

PERSONAL SINGULARITY AND
THE *COMMUNIO PERSONARUM*:
A CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF
THOMAS AQUINAS' DOCTRINE
OF *ESSE COMMUNE*¹

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“To be a person is to be a member
of a *communio personarum*.”

Introduction

God is the unity of being and love. In him, substance and the fully conscious act of loving are one. By the same token, each of the three divine persons, who is identical with the one divine substance, is his conscious act of loving the other two.² And if that is the case, then

¹For two friends: R. G. and F. U.

²Richard of Saint Victor, in his *De Trinitate*, helps us to see the “logic” of this claim. Richard argues that God, as the fullness of being, is also the fullness of charity. Absolute being is absolute goodness, and absolute goodness is absolute love. Now, as Richard famously argues in Book III, love comes to perfection, not just when two love each other, but when those two love each other by jointly loving a third, a *condilectus*, or “co-beloved,” in Richard’s felicitous terminology. If, then, God’s being is his love, and his love is his being, then—as Richard makes clear in Book IV—the Trinity just *is* God’s way of being the unity of substance and conscious love that he is. What Richard is saying, in other words, is that there is never a time when God exists outside of love, and that is why there is never a time

it follows that the personal singularity³ of Father, Son, and Spirit is

when he exists other than as tri-personal. But the converse is also true: there is never a time when any of the divine Persons has not always already existed in love, which is to say, in communion with the other two divine Persons. To be sure, Richard insists in Book IV that the divine Persons, as persons, are mutually incommunicable. Indeed, the very definition he gives of a divine Person is “incommunicable existence of the divine nature.” And yet, because to call the divine persons “existences,” as Richard understands the term, is to say that they are one in substance, but distinct in how they share that substance with one another, the divine persons’ incommunicability turns out to be the “obverse” of their being always and wholly invested in the acts of giving and/or receiving that constitute them. And that, once again, is how they are, singly and collectively, the one God in the coincidence of substance and love that makes his being personal through and through—where, to repeat, that being cannot be personal unless it is also tripersonal. It would be easy to show that Aquinas, while constructing a very different trinitarian “model” from that of Richard, nonetheless arrives at the same conclusion. As Thomas explains in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 4, the divine persons are so many “subsistent relations.” Insofar as Father, Son, and Spirit are really distinct, Thomas is saying, their distinguishing “content” is, in each case, a different relation, or relational direction, rather than a different substance. Elsewhere, Thomas says that the “notional acts” that are peculiar to single persons, such as active generation, are only rationally, and not really, distinct from the relations that constitute them. But note the implication of all this: the divine being, Thomas is saying, is a coincidence of substance and relation; and to say that each of the persons is God is to say, not just that he possesses the one divine substance, but that he is what God is, namely, a being constituted in the coincidence of self-being and relation, of subsistence and love. If the divine Persons are subsistent relations, and those relations are really identical with the notional acts, then the Persons are their acts of sharing the one divine being with one another—and, indeed, it is by so doing that they *are* the one divine being together. For Aquinas, too, divine being is love.

³By “singularity” I will mean in this paper the *unmistakable uniqueness* of the person. It is a common conviction of the classical tradition of Christian thought that some principle internal to the person himself is at least a necessary condition of his having such unmistakable uniqueness. Different authors explain this principle differently, of course. One thing is clear, however: everyone in the tradition agrees that the principle of personal singularity, whatever it is, is of the *metaphysical* order, that is, has to do with the very *being* of the person, seen as irreducible to material process. In what follows, I will be working within the horizon of this traditional consensus and so will be wondering about the metaphysical constitution of personal singularity. That having been said, I will also be trying to show that personal singularity is not only not opposed to communion, but is, so to say, its “flip-side.” Personal singularity, in fact, is not just bare individuality. Rather, it is something that integrates in itself the values of both the individual and of the universal—while transcending the order in which their opposition exhaustively determines the field of possibilities. The unique, my thesis will be, is precisely what is universally

constituted wholly within communion.⁴ But we human beings are not God. Apparently, then, we human beings must first begin to exist in ourselves—and then, only much later, if at all, go out of ourselves in a fully conscious act of loving (and being loved). It would seem, in other words, that, whatever might be true about God, in our case personal singularity cannot be constituted even partly, let alone wholly, within communion. Communion cannot be the *context* in which personal singularity arises and makes sense, but can be only the result of the action of already constituted personal singularities. Communion cannot embrace the whole arc of our personal existence, from conception on, but can only follow upon our conscious acts of love. Or, at least, so it has seemed to many.

