
THE GIFT OF LIFE: THE NON-SUBSISTENCE OF THOMIST *ESSE COMMUNE* IN ITS TRINITARIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates in what way the Christian Trinity is the ‘*causa et ratio*’ of creation, as Thomas Aquinas states it in the prologue of his *Commentary to the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. Of particular importance for this project is a better understanding of the Thomist *esse commune* as a *completum et simplex, sed non subsistens* (De Potentia 1.1 c). In dialogue with the Neoplatonic tradition is shown how Aquinas absorbs all Neoplatonic intermediary principles into the *esse commune* and opens up the understanding of creation as a structured act of love: Creation is the giving of being (*esse*), by which the Creator makes himself present to his creatures, in order to grant them their subsistence. It is shown how the non-subsisting *esse commune* is an analogue to the divine essence which only subsists in the divine persons, starting with the Father. This explains the thoroughly personal character of metaphysics.

Keywords

Trinity; Father; Being; Creation; Gift; Subsistence

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1. Preliminaries

In his important work *Der Andere*, Michael Theunissen recounts contemporary philosophy’s troubled attempts to reconcile the dialogical approach developed by the likes of Martin Buber, on the one hand, and the sort of subject-centred approach we find in the work of Edmund Husserl, on the other.¹ In Buber’s account, the I-Thou relation

¹ Michael Theunissen, *Der Andere* (Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, ²1981).

that so occupies his attention seemingly excludes the ‘Es’ (it), which, at least in his view, stands for an impersonal and non-relational ontology.² Husserl, for his part, seems to represent this latter kind of thinking. So, too, it appears, does Thomist metaphysics, which Buber felt to have a profoundly alienating character.³ But, as Franz Rosenzweig rightly reminded Buber, behind the Buberian ‘Es’ (it) there stands the third *person*: ‘Er’ (He), the Creator. Buber’s division between a supposedly personal second- and first-person perspective, on the one hand, and the putatively *impersonal* perspective of the third-person, on the other, proves deeply problematic.⁴ Yes, the ‘I-Thou’ relationship expresses closeness between persons, but this closeness is shallow without the respectful personal distance of the ‘He’, who stands for the most immediate intimacy, the presence of the Creator in us, a presence constituting us as free persons capable of a genuine attachment to other persons. Without the presence of the ‘He’, we lack the depth and dignity of freedom, apart from which we cannot rise to the level of a genuine ‘Thou’ even on Buberian terms.

Rightly understood, personal closeness and personal distance are not opposed but mutually presupposing! Consider the triune God: The intra-trinitarian *principium quod* (the trinitarian persons) and the intra-trinitarian *principium quo* (the one substance), which jointly characterise the Creator in himself, *are both thoroughly personal*.⁵ Looked at from this height, the whole of metaphysics reveals itself to be a meditation on intimacy, so much so that we could even replace the

² Martin Buber, *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, ⁵1984), 7–136.

³ Martin Buber, *Das Problem des Menschen* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, ⁵1982), 27–28.

⁴ Bernhard Casper, ‘Franz Rosenzweigs Kritik an Bubers “Ich und Du,” in: Jochanan Bloch–Haim Gordon (eds.), *Martin Buber. Bilanz seines Denkens* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder Verlag, 1983), 159–179. For an earlier treatment of the difference between ‘Es’ and ‘Er’ (personal God), see Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *System der Weltalter*. Edited and introduced by Siegbert Peetz (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, ²1998), 192.

⁵ Elmar Salmann, ‘Wer ist Gott? Zur Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Person und Natur in der Trinitätslehre,’ *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 35 (1984): 245–261; Hans Jorissen, ‘Zur Struktur des Traktates ‘De Deo’ in der Summa theologiae des Thomas von Aquin,’ in *Im Gespräch mit dem dreieinen Gott. Elemente einer trinitarischen Theologie. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Wilhelm Breuning*, eds. Michael Böhnke–Hanspeter Heinz (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1985), 231–257; Martin Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe. Ein schöpfungstheologischer Entwurf* (Freiburg–Basle–Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1991), 204–208.

term ‘metaphysics’ with that of ‘meta-anthropology’.⁶ Only in this context, set by the unity of the personal and ontological aspects of reality, does the Thomist *esse commune* become intelligible. How this connection undergirds and illumines Aquinas’s metaphysics is the subject of the present paper.

Thomas Aquinas was not only a prolific theologian but also a highly original metaphysician, even though he never worked out a synthetic, stand-alone treatment of his metaphysics.⁷ His metaphysical insights are scattered throughout his whole work, and the reader has to connect the dots for him- or herself. One who did so particularly well was the German philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich, who rightly located the core of Aquinas’s metaphysics in the vision of *esse commune* as a *completum et simplex, sed non subsistens* (*De Potentia* 1.1 c).⁸ In his opus magnum *Homo Abyssus*, Ulrich developed this foundation into what could be called a new trinitarian ontology *ad mentem divi Thomae*.⁹ One of Ulrich’s key insights is that *esse commune*, both in its completeness and simplicity and in its non-subsistence, is a likeness of God’s goodness (*similitudo divinae bonitatis: De Veritate* 22.2 ad 2), an effective sign that, already as Creator, God bestows participation in his life by the communication of being (*esse*). As Ulrich interprets it, then, the Thomist doctrine of *esse commune* is nothing less than a means for showing that and how the entire creation is a gift on the part of the Creator.

As Leo Elders has rightly observed, Aquinas rarely writes in the first person singular. He does so in *De Potentia* 7.2 ad 9, however, where, as he himself seems to understand quite clearly, he is presenting something new in philosophy¹⁰: ‘It is thus apparent’, Aquinas writes in this

⁶ Martin Bieler, ‘Meta-anthropology and Christology: On the Philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar,’ *Communio International Catholic Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 129–146.

⁷ See Fernand van Steenberghen, *Die Philosophie im 13. Jahrhundert* (Munich–Paderborn–Vienna: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1977), 326 ff. In the following, Aquinas is cited according to the Marietti edition (Turin), unless otherwise indicated. His *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* is cited according to the *Index Thomisticus*, ed. by Roberto Busa, vol. 1 (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980).

⁸ See Martin Bieler, ‘*Analogia Entis* as an Expression of Love According to Ferdinand Ulrich,’ in *The Analogy of Being. Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 314–337.

⁹ Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus. The Drama of the Question of Being*, translated by D.C. Schindler (Baltimore, MD: Humanum Academic Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Leo J. Elders, *Die Metaphysik des Thomas von Aquin in historischer Perspektive, I. Teil* (Salzburg–Munich: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1985), 160. For an earlier treatment along the

text, ‘that what I call *esse* is the actuality of all acts, and so the perfection of all perfections’. With *De Potentia*, Aquinas has reached a turning point in his understanding of *esse*.¹¹

How, then, does Aquinas approach *esse commune* in *De Potentia*? In one crucial passage, he states that, if something is common to different things, there must be a singular cause to explain its presence in them. But being (*esse*) is a perfection all things have in common, even as it differentiates them from one other at the same time. Consequently, it must be attributed to them by a single cause since, as Plato shows, unity precedes multiplicity.¹² The upshot is that there must be a First Being that is its own *esse*: ‘*Est autem ponere aliquod ens quod est ipsum suum esse*.’¹³

All other things, for their part, are from this one Being. Although the Creator’s essence does not enter formally into that of his creatures, the being (*esse*) that is at the heart of their existence cannot be understood except as ‘deduced’ from the divine being.¹⁴ By the same token, creatures are not their being but only *have* being (*esse*) *per modum participationis*.¹⁵ It is this participation that grounds a certain analogy between God and his creatures.¹⁶

Furthermore, of all the divine effects, being (*esse*) is the most common effect and the most intimate. It is the effect that can be caused only by God,¹⁷ the effect in which all other created causes communicate.¹⁸ *Esse*, as the *primus effectus* before which nothing else is created,¹⁹ is caused by a constant influx from God, who conserves created beings in the same act in which he creates them.²⁰ *Esse*, then, does not subsist but ‘hangs into’ beings,²¹ an expression indicating the constant

same lines, see Johannes B. Lotz, *Der Mensch im Sein. Versuche zur Geschichte und Sache der Philosophie* (Freiburg–Basle–Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1967), 59.

