

John of Damascus' view of universals and particulars in light of the Christological debate

Johannes Zachhuber, University of Oxford

In this paper, I will consider John of Damascus' understanding of universals and particulars. I shall argue that the Damascene's philosophical views can be explained by inscribing his reflections into a trajectory emerging from the Christological controversies of the fifth century. Specifically, I shall contend that the apologetic need to justify the Chalcedonian tenet that the Incarnate existed as one hypostasis in two natures, divine and human, can be shown to stand behind some of John's most distinctive philosophical ideas. In this sense, I reconstruct the Damascene's ideas on universals and particulars as a paradigmatic case of Patristic philosophy.

As in most Patristic authors, John's views on universals and particulars are closely aligned to his use of two terms, *ousia* and hypostasis. Both these terms were originally coined by Hellenistic philosophers, but they had become central to Patristic thought since at least the fourth century.¹ The Damascene inherited them in their Christological context into which they were first introduced during the controversies of the fifth century. Thus far, his own deliberations were inevitably connected with long-standing intellectual traditions. In arriving at his own position, consequently, the Damascene interacted with, and responded to, a considerable number of views he had encountered in earlier authors. It is therefore understandable that his own contributions to the development of Patristic philosophy have sometimes seemed difficult to disentangle from his seemingly unoriginal deference towards earlier thinkers. While it is not the primary purpose of my paper to solve the protracted issue of the Damascene's originality, my argument will reveal him as a remarkably independent, powerful and creative thinker whose significance for the subsequent history of Eastern and Western philosophy should not be underestimated.

1. John of Damascus on the hypostasis

At good place to start my analysis is John's account of hypostasis in his so-called *Dialectic*. The foundational importance of the concept of hypostasis for the Damascene's thought has been recognised in previous research,² and my own work perfectly confirms those conclusions. The Damascene offers the following definition of the term hypostasis:

[The word hypostasis] indicates the thing that exists by itself and in independent, concrete realisation (ἰδιοσύστατον) by which is signified the individual, which is different in number, for example Peter, Paul, this particular horse.³

¹ For *ousia* the authoritative account is still Stead (1977); for hypostasis cf. Dörrie (1955).

² Erismann (2011: 272–7); Markov (2015: 54–7), Zhyrkova (2010: 90–5).

³ John of Damascus, *Dialectica* 43 (108, 4–7 Kotter): Τὸ τῆς ὑποστάσεως ὄνομα [...] σημαίνει [...] τὴν καθ' αὐτὸ καὶ ἰδιοσύστατον ὑπαρξιν, καθ' ὃ σημαϊνόμενον τὸ ἄτομον δηλοῖ τῷ ἀριθμῷ διαφέρον ἕγγουν τὸν Πέτρον, τὸν Παῦλον, τὸν τινὰ ἵππον. The Damascene concedes that hypostasis *can* also be used synonymous with *ousia*.

Hypostasis, then, is foremost the independently subsisting thing, capable of being pointed to ‘by stretching out a finger’, as John writes elsewhere,⁴ separated from other individuals in space and time. In light of popular late ancient theories of the individual it is notable that hypostasis is not here defined with reference to a unique set of properties. I shall come back to this observation.

Hypostasis, the Damascene continues, is ontologically primary. This unique role is summed up in a simple but powerful formula:

For it is necessary to know that neither undetermined *ousia*, nor the substantial difference, nor the species, nor the accident subsist by themselves, but only hypostases or individuals. In them are seen substances, substantive differences, species, and accidents.⁵

Being is here divided into two kinds: independent being, that is, hypostases; and all other being which only exists by virtue of its inherence in hypostases. This is a remarkably radical view cutting across both the traditionally Patristic duality of universal *ousia* and particular hypostasis *and* the Aristotelian duality of substance and accident.

This concept of hypostasis thus emerging from the *Dialectic* is supported by statements elsewhere in John’s works. In an important passage in his *Exposition of Faith*, for example, he adds the following ontological principle, which is fully compatible with the viewpoint of *Dialectic*:

Hypostases do not inhere in each other. Each one of them is separate and by itself, distinct and considered in itself, since it has a great many things to distinguish it from the other.⁶

The mention of independent existence is once again connected with a reference to inherence. Yet whereas in *Dialectic* 43 the Damascene contrasted the existential independence of hypostasis with the inherence of other kinds of being, he here insists that hypostases don’t ever inhere. We thus arrive at a rather neat binary: all being either inheres or it does not. If the latter, it is called hypostasis; if the former, it can be either *ousia* or difference, or accident.

2. The historical background

It is hardly exaggerated to say that all ancient debates about inherence ultimately go back to Aristotle’s *Categories* with its much discussed logical and ontological quadrilateral: being, according

⁴ John of Damascus, *Contra Jacobitas* 11 (114, 13–4 Kotter): Ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὑπόστασις τὸν τινὰ ἢ τόδε δηλοῖ τὸ ἅμα τῇ τοῦ δακτύλου ἀνατάσει δεικνύμενον.

