This article spells out different terminological trends within the Eastern Christian tradition as well as the East-West use of terminology to express the mystery of inner-trinitarian life and God's activities *ad extra*. It also surveys the meaning of the Greek words ὀψία and ἐνέργεια in their evolution from classical Greek philosophy, through the Cappadocians, John of Damascus, and Gregory Palamas, to neo-Palamites such as Sergii Bulgakov and Georgii Florovsky. My task here is to show how the fundamental terms ὀψία, ἐνέργεια and δύναμις functioned in their correlations, whilst forming the subsequent theological traditions of East and West. It is argued that in refining classical philosophical terminology for Trinitarian theology, not only did Eastern and Western fathers have different positions, but also among the Easterners there were considerable differences: a) the phrase *God's essence/opsis* τοῦ θεοῦ for Easterners does not have the same meaning as ὀψία/substantia for Westerners in view of the Eastern notion of divine transcendence rendered through the ὑπερούσια language; b) the ὀψία – ἐνέργεια distinction that has now become axiomatic in Eastern Orthodox theology due to the revival of Palamite theology.

Whilst almost all neo-Palamite theologians, including Georgii Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff, claim that Gregory Palamas stands in direct theological continuity with the previous patristic teaching on the essence-energies distinction – arguing that the Palamite distinction can be traced to the Cappadocians, Denys the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor – Sergii Bulgakov
acknowledges that this language has been theologically multivalent in the Eastern fathers; particularly the use of ἐνέργεια in particular parallels the perplexing usage of the terms ousia/person and δύναμις prior to the clear distinction established by the Cappadocians. This study is vital for understanding issues such as how the East arrived at the essence-energies distinction commonly associated with Gregory Palamas.

I shall also demonstrate that there have been different terminological trends even within the Eastern Christian tradition, let alone the East-West use of terminology to express the mystery of intra-trinitarian life and God’s relation to the cosmos. Apparently, the usage of ousia, ἐνέργεια and δύναμις has been notoriously difficult to clarify even among professional philosophers and theologian alike, as the meanings of these terms are extraordinarily fluctuating, ambiguous and highly debated. Moreover, behind the divergence in the patristic traditions of the East and West lies both a divergence in the usage of philosophical terminology as well as differing ecclesial, ascetical and theological concerns.

In the terminological chaos marked by the fusion of horizons, there seems to be a fairly general agreement that Plato⁴ approximates ousia, ἐνέργεια with δύναμις (act and potency), differing from Plato. My overarching task here is to show how the above terms have been variously translated, interpreted and eventually assimilated within the patristic tradition.

THE LEGACY OF PLATO

Plato was among the first writers who utilised the term ousia/essence/substrate philosophically, i.e. as distinct from its popular, ordinary meaning – wealth or possession⁶ –


³ Parmenides (540-470) is routinely credited as the first among the philosophers who perceived reality in terms of Being in a poem which Anthony Kenny labels as «the founding charter of ontology». See Anthony Kenny, A Brief History of Western Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 8.
attaching to it an ontological sense. Oουία is a noun deriving from ούνα - the feminine singular participal form of «to be» (τό εἶναι). Its first everyday meaning is «that which is one’s own’, one’s property or, «substance».

This first idea is of stable, indeed immovable property, real estate, which had an impact on the metaphysical idea of stable being: hence essence. In Plato’s early works the preference is given to synonymous terms - τό εἶναι and τό ὄν.- but from the Republic onwards, the usage of οουία is fairly well established.9

Among the variety of senses in which οουία is used by Plato, there are passages that contain οουία not as a synonym of «existence»11, but rather as referring to a character/property that can be lost or acquired.12 This usage reappears in Aristotle, who is known for fixing the terminology to distinguish between substance and accident - οουία and συμβεβηκός - using Plato’s own distinction as well as a similar one: οουία and πάθος.13

Christopher Stead remarks that Plato does not utilise οουία in the sense of Aristotelian first substance - πρώτη οουία - to denote a particular individual being.15 Nor does Plato use

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7. Arguably, the more accurate translation of the word οουία should be «beingness» - to be-eἶναι; being-ουα; beingness-ουία. For the etymological discussion see Hanley, Being and God in Aristotle and Heidegger: the Role of Method in Thinking the Infinite, 58.

8. See Owens, The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics: A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought, 150. Substance is a derivative of the Latin sub-stantia which is equivalent to the Greek ὑποκείμενον. Aristotle himself, for instance, rejects ὑποκείμενον as a misleading characterization of οουία (in the Metaphysics 1029a.7-1029a.10: γὰρ μὲν οὖν τῶρον ἀρίθμητος τοίνυν ἡ οουία, ὅτι τὸ μὴ καθ’ ὑποκείμενον ἄλλα καθ’ οὗ τὰ ἄλλα: δὲι δὲ μὴ μόνων οὐκείσ: οὐ γὰρ ἰκανόν: αὐτὸ γάρ τὸ τότο ὄνομα, καὶ ἑτέρα οουία γίγνεται.). Original texts are in Aristotle’s Metaphysics, ed. W. D. Ross, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924). However, the most problematic issue in rendering οουία as substance is that the latter term is not at all connected with the verb «to be» - εἶναι, and, therefore, is deprived of the intrinsic ontological connotation of οουία. See Hanley, Being and God in Aristotle and Heidegger: the Role of Method in Thinking the Infinite, 58.


14. Aristotle’s distinction between «primary substances» such as humans or horses, and the groups that they belong to, for example, humanity, which are «secondary substances» will later be employed by the Cappadocian fathers to establish a clear distinction between ὑπόστασις and οουία, primarily on
the basis of the difference between particular and common. The transformation of the ancient Greek philosophical concepts is extensively discussed by Panayiotis Nellas. In a characteristic passage he writes: «[The] cosmology of Plato and the anthropology of Aristotle, both of which left clear traces, have been thoroughly assimilated and broken down as systems, and ... the true elements which they contain have been unified and used to illuminate the real relationship that exists between sensible things and their inner principles». See P. Nellas, Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person (Crestwood, New York, 1987) 59.

15 See Stead, Divine Substance, 30.

16 Stead, Divine Substance, 30. Another crucial omission is the use of οὐσία to denote «matter».

17 Origen in Contra Celsum 8, 12-8, 16 – alluding to John 14, 6 «I am...the truth» – calls Jesus «the essence of truth / η της άληθείας ουσία». The context of Origen’s saying is: Αυτώ γάρ πει-θόμεθα το είποντι: 'Ηριν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι εγώ είμι' καί λέγοντι: ’Εγώ είμι η άληθεία: καί ουκ οὕτως τις ἡμῶν ἔστιν ἀνάρρηστον, ὡς οἴεται ὁτι η της άληθείας ουσία προ τῶν χρόνων τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἴπομενας οὐκ ἂν. In Contra Celsum, ed., trans. and notes Marcel Baret, vol. 4. SC 150 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968). «Truth» as Stead observes, has «its rather specialized Platonic sense of ideal and eternal reality». In another pericope Origen portrays Jesus as «the archetypal being of truth» γάρ της άληθείας πρωτότυπος οὐσία ἐν τῷ Ἱσοῦ μόνῳ λέγοντι εγώ είμι η άληθεία. Therefore, Jesus, according to Origen is labeled as η αυτοποιηθεία; fuller quotation is: είναι θεόν καὶ κυνθθεόν, οὕτως ὁ αὐτοποιηθείς ἀστι καὶ η αυτοοιοσσία καὶ η αυτοποιηθεία. Cf. Stead, Stead, Divine Substance, 152.