Like many apparently abstruse metaphysical issues, the question of whether or not the singularity of human persons is constituted within communion has huge implications for how we understand ourselves and how we live our lives, not only as individuals, but also as cultures and communities. If, in fact, communion can only be the result of our conscious acts of love, and cannot be seen as somehow constituting consciousness itself, then such acts can no longer be strictly necessary for the integrity of our being. They become, at best, supererogatory “extras.” But if conscious acts of love are just extrinsic add-ons, they are not even acts of love, for there is no love without the grateful acknowledgment that relation to the beloved is not a mere option, subject to

available without diminution of its uniqueness. Why? Because being is love. In order to show that being is love, and that this grounds the possibility of a communal account of personal singularity, I will be drawing in a special way on Thomas Aquinas. His doctrine of *esse commune*, roughly, “common being,” I will try to argue, offers us the resources we need for reconciling communion and singularity metaphysically within a horizon in which being is love.

⁴By “communion” I will mean in this paper a sharing in which there is a real mutual interchange of some kind. In my view, all of reality is communal in this sense. This is especially true, I want to argue, of persons, who, of all things, can exist least outside of communion. This is, of course, easy to see in the case of the Trinity, where the three divine Persons not only are their sharing with one another, but, because of that, share with one another just one substance. Clearly, human persons essentially fall short of this divine ideal in many ways. Human persons aren’t simply the same as their acts of sharing, nor, again, are they consubstantial with one another in the way that the trinitarian Persons are. And yet, I will be arguing, even human persons are singular, not in spite of, but because of, their communal constitution.

human velleity, but is the foundation of one's very existence. In a word, if we cannot maintain that personal singularity is somehow constituted communionally even for us, then we are bound to say that our finite being, as such, is inescapably "ontologically selfish," and that redemption into the trinitarian *agape* is a redemption *from* the human condition, and not *of* it.

In what follows, then, I propose to argue that, even in the case of human persons, singularity is constituted within communion. Now, as Augustine points out, we human beings are only *imago Trinitatis*, the image of the Trinity, and not the *Trinitas* itself. The likeness making us similar to God is cut through by an even greater unlikeness. One of the signs of this greater unlikeness, moreover, is that, whereas the divine Persons, by virtue of their identity with the Supreme Good, always already *are* their acts of loving communion, we human creatures necessarily experience a time-lag between our coming into being and our first conscious act of love. Now, in the following pages, I do not intend to deny, or even to bypass, this time-lag that differentiates us from the Trinity. Fortunately, however, I do not need to in order to make my case. The fact of the matter is that, although it does expose us to the risk of failing to love, the time-lag between being and fully conscious love is not itself a failure to love, and so is not in itself an argument against the communal constitution of personal singularity. On the contrary, rightly understood, human persons' communal constitution includes, makes room for, and even, in some sense, needs, their temporal contribution to that constitution. Here, not only does *agere sequitur esse* [action follow being], but, in a way, *esse sequitur agere* [being follows action]—not through Promethean self-creation, but through the omnipotent fruitfulness of God's creative gift.

The subtitle of this essay promises a "creative development of Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of *esse commune*." I will explain what is meant by *esse commune* in Section Two. For the time being, let me say something about the first part of the subtitle: "creative development." In principle, the careful reading of philosophical and theological texts in order to understand them, as far as possible, from the author's point of view need not exclude the reader's own effort to do philosophical and theological thinking in his own right using the texts as a source. After all, a great theologian or philosopher is himself primarily a thinker, and not an archeologist, so that to understand him as he understood himself *is* already to think. For the same reason, however, it is sometimes legitimate to treat the source-

text more freely, and to seek, not so much to exposit it, as to draw out, in an original way, some of its implications and latent possibilities. To use a text in this way is to develop it creatively, and it is in this kind of reading that I will be trying to engage in this essay. Rather than presenting a scholarly account of Thomas' doctrine of *esse commune*, then, I will be concerned in what follows to highlight its potential to illuminate the question at hand: If human persons experience a time-lag between their coming-into-being and their first conscious acts of love, how is it that we can say that they are constituted communally already from the first moment of their existence?⁵ I have chosen Thomas as a central author because, for Catholics, he remains the *doctor communis*,⁶ the universal doctor. Thus, to the extent that his metaphysical intuitions somehow support a communal account of personhood, Catholic intellectuals have one less reason to fear that such an account simply collapses the distinction between creaturely being and consciousness, between nature and grace, and between the *imago Trinitatis* and the *Trinitas* itself.⁷

⁵Needless to say, my use of Thomas' doctrine of *esse commune* also presupposes an interpretation of it. For details of that interpretation, see, among others, Martin Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe. Ein Schöpfungstheologischer Entwurf* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 235–238; Martin Bieler and Stefan Oster, “Einleitung,” in Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1999), xviii–xxii; Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), esp. 117–133.