¹¹ Fernando Inciarte, *Forma Formarum. Strukturmomente der thomistischen Seinslehre im Rückgriff auf Aristoteles* (Freiburg–Munich: Karl Alber, 1970), 126 ff.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 3.5 c.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 5.5 ad 1. For more on the relationship between God’s essence and our individual essence, see Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 246–248.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 3.4 ad 9. See also 7.7 c.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.7 c.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.2 c.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.4 c. See also *Super librum De causis expositio* (Saffrey) 4 (26 ff.). Werner Beierwaltes, *Catena Aurea* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2017), 175–204.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.14 ad 10; 5.1 c; 5.1 ad 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.2 ad 7.

flow of being from *esse subsistens* into all created things. Aquinas often describes this inflowing *esse* using the metaphor of light, which is not the sun, but comes from the sun, depends on the sun, and illumines every creature²²: Non-subsisting *esse commune* is *not* simply God, but it depends on God and, like him, reaches every creature.²³

In all this, three points are particularly important. First, *esse commune* is something complete, simple, perfect, and intimate: the act of all acts.²⁴ It embraces the whole creation. Only non-being is excluded from *esse commune*.²⁵ Second, *esse commune* does not subsist, even though it ‘hangs into’ beings. Third, it follows that God is not *esse commune* but the source of *esse commune*. So much for Aquinas’s view of *esse commune* in *De Potentia*.

This account of *esse* clearly places Aquinas in critical continuity with the tradition of Platonism, from Plato to Plotinus and his followers. Plato speaks of the Good beyond *ousia* (*epekeina tes ousias*),²⁶ which he identifies with the One as the supreme principle.²⁷ Plotinus was therefore right to understand himself as a follower of Plato in his quest for the One beyond all things.²⁸ The difficulty facing Plotinus, however, was to explain how the One can emanate into finite beings. His resolution of the problem was to posit intermediate principles – think of the Plotinian *Nous* – as mediators between the one Source and the many beings.²⁹ Aquinas, for his part, worked out his account of *esse commune* by transforming this Platonic henology and resolving its aporias. We can observe this transformation in action in his *Expositio super*

²² Martin Bieler, ‘The Theological Importance of a Philosophy of Being,’ in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, eds. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hüter (New York–London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 316.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 7.2 ad 4.

²⁴ Cornelio Fabro has called this aspect the ‘intensity’ of *esse*. See his *Participation et causalité selon saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Louvain–Paris: Publications Universitaires de Louvain/ Éditions Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1961), 220. See *ibid.*, 222–223 on the significance of understanding *esse* as act.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 7.2 ad 9.

²⁶ Plato, *Politeia* 509 B 9.

²⁷ Plato, *Parmenides* 137 C–142 A. See Jens Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen. Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin* (Munich–Leipzig: K.G. Saur, ²2006), 20–21.

²⁸ See the illuminating account offered by Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen*, 9–52.

²⁹ See Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), 172–179. These intermediate principles *indicate* the problem rather than solving it: Werner Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, ²2011), 39.

Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus, which dates from about the same period as *De Potentia*, if not somewhat earlier.⁵⁰

In his commentary on the Dionysian *De Divinis Nominibus*, then, Aquinas emphasises that God the Creator remains separate from his creatures. His essence does not formally enter into composition with finite beings.⁵¹ At the same time, God is the place, foundation, and connection of creatures.⁵² Everything is contained in him.⁵³ He is the universal principle of the being and duration of things.⁵⁴ The question, then, is how these two aspects – that of separateness and that of intimate presence – can cohere in simultaneity.

Unlike Plato and Plotinus, Aquinas regards ‘being’ as prior to the *unum* and, indeed, to everything else. The highest name for God on his view is therefore being itself (*ipsum esse*): ‘*Si alia causa nominetur a suo effectu, oportet quod principalius nominetur Deus per ipsum esse a primo effectu per quem omnia fecit; huiusmodi autem est ens; ergo principalius nominatur Deus per ipsum esse.*’⁵⁵ This decisively important statement, which emancipates God from the straitjacket of the natural one-many pairing still assumed by Plotinus, makes possible the identification of *esse subsistens* with absolute freedom – which, in its turn, can be identified with the freedom of the biblical God (Ex 3) revealed in Christ as Trinity and, therefore, as absolute love.⁵⁶ This decisive Thomist breakthrough enables us to bring into clear focus the nature

⁵⁰ According to James A. Weisheipl, the *Expositio super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus* was written in Rome in 1265–1267: *Friar Thomas d’Aquino. His Life, Thoughts and Works* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 174–175, 197, 382. *De Potentia* was also written in Rome between 1265–1266: *Ibid.*, 198–212, 363. Jean-Pierre Torrell conjectures that the *Expositio super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus* was written in Orvieto around 1261–1265: *Initiation à saint Thomas d’Aquin. Sa personne et son oeuvre* (Fribourg, CH: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1995), 185–189, 505. For the composition of the *De potentia*, Torrell argues for the same dating as Weisheipl: *Ibid.*, 234–238, 489. In addition, Torrell emphasizes that Aquinas had already known *De Divinis Nominibus* for some time: *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus* 1.2 (52); 1.1 (28).

⁵² ‘*Ipsa Deus est et locus et fundamentum et vinculum connectens omnia.*’ *Ibid.*, 10.1 (851).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.22 (575).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.1 (847).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.1 (635). See Fran O’Rourke’s remarks on the difference here between Dionysius, for whom the Good is beyond being, and Aquinas: *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden–New York–Cologne: E.J. Brill, 1992), 56.

⁵⁶ See also Walter M. Neidl, *THEARCHIA. Die Frage nach dem Sinn von Gott bei Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita und Thomas von Aquin (dargestellt anhand der Texte von PERI THEION ONOMATON und des dazu verfassten Kommentars des Aquinaten)* (Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habel, 1976), 91–92.

of creation as a free donation of *esse*, and so to explain the simultaneous separateness and togetherness of God and the creature.³⁷ As Hans Urs von Balthasar has rightly observed, *esse commune* clearly differentiates God from his creation while at the same time showing his intimate presence in it.³⁸ Paradoxically, it is precisely *esse subsistens* that finally safeguards the true meaning of *bonitas* in creation and beyond!

