

PERFECT DIFFERENCE:  
GENDER AND THE  
ANALOGY OF BEING

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“[G]ender is a differentiated unity or a unified  
difference, and is both, so to speak, ‘all the way down’  
to the core of the being.”



The theme of difference is no doubt one of the most prevalent in contemporary thought, especially in that thought which is recognized as “postmodern.” Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it was among the French (who have been known traditionally for their appreciation of the matter: “Vive la différence!”) that the postmodern version of the theme first became a direct focus. We have, for example, Emmanuel Levinas’s recovery of the importance of *otherness* over against what he took to be a kind of totalizing ego-centeredness dominating Western patterns of thought.<sup>1</sup> Even more broadly influential on this score is Levinas’s student, Jacques Der-

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1. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

rida, who gave the word a new spelling (“différance”<sup>2</sup>) and, on its basis, engaged a relentless attack on the traditional thinking that he felt to be inextricably caught up in various *binary* oppositions: pure-impure, speech-writing, good-bad, act-potency, form-matter, male-female, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> However seriously Derrida may have been taken inside the academy—in the end, his philosophy seems to have had the most success, not so much in France as in the United States, and not so much in the field of philosophy as in English, where identity politics seems to be especially present—his critique of binary thinking has recently started to become mainstream. This is above all the case with respect to the issue of *gender*. A few months ago, for example, one of the two siblings formerly known as the “Wachowski brothers” decided to join his sibling in “transitioning,” and accompanied his announcement with what amounts to a brief manifesto:

But these words, “transgender” and “transitioned” are hard for me because they both have lost their complexity in their assimilation into the mainstream. There is a lack of nuance of time and space. To be transgender is something largely understood as existing within the dogmatic terminus of male or female. And to “transition” imparts a sense of immediacy, a before and after from one terminus to another. But the reality, my reality is that I’ve been transitioning and will continue to transition all of my life, through the infinite that exists between male and female as it does in the infinite between the binary of zero and one. We need to elevate the dialogue beyond the simplicity of binary. Binary is a false idol.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Derrida introduced the term “différance” in his 1963 essay “Cogito et histoire de la folie.” The difference between this word and the original is detectable only in writing. In addition to difference, Derrida’s new orthography references “deferral,” indicating that we understand the meaning of words only by referring to other words, or “signifiers,” and so on, never arriving at a founding “signified.” See his “Différance,” *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

3. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

4. “Second Wachowski Filmmaker Sibling Comes out as Trans,” by Tracy Baim, *Windy City Times*, March 8, 2016, <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/Second-Wachowski-filmmaker-sibling-comes-out-as-trans-/54509.html>.

One of the reasons Wachowski's statement is so interesting is that it reveals what is both a confusion and an ambivalence toward difference in our contemporary culture. First, the ambivalence: on the one hand, we *celebrate* difference, to the extent of making diversity the highest of all values, which trumps every other whenever conflict emerges. One might even speak with some justice of a "tyranny of diversity" in this regard, which is already itself evidence of confusion. On the other hand, we are plagued with a kind of "difference intolerance"; we cannot abide the slightest trace of difference, and thus seek to minimize it as far as possible at every turn.<sup>5</sup> So, for example, we promote ethnic diversity, not by affirming the depth of difference as good, but by reducing the significance of ethnicity to the mere "color of one's skin," and reducing differences of culture to mere sets of practices, rituals, and ornamentation, which may be painlessly exchanged for each other because they are so superficial: one night, we go out for "Thai," the next night we eat "Mexican," and the third we reheat the leftovers of both at home. Is this a celebration of difference, or a trivializing of it? To return to the manifesto: Isn't the "binary" thinking we sneer at precisely a taking seriously of *difference*, after all? Why is a culture so preoccupied with difference so reluctant to acknowledge anything that might significantly distinguish a man from a woman? And just here we see the confusion implied in the ambivalence: to reject binary thinking, as Wachowski does, is to affirm nonbinary thinking: nonbinary thinking, in other words, is good, while its opposite, binary thinking, is bad. This division of the world is just as "binary" as the division it rejects; the only difference (!) is that, precisely unconsciously (in fact *necessarily* unconsciously), it denies the difference between its terms. And it does so in the name of difference! In short, we in the modern world affirm difference, only to absolutize it to the exclusion of all else; and we

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5. Tony Anatrella diagnoses contemporary culture as founded on a rejection of difference, and gender difference above all, at the root of which is the rejection of the father, who symbolizes difference. This rejection, he believes, has resulted in the infantilizing of society. Anatrella's analysis concerns post-May 1968 France, but his insights apply at least as well to the analogous sexual revolution, in its successive repercussions, in the United States. See his "Forbidden Difference" in the present number of *Communio* (311–29), translated from *La différence interdite: Sexualité, éducation, violence. Trente ans après Mai 68* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

reject difference, only ruthlessly to divide the world into pluses and minuses, Sneetches with, and Sneetches without, stars on thars.

Now, for all of this confusion, there are very serious questions that emerge around this issue, which may not be taken lightly: on the one hand, there is the broad cultural and historical question regarding the unjust privileging of one side of any given difference over another—though of course we have to be very careful how we formulate this question, so as to avoid presupposing a notion of justice as abstract mathematical equality,<sup>6</sup> which would impose once again a confused elimination of the significance of difference.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there is the very basic question concerning what difference *is*, and whether (or indeed how) it is something good. The former question, as serious as it is, is too vast to be explored in this essay, and in any event presupposes an investigation into the latter if it is to be genuinely fruitful. Regarding this latter question, which will be our focus here, it is difficult even to know where to start: Is this most basically a *logical* question, or an ontological one? Or is the question perhaps an anthropological one, or even more fundamentally a cultural one?<sup>8</sup> I wish to suggest that it is all of these at once, and that these various dimensions cannot be separated from each other. It is not an accident that the cultural issue of difference has come to a head, as it were, in the question of gender, and that the language we use to discuss it falls naturally into the logical terms of the “binary.” More fundamentally, the question of difference has its roots in what is no doubt *the* original metaphysical theme, namely, the great question of “the One and the Many.”

Aristotle takes up this ancient question in book X of his

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6. Plato and Aristotle already recognized the problem with the sense of equality implied here: see Plato, *Laws*, 757b, 744c, 745d, and Aristotle, *Politics*, 1301a27ff. The issue is whether the notion of equality is concrete and so includes difference, or abstract, and so formally excludes it.

7. The point is not to go to the other extreme, which would allow injustice in the name of difference. Rather, the meaning of justice needs to be obediently reflected on in a serious way, and requires a genuine exercise of prudence.

8. “Structuralism,” founded on systems of binaries, which was what most immediately provoked Derrida’s “Deconstruction,” began as a linguistic theory (Ferdinand de Saussure) but bore some of its first fruits in cultural anthropology. See the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Of course, its significance exceeds these particular fields; beyond philosophy, it has been especially influential in psychology (Jacques Lacan).

*Metaphysics*, specifying it as a question of the relation between unity and plurality, sameness and otherness, identity and difference.<sup>9</sup> It is in this context that he raises the question of the male and female as a special case of difference. One is struck by his puzzlement over the question of what I will call “gender difference,”<sup>10</sup> which does not seem—for reasons I will explain in a moment—to fit into the usual categories. His puzzlement is helpful because it puts the issue in the proper philosophical terms, which will provide an entry point for our own inquiry. But Aristotle’s own resolution of the question of what sort of difference gender represents is unsatisfying even in his own terms, and has become much more deeply unsatisfying as we have deepened our theological, philosophical, and indeed biological understanding of what is at issue here. In the following essay, I will first explain Aristotle’s view and his puzzlement, showing how his framing of the issue leads to a certain dilemma. Second, in response to Aristotle’s dilemma, I will make a speculative proposal regarding the nature of the gender difference, its ontological status, so to speak, and where it fits in a philosophical anthropology. Our proposal will be based on Aristotle, but it will point toward a development of his thinking in light of the subsequent Christian tradition. Finally, in the third section, I will offer some reasons for regarding the gender difference as *perfect difference*, as the most perfect instance of what Aristotle himself presents as difference in its perfect form. I will propose that gender does not “fit” the usual category as a mere instance of difference in general precisely because it represents a foundational principle. The gender difference will thus turn out to play a decisive role—so I will conclude—in a general analogy of being.

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9. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book X (hereafter cited as *Meta.*).

10. In this essay, I will use the expression “gender difference” to designate the difference between “male” and “female,” regardless of the further specifying contexts. It has become customary to draw a line of separation between “sex,” a supposed biological reality, and “gender,” a cultural interpretation of sexuality (the original appearance of this distinction seems to be Marcia Yudkin’s article “Transsexualism and Women: A Critical Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 3 [October 1978]: 97–106), but we will be calling into question precisely this separation. It is worth pointing out that the customary use of the term “gender” is (unsurprisingly) altogether artificial: “gender” is cognate with “generation,” and refers naturally to the fruitfulness of the male–female relation.

