RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Consubstantiality’ as a philosophical-theological problem: Victorinus’ hylomorphic model of God and his ‘correction’ by Augustine

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Abstract

This article expands our knowledge of the historical-philosophical process by which the dominant metaphysical account of the Christian God became ascendant. It demonstrates that Marius Victorinus proposed a peculiar model of ‘consubstantiality’ that utilised a notion of ‘existence’ indebted to the Aristotelian concept of ‘prime matter’. Victorinus employed this to argue that God is a unity composed of Father and Son. The article critically evaluates this model. It then argues that Augustine noticed one of the model’s philosophical liabilities but did not publicly name Victorinus when he rejected it, thereby exemplifying the New Testament practice of private ‘rebuke’ (ἐλέγχειν).

Keywords: Augustine; fraternal correction; Marius Victorinus; philosophical theology; Trinity

Marius Victorinus, the fourth-century rhetor, Neoplatonic philosopher and theologian, played a pivotal role in the historical-philosophical process by which the dominant metaphysical account of the Christian God became ascendant. His crucial influence has only recently begun to be fully appreciated. There are two chief reasons for this: his treatises on Arianism are philosophically difficult and he was overshadowed by Augustine.

Though Victorinus was fluent in Greek and Latin, he wrote in Latin, and his explicit reception by the most important Latin theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries was mixed. Jerome complained that his treatises about Arianism were obscure and could only be understood by those learned in ‘dialectic’ (philosophy). Ambrose never mentioned him, despite the fact that he at least knew of him through Simplicianus. Augustine named Victorinus as a translator of (Neo)Platonic texts and described his

1 Though sprinkled with Greek terms; see e.g. notes 8, 9, 21, 39, 45 below.
2 Vir. ill. 101: ‘Victorinus, an African by birth, taught rhetoric in Rome under the emperor Constantius [III], and in extreme old age converted to faith in Christ. He wrote very obscure books “against Arius” in the mode of philosophical argumentation; they cannot be understood except by those who are learned [in philosophy]. He also wrote commentaries on the Apostle [Paul].’ (uictorinus, natione afer, romae sub constantio principe rhetoricam dociuit et in extrema senectute christi se tradens fidei scriptis adversus arium libros more dialectico valde obscuros, qui nisi ab eruditis non intelleguntur, et commentarios in apostolum; translation mine.)

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celebrity conversion in Confessions, 8.2.4–5; yet he did not cite him in his On the Trinity.

Jerome was right: in order to understand Victorinus’ trinitarian theology, one needs to know the conceptual schemata he presupposes and this requires knowing quite a lot of ancient philosophy. Augustine’s On the Trinity, though still challenging, was written in a more accessible way, and it became the bedrock and starting point for all subsequent Western trinitarian theology. Victorinus therefore never achieved much recognition as an important player.

This began to change in the twentieth century, when Hadot and others started to explore the possibility that Augustine uses Victorinus’ ideas, even though he does not credit them. It is typical, of course, for ancient and medieval authors to borrow insights from earlier authors without citing them. What had prevented the recognition in this case was the need for interdisciplinary work in classical languages, philosophy and theology in the interpretation of Victorinus. That is necessary if we are to recognise when Augustine is adopting or adapting Victorinus’ trinitarianism. Indeed, despite the recent progress in recognising Augustine’s debt to him, Victorinus’ importance still tends to be underappreciated.

My purpose here is to present an important case of this indebtedness. I will demonstrate that Victorinus proposed a peculiar model of the ‘consubstantiality’ of the divine Word or Son to the Father by utilising a notion of ‘existence’ indebted to the Aristotelian concept of ‘prime matter’ in order to argue that God is a unity composed of Father and Son. The fact that Victorinus ‘existence-as-such’ (existentia, solum esse, rendering ὑπάρξεις, τὸ εἶναι μόνον) is actually a gloss on ‘prime matter’ (ἡ πρῶτη ὕλη) has not yet been pointed out by modern commentators on Victorinus. Consequently, the somewhat startling way that he uses this conception in his trinitarian metaphysics is in need of elaboration. I will then critically evaluate his model, pointing out two objections that could be raised against it on metaphysical grounds. Lastly, I will show that Augustine has noticed one of the model’s philosophical liabilities but that he does not publicly name Victorinus when he rejects it in his On the Trinity, thereby exemplifying the New Testament practice of private ‘rebuke’ (ἐλέγχειν; see Matt 18:15; cf. Lev 19:17).