Nevertheless, it was Dionysius who prepared the discovery of being as God's primary name:

Moreover, by attributing the mediation of all created perfection to the unique though created perfection of εἶναί, Dionysius reaches a unique view of the immanent and intensive richness of being. With the intuition of being as the primary participation and first creature comes a radical transformation in the relation of beings to God. Through *esse*, God is immediately active throughout each and every being at its most radical and interior origin. It remains for Aquinas to remove the distance between these two principles of perfection – finite and infinite – and proclaim the identity of the divine Good with the absolute fullness of Being itself.³⁹

By emphasising *esse* as the first effect of God's creation, Dionysius re-absorbs into God himself the various elements severally distributed among the Neoplatonic mediating principles: God now acts directly on the beings by creating them.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Dionysius reduces the plurality of the mediating principles to the one *esse commune* by which God causes everything.⁴¹ The result is a 'simplification' echoing the free creative activity of God.⁴² This double reduction lays the groundwork for Aquinas to transform the Platonic tradition in light of the biblical idea of creation as the communication of being. This Dionysian background also explains the sense in which Aquinas calls *esse commune* a *completum et simplex*:⁴³ The point is that *esse* contains the whole aspectual wealth of Neoplatonic mediations between the one

³⁷ On the unity of *esse* and freedom, see Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, *Das Mysterium des Vaters. Apostolischer Glaube und moderne Gnosis* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974).

³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III,1, 354–366.

³⁹ O'Rourke, l.c., 117–118. See also *ibid.*, 124–125 with reference to the *Liber de Causis*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus* 5.1 (639).

⁴² 'Secunda est quod omnia in esse continet et conservat secundum simplicem sui infinitam unitatem.' *Ibid.*, 5.3 (670).

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* 1.1 c. See also *In De Divinis Nominibus* 8.1 (751)!

and the many (*completum*), while gathering them into a simplicity rooted in the unity of divine action.⁴⁴

Being however, is not merely the sum of all perfections and forms, but is their total simplicity and plenitude. All other qualities which the earlier Platonists would have established as independent, individual forms in themselves, Dionysius united in the simplicity of the single and universal form of Being.⁴⁵

This is not to say, of course, that Aquinas jettisons the Dionysian vision of the *bonum* as the highest reality. On the contrary, his understanding of God as *esse subsistens*, which is in fact a trinitarian reality – a truth metaphysics cannot say on its own – enables him to infuse the Dionysian *bonum* (which is of course also of trinitarian origin) with absolute loving *freedom*. By giving the *bonum* this, its proper foundation, Thomas also confirms and enhances its radicality *as the good it is*.⁴⁶ (Let's not forget that he understands *esse creatum* as the *similitudo divinae bonitatis* [*De Veritate* 22.2 ad 2]!) Without pitting Aquinas and Dionysius against each other or denying their proximity, we can therefore say that Thomas goes further than his predecessor by laying bare the 'basis' of God's goodness in a way that is both metaphysically more stringent and theologically more clarifying.⁴⁷ Note that the stringency of Aquinas's metaphysics appears not only in his understanding of God but also in his anthropology, which he develops in light of his understanding of creation as the communication of being.⁴⁸

We have now arrived at the point where we can pose the two questions we intend to treat in the following section. These are crucial questions concerning nothing less than the nature of God's relationship to his creation.

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus* 2.6.

⁴⁵ O'Rourke, l.c., 178.

⁴⁶ For Aquinas, freedom is rooted in the *ens* as an *esse habens* (cf. *In Metaphys* XII.1 [2419]), and not merely in an isolated capacity of the soul. This has been ably demonstrated by Dorothee Welp in her *Willensfreiheit bei Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1979), 175 ff. For an account of how Aquinas construes this as a reflection of the *esse subsistens*, see e.g. Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London–New York: Routledge, 2005), 35–187.

⁴⁷ '*Nam error circa creaturas redundat in falsam de Deo sententiam*.' Thomas Aquinas, *ScG* II,3 (869).

⁴⁸ Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 223–487.

The first question is this: Granted that Aquinas has reduced the Platonic complexity of mediating principles to being, and hence to freedom, why does he still operate in the seemingly Platonic framework of *esse commune* as a mediation between Creator and creature? If we take seriously Thomas' own insight that God creates from nothing in the plenitude of freedom, should we not exclude *any sort* of medium between the Creator and his creatures?⁴⁹ Indeed, does not the 'non-*subsistence*' Aquinas ascribes to *esse commune* imply an inadequate appreciation of the radical 'nothingness' that, by all rights, we should speak of when it comes to an *esse commune* that, after all, is produced *ex nihilo*?

The second question: Even supposing Aquinas can convince us of the need to speak of *esse commune* as a *completum et simplex, sed non subsistens*, what is the ontological status of this *esse commune*? What is it supposed to 'be' if it does not subsist? How can Aquinas connect *esse commune* to an *unum-verum-bonum-pulchrum*, as Balthasar argues he does?⁵⁰ Let us now approach this two-fold question in light of the Trinity.

2. Trinity

In a well-known passage from the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas states that the knowledge of the Trinity is necessary for the right understanding of the creation and salvation of human beings.⁵¹ Because God as Trinity has life to the fullest in himself, he does not need creation; he is in no need of improvement, especially by anything external to himself. Creation, then, is a free gift of God's love, not only with respect to the world's production and conservation in *esse*, but also – beyond this – with respect to God's assumption of responsibility for his handiwork through the salvific gift of the Son and Spirit. Aquinas' appeal to the Trinity does more, however, than merely safeguard God's freedom and, with it, his concrete goodness toward creation. For, as Aquinas writes in the prologue to his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the Trinity, far from merely being an external framework for creation, harbours within itself the very *causa et ratio* of creation itself. If, for

⁴⁹ '*Non potest autem aliquid esse medium inter creatum et increatum.*' Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* 8.17 c.

⁵⁰ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III,1, 337.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I, 32.1 ad 3.

Aquinas, the trinitarian processions are like a river (the *processus personarum* as a *fluvium*), then creation resembles the temporal outflow of this eternal flow – which, for its part, is the cause and essential pattern (*ratio*) of that very temporal outflowing.⁵²

The Trinity, then, not only illumines the presuppositions and possibility of creation but also sheds explanatory light on the creative act itself, even as it enables us to see how the innermost form of creatures is shaped to the pattern of trinitarian life. The Trinity thus opens up the metaphysical meaning of creation in an astonishingly concrete way. What is at stake is much more than a quest for – sometimes far-fetched – *vestigia trinitatis* supposed capable of revealing the created traces of the Trinity from which to derive a trinitarian ontology.⁵³ What is at stake is rather the Trinity's connection with the inmost essence of things – a connection that alone brings into clear focus the nature and ontological status of *esse completum et simplex, sed non subsistens*.

At this point, we encounter the oft-repeated objection that the doctrine of the Trinity is incapable of providing an adequate interpretation of the story of Jesus.⁵⁴ Are the Christology and Trinitarian theology of the early councils not a distortion of the biblical data, a subtle replacement of Hebrew thinking with Greek thought? Do they not represent an undue Hellenisation of the faith? And is this tendency not the ultimate reason for the Church's failure to eliminate the Platonic resonances still echoing in the Thomist notion of an *esse creatum completum*?

⁵² When speaking of a 'temporal outflow' – as Aquinas does in the prologue of his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* – one must keep in mind that creation is not a *motus*: *ScG* II.17; *STh* I,45.1 ad 2.

⁵³ See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VI.10.12 (CChr.SL 50, 242–243); Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I,1 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1975), 352–367. For a sophisticated philosophical attempt to exploit triadic structures for a trinitarian ontology, see Heinrich Beck, *Der Akt-Charakter des Seins. Eine spekulative Weiterführung der Seinslehre Thomas v. Aquins aus einer Anregung durch das dialektische Prinzip Hegels* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2001).