## I.

In book X of the *Metaphysics*, as I said, Aristotle presents “contrareity” as the perfection of difference (ἡ τελεία διαφορά).<sup>11</sup> There are two basic steps to his argument for this judgment. First, difference always occurs inside of some common genus. Second, contraries represent the extremes of such a distinction within a genus, the “ends of a series,” and so the “greatest difference” (μεγίστη διαφορά). In this regard, there can be no difference beyond contrareity, which thus represents the perfection, the completion, of difference.

Let us elaborate these two points, which Aristotle himself makes in a fairly condensed form. First, regarding the “species-genus” structure of any difference: we do not often note the fact, but a little reflection shows that difference always presupposes a more basic unity. We take this for granted, however unconsciously, even in our ordinary discussions of difference. For example, to indicate what we take to be extreme difference, which would defy all comparability, we say, “It’s apples and oranges.” What we mean is that, while we might be able to determine that one apple is better than another, it is not possible for us to say that any apple is better than an orange; it is certainly better at being an *apple*, but this implies at the same time that it cannot compete with even a sickly orange at being an orange, no matter how glorious an apple it may be. We cannot say that one is better than the other because they are “just different.” It is clear that we are speaking of a qualitative difference in this case, rather than a quantitative one, and qualitative differences differ from quantitative ones specifically with regard to commensurability.<sup>12</sup>

Leaving aside the question of better and worse, it is not hard to see that we are able to recognize the incomparability of apples and oranges because we are able to compare them; they share something in common: namely, they are both fruits. Difference becomes less intelligible as difference, paradoxically, the

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11. *Meta.*, X.4.1055a4–18.

12. If a qualitative difference were commensurate it would be a quantitative difference, because the difference would be determinable by *measure*. (Incidentally, the difference between qualitative and quantitative differences is an illustration of just the point we are making: they are species within a common genus.)

less real unity there is. We understand the difference between apples and oranges, but what about the difference between apples . . . and jazz? Between apples . . . and justice? In a certain respect, we clearly recognize these things as not being the same, to say the least, but do we understand them specifically as different? Let us try, and note as we do that whatever effort we make in this regard involves at some level an attempt to identify some commonality in relation to which we “locate” their distinction: we might say that apples are things we touch and taste, and jazz is something we listen to—which distinguishes them as species within the genus of sensible things; or apples are physical entities and justice is an abstract universal—which implies the acknowledgment of a notion of being radical enough to admit both possibilities as specifications.<sup>13</sup> But the unities are relatively distant ones in these examples, which is why we can expect that the phrase “difference between apples and justice” will never enter into common parlance: the more distant the unity, the less intelligible the difference. The two dimensions are intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, related—though this aspect will require the argument below to be evident. As Aristotle puts it, things that are “different” *in genus* “have no way [or ‘path’: ὁδος] to one another, but are too far distant and are not comparable,” and even more precisely, “there is *no* difference between anything and the things outside its *genus*.”<sup>14</sup> Note that things can differ only if they have a “path to each other,” which means only if they share some unity with each other.

It is illuminating, in this regard, to note that the very word “difference” implies a certain priority of unity. The Latin word “differentia” comes from “dis” (“away from”) and “ferre” (“to carry”). A thing can “differ,” or move away, only *from* some particular thing to which it thus bears some relation, and the distancing necessarily presupposes a prior proximity. (The Greek word “διαφορά” is exactly like the Latin in this regard: διά + φέρω.) The prior context of unity is especially evident in the

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13. A whole genre of jokes exists, the humor of which is due to the highlighting, whether implicitly or explicitly, of some unity between two apparently wholly disparate things. For example: What is the difference between the mafia and the government? One of them is organized.

14. *Meta.*, X.4.1055a6–7 and 1055a26.

Greek word for contrareity, namely, ἐναντία, which indicates things that oppose each other (-αντία) precisely *within* a relation (ἐν), and this comes to expression, too, in the Latin “contra” (“com” = “together” or “with,” and “-ter” is a comparative or contrastive suffix). There is nothing so perfectly related as two contraries, even in their opposition.<sup>15</sup>

In light of the “species-genus” structure that defines all difference, Aristotle’s description of contrareity as perfect difference makes perfect sense. As he explains, contraries represent the extremes, the final, boundary terms, of species in a genus, which we might say cross the entirety of the genus in such a way that they leave nothing out. Apples and oranges are not contraries. They differ as species within the genus “fruit,” which is why, as I just explained, we are able to understand them *as* different; but they do not represent co-relative extremes. There are many other kinds of fruit that fall outside of the difference between apples and oranges, the meaning of which, we could say, is not illuminated very brightly by that difference. What do bananas have to do with the difference between apples and oranges? Virtually nothing. The logical contrary of apples is not oranges, but “not-apples” (or more properly, but less elegantly: “fruits that are not apples”). Apples and not-apples are contraries because they reach the extremities of the genus: there is no fruit that lies outside of the difference between apples and not-apples. We will come back to the fact that “not-apples” does not designate a real thing, a “substance,” but only a logical category, but let us note first that, if the difference between apples and not-apples is more abstract, and so in a significant way less interesting, than that between apples and oranges, it is nevertheless more complete; the mind is able to come to a certain rest in the former, more so than in the latter. We can say something similar about any genuine contrary, which satisfies the intelligence because it presents the final end-points, the defining terminus, in a single order, and so a perfect difference within a unity: hot-cold, tall-short, light-dark, and so forth. These extremes embrace all of the possibilities within that order, and so can be said to illuminate the whole of it, to give a relative meaning to all the possibilities

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15. The Greek word “*heteros*” and the Latin word “*alter*,” moreover, are both made up of a word meaning “same” or “together” and the contrastive suffix.



contained therein. Intelligibility “crystallizes,” we might say, in a properly located distinction.<sup>16</sup>

But this perfection comes at a certain cost, and, in assessing that cost, we begin to see a legitimate concern behind Derrida’s critique of traditional thought’s privileging of unity over difference and its tendency toward “binaries.” First of all, we note that the contraries mentioned above are more concrete than apple-not-apple, but they achieve that concreteness only at the cost of a certain superficiality: they are precisely *accidents*. Aristotle observes that, strictly speaking, *substances* have no contraries,<sup>17</sup> and the reason is plain: contraries require a prior unity, and, according to Aristotle, substance is the most perfect kind of being, which makes it the highest “level” of unity. Contraries can oppose each other only *in* some “common ground,” as it were: accidents, like hot and cold, can oppose each other only *in* some substance. But what would be the prior unity within which substances could oppose each other? The only option, given Aristotle’s metaphysics, is a non-substance, which is to say, an abstraction, a logical category rather than an ontological reality: not-apple.<sup>18</sup> It appears that there is no possibility of having a truly *profound* difference that concerns the very *being* of things, but only the manner so to speak in which a thing *appears*. In short,

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16. Plato refers to the need, if one wishes to make something intelligible, of first being able to identify the unity, and then being “able to cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints, and to try not to splinter any part, as a bad butcher might do” (*Phaedrus*, 265e).

17. “Another mark of substance is that it has no contrary. What could be the contrary of any primary substance, such as the individual man or animal? It has none. Nor can the species or the genus have a contrary” (Aristotle, *Categories*, 5.3b24–26).

18. The ancient Greek mind does not so readily separate logic from being. Plato, for instance, denies that “not-x” is the contrary of x, since—to take an example—a banana, which is not an apple, is nevertheless not the contrary of apple: see *Sophist*, 257bff. In other words, Plato is thinking of the *thing* that would fall into the category of “not-x,” rather than hypostasizing the category itself, as it were. Aristotle, for his part, does not posit “not-apple” as the contrary of apple (as we just noted, he denies that substances have contraries). We introduce the notion just to make a point, but we will consider in a moment the problem with thinking of “not-x” as a contrary to x. Aristotle explains that, if we can call something nonexistent “not the same” as a particular thing, we *cannot* call it “other,” because only another existing thing can be other (*Meta.*, X.3.1054b18–22).

difference concerns appearance rather than reality: real difference is not deep, and deep difference is not real. Moreover, contraries define a single order of accident within a substance, and a single order can have only one governing principle. This means that the extremes of contrareity must be the presence of a particular determination on the one side and its absence on the other. In other words, contrariety apparently has, inevitably, a “form-privation” structure. Perfect difference cannot exist between two positive qualities, we might say, but only between a positive and a negative: “it is evident that one of the contraries is always privative.”<sup>19</sup>

Both of these shortcomings show up in a decisive way in Aristotle’s reflection on the difference between male and female, which he takes up precisely in this chapter of the *Metaphysics*. This difference is a contrareity, he observes, which is to say that it represents a complete opposition, a difference of extremes.<sup>20</sup> And yet it does not reflect the species-genus structure that typically governs difference in a straightforward way. Man is already a species of a more encompassing genus, namely, “animal”; the difference between male and female does not divide species, as does the difference between horse and man, to use Aristotle’s example. Still, Aristotle observes that gender seems to belong in an essential way to animality; there is no such thing as an animal in the full sense of the term that is not gendered<sup>21</sup>: “this difference belongs to animal in virtue of its own nature, and not as paleness or darkness does; both ‘female’ and ‘male’ belong to it *qua* animal.”<sup>22</sup> Gender, in other words, is a fundamental expression of animal existence. In this respect, it is different from contraries such as pale and dark, tall and short, and so forth, which are more obviously accidents, and so not essential expressions of the meaning of animal existence.