⁵ John of Damascus, *Dialectica* 43 (108, 8–11 Kotter): Χρὴ γὰρ γινώσκειν, ὡς οὔτε οὐσία ἀνείδεος ὑφέστηκε καθ’ ἑαυτὴν οὐδὲ διαφορὰ οὐσιώδης οὔτε εἶδος οὔτε συμβεβηκός, ἀλλὰ μόναι αἱ ὑποστάσεις ἦτοι τὰ ἄτομα καὶ ἐν αὐτοῖς αἱ τε οὐσίαι καὶ αἱ οὐσιώδεις διαφοραί, τὰ τε εἶδη καὶ τὰ συμβεβηκότα θεωροῦνται.

⁶ John of Damascus, *Expositio Fidei* 8 (I 8) (28, 231–3 Kotter): Οὐδὲ γὰρ αἱ ὑποστάσεις ἐν ἀλλήλαις εἰσὶν· ἰδίᾳ δὲ ἐκάστη καὶ ἀναμέρος ἡγουν καθ’ ἑαυτὴν κεχώρισται πλείστα τὰ διαιρούντα αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς ἐτέρας ἔχουσα.

to this text, is either universal or particular; and it is either inherent in other being or it is not.⁷ The conventional interpretation of this complicated scheme is that it divides being into substances and accidents each of which exist as universal and particular being. Thus far, the Damascene's theory with its simpler division into hypostasis as concrete individual existence on the one hand and all other being as existing in hypostases can be seen as a particular development within this history.⁸

By the time the Damascene wrote, however, there was another important context in which the notion of inherence had become equally significant, namely, Chalcedonian Christology.⁹ Given that the primary purpose of John's writing was to offer intellectual support to the Chalcedonian community now living under Arab rule, unprotected by the power of the Byzantine state,¹⁰ this tradition must be deemed a good candidate for explaining any apparent novelty in his teaching.

Key for this development was the need to justify why the Incarnate Christ could exist in two natures but existed in only one hypostasis. Against this, all the many opponents of the divisive Council of Chalcedon protested that no nature could exist without their own hypostasis. From this it would follow that the Incarnate was either two natures in two hypostases or one nature in one hypostasis. The former position was developed with increasing sophistication by so-called Nestorians,¹¹ the latter by the miaphysite opponents of Chalcedon.¹²

Yet the notion that there could be no nature without hypostasis (which I shall henceforth call the NNWH principle or axiom) was not only accepted by the opponents of Chalcedon but also by most Chalcedonians themselves.¹³ In order to understand its force, we need to take a step back from the Christological context and recognise that the philosophical assumptions generally accepted by all participants of these debates were those developed by the Cappadocian theologians of the late fourth century in the context of their solution to the trinitarian controversy.¹⁴

This solution is known for the terminological distinction it drew between *ousia* and hypostasis: the former refers to being as universal, whereas the latter signified its individual instantiations.¹⁵ Yet it is

⁷ Aristotle, *Categories* 2 (1a20–1b5): Τῶν ὄντων τὰ μὲν καθ' ὑποκειμένου τινὸς λέγεται, ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ δὲ οὐδενὶ ἐστὶν [...] τὰ δὲ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ μὲν ἐστὶ, καθ' ὑποκειμένου δὲ οὐδενὸς λέγεται, — ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ δὲ λέγω ὃ ἐν τινὶ μὴ ὡς μέρος ὑπάρχον ἀδύνατον χωρὶς εἶναι τοῦ ἐν ᾧ ἐστίν, — [...] τὰ δὲ καθ' ὑποκειμένου τε λέγεται καὶ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ ἐστὶν [...] τὰ δὲ οὔτε ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ ἐστὶν οὔτε καθ' ὑποκειμένου λέγεται, οἷον ὁ τίς ἀνθρώπος ἢ ὁ τίς ἵππος, — οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν τοιούτων οὔτε ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ ἐστὶν οὔτε καθ' ὑποκειμένου λέγεται. On the interpretation of this ontology cf. Graeser (1983: 30–56).

⁸ For this view cf. Erismann (2011: 277–8).

⁹ Gleede (2012).

¹⁰ For this interpretation cf. now Ables (2016).

¹¹ Abramowski (1974).

¹² On the use of this argument by Severus of Antioch cf. Lebon (1951: 461–2); for its affirmation by John Philoponus cf. Lang (2001: 63). Note that both scholars interpret its significance in a way different from what I propose here.

¹³ Extensive references in Lang (2001: 63, n. 212).

¹⁴ For a full account of this 'classical theory' cf. Zachhuber (2020), ch. 2.