⁶If Thomas is indeed the “common doctor,” then no one order of school can claim to have a monopoly on him. Thomas is *communis* in a way analogous to *esse commune* itself: freely available to all as a source for Christian thinking. This does not mean, of course, that anyone is entitled to force the Thomistic texts to say something that Aquinas did not say, or would not have countenanced. What it does mean, though, is that the Thomistic texts are so fruitful that no one, not even Thomas himself, can or could control the wealth of their implications, which will continue for all ages to unfold throughout the life of the Church.

⁷I should highlight one area of difference between Aquinas' thought and the communal account of the person that I will be presenting. Aquinas, following Augustine, explicitly denies that the image of the Trinity can be found in a group of persons (for example, in Adam, Eve, and their offspring). Aquinas wishes to underscore that the trinitarian persons are relations within a single intellectual substance, which means, for him, that the *imago Trinitatis* can show up only in the individual intellectual soul and its acts of knowing and loving. In what follows, I do not wish to defend the view that human persons share one and the same substance in the way that the trinitarian persons do. What I wish to argue is simply

I. Fruition, Time, and the Constitution of Substance

What might be called the classical Christian metaphysical Tradition agrees in making a distinction between substance and full conscious activity, a distinction marked by a temporal gap between the two. Thomas is no exception to this consensus. Only in God, Thomas insists, is being the same as understanding, *esse* as *intelligere* (and so *velle*, willing). We must not imagine, however, that Thomas thinks that full conscious activity is merely a kind of psychological epiphenomenon loosely pasted onto a non-conscious, if not downright inert, “substance.” Aquinas insists that distinctively human substance is *by nature* intellectual, and that full conscious activity is from one point of view just the flowering of that nature. This suggests, at the very least, that there are Thomistic grounds for holding that something anticipating full conscious activity can be present from the very first moment in which the substance exists. Can be present, that is, as “nature.” Which means, of course, that it has to be “taken over” later at the level of “freedom.” Notice, however, that, if it is taken over later freely, it can be so only in virtue of . . . itself. In other words: *Nature is already the beginning of the free taking over of itself*. Conscious love, then, can very well be present in us from the first moment of our existence . . . not in its final, developed form, but in an *incipient* form whose dynamism, already operating without our choice, is the shaping, ordering ground on which choice is, so to say, carried up into the daylight of self-consciousness.

What I have said just now corresponds more or less to Thomas’ account of the relationship between man’s intellectual nature and his conscious love. Now, we can already begin our creative development of Aquinas’ thought by considering that, for him, the created intellect is a capacity for being in its universality, even as this capacity begins to be (partly) filled (in this life) only

that Thomas’ own metaphysics allows us to assess a communal account of the *imago Trinitatis* more positively than Thomas himself would have done. Not only that, but a careful examination of Thomas’—and Augustine’s—trinitarian theology would reveal elements that, in my view, would significantly bolster such an account: for both of them, I would argue, the divine being is a coincidence of ecstasy and enstasy, of substance and relation, in which all the values of the interpersonal and the intra-personal are combined. But the demonstration of this claim must wait for a future study.

through the mediation of particular entities. If this is true, however, it cannot be the case that the individual's nature unfolds consciousness out of itself simply by its own motive power. There must also be something else that initiates, and sustains, that unfolding: *the presence of being itself*, mediated, of course, through the world in which, as embodied spirit, man always already finds himself, and from which he is destined, according to Aquinas, to rise to the vision of Subsistent Being in Itself.

I would like now to try to draw out a crucial implication of this idea, using my own, non-Thomistic vocabulary. Let us go back for a moment to full adult consciousness, then. And let us consider it at its best, namely, when man is at play. It is just then, in fact, that his consciousness is most fully engaged. Now, this engagement is nothing other than a kind of savoring perception of value, ultimately, then, of the richness of being. Full consciousness, at its best, is enjoyment of the richness of being, is a being "into"—literally, albeit not in a "spatial" sense—the abundance of being. It is fruition.⁸

Now, if fruition is a being "into," I experience it as a being encompassed. But I cannot be encompassed by something if I alone set the conditions of my engagement with it. It itself has to play a role in setting those conditions. Indeed, to say that I am encompassed is to say, precisely, that the encompassing thing is responsible for the whole of my engagement with it—not in such a way as to cancel my engagement, but precisely so as to enable it. Only, if this

