CHAPTER FOUR

COMPARISON OF INTERPRETATIONS

4.1. Introduction

Part of the problem during the Nestorian and Miaphysite controversies in the fifth and sixth centuries was that terms like φύσις and ὑπόστασις carried different meanings for different authors, even within the writings of one and the same author. This was bound to lead to misunderstandings. But when these terms or their translations, like ‘nature’ and ‘hypostasis’, are employed in present-day literature about these controversies the ambiguities often return, which adds more misunderstandings. And the use of terms like ‘person’ and ‘subject’ in this literature compounds the problem, due to the modern connotations these words carry. In order to reduce the equivocality, a number of terms will be defined in this chapter, which can be recognized by their being written in small capitals. In the remainder of this study, these small-capital terms will be used to facilitate a comparison of statements of various authors, both from ancient and from contemporary times. For this purpose, more ambiguous terms like φύσις, ὑπόστασις, ‘nature’, ‘person’, ‘subject’ will be ‘translated’—if possible—into the small-capital terms. In the second part of this chapter, such a translation of words into small-capital terms will be executed for the interpretations of Cyril’s christology by modern authors, so that it will become more obvious where they are in line with each other, and where they diverge.

4.2. Small-Capital Terms

4.2.1. Definition of the Small-Capital Terms

Cyril of Alexandria’s metaphysics, as described in the previous chapter, can be a starting-point for developing a set of small-capital terms. One of the most basic terms would be reality, which can be used to denote anything that has real existence, whether Cyril’s secondary
substances, his common natures, individual substances and natures, differentiae, propria, inseparable and separable accidents, radiated factors. A reality is not an abstraction, it does not exist merely in thoughts, in contemplation.\(^1\) A Greek word which may have a similar meaning is πρᾶγμα,\(^2\) while sometimes χῶμα is used in this sense.\(^3\)

As we have seen, Cyril considers the secondary substances and the common natures as realities. For these, the terms common substances and common natures will be employed. A common substance is a secondary substance which is not regarded as an abstraction, but as really existing, as a reality. It denotes only what belongs to the definition of the substance, that is, the essence, which includes the differentiae, and the potentiality for individual existence. The propria and the inseparable attributes are not part of the substance, but they are things round the substance. Virtually synonymous with common substance is common nature. It, too, indicates a reality which is common to all individuals of the same species or genus, and does not include the propria and the inseparable attributes. The difference between the two terms is that common nature is reserved for materials, plants, ‘living beings’ (ζῶον), angels, and God, while common substance is also applied to works of craftsmanship; and common nature has the connotation that a principle of operation is at work.

\(^1\) Strictly speaking, this would imply that, if ‘nature’ denotes a reality, ‘two natures in thought only’ would be a contradiction in terms. According to common parlance, however, this expression means that in reality there are not two natures.

\(^2\) See, for example, Thesaurus, 116C: the divine attributes apply equally to Father and Son, “except only for the name and the reality (ἁρμονίας τε και πρᾶγμας) of ‘Father’ and ‘Son’”; ibid., 120D: “if someone wants to apply the words and the realities (ὁμοία τε και πρᾶγματα) of the humanity to the naked God the Word, before the inhumanization (ἐνανθησαθεντῶν), he acts severely impiously”. A very clear example can be found in ibid., 321AB, where a distinction is made between the names (ὄνοματα) and the realities (πράγματα) they refer to. For instance, the heaven (in the sense of firmament) is a visible reality (πρᾶγμα ὀφειλόν), while the name ‘heaven’ cannot be seen, but only heard (μόνον ἀκοινοτόν). The same applies to a man and the name ‘man’.

\(^3\) Other examples include ibid., 324B, 325B, 448A; Dial. Trin. II, 438d; III, 485d.

Hadot (1980) writes that in ancient Greek philosophy the word πρᾶγμα, as opposed to ὄνομα or λέξις, often means ‘sense’, ‘concept’ or ‘notion’. Especially from the example in Thesaurus, 321AB, it is obvious that with Cyril it can also have the meaning of ‘reality’ in opposition to ‘name’ or ‘word’. In each case, the context will have to be taken into account in order to come to a good rendering of πρᾶγμα.

\(^3\) Dial. Trin. I, 404c: “the name and the reality of mediation”: τὸ τῆς μεσιτείας ὄνομα τε και χῶμα; ibid., I, 413d: “the reality (χῶμα) of birth” (of the divine Son); ibid., II, 419b: “the name and the reality of ‘Father’”: τὸ Πατρί ὄνομα τε και χῶμα.