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Basil, *ep.* 214, 4, 6–11: Εἰ δὲ δεῖ καὶ ἡμᾶς τὸ δοκοῦν ἡμῖν ἐν βραχεὶ εἰπεῖν, ἐκεῖνο ἐροῦμεν ὅτι ὃν ἔχει λόγον τὸ κοινὸν πρὸς τὸ ἴδιον, τοῦτον ἔχει ἡ οὐσία πρὸς τὴν ὑπόστασιν. "Ἐκαστος γὰρ ἡμῶν καὶ τῷ κοινῷ τῆς οὐσίας λόγῳ τοῦ εἶναι μετέχει καὶ τοῖς περὶ αὐτὸν ἰδιώμασιν ὁ δεῖνός ἐστι καὶ ὁ δεῖνός.

important that underlying this distinction there was a specifically defined *relationship* between the two terms. In the context of the Trinitarian debate, it was crucial to insist that the only way universal being, *ousia* or nature, could exist was precisely in and through concrete individual hypostases. There was no free-floating universal which, according to a popular anti-Nicene argument, could be conceptualised as a fourth hypostasis.¹⁶ At the same time, hypostases were nothing but individuated realisations of universal natures.¹⁷ Thus far, *ousia* and hypostases were mutually dependent: human nature, for example, existed only and exclusively in concrete individual human beings, while individual human beings were concrete instantiations of the ‘one man’ (εἷς ἄνθρωπος), as Gregory of Nyssa put it.¹⁸ Analogously, God – divine nature or substance – existed only and exclusively in three divine hypostases, while the three Persons were *merely* hypostases of the one divine nature.

As the Christological controversy unfolded, this Cappadocian theory was increasingly applied to the doctrine of the Incarnation.¹⁹ We find early-sixth-century Chalcedonians such as John the Grammarian and Leontius of Byzantium using Cappadocian language in support of the Chalcedonian doctrine that the Incarnate Christ existed as a single hypostasis but in two natures. This, they argued, was unproblematic since the two terms meant different things. The two natures simply referred to universal humanity and divinity in which the single hypostasis (= individual) participated.

Yet this was only half the Cappadocian theory, its abstract part so to speak. Its concrete aspect, according to which hypostases were the individual realisations of universal natures, was left to one side by the early advocates of a Chalcedonianism expressed in Cappadocian terminology. This precisely gave NNWH its significance. It was a reminder that the whole Cappadocian theory included the claim that natures exclusively existed in and through their hypostatic instantiations. Thus far, the NNWH-principle was no more than a restatement of a genuine aspect of Cappadocian philosophy. It is important to emphasise this fact as scholars have sometimes understood NNWH as indicating that non-Chalcedonians had suddenly decided that nature and hypostasis meant the same thing and *for that reason alone* could not accept the language of Chalcedon which was based on a Christological extension of the Cappadocian logic. If this were the case, however, it would be difficult to understand why the Chalcedonians themselves did not oppose NNWH much more aggressively.

Instead, they acquiesced in it, at least in principle, and much of their creative energy for the subsequent two hundred years seems to have been spent on responses to this challenge.²⁰ In doing so,

¹⁶ Athanasius: *De synodis* 51, 3 (274, 35–275, 4 Opitz); *Contra Arianos* I 14, 1 (123, 31–3 Tetz). Cf. also Williams (1983: 66) for other occurrences of this argument.

¹⁷ Cf. [Basil], *ep.* 38, 3 (1, 82, 8–83, 12 Courtonne): Τοῦτο οὖν ἐστὶν ἡ ὑπόστασις, οὐχ ἡ ἀόριστος τῆς οὐσίας ἔννοια μηδεμίαν ἐκ τῆς κοινότητος τοῦ σηματομένου στάσιν εὐρίσκουσα, ἀλλ’ ἡ τὸ κοινόν τε καὶ ἀπερίγραπτον ἐν τῷ τινὶ πράγματι διὰ τῶν ἐπιφαινομένων ιδιωμάτων παριστῶσα καὶ περιγράφουσα. On the authorship of the letter cf. Zachhuber (2003).

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 16 (PG 44, 185 BC). Cf. Zachhuber (1999: 155–60).

¹⁹ Zachhuber (2020), ch. 7.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. John of Caesarea (the Grammarian), *Apology of the Council of Chalcedon* IV 2 (53, 121–30 Richard): οὐκ ἔστι φύσις ἀπρόσωπος. Τί τοίνυν αὐτοῖς τὸ σοφὸν τοῦτο βούλεται πρόβλημα; Εἰ μὲν ὅτι οὐ δυνατόν τὰς φύσεις ἄλλως ἢ ἐν προσώποις θεωρεῖσθαι, τούτοις πᾶς τις καὶ τῶν μικρὰ εἰδῶτων συνομολογήσειε. Τίς γὰρ ἀγνοεῖ, ὅτι καθόλου ἐν τοῖς κατὰ μέρος προσώποις, ὅπερ ταῖς χαρακτηριστικαῖς ὑποστάσεσι θεωρεῖται, οἷον ἡ τῆς θεότητος φύσις ἐν πατρὶ, ἐν υἱῷ, ἐν ἀγίῳ πνεύματι, ὁμοίως ἢ