18 Stead, Divine Substance, 37-38.

19 In his Stolp i unverscheden istyny (Moscow, 1914) 15-16 Florensky writes: «Our Ruthenian word for truth, “istina”, is linguistically close to the verb “est” [to be]. Hence, “istina”, according to the Russian understanding of it, embodies the concept of absolute reality: istina is “what is”, the genuinely existent, τό ὄντως ὄν or τό ὄντως ὄν, in contradistinction to what is imaginary, unreal, unactual. In the word, “istina”, the Russian language marks the ontological aspect of this idea. Therefore, “istina” signifies absolute self-identity and, hence, self-equality, exactness, genuineness. Ispi, istimnyi, istovyi [true, authentic, real] are words that issue from the same etymological nest. This ontologism in the Russian understanding of the truth is strengthened and deepened for us if we consider the etymology of the verb est’. Ests’ comes from the root es, which in Sanskrit gives as (e.g., āsmi = esmi; asti = esti). Esm’, est’ can without difficulty be related to the Old Slavic esmi; the Greek eimi (esmi); the Latin esum, est; the German is; the Sanskrit asmi, asti, etc. But in accordance with certain hints in the Sanskrit, this root es signified – in its most ancient, concrete phase of development – to breathe, hauchen, athmen. In confirmation of this view of the root as, Curtius points to the Sanskrit words as-u-s (the breath of life), asu-ras (vital, lebendig); and, equivalent to the Latin os, mouth, the words as, ās-ja-m, which also signify mouth; the German athmen is also related to this. Thus, “est” originally meant to breathe. Respiration, or breath, was always considered to be the main attribute and even the very essence of life. And even today, the usual answer to the question, “Is he alive?” is “He’s breathing.” Whence the second, more abstract meaning of “est”: he’s alive, he has strength. Finally, “est” acquires its most abstract meaning, that of the verb that expresses existence. To breathe, to live, to be – these are the three layers in the root es in the order of their decreasing concreteness, an order that, in the opinion of linguists, corresponds to their chronological order.» English translation
In the *Sophist* (247e) Plato expresses the idea that a real being is nothing but power / δύναμις. However, Stead argues that this may perhaps be little more than a debating-point advanced against the materialists, designed to show that some immaterial things are real, since they produce effects; but the aphorism «being is power» was taken out of context by Plato’s successors, and is very likely presupposed by Aristotle’s counter-argument that actuality, ἐνέργεια, is prior to power, or «potentiality», as it is usually translated by Aristotelian scholars. The Stoics are said to have revived Plato’s suggestion that «being is power», and in later philosophy there seems to be little agreement; professional philosophers no doubt had to decide for or against Aristotle’s subordination of «power» to «actuality», but the common usage of these terms is extraordinarily fluctuating and confused.

Apparently, for our further discussions related to the patristic period and subsequent Slavic theology, the Platonist sense of «beyondness», so to speak, is the most crucial. Relating the Ideas as perfect prototypes to the Idea of the Good, Plato gives us a remarkable statement of divine transcendence that later will be taken on board by numerous Christian authors, particularly those who were inclined to elaborate the so-called mystical theology. In the *Politeia/Republic*, (Book 6, 509 β) Plato says:

...that the objects not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence (οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἄγαθοῦ) , but still transcends essence (ἄλλα ἐτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας) in dignity and surpassing power (πρεσβεία καὶ δύναμις ὑπερέχοντος).

Stead observes that having said that the good is «beyond being/ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας», Plato «manifestly does not mean that it is too excellent to be real; in his view it is more real than any of its instances. Most probably the term “being” carries the implication of “being so-and-so”».

The Good of Plato, as the ultimate reality, certainly occupies the space that later theism assigns to a personal God, whose ultimate divinity is unknowable.

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21 See Stead, *Divine Substance*, 45.


24 See Stead, *Divine Substance*, 41.


26 See Stead, *Divine Substance*, 41.
Plato’s dictum – principle of divine transcendence (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας) – will later have life on its own, surfacing in Origen, the Nicene Fathers, Denys the Areopagite, and subsequent Byzantine mystical theology.

What then was the sense given to Plato’s famous phrase – «beyond being/ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας» – by Christian commentators? In fact, some Christian authors not only used Plato’s dictum, but also considerably extended it, maintaining that the Good transcends all human intellectual capacity and, hence, the category of οὐσία itself. A few examples of this development are pertinent here.

Origen, in the Contra Celsum 6, 64 emphatically suggests that the Logos is «being of beings, and Idea of Ideas» (οὐσιαν μὲν οὐσιῶν λεκτέων καὶ ιδέαν ιδεῶν); however, «the Father is beyond everything of this kind» (θεου άκολουθεὶ τὰ πάντα τούτων τῶν πατέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ θεὸν). Similar language appears in later Platonists, namely, the Neo-Platonists. In Plotinus’ Ennead I, 7 we can find what might be a step further with regard to the Republic discussion of the Good. As Plotinus puts it: «For because it [the Good] is beyond being, it transcends activity and transcends mind and thought / Καὶ γὰρ ὅτι ἐπέκεινα οὕσιας, ἐπέκεινα καὶ ἐνεργείας καὶ ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ νοησεως.»

A glance at the issue of Eusebius of Caesarea’s «baptising of Plato» will give us an insight as to how Plato’s dictum was being mulled over by Christian authors on the threshold of the first ecumenical council:

Herein Plato says most distinctly that the intellectual essences receive from the «good», meaning of course from God, not merely the property of being known, but also their existence and essence... So far he [Plato] does not regard the ideas as coessential, nor yet suppose that they are unbegotten, because they have received their existence and their essence from Him who is not an essence, but far transcends essence, in dignity and power (ὁ γὰρ ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, προσβείς καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχον), whom alone the Hebrew oracles with good reason proclaim as God, as being the cause of all things.

28 Origen enquires «whether we ought to say that the only begotten is being of beings and Idea of Ideas’ / Σηματεύον δὲ καὶ, εἰ οὐσιαν μὲν οὐσιῶν λεκτέων καὶ ιδέαν ιδεῶν καὶ ἀρχήν. (Contra Celsum 6, 64) The Greek quotation is in Stead, Divine Substance, 152.
29 Gregory of Nyssa will speak of God as transcending all principles: ὃς ἐστὶν ὁ πάντων ἀρχής, τῆς ἐπέκεινα πάσης ἀρχῆς ἡμῖν εὑρισκομένης, ἦτις ἐστὶν ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς; see Contra Euromine I.1.531.11-12 in Gregorii Nysseni Opera, ed. W. Jaeger, vol.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960).
30 God is the Cause of existence while Himself existing not, being beyond Being (ὡς πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα)... See The Divine Names I, 1. The Greek text: Καὶ ἐπί τῶν μὲν τοῦ εἶναι πάσαν αὐτόν καὶ μὴ διὰ ὃς πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα, καὶ ὃς δὲν ἐστὶν περὶ ἔσχατος καιροῦ καὶ ἐπιστημῆς ἀποφαίνεται. See PG 3, 588B. See also Louth, The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys, 164-165.
31 See Stead, Divine Substance, 140.
32 See Stead, Divine Substance, 152.
34 In the Preparation for the Gospel 11.21; The Greek original is: Σαφῆσται διὰ τούτων οὐ μόνον τὸ γινόμενος τάς νοητὰς οὐσίας, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ἔχειν παρὰ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, δηλαδὴ τοῦ θεοῦ, φησιν ὁ Πλάτων τὸ τε ἀγαθὸν "μὴ εἶναι οὐσίαν, ἀλλ’ ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, προσβείς καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχον." ὅταν μὴ ὁμιοστοῖς αὐτὰ τίθεσθαι,
Finally, Plato has to say something extremely crucial about the relationship between the name – δόμα – and the named. Not for nothing did Aleksei Losev and Sergii Bulgakov – the apologists of the glorification of the divine name (imiaslavie) – focus on Platonist foundations for their elaboration of the philosophy and theology of the imiaslavie in connection with Palamite thought and the Eunomian controversy. In the Cratylus, Plato provides a description of a name that refers to the δόμας of the named, where δόμας has a connotation of "something like its intelligible presence". Yet, describing the knowledge provided by names, Plato’s inclination to approximate οὐσία and δόμας makes his next step fairly easy – he upholds the position that a name refers also to the οὐσία of the object named. This type of embryonic onomato-ontology, so to speak, when transposed into the realm of theology might well result in the divine onomatodoxy – in its

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Russian embodiment – with its highly controversial slogan «God’s name is God Himself». The Divine Name controversy or imiaslavie has been terra incognita for a long time and only recently received scholarly attention. Despite the vast research on the history of the Russian Church and Slavic Athonite monasticism, little has been written about the phenomenon of imiaslavie, a monastic movement that taught the divinity of the names of God.