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19. *Meta.*, X.4.1055b25–26.

20. *Meta.*, X.9.1058a30–31.

21. Parthenogenesis, interestingly, is a phenomenon that occurs only in “low-level” animals, which are closer to plants. But even plants generally have “male” and “female” characteristics, though they are part of the same organism. Something like the differentiation of gender coincides with life simply, in its analogous expressions.

22. *Meta.*, X.9.1058a31–33.

After puzzling over the precise nature of this difference, however, Aristotle finds no other way to make sense of it, and so, with what seems to be a certain reluctance, he ends up denying that the gender difference concerns the essence of animal as such, even if it does qualify the essence in some respect: “male and female, while they are modifications peculiar to ‘animal,’ are not so in virtue of its essence (οὐ κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν), but in the matter, i.e., the body.”<sup>23</sup> Gender turns out to be a *pathos*, an accidental modification of a substance, and thus something of the same order as paleness and darkness. It may affect the *physical* being of an animal, perhaps even radically, but it does not “enter into” its very essence so to speak. Aristotle finally justifies this classification by appealing to his infamous biological process of sexual differentiation, which we now know to be deeply problematic for all sorts of reasons: according to Aristotle, sexual differentiation is an accident in the strictest sense; it is something that simply *happens to* a given substance in a certain way (τι πάθος), as an externally imposed condition. The seed, he says, which comes from the male, is in itself originally male, but improper conditions—such as a cold wind—may prevent the form from fully mastering the material presented by the female, in which case the organism takes on the material conditions opposed to the male form.<sup>24</sup> A female, in short, is a “misbegotten male.”<sup>25</sup> We have here a purely accidental difference, which has a “form-privation” structure.

There are many obvious reasons for us to reject this interpretation, but it is hard to imagine how Aristotle himself could have been content with this solution: not only does it undercut his earlier observation that gender concerns animality as such, as I pointed out, but it makes something that is clearly essential to animal life, namely, reproduction, dependent on the pure happenstance of history, which is an inversion of the relationship between essential necessity and contingency. On the other hand, however, we have to admit the difficulty of avoiding his conclusion given the metaphysical horizon within which he thought: substance is supreme, and substance is composed of form and

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23. *Meta.*, X.9.1058b22–24.

24. See Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, IV.1–2.

25. *Ibid.*, II.3.

matter. Gender difference cannot be a matter of form, because that would fracture the unity of a given species, since it would turn the species into a genus encompassing what would now be the different species of male and female. This would become a difference of the same order, for example, as that between horse and man. So it must be a matter of matter. And yet, even here, to take man as the example, it cannot be something essential to the human body precisely *as human*—in the way that the *hand* is, for example, which in its “pluripotency” reflects the characteristic transcendence of human intelligence,<sup>26</sup> because this would still make the difference too essential. Instead, it would have to be something more properly contingent, like being born with red hair rather than black. In fact, however, even hair color is too natural a difference, and as we see does not indicate a contrary. In this case, the gender difference would be more like being born with hair or being born without the capacity to grow hair at all. As I mentioned above, for Aristotle, contraries—of which male and female are an example—necessarily consist of a form and its privation. Amazingly, because there seems to be no metaphysical locus for gender, Aristotle is brought from his commonsensical observation that gender is essential to animality to the relegation of the different to the status of contingent aberration. And the life of the species depends on this aberration! This is a logical contradiction.<sup>27</sup>

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26. Aristotle draws an analogy between the hand, as the “tool of tools,” and the mind, which is “in a certain sense all things” (*De anima*, III.8). We might think of the hand as the bodily expression of intelligence. On this, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 91, a. 3 ad 2 (hereafter cited as *ST*), who says that the hand, rather than a horn or a claw, is “more becoming to the rational nature [of man], which is capable of conceiving an infinite number of things, so as to make for itself an infinite number of instruments.” The hand, then, represents a certain kind of natural transcendence.

27. Aquinas’s attempt to resolve this contradiction by appealing to the God who “writes straight with crooked lines,” so to speak, is not very convincing insofar as it introduces a tension between nature in its universal sense and in its individual sense, which it is not evident how to resolve: “As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence; such as that of a south wind, which is moist, as the Philosopher observes (*De Gener. Animal*, iv, 2). On the other hand, as regards human nature in general, woman

## II.

If we wish to find a more adequate metaphysical *locus* for the gender difference, where do we look? In fact, there seems to be an opening inside of Aristotle's categories, but an opening that requires a perspective beyond that of Aristotle in order for us properly to make sense of it. We will see that Christianity introduces just such a perspective.<sup>28</sup>

There is not sufficient space in the present context to carry out a detailed interpretation of Aristotle's conception of nature and life, which would provide the proper background for the argument that follows. But I have begun such an interpretation in another essay,<sup>29</sup> and I will draw on some of the conclusions of that treatment here, summarizing the basic idea. Because nature, according to Aristotle, is an intrinsic principle of motion and rest, living things, and especially rational ones, are revelatory of nature more generally. This intrinsic principle is the *form* of living things, i.e., the "soul," and it produces motion and rest precisely insofar as it transcends the matter to which it is united in any given type of thing. The *excess* of form beyond the particular matter of an organism is what allows that organism to grow, to incorporate elements from its surrounding environment into its own material being; it is what enables an organism, at higher levels, eventually to receive into its imagination the sensible species, the accidents of other species it encounters, and to move itself in space toward and away from them; and finally, at the highest level, it is what allows an organism to take into its mind the essential form, *qua* intelligible species, of the things it encounters, and to will the good proper to those things. None

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is not misbegotten, but is included in nature's intention as directed to the work of generation. Now the general intention of nature depends on God, who is the universal Author of nature. Therefore, in producing nature, God formed not only the male but also the female" (*ST I*, q. 92, a. 1 ad 1). We will argue below that Aquinas's metaphysics provides a resource to avoid the contradiction that he does not make use of here.

28. To be clear: I am not making the claim that gender can be understood inside of Christianity alone, but only that there is a certain astonishing fittingness between the meaning of gender and Christian revelation.

29. D. C. Schindler, "Analogia Naturae: What Does Inanimate Matter Contribute to the Meaning of Life?" *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 657–80.

of these activities would be possible if the boundary of the living being coincided simply with its material limit. All of these are different degrees of the activities of life, different degrees of power, and they are all due to the different degrees of form's transcendence of matter.

It will be noticed that I did not mention here the central, in a certain respect the *defining*, life-activity of reproduction, which was left out of this brief survey because it warrants more careful consideration for two reasons: it brings to light an additional dimension of form's transcendence of matter, and it is of special interest with respect to the question of the meaning of gender.<sup>30</sup> Scholars have observed that Aristotelian form is neither strictly universal nor strictly particular, but instead represents a unity that precedes the distinction.<sup>31</sup> Setting aside the larger question of whether, and to what extent, matter alone represents for Aristotle by itself the "principle of individuation," we can nevertheless say that an enmattered form, that is, a hylomorphic substance, is basically an individual *thing*, localizable in space and time. But because form remains distinct from matter, even in the hylomorphic unity, that form may be considered in its universal aspect, in abstraction from the particularizing conditions of matter. "Substance," for Aristotle, can never be reduced *simply* to individuality or universality, but includes both dimensions, either of which will stand out depending on the context: as he explains, we may consider substance either in its "primary" sense, as individual thing, or in its "secondary" sense, as species or genus.<sup>32</sup>

Now, the relation between form and matter is not at all the same in every *kind* of substance; Aristotle's sense of being is thoroughly analogical, which means that every ontological principle established will come to expression differently in different

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30. We do not have space to explore it here, but it is interesting to note that there is a certain connection between knowledge and reproduction: intelligence represents form's transcendence of itself in a "vertical" sense, while reproduction represents form's transcendence of itself in a "horizontal" sense.

31. See Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), 379–400.

32. Aristotle, *Categories*, 5. It is important to note that the abstraction is not necessarily from matter simply, but specifically from its particularizing conditions; Aristotle is not distinguishing here between matter and form, but between primary and secondary substance, each of which is a hylomorphic unity.

contexts. Regarding artifacts, the relation is more or less an *accidental* one: in fabrication, a higher form is more or less imposed on material things, which means that the form does not enter *into* those things in a profound sense. In this respect, artifacts are essentially instances of a universal type, which means that they can be effectively exchanged for one another, and the form *qua* universal lies essentially in the producer's mind. It is right on this point in fact that we come to see the decisive characteristic of organic being, which distinguishes it from artifacts: in living things, form and matter are not related extrinsically to each other, but *intrinsically*. This is to say that, in a living organism, matter is never "merely" material, and form is never "merely" formal; instead, the very material being of an organism participates to a certain degree in the nature of form, and so in its universality, and conversely (indeed, this turns out to be the very same point made from the opposite direction), the form enjoys its "in itself" reality, it "lives the life proper to it," as it were, precisely in the material being.