Chalcedonian thinkers developed two fundamentally different philosophical or conceptual strategies. Some sought to neutralise the charge by insisting that NNWH only referred to the substantial component in the individual for which they introduced the term *enhypostaton*. NNWH in Greek reads οὐκ ἔστι φύσις ἀνυπόστατος; from this wording, Chalcedonian thinkers beginning with Leontius of Byzantium inferred that the solution lay in the postulation of an *enhypostaton* that could be shown to correspond to each nature.²¹ In this trajectory, the duality of universal *ousia* and its individuation in the hypostasis became the focal point of a Patristic ‘philosophy of the enhypostaton’ which was developed further by Pamphilus the Theologian and Theodore of Raithu.²²

As we shall see, the tradition flowing from Leontius of Byzantium is not without significance for the Damascene; more pertinent for the purposes of this paper, however, is its alternative. This second main strand of Chalcedonian philosophy was initiated by John the Grammarian but developed most consistently in Leontius of Jerusalem. Its doctrinal starting point was the celebrated notion that Christ’s humanity did not need a hypostasis of its own because it only ever existed within the hypostasis of the Logos.²³ We find it first enunciated in the Grammarian’s *Apology for the Council of Chalcedon* written at the beginning of the sixth century.²⁴ Later on, this doctrinal assumption was sanctioned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. It was therefore in principle affirmed by all Chalcedonian authors from the mid-sixth century, although its conceptual significance remained limited for many of them.²⁵ Among those whose texts we possess, it was only Leontius of Jerusalem who followed earlier hints in John the Grammarian to develop this dogmatic principle into a fully-fledged answer to the intellectual challenge of NNWH.²⁶

The most distinctive property of this approach was that it turned the specific case of the Incarnation, the inherence of an individual human nature within a non-human hypostasis, into a more universal, ontological paradigm.²⁷ In order for this to be possible, Leontius severed the traditional ontological link between *ousia* and hypostasis. To him, hypostasis no longer was the concrete realisation of a

ἀγγελικὴ φύσις ἐν Μιχαήλ, ἐν Γαβριήλ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς, καὶ ἡ τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος φύσις ἐν τοῖς καθ’ ἕκαστον γνωρίζεται προσώποις;

²¹ Leontius of Byzantium, *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos* 1 (132, 19–26 Daley). For the protracted debate about the interpretation of this passage cf. Gleede (2012: 64–7).

²² Zachhuber (2020), ch. 8.1 and 8.2.

²³ Perhaps confusingly, this notion of insubsistence was not initially connected with the term *enhypostatos*. Cf. Lang (1998). For a different interpretation cf. Krausmüller (2017).

²⁴ John of Caesarea (the Grammarian), *Apol. conc. Chalc.* IV 3 (55, 177–88 Richard): Εἰ δὲ ἐγὼ ἐκ δύο οὐσιῶν διαφόρων συγκαίμενος οὐκ εἰμι δύο ἄνθρωποι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς δύο ἔχω οὐσίας τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος καὶ ἐν ὑποστάσει μιᾷ θεωροῦμαι, τίς ἀνάγκη καὶ ἐπὶ Χριστοῦ τὰς δύο οὐσίας ὁμολογοῦντα δύο φάναι καὶ ἰδικὰς ὑποστάσεις; Αὐτοῦ μὲν γὰρ τῇ φύσει τὰ θεῖα, αὐτοῦ δὲ διὰ τὴν ἐνυπόστατον ἔνωσιν καὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα· οὐ γὰρ ἐν ἑτέρῳ, ἀλλ’ ἐν αὐτῷ ἡ ἰδικὴ αὐτοῦ ὑπέστη σὰρξ, ὡς προείρηται. Τὸ κοινὸν γὰρ ἔχουσα τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης οὐσίας, τουτέστι τὸ εἶναι σὰρξ ἐψυχωμένη ψυχῇ λογικῇ, ἐν μόνῳ τῷ θεῷ λόγῳ ἔσχε τὰ ἰδικά, τουτέστι τὸ εἶναι τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου καὶ οὐχ ἑτέρου σὰρξ. Πῶς οὖν ἑτέρα ὑπόστασις ἢ μηδὲν καθ’ ἑαυτὴν ὑποστᾶσα; There is a pre-history to this idea for which cf. Gleede (2012: 111–3).

²⁵ E.g. Pamphilus, *Solutio* 7 (176, 77–80 Declerck); Theodore, *Praeparatio* 8 (192, 9–25 Diekamp).

²⁶ On Leontius cf. Richard (1944); Grillmeier/Hainthaler (1995: 271–312).

