CHAPTER EIGHT

GILBERT OF POITIERS ON THE APPLICATION OF LANGUAGE TO THE TRANSCENDENT AND SUBLUNARY DOMAINS

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As is well known, throughout the years readers of the work of Gilbert of Poitiers have had enormous difficulties interpreting his views. Especially his ideas on how language can be used for both creature and the Divine are hard to uncover. The major problem in this case is of course what happens to the meaning of terms when they are transported from a domain we are familiar with to the supranatural.

Fortunately a lot of work has been done to clear up the obscurities, not the least by Professor de Rijk,1 to whom this paper is respectfully dedicated. On the other hand, we are not out of the woods yet. Among other things, Gilbert’s ideas on the unity of Christ are still sources of confusion.2

My intentions in this contribution are of a modest nature only. What interests me is to see in what ways Gilbert, when speaking of divinity, distinguishes between different uses of language. In order to do so I shall look into the things he has to say about this subject in his commentaries on Boethius.3 First of all, there are manners of expression that derive their proper meaning from the world of the transcendent but can also be conveniently used for things in the created world. There is also one term at least, \textit{viz. persona}, that has a sublunar source and is applied to God, and in fact, to the mystery of the Trinity.

The objective of this contribution, is to explore Gilbert’s ideas as to how the significates of terms are influenced when transportation from one domain to the other takes place. Specific attention will be given to the concepts the theologian uses to explain the relationships between different uses of one and the same term. First I shall deal with those linguistic expressions that have their real meaning in the Transcendent Domain (sections 1.1-1.3). Next, the notion of \textit{forma} will be looked into (section 2). Finally, the notion of \textit{persona} as applied to the Divine Persons will be considered (section 3).

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3 The commentaries on Boethius edited by Häring (1966).
1. The transcendent source of linguistic expressions: 
the notions of esse, bonum and unum

1.1 The concept of esse

As is to be expected in a Neoplatonic theory, of pivotal importance in Gilbert’s semantics is the role played by the term being. Of course in such a metaphysics, the only thing that can be truly said to be is God. That is to say, all other entities have somehow derived their being from that First Cause. Thus their being is on a different level, and the way in which they can be said to be must be understood in terms of the different principles at work in them. Put otherwise, for the created things it is true to say that they ‘are something’ (esse aliquid), but for God it is not.4 His being is not restricted in any way.5 Put otherwise, whereas created being is always something qualified, God is not. De Rijk remarks that it is therefore unfortunate that Gilbert should say that God is qualis (de Rijk (1988a) 98). However, I think that this statement does not create a problem, because when he describes God, that is, when he explains how we are to understand what we say about God when we use the familiar labels, Gilbert says:

In Contra Eut. I, 23, p. 24725-28: Itaque etsi magnus est, non tamen hoc est quantitate; etsi qualis est, non tamen qualitate; etsi durat, non tamen tempore.

Although he is great, he is not thus in virtue of quantity; although he is of a certain kind, he is not thus in virtue of a quality; although he endures, he does not in virtue of temporality.

Perhaps de Rijk’s translating qualis into ‘qualitative’ is the source of misunderstanding. I think the only thing that Gilbert is trying to say here is that when we say certain things about God (when we apply greatness to Him), when we consider Him to be of a certain kind (wise, good, just, and so on), no restrictions are involved at all, even though when we apply these same expressions to created entities they suggest a limitation of being.

That God truly is, whereas other things than He derive their being from that Source, has its effect on the way in which the word ‘esse’ is used for the created beings, and the same goes for the label ‘essentia’. In Gilbert’s words:

In De Trin. I, 2, 45, pp. 8763-8869: Essentia vero, que Principium est, omnia creatae precedit: illis omnibus, ut “esse” dicantur, impertiens et a nullo alio, ut ipsa sit, sumens. … Et cum de ea quis loquens dicit “essentia est”, sic debet intelligi: Essentia est illa res QUE EST IPSUM ESSE i.e. que non ab alio hanc mutuat dictionem ET EX QUA EST ESSE i.e. que ceteris omnibus eandem quadem extrinseca participacione communicat.

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4 In Contra Eut. I, 24, p. 24724: Deus est essentia, non est aliquid.
5 See de Rijk (1988a) 94.