It is crucial to note that this deep unity between form and matter in organic being is not at all in tension with the form's transcendence of matter, which we just identified as characteristic of life. Instead, the unity is precisely an essential expression of this transcendence: the more *genuinely* transcendent form is, the more *wholly* it is able to enter *into* matter. This point becomes clear when we compare organic being with artifacts, which exhibit only a primitive type of transcendence. As we observed above, in artifacts, the universality of form does not exist "in reality," but only in the mind that knows it; conversely, to the extent that form is real at all, it is merely this or that thing: form collapses into material being. At the same time, however, the artifact has no real substance of its own with respect to the abstract "prototype," but stands as a mere instance of a universal type. There is no real "participation" here, and no internal transcendence; instead, there is collapse of form into matter on the one side, and separation of form from matter on the other side. With organic being, by contrast, the individual thing is always a *member* of a species, which is to say that the species lives its life *in* the individual organisms; it is genuinely *present* to and in them. In this respect, an individual organism is always *itself* more than itself; its "species being" is not an abstract idea (as it is, more or

less, in artifacts), but is a dimension of its own reality. This is why, for example, animals tend to exhibit a spontaneous tendency to love their species, as it were, more than their own individual existence.<sup>33</sup>

I would like to suggest that it is just this twofold dimension of organic form, this “immanent transcendence” and “transcendent immanence” of form in matter, which opens up a metaphysical place, so to speak, for gender. As we just saw, the very form that constitutes the individual being transcends that being in its individuality, which is to say that the individual being does not exhaust on its own the full wealth of the form in which it participates; the one form demands a variety of expressions: *quod non potest effici per unum, fiat aliquid per plura*.<sup>34</sup> But this does not imply, as it does for artifacts, that the individual is a mere instance of a universal type; instead, the living individual participates internally, and in its very natural existence, in the universality of its form. There is no single way to exhibit this supra-individuality of the living individual, and this excess comes to expression in two distinct ways: on the one hand, there is in living things the natural inclination to reproduce, which means not simply to multiply the numbers of the species’ members (although of course it *does* mean that), but also in higher level forms to nurture, care for, and educate these members. Nurturing is in

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33. To be sure, there are also animals who eat their young. Acknowledging a great diversity of behavior, I mean to say simply that the animal world gives expression to *more* than just individual self-interest as a governing principle. For a beautiful illustration, see the 2005 film *March of the Penguins*. In the “bourgeois ontology” that tends to define the modern mind, this evidence tends to get interpreted in the essentially mechanistic terms of genetics, principally, one suspects, in order to preserve the supremacy of self-interest. For a classical example of such a bourgeois science, see Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

34. “Whatever cannot be achieved by one, let it be done by many.” This is an axiom cited by Pierre Rousselot, *Intelligence: Sense of Being, Faculty of God* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999). The reference seems improperly given as *In 2 Cael.*, 1.18; the more likely passage is *In 2 Cael.*, 13.8.418. In *ST I*, q. 47, a. 1, Aquinas presents the multiplicity of the universe as a perfection, an attempt to give expression to God’s infinite goodness, which would be infinitely less adequately expressed by a single creature. We might say that the very diversity of genders, as modes of substance, is an image of God’s goodness. In other words, as we will suggest at the end, it is an expression of love.



fact one of the expressions of the degree of immanence of universal form, what we could call its “incarnational” aspect: the lower the degree of transcending immanence (i.e., the less *integration* between matter and form), the more reproduction will take the form of mere multiplication, which is to say the more closely it will resemble the production of instances that characterize artifacts. The higher the degree of integration, by contrast, the more reproduction will resemble an abiding within form that requires a patient and creative handing on. What nurturing is, metaphysically considered, is the adult’s communicating a form that transcends biology and includes a way of existing, a form of life; this is a form that so exceeds the individual beings as to enable them to face each other inside of it, so to speak. It comprehends not just their being but also their acting.

On the other hand, the “supra-individuality” of life comes to expression in the fact that reproduction requires more than a single individual to take place: *reproduction is essentially a shared activity*, a “co-operation.” In reproduction, both means and ends are “supra-individual”; reproduction is the giving rise to super-individuality supra-individually. (As subtle as it may seem at this point, the adverb here will turn out to be the crucial part of our argument.) Reproduction is, in other words, a single activity that is divided between two agents, which are able to jointly enact a single action because they are “co-relates.” Maleness and femaleness make sense only in relation to one another (*pace* Aristotle!), and moreover they make sense only in relation to the generation of new members of the species, because these are both diverse expressions of the single “phenomenon” of the transcendence of form in matter that constitutes life. Gender is thus the way an individual being participates in the universality of its species, not in some abstract sense, but in and through its very material, concrete, individual reality. This inward self-transcendence comes to expression in its very flesh.

Let me deepen this last point, since it is central for my thesis. I am proposing here that the *difference* between form and matter in the internal self-transcendence of life opens up space, so to speak, for the *dual* form of living the universality, that is, the “supra-individuality,” of the species, and the intrinsic *unity* between form and matter that likewise characterizes life reveals

why diversity of modes manifests itself precisely in the body.<sup>35</sup> There are a number of things in this statement that require further elaboration. First, we must see that difference between form and matter could not come to expression in a single mode of that form (we will explain in just a moment what “mode” means here), because strict singularity of the mode would represent precisely the *exclusion of difference*: the uncloseable difference, as it were, between the male and the female is the “horizontal” difference that reveals the “vertical” difference between form and matter, which stands or falls in a sense with the latter. Second, this difference, this “more than mere oneness,” cannot be indifferently multiple, but must necessarily be twofold: as a diverse manifestation of unity, the genders cannot be unrelated to each other, as they would be if there could be any number, i.e., if the number of the different things were a matter of indifference. Instead, the differands have to be precisely correlated, and indeed in a way that crosses through the whole of the unity to which they give essential expression. This is to say, drawing on our discussion in the first section, they have to be *contraries*, and contraries are necessarily twofold.<sup>36</sup> Just as there cannot be any third possibility over-against hot and cold in the order of temperature, so too there cannot be some third gender over-against male-

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35. It is worth noting that Aristotle, too, in a certain sense explains gender difference in terms of the difference between form and matter, but for him this difference can only be a deficiency: when form masters matter (and so overcomes the difference), what results is a male, but when form fails to master the matter (and so leaves the difference standing), what results is a female. In our interpretation, by contrast, the difference between form and matter in a living thing is a perfection, a sign of fullness and fecundity. In this context, it is interesting to note Edith Stein’s observation that men and women exhibit a different way of relating the soul to body, which would be a natural implication of the metaphysical status of gender we are proposing. See Stein’s essay “Spirituality of Christian Women,” in *Collected Works* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 2:94–95. I am grateful to Catherine Pakaluk for reminding me of this text.

36. As Aristotle puts it, “[I]t is clear that one thing cannot have more than one contrary (for neither can there be anything more extreme than the extreme, nor can there be more than two extremes for the one interval), and, to put the matter generally, this is clear if contrareity is difference, and if difference, and therefore also the complete difference, must be between two things” (*Meta.*, X.4.1055a19–23).

ness and femaleness.<sup>37</sup> As we saw earlier, Aristotle cannot help but interpret contraries in terms of a form–privation polarity, in which the two extremes are essentially extrinsic to each other, so that they can only be either opposed or interpreted unilaterally in the sense that one side implies nothing more than the absence of the other. Our reflections, which begin from the centrality of the phenomenon of life, reveal a different kind of relation between contraries: the different genders in this case are necessarily asymmetrically related (or else they would act together only extrinsically, as parallel individuals, rather than dual sharers of a single action), but are nevertheless *co-agents*, ordered to each other reciprocally and from their very core; they are not a positive agent and a negative patient, but two differently positive, correlated agents in a single activity. In other words, the genders are “supra-individual” from the ground up, reciprocally *for* one another, both as an expression of the immanent transcendence of form in living being.<sup>38</sup>

As we saw above, the relation between universality and particularity in reproduction is expressed diversely according to the levels of organic being. The multiplicity that reveals the uni-

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37. The *empirical* observation that there are animals that happen to be born with traits of both genders does not contradict this statement (any more than the existence of “lukewarm” undermines the contrareity of hot and cold). This phenomenon is precisely a coincidence of male and female traits, each of which logically make sense only as the contrary of the other.