3See note 50 below.

4The claim that the Son is ‘consubstantial’ (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father is from the Council of Nicaea I in the year 325. For the text see Heinrich Joseph Denzinger, Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declaratum de rebus fidei et morum, 43rd edn, ed. P. Hünermann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 2010), §§125–6.

5Aristotle’s Metaph. 7.3 was used as a proof-text for prime matter in late antiquity, notably by the Greek Neoplatonists. Currently the question of whether Aristotle was committed to a concept of ‘prime matter’ is controversial among some scholars, but in late antiquity it was not. Cf. Richard Sorabji, The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600 AD: A Sourcebook (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), vol. 2, p. 253. See further note 21 below.

6Victorinus also has other models of consubstantiality, using a different sense of ‘consubstantial’; see notes 45, 47 below. The reason for multiple models is the ambiguity of meaning in the term ὁμοούσιος in the fourth century generally owing to different senses of ‘substance’ (ὁνόμα and related terms) in philosophical and theological discourse. On this see R. P. C. Hanson, The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 168–9; Lewis Ayres, Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 86–104.
Substance versus existence: Victorinus’ engagement with the Aristotelian commentary tradition

Although Marius Victorinus is recognised as belonging to the commentary tradition on Aristotle owing to his work on the Categories, there has been to date virtually no investigation of his engagement with Aristotle’s metaphysics. As it happens, this bilingual North African is important for the way that he transmits a number of terms for ‘being’ from Greek to Latin, some of which have an Aristotelian provenance, and for his remarkable nomenclature of ‘existence’ for the concept of matter as such, that is, for the ultimate substrate of composed entities in the Aristotelian schema.

There are two passages in Victorinus’ treatise Against Arius, only the first of which Hadot noted as conceptually dependent upon Aristotle, whose intellectual patrimony is precisely the analyses of substance found in Aristotle’s Categories and Metaphysics. These are Against Arius IA.30, lines 18–26, and 2.4, lines 17–19. In IA.30, Victorinus presents the following general definition of ‘substance’:

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8Subiectum (cf. ὑποκείμενον), substantia (ὑπόστασις), praesentia, subsistentia (which would be ὑπόστασις προεκτομικά, subjectum et principale (rendering ὑποκείμενον πρώτον, ὑποκείμενον, existentia (rendering ὑποκείμενον, solum esse (presumably τὸ ἐξαιρετικὸν, the phrase used by Damascius in a passage that runs parallel to one of Victorinus’).

9Gerald Boersma, Augustine’s Early Theology of Image (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 56, writes that Victorinus received the notion that material substances are composed of form and matter from Aristotle’s Cat.; however, Aristotle does not mention matter in the Cat. Furthermore, the term ὑποκείμενον does not typically mean ‘existence’ or ‘existent’ in Victorinus, pace Boersma and similarly the translation of Mary T. Clark Marius Victorinus: Theological Treatises on the Trinity (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), passim. Rather, it means that which always stays the same. The term is of Platonic provenance and is used as a term of art for transcendent Form (ἰδέα, ἐνίοτος). For Victorinus’ and Augustine’s use of this term, see Sarah Catherine Byers, ‘Love, Will, and the Intellectual Ascents’, in Tarmo Toom (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Augustine’s Confessions’ (Cambridge: CUP, 2020), pp. 154–74, esp. pp. 169–70.

Werner Beierwaltes, ’Substantia und Subsistenta bei Marius Victorinus’, in F. Romano and D. P. Taormina (eds), Hyparxis e Hypostasis nel Neoplatonismo (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1994), p. 49, rightly notes that in using the terminology of ‘substance’ Victorinus does not mean to describe God as a physical substance. However, Victorinus is not doing something new in using the term subiectum (cf. ὑποκείμενον) to refer to a completely unqualified (Beierwaltes, ’absoluten’) ground; cf. Aristotle’s use of ὑποκείμενον in Metaph. 1017b24, 1029a1 and 1029a20–6. What is new in relation to Aristotle is Victorinus’ claim that, in God, the Father is analogous to matter.