⁵⁴ See e.g. Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1920), 128: 'Der Satz: der Logos ist unter uns erschienen, hatte eine berausende Wirkung; aber der Enthusiasmus und der Aufschwung der Seele, den er hervorrief, führten nicht sicher zu dem Gott, den Jesus Christus verkündigt hat.' On the same page, Harnack speaks of the 'akute Hellenisierung' of the Christian religion. What Harnack ignores here is the Jewish wisdom tradition, which serves as an intellectual background for the messianic idea and is connected to the notion of the *logos* in the Gospel of John. See on this point Martin Hengel–Anna Maria Schwemer, *Der messianische Anspruch Jesu und die Anfänge der Christologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 81–151.

The view underlying these questions runs aground on a basic problem: The New Testament itself is, as Martin Hengel has shown in several works,⁵⁵ already ‘Hellenised’. Nor is there anything objectionable about such ‘Hellenisation’, inasmuch as by its very nature God’s revelation in history always takes up and transforms human thinking, whether ‘Semitic’ or ‘Greek’.⁵⁶

The main fact Harnack, Bultmann, and others tended to ignore was this: On the basis of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, the New Testament ascribed to him prerogatives and attributes of Yahweh while (in a very specific sense) remaining within the horizon of the Old Testament. Yahweh’s authority was in no way diminished. Rather, Jesus was placed in the realm of Yahweh, the realm of the divine dignity and power – not, however, as a demi-god (which would have destroyed Jewish monotheism), but as God himself (Jn 20:28).⁵⁷ We therefore have good grounds for placing the beginning of trinitarian reflection in the New Testament itself, without, of course, denying the latter’s (propitious rather than baneful) Hellenistic context.⁵⁸ By the same token, refusal to engage in trinitarian theology in the footsteps of the early Church is tantamount to a betrayal of the New Testament witness.

In order to develop a trinitarian theology, the New Testament itself already makes use of Hellenistic thought, even while subjecting it to the control of the inherited Old Testament monotheism. This effort very quickly evolves into something radically new.⁵⁹ What we see, then, is a total transformation, a groundbreaking intellectual revolution so novel that it continues to unfold today. The ‘Platonism’ in Christianity

⁵⁵ Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus. Studien zu ihrer Begegnung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2. Jh.s v. Chr.* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], ²1973); id., *Studien zur Christologie. Kleine Schriften IV* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

⁵⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, ‘Gott redet als Mensch,’ in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1960), 73–99.

⁵⁷ Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge, U.K., 2003); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel. God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge, U.K., 2008). We find the same idea already in Theodor Zahn, *Die Anbetung Jesu im Zeitalter der Apostel* (Leipzig: A. Deichert’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf., ⁵1910), 14: ‘Ihrer religiösen Bedeutung nach unverkürzt und unverändert ist die alttestamentliche Anbetung Jahveh’s übergegangen in die Anbetung Jesu...’

⁵⁸ Hans-Joachim Eckstein, *Kyrios Jesus. Perspektiven einer christologischen Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, ²2011), 3–35.

⁵⁹ See Hurtado on Justin Martyr, who marks an early watershed in this development: L.c., 646.

was a profoundly transformed one,⁶⁰ as our account of the trajectory from Plato through Dionysius to Aquinas in the previous section already suggests.

What was new in Christian trinitarianism was the *topos* of God's absolute self-giving, first in himself and then in relation to his creatures as well. This truth, which is already essential for the New Testament, was further explored and unfolded by the early Church. Augustine, for example, speaks of the Father's generation of the co-equal Son as the highest form of power.⁶¹ And, for Augustine, this exercise of paternal power is fundamentally a perfect *giving*: The Father gives to the Son the same life he (the Father) has and is himself.⁶² The theme of giving is emphasised even more vigorously in an earlier generation by Hilary of Poitiers, who writes in his *De Trinitate* that the Father gives to the Son his (the Father's) own being and generates him from his (the Father's) own form.⁶³

Whereas Augustine sought to explore the mystery of the Trinity on the analogy of the created mind (*mens-amor-notitia* and *memoria-intelligentia-voluntas*),⁶⁴ Richard of Saint-Victor took his primary trinitarian bearings from the social laws of human nature.⁶⁵ Both approaches to the Trinity have their limits. Just as Augustine has difficulty doing justice to the trinitarian relationships as love, Richard has difficulty securing trinitarian unity, despite his role in preparing the further development of trinitarian theology by Bonaventure.⁶⁶

More than anyone else, it is Bonaventure who attains a higher synthesis of the two theologies by approaching the Trinity from the

⁶⁰ Endre v. Ivánka, *Plato Christianus. Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1964).

⁶¹ Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 38.4 (CChr.SL 36, 340).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 54.7 (462).

⁶³ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* IX.54 (SC 462, 128): 'Major itaque Pater Filio est. Et plane maior, cui tantum donat esse, quantus ipse est; cui innascibilitatis esse imaginem sacramento nativitatis inperit; quem ex se in formam suam generat.' Because the Son receives the Father's own *esse*, he is *not* less than the Father: 'Major itaque Pater est, dum Pater est. Sed Filius, dum Filius est, minor non est.' *Ibid.*, IX.56 (132).

⁶⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX.4.7 (299–300); X.10.13 (327).

⁶⁵ Richard de Saint-Victor, *De Trinitate. Texte critique avec introduction, notes et tables, publié par Jean Ribaillier* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. VRIN, 1958).

⁶⁶ 'Die 'primitas' des Vaters als 'fontalis plenitudo' – ein Gedanke, der in Bonaventuras Trinitätsspekulation eine entscheidende Rolle spielt – ist im Kern hier von Richard vorgebildet.' Heinz Wipfler, *Die Trinitätsspekulation des Petrus von Poitiers und die Trinitätsspekulation des Richard von St. Viktor. Ein Vergleich* (Münster: Aschendorfsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965), 109. Wipfler refers here to Richard's understanding of the connection between *relatio* and *origo*.

unifying perspective of the self-communication of the Eternal Father.⁶⁷ For Bonaventure, the relational and essential aspects of the Trinity are personally united in the innascible Father: ‘God is first not only in the sense that His nature is prior to all created natures, but the concept of primacy must be drawn into the very life of God where it finds its absolute roots in the person of the Father, who is source and origin of all, within and without the Godhead.’⁶⁸ Unlike Aquinas, who prioritises the *ratio* of *relatio* in order to honor the rule that *actus sunt suppositorum* (*STh* I,39,5 ad 1), Bonaventure emphasises that *relatio* and *generatio/spiratio* form an inseparable ontological unity: There is no *relatio* with respect to the Son, for example, that is not already both a *generare* and a *generari*.⁶⁹ Even though Bonaventure seems to do greater justice to divine giving than even Aquinas on this score, Aquinas, too, provides a remarkably fruitful account of God’s donativity, both in himself and in his outflow towards creation.⁷⁰ In the end, then, both giants agree: If we are looking for the cause and essential pattern of creation, we will find it exactly where the Aquinas of the *Sentence* commentary says it lies, namely, in the logic of love unfolded in the trinitarian giving and receiving between the divine persons.⁷¹

What is given and received in the trinitarian processions is the one essence of God, which – according to Bonaventure – can be one in more than one person.⁷² The essence of God does not subsist as a separate reality, but only in the three trinitarian persons. The divine essence

⁶⁷ ‘*Secus autem est in Filio, qui est verbum Patris et splendor perfectissimus, per omnia Patri aequalis, accipiens a Patre totum, quod Pater habet intra se*’ Bonaventure, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Mysterio Trinitatis* IV.2 ad 5+6. It was Bonaventure who first spoke of the Father as the ‘*origo originans originantem*.’ See *Hexaemeron* XI.6.