38. It is not possible to explore this here, but it would seem to be the case—and would confirm the central thesis of this essay—that the gender difference, properly interpreted, would cast a new light on difference simply, and would thus allow a different take on contraries in general as something other than mere form–privation relations. Instead, they might be revealed as genuine *polarities*—which would, it seems, go a long way in answering Derrida’s critique of the simple binary opposition that privileges one side to the detriment of the other. For some hints in this direction, see Emmanuel Tourpe, “Love: Philosophy’s Blind Spot? Toward a Wisdom of Love,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 430–47. (Tourpe is developing a systematic philosophy of love, one of the pillars of which is polarity interpreted as reciprocity.) Note that following this path would pay heed to Hans Jonas’s insistence that we need to begin philosophical reflection from within the unity of life, and that this would have profound implications for our interpretation of being more generally: see his “Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being,” in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 1–26. Specifically, this approach would enable us to avoid Gnosticism, which would otherwise seem inevitable.

versality of the species tends to occur in a more extrinsic fashion in lower-level beings: in these, reproduction occurs *outside* the reproducing individuals, and there is little or no nurturing involved after the generation. A plant, for example, does not actively share its form with its “progeny.” In higher level beings, by contrast, conception occurs *inside* the individual, and this internal relation continues postpartum because the *form* that constitutes the individual organism exceeds its material individuality sufficiently in both space and time to provide nurturing shape to a larger field of existence.<sup>39</sup> In less technical language, man is naturally inclined to make a *home*. In gender difference, we have an inverse expression of the same phenomenon: at the lowest levels of life, sexual differentiation occurs within the same individual being; a plant, for instance, has both male and female characteristics, and so can reproduce more or less on its own. As a general rule, the higher the level of the organism, which is to say, the more perfectly form transcends matter in its hylomorphic unity, the greater the differentiation of the sexes (though, as I will explain in just a moment, this greater differentiation coincides with a more profound unity). More complex beings tend to divide roles, not just in the act of conception, but over the whole process of nurturing, and beyond. If reproduction is more intensive at higher levels, gender difference is more extensive. The point is not to separate, of course, but to express unity in a more richly complex fashion.

Let us look more closely at the gender difference in human beings. In man, and uniquely in him among the creatures of the natural cosmos, form has an essential completeness in itself, which is to say that it is defined by the “*reditio completa*”; in other words, the human soul subsists naturally in itself.<sup>40</sup> This perfect

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39. Indeed, in human beings we have not only education as nurturing (*Erziehung*), which brings a child to adulthood, but also education as cultural formation (*Bildung*), which ideally continues through the whole of life. One of the most profound texts that has been written on education, Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), takes as its founding presupposition that man, precisely in his uniqueness, possesses within himself the universal form of man, the “ideal”; education is the realization of this form, which coincides with a proper particularizing of personality. See especially Letter IV, 30–33.

40. This is why Aquinas defines the human soul as an intellectual principle (*ST I*, q. 75, a. 2), why it is immortal of its nature (*ST I*, q. 75, a. 6), why it

transcendence is the ground of man's intellect and will, his capacity to understand the essence of things and to be free. It is this that constitutes his personhood.<sup>41</sup> But this perfect transcendence of the soul in relation to the body does not in the least "detach" human existence from the specific material conditions of the body, as some seem to think; this transcendence does not separate gender (as a so-called "social construct") from sexuality (as a merely biological "fact"). Precisely to the contrary: as we have seen, it is nothing other than the form's transcendence of the matter that constitutes the gender difference and it is this transcendence that reveals itself in bodily sexuality. *Human personhood is therefore the perfection of the very thing that causes gender difference, namely, the transcendence of form.* Whereas plants and animals live gender in a more limited way because of the only relative transcendence of form, in man gender comes to expression not only biologically, and indeed not only psychologically, but in personal existence more generally, and that means in the cultural incarnations of human freedom. For man, gender is not only a natural given; it is also a cultural task.<sup>42</sup> The connection between gender

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is a kind of supra-formal form, supra-natural form, that allows it to know all other things (*ST I*, q. 84, a. 2). The soul's self-relation is what opens it to being *qua* being, and indeed to God. On this last point, see Ferdinand Ulrich, *Gabe und Vergebung* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag-Einsiedeln, 2006), 805–07: "In *this* (!) sense, the created (formata) 'anima humana,' in analogy to the uncreated (forma genita), is also a 'forma non formata'; formless form, 'capax finiti et infiniti.' To express this by means of an image: being *external to* (in a primal distance from) all forms, it is able to *internalize* all forms in itself [aller Formen *inne* zu werden]. An 'essence,' the fullness of which (beyond all dialectic) consists in a certain super-essential essence-lessness: the mystery of human intellect, in its openness to being: '*Intellectus, a quo homo est id quod est.*'"

41. If a person is "an individual substance of a rational nature," it is the rational nature of the form—its complete self-relation—that brings about the individual subsistence of personal being. See *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1.

42. One of the most illuminating presentations of the cultural task entailed by gender can be found in Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). There is, then, an analogy between biological form and cultural form: just as the transcendence of biological form allows an organism to take in elements of the environment that are *other* than it—air, water, food—and take them into its very being, so too is culture an increased transcendence of form that allows a greater comprehension of elements, beyond the merely material. Man is able to take up the things that constitute the entire cosmos, in a certain respect, and to give these a distinctive form.

and personhood, moreover, means that gender does not exhaust its meaning in sexual reproduction, but serves, more fundamentally, to reveal the good and beautiful truth about man (and as we will see in the end, about being simply). In other words, gender does not serve principally a pragmatic purpose (i.e., reproduction), but has a more profound and basic revelatory purpose. Man must cultivate gender difference as what gives form to his life more comprehensively: in the way he dresses, interacts with the world and other human beings, in the various forms of cultural life, acting, playing, courtship, work, establishing a home, and so forth. The other sex is not simply inside of one, as in plants, but in a certain respect lies at the other extreme of human nature; to cross from the one to the other, we might say, entails passing through the whole world. This is why the union of the sexes, in man, is not a momentary event, an episodic occurrence, as in other animals, but a unity of existence, which involves the whole person and includes the work of intellect and will, the assent of freedom.<sup>43</sup>

A third point from the statement above concerns our use of the word “mode” to describe the kind of being gender represents, that is, its metaphysical status. The term is meant to indicate a different kind of differentiation, as it were, which allows us to find a way out of the dilemma that Aristotle faced. As we saw in the first section, Aristotle recognized that gender was essential to animality, but at the same time could not represent a difference of *essential form*, because that would necessarily make maleness and femaleness different species within the genus “man” (or “horse,” or “rabbit,” etc.). This difference, though, is evidently too extrinsic to characterize gender: what defines the difference of species is precisely the opposite of what defines gender difference, namely, the incapacity to reproduce. Moreover, contraries would seem to have to be mere accidents, because they would seem to have to oppose each other *in* some substance, and would have to exist as a relation between form and its privation. But we have seen that the gender difference, though an instance of con-

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43. For a fuller account of this point from the perspective of a philosophical anthropology, see my “The Crisis of Marriage as a Crisis of Meaning: On the Sterility of the Modern Will,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 331–71.

rarity, does not concern accidents in some more fundamental substance, nor is it a difference between two different kinds of substance. Instead, it is a radically different kind of difference: it represents two different *ways of being* a single kind of substance. To be sure, accidents are also described in similar fashion, as the modification in the way of being of a substance; an accident is not what makes a man *a man*, but what makes him *such* a man: a tall man, a dark man, a handsome man. But to place gender in this category, as Aristotle finally does, is to miss the point. We are talking about something more fundamental; gender concerns the very substance, the man himself, who is “then” modified as tall, dark, or handsome. It is a difference that is not *subsequent* upon substance, even immediately subsequent upon it, as a proper accident may be<sup>44</sup>; nor is it a part of substance, which would entail its inclusion in the definition of that substance (i.e., it would make it a differentiation of species within a genus). Rather, it is a difference that coincides with the substance; it is a difference in the modality of substance, one of the correlated ways of being a living thing, of “incarnating” the supra-individuality of form that is coextensive with life. Gender concerns animality as such; there is no such thing as an animal that is not gendered, because gender “happens” whenever there is a difference between form and matter that is coincident with their intrinsic relation.<sup>45</sup>

It is necessary, here, to clarify the meaning of “mode” as I am proposing to use it to illuminate gender. The term most immediately suggests an accidental specification, that is, a char-

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44. Michael Waldstein has argued against David L. Schindler that relation ought to be understood as analogous to proper accidents, which are *not* superficial or extrinsic, even as they nevertheless remain accidents. See his article “Constitutive Relations: A Response to David L. Schindler,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 496–518, and Schindler’s response, “Being, Gift, Self-Gift: Reply to Waldstein on Relationality and John Paul II’s Theology of the Body,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 221–51. The foundation of this debate turns on the relation between *esse* and substance; my argument that gender concerns a mode of being a substance lines up with Schindler’s position, which argues for a certain “equiprimordiality” between substance and relation, insofar as creation is a relation, and the being that is given in creation is not merely subsequent to the substance of a creature, but paradoxically also precedes it in a certain respect.