What do we say that substance is? As the sages and the ancients defined it: ‘(1) That which is subject, (2) that which is something, (3) that which is not existing in another.’ And they differentiate between existence and substance; indeed they define (4) ‘existence’ and ‘existentiality’ as pre-existing subsistence without (5) accidents, because they [= (4) existence, existentiality] will subsist purely and only in [= in the condition of] that which is to-be solely; but they define (6) ‘substance’ as a subject with all its accidents inseparably existing within it.11

In the first sentence, Victorinus is obviously presenting a theory of substance derived from Aristotle, the ancient philosopher who famously described the same referent, primary substance, in these three ways.12 For Aristotle, an individual, which is a substance (οὐσία) in the primary sense of the term, is (1) a subject (ὑποκείμενον) of predicates.13 It is (2) a ‘that which is something’ (τὸ τί; cf. Victorinus’ quod est aliquid). That is, it is an individual entity that exists as some kind of thing (has an εἶδος because it is formed/organised matter).14 And a primary substance (3) is not in a subject, but exists in its own right.15

More interesting is Victorinus’ ensuing distinction between existence as such and substance: ‘And they [namely, the ancients and sages] differentiate between existence and substance …’ Victorinus is analysing primary substance into its constitutive parts. These are: (4) ‘pre-existing subsistence’, which he says is equivalent to existence per se and ‘to-be solely’; (5) specifications; and (6) the individual entity composed of the two, namely the primary ‘substance’.

The ‘specifications’ are alluded to as ‘accidents’ here, but this must be meant to include essential specifications, that is, substantial form, as well as accidents properly so called (συμβαίνοντα), that is, changeable details. For primary substance is the subject of accidents properly so called; but Victorinus cannot mean that existence/pre-existing subsistence is primary substance, for he is here contrasting it with primary substance. So existence/pre-existing subsistence must refer to the substrate of the primary substance, that is, the substrate for the form, in composition with which it comprises a subject of accidents in the proper sense. (Damascius’ parallel formulation has ‘other things’ (τὰ άλλα) where Victorinus has accidentia, which reinforces the point that Victorinus is using the term ‘accidents’ in the same way that Neoplatonists use the term ‘other things’ for all kinds of properties.16)
'Pre-existing subsistence’, then, means ultimate substrate, what is underlying any kind of specifications that make matter be a particular primary substance. Victorinus’ Latin phrase praexistens subsistentia would in Greek be ὑπόστασις προϋπάρχουσα, but his pra is evidently not temporal but metaphysical – a foreground or substrate for properties.

Notice that it is being here that ‘existence’ or ‘to-be solely’ is another way of describing matter. For Victorinus here calls this substrate ‘existence’ or ‘to-be solely.’ And Victorinus’ threefold schema (categories 4, 5, 6 above) correlates to Aristotle’s threefold distinction (in Metaphysics, Physics and On the Soul) between (a) matter, (b) form and (c) the composition of both, the primary substance.

This reading of Against Arius, IA.30, lines 18–26, is confirmed by the conceptually parallel passage Against Arius, 2.4, lines 17–19, and others, in which the epithet ‘pure to-be’ occurs again. We are told that it is that which is formed, and is the primary and ultimate subject. Victorinus says: ‘it is one thing to be a form and another thing to be formed. But that which is formed is to-be; the form is that which makes known [=intelligible] the to-be.’ Again, he notes that Greek words for ‘being’ (ὄν, οὐσία, ὑπόστασις), are used homonymously, to name alternately (a) the ultimate subject (subiectum et principale) or ‘primary to-be’ (esse principale, esse primum et solum, esse purum) alone without form, (b) form or (c) the two together. Thus what in Against Arius, IA.30 is called ‘pre-existing subsistence’, ‘existence’ and ‘to-be solely’ is in Against Arius, 2.4 named the ‘ultimate subject’, ‘primary to-be’ and ‘pure to-be’. In the 2.4 passages Victorinus’ Latin ‘ultimate subject’ has recognisable verbal parallels to Aristotle’s accounts of ultimate substrate in Metaphysics, 7.3, 8.4 and 9.7, wherein ultimate substrate is said to be ultimate (or ‘first’/’prime’) matter. So, Victorinus’ language of ‘existence’ and ‘to-be solely’ rather clearly refers to ultimate substrate, completely undetermined matter.

