CHAPTER FOUR

BASIL’S CRITIQUES OF EUNOMIUS’S THEORY OF NAMES

The last three chapters examined the Heteroousian theory of names and its sources. In this chapter we turn to Basil’s theory of names. Since Basil articulated his to refute Eunomius’s, I begin my discussion of Basil’s with his critiques of his opponent’s. We need to know what Basil found wrong with Eunomius’s in order to arrive at a full appreciation of the alternatives that he offered. Basil’s critiques are both substantive and reductiones ad absurdum. Nonetheless, by both forms of argument he reveals what he thinks a good theory of names should be. Identifying these criteria will enable us to understand the goals that Basil set for himself in formulating his own theory of names and to evaluate whether he has met them.

Basil criticizes five aspects of Eunomius’s theory of names, all of which were discussed in Chapter One: (1) that a name uniquely applied to God reveals his substance, which is to say that it defines the divine essence; (2) that such divine names are synonymous; (3) that divine simplicity necessarily entails essential predication; (4) the epistemological principle whereby different names imply different substances; and (5) the identity of name and substance.

The incomprehensibility and ineffability of God’s substance

We saw in Chapter One that the Heteroousians claimed to know both the name and the substance of God—‘unbegotten’ and unbegottenness.1 Basil denies the possibility of knowing either, affirming the ineffability and incomprehensibility of God’s substance. He thereby followed a venerable Christian tradition whose adherents included the second-century Apologists, as well as Arius and Athanasius, whom I discussed in Chapter Three.2 His refutation of this Heteroousian claim takes two related but distinct approaches: the demonstration that it

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1 See pp. 28–38.
2 See pp. 98–115.
is impossible for human beings to know the substance of God, and charges of Heteroousian arrogance for claiming that they do. As we will see, the latter is woven into the former in the three arguments that Basil employs.

(1) His first argument is that there is no means by which we may come to know God’s substance. Basil challenges the Heterousians to acknowledge the source of the knowledge they claim to have. He sees only two possibilities: the common notions of philosophy or scripture. If the Heterousians claim a common notion, Basil replies that “this tells us that God exists, not what God is.” Therefore, the common notions of philosophy do not grant us knowledge of the divine substance. After he dismisses this avenue, Basil asks whether scripture is the basis for their claim. He cites several scriptural testimonies to show such knowledge is beyond human capacities:

Isn’t it clear that the great David, to whom God manifested the secret and hidden things of his own wisdom [see Ps 50:8], confessed that such knowledge is inaccessible? For he said: I regard knowledge of you as a marvel, as too strong—I am not able to attain it [Ps 138:6]. And when Isaiah came to contemplate the glory of God [see Is 6:1–3], what did he reveal to us about the divine substance? He is the one who testified in the prophecy about Christ, saying: Who shall tell of his begetting? [Is 53:8]. Then there’s Paul, the vessel of election [Acts 9:15], who had Christ speaking in him [2 Cor 12:2–4]. What teaching did he bequeath to us about the substance of God? He is the one who peered into the particular reasons for the economy and cried out with this voice, as if the vastness of what he contemplated made him dizzy: O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments, and how unsearchable are his ways! [Rom 11:33]. If these things are beyond the understanding of those who have attained the measure of the knowledge of Paul, how great is the conceit of those who profess to know the substance of God?

Hence the Heterousians display nothing but arrogance in claiming to exceed the knowledge of Paul.

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3 Eun. 1.12, 8–9 (SChr 299: 212 Sesboüé): ἀλλ’ αὕτη τὸ εἶναι τὸν θεόν, οὐ τὸ τί εἶναι ἡµῖν ὑποβάλλει. I discuss this passage more fully in Chapter Five, p. 157.
4 Eun. 1.12, 10–11.
5 Eun. 1.12, 11–29 (SChr 299: 212–4 Sesboüé).
6 Eun. 1.12, 1–7 (SChr 299: 212 Sesboüé): “Generally speaking, how much arrogance and pride would it take for someone to think he has discovered the very sub-