The controversial expression – «the name of God is God Himself» – Bulgakov will reinterpret in an orthodox way, explaining that the word God means rather divine – 8E66. Following the other two adherents of imiaslavie, Losev and Florenskii, Bulgakov provides the Greek formula to husk the Russian one: το του Θεου ονομα Θεος εστιν, although not Θεος. The reverse formula, Bulgakov argues is heretical: ο Θεος το του Θεου ονομα εστιν.

THE LEGACY OF ARISTOTLE

If we turn to Aristotle, we find striking similarities as well as differences. It is generally acknowledged that Aristotle – drifting away from Plato’s ontological distinctions – focused on what later will be clearly defined as a philosophical distinction between essence and existence. The question for us is: can we locate in Aristotle any «beyond being» notion resembling Plato’s dictum that the Good transcends being/essence (επέκεινα της ουσίας)? Rowan Williams rightly concludes that «Aristotle’s God is ουσία, and it would make no sense to speak of Him as επέκεινα της ουσίας.» However, we can find in Aristotle at least a tiny hint that echoes Plato’s notion of divine transcendence. In the Metaphysics (A 7.1072b, 24-25), pondering over the human and the divine, Aristotle maintains that it is active thinking that is most divine in us and «if God always enjoys this well-being (ουτως ευ έξει) which we sometimes do, this is wonderful (θαυμαστον); and if more than this (ει δε μαλλον), more wonderful yet (ετι θαυμασιωτερον).» Aryeh Kosman remarks that the word «more» can be easily overlooked:

What does Aristotle mean by the suggestion – ει δε μαλλον – that the divine may enjoy a mode of being better – more well – than the well-being we

41 Sergii Bulgakov, Filosofia imeni (St Petersburg: Nauka, 1998) 327-328.
44 Bulgakov, Filosofia imeni, 328.
45 Bulgakov, Filosofia imeni, 328.
47 Quoted in Aryeh Kosman, «Metaphysics Λ in the Corpus Aristotelicum see Elders, Aristotle’s Theology: A Commentary on Book Λ of the Metaphysics, 44-49.
occasionally enjoy? Aristotle’s «more» here may recall Plato’s description of the good as «beyond substance – ἐπέκειται τῆς οὐσίας» (Republic 509b9). Simplicius clearly thought something of the sort, for he supports his claim that Aristotle had in mind something beyond thought by quoting from the lost On Prayer Aristotle’s assertion that «the divine is either thought or something beyond thought (ὁ θεὸς ἢ νοῦς ἢ καὶ ἐπέκειτα τι τοῦ νοο)» (in De Caelo⁴⁹ 485. 19-22; cf. Eudemian Ethics VII. 14. 1248a27). Simplicius’s testimony may or may not be accurate, and there may or may not be a connection between it and Aristotle’s remark here; but more simply the implications of the remark. The view that Aristotle offers, it seems, is not simply that God thinks as we do, only all the time rather than merely some of the time; it is rather that God engages in an activity that is like thinking, but something more. And indeed, Aristotle concludes, that is the case: ἐχεῖ δὲ δώδε. And thus, he concludes, the being of the active principle is of this nature, for, as I began this now long introductory remark by quoting, τούτο γὰρ ὁ θεὸς: "this thing we have been talking about God is" (Met. Α 7.1072b3).⁵₀

In Aristotle’s thought at various stages of its development, as well as in thinkers of late antiquity, the question of essence-οὐσία is unresolved. Stead suggests a scheme⁵¹ that distinguishes between 28 different senses of οὐσία, whilst the Patristic Greek Lexicon⁵² contains 58 subsections to treat the issue. For our purpose the most significant aspect of Aristotle’s rich ontological tapestry is his distinction between primary and secondary substances, which – to reach very far afield – provides the platform of the Cappadocian Fathers distinction between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις. As Aristotle puts it:

Substance (οὐσία) – what is most properly and primarily and especially so called – is what is neither said of a subject nor in a subject; e.g. this man, or this horse. What are called secondary substances (δεύτεραι δὲ οὐσίαι) are the species in which are the things primarily called substances, together with the genera of these species; for instance, this man belongs in the species, but the genus of the species (γένος δὲ τοῦ ἐλέους ἠστί) is animal; these, then, are called secondary substances (δεύτεραι οὖν αὕτη λέγονται οὐσίαι) – for instance, man, and animal.⁵³

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⁵¹ See Stead, Divine Substance, 133.


⁵³ See Stead, Divine Substance, 57. The Greek original is: ὑπόστασις, ὃς καὶ τὰ τῶν εἴδων οὐσίαν ἐχουσι τῶν εἴδων οὐσίαν ὑπαρχον, τούτα τα καὶ τα τῶν εἴδων τούτων γεγονός ὁ τῶν ἄνθρωπως ἐν εἰδί μὲν ὑπάρχει τὸ ἄνθρωπος, γένος δὲ τοῦ ἐλέους ἠστὶ τὸ ζῷον. δεύτερα οὖν αὕτη λέγονται οὐσίαι, οἷον ὁ τῶν ἄνθρωπως καὶ τὸ ζῷον. Quoted in Stead, Divine Substance, 57.
The πρῶτη οὐσία is the answer to the question «what is it»: it is meant to denote the individual, whilst the second substance (δεύτερα οὐσία) refers to the common genus. Here we see how the Christian tradition, beginning with the Cappadocians, perfects Aristotle’s understanding, because the πρῶτη οὐσία (in the case of Socrates) refers to a «who» and not just to a «what». The language of genus involves further ambiguities related to the legacy of Platonism. Aristotle employs the terms genus (γένος) and εἴδος – sometimes using the latter neither in the sense of «shape» nor species, but «something more like “the shape or form characteristic of a species”», concluding that «the development of a living creature is regarded as an endeavor to realize this characteristic form, which in its complete articulation is called ἐντελέχεια, or ἐνέργεια, “actuality”».

Actualization is the process of bringing the potentiality of a being into ἐντελέχεια – fulfillment of its τέλος through realization of its potential. Potentiality / δύναμις is a given capacity within beings to be other than they are. Actualized being (ἐνέργειαν οὖ σιαν) is contrasted by Aristotle with the merely potential. In actual things essence and efficacy (οὐσία and ἐνέργεια) are, according to Aristotle, one and the same. In Α 6 Aristotle comes up with «a principle whose very essence is activity which does not involve the actualization of any power δύναμις – the pure act of Aristotelian tradition.» This principle moves all things as «thought is moved by the object of thought (νοῦς), and this is God (τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ θεός)». In Α 7, the First Mover is described as being ἐνέργεια so that he moves the world as the object of desire.

As mentioned earlier, there are different ways of combing the terms οὐσία, ἐνέργεια and δύναμις in Plato and Aristotle. There can be an approximation of the nearly synonymous terms δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, both of which are contrasted with οὐσία in the case of Plato. Or there can be an approximation of οὐσία and ἐνέργεια that is contrasted with pure potentiality – δύναμις – in the case of Aristotle.