45. This is why, as we saw earlier, there is also something “like” gender even in plants. The basic claim I wish to make is that there cannot be an internal transcendence of form without some analogous differentiation of gender.

acterization of the particular way a thing realizes itself in history, rather than what it is in itself. We might say that mode thus typically concerns “second act,” *operatio*, rather than “first act,” the *esse* of substantial form.<sup>46</sup> But we mean here to describe gender as a *mode of essence* before being a *mode of existence*; it indicates a modification of essence, not in the sense that it affects the whatness of the what (i.e., changes one nature into a different nature), but the *how* of the what. The reason it concerns the living being’s essence itself, and not simply its historical instantiation, is that, as I have been arguing, the differentiation represents an *internal necessity of the form itself*, which is demanded by its natural transcendence of matter. In this sense, to use Aristotle’s language, “it belongs to the animal in virtue of its nature”; an animal cannot be at all except as either male or female. The modification does not occur after the thing exists in its universal nature, or in other words, at some particular moment in its history, as Aristotle eventually felt compelled to affirm when he designated gender as “τι πάθος,” even if that moment is the tiniest fraction of a second after the reality of the thing. Instead, the substantial form only arrives into being, so to speak, as already either male or female. In this regard, the differentiation occurs perfectly with the being of the essence. Because gender concerns a differentiation of the essence, it may be more adequate to use the word “modality” rather than “mode”; but in the end the point is that gender concerns the way of being of a living thing, and not merely a way of appearing or acting.

One of the implications of this way of conceiving gender is that it brings to light a deeper unity between unity and difference than is evident even in Aristotle’s already integrated understanding, such as I described it in the first section. We saw that, for Aristotle, difference always presupposes a prior unity, as the genus in which it distinguishes species, or as the substance in which accidents distinguish themselves from each other. But gender difference presupposes unity only in a wonderfully paradoxical and analogous sense. Because it concerns a difference of

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46. For an argument that relationality concerns “first act” rather than “second act,” see David L. Schindler, “Norris Clarke on Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 580–92.



modality of substance, the *whole content* of the species is present in each gender . . . differently. There is not a division *inside* of that content, which would distribute the content to separate members. Nor is gender merely an accident, to which the substance would be relatively indifferent as nothing but the supporting ground that makes the difference possible. Instead, as a difference of mode, gender difference is exactly coextensive with the form that defines the substance: in other words, it is a difference that goes “all the way down,” not determining some particular essential content of the nature, but rather determining the particular manner of *all* the content. We see, in other words, that gender is more fundamentally a matter of adverbs than a matter of nouns or adjectives: it will generally be the case that some characteristic is more obviously exhibited by one gender or the other, but the particular exhibition of human attributes can never be exclusive. Thus, for example, men may be more evidently “strong” and women more evidently “gentle,” but there is a distinctively feminine *way*, or *mode*, of being strong and a distinctively masculine way of being gentle. We may speak here of the different genders “appropriating” attributes in a nonexclusive fashion in a way that images the differentiation of persons and divine attributes in the Trinity—which is a point I will develop further below. In any event, we see here the metaphysical basis for distinguishing a proper “integral sexual complementarity” from a “fractional sexual complementarity.”<sup>47</sup>

Because gender difference is a difference in modality of the form that defines the species, unity and difference coincide perfectly in it. The universality of the species and the difference of genders *have the very same cause*, namely, the form in its transcendence of matter. This sameness of course means that what “specifies” each gender in itself does not separate it from the universality of human nature; quite the contrary, a deepening of the specificity, because it is a deepening of the precise way of incarnating the “supra-individuality” of life, is a transcendence

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47. On this, see Prudence Allen, “Integral Sexual Complementarity and the Theology of Communion,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 523–44. Allen conceives the basis of the complementarity differently from the way I have proposed here, and one may raise a question whether her interpretation is able in the end to support the unity she rightly intends.

of individuality and particularity. We become more universally human the more fully and completely we live our distinctive masculinity or femininity. Moreover, the simultaneity of universality and particularity allows our associations a form of freedom. We see why we both desire relations with others, most naturally with the other gender, and yet, in the best cases, enter into these relations not out of a desperate need, an escape from the tragedy of partial existence,<sup>48</sup> but more generously. The union of the genders is most fundamentally a sharing of our wholeness that coincides with a certain completion of it, rather than first a negative overcoming of our own lack. It is also why one learns to appreciate the *other* gender best by being true to one's own gender: a man comes closest to femininity, paradoxically, by perfecting his masculinity rather than abandoning it, and each gender is most liberated in its own specificity in the presence of others who authentically live their own. Again, unity and difference are perfectly coincident.

We have yet to take a decisive step in "locating" gender metaphysically, and this will be our last before we turn, briefly in conclusion, to the question of how gender represents the perfection of difference. This final step will show us why Christianity in particular reveals the significance of this essential dimension of life. We proposed characterizing gender in terms of the differentiated modality of a (living) substance. Though this expression is at least arguably intelligible on Aristotelian grounds, it does not fall into the categories that he himself used to interpret being—and it is certainly not the way he interpreted gender.<sup>49</sup> But however intelligible it may be for an Aristotelian, it is particularly intelligible for a Thomist, for whom substance does not present the most ultimate metaphysical horizon. By virtue of an understanding of the world as *created*, Aquinas (among others) made thematic what is sometimes referred to as the "existen-

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48. The classic expression of gender as a "tragic division" may be found in Aristophanes's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, in which he presents man as originally a sphere, cut in half as divine punishment for hubris, and thus left to seek lost wholeness through sexual union (189d–193e).

49. All of the categories Aristotle enumerated—quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, possession, action, and passion—are accidents inhering in substance, the most basic category, and so fail to capture the "status" I have proposed assigning to gender.

tial” dimension of being, as really distinct from the “essential” dimension. The things that make up the world are not simply substances as hylomorphic unities of form and matter, but are *entites* that have received the gift of being (*esse*) from God. Aquinas calls the *act of being*, over and above the essence that is defined by form, i.e., formal act, the “act of all acts” and the “perfection of all perfections,” a principle that is “what is innermost in each and every thing, and what is deepest in them all, for it is formal in respect of all that is in a thing.”<sup>50</sup>

A vast dimension opens up here in the understanding of being, which we are not able to explore in the present context other than to make the following observation. To say that *esse* is “formal with respect to every form” in a thing is to say that it does not represent an additional form next to the other forms that make up a particular thing, i.e., substantial form and its proper parts; nor is it a mere modification of a “preexisting” substance, as an accident among others (e.g., “tall,” “dark,” “handsome”). Instead, *esse* concerns the particular form that every form in a thing takes, which is to say the modality or way of being of a substance and everything in it. In this respect, we see why it is appropriate to associate gender metaphysically with *esse*: *esse* is a distinct mode of the essence that bears on everything in it “adverbially,” we might say. *Esse* is not the mere *fact* of existence, as some modern Thomists think,<sup>51</sup> but is a contentful actuality, the content of which is expressed not just in the fact that a thing exists at all, but in its very manner of existing in all of its formal and material dimensions. In this sense, we can think of gender as a privileged expression of *esse*: it is, as it were, the *essential* expression of the “perfection of all perfections” in the created order, that is, the manifestation of *esse* in the very substantiality of the substance in an obviously meaningful way. It is not just a mode

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50. Aquinas, *De potentia*, VII, q. 2, a. 2 ad 9; *ST I*, q. 4, a. 1 ad 3; *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1.

51. The reduction of *esse* to the simple fact of existence appears to arise from the reduction of the distinction between *esse* and *essence* to a mere formal distinction. On this, see Francisco Suarez, at the origin of a certain current in modern Thomism, who characterizes the distinction as that between *esse essentialis* and *esse existentiae* (*Disputationes metaphysicae*, XXXI; *Opera Omnia* XXVI, 224b). The first to have drawn the distinction in this way is Henry of Ghent (*Quodl.* I.9. follio.7r).

in the existential order, as we explained above, but specifically in the essential order, though it indicates a sort of modification that governs the entire order rather than some part of it (as for example genus or specific difference does). The way *esse* shows itself to be formal with respect to all form is in the distinctive modalities of essence in the highest kind of being, namely, living being, and especially and most dramatically in the modalities of human being—in other words, in the gender difference. If substance is the ultimate category in one's metaphysics, it will be difficult to make sense of the gender difference, because it is not clear relative to *what* the difference exists; a recognition of *esse*, the act that lies in some sense beyond substance, opens up an answer to this question. We will return to this point at the end.

Now, we said above that it is Christianity in particular that reveals the significance of the gender difference. The notion of the modality of substance is not *opposed* to Aristotle's thinking, even if it is not obviously thematic therein, but comes to light in a special way with the acknowledgment of *esse* as a metaphysical principle really distinct from essence. This principle comes to the fore when we recognize the world as freely created by God *ex nihilo*.<sup>52</sup> Still, the notion of the world as created is not exclusively Christian, even if a metaphysical sense of the implications of God's creative act seems to have developed especially within Christianity. Whatever one might make of the specifically Christian interpretation of creation, however, it is nevertheless the case that Christian revelation deepens our understanding of the distinctiveness of *esse* as a metaphysical principle, and the distinction between subsistence and substance or nature, all of which stands out sharply in relation to the central Christian mysteries of the hypostatic union and the Trinity. These mysteries are, of course, infinitely rich with meaning, but we intend here only to allude to their aspects that bear directly on the question of the metaphysical "locus" of the gender difference.