²⁷ For Leontius’ insubsistence Christology cf. esp. *Adversus Nestorianos* II 14 (PG 86/1, 1567D–1568B).

species; instead, it had its main property in its separate existence. According to Leontius, hypostasis ‘most correctly and properly’ (κυριώτερον καὶ οἰκειότερον) signified

[...] that which shows the concrete individual thing (ὑποκείμενον ἄτομον τὸδε τι) in its existence (πρὸς τῇ συστάσει) and as set off from all other things, whether of the same or of a different substance, by its specific mark (κατὰ τὸ ἰδικὸν γνωριστήριον); it is, as such, a detachment (ἀπόστασις τις) and a limitation of unlimited being (διορισμός τῶν ἀδιορίστων οὐσιῶν) into the personal singularity of each one. This is why the Fathers considered, and called it, person (*prosopon*).²⁸

On this basis, he insisted that it was perfectly possible and, in fact, normal for more than one nature to co-exist in one and the same hypostasis. Another definition of hypostasis found in Leontius’ *Against the Nestorians* laid special emphasis on this tenet:

Hypostasis is called the stable constitution (στάσις ἢ σύστασις) conceived in one particular object of the particular properties [united into] the common property in either one simple nature or in a composite one, or in a particular one, or in a universal one (such as divine nature), *either in one nature alone or in many that are united* – always though in one existent (ἐν ὑπάρξει).²⁹

Thus, while there could be no nature without hypostasis, their relationship was not necessarily exclusive or transitive. As an independently existing entity, hypostasis was simply the container of one or more substances.

This philosophy broke new ground both with regard to the traditional Patristic view going back to the Cappadocians and with regard to the logic of Aristotle’s *Categories*. The Cappadocian terminology of *ousia* and hypostasis was nominally preserved but the ontological centre of gravity in Leontius was no longer the duality of universal and particular but the difference, within the individual, between its hypostatic existence and its more or less accidental components including but not limited to one or more *ousiai*. In this sense, Leontius’ version of Chalcedonian philosophy can be called a philosophy of the hypostasis.

Compared with the Aristotelian tradition, the most extraordinary aspect of Leontius’ Patristic philosophy is the way it blurred the distinction between *ousia* and accidents, which in *Categories* had been defined by the principle that only the latter existed *in* substances.³⁰ While Leontius nowhere suggested the two are the same, his emphasis on insubstance and, even more, the examples he adopted to make Chalcedonian Christology plausible speak a distinct language. For example, he would compare the insertion of human nature into the divine hypostasis to the dying of wool in red,³¹

²⁸ Leontius of Jerusalem, *Adversus Nestorianos* II 1 (PG 86/1, 1529D).

²⁹ Leontius of Jerusalem, *Adversus Nestorianos* II 1 (PG 86/1, 1529C–D).

³⁰ For the complications surrounding this principle in later Aristotelian exegesis cf. Gleede (2012: 69–100).

³¹ Leontius of Jerusalem, *Adversus Nestorianos* I 30 (PG 86/1, 1593C–D).

the coating of wood in gold,³² or to a man who put on his armour.³³ *Ousia*, then, appears as little more than a qualitative modifier not dissimilar from other accidents and ontologically fully dependent on hypostasis as its ontological foundation.

3. John of Damascus and the philosophy of hypostasis

While it is unclear whether the Damascene knew the writings of either John the Grammarian or Leontius of Jerusalem, it seems evident to me that his own conception of hypostasis as explained above owes much to this particular trajectory of Chalcedonian philosophy. In particular, the ontological primacy given to the hypostasis and the emphasis on inherence as the principle of all other being betrays his allegiance to this tradition. Insubstantial Christology too was of the utmost importance to the Damascene; in fact, this notion has been identified as the systematic basis of his entire Christology.³⁴

At the same time, such a contextualisation also helps to put into relief the Damascene's deviations from Leontius' philosophy of the hypostasis. Some of them can be explained by John's reliance on different sources; others point to his own originality.

Perhaps the most obvious distinction between the Damascene's account of the individual and that of Leontius of Jerusalem is their different views of *idiomata* or properties. While I cannot go in any detail into Leontius' famous but controversial concept of the 'composite property' as characteristic of any hypostasis,³⁵ suffice it to say that for him and, in fact, for the majority of Chalcedonian thinkers the concept of hypostasis was closely aligned with a unique combination or bundle of properties. For this, they had an excellent authority in the Cappadocian *Epistle 38* in which the hypostasis was described in those very terms.³⁶

From this consensus, one important early sixth-century voice diverged: Leontius of Byzantium. While scholars have not reached full agreement on this point,³⁷ I believe there is strong evidence that he, unlike most of his peers, moved towards an understanding of hypostasis as existence pure and simple while identifying the individual properties as indicative of an individual nature. This tendency can be gleaned from a passage in his influential *Against Nestorians and Eutychians* where he protests against 'Nestorian' opponents as follows:

They pass from the nature of the Logos – a phrase which signifies both the common property and the individual property of the hypostasis; for we said 'the nature of the

³² Leontius of Jerusalem, *Adversus Nestorianos* IV 36 (PG 86/1, 1704D).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rozemond (1959: 22). Cf. for this aspect of John's thought Gleede (2012: 174–81).