54 Stead, Divine Substance, 61-63.
55 Stead, Divine Substance, 61.
56 Stead, Divine Substance, 61.
57 On essence as a form of genus see Wedin, Aristotle’s Theory of Substance: The Categories and Metaphysics Zeta, 230-257.
58 For a discussion on inconsistency of Aristotle’s usage of this term see Stead, Divine Substance, 73-74.
59 Stead, Divine Substance, 74.
61 Stead, Divine Substance, 74-75.
62 Leo Elders ascribes a vague notion of potentiality – actuality to Anaximander and Anaxagoras. See Elders, Aristotle’s Theology: A Commentary on Book A of the Metaphysics, 93.
63 Metaphysics, 1042b, 10-12.
64 Kosman «Metaphysics Α 9: Divine Thought», 308.
66 For an overview of nous, see F. E. Peters, Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon (New York/London, 1967) 132-139.
68 Elders, Aristotle’s Theology: A Commentary on Book A of the Metaphysics, 144.
It has become conventional to associate the first ontological set with an Eastern-style theology, culminating in St. Gregory Palamas' distinction between God's essence and energy, and the second ontological set — with Western theology beginning from Tertullian and carrying on through Augustine to Thomas Aquinas. Certainly, this is an oversimplified scheme — albeit not without a grain of truth — but historically it does not stand up to critique considering the numerous exceptions on both sides, as well as their mutual fusion and correlatedness. Inevitably, contemporary readings of both Thomism and Palamism in their numerous versions highly depend upon the continuity or discontinuity of their foundational metaphysics — that stem from privileging one scheme over another. Therefore, our next section will be on how Hellenistic ontology was «baptised» in the patristic era.

**TRINITARIAN THEO-ONTOLOGY IN THE PATRISTIC ERA**

Some fathers — Cyril of Jerusalem and Alexander of Alexandria, among others — tend to avoid the term ὀοόῳ, utilising ὑπόστασις as a synonymous term. Tertullian, however, not being influenced by Plato to the extent the Eastern Fathers were, applies the term «substantia» to God without any reservations: Pater enim tota substantia est, Filius vero derivatio (Adversus Prax. 9).

Eastern Fathers who theologized in the orbit of Platonism — keeping in mind Plato's axiom that the good is beyond «essence»/ ἐπέκεινα τής ὀοόῳς — were reluctant to apply ὀοόῳ to God unwarrantedly. In this regard East and West differ from each other, at the very

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70 This bold cliché requires the greatest care if it is to be utilised in any helpful ways, and theologians on both sides quite rarely insert the necessary exceptions, qualifications and nuances.


72 A good discussion on the East-West ontological approaches for grounding corresponding theologies is in Reid, Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodox and Western Theologies, 1-26.

73 Athanasius the Great, for instance, apologizes for the use of ὀοόῳ (Decr. 19) because it is a predominantly philosophical term, which is not found in the Bible, whereas ὑπόστασις appears in Wisdom, St. Paul, and Hebrews. See Stead, Divine Substance, 161. In the time of Athanasius the Great, the identification of ὀοόῳ and ὑπόστασις supported the teaching of the divinity of Christ as consubstantial with the Father. Later the identification of ὀοόῳ with ὑπόστασις ended in the belief in the existence of one God, who presents Himself with different masks. This is why it was necessary to distinguish the term ὀοόῳ from the term ὑπόστασις person. Detailed discussion in A. Spassky, Istoriaa dogmaticheskikh divizhenii v epokhu vseleinsikh soborov (Sergiev Posad, 1914) 449.

74 Basil the Great makes a huge conceptual leap by emphasizing the distinct ontologically-integrated existence of the Father, the Son and the Spirit in the divine Trinity. Whereas in classical Greek thinking the term ὑπόστασις was a purely ontological category like substance (οοόῳ), Basil makes the identification of the ontological category of ὑπόστασις with, for lack of a better term, existential or relational notion of «person» (πρόσωπον). See G. Prestige, God in Patristic Thought (London, 1952) 244. In saying that the πρόσωπον or person is a ὑπόστασις, Basil the Great gave to the notion of person an ontological significance. «Person» no longer simply partook of being (substance or essence) which somehow preceded it; person became being; or, being became personalized. A crucial improvement has been introduced: the new ontological category known as πρόσωπον or ὑπόστασις became, by being personal, a relational idea. See J. Zizioulas, «The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution», Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Acts, ed. C. Schwöbel (Edinburgh, 1995) 47. See also M. Heim, The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001) 169-171.

75 See Stead, Divine Substance, 161. More on the Son's derivation see Stead, Divine Substance, 179.
least, on the terminological level. Western theology, with some exceptions, employed the relatively coherent Aristotelian concept ὁ oότα/essence, whereas Eastern theology vacillated between different—often incoherent, or even contradictory concepts and terminologies.

Leaving aside the question of the intrinsic coherence of the ontological systems of Plato and Aristotle, a crucial point for our theological, particularly Trinitarian, discussions, is that some elements of Platonism, alongside purely biblical revelational insights, resulted in the extension of the patristic Trinitarian vocabulary. Namely, apart from the traditional (i.e. Platonic and Aristotelian) ontological vocabulary, stood the growing tendency—in light of the impact of Neo-platonic tradition on Christian mysticism—to formulate God’s transcendence in terms of ὑπερούσα, ὑπερούσα, ὑπερούσα ὑπερούσια or ὑπέρθεος θεότης. This tendency, evolving from Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite, Roman the Melode and Maximus the Confessor, finds its expression in John of Damascus’s Exposition of Orthodox Faith:

Therefore, we believe in one God: one principle, without beginning (μίαν ἀρχήν ἀναρχον), uncreated, unbegotten, indestructible and immortal, eternal, unlimited, uncircumscribed, unbounded, infinite in power, simple, uncompounded, incorporeal, unchanging, unaffected, unchangeable, invisible, source of goodness and justice, light intellectual and inaccessible; power which no measure can give any idea of but which is measured only by His own will, for He can do all things whatsoever He pleases; maker of all things both visible and invisible, holding together all things and conserving them, provider for all, governing and dominating and ruling over all in unending and immortal reign; without contradiction, filling all things, being their conserver and first possessor; pervading all substances without being defiled, removed far beyond all things and every substance (ὅλας οὐσίας ἐπικατεύθυναν καὶ πάντων ἐπέκεινα) as being supersubstantial and surpassing all (ὅς ὑπερούσιον καὶ ὑπέρ τὰ δυντα οὖσαν), supremently divine (ὑπέρθεον) and good (ὑπεράγαθον) and replete (ὑπερπλήρη); appointing all the principalities and orders, set above every principality and order, above essence and life and speech and concept (ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν καὶ ζωήν καὶ λόγον καὶ ἐννοιαν); light itself and goodness and being (ἀντοσκόπητι, ἀντοσκόπης, ἀντοσκούσιαν) in so far as having neither being nor anything else that is from any other; the very source of being for all things that are, of life to the living, of speech to the articulate, and the cause of all good things of all; knowing all things before they begin to be; one essence, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, one kingdom (μίαν οὐσίαν, μίαν θεότητα, μίαν δόμησιν, μίαν θελησιν, μίαν ἐνέργειαν, μίαν ἀρχήν, μίαν ἔξοσιαν, μίαν κυριότητα, μίαν βασιλείαν); known in three perfect Persons (ἐν τρισὶ τελείας ὑποστάσει) and adored with one adoration, believed in and worshiped by every rational creature, united without confusion and distinct without separation (ἀσυγχωτος ἤμομένας καὶ ἀδιαστάτως διαμορμομένας), which is a paradox (παράδοξον). We believe in Father and Son and Holy Ghost in whom we have been baptized.76

Roman Zaviyskyy

The same intricate language – employing classical philosophical vocabulary with further modifications – will reappear in Gregory Palamas. The inevitable questions that arise from the aforementioned terminological development in the East are: how correlated is the term ὑπερούσιον with the Nicene δομούσιον, which in fact was introduced in a more Aristotelian technical sense into the Creed; and how did this contribute to the subsequent clash between Palamism and Thomism in terms of created and uncreated grace?