⁶⁸ Zachary Hayes, *Saint Bonaventure’s Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (St. Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, 1979), 100–101.

⁶⁹ Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 160–165, 174–209.

⁷⁰ For Bonaventure, see the fine synthesis of Zachary Hayes, l.c., 15–105; Martin Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 166–209 and Klaus Obenauer, *Summa Actualitas. Zum Verhältnis von Einheit und Verschiedenheit in der Dreieinigkeitslehre des heiligen Bonaventura* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1996). For Aquinas, see now: Louis-Marie Rineau, «*Celui qui donne*». *Le don d’après saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2018). I am not convinced by Emmanuel Durand’s attempt to show the superiority of Aquinas’s solution to the Bonaventurian model: *Le Père Alpha et Oméga de la vie trinitaire* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2008), 159–274.

⁷¹ This unity of giving and receiving would be the starting-point for a reconsideration of the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in God of which creaturely masculinity and femininity, respectively, are the analogues.

⁷² Bonaventure, 1 *Sent* d 9. q 1.

belongs first of all to the Father. It is thus in his person where we must search for the origin of the difference between *principium quod* (person) and *principium quo* (essence). This difference, which stems from the Father himself, is the guarantee of his communicability.⁷³

It might seem as though the personal aspect of God were represented by the persons as relations, whereas the more objective aspect of God, displayed in his power, etc., were represented by the one substance. But in God, everything is personal; in God, there is nothing that is not entirely an aspect of his personal life. Even his substance, too, is fully personal. The one divine substance is first of all the life of the Father himself (Jn 5:26). If, then, there is a difference between the person of the Father (*ut quod*) and the one divine substance (*ut quo*), it is because, in generating the Son, the Father so to speak ‘enacts’ the difference between himself as *ut quod* and as *ut quo* in the very gesture of giving his whole life to the Son. For, in so doing, the Father brings about a double distinction: on the one hand, a separation (that entailed in the logic of *giving!*) between himself and the Son; on the other hand, a difference between himself (the Father) as a relation with a fixed position in the *ordo processionis* and himself as the sustaining power (the one substance) of this same fixed position. This difference is not a self-estrangement of the Father. It is his absolute *self-affirmation*: By separating himself (*ut quod*) from himself (*ut quo*), he lets himself be in self-hiddenness and so *affirms the mystery of his own loving freedom*.⁷⁴ (More on the meaning of this trinitarian ‘separation’ below.) The Father, then, exists in a positive self-differentiation, one that allows him to give himself – and receive himself as well – even as this self-differentiation never exists or occurs separately from the Father’s relationship to the Son and to the Spirit.⁷⁵

In his freedom, the Father is open towards the Son and the Spirit, without whom he does not want to be because he is the Father in

⁷³ Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 204–209.

⁷⁴ It is in this context, and in this sense, that we can follow Augustine in assigning – with all due caution – *memoria*, the ability to remember (which is connected with the phenomenon of forgetting) analogously to the Eternal Father: *De Trinitate* XV.23,43 (CChr.SL 50A, 520). For *memoria* in Augustine, see Johann Kreuzer, *Pulchritudo. Vom Erkennen Gottes bei Augustin* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1995), 16–104 and Anton Maxsein, *Philosophia cordis. Das Wesen der Personalität bei Augustinus* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1966), 177–193.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the divine vitality implied in all this, see Joachim Ringleben, *Der lebendige Gott. Gotteslehre als Arbeit am Begriff* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

eternal decidedness. His person is thus connected to the other two from its inmost core, out of which he opens to the unknown-known that is their free love. By the same logic, the Father determines himself – in this specific manner and sense – as ‘unknown’ to himself: In *generatio* and *spiratio*, the Father *grants* himself to be *the absolute loving freedom awaiting the answer of the Son and the Spirit*. The hiddenness of the Father to himself, which this ‘dependence’ on the other two trinitarian persons implies, is not, however, an identity confusion. On the contrary, the hiddenness at stake here is – to speak with Eberhard Jüngel – a *precise* hiddenness,⁷⁶ precise because it is the luminous abyss of love itself! To see and respect this abyss as an expression of freedom is the presupposition of all true intimacy, even with oneself. The abyss of loving freedom is the depth of being, which is why the seemingly anonymous substance can be the expression and reality of intimate love.⁷⁷ Here we see how closely our experience of substance in its depth resembles our experience of the Spirit as the ‘unknown beyond the Word’.⁷⁸

The Father’s simultaneous affirmation of the hiddenness of the three trinitarian persons is the total coincidence of his genuine self-love with his love for the Son and the Spirit. *Thanks to this coincidence, the one substance is the completely affirmed life of the Father himself, which, in the very act of being affirmed, is also given to the Son and the Spirit who accept it in return*. If one wanted to use a metaphor, one could say that the one substance is like the house in which the Father dwells – in the sense of the *habitare secum* – and into which he invites the Son and the Spirit, the former as companion and the latter as atmosphere, in order to celebrate with them the feast of the trinitarian life in this encompassing space of intimacy. The *telos* of this invitation is for the trinitarian persons to *indwell one other*, because what belongs to the Father *also belongs to the Son and to the Spirit* (Lk 15:11–32). From this perspective, talk of creation as the communication of *esse* represents

⁷⁶ Eberhard Jüngel, *Entsprechungen: Gott–Wahrheit–Mensch. Theologische Erörterungen* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1980), 259 ff.

⁷⁷ See Ferdinand Ulrich’s beautiful meditation on the mother who delights in the tower built by her child as his personal self-expression. In ‘it,’ the tower, appears ‘he’: *Gabe und Vergebung. Ein Beitrag zur biblischen Ontologie. Schriften V*, ed. Stefan Oster (Freiburg i.Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2006), 354–370.

⁷⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Spiritus Creator. Skizzen zur Theologie III* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1967), 95–105.

another way of saying what Christ says in the Gospel: ‘In my Father’s house are many mansions’ (Jn 14:2).⁷⁹

When, therefore, the Father generates the Son, he gives the Son the whole divine essence; the Father gives himself (the Father) *totally* to the Begotten.⁸⁰ By virtue of this perfect giving, the Son is equal to the Father, so much so that, according to Aquinas, one and the same generative act is both the *generare* and the *generari*.⁸¹ Thomas also clarifies that the Son’s receiving from the Father leaves him in no way inferior to his Begetter.⁸² On the contrary, the Father’s giving in the *generatio* is so perfect that, in the very first upsurge of his donative act, the *receiver of the gift, the Son*, is already wholly present to accompany it from its inmost ground. This, in fact, is why *one and the same act of generatio can be both a generare and a generari without any confusion between generans and generatum*. (A similar logic holds with respect to the *spiratio*).

What is not communicated in the trinitarian life are the positions of the relations themselves; these cannot be communicated because they are the presupposition of the intra-divine giving and receiving. According to Richard of Saint-Victor, the trinitarian persons each prefer to retain their own respective positions (*proprietas*) in the *ordo processionis*, inasmuch as these positions enable them to love their fellow divine persons as themselves.⁸³

This inseparable unity of incommunicability and self-gift explains why the Trinitarian persons find themselves rather than losing themselves in giving away *all* they have.⁸⁴ It also explains how the subsistent

⁷⁹ Mirjam Ellinger, “‘Habitare secum – Wohnen in sich selbst.’ Kontemplation bei Papst Gregor im zweiten Buch der Dialoge,” *Erbe und Auftrag* 78 (2002): 452–471. See also the reflections of Ulrich in *Gabe und Vergebung*, 624 ff.

