A Theological Conundrum

Hugh construes human nature as a union of soul and body. The human being Diana Gregory is thus a composite of a human soul and a human body. Ontologically speaking, what is a human person? Is the person who is Diana Gregory the same as her soul, her body, or the union of her soul and body? The answer Hugh gives to this question appears to commit him to a consequence that contradicts Christian orthodoxy.

Hugh claims that “Man was made to the image and likeness of God, because in the soul, which is the better part of man, or rather was man himself, was the image and likeness of God [according to understanding of truth and love of virtue].”¹ Elsewhere Hugh writes, “For man, since he is not simple in nature but composed of a two-fold substance, is immortal in that part of himself which is the more important part—that part, to state the case more clearly, he in fact is.”² Hugh echoes Boethius’s definition of a person as the individual substance of a rational nature,³ or a soul:

Person is the individual element of rational substance…Now the soul is rational according to itself, because it has reason or rationality in itself, that is, capacity for reason…Thus the rational spirit here is properly called “person,” both distinguished in number and distinguishing by reason.⁴

Indeed, Hugh asks rhetorically, “For what is man more than soul?”⁵ He would then identify the human person who is Diana Gregory with her soul.
The God-human Jesus Christ is traditionally understood as a hypostatic union in which divine nature in the Person of the Son assumes a particular human nature. The only Person in the hypostatic union is the Son as the divine Word; there is no additional human person associated with Christ’s human nature. In 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned as heretical the Nestorian view that the hypostatic union includes both the divine Person of the Word and a distinct human person. However, if Hugh is correct that a human person is a human rational spirit or soul, then since the human soul-body composite assumed by the Word includes a human soul it ipso facto includes a human person. But then in addition to the divine Person of the Word, the hypostatic union includes a human person as well. Hugh’s Boethian conception of human personhood seems to commit him to the Nestorian heresy.

Hugh explicitly denies the existence of a distinct human person in the union of the Word with a human soul and body: “Now He assumed flesh and soul, that is man, nature not person. For He did not assume man the person but assumed man into person.”

Hugh proceeds to explain:

For man, that is, body and soul joined together, has to be person, yet not different from the Word, since man and Word are one person. Certainly the union makes them one. For flesh and soul joined together would have been [human] person, if they had not been . . . united to the [divine] person, the Word.

From the premise that all human persons are human souls, it does not follow that all human souls are human persons. Specifically, Hugh asserts that the human soul included in the hypostatic union is not a human person, though he also makes the counterfactual claim that if Christ’s human soul had existed without being united with the Word then it would have been a human person.

As it stands, Hugh’s reply fails to justify this counterfactual claim. Why would Christ’s human soul have been a human person if it had existed but not been united with the Word? So far the only discernible reason is that Christ’s human soul would have been an individual rational substance. Yet if Christ’s non-assumed human soul would have been a human person because it would have been an individual rational substance, then it is totally unclear why Christ’s assumed human soul is not also a human person since it is certainly an individual rational substance. Hugh wants to say that just as a human body is assumed into the human personhood of the soul with which