What we have here in Victorinus’ Against Arius, then, is the notion that matter as such is nothing but existence. This claim was not made by Aristotle himself and so must be attributable to the ‘sages’ alluded to by Victorinus. The rationale behind it is apparently that being (οὐσία) in the sense of ultimate matter/substrate is ‘being’ stripped of all its properties, and hence is mere existence (Victorinus: existentia, which would be ὑποστάς) or to-be solely (Victorinus’ esse solum, which would be τὸ εἶναι μόνον).


18Victorinus, AA 2.4 passim, esp. lines 42–5 and 24 and 29.

19Aristotle, Metaph. 8.4 1044a15–24 (τὸ πρῶτον (compare Victorinus principale) = ἡ ὑπόστασις προϋπάρχουσα, ἡ πρώτη ὑπόστασις; Metaph. 7.3, 1029a1–3, 1029a24 (τὸ ὑποκείμενον πρῶτον, τὸ ἐσχατον, compare Victorinus subjectum et principale); Metaph. 9.7 1049a24–35 (τὸ ἐσχατον, τὸ ὑποκείμενον; cf. Victorinus subjectum et principale); An. gen. 729a32.

20According to the late ancient custom, Victorinus’ plurals ‘ancients’ and ‘sages’ do not necessarily literally refer to multiple figures of each or either designation.

21With existentia, Victorinus must be rendering ὑποστάς, because later in the same work he gives ὑποστάτημα as the Greek for existentialitas (AA 3.7). David Bradshaw, ‘Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being’, Review of Metaphysics 53/2 (1999), p. 384, n. 4, rejects Charles Kahn’s taking Victorinus’ existentia/esse solum as a reference to ὑποστάς on the grounds that Victorinus in a different passage (AA 2.4, lines 23–4) says that ὑποστάς is equivalent to ὄν and signifies ‘esse with form’. (See Charles Kahn, ‘On the Terminology for Copula and Existence’, in S. Stern (ed.), Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), p. 155.) However, AA 2.4, lines 23–4, is
Precisely who was the ‘sage’ in the commentary tradition on Aristotle, referenced by Victorinus here, who first proposed that matter-as-such is bare existence? The evidence regarding ‘existence’ does not point to Porphyry. Porphyry did write a non-extant treatise On Matter; but the little that we know about his views on matter gives us no reason to suppose that he argued that matter was pure existence. Again, the Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides’, which Hadot and others have taken to be authored by Porphyry, does not appear to have been the source for this doctrine that ultimate substrate is pure existence. It does not identify ὑπαρξίς and τὸ εἶναι μόνον with each other, and although it does, like Victorinus, speak of a metaphysically prior thing ‘pre-existing’ a second, unlike Victorinus it explicitly denies that the ‘pre-existing’ one is a substrate for the second entity. Damascius reports something that may help us, however. Recall that he preserves a parallel text to Victorinus’ Against Arius, IA.30, lines 18–26. He also says that Iamblichus employed the distinction between existence (ὑπαρξίς) and substance (οὐσία/εἶναι) ‘everywhere’ in his writings. So perhaps a non-extant Aristotelian commentary by Iamblichus is the source for Victorinus’ notion that prime matter is pure existence.

The first divine principle as ‘existence’