⁸⁰ ‘*Relinquitur ergo quod Dei Filius sit genitus de substantia Patris. Aliter tamen quam filius hominis. Pars enim substantiae hominis generantis transit in substantiam geniti. Sed divina natura impartibilis est. Unde necesse est quod Pater, generando Filium, non partem naturae in ipsum transfunderit, sed totam naturam ei communicaverit, remanente distinctione solum secundum originem, ut ex dictis patet.*’ Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I,41,3 c.

⁸¹ ‘*Una enim et eadem operatione Pater generat et Filius nascitur; sed haec operatio est in Patre et in Filio secundum aliam et aliam relationem.*’ Thomas Aquinas, 1 *Sent* 20.1.1 ad 1.

⁸² ‘*Ex eo autem quod Pater Filio dare dicitur in Scripturis, ex quo sequitur ipsum recipere, non potest ostendi aliqua indigentia esse in ipso.*’ Thomas Aquinas, *ScG* IV.8 (3431).

⁸³ Richard of Saint-Victor, *De Trinitate*, V.24.

⁸⁴ ‘*Si autem concedimus unde post tot premissas rationes ambigere non possumus, si, inquam, concedimus unam aliquam personam in vera divinitate esse tante benevolentie*

relationality of the persons avoids bringing the divine life to an end. If the communication of the divine essence by the trinitarian persons is complete but does not come to a halt, it is because the fullness of the Godhead *remains* with each *proprietas*.⁸⁵ Otherwise, the *proprietates* would collapse as such. Richard's insight into the incommunicable *proprietas* of the trinitarian persons – *in favour of communication* – aligns him with Bonaventure's emphasis on the *innascibilitas* of the Father, which Bonaventure always sees in connection with the Father's *generatio* of the Son.⁸⁶ The *innascibilitas* of the Father, when looked at in *this* light, is simply the irreplaceable opening position of the Father in the *ordo processionis*.

Insofar as the Father always generates the Son,⁸⁷ the divine life is superabundant in its very completeness. But this superabundance comes to light especially in the second procession: the *spiratio* of the Spirit by the Father and the Son. At a certain point, Bonaventure asks whether the Father has already given everything in begetting the Son. Yes, he answers, but *not in every way possible*.⁸⁸ The *generatio* brings Father and Son into a kind of 'dialogue' in which they relate to each other ever anew.⁸⁹ The expression of this dialogue is the Holy Spirit, who is at one and the same time the crowning completion of the trinitarian processions and the definitive, irrevocable opening of the divine life in itself.⁹⁰ *Generatio* in its fullest sense means this: The Father relates himself in the generative act to the answering Son, while the Son responds by turning back towards the Father in the very reception of the divine substance. From this turning of each towards the other,

ut nihil divitiarum, nihil deliciarum habere velit quod nolit communicare. Ibid., III.14.

⁸⁵ It is thus very misleading to treat Balthasar's view of trinitarian giving under the rubric of 'Le don comme perte' as Louis-Marie Rineau does in his book 'Celui qui donne' (153–178). This is not an adequate summary of Balthasar's view. Consider just this one sentence of Balthasar: 'Indem der Vater sich ohne Vorbehalt ausspricht und hingibt, verliert er sich nicht, geht nicht unter in der Gabe, sowenig er andererseits etwas von sich oder für sich zurückbehält.' *Theodramatik* III, 303. Fortunately, Rineau's book also contains many valuable insights not vitiated by his treatment of Balthasar.

⁸⁶ 'Innascibilitas in Patre dicit fontalem plenitudinem. Fontalis autem plenitudo consistit in producendo.' Bonaventure, 1 *Sent* d 27. p 1, a unic. q 2 ad 3.

⁸⁷ Bonaventure, 1 *Sent* d 9, a unic. q 3.

⁸⁸ 'Ad illud ergo quod obicitur, quod Pater dat Filio totum quod potest, dicendum quod verum est, sed non dat omni modo quo potest.' Bonaventure, 1 *Sent* d 2, a unic. q 4 ad 1.

⁸⁹ Karl Barth uses the term 'Gespräch': *KD* II,1, 454; II,2, 839.

⁹⁰ Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 190–197.

which (as Richard of Saint-Victor shows) is at the same time an opening of both in their mutual relatedness towards the *other* ‘other’ so as to share their joy with him, springs the Spirit.⁹¹ Evidently, then, *generatio* and *spiratio* are closely interconnected: The former is not complete without the latter.⁹² This shows that the trinitarian self-communication comes ‘full circle’ to complete affirmation in complete openness and *vice versa*.⁹³ To think the highest of God (*sentire altissime*) is to think him as this absolute communication,⁹⁴ which, as Richard puts it, is like a wave of love.⁹⁵ Thomas adds his voice to the choir in describing trinitarian life as a river. Before we can look at the rivulet flowing out from that source (creation), however, we must reflect even more deeply on the logic of love shown in the trinitarian processions themselves.

It is clear, as Bonaventure remarks, that the *generatio* brings about a real distinction – a distinction that is not merely intellectual, but a *distinctio in supposito*.⁹⁶ Augustine had already highlighted the reality of this distinction in stressing the *ad aliquid* in God: ‘*Sicut pater ad filium et filius ad patrem...*’⁹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, too, affirms this real otherness in his *Expositio super Secundam Decretalem* (1195): ‘*Dicimus enim quod licet sit alius Pater, et alius Filius et alius Spiritus sanctus, non tamen sunt aliud, quia non est alietas in essentia, et sit alietas in personis.*’ This means that there is something like a ‘limitation’ in God that (like created limits) orders and distinguishes but (unlike created limits) does not finitise. We could also speak of a positive, but real ‘holding back’, since, in the *generatio*, Father and Son encounter each other in the seriousness of a real distinction and a consequent real mutual otherness. In this context, it makes sense to speak with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Ferdinand Ulrich of a positive *separation between giver and gift in the performance of the giving*.⁹⁸ Yet this is only one side of the coin. By giving the Son his own paternal essence, the Father makes

⁹¹ Richard of Saint-Victor, *De Trinitate* III,11–25. See also Augustine, *De Trinitate* XV.17,29 (CChr.SL 50A, 504): ‘*Sic ergo eum genuit ut etiam de illo donum commune procederet et spiritus sanctus esset amborum.*’

⁹² Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 187–197; Durand, *Le Père Alpha et Oméga de la vie trinitaire*, 254 ff.

⁹³ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 9.9 c.

⁹⁴ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* I.2.

⁹⁵ Richard of Saint-Victor, *De Trinitate* V.25.

⁹⁶ Bonaventure, 1 *Sent* d 9, a unic. q 2.

⁹⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate* V.5,6 (CChr.SL 50, 210).

⁹⁸ Balthasar, *Theodramatik* III, 297–305; Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg i.Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1999), 71–72.

himself so intimately present in the Son as to rule out any negative separation or estrangement between them.⁹⁹ Both sides of the coin – the positive separation and the presence – need each other!

