

Stoic substance, non-existent matter?

Some passages in Basil of Caesarea reconsidered

This communication attempts to tie together some loose ends in recent research on Basil of Caesarea. I am not proposing the presentation of texts that have hitherto been totally unknown or neglected. On the contrary, I shall dwell mainly on two passages both of which are fairly well known.

The first of the two is from Basil's *Against Eunomius*, his major contribution to the Trinitarian debate from his early career. It has been noted for Basil's reference there to the common *usia* of all human beings as their 'material substratum' generating discussions about the supposedly Stoic background of Basil's concept of divine substance.¹ The other text stems from the first of his *Homilies on the Hexaëmeron*, his major work on cosmology. This passage has become a classic in the debate about the now celebrated Cappadocian doctrine that there is no matter.²

Both seem to me to pose serious difficulties, and it will be my attempt to shed some light on those problems by bringing the two texts together, a task which has, as far as I am aware, not yet been undertaken. This would appear somewhat surprising if only on account of the fact that both speak in rather similar terms about substance (*usia*), substratum (*hupokeimenon*) and matter (*hule*). What is more, however, their supposed upshot would seem to reveal a blatant incoherence: for if, as is sometimes claimed, Basil's *usia* is the Stoic *hupokeimenon*, then his other claim that such a substrate is non-existent must have really devastating consequences for

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¹ R.M. Hübnér, 'Gregor von Nyssa als Verfasser der sog. ep. 38 des Basilios' in: J. Fontaine, Ch. Kannengiesser (eds.), *Epektasis. Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou*, Paris 1972, 463-90; D. Balás, 'The Unity of Human Nature in Basil's and Gregory of Nyssa's Polemics against Eunomius' in: *StPatr* 14 (1976), 275-81; Th. Böhm, 'Basilios: *Adversus Eunomium* II 4: Eine untypische Verwendung von οὐσία und ὑπόστασις?' In: *StPatr* 32 (1997), 72-80.

² A.H. Armstrong, 'The Theory of the Non-Existence of Matter in Plotinus and the Cappadocians' in: *StPatr* 5 (1962), 427-29; R. Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, London 1983, 290-4.

important parts of his theology.

I. Let me turn first to the passage from the second book of Basil's anti-Eunomian treatise. The context is Basil's well-known diatribe against Eunomius' claim that names indicate substances. Against this, Basil puts his own theory, according to which names do not (ever!) refer to substances, but to properties.³ He gives the example of people, like Paul or Peter and observes:

So then when we hear 'Peter' we do not from the name think of his substance (by 'substance' I now mean the material substratum, which the name in no way signifies), but we are imprinted with the notion of the characteristics which are observed concerning him. For immediately from this utterance we think of the [son] of Jona, the man from Bethsaida, the brother of Andrew, the man called forth from the fishermen into the service of the apostolate [...]: none of which is the substance, if conceived as a substrate (*hupostasis*).^{4,5}

As I said, this text has been noted mainly for its reference to human *usia* as the material substratum. Scholars were divided about its relevance. Some, like Balás and Hübner, proposed to accept this as Basil's regular understanding of *usia*, arguing on the basis of this and other, related passages for a Stoic concept of substance in Basil.⁶ There appear to be, however, insurmountable difficulties with such an interpretation. Stoic *usia* is matter (as Basil himself says: ὑλικὸν ὑποκείμενον), a substrate devoid of any quality; it is, whatever is left of a thing once any property is taken away from it. For Basil, divine substance does have properties; Basil's entire Trinitarian theory is built on the assumption that we need to distinguish between properties common to the three Persons (τὸ κοινόν) and properties shared by only one of them (τὸ ἴδιον):⁷ it would break down if Basil were serious about a Stoic account of *usia*.

The obvious alternative way, then, followed in principle already by Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa would be to dismiss his phrasing in our passage as an error (Gregory tacitly 'corrected'

³ For the wider issue of Basil's semantic theory cf. now: D.G. Robertson, 'A Patristic Theory of Proper Names' in: *AGPh* 84 (2002), 1-19.

⁴ Basil's use of *hupostasis* here is difficult. As for the meaning I concur fully with Thomas Böhm (op cit, 80). Given the general lack of a technical use of *hupostasis* in the *Adversus Eunomium* I find it, however, possible that Basil here uses the phrase synonymously with *hupokeimenon*, a use well attested elsewhere: cf. *PGL*, s.v. ὑπόστασις B.4.