³⁵ For this theory cf. Grillmeier/Hainthaler (1995: 289–93); dell'Osso (2012: 359–63).

³⁶ [Basil], *Ep.* 38, 6 (1, 89 Courtonne): Εἰ γὰρ ὑπόστασιν ἀποδεδώκαμεν εἶναι τὴν συνδρομὴν τῶν περὶ ἕκαστον ἰδιωμάτων ...

³⁷ Cf. Grillmeier/Hainthaler (1995: 193); Richard (1944: 26–7); Cross (2002: 247).

Logos', not 'the nature as such' – to that which signifies its individuality, the hypostasis.³⁸

The 'Nestorians' had argued on the basis of NNWH that the Chalcedonians had to accept two hypostases in the Incarnate alongside their two natures. Yet Leontius retorts by insisting the nature includes both universal and individual properties. *As such*, it is juxtaposed with hypostasis which, evidently, is reduced to the notion of existence as such.

It seems that John of Damascus followed Leontius in this regard, as suggested by Richard Cross.³⁹ The evidence in the case of the Damascene is complex, but recall here that in the principal places in which he defined hypostasis,⁴⁰ no mention was made of properties but instead the emphasis was squarely on concrete existence citing factors such as independent existence in space and time, inability to inhere in something else, and so forth.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for the Damascene's adoption of a view of the individual as purely existing is contained in a celebrated passage which is, however, not without difficulty and also somewhat unique in his writings.⁴¹ It therefore needs to be approached with care. It is celebrated for containing a distinction between different kinds of *physis* which the Damascene offered in response to the question what kind of human nature Christ assumed:

Nature is either seen in pure thought (in which it does not subsist), or as a universal in all the hypostases of the same species binding them together (in this way it is called nature seen in the species), or concretely as the same, but including its accidents in one hypostasis (in this way it is called nature seen in the particular).⁴²

I cannot here unpack this text as a whole but would solely draw attention to the last of the three meanings the Damascene here stipulates for the concept of *physis*; this is also, as the text notes in what follows, the kind of nature the Incarnate assumed.⁴³ John writes here of nature as it exists 'concretely' in the hypostasis 'including its accidents' (ἐν προσλήψει συμβεβηκότων). This, I believe, must mean that, like Leontius before him, he embraced the notion of an individual nature inclusive of individual properties which is, as such, distinct from the hypostasis. The latter, then, can be no more than the pure fact of the individual's independent existence. Against the precedent of conventional

³⁸ Leontius of Byzantium, *CNE* 4 (144, 16–9 Daley): Μεταβαίνουσιν ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ Λόγου φύσεως, τῆς καὶ τὸ κοινὸν σημαινούσης τῆς φύσεως, μετὰ τοῦ ἰδίου τῆς ὑποστάσεως· Λόγου γὰρ ἔφαμεν φύσιν, οὐχ ἀπλῶς φύσιν, ἐπὶ τὸ ἴδιον αὐτοῦ σημαινόμενον τῆς ὑποστάσεως.

³⁹ Cross (2000); (2002: 252–3).

⁴⁰ See at n. 2–5 above.

⁴¹ For a fuller interpretation cf. Cross (2000: 81–4).

⁴² John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 55 (III 11) (131, 4–7 Kotter): Ἡ φύσις ἡ ψιλῇ θεωρία καταννοεῖται (καθ' αὐτὴν γὰρ οὐχ ὑφέστηκεν), ἢ κοινῶς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ὁμοειδέσιν ὑποστάσεσι ταύτας συνάπτουσα καὶ λέγεται ἐν τῷ εἶδει θεωρουμένη φύσις, ἢ ὀλικῶς ἢ αὐτὴ ἐν προσλήψει συμβεβηκότων ἐν μιᾷ ὑποστάσει καὶ λέγεται ἐν ἀτόμῳ θεωρουμένη φύσις.

⁴³ John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 55 (III 11) (131, 8–12 Kotter): Ὁ οὖν θεὸς λόγος σαρκωθείς οὔτε τὴν ἐν ψιλῇ θεωρία καταννοουμένην φύσιν ἀνέλαβεν [...] οὔτε τὴν ἐν τῷ εἶδει θεωρουμένην [...], ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐν ἀτόμῳ τὴν αὐτὴν οὖσαν τῷ εἶδει (ἀπαρχὴν γὰρ ἀνέλαβε τοῦ ἡμετέρου φυράματος).

ancient theories of individuation,⁴⁴ this is a rather stunning view, which gains its plausibility against the backdrop of Chalcedonian apologetics as it explained how Christ could be fully human and in possession of both generic and individual properties without, however, being a human hypostasis.

