essential difference and its opposite to be in the same subject⁸. Therefore, a substance cannot be made of two substances formed of diverse specific differences. Correspondingly, it is impossible for a nature, in the meaning of substance qualified by essential differences, to be made of two substances of different kinds, i.e. of two natures⁹. Likewise, it is impossible for the substance of man to be comprised of being rational and irrational, or mortal and immortal. Since nature *as such* cannot possess in itself diverse essential differences, the compound nature will not preserve its composites, but will change and alter them¹⁰.

On the contrary, it is possible for one compound hypostasis to be made of diverse natures¹¹. A hypostasis, in this case, is considered to be the principle of union of its components, namely natures. Natures are united according to hypostatic union (καθ' ὑπόστασιν ἕνωσις), which is the union of natures or the union of nature and hypostasis in one hypostasis. This union is the union of composition, which allows a mutual association of the parts without damage to

⁵ Cf. *Dialectica* 31, 4-7, Kotter I, Berlin 1969, 93: „φύσιν δὲ οὐσίαν εἰδοποιηθεῖσαν ὑπὸ τῶν οὐσιωδῶν διαφορῶν καὶ μετὰ τοῦ ἀπλῶς εἶναι καὶ τὸ τοιῶσδε εἶναι ἔχουσαν, εἴτε λογικὴν εἴτε ἄλογον, εἴτε θνητὴν εἴτε ἀθάνατον” (ed. and transl. F.H. Chase: Saint John of Damascus, *Writings*, Washington 1999, 55: „nature was substance which had been made specific by essential differences so as to have, in addition to *simple being, being in such a way*, whether rational or irrational, mortal or immortal”).

⁶ Cf. *Dialectica* 31, 29-34, Kotter I 94-95: „Ἡ δὲ ὑπόστασις θέλει ἔχειν οὐσίαν μετὰ συμβεβηγῶτων καὶ καθ' ἑαυτὴν ὑφίστασθαι καὶ αἰσθησίᾳ ἦγον ἐνεργείᾳ θεωρεῖσθαι. Ἀδύνατον δὲ δύο ὑποστάσεις μὴ διαφέρειν ἀλλήλων τοῖς συμβεβηγῶσι καὶ ἀριθμῶ διαφέρειν ἀλλήλων” (Chase, *Saint John of Damascus*, p. 56: „The hypostasis must have substance together with accidents and subsist in itself and be sensibly, that is, actually, perceivable. It is furthermore impossible for two hypostases not to differ from each other in their accidents and still to differ from each other numerically”).

⁷ Cf. *Dialectica* 43, 8-11, Kotter I 108.

⁸ Cf. *Dialectica* 5, 103-111; 48, 20-21, Kotter I 63; 113.

⁹ Cf. *Dialectica* 42, 16-18, Kotter I 107-108.

¹⁰ Cf. *Dialectica* 67, 39-45, Kotter I 140.

¹¹ Cf. *Dialectica* 42, 18-26, Kotter I 108.

any of them¹². Natures are united as components of one hypostasis, but they are not united in nature. Therefore, there is no creation of a compound nature which consists of different essential features. The united natures remain essentially unchangeable in themselves and different from each other. The principle that allows such a union appears to be the actual and independent being of a hypostasis as a concrete individual of a certain species. As long as actual being belongs to a hypostasis and not to a nature, the hypostasis remains the principle of being and of the existence of its components¹³. The united natures exist via participation in a hypostasis. In other words, the way of existence of the united natures is not the being of a compound nature, which might be a subsisting entity, but rather the being of hypostatic components that subsist in a hypostasis. The different natures, then, participate in the one existence of a hypostasis and constitute one entity. However, they do not compose another nature. For this reason, each of the essential characteristics of the respective natures, such as differences and essential properties, are kept unchangeable and unmixed.

Characteristic differences of the united natures, by which each of them is distinguished from the others, become the differences of the compound hypostasis. As a result, the compound hypostasis essentially differs from its components. One can speak of one nature, to which hypostasis belongs, yet only in the sense of a common species¹⁴. In this way, the hypostasis of a human that contains two natures, i.e. soul and body, receives differences of each of them. As a result, such a hypostasis essentially diverges from both of the natures. A human is neither a pure soul, nor just a body. However, there is no such thing as a compound humane nature. A human hypostasis unites in itself two different natures, which remain unchangeable and unmixed. Furthermore, since hypostasis is the „initial constitution of the being of each particular entity in itself” (ἡ ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ τῆς ἐκάστου ὑπόξεως κατ’ αὐτὸ σύμπηξις)¹⁵, the constitution of a compound hypostasis is the way of being of its components. In other words, each of the united natures subsists only as a component of its hypostasis. The hypostasis, in turn, is the principle of being of its components and *as such* persists even after their separation. If the natures become separated, it appears that each of them remains as a composite of a certain hypostasis. Accordingly, the human hypostasis, composed of soul and body, preserves the substances and differences of its compounds as distinct and their properties as unconfused, while the principle of their union remains indivisible. Even if the soul is separated from the body in death, the hypostasis of both remains one and the same¹⁶.