For his part, Victorinus applies this analysis of substance that he inherited from the ‘ancients and sages’ to the case of God. While he holds that God is immutable and non-physical, he says that the analysis of substance into ultimate substrate (existence) and properties is a suitable way to explain how God the Son is ‘consubstantial’ (ὁμοούσιος) with God the Father. What is interesting here in relation to the larger history of metaphysics is that Victorinus is purposefully employing the commentary tradition on Aristotle in order to distinguish his account of God from that of the Arians, and by implication that of his forerunning Neoplatonists as well.
Victorinus’ strategy with this model of divine consubstantiality is to argue against the ‘Arians’ that the Father and Son are not two separate individual entities, the latter of which is created by and subordinate to the former, but instead constitute one single God, one primary substance.\textsuperscript{30} Aristotle had insisted that matter and form are not separate in reality. Substrate only exists in primary substances, and the same is true of form. Victorinus similarly maintains that ultimate subject, or ‘primary to-be’, and form, ‘are always together’ in fact, even though they are distinguishable.\textsuperscript{31} He then assigns the role of substrate to the Father and form to the Son, arguing that the Son is ‘inseparably in’ the Father.\textsuperscript{32} The First Principle (the Father) is substrate distinct from form,\textsuperscript{33} that is, pure existence, pure to-be.\textsuperscript{34} The Logos, also known as the Son, is form.\textsuperscript{35} The Father is bare ‘to be’ (esse) while the Son is ‘to be thus’ (sic esse).\textsuperscript{36} More specifically, the Logos is the form of God, making the Godhead be the kind (Victorinus: \textit{universalis, forma}; cf. Aristotle τὸ καθόλου, τὸ εἰδος) of thing it is and thereby giving it its intelligibility,\textsuperscript{37} while also being the set of all the Forms, that is, the pattern for all creatures, as a Nicaeanised Neoplatonic Divine Intellect.\textsuperscript{38} It is very clear here that Victorinus is not arguing merely that both the Father and Son have or participate in existence, though each ‘is’ in a different way or a different sense. Rather, he is claiming that in their combination they make up one substance, and that this is what ‘consubstantial’ means in reference to them. It means that there is only one God, equally composed of these two as substrate and form: they are each consubstantial for the other (ὀμοούσιοι).\textsuperscript{39} An Aristotelian account of composed substance is thus pressed into service to defend the ‘consubstantiality’ of God.

At the same time, Victorinus’ claim that the Father has a kind of dependence upon the second principle differentiates him from earlier Neoplatonic or middle Platonic authors, of course. Plotinus’ three divine realities are three individual divine entities, hierarchically arranged, and the One is not in any way related to or dependent upon the Divine Intellect, who is not dependent upon Soul. Similarly, although the \textit{Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s ‘Parmenides’} calls the First One ‘being alone’ (τὸ εἶναι μόνον),\textsuperscript{40} it explicitly denies that the One is substrate (ὕποκείμενον) for the Second One,\textsuperscript{41} and identifies the Second One, rather than the First, with existence (ὑπάρχει).\textsuperscript{42}

One might ask here, what about the Holy Spirit? We must always remember that Victorinus’ \textit{Against Arians} is a reaction to the claim of Nicaea I that the Son is...

\textsuperscript{30}So e.g. Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.34, lines 31–3; \textit{AA} IA.29, lines 20–5; \textit{AA} IA.30, lines 54–9; \textit{AA} 3.7, line 3.
\textsuperscript{31}Victorinus, \textit{AA} 2.4 \textit{passim}, esp. lines 42–5 and 24 and 29.
\textsuperscript{32}Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.22, lines 32–7; \textit{AA} IA.30, lines 56–9; \textit{AA} IA.34, lines 31–3; \textit{AA} 2.4, lines 24 and 29; \textit{AA} 3.7, lines 18–21. Cf. the analogy for the human soul as a composed substance (soul/animating stuff : mind :: matter : form), with the human soul compared to God, in \textit{AA} IA.32, lines 21–8 and 30–2.
\textsuperscript{33}Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.29, lines 14–15; \textit{AA} IA.34, lines 23–33; \textit{AA} 1B, lines 23–6; \textit{AA} 3.7, lines 16–21.
\textsuperscript{34}Victorinus, \textit{AA} 1B.49, lines 23–6.
\textsuperscript{35}Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.21, lines 38–9; \textit{AA} IA.22, line 34; \textit{AA} IA.29, line 16.
\textsuperscript{36}Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.29, lines 21–2; \textit{AA} 4.19, lines 4–22.
\textsuperscript{37}E.g. Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.29, line 17.
\textsuperscript{38}Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.22, lines 39–40; \textit{AA} 3.7, line 18; \textit{AA} 4.19, line 26.
\textsuperscript{39}όμοούσιοι: Victorinus, \textit{AA} IA.29, line 25.
\textsuperscript{40}Fragment II p. 4 Folio 94v line 8.
\textsuperscript{41}Fragment V p. 11 Folio 93r lines 18–20.
\textsuperscript{42}Fragment VI p. 14 Folio 90r lines 15–26. Victorinus’ account is, however, closer to Damascius’ account of the third divine principle in \textit{Prim. prin.} 61.
consubstantial with the Father. It is not until Augustine's *On the Trinity*, written after the Council of Constantinople in 381, that we get a major concern with the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity in a theological treatise in the Latin West. Victorinus does have another model, which is beyond the scope of this article, but which he apparently takes to be complementary to the substrate-form model that concerns us here. According to this other model, God wills to know himself, and this will is perfectly effective of his successfully knowing and so is essentially the same one act. It is the Son as willing-to-know and the Holy Spirit as knowing.43