In fact, the phrase «God’s essence/οὐσία τοῦ Θεοῦ» – has a different meaning for a Westerner and an Easterner. For the former οὐσία/substantia refers to God’s ultimate aseity (unknowable, imparticpable); whereas for the latter, the same sense is reserved for ὑπερούσια; οὐσία in the eyes of Westerners, becomes to a certain extent particpable through the energies (ἐνέργειαι), according to the common interpretation of Gregory Palamas, who extrapolated the monastic experience of the union with God through prayer into the realm of dogmatic theology. Certainly, in the eyes of a Westerner who looks through Aristotelian spectacles, this double-layer-ness of Eastern thea-ontology is rather questionable and problematic. It entails the problem of preserving what is called God’s simplicity, which seems, in the eyes of Thomists, to be jeopardised, and claimed to be preserved by the neo-Palamites.

Another question might be: how did the East arrive at the language of ὑπερούσια and employ it for Trinitarian theology? The following survey will be very sketchy, and therefore by no means conclusive.

Under the influence of Plato’s famous dictum that the Good is beyond essence/ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, the language of ὑπερούσια appears in a neo-Platonist who exerted huge influence on Denys the Areopagite, namely, Proclus77 (410-485), who says: Πᾶς θεὸς ὑπερούσιος ἐστι καὶ ὑπέργειος καὶ ὑπέρμοιος (Institutio theologica, 115.1)78 or similarly, πᾶς θεὸς ἐν τῷ εἶναι θεὸς οὐσίως, μᾶλλον δὲ ὑπερωσίαται (in Platonis Timaeum commentaria, 364.20).79

There are numerous occurrences of the term ὑπερούσια in various Christian authors. Theodoret of Cyrus’s God also transcends everything that exists (ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὅντα ἄστι) and he is the one who ὑπερούσιος ὁν (In Explanatio in Canticum canticorum).80 In Roman the Melode ‘s hymnographic language, the Virgin gives birth to the superessential One (Ἡ παρθένος σήμερον τὸν ὑπερούσιον τίκτει),81 therefore, even dogmas of the Church are superessential (ἐν φρεσιν θείς δαυμιλὼς ὑπερουσίων δόγματος).82 Likewise, Denys the Areopagite elaborated his doctrine of the supra-essential Godhead (ὑπερούσιος Θεορχία) in somewhat extravagant vocabulary. «The Existent God», according to Denys, «is, by the nature of His power, supressentially above all existence

80 PG 81. 116.39.
(ὑπερούσιος ἔστιν); He is the substantial Cause and Creator of Being (δημιουργός ὄντος), Existence (ὑπάρξεως), Substance (οὐσίας) and Nature (φύσεως), the Beginning and the Measuring Principle of ages (μέτρου αἰῶνων); the Reality underlying time and the Eternity underlying existence).83

In the East, by the time of John Damascene, the ὑπερούσια language becomes a part of the ordinary trinitarian vocabulary alongside other trinitarian terms that seem to be synonymous for contemporary theologians – perὶ οὐσίας καὶ φύσεως for instance – however, not quite synonymous in the patristic age.

A good example of how John of Damascus brings together numerous, often conflicting, trinitarian terms is in his Institutio Elementaris: Ἐστι μὲν ὑπερούσιος οὐσία καὶ φύσις καὶ μορφὴ ἡ ἀκατάληπτος θεότης, ὑποστάσεις δὲ αὐτῆς καὶ πρόσωπα πατήρ, υἱός καὶ τὸ πανάγιον πνεῦμα.84 And also his similar expression, Ἐστιν οὖν ὑπόστασις μὲν καὶ ἄτομον καὶ πρόσωπον πατήρ, υἱός καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἄγιον· περιεκτικὸν δὲ αὐτῶν εἶδος ἡ ὑπερούσιος καὶ ἀκατάληπτος θεότης.85 For John of Damascus, being/essence/οὐσία might be predicated of God and creatures alike,86 therefore, God is beyond essence; he is the superessential essence: Οὐσία τοῖνυν ἐστὶ θεὸς καὶ πάντα κτίσμα, εἰ καὶ ὁ θεὸς ὑπερούσιος οὐσία ἐστίν.87

In the Exposition of the Orthodox Faith John of Damascus, following Denys the Areopagite, discusses theological epistemology and onomatology. If we are to name God, how do we do this, taking into account that «He did not grant us the knowledge of his essence»; «how can there be knowledge of the superessential? (τὸ ὑπερούσιον πῶς γνωσθήσεται;)» he asks. Apparently, God «receives names drawn from all that is, even from the opposites: for instance, He is called light and darkness, water and fire, in order that we may know that these are not of His essence (ιδα γνώμην, ὅτι σὺ ταύτα κατ᾽ οὐσίαν ἐστίν) but He is superessential, hence unnameable (ἀλλ’ ἐστι μὲν ὑπερούσιος, διὸ καὶ ἄκατονόμαστος); but inasmuch as He is the cause of all, He receives names from all caused by Him (ὡς δὲ πάντων τῶν ὄντων αἰτίας ἐκ πάντων τῶν ἀπίστων ὅνομάζεται).»88 Divine names that stem from the apophatic way of speaking (θείων ὄνομάτων τὰ μὲν ἀποφαστικῶς λέγεται), indicate

85 Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, 24.
86 However, according to John of Damascus, nothing in creation can adequately portray the inner life of the Holy Trinity, i.e., the superessential divine essence. All creation is subject to corruption, he concludes: Τὸ γὰρ κτιστὸν καὶ σύνθετον καὶ ποιητὸν καὶ πρεπόν καὶ περιγραφὴν καὶ σχῆμα ἔχον καὶ φθαρτόν, πάς σαφῶς δηλώσει τὴν πάντων τούτων ἀπηλλαγμένην ὑπερούσιον θεῖαν οὐσίαν; Πάσα δὲ ἡ κτίσεως δήλων ὡς τοῖς πλεοντεῖς τούτων ἐνέχεται καὶ πάσα κατὰ τὴν εαυτῆς φύσιν τῇ φθορᾷ ὑποκείται. In Expositio Fidei, see Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, ed. Bonifatius Kotter, vol. 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 25.
87 In Dialectica, see Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, vol. 1, 59.
the superessential (τὸ ὑπερούσιον); such are non-essential (οἷον ἄνοσίας), timeless, without beginning, invisible (ἄγρυνμος, ἀναγρῦνμος, ἀόρατος...because God above all things (ὑπὲρ πάντα ἑστὶ). Some names have a kataphatic (Τά δὲ καταφατικῶς) signification, as indicating that he is the cause of all things (οἷς αἰτίαι τῶν πάντων) ...These, then, are the affirmations and the negations, but the sweetest names are a combination of both (γιὰς οὖν καὶ ἡ ζύμη συνάφεια): for example, the superessential essence (ἡ ὑπερούσιος οὐσία), the Godhead that is more than God (ἡ ὑπέρθεσις θεότητι), the beginning that is above beginning (ἡ ὑπεράρχχις ἀρχή) and such like.89

A few passages further, John of Damascus makes it clear that God’s simplicity must be preserved, i.e. that there is not a synthesis in the Godhead (οὐ δύνατον ἑστὶν ἡ θεότητι):

However, whenever I think of the relation of the Persons to one another (πρὸς ἄλληλα σχέσεις τῶν υποστάσεων), I know that the Father is a superessential sun (ὃτι ἑστὶν ὁ πατὴρ ὑπερούσιος ήλιος), a well-spring of goodness, an abyss of essence, reason, wisdom, power, light and divinity, a begetting and emitting well-spring of the good hidden in himself.90

Given the Eastern fascination with Denys, it comes as no surprise that the notion of superessentiality (ὑπερούσιος) of God as it is articulated in John Damascene is not the last word in the development of the notion of divine transcendence in Eastern theology. If in the first millenium the fathers were reluctant to apply ὁσία to God, and preferred the term ὑπερούσια as an expression of God’s transcendence and beyondness, in the second millenium, Gregory Palamas, prompted by Denys and Maximus the Confessor, takes a further step in this regard. God, according to Gregory, is transcendent even to his ὑπερούσια. In the Against Akindynos he says that God transcends not only all beings, being ὑπερούσιος, but also that «his very superessentiality self-super-essentially unlimitedly transcends»91 (αὐτὸ τὸ ὑπερούσιον ἀνθυπερούσιοις ἀπέραντος ὑπερέχων).92 Gregory Palamas, following Gregory the Theologian93 and Denys the Areopagite, resists the essentialist concept95 of God, saying that when God spoke to Moses, He did not say «I am