¹² Cf. *Dialectica* 65, 104-113, Kotter I 135-136.

¹³ Cf. *Dialectica* 67, 2-8; 21-22, Kotter I 139.

¹⁴ Cf. *Expositio fidei* 47, 39-49, Kotter II 112-113.

¹⁵ Cf. *Dialectica* 67, 21-22, Kotter I 139.

¹⁶ Cf. *Dialectica* 67, 8-24, Kotter I 139.

According to Ioan Ica, John of Damascus' doctrine reveals a type of „existential realism in which essence is indissociable from existence, is always the essence of something else”. This type of existentialism exceeds Platonic transcendental essentialism, which considers existence to be an accident of essence¹⁷. To be sure, the parts of *Fount of Knowledge* that concern the issues related to the concept of hypostasis are generally considered to be dependent upon the works of Leontius of Byzantium († 543/544) and Maximus Confessor († 662)¹⁸. Yet, Damascenus' interpretation of hypostasis as a principle of being and of its structure appears to be closer to Christian Medieval philosophy than to the writings of his predecessors. To a certain extent, his conception anticipates the theories of existential and essential individuation, i.e. *sui generis* individuation. According to the first theory, elaborated, for instance, by Thomas Aquinas, the principle of individuation of particular substances is their existence or the act of existence. The second theory holds that individuation is due to a *sui generis* principle of things whose function is only to individuate and has no characteristics of its own. John Scotus' doctrine of *haecceitas*, or in other words „thisness”, might be considered as another version of this theory¹⁹.

Damascenus' interpretation of the notion „hypostasis” is essentially important for Christology, since it precludes heretical accounts of the nature of Christ²⁰. According to John, even if, as heretics believed, Christ had a compound nature after the union, He would have neither been of divine nor of human essence. For the compound nature cannot be of the same essence as any of the natures out of which it is compounded²¹. In contrast, since a hypostasis exists in itself and is the principle of being, two natures can be united and exist in one hypostasis distinctly and unconfusedly. Thus, the divine and the human nature are hypostatically united in the one hypostasis

¹⁷ Cf. I. Ica, „Dialectica” *Sf. Ioan Damaschinul – Prolegomena Logico-Filosofica a „Dogmaticii”*, „Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa” 40 (1995) 121.

¹⁸ Cf. A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford 2002, 48, 113-115 and 157. According to Leontius the notion of „hypostasis” denotes the individual substance (ἄτομον οὐσίαν: *De sectis*, PG 86, 1193A). Maximus Confessor (*Epistula* 15, PG 91, 557D-560A) and Leontius Byzantinus (*Adversus Nestorianos et Eutychianos* I, PG 86, 1280A) also gave some emphasis to existence in itself, which is proper only to hypostases. Cyrillus of Alexandria (*De Trinitate* 13, PG 77, 1149B) also describes the hypostasis as a particular entity, which has real being (τὸ εἶναι πραγματικῶς), in relation to a nature, which is something general and comprehended conceptually.

¹⁹ I have spoken about the subject in more details in the *International Conference on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, Fordham 2006. More detailed analyses can be found in my paper *Hypostasis—the principle of individual existence in John Damascene*, which will be published in 2009 issue of „Journal of the Eastern Christian Studies”.

²⁰ Cf. Louth, *St. John Damascene*, p. 158-161.

²¹ Cf. *Expositio fidei* 47, 10-16, Kottler II 111.

of Christ. Yet, in Him not only are natures united to each other hypostatically, but also the hypostasis assumes an additional nature. The pre-existent hypostasis of God the Word assumed a perfect human nature, which is the human soul and the body. The hypostasis of God remains the principle of the existence for both. Both natures do not subsist as independent existence, but rather as hypostatic components of one hypostasis of the Son of God²². According to Damascenus, this union is essential in the sense that the union is real and not imaginary. The two natures have been united with each other without a change or alteration and have remained perfect. Moreover, their essential differences have been preserved. Therefore in Christ are united and remain perfect and unchangeable the divine and human natures with all their characteristics²³. Subsequently, both natures from the beginning had existence in one hypostasis. Thus, each of them remains in possession of the hypostasis of God the Word, even during the separation in death. The hypostasis of Christ persists always one and the same, and it preserves in itself hypostatically united divine and human natures²⁴.

Damascenus' teaching also has remarkable consequences for anthropology. The claim that the human hypostasis is the principle of being and existence of its components implies that a soul is not a form of the human individual. Rather the constitution of the compound hypostasis might be considered as the *form* of an individual human. Indeed, John of Damascus defines the human soul as a special kind of matter. According to his doctrine, only God is immaterial²⁵. The soul as such, then, is a particular *ex definitione* and its individual being should not be proven. Since a human soul exists due to the existence of a particular human hypostasis, the soul *as such* could belong solely to *this* particular man. Therefore, the reincarnation of a soul is absolutely impossible. Moreover, since the being of human nature is the being according to the existence of the compound hypostasis, the existence of a human after separation of the soul from the body in death could not be complete and perfect. This gives a foundation for philosophical and theological explanations of the resurrection of the human body.