To return to the matter-form model: whatever can Victorinus mean by saying that an immaterial God has an ultimate substrate that functions the way that matter does in material substances? The idea is that God is pure spirit, that is, *the kind of stuff that God is*, *is immaterial reality*;44 but that saying this is not yet saying what the nature of God is (that God is goodness, or an intelligent mind, for instance). God is an immaterial substance of a certain nature. There are other immaterial substances having other natures, such as angels and human souls. Hence these diverse things are the same in substrate (immateriality) while different in form (the form of divinity, or of angel, or of human being).

**Two problems in the Victorine model of consubstantiality**

As an attempt to defend divine ‘consubstantiality’, Victorinus’ procedure here is atypical. The common reading of ‘consubstantial’ by pro-Nicene authors was that the relevant sense of ‘substance’ was nature (secondary substance) rather than entity (primary substance).45

More importantly, on philosophical grounds Victorinus’ model could be challenged by anyone committed to the proposition that God must be simple. If God is composed of substrate (pure existence) and form, then God is not simple. Of course, since it is axiomatic in classical metaphysics that simplicity is superior to multiplicity, this is an objection that any reader of Victorinus would be likely to raise. In fact, Victorinus himself is aware of the potential objection, and believes that he has disposed of it.46 He explicitly protests that in dividing the Godhead up into substrate and form he has nevertheless not ascribed accidents (changeable details) to God,47 nor asserted that God actually was temporally generated by the addition of form to matter and is thus *de facto* divisible.48 But this response is inadequate: it is not merely accidents, or the fact of having come into being, that would rule out the simplicity of God. *Any kind of components that make up God would render God non-simple.*49

45On ομοειδῆς as the sense also intended by Athanasius, see Christopher Stead, ‘The Significance of the *Homoousios*’, in *Studia Patristica III* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), pp. 397–412, 404–11. Cf. ps-Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 8.3 τῆς φύσεως ὁμολογούντες as the correct understanding of ομοούσιος τῷ πατρί. Augustine takes this as the normative meaning; e.g. *F. et symb.* 4.6 and *passim; Trin.* 7.6. Note that Victorinus in the context of his other models of God uses this other sense of ‘consubstantial’ (e.g. *AA* 2.10, line. 38, ομοειδῆς). Secondary literature up to this point has focused on this other sense, e.g. Matthias Baltes, *Marius Victorinus: Zur Philosophie in seinen theologischen Schriften* (Munich and Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2002), p. 77; Christoph Erismann, ‘Identité et resemblance: Marius Victorinus, théologien et lecteur d’Aristote’, *Les Études philosophiques* 101/2 (2012), p. 186.
47Victorinus, *AA* IA 29, lines 18–21.
48Victorinus, *AA* 3.11, lines 30ff.
It should perhaps be emphasised that Neoplatonic ‘universal hylomorphism’ cannot free Victorinus of this difficulty. Universal hylomorphists hold that all changeable or multiple things have some kind of ‘matter’, whether corporeal or incorporeal. They make use of the ‘incorporeal matter’, to which Aristotle ascribes the plasticity of the rational creative imagination (in *Metaphysics*), to posit that the human soul, angels or daimones, and lesser deities have ‘spiritual’ (namely, non-three-dimensional) material, because these are subject to change and time. And Plotinus conceives of his second principle, Divine Intellect, as having intelligible ‘matter’ because it is the seat of the multiple intelligible Forms, each of which is a kind of goodness. But Victorinus says that he is committed to the claim that God is both unchangeable and simple. So assuming he means this, his God cannot be hylomorphic.

There is a second difficulty with Victorinus’ model: it reifies a privation. Immateriality is simply the absence of matter. Yet Victorinus wants to make it a substrate for form, and to say that this substrate is God the Father, who underlies the Son. But, of course, if we were to say ‘God is immaterial’ more precisely, we would say ‘God is only a nature (form) without any matter added to it’. The implication of this for Victorinus’ model will be that there simply is no Father, an unwelcome implication for him, to say the least.