⁵ Basil, *Adv. Eun.* II 4,9-18 (II 20 Sesboüé). ET: Robertson, op cit, 11.

⁶ Balás, op cit, 279; Hübner, op cit, 476-84. Different, e.g.: V.H. Drecoll, *Die Entwicklung der Trinitätslehre des Basilios von Cäsarea. Sein Weg vom Homöusianer zum Neunizäner*, Göttingen 1996, 63-7.

⁷ Cf. e.g. Basil, *epp.* 214,4; 236,6.

the formulation, when he quoted it in his own *Contra Eunomium*, by the insertion of the negative *ou*⁸). I myself have previously dismissed these passages as singular *ad hominem* references without any bearing on Basil's understanding of divine substance.⁹

2. While I still hold that *usia* as the material substrate cannot be divine substance as we find it employed in Basil's Trinitarian thought, a comparison of the passage from the *Hexaëmeron* homilies will reveal that its relevance goes beyond an *ad hominem* reference. This text, from Basil's late years, not only shows quite distinctly that the concept of a nucleus of substance that is unknowable insofar as it is devoid of any property is part of Basil's thinking, but may help to integrate this view with Basil's accounts of divine substance in his Trinitarian texts. It is necessary, once again, to quote the relevant passage in full:

In the same way we shall counsel ourselves with regard to [sc. the *usia* of] earth [the context is an exegesis of Gen I,1]. We will not meddle about its *usia* proper (ἥτις ποτέ ἐστί), nor waste our thoughts searching for the substrate itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ὑποκείμενον), nor try to find some nature devoid of qualities, existing in such a way on its own account. For we are well aware that whatever is seen around it (περὶ αὐτήν) has been rendered fully by the account of being as complete of the *usia* (συμπληρωτικά τῆς οὐσίας). You arrive at nothing [therefore] if you try to take away by reason each of the qualities it possesses. If you take away black, cold, depth, density, the qualities associated with taste a substance possesses, or any other that may be seen around it, the substrate will be nothing.¹⁰

The passage has been commented on mainly as one of the proof texts for the Cappadocians' by now famous theory of the non-existence of matter. Armstrong was the first – to my knowledge – to draw attention to this remarkable theory;¹¹ recently Richard Sorabji has contributed decisively to its clarification especially with regard to Gregory of Nyssa.¹² Let us postpone this issue a little.

Basil's main intention here is to reject speculative interest in *usia*. More specifically, he argues that we should not treat of *usia* as it is by itself (ἥτις ποτέ ἐστί), a phrase that is apparently

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, CE III/5, 21-2 (*GNO* II, 167, 22-168,4); cf. Balás, op cit, 275-8

⁹ J. Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa. Theological Background and Theological Significance*, Leiden 2000, 62.

¹⁰ Basil, *Hom in Hex I* 8 (15,3-12 Amand de Mendieta/Rudberg)

¹¹ Armstrong, op cit.

¹² Sorabji, loc cit.

further explained by the subsequent references to ‘the substrate itself’ and ‘some nature empty of qualities’. Instead we are taught to focus on all the properties that are ‘around’ it, knowing that they fill up or complement the *usia* and are contained in the ‘account of being’ (Ἐ τοὰ εἶναι Ἰὸγοι). Basil’s phrasing here is quite technical: τὰ συμπληρωτικά τῆς οὐσίας was the designation given by the Aristotelian commentators to the *differentiae*, those properties that belong to the essence of a particular being and are, therefore, part of the definition¹³ for which again they often employed the phrase ‘account of being’.¹⁴

We are presented here, I should propose, with a two-tier theory of *usia*.¹⁵ *Usia* (1), substance proper, is, apparently, an empty notion. It is what is left when all the properties have been taken away. Basil commends that his hearers should rather not spend their intellectual energies on this entity. *Usia* (2) is the real being of things, consisting of the former plus all their essential properties. Such a schema may have been derived from the average definition that calls

a living being an *usia* endowed with a soul and with sense-perception.¹⁶

The reading that we may find most natural of such a definition is that the living being is a kind of *usia* characterised by the said properties. This, clearly, is *usia* (2). The same definition, however, might also be read as saying that the living being is something called ‘*usia*’ plus those properties. This would be the mysterious *usia* (1) of which we neither learn anything by this definition, nor could we ever do so.