90 St John of Damascus, Writings, 196, but changing «negation» to «relation». The Greek original is: Οὔτων δὲ τὴν πρὸς ἄλληλα σχέσιν τῶν ὑποστάσεων ἔννοιαν, οὖν, ὡς ἑστὶν ὁ πατὴρ ὑπερούσιος ήλιος, πηγὴ ἀγαθότητος, ἄρσεσις οὐσίας, λόγου, συφής, δυνάμεως, φωτός, θεότητος, πηγὴ γεννητική καὶ προβληματικὴ τοῦ ἐν αὐτῇ κρύπτων ἱγαθῆ. See Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, vol. 2, 36.
91 See Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ, ΣΥΓΤΤΡΑΜΜΑΣΑ. ΤΟΜΟΣ Γ'. ΑΝΤΙΡΡΗΤΙΚΟΙ ΠΡΟΣ ΑΚΙΝΔΥΝΟΝ.
92 This extravagant phrase is indeed difficult to render in English. The wider context is: Καὶ γὰρ ἐπὶ τῶν παρατέταν δῶμα καὶ ἀφανέσεως καθὰ καὶ μικρῶν ἀνωτέρω εἰρήνη τὸ θεῖα καὶ οὐκ οὐκ ἐπὶ τὰ κτισματά μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτῶν τῶν ὑπὲρ τὰ δυστὰ διήνοιας ἀνεκτελέστως, καὶ αὐτῶν τοῦ ὑπερούσιου ἀνθυπερούσιοις ἀπέραντος ὑπερέχου, κατὰ τῶν πολίων τα θεῖα Μάξιμων. See ibid, 251.
93 Homily 45, 3; PG 36. 625C.
94 In the Divine Names V, 4-5. PG 3. 817C-820AB.
95 John Meyendorff, emphasises Palamas’s dictum that «the essence is necessarily being, but being is not necessarily essence» (See Παλαμᾶ, ΣΥΓΤΤΡΑΜΜΑΣΑ. ΤΟΜΟΣ Γ', 31-32, 184) concludes that this is the very heart of Palamism, namely, that God can manifest himself in his very being and, at the
the essence», but «I am that I am» (Exod. 3: 14). «It is not therefore He-that-is who comes from the essence, but it is the essence which comes from He-that-is, for He-that-is embraces in Himself all Being (τὸ ἑξῆς)).

The patristic authors as well as the medievals were interested in the revealed divine name not only per se, but insofar as it bridged the gap between the biblical revelation and the Greek concept of Being, constructing the so-called «onto-theology» which in recent decades received criticism that has been augmented by the deconstructionist ethos, appealing to postmodern sensitivities. Apparently, both Palamas and Aquinas have been liable for critique in light of Heidegger’s grand narrative of the abandonment by Being. Yet, despite the deconstructionist tendencies with regard to onto-theology, the latter has not died out; on the contrary, it received a new impetus and is being pursued – albeit cautiously – with new dynamism.

Still more intriguing is Gregory Palamas’s teaching on Θέωσις, for which he inevitably had to clarify terminology pertaining to the theology of the real participation of the human person in the Divine Being, inasmuch as human beings are called to partake vitally of the divine energy, rising to the rank of «sharers of the divine nature» (θειάς κοινωνία φύσεως), according to the words of the New Testament (2 Peter 1:4). Without embarking on a full discussion, it seems appropriate to first ask: what do we participate in – God’s nature (φύσις), essence (οὐσία) or super-essence (ὑπερ-οὐσία) from Palamas’s vantage point?

Apparently, Palamas insists that there is no question of approximating the New Testament term «nature» (φύσις) with the patristic notion of ὀουσία,79 all that the Apostle tried to express was the reality of our participation in the very life of God;99 he speaks of the promises «given»; therefore by «nature» Peter means sanctifying and deifying grace, and certain Fathers have occasionally utilized the term in this way.100 As Palamas himself puts it: «Theologians have been accustomed to label as nature and essence (φύσις καὶ ὀουσία) not only the nameless (ἀνωτέρων) and hyper-onymous (ὑπερονύμων) superessentiality (ὑπεροσιάτητα) which passes beyond all names, but also the productive power of essence (οὐσιοποιοῦν δύναμιν) and of all the natural attributes (τὰ φυσικῶν προσώπη) of God.»101

same time, He remains imparticipable in His essence. See Jean Meyendorff, Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas (Paris, 1959) 292-93. This obviously raises more questions than it answers.


98 Palamas, speaking of deification, makes it clear that men cannot become «gods» except through grace (θεῖον or γὰρτι) and not through nature (φύσις). See Meyendorff, Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas, 248.


100 See Meyendorff, Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas, 248.

101 The Greek original is Ὁ γὰρ τὴν ἀνωτέρων μόνην καὶ ὑπερονύμων ὑπεροσιάτητα ἔκειντον φύσιν καὶ ὀουσίαν εἰσόδων οἱ θεολόγοι καλείν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν οὐσιοποιοῦν δύναμιν καὶ τὰ φυσικὰς προσώπη πρὸς τὸν πάντα τῆς φύσεως καὶ ὀουσίας ἀξιοῦσι προσρήματα, καὶ τάτα μᾶλλον καὶ γὰρ ἀπὸ τούτων τούτων μεταφέρεται πρὸς ἐκείνην ὡς ὑπερβαίνουσιν ἀπὸ τὸ διὰ φύσις σημανόμενον. See Palama, ΣΥΤΤΡΑΜΜΑΤΑ. ΤΟΜΟΣ Ι’, 1-4, 130.
Since Palamas’s theology employs the term energies/ἐνέργεια to stand for operations which are distinct from, and even contrasted with, the essence/οὐσία, he is often prompted to ensure God’s simplicity by reiterating that the essence is the cause of the energies. «Trihypostatic essence (τρισυμποστάτος οὐσία),» he writes, «is transcendent as the cause of natural energies and powers (τῶν φυσικῶν ἐνέργειῶν τε καὶ δυνάμεων); and in the trihypostatic essence there is one transcendent cause (ἐν τῷ ὑπερκείμενῳ ὡς αἰτίου), the Source (ἡ πηγάς) of the Godhead (θεότης), according to Denys».102 This statement stems from a divergent reading of Denys103 who speaks of «transcendent essence/ὑπερκείμενη οὐσία» and «downward divinity/δυνάμενη θεότης».104 Meyendorff remarks that these expressions were taken by Barlaam in an Arian sense, according to Palamas, who clearly perceives this Dionysian language as the distinction between the essence and energies in the bosom of one unique God.105 This has to be, of course, a very loose reading of Denys by Palamas.