In the view of Andrew Louth, Damascenus' concept of hypostasis does not expose signs of so called „personal ontology“, which can be found in such authors as Theodore of Raïthu and Boethius²⁶. Still, it should be indicated that Damascenus distinguishes between the terms „hypostasis“ and πρόσωπον. Obviously both of these terms apply to the entities of individual nature. Ho-

²² Cf. *Expositio fidei* 53, 7-17, Kotter II 128.

²³ Cf. *Expositio fidei* 47, 19-74, Kotter II 111-15.

²⁴ Cf. *Expositio fidei* 71, 24-29, Kotter II 170-171; see also B. Schultze, *Byzantische-Patrische Ostchristliche Anthropologie (Photius und Johannes von Damaskus)*, OCP 38 (1972) 172-194.

²⁵ Cf. *Expositio fidei* 26, 2-5, Kotter II 75.

²⁶ Cf. Louth, *St. John Damascene*, p. 51-53.

wever, John of Damascus, when defining and describing the *person*, emphasizes actions of a certain individual: πρόσωπόν ἐστιν, ὅπερ διὰ τῶν οἰκείων ἐνεργημάτων τε καὶ ἰδιωμάτων ἀρίθμητον καὶ περιορισμένην τῶν ὁμοφυῶν αὐτοῦ παρέχεται ἡμῖν τὴν ἐμφάνειαν (= „a person is one who by reason of his own operations and properties exhibits to us an appearance which is distinct and set off from those of the same nature as he is”)²⁷. The Angel Gabriel is given as an example of a person, who is known as a distinct person due to his conversation with the Mother of God. Another example is St. Paul, who is seen as being distinct from the rest of humans, since he spoke from the stairs of Areopagus to people. Thus, the term πρόσωπον seems to signify a certain hypostasis of rational nature, which is distinct from other rational hypostases by its own actions and characteristics. Consequently, Damascenus’ definition of being a person exceeds the famous definition of Boethius: *persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*²⁸.

Undoubtedly, John of Damascus considered the problem of hypostasis in accordance with the Christian tradition. However, he reviewed the issue from logical and ontological perspectives, which allowed him a philosophical explanation and justification for hypostatical union. His concept not only defends and proves substantial consistency of the orthodox dogma of union of natures in one hypostasis, but also opens doors for further discussion on many theological issues. The above analysis shows that John Damascene’s doctrine requires a new analysis in a deeper philosophical context, which may lead to a reconsideration of the originality and value of his teaching.

TEOLOGICZNE KONSEKWENCJE KONCEPCJI HIPOSTAZY JANA DAMASCEŃSKIEGO

(Streszczenie)

W przeciwieństwie do opinii wielu współczesnych badaczy, według której nauka Jana Damasceńskiego stanowi kompilację neoplatonickich komentarzy i tekstów patrystycznych, przez przedstawicieli Zachodniego i wschodniego Chrześcijaństwa Damasceńczyk był uznawany za jeden z największych autorytetów w kluczowych problemach filozofii i teologii. Jeden z owych problemów stanowiła interpretacja pojęcia hipostazy zgodna z potrzebami teologii. Damasceńczyk uznaje hipostazę za zasadę istnienia tworzących ją komponentów. Niezależne aktualne istnienie,

²⁷ Cf. *Dialectica* 44, 2-9, Kotter I 109, Chase, *Saint John of Damascus*, p. 67.

²⁸ Boethius, *Liber contra Eutychem et Nestorium de duabus naturis* 3, 4-5, ed. and transl. H.F. Stewart – E.K. Rand: *The theological tractates*. Loeb Classical Library 74, Cambridge 1962, 84.

które przynależą hipostazie, pozwala na hipostatyczne zjednoczenie różnych natur w jednym indywiduum. Zjednoczone natury istnieją przez partycypację w jednej i tej samej hipostazie jako jej komponenty, lecz pozostają odrębne i niezmiennie. Taka interpretacja filozoficzna pozwoliła Damasceńczykowi wyjaśnić teologiczne problemy związane z uznaniem ludzkiej jednostki za złożoną z różnych natur oraz z przyjęciem unii hipostatycznej Chrystusa.

W niniejszym artykule poddane są analizie teologiczne konsekwencje wynikające z filozoficznej koncepcji hipostazy Jana Damasceńskiego. Procedura ta pozwala właściwie ocenić oryginalność i znaczenie koncepcji Damasceńczyka, która winna być uznana za ważny wkład w rozwój myśli chrześcijańskiej.