3. I should propose now that this analysis helps us put into context the earlier text from *Against Eunomius*. That they speak in similar terms about *usia* and *hupokeimenon* may seem obvious but not quite exciting. Something more striking becomes apparent, however, once we recall that in the earlier text it had been Basil’s intent to argue against Eunomius’ contention that names

¹³ Cf. Porphyry, *In Cat* (95,22-33 Busse). Cf. A.C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, Oxford 1990, 85 f.

¹⁴ Cf. Zachhuber, *op cit*, 71-5.

¹⁵ For a similar view cf. Porphyry ap. Simplicius, *In Cat* (48,11-16 Kalbfleisch).

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Porphyry, *Isagoge* (10,6 Busse).

refer to the substance of things. Against this view Basil had protested by drawing the distinction between *usia* and properties, claiming that only the latter are signified by names. We can easily identify the same conceptual framework standing behind both arguments although the consequences may not necessarily be identical. It would appear that in the *Adversus Eunomium* text Basil had pretended to read a definition like the one that

a living being is an *usia* endowed with a soul and with sense-perception

as speaking of *usia* (1) plus properties. He there either ignored or wished to ignore what I termed *usia* (2) in his later text. But the basic idea of a distinction between a kind of *usia* on the one hand and the properties that are ‘around’ it and signified by name and definition, is the same in both.

That Basil may have found such a view attractive becomes evident as soon as we recall that one of the cornerstones of Eunomius’ thought was the notion that the divine (as any) *usia* was captured by one (and only one) particular name (in the case of God, the unbegotten).¹⁷ Against this, Basil urged that the *usia* of God was unknowable by the very definition of our thinking minds.¹⁸

At the same time, the comparison of the two texts makes it quite clear that while the concept of *usia* as a material substrate, as Basil employed it in his *Against Eunomius* may have facilitated his argument there by drawing a distinction between properties that are known, can be spoken and are the basis for our conception of things on the one hand and a thing’s substance on the other, it can have been of no great help for Basil’s Trinitarian theory. The latter obviously draws on *usia* (2), i.e. on substance as the collection of common properties.

4. If the comparison has thus helped to gauge Basil’s use of *usia* (1) in his *Adversus Eunomium* it appears to reveal a real problem with regard to the text from the *Hexaëmeron* homilies. Basil

¹⁷ Eunomius, *Apol.* 8 (40, 16-42, 18 Vaggione).

¹⁸ Basil, *Adv. Eun.* I 12-14.

there seems to say that this *usia* (I) is ‘nothing’. Does this mean, as Armstrong surmised, a theory of the non-existence of matter, i.e. *usia* (I)? Assuming that my findings with regard to the *Adversus Eunomium* are basically correct Basil in this case would seem guilty of severe inconsistency. Alternatively, a development in his thought could be contemplated, or we might even speculate that he here wished to make a distinction between earthly substance, i.e. matter in the strict sense of the word, and the inscrutable divine substance beyond all its properties. After all, Basil is referring explicitly of the *usia* of the earth.

A development, however, is quite unlikely as Basil had embarked on a very similar argument already in his *Adversus Eunomium*.¹⁹ Without employing the phrasing that has here made the later text interesting, the similarities between the two passages suggest, to my mind, the same conceptual background. By the same token it seems unlikely that Basil should be credited with a principal difference between non-existent ‘earthly’ matter and divine *usia* that is simply beyond knowledge. For in his anti-Eunomian writing his reference to our ignorance of the substance of the earth serves as an illustration for the claim that divine substance cannot be grasped.

I should, then, conclude that Basil probably did not espouse a theory of the non-existence of matter.²⁰ In my view it is perfectly likely that all he wished to express in the present passage was his conviction that the search for the underlying substance was not worthwhile, a vain undertaking that would lead to nothing. It appears not impossible, however, that Gregory of Nyssa was the first to think otherwise. He might then have felt it incumbent on him to work out and defend what he saw hinted in his brother’s text.²¹

Ultimately, Basil had a limited interest in a concept of *usia* as a substrate devoid of qualities. This was not ‘his’ notion of substance, but his adoption of this concept should guard us against the assumption that he may have argued for its inexistence.

¹⁹ Basil, *Adv. Eun.* I 12,30- 13,24 (I 214-218 Sesboüé).

²⁰ This leaves open the possibility that we have in *Hom in Hex* I 18 an unwitting echo of a text like Origen’s *Princ* IV 4,7 (357,29-328,5 Koetschau).

²¹ Cf. Gregory, *Apol in Hex*, PG 44, 69 B-C; *An et res* , PG 46, 124 C-D.

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