The term ἐνέργεια had an extremely intricate history of development in patristic literature, particularly in view of the correlation with the term power/δύναμις. The trinitarian use of ἐνέργεια should be properly placed in the context of a causal sequence describing God’s productive capacity οὐσία/δύναμις > ἐνέργεια > ἐργα.106 In theology ἐνέργεια has been often used to describe the Incarnation,107 as God’s self-revelation. It has also been used as a term to denote the will (βουλή)108 of God and occasional109 gifts of grace. Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, uses ἐνέργεια in an accidental sense; for him ἐνέργεια is not contemporaneous with οὐσία. Exploring the status of the Holy Spirit, Nazianzen writes: «If He were an Accident (συμβέβηκεν), He would be an Activity

103 In Letter to Gaius, PG 3, 1068-1069.
104 See Meyendorff, Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas, 300.
105 See Meyendorff, Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas, 300.
107 St Clement in Stromata 5.55.3 and 7.7.7. See Stead, Divine Substance, 279.
108 One example is Eunomius, who says: «Грοт когда άνεργας had a start, the action ένέργεια is not without beginning, and granted the effects come to an end, the action is not without ending. There is no need, therefore, to accept the half-baked opinion of outsiders and unite the action to the essence. On the contrary, we must believe that the action which is the truest and most befitting God is his will [βουλή].» See Apology 23:14-17. Quoted in Barnes, The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology, 191; For Gregory of Nyssa, the operation of will is correlated with power, not with the energy. Christ is, according to Gregory of Nyssa, the power and wisdom of God, hence His will suffices to effect the existing things because his will is power (δύναμις). NPNF 5:111. Cf. Refutatio Confessionis Eunomii (70.1-6); Χριστός δὲ ἐστιν ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ δύναμις καὶ σοφία, δι’ αὐτόν πάντα ἐγένετο καὶ ὁ χωρίς τῶν ὄντων ἐστίν οὐδέν, καθὼς ιδούντις μαρτύρεται. εἰ οὖν πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, ὥστε καὶ λόγως, δι’ αὐτοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐγένοιτο ἢ βουλής μονὴ δύναμις γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βουλής, τὸν ἡμέτερον ἑπεί αὐτόν ἐν ἀόρασι ὑπό τῆς ἔμφασιν. See Contra Eunomium Libri, in Gregorii Nysseni Opera, ed. W. Jaeger, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill 1960) 341.
109 See Stead, Divine Substance, 279.
(ένεργεία) of God, for what else, or of whom else, could He be, for surely this is what most avoids composition? And if He is an Activity (εί ἐνεργεία), He will be effected, but will not effect and will cease to exist with the cessation of his production, for this is the kind of thing an activity is (τουτούν γὰρ ἡ ἐνεργεία)». Therefore, Nazianzen rejects the term ένεργεία in relation to the Spirit, whereas other authors (Athanasius in Contra Arianos. 2,2) for instance, applied it to the Son as well as to the Holy Spirit.  

Paradoxically, Gregory of Nyssa used the pair ένεργεία - δύναμις in a non-Aristotelian sense, whereas John Damascene had an almost Aristotelian understanding of energy as an active movement of nature (ενεργεία ἐστὶ φύσεως κίνησις δραστική), the power of essence (ενεργεία γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ φυσική ἐκάστης οὐσίας δύναμις τε καὶ κίνησις) and the actualization of potency (Λέγεται πάλιν ένεργεία καὶ τὸ ἀποτέλεσμα τῆς δυνάμεως).

**NEO-PALAMITES AND THE ESSENCE-ENERGIES DISTINCTION**

Whilst almost all neo-Palamite theologians, such as Vasilii Krivosheine, Kiprian Kern, Georgij Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff, claim that Gregory Palamas stands in direct theological continuity with the previous patristic teaching on the essence-energies distinction – arguing that the embryo of Palanism can be traced to the Cappadocians, Denys and Maximus the Confessor – Sergii Bulgakov quite honestly acknowledges

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110 Theological Oration 31:6; NPNF 7. Translation adapted. The original is εἰ μὲν οὖν συμβέβηκεν, ἐνέργεια τοῦτο ἄν εἴη θεός. τί γὰρ ἕτερον, ἢ τίνος; τίτοι γὰρ ποιεῖ μάλλον καὶ φεύγει σύνθεσιν. καὶ εἰ ἐνεργεία, ενεργήσεται δὴ δύναμις δὲ, οὐκ ἐνεργήσει, καὶ οὐκ ἐνεργήσει, καὶ οὐκ ἐνεργήσει, καὶ οὐκ ἐνεργήσει; εἰ δὲ οὐσία τις, οὐ τὸν περί τὴν οὐσίαν, ἢ τοῦ κτίσμα ὑποληφθῆσαι, ἢ θεός. PG 36,140,36-38.

111 See Stead, Divine Substance, 293. Origen speaks of the Spirit as «an energetic substance»; Eusebius applies a similar language to the Son. Ibid, 279.

112 Gregory of Nyssa argues in Against Eunomius 3.4.34 that what is done by the Son is done by the Father since the Son is the Power of God (δύναμις τοῦ πατρὸς) by which the Father acts (ἐργάζεσθαι). See Χριστός γὰρ ἐστιν ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνη ... πάντα ταῦτα τοῦ πατρὸς ἐστὶν ἑγαίμονες, τῆς δυνάμεως, αὐτὸς ἐγαίμονες, καὶ οὕτως ἀνέθεσε δὲ ἀμφοτέρου ῥόον καὶ βάσιν τὸν πατέρα ἐργάσθαι τιμήν καὶ χαρίς τοῦ ὀνόματος τῶν ὀνόματος οὐδὲν ἡ γὰρ τῆς δυνάμεως ἐνεργεία εἰς τὸν οὕτως δυνάμις τὴν ἀναφορὰν ἔχει. εἰπέν οὖν δυνάμις τοῦ πατρὸς ὁ υἱὸς, πάντα τὰ ἐργα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐστὶν ἑγαίμονες. Contra Eunomium Libri, in Gregorii Nysseni Opera, vol. 2, 147.

113 See Barnes, The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology, 293.

that this language generally, and the use of ἐνέργεια particularly, parallel the perplexed usage of the terms essence/οὐσία and person/ὑπόστασις prior to the clear distinction established by the Cappadocians.

Drifting from the inherited Solov’evian definition of Sophia as all-unity (vseiedinstvo), Bulgakov being prompted by Palamas, re-envisioned Sophia as the energy of God in the sense of ὑπόστασις, although not ὑπόστασις. In his mature sophiology this will translate into a formula: «Σοφία so far as the hypostasis of the Father is concerned, connotes predominantly οὐσία – prior to its revelation as Σοφία.»¹¹⁶ The Father’s οὐσία as Love-Sophia reveals «the hidden essence of the Father; she is His genuine predicate, whose true Subject He is.»¹¹⁷ Consequently, the Father is Sophia, but Sophia is not the Father. Σοφία is Deus revelatus in relation to Deus absconditus.⁰¹¹⁸ Arguably, what Bulgakov is trying to express is this: the Father is Σοφία-οὐσία, but Σοφία is not ὑπόστασις.

The debate over Sophia (Spor o Sofii) will bring Bulgakov and his early opponent Florovsky, who opposed his allegedly illegitimate use of Palamite thought for the construction of his sophiology, to the unrecognised incoherencies within Palamite theology. Florovsky, like Lossky uncritically took for granted the continuity of the distinction between essence and energies from the Cappadocians all the way to Palamas. Florovsky, in one of his letters to Bulgakov, writes,

The very terminology – οὐσία and ἐνεργεία has its beginning in Basil the Great. I see no difficulty in this terminology. Aristotle has nothing to do with this. [...] It is this that is «Energy», «Glory», «Sophia» – a non-hypostatic revelation of «the same» God. Not «essence», not «personhood», not «hypostasis». If you like, yes, – Divine accidentia...¹¹⁹

Bulgakov seems to be a lot more subtle in grasping the ambiguities of the essence-energies distinction retrospectively and the difficulty that Palamas had in grappling with patristic usages of the notion of ἐνέργεια. Palamas was even compelled to admit that the energies might be called συμβεβηκός πῶς.¹²⁰ Indeed, as I demonstrated in some detail, the term ἐνέργεια has been used inconsistently within patristic tradition. Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, used ἐνέργεια in an accidental sense; for him ἐνέργεια is not contemporaneous with οὐσία, whereas Athanasius (in Contra Arianos 2,2) applied ἐνέργεια to the Son as well as to the Holy Spirit.

¹¹⁵ In a series of lectures Chitenta o bogochełovechestve [Lectures on Godmanhood] (1877-1881), Solov’ev, having introduced his ambiguous insights about Sophia, reminded his audience – Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, among others – about a personified Wisdom in Prov. 8 and Christ the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-31). Moreover, Solov’ev remarked, that dedicating their most ancient cathedrals to St Sophia, «the substantial Wisdom of God», the Slavs gave to this idea a new articulation, unknown to the Greeks, who conflated Sophia with Logos. Or as he himself puts it: «Alongside with the individual, human image of the divine – the Mother of God and Son of God – the Slavs knew and loved under the name of Saint Sophia, the social embodiment of the Godhead in the Universal Church. And now we ought to give a rational expression to this idea, to the idea that was revealed to the religious sensibility of our ancestors.» See La Russie et l’église, SS 10:310.