It is precisely by separating between himself as giver and himself as gift that the Father opens up to the Son from his innermost core as Father.¹⁰⁰ The separation we are dealing with here is one that establishes their coinherence. The abiding positive difference between Father and Son is what constitutes the seriousness of their *openness* for each other. It is, in fact, by *remaining* the *genitor* that the Father attests that he has *already given everything to the Son* and so opened *himself* up to the Son – *as* the eternal source for the Son, while the Son, in consequence of this openness, is an eternal source himself, endowed with the full power and ability to respond to the Father ‘on the same level’.

Paradoxical as it may seem, then, the Father’s *givenness is what makes it impossible for him to leave the position of genitor for the Son*. For his part, the Son never ceases receiving because what the Father has given him is *not a dead essence, but an actualitas*, the *actualitas of the never-ending life of the Father himself* (Jn 5:26). Each one’s ‘staying in position’, then, is (as already noted) a non-finitising ‘limitation’ to his proper ‘place’. Far from imprisoning the divine persons in themselves, however, this limitation represents an *extension*, a superabundance of love, which never stops being gracious, not only in giving but also in receiving in return. In communicating his essence, the Father not only gives the Son his (the Father’s) ‘past’, but also opens to him his (the Father’s) ‘future’, inasmuch as he gives himself *as the source that will never be exhausted*. This mystery helps explain how each divine person’s preferential love of his own *proprietas* is not a higher egoism but a holding back ordered to the accessibility of this *proprietas as such* to the others. If the Father loves his position in the trinitarian processions more for himself, this is a pure responsibility for the others, sheer goodness rooted in unstinting fontal liberality. Here, my readiness – so to speak – is readiness for the other *by myself*; the *ad alium* lies in the abyss of the fontal *per se*.

⁹⁹ Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod*, 70–71.

¹⁰⁰ For the following, see Martin Bieler, ‘Das ernste Spiel der Liebe. Zur Trinitätstheologie H.U. von Balthasars,’ *Theodramatik und Theatralität. Ein Dialog mit dem Theaterverständnis von Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Volker Kapp, Helmuth Kiesel and Klaus Lubbers (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2000), 48–56.

Does God ‘lose’ anything in giving himself away? The New Testament’s exhortations to lose our life (Matt 10:39), to be the grain of wheat that falls into the earth (Jn 12:24), etc., should make us wary of too quickly answering this question in the negative. For in a sense, God *does* ‘lose’ something in giving himself away *ad intra*; if he did not, he would merely be playing games and would lack any genuine otherness in himself.

Inasmuch as God holds nothing back, he ‘loses’ himself, even *to the point of nothingness*.¹⁰¹ It is important to add, however, that this nothingness remains interior to infinite being as an implication of the self-communication *ad intra* of *esse subsistens*. The Father’s ‘nothingness’ is his *not* being the Son or Spirit – which non-being is the same as his being the sheer fontal plenitude for both.

Looked at in this light, God’s ‘loss’ is not a destructive elimination of self but an unfolding of fecundity in the absolute affirmation of otherness. By the same token, it is a way of gaining everything anew in the act of giving everything away. For, having given everything away, the Father ‘contracts’ to his own *proprietas*, yet in that very ‘contraction’, he *possesses himself in a completely new way*. Not only does he now indwell himself as the *fontalis plenitudo*, but he also extends simultaneously *in complete openness* to everything else in the Son and in the Spirit. This *is* the substantial self-affirmation of the Father. He who loses his life for Christ’s sake will participate in this self-affirmation, which is stronger than death because it is love itself.

And what is contained in this infinity? The essence of the three persons. As already mentioned, this essence does not subsist as a fourth hypostasis. It subsists only as Father, Son and Spirit. And yet, it is also what they have in common. It is one in more than one. No wonder Master Eckhart was fascinated by what he called the ‘silent desert’, in which no difference ever was.¹⁰² We may speak here of the first anticipation of the way in which non-subsistent *esse commune*, in its simplicity, is somehow ‘in-between’ the trinitarian God as the eternal source of being, on the one hand, and finite subsisting freedom, on the other hand – albeit in such a way as to remain rooted in *esse subsistens* and

¹⁰¹ On this understanding of nothingness, see Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche mystische Schriften* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1986), 356–357.

¹⁰² Meister Eckhart, *Predigten* (Largier), vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993) 509.

to ‘hang into’ created substances.¹⁰⁵ It is to this created *esse commune* we now turn.

3. Trinity, Creation, and *Esse Commune*

If the foregoing is right, *esse commune* reveals itself as a similitude of the divine goodness in a new and deeper sense. In particular, it mirrors and communicates the inner power of *esse subsistens* to be one in more than one hypostasis without forming a separate fourth hypostasis of its own. We see this mirroring and communication in the fact that *esse commune* is not a stationary bridge connecting two foreign shores, but rather a flow in which the Creator most intimately and directly approaches his creatures while upholding them in love.

Seen in light of the Trinity, then, *esse commune* appears most clearly as what is: the fluid path of the Creator’s self-communication to finite creatures, that by which all finite things are connected with one other, just as (for the same reason) it is that by which each participates in the uniqueness of the Creator. Aquinas draws a subtle distinction in his *In De Divinis Nominibus*. *Esse commune*, he says there, is *not* God, but it is *not simply not* God: It is *a kind of participation in God*, and it depends on God.¹⁰⁴ It must be a kind of participation in God because otherwise God would not give *himself* in creation, yet it cannot simply be God because God does not directly ‘transplant’ his essence into created beings.¹⁰⁵ Balthasar offers a helpful gloss on Aquinas when he describes *esse commune* as God’s being in the condition of being given to finite creatures,¹⁰⁶ while Gustav Siewerth speaks in this context of an ‘exemplary identity’ and of the ‘finitization of being’ (*esse*).¹⁰⁷ (This makes it clear, by the way, that God’s creating the world ‘out of nothing’ means that he relies on nothing outside of himself in order to produce

¹⁰⁵ Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 17–21.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus* 5.2 (660): ‘*Et hoc est quod dicit quod ipsum esse commune est ipsius Dei, tamquam ab ipso dependens, et non ipse Deus est esse, id est ipsius esse communis, tamquam ab ipso dependens... sed magis ipsum esse creatum est quaedam participatio Dei et similitudo Ipsius.*’

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 2,3 (158).

¹⁰⁶ ‘Die strömende Fülle des Seins Gottes im Zustand ihres Gegebenseins an die endlichen Empfänger.’ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III,1, 961.

¹⁰⁷ Gustav Siewerth, *Der Thomismus als Identitätssystem*. *Gesammelte Werke Bd. II* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1979), 31–32, 132 f.

creatures in being. Or, to put it positively: all preconditions for creating the world lie in God himself.¹⁰⁸)

The non-subsistence of *esse commune* is an expression of the fact that it is totally given into the many creatures, which (and who) by their multitude attest to the richness (*infinitas*) and graciousness of the divine goodness:¹⁰⁹ The *esse subsistens* gives *non-subsistent esse commune* to creatures in order to let them *subsist*. Nothing is kept back in *esse commune*; it is pure givenness. This is why it *does not subsist* itself. With respect to subsistence, one must say that only God and creatures subsist. Similarly, the divine substance does not subsist as a fourth hypostasis, but only in the three trinitarian persons, and this for an analogous reason, namely: that it is totally given – to these three persons. This is true even for the first person, who affirms, and in a certain sense ‘receives’, himself as *esse subsistens in the form proper to his fatherhood* by generating the Son and co-spirating the Spirit.¹¹⁰