**Augustine’s delicate correction of Victorinus**

The observations in the preceding sections allow us to recognise one way that Victorinus plays a pivotal role in the development of the Latin theology of the Trinity. We can now see that Augustine is alluding to this model of Victorinus when he mentions and rejects the suggestion that God could be considered a ‘subject’ in his *On the Trinity* 7.4–5.  

Augustine betrays his use of Victorinus partly through his language, utilising the latter’s translation of the Greek ὑπόστασις, which is *subsistentia*, to signify the type of being that each of the trinitarian persons has. He says:

> The word [substance, *substantia*] is rightly used for things which provide subjects for those things that are said to be in a subject (*subjunctum*), like color or shape in a body. Thus body subsists, and is therefore substance; but those things are in the subsisting, in the subject or underlying body, and so they are not substances, but in substance. ... But if God subsists in such a way that he can properly be called substance, then something is in him as in its underlying subject, and he is not simple – he for whom it is the same thing to be as to be whatever else is said of him with reference to himself, such as great, omnipotent, good, and anything of that sort that is not unsuitably said of God. But it is impious to say that God subsists to and underlies his goodness, and that goodness is not his substance or rather his being, nor is God his goodness, but that it is in him as in an

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50 Scholars have compared and contrasted the two authors, but to my knowledge have not noted this case that I present here. See Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp. 293–6; Nello Cipriani, ‘La presenza di Mario Vittorino nella riflessione trinitaria di S. Agostino’, *Augustinianum* 42/2 (2002), pp. 299, 307, 309, 310; Bradshaw, ‘Neoplatonic Origins’, p. 397; Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*, vol. 1, p. 477.
underlying subject. So it is clear that God is improperly called substance, in order to signify being by a more usual word.51

The target here is not merely anyone who misapplies the ‘subject’ discussed in Aristotle’s *Categories* to the case of God, for then his point would simply be that God is not a physical subject of accidents, which is the topic of that treatise.52 Augustine says he is concerned to argue instead that there is nothing in God that underlies God’s essential attributes, in other words, God’s form.

And the relevance of this to Victorinus’ model is clear. Victorinus often uses the term ‘substance’ (*substantia*) in the sense of ‘substrate’ when asserting that God the Father is the substrate underlying the Logos/Son/Form.53 Keep in mind, too, that by the name ‘God’ Victorinus typically refers particularly to the Father. Victorinus is surely Augustine’s target, then, when he says: ‘it is impious to say that God subsists to and underlies his goodness, and that … it is in him as in an underlying subject’.54 And the conclusion of the passage is a round rejection of Victorinus’ model, which depends upon an attempt to gloss ‘consubstantial’ as ‘together comprising one primary substance’.

This is important not only for our understanding of the history of theology, but also for the precision it brings to our interpretation of Augustine. In this passage Augustine is not rejecting ‘ontotheological’ accounts of God in general.55 Rather, he is denying that God (the Father) is a substance in the sense of a substrate, and that the Father and Son are one in the imperfect way that a compound is ‘one’. The Godhead does not have a substrate for its form; it simply is identical with its essential attribute of goodness.

Why does Augustine not name Victorinus here, if he believes the latter’s *Against Arius* contains such a danger to piety? The answer is not difficult to discern. Augustine’s default method when disagreeing with confreres is to assault their position but not their person, to the extent of not even naming them. Presumably the driving concern is that Christians should correct each other without publicly humiliating one another (cf. Matt 18:15). Moreover, the danger was slight, if Jerome’s complaint is indicative of the general reaction. Few people, apparently, were actually soldiering through Victorinus’ difficult treatise. Those who did were also likely also to read Augustine’s *On the Trinity*. And there they would find a clear correction.


52 As in Augustine, *Conf.* 4.16.30.


54 When he wants to refer to the Son or Holy Spirit, he typically calls them by their proper names, but not so with the Father, whom he usually simply calls God (presumably because he is the first principle).

Conclusions

We have seen that the Arian controversy, which is the historical context for Victorinus’ metaphysical treatises, was an occasion for him to develop his own trinitarian metaphysics. He participated in the tradition of commentary on Aristotle as well as that of Neoplatonic speculation about transcendent being. His particular model of ‘consubstantiality’ that we have just examined was important in the West even though it was rejected in what became the mainstream position. It sharpened Augustine’s own speculations, the influence of which have been unmatched in the history of Western theology.