¹¹⁶ Bulgakov, Sophia, The Wisdom of God, 41.
¹¹⁷ Bulgakov, Utrestiel', 419.
¹¹⁸ Bulgakov, Ikona i Ikonopochitanie, 51.
¹¹⁹ Pis’ma G. Florovskogo S. Bulgakovu i S. Tyshkevichju, Simvol 29, September 1993, 205-206.
¹²⁰ Capita 127; PG 150. 1209C.
Whilst Florovsky and later Lossky would use Palamas without actually subjecting his theology to a rigorous scrutiny, Bulgakov tends to be more sophisticated and aware of the ambiguities and inconsistencies related to Palamism. His reply to Florovsky’s reads as follows:

I think that your «sophia-clasm» (sofieborstvo) leads you towards such dubious ideas as «accidentality (akterisinalnost)» of the energies and the disguised splitting apart of the Holy Trinity («Glory» is thus Sophia, the entire O[J]d[ Testament] testifies of this!), when you subdivide the relation of the created conscience to God as to the hypostasis of Christ and to hypostasis of the Spirit, and therefore inevitably employ either «philosophy of all-unity, [or] monism of Karsavian sort. Particularly, as far as St Gregory Palamas is concerned, there need to be a distinction between the hesychast aspect of his teaching, where the [monastic] feat\textsuperscript{121} (podvig) speaks itself and of itself and religious-philosophical formulation of the teaching on ἐνέργεια which is, if not directly insufficient, then, in any case needs clarification, at the very least, of the notions. Aristotelian ἐνέργεια is taken not in relation to δύναμις, but to ὀνίσκια; therefore, we are having a pair of notions that are difficult to combine. This, of course, pertains to the form of theological expression, and not to the matter as such, however, terminological difficulties lead to obscurities unless they are overcome; this is a full analogy with the terms ὄνισκια and ἐπόστολος prior to the Cappadocians. The polemic with Palamas, particularly that he introduces polytheism (mnogobozhie), is fully analogous to the accusation of the Sophia-machoi (sofiebortsev) regarding the fourth hypostasis.\textsuperscript{122}

Being challenged by his mentor thus, Florovsky, would amend his views on accidentality of the energies two years later after Bulgakov’s letter. He reformulates his argument in a more balanced way, saying that

The active Divine power does not separate itself from the Essence. This «procession» expresses an «ineffable distinction», which in no way disturbs the unity «that surpasses essence». The active Power of God is not the very «substance» of God, but neither is it an «accident» [symbebekos]; because it is immutable and coeternal with God, it exists before creation and it reveals the creative will of God. In God there is not only essence, but also that which is not the essence, although it is not accident the Divine will and power His real, existential, essence-producing providence and authority. St. Gregory Palamas emphasises that any refusal to make a real distinction between the «essence» and «energy» erases and blurs the boundary between generation and creation both the former and the latter then appear to be acts of essence.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} A literal translation of «podvig» would be «feat>>, but the English term has some exhibitionist connotations which are completely lacking in the slavic word. «Podvig» in the ascetic monastic literature denotes the spiritual combat, interior struggle and ascetic endeavors aiming at perfection of the Christian identity.


\textsuperscript{123} Georges Florovsky, «Tvar i Tvarnosti» [1928], CW III, 69.
The necessity to demarcate the line – in the polemic with Bulgakov’s sophiology – between the generation and creation, in Florovsky, is not properly balanced, as it seems to suggest that essence and energy are two acting agents within one Godhead. The difficulty that Florovsky faces brings him to another difficulty, namely, that the idea of the world is eternal, but not co-eternal, or «rather that the Divine idea of the world is eternal by another kind of eternity than the divine essence»124. In this vein, the energies are eternal but not coeternal, in the sense that the Son and the Spirit are coeternal with the Father. It can be argued that in attempting to free the Trinity from the necessity of the world, Florovsky subjects the Trinity to an inward necessity; by making the substantial generation and procession subject to necessity, the notion of the perichoresis is undermined. Florovsky tents to ignore Bulgakov’s subtle attempts to hold together the two antinomic poles, namely, to be able to «simultaneously unite, identify, and distinguish creation and God’s life».125

Summary

An attempt has been made to sketch the divergent terminological trends within Hellenistic philosophy which exerted influence upon, and was considerably transformed by, the subsequent patristic tradition of West and East and modern Orthodox theology.

The meaning of the Greek terms οὐσία and ἐνέργεια has been surveyed in their evolution from Greek philosophy, through the Cappadocians, John Damascene and Gregory Palamas, to neo-Palamites such as Sergii Bulgakov and Georgii Florovsky.

The legacies of Plato and Aristotle have been explored in light of the formation of Christian theology and particularly trinitarian theology that employed terms: οὐσία, ἐνέργεια, δύναμις and ὑπόστασις. It has been pointed out that in refining classical philosophical terminology for trinitarian theology, not only did Eastern and Western fathers have different positions, but also among the Easterners there were considerable discrepancies.

Broadly speaking we may therefore say that Plato approximates οὐσία and δύναμις, whereas for Aristotle it is οὐσία and ἐνέργεια; at the same time, Aristotle contrasts οὐσία with δύναμις, whereas Plato contrasts οὐσία and ἐνέργεια. Likewise, later in Platonist systems what a thing is (οὐσία), is usually contrasted with what it does (ἐνέργεια); whereas in Aristotelian systems, activity (ἐνέργεια) is what a thing is essentially (κατ’ οὐσίαν). Hence energy (ἐνέργεια) is equated with essence (οὐσία).

The highly conventional cliché – that the Aristotelian interpretation of οὐσία – ἐνέργεια was eventually taken on board by medieval authors in the West, whereas the Platonist interpretation was employed in the East – is neither historically nor theologically accurate. Despite a certain degree of consistency among the fathers, the patristic thrust towards «baptising» classical philosophy tended to blur the binary conceptual interpretations. Gregory Nazianzen’s use of ἐνέργεια owes something to Plato and Aristotle alike; John Damascene’s interpretation of ἐνέργεια has Aristotelian connotations, as has been noted. The category of ἐνέργεια has been theologically multivalent, and even the Eastern fathers were by no means consistent in following either Platonist or Aristotelian usage. Therefore, standardization of the trinitarian vocabulary was, and remains, an unfulfilled dream. The phrase «God’s essence/οὐσία τοῦ Θεοῦ» does not have the same meaning for Easterners as

124 Florovsky, «Твар и Тварность» [1928], 56.
о́сіа/substantia does for Westerners in view of the Eastern notion of divine transcendence rendered through the ὑπερούσα language.

All patristic refinements and «baptisings» led, gradually, to a sophisticated variable trinitarian vocabulary that bore little resemblance to either classical Hellenistic usage or biblical parabolic narrative language. Various theological/ecclesial concerns also came into play. The previous language was tapped by Gregory Palamas to describe the new complexities (the οὐσία – ἐνεργεία distinction for humans to become gods through grace) of interrelated processes (divinization/Θεωσία as a call to realise the ἰμαγο Dei, mental prayer etc).

Given the preponderance of Aristotelian philosophy in the West, it should come as no surprise that Palamism generally, and the essence-energies distinction particularly, have often been misunderstood in view of the Aristotelian legacy of the potentiality-actuality distinction.

However, the attempts to divide East from West on the basis of the imagined role of Platonist and Aristotelian legacies as their respective metaphysics are no longer credible; regardless of whether these attempts stem from Lossky’s, Florovsky’s or Yannaras’s adherents. Whatever East and West were, and are now, the impact on them is a lot more complicated than just Platonist East and Aristotelian West.