This last text already broaches on the problem of what the Damascene's innovative theory of hypostatic being meant for his understanding of *ousia*. I shall use the remainder of this paper to consider this problem. Before moving on to that task, however, let me summarise my argument up to this point. The Damascene, I observed, defined hypostasis in terms of concrete existence. All other beings inhere in hypostases. This concept, I have then argued, can be understood against the backdrop of earlier Chalcedonian responses to the argument that no nature can exist without a hypostasis of its own (NNWH); especially pertinent were those proffered by John the Grammarian and Leontius of Jerusalem. Like those thinkers, the Damascene emphatically endorsed the Neo-Chalcedonian insubsistence Christology and accorded to hypostasis a privileged place in his ontology distinguishing it from all other being as the unique carrier of being in which all other entities inhere. At the same time, John followed Leontius of Byzantium against a broad consensus of earlier Chalcedonians in a conceptual separation of hypostasis from its constituent properties thus introducing the notion that the most fundamental form of being was concrete existence.

3. John of Damascus on universal and individual substances

Unfortunately, an examination of the Damascene's view of *ousia* does not lead to results that are as poignant and satisfactory as those attained in connection with his concept of hypostasis. His most well-known statement on this topic, which has already been cited, is found in Chapter 55 of the *Exposition of Faith*. Yet its claim that *physis* can be understood in three different ways is neither particularly clear nor, as far as I can see, supported by passages elsewhere in John's works or even in the *Expositio*.

In fact, in many places the Damascene is content to insist without qualification that *ousia* is universal.⁴⁵ He regularly polemicizes against the miaphysite stipulation of particular substances in addition to the universal.⁴⁶ On a number of occasions, John makes it clear that in his view the physical doctrine of salvation could only be affirmed if Christ assumed universal human nature.⁴⁷ All these passages, then, suggest a realist view of the universal, perhaps in conscious opposition to the theory associated with John Philoponus.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ For those theories cf. Sedley (1982); Chiaradonna (2000).

⁴⁵ John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 50 (III 6) (122, 55–7): Καὶ τοῦτο δὲ φαμεν, ὅτι ἐκ κοινῶν οὐσιῶν ἡ ἔνωσις γέγονε· πᾶσα γὰρ οὐσία κοινή ἐστι πασῶν τῶν ὑπ' αὐτῆς περιεχομένων ὑποστάσεων, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν εὐρεῖν μερικὴν καὶ ἰδιάζουσαν φύσιν ἥτοι οὐσίαν ...

⁴⁶ John of Damascus, *De haeresibus* 83 (50, 14–8 Kotter); *Contra Jacobitas* 2 (111, 16–26 Kotter).

⁴⁷ John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 50 (III 6) (122, 60–8 Kotter).

⁴⁸ Cf. esp. the contrast between John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 50 (III 6) (120, 13–6 Kotter): Πασχούσης τοίνυν μιᾶς τῶν ὑποστάσεων πᾶσα ἡ οὐσία, καθ' ἣν ἡ ὑπόστασις, πεπονθέναι λέγεται ἐν μιᾷ τῶν αὐτῆς ὑποστάσεων, and John Philoponus, *Arbiter* 7, ap. John of Damascus, *De haeresibus* 83 add. (52, 55–9 Kotter): Τὸ γὰρ ἐν ἐμοὶ ζῶον λογικὸν θνητὸν οὐδενὸς ἄλλου κοινόν ἐστιν. Ἀμέλει παθόντος ἀνθρώπου τινὸς ἢ βοῦς ἢ ἵππου ἀπαθὴ μένειν τὰ ὁμοειδῆ τῶν ἀτόμων οὐκ ἰδύνατον.

Elsewhere, however, the Damascene could demote the universal to a purely conceptual entity, as in *Exposition* 8, where he asserted that among created beings universal nature is only known conceptually whereas in the Godhead, we know it as ‘real’ (πράγματι).⁴⁹ The same language is used in Chapter 55 of the *Exposition* speaking of universal nature as conceptual and arguing that *this* nature could not be the basis of the Incarnation, ‘for this would not be an Incarnation, but a deceitful and fictitious Incarnation’.⁵⁰

The most plausible conclusions from these different and indeed divergent texts seem to me that (i) the Damascene thought of universal nature as something that is ontologically real but, in their oneness, only available to us in conception (ἐπινοία). Such a position, I take it, would work well with his quasi-alignment of *ousia* and accidents: like a colour, say, natures are truly universal and become individuated only by virtue of their inherence in the hypostasis. In addition (ii), it seems likely that John possessed a concept of individual nature as the compound of universal and particular properties jointly making up the qualitative determination of the individual but distinguished from hypostasis as its existential realisation. Finally (iii), the Damascene seems to have drawn a distinction between the unity of created species and the unity of divine nature.⁵¹