Non-subsisting *esse commune* is the influx of a powerful sustaining presence, which establishes the many creatures in their genuine otherness to the Creator – precisely on account of his presence in them. At first blush, *esse commune* looks more like an event. Because, however, it bears the presence of the Creator in itself, it is also a *fixum et quietum in ente*, as Aquinas nicely puts it in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.¹¹¹ Aquinas also emphasises that being caused does not belong to the *ratio* of *ens* as such.¹¹² There is something absolute in every creature because *esse* is not participated in parts but according to its outflow from God. This means that it is participated in wholeness – within the limits set by the creaturely essence of its many participators.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ ‘Aber ebenso gewiss darf das ‘Nichts-woraus’ die Welt ward, nur in der unendlichen Freiheit selbst gesucht werden: in den durch die göttliche Allmacht und tiefer in den durch das trinitarische Seinlassen der hypostatischen Akte sich öffnenden Räumen des Erschaffbaren.’ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II.1, 241. See also Werner Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz*, 94: ‘Das “Nichts,” aus dem Gott schafft, ist im Grunde er selbst.’ Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2004), 170: ‘Wenn Gott alle Dinge einschliesslich der Materie aus dem Nichts erschafft, so ist dieses Nichts *Er selbst...*’

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *ScG* II.59–45; *De Potentia* 3.16; *STh* I.47.1.

¹¹⁰ Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 175–209. See especially *ibid.* pages 204–209 on the difference between the divine *principium quod* (person) and the divine *principium quo* (essence).

¹¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *ScG* I.20 (179).

¹¹² Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I.44.1 ad 1.

¹¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I.75.5 ad 1.

We see at work here the same law of separation and presence we observe in every true act of giving and communication, whether it be the generation of the Son by the Father or the production of the creature by God. The power to posit a difference while uniting the different with oneself is in its deepest core the pure power to give (and receive). The highest form of this power is the eternal processions of the Trinity. Indeed, they define and constitute this power. Bonaventure is therefore right when he says: ‘*Omnis creatura clamat generationem aeternam*.’¹¹⁴ The absoluteness thus constituted in the creature also highlights the scope of the Evangelist’s statement that the incarnate Son ‘came *into his own*’ (*eis ta idia elthen*) (Jn 1:11).¹¹⁵

Esse commune is a gift given by the Creator through which creatures are simultaneously connected to and differentiated from him. Just as the divine essence is common to all three trinitarian persons, *esse commune* connects us to all other beings. At the same time, it is by *esse commune*, adapted to the limits of our being (*ens*), that the Creator becomes present in each creature, thus constituting it in its absolute uniqueness. Indeed, essential limitation plays a decisive role in opening the *superabundance of esse* to us as the ground of our own unique identity – in analogy to the Son, who receives the essence of the Father by way of a differentiating generation. The very thing that makes us finite (our essence) is also the means of our total affirmation by the Creator. As Aquinas, citing Basil, writes in the *Summa Theologiae*, the eternal Son and creatures have receiving in common.¹¹⁶ Hence the fittingness of the world’s creation *in the Son*.¹¹⁷

The upshot of all this is that created being is not a neutral object but a true gift infused with the *loving* presence of the Creator who sustains us. This gift is not recognisable to us as such unless it is illumined by the donative freedom of the Creator.¹¹⁸ And it is hard, if not impossible, to stabilise our recognition of the created character of finite beings unless we understand how the Creator is able to give being, namely,

¹¹⁴ Bonaventure, *Hexaemeron* 11.13.

¹¹⁵ This is true independently of whether one interprets ‘*idia*’ as the cosmos or the Jewish homeland of Jesus.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I,33,3 ad 2. Whereas the Son receives an *esse acceptum*, we receive an *esse receptum* – within the essential limits of our finite being: *STh* I,29,2 ad 3.

¹¹⁷ Wolfgang Beinert, *Christus und der Kosmos. Perspektiven zu einer Theologie der Schöpfung* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder Verlag, 1974).

¹¹⁸ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III,1, 366.

as the *trinitarian* God he is.¹¹⁹ As Ulrich has shown with great acuity, our understanding of the nature and possibility of creation ultimately depends on our recognition of the eternal Father and his capacity to remain himself in distinguishing within himself between giver and gift.¹²⁰

In conclusion, one may say that *esse commune* enables God to be present to his creatures with a striking directness impossible on the Neoplatonic model with its intermediate hypostases.¹²¹ The Platonic intermediaries are lifted (*aufgehoben*) via *esse commune* into the direct communication of God to finite beings as a structured act of God's love. Platonism is thus transformed to the point that such hypostatic intermediaries are replaced by the laws of a personal relationship between giver, gift and receiver. *Esse commune*, then, is not a neutral joint connecting Creator and creature. The 'in-between' of *esse commune* is not a mediator we could somehow control from above (that would be onto-theology), but a living communication lying within the hand of God himself: The miracle of God's presence in his creatures stems from the power of the eternal Father, who is able to give his own substance in such a way that it is one in more than one within the deity itself. What happens between the Creator and the creature in the communication of being is an analogue of what happens between Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the *ordo processionis*: God is able to give precisely *himself* to his creatures, and what might appear to be a diminution of this giving on account of the 'finitization' of *esse* in the act of creation is merely the presupposition for God's opening his *inner* trinitarian life to *free* creatures in Christ through the Spirit. *De facto*, this alone is worthy of God's goodness: God is able and willing to give himself *absolutely*, even to *finite* creatures.¹²² Non-subsistent *esse commune*, by which the

¹¹⁹ Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 261. On the aberrations in the understanding of *esse non subsistens*, see Martin Bieler, 'Ferdinand Ulrich's "Metaphysics as Reenactment"' *Communio: International Catholic Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 41–72.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56–60.

¹²¹ For this directness, see also Marine de la Tour, *Gabe im Anfang. Grundzüge des metaphysischen Denkens von Ferdinand Ulrich* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016), 111–119.

¹²² This is the answer to Spinoza's worries about the existence of limited substances: 'Ferner, wenn sie also durch ihre Ursache begrenzt ist [sc. the limited substance. MB], muss das so sein, weil die Ursache entweder nicht mehr hat geben können oder nicht mehr hat geben wollen' Baruch de Spinoza, *Kurzer Traktat über Gott, den Menschen und dessen Glück* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2014), 19.

finite free creatures whom God loves are enabled to be in freedom, is indeed the *similitudo divinae bonitatis*!¹²⁵

It is both necessary and possible to look at *esse commune* from ‘below’ through philosophical inquiry.¹²⁴ But when we look at it from ‘above’, from the perspective of creation as an act of the trinitarian God, we come to grasp the logic of *esse commune* in a way transcending philosophical inquiry alone. Beyond all mere philosophical inquiry, the absolute trinitarian freedom must enlighten us in Christ through the Spirit about the origin of our world and of the free creatures in it. Such a trinitarian ontology is unparalleled in its power to unlock a deeper understanding of human beings in their world.^{125*}

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¹²⁵ This might explain why the ‘world order’ appears in the Old Testament as a beautiful woman who speaks to mankind (Prov. 8). See Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), 189–228.

¹²⁴ For more on *esse commune* from a philosophical perspective, see Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff’s still useful *Ens et unum convertuntur. Stellung und Gehalt des Grundsatzes in der Philosophie des hl. Thomas von Aquin* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1953).

¹²⁵ For an attempt to show that this is not an unfounded claim, see Martin Bieler, ‘Attachment Theory and Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Creation,’ *Analecta Hermeneutica* 3 (2011): 1–25.

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