First, by distinguishing between nature and person in Christ, who is "two natures in one person," christological doctrine has set into relief a dimension of reality that opens up the horizon even further for our understanding of gender. It is only

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52. On all of this, see Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).

because personhood transcends nature that Christ is able to unite human nature fully with his divine nature without separation or confusion. In order to allow both perfect unity and perfect difference in Christ, Maximus the Confessor proposes the category of “tropos,” “mode,” which is distinct from “logos,” essence or rational nature, to understand a kind of being that transcends the horizon of nature without adding some other “thing.”<sup>53</sup> It is an analogous sense of mode to which I have been appealing here to understand the gender difference, though in this case it is precisely to preserve the fully integral unity of human nature rather than the unity of the person of Christ in his two natures.<sup>54</sup> What we see here, in any event, is once again the significance of personhood, a transcendence of nature that nevertheless bears on the meaning of nature *essentially* and not *accidentally*. According to Aquinas, “Whatever accrues after the completion of the being comes accidentally, unless it be taken into communion with the complete being” (*ST III*, q. 2, a. 6 ad 2). We are suggesting that the gender difference is just this, a difference that does not accrue *after* substance, but pervades it from the beginning. Just as the *union* of God and man “took place [not] in the essence or nature, nor yet in something accidental, but midway [*medio modo*], in a substance or hypostasis” (*III*, q. 2, a. 6), so too the gender *difference* concerns the subsistence of nature, and so bears on the essence as a whole without changing that essence.

Second, according to Christian doctrine, God is one nature subsisting in three persons, who are really distinct from each other *qua* person, but absolutely one *qua* God. The distinction of persons, in other words, is not a distinction of natures, or *a fortiori* a distinction of attributes inhering in natures. Instead, as the traditional language has it, the difference of persons is a different subsistence of the same substance—i.e., a different way of possessing the one divine nature: the Father possesses it as the unoriginate origin of the Godhead; the Son, in being begotten

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53. For a succinct account of Maximus’s terminology, and the terms of the problem which he addressed, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 207–35.

54. This analogy would open up, in turn, a metaphysical basis for understanding the hypostatic union in nuptial terms.

from the Father, possesses it as receiving it from him; and the Spirit possesses it as cospirated by the Father and Son, that is, as simultaneously fruit and union of the two. As different “modes” of subsistence, the difference of trinitarian persons bears a clear analogy to the gender difference, though we are not able in the present essay to work out the details of that analogy.<sup>55</sup>

The more immediate point for us here is simply to see that this analogy illuminates the gender difference in three ways: first, it brings definitively home, as it were, the equiprimordiality of unity and difference that we sought to highlight as distinctive of the gender difference. In God, there is no prior unity of substance that is *then* divided among the persons. The mystery of the Trinity is such that we are just as able to interpret the distinction of the persons on the basis of the unity of the divine essence as we are the unity of the essence on the basis of the distinction of persons. For this reason, it is true that each divine person, in the radical difference of his subsistence, is nevertheless *wholly* and *perfectly* God, without the slightest defect, and yet, at the same time, “all together” they are not three Gods but one God in perfect simplicity. Their unity and their difference each imply the other. Second, the Trinity reveals that the differentiation of subsistences is both perfectly correlative and essentially fruitful. The differentiation is not a setting apart of parallel existences that “then” cooperate; rather, the differences are *radically*, as it were, from top to bottom and all the way through, *for* each other, and *from* and *with*.<sup>56</sup> Each person possesses the divine essence in his “own” ir-

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55. For a fundamental discussion of this analogy, see David L. Schindler, “Catholic Theology, Gender, and the Future of Western Civilization,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 200–39. It should be noted that to speak of the persons as “modes” of the one nature is not to affirm a “modalistic” interpretation of the Trinity, such as we find in the Sabellian heresy which trivializes the difference between the persons. Rather, I mean to do just the opposite, namely, to interpret the meaning of mode—ultimately as it bears on the gender difference—in the light of an orthodox understanding of the Trinity.

56. “The true God is, of his own nature, being-for (Father), being-from (Son), and being-with (Holy Spirit). Yet man is in the image of God precisely because the being for, from, and with constitute the basic anthropological shape” (Joseph Ratzinger, “Truth—Tolerance—Freedom,” in *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 248). David L. Schindler, along similar lines, had already characterized being as “*esse ab*,” “*esse ad*,” and “*esse in*.” See his “Norris Clarke on Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” 586.

reducibly unique way, and yet that possession is *perfectly* generous; it is at the same time a total sharing, so that we can speak of an absolute coincidence of the perfect uniqueness of each and the perfectly simple unity of all. In short, the Trinity reveals that the basic meaning of the personal difference of which the gender difference is an image, is *love*. Finally, the trinitarian nature of God reveals that difference is not an imperfection in principle, as it seems to be in traditional Neoplatonic metaphysics for example; instead, difference is revealed to be itself a *perfection*, and indeed a perfection that images *difference in God*, a difference that does not in the least compromise unity.<sup>57</sup> According to Aquinas, the difference in persons in God is not only the most perfect “instance” of difference, but is *causal* of all other differences:

[T]his distinction [of persons in God] excels every distinction in the order of dignity and causality, and similarly relation, which is the principle of distinction, excels in dignity every difference in creatures, not to be sure because it is a relation but because it is a divine relation. It excels, moreover, in causality too, since the procession and multiplication of creatures is caused by the procession of the different divine persons.<sup>58</sup>

Because gender difference is a distinction of modes of subsistence in one nature, we may see it as the highest created image of divine personhood, and thus as a *principle* of difference in the created order, one that exceeds in dignity and causality all other differences in creation. To reflect for a moment on what this might mean will be the theme of our concluding section.

### III.

We began our investigation with a discussion of Aristotle’s concept of “perfect difference,” and we end by returning to this question, now in the light of gender difference as we interpreted

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57. For a longer argument on this score, see my “What’s the Difference? On the Metaphysics of Participation in Plato, Plotinus, and Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 3 (2007): 583–618.

58. Aquinas, *1 Sent* 26.2.2.2.

both metaphysically and theologically. As we saw, Aristotle presents contrareity as perfect difference; we are proposing the gender difference as the most perfect of all perfect differences, and indeed, not just on a continuous scale, but of a fundamentally different order, which represents a *principle* of difference. There are many reasons why we ought to recognize gender difference as the most perfect of perfect differences:

1) Contrareity is perfect because it is complete, which is to say it represents the extremes of a particular order. For Aristotle, however, that order can only be accidental, because substance can have no contrary, and, because it represents a single order, with a single principle, contrareity has to have a form-privation structure. But gender difference presents what we might call “substantial contrareity,” not a relation between one substance and its opposite, but two positive and correlative ways of being a (living) substance. In this sense, gender difference is not only perfect, it is also profound.

2) Gender difference is “perfect” not only as a (substantial) contrary, but also as joining in an essential and complete way the unity and distinction that constitutes all difference, as we saw in Aristotle. If it is possible to say that difference becomes more perfect the more these dimensions are integrated, then gender represents a culminating fulfillment of difference. As we have seen, in gender, unity and difference perfectly coincide, and indeed are, we might say, generative of each other. Particularity and universality come together here, in a sense, both “essentially” and “existentially.” The genders, as positive contraries, are irreducibly distinct “extremities” of the human “essence” or nature, and yet that nature is not divided between them but is wholly present in each: gender is a differentiated unity or a unified difference, and is both, so to speak, “all the way down” to the core of the being. Moreover, in the “existential” order, it is just this radical difference that allows male and female to come together in a union that is greater than each separately. This union not only brings out more profoundly the distinctiveness of each gender—i.e., it *liberates* rather than annihilates the difference—but it is at the same time generative of new individuals, different from their progenitors; the species lives its life in the gendered members, and the members live their lives in the unity of the species. Gender reveals the perfect positivity



of difference and its dramatic unity with unity; it is a difference that unifies and in doing so multiplies difference, the possibility of more unity.

3) We said in the first point that the gender difference is profound. How profound is it? Quite literally, it is as profound as can be. We can see this in terms of anthropology, metaphysics, and theology. First, anthropology: I have argued that gender difference arises within the space, so to speak, between form and matter in living things, which is to say, between soul and body. Aristotle presented the soul as one of the worthiest objects of reflection because of its great dignity and capacity to reveal the meaning of nature,<sup>59</sup> and the human soul is the highest instance of soul because it is most completely transcendent of the body. According to Aquinas, personal existence—as the self-subsistence of form—is the most perfect kind of being in the cosmos.<sup>60</sup> I have argued that personhood represents the perfection of gender because it is, so to speak, the “extremity” of the difference at the root of gender. The gender difference is a perfect difference, not just in substance generally, but in fact in what is most perfect.