Conclusion

In this paper, I have investigated John of Damascus’ view of universals and particulars. In pursuing this question, a curious fact has come to light. While there exists rather straightforward textual evidence in support of John’s fascinating and innovative conception of the individual, the clues permitting us to reconstruct his understanding of *ousia* are much more circumstantial. While some conclusions seem to be warranted, none of them can be substantiated by unambiguous textual evidence the way this can be accomplished for the Damascene’s concept of hypostasis. This observation itself may well be significant as it indicates the extent to which by the time of the Damascene’s literary activity the Christological controversy had pushed the philosophical problem of the individual into the centre of Patristic reflection. John of Damascus’ contribution to this development was his uncompromising affirmation of the hypostasis as ontologically foundational *in the sense of pure existence*. As such it could contain, in the case of the Incarnate Christ, two complete natures with universal as well as individual properties without the need to stipulate two hypostases. This was John’s response to NNWH. It was coherent as far as such things go, but it also opened

⁴⁹ John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 8 (I 8) (28, 224–31 Kotter): ‘Ἐπὶ μὲν οὖν πάντων τῶν κτισμάτων ἡ μὲν τῶν ὑποστάσεων διαίρεσις πράγματι θεωρεῖται· πράγματι γὰρ ὁ Πέτρος τοῦ Παύλου κεχωρισμένος θεωρεῖται. Ἡ δὲ κοινότης καὶ ἡ συνάφεια καὶ τὸ ἐν λόγῳ καὶ ἐπινοίᾳ θεωρεῖται. Νοοῦμεν γὰρ τῷ νῷ, ὅτι ὁ Πέτρος καὶ ὁ Παῦλος τῆς αὐτῆς εἰσι φύσεως καὶ κοινὴν μίαν ἔχουσι φύσιν· ἕκαστος γὰρ αὐτῶν ζῶν ἐστὶ λογικὸν θνητόν, καὶ ἕκαστος σὰρξ ἐστὶν ἐμψυχωμένη ψυχῇ λογικῇ τε καὶ νοερᾷ. Αὕτη οὖν ἡ κοινὴ φύσις τῷ λόγῳ ἐστὶ θεωρητή.’

⁵⁰ John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 55 (III 11) (131, 8–10 Kotter): ‘Ὁ οὖν θεὸς λόγος σαρκωθείς οὔτε τὴν ἐν ψιλῇ θεωρίᾳ κατανοουμένην φύσιν ἀνέλαβεν (οὐ γὰρ σάρκωσις τοῦτο, ἀλλ’ ἀπάτη καὶ πλάσμα σαρκώσεως).

⁵¹ Such a distinction was always built into the traditional analogy of human and divine nature, as in Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Ablabium* (41, 15–42, 3 Mueller). It became, however, more pronounced in authors writing after the tritheistic controversy, cf. esp. Pamphilus, *Solutio* 2 (138, 100–139, 119 Declerck); Theodore of Raithu, *Praeparatio* 15 (211, 12–5 Diekamp); Anonymus Coislinianus, *De universalibus et Trinitate* 11 (375, 96–7 Rashed).

philosophical possibilities that went far beyond anything permitted by more traditional ancient thought whether pagan or Christian.

As I indicated at the outset, this theory can be interpreted as part of the reception history of Aristotle's *Categories* as much as it can be understood, as I have proposed here, against the backdrop of the Christological controversy. The notion of ontological inherence, so crucial for the Damascene, is ultimately derived from the logic of *Categories*. What is perhaps more, there are indications that earlier readers of the Aristotelian text were willing to align second substances with accidents on the basis of their common inherence in individuals or first substances.⁵²

I think, however, that John of Damascus' philosophy is ultimately misunderstood if it is taken along those lines as a philosophy based on the primacy of individual being. In order to perceive the difference, it is helpful to recall that the Damascene refers to his fundamental existents as 'hypostases' while *ousiai* are among the beings that only exist by inhering in the former. In fact, hypostases to him are emphatically not substances. As we have seen, he lodges an energetic complaint against his miaphysite opponents on account of their introduction of particular substances at the level of the individual. This is no mere quibble but indicative of real philosophical differences flowing from fundamental Christological decisions. While all Christological reflection after Chalcedon led to a stronger emphasis on the individual, it was its miaphysite not its Chalcedonian form that led to the introduction of philosophical particularism into Patristic thought.

What, then, was the philosophical upshot of John of Damascus' view of particulars? As his overall vagueness on the status of universals indicates, the Damascene's philosophy was no longer driven by the binary of universal and particular. Rather, *ousia* and hypostasis for him had become different ways of referring to the individual. In this regard, hypostasis indicated its that-ness or existence while *ousia* stood for its what-ness or qualitative determination. This view had been prepared by earlier Chalcedonians, but from our sources it can be plausibly argued that it first finds its fullest expression in John of Damascus. His radical reconfiguration of hypostasis as pure existence and, as such, a foundational category of metaphysics continues, radicalises, and systematises insights in earlier thinkers, such as Leontius of Byzantium, John the Grammarian, and Leontius of Jerusalem. In its radical separation of concrete 'being there' from qualitative 'being something', his ontology broke new ground opening up a new philosophical horizon which, over time, was to become known as the duality of existence and essence.

⁵² This seems to have been the position of Boethius of Sidon: Simplicius, *In Categories* (78, 10–21 Kalbfleisch).

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