4) In terms of metaphysics, I have argued that the gender difference is an expression of *esse*, the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections, in living beings. For Aristotle, difference always presents a genus–species structure and occurs generally in the accidental order in relation to some analogous substance. We saw that gender does not fit this usual structure. But this does not make the structure irrelevant. Instead, I would like to suggest that the gender difference *is* a kind of specification of a “prior” unity, but that unity is not a genus,<sup>61</sup> nor does the differentiation occur in some substance.<sup>62</sup> We can say that there is literally “nothing” beyond the gender difference, neither a more universal logical category, nor a more fundamental reality. And yet, even in its non-subsistence, its “no-thingness,” *esse* is most

59. Aristotle, *De anima*, I.1.402a1–9.

60. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 3.

61. Being is not a genus: see Aristotle, *Meta.*, III.3.998b22; Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, q. 25, a. 6.

62. *Esse* is “non-subsistent” (Aquinas, *De potentia* I, q. 1); it is the “substance that subsists” (*Meta.*, 12.1).

common and more intimate than any reality.<sup>63</sup> *Esse's* nonsubsistence implies that the gender difference that specifies it in living beings is not derivative, but actually *ultimate*, even though this ultimacy does not at all relativize the absoluteness of substance.<sup>64</sup>

5) From a theological perspective, the revelation of personhood shows that a transcendence of nature belongs to the perfection of being. The category of nature that defines the horizon of Greek philosophy, in other words, is not ultimate, or perhaps better: is not exclusively ultimate.<sup>65</sup> Christ's divine personhood is what unites his divine and human natures,<sup>66</sup> and the simple nature of God is "shared," as it were, by the divine persons. If nature were, by itself, the ultimate horizon, we would not be able in the end to make sense of the gender difference, which as we saw in Aristotle would be forced to become a contingent accident of history affecting only the bodies of animals. This leads us to characterize the gender difference as a transcendence *of* nature precisely *in* nature, both because it belongs specifically to nature's participation in eternity, as both Plato and Aristotle noted,<sup>67</sup> and also because it brings to light, as I argued above, the "vertical" difference between form and matter that makes living being al-

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63. *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1.

64. In this, I am following Ferdinand Ulrich's interpretation of being in Aquinas, according to which the primacy of *esse* is of a paradoxical sort, insofar as being, as the likeness of divine goodness, "pre-supposes" the recipient, which gives the being itself a certain relative priority. On all of this, see his *Homo Abyssus*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag-Einsiedeln, 1998).

65. Leo Strauss identifies the emergence of philosophy with the "discovery of nature," which henceforth defines the rational insofar as it transcends myth, religion, culture, and history (see *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 82). Christianity does not simply trump the priority of nature, as Strauss assumes—which is why he takes Christianity to have opened the door to modern liberalism—but, more paradoxically, renders it more absolute as a gift of God, redeemed in love.

66. *ST III*, q. 2, a. 2.

67. For Plato, nature is ordered to goodness *simpliciter*, and attains the eternity this represents by living its image in reproduction (see *Symposium*, 207a–208b). According to Aristotle, "the most natural act [of a mature organism] is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible" (*De anima*, II.4.415a28–b2).

ways “more” than itself. To put the point simply, the gender difference is a kind of window open inside the created order to what lies beyond, that is, ultimately to God. There are some grounds for the suggestion that man’s imaging of God lies in a special way in the gender difference: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ . . . So God made man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gn 1:26–27). To be an image is, moreover, not simply to share a similar form, but to be in ontological unity.<sup>68</sup> Though we cannot explore it here, it seems that gender difference is a concrete place in which we live out our relation to God.<sup>69</sup> We suggested that insofar as gender concerns different modalities of a single nature, it images trinitarian personhood in a particular way. If the difference of persons in God is the source and summit, as it were, of all differences in creation, the gender difference is the highest image of this in the created order.

6) As has become evident, the difference expressed in gender is not just a logical or even ontological category, but most fundamentally a manifestation of love. In other words, gender reveals that difference is thoroughly meaningful. According to its etymological root, “difference” indicates a setting apart, a movement away; gender, however, shows that the movement away is for the sake of a deeper unity (which itself generates more difference). Difference turns out to be, not an “indifferent” separation of one thing from another, but a radically positive relationality: a being *for*, being *from*, and being *with*. Aristotle said that for there to *be* difference, the differands must have some “path to one another,”<sup>70</sup> and gender is a paradigm of this path, since the very difference is what allows a unity. John Paul II, of course, elaborated in great depth the relativity of gender as an inscription

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68. Aquinas explains that man is an image of God insofar as he is able to imitate God in his reason. But instead of saying that just as God knows and loves himself, so man, as his likeness, knows and loves himself analogously, Aquinas says instead that man imitates God *actually* by knowing and loving God (see *ST I*, q. 93, a. 4).

69. Pascal Ide presents this idea, basic to the thought of John Paul II, succinctly in his “John Paul II’s ‘Meditation on Givenness,’” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 123–38.

70. *Meta.*, X.4.1055a6–7.

in the body of the calling to love.<sup>71</sup> If the gender difference has the metaphysical status I have proposed, then the “meaningfulness” that gender implies is not a mere accident of things, but expressive of their most essential being. In gender, meaningfulness proves to be, not a subjective overlay, but a reality that penetrates to the very core of things; meaning pervades the whole of being. If “perfection” indicates completeness, purpose (τέλος), then, once again, gender, as the manifestation of love, the highest of all ends, is the most perfect of all differences: ἡ τελειότατη διαφορά.

7) As bringing to light the positivity of difference, we can say—summing up all of the preceding reflections—that gender is a revelation of the meaning of being simply. Interpreted metaphysically, gender shows that difference is *radical*; it reaches down to the very foundations of existence and is not merely a derivative category. Not only is difference radical, but it is also *good*—and *true*, and *beautiful*. As an expression of love, it reveals that unity and difference are coextensive, that they are intrinsically related rather than oppositional, and that they imply one another. Gender comes to completion at the level of the person, but we must recognize that personal being is not just one kind of being among others; instead, as the highest mode of being it is revelatory of being in general. For Aristotle, the answer to the question “What is being?” is *substance*; moreover, it is natural being that reveals what substance is, and, among natural beings, the paradigm is not just living being, but ultimately rational being. In this respect, we look to *man* for insight into the question “What is being?” For Aristotle, this is because the intellectuality that gives man “per se” existence, a standing in himself, presents a paradigm of the independence that defines substance, and therefore being in general. But the gender difference brings out a dimension that is missed by Aristotle: the person is not just an independent substance, but is characterized by relationality as basically as substance, because it is precisely the substance that subsists in a gendered way.<sup>72</sup> Gender is a specific, correlated way

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71. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

72. On the significance of relation as constitutive of personhood, see the classic essay by Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 439–54.

of being a substance. We thus see that it is not only independent self-relation that reveals the meaning of being, but at the very same time self-transcending relation to the whole, and to what is other. In other words, being is love. Difference is just as deep, just as good, true, and beautiful, as self-sameness, and they are both coincident features of substance. We might therefore say that, if analogy is the simultaneity of unity and difference, then the gender difference realizes being *precisely as analogy*.<sup>73</sup> Gender is unified difference and it creatively generates difference, even while it thus deepens unity. In this respect, it can be said to be a generative enactment of the analogy of being.

We thus see how great the stakes are in the question of gender. If the account presented above is a good one, it follows that to trivialize the gender difference is to undercut the principle of difference simply; it is therefore to “flatten out” all of being in principle, and so, among other things, to render reality a helpless prey of arbitrary technological projects.<sup>74</sup> Many people have a certain intimation, an intuitive sense, that the gender difference has a special connection with Christianity, and the preceding reflections have shown that this is not simply because of the various moral issues surrounding marriage and family. People also generally have a sense that the trivializing of the gender difference poses a much deeper threat than the simple legal questions, for example, of privacy rights in public restrooms, and the ferocity of such debates betrays no doubt a recognition that there is much more going on beneath the surface (as well as a frustration that the truth cannot be articulated). We have been suggesting here that what is at stake is the reality of nature, the goodness of difference, and the meaning of being simply, the ever ancient and ever new question of the “One and the Many” that was acknowledged from the very beginning as foundational in our understanding of the world. A recollection of the depths of gen-

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73. It is interesting to note that, on this score, Aquinas distinguishes analogy from equivocity and univocity by saying that while the former indicates terms that are distinguished by the diversity of things that are signified, and the latter indicates terms that are distinguished by the diversity of differences (added to a genus that remains the same), analogous terms are distinguished by a diversity of modes of being. See *1 Sent* 22.1.3.2.

74. See Michael Hanby, “Technocracy and the Fate of Christian Freedom,” *First Things*, forthcoming.

der reveals that we do not have to be terrified of difference, as liberalism cannot help but be in spite of its sometimes hysterical protests; instead, we can affirm difference, celebrate it, and indeed ultimately *love* it, because in the end, as we discover through the analogy of being, real and deep difference *is* love. □

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