⁸By "fruition" I mean roughly what Augustine means by "*frui*," that is, the enjoyment of something *for its own sake*. I would emphasize three points about this enjoyment that are important for the rest of the discussion: (1) Fruition is an act of *love*. Notice that the kind of love that is at stake here transcends the conventional (and to my mind misleading) opposition between *eros* and *agape*. That is, the one who experiences fruition is at once enriched in himself and forgetful of himself. For the same reason, *frui* is an eminently communal reality. (2) Fruition has a connotation of fruitfulness, that is to say, not only of richness, but also of *overflowing* richness. Fruition—and this is something we experience when at play—always disposes to, or brings with it, (qualitatively) more than one expects, or even can expect, when looking at the fruition experience from the outside. (3) Whereas Augustine restricts the possible objects of *frui* to God, I would extend the range of fruition to everything that is. Loving something for its own sake and loving something for God's sake need not be antithetical kinds of love—for it is in God that everything else that we might love most truly has a "sake" for which to love it.

is the case, then my engagement is enabled as gift. This is in fact why I can play. Play is nothing other than the receiving of my engagement as gift, a receiving that takes place in a kind of pervasive recognition of being set free, hence, as a freedom from all constraint, which is to say, as . . . play.

The full form of adult consciousness, which is fruition, is an experience of being liberated, hence, of free play, within, and in still some to-be-specified sense (the specification will come in Sections Two and Three), *by* being. It is as if being were giving itself to be experienced as gift—and, in so doing, letting me experience myself as gift. Full consciousness is the experience of my being as gift, the name of this experience being freedom. This confirms the idea that consciousness unfolds out of being. But it also enriches it significantly. For, given the predominance of the fullness of being as a letting be *even in adult consciousness*, we can re-conceive the unfolding of consciousness from substance, not simply as a self-directed process but as a response to the presence of being, a response awakened by its letting be. Not only that, but we can say, echoing Thomas, that this presence is always concretely mediated by, while, of course, transcending, other creatures. And, as Hans Urs von Balthasar says, it is mediated to the child primarily by his parents, whose love is thus the “force” that awakens consciousness to itself, putting the child into his own hands as a gift to be given further . . . and back (in an original way).

So far, I have said that consciousness is the experience of fruition, in the sense of an experience of oneself as a gift to oneself, and that, as such, it is present, at least as “nature,” from the first moment of one’s “substantial” existence. We can go one step further: What is true “historically,” in the story of the unfolding of consciousness, is simultaneously true, *mutatis mutandis*, “ontologically,” in the supra-historical dimension in which, it is traditionally thought, substance is constituted. The fruition of adult consciousness is what the person’s supra-temporal ontological constitution looks like when seen from its historical “underside.”

We would totally misunderstand this crucial point, however, if we thought that conscious fruition were simply a mechanical unfolding of our supra-temporal ontological constitution. We are talking, after all, about a *supra-temporal* event, which, therefore, can be described only improperly as “always already” having occurred. It is much more adequate—although one can never speak entirely adequately about such things—to say that the supra-temporal

“moment” of the person’s ontological constitution is (as such) equally present to the entirety of his life, from conception to death. From this point of view, the supra-temporal and the temporal are the two dimensions in which one and the same personal being exists. Neither of these dimensions has a monopoly on the unity of the person, and each is in its own order the same personal reality as the other—“without confusion or separation,” in a kind of natural foreshadowing of the “communication of idioms” that characterizes the hypostatic union. Indeed, just as Christ’s human life *was* the living out in time of his supra-temporal assumption of the flesh, our supra-temporal constitution as persons expresses itself, not only as a “nature,” fixed once and for all in the past, but also as a “destiny,” to which our free action contributes—thus “retroactively” affecting our original constitution itself. As C. S. Lewis puts it, it is as if God completed his own creative act by lifting us, at the end of our lives, into the eternity from which we can then, with God, pronounce our Yes to our own coming-into-being:

And suddenly all was changed. I saw a great assembly of gigantic forms all motionless, all in the deepest silence, standing forever about a little silver table and looking upon it. And on the table there were little figures like chessmen who went to and fro doing this and that. And I knew that each chessman was the *idolum* or puppet representative of the great presences that stood by. And the acts and motions of each chessman were a moving portrait, a mimicry or pantomime, which delineated the inmost nature of his giant master. And these chessmen are men and women as they appear to themselves and to one another in this world. And the silver table is Time. And those who stand and watch are the immortal souls of the same men and women. Then vertigo and terror seized me and, clutching at my Teacher, I said, “Is *that* the truth? Then is all that I have been seeing in this country false? These conversations between the Spirits and the Ghosts—were they only the mimicry of choices that had really been made long ago?” “Or might ye not as well say, anticipations of a choice to be made at the end of all things? But ye’d do better to say neither. . . . Do not ask of a vision in a dream more than a vision in a dream can give.”⁹

II. *Esse Commune*

⁹C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), 126f.

So far, we have seen that consciousness, at every step of the way, is fruition, a being let “into” the richness of being in some sense by being itself. And this fruition is present from the very beginning of a person’s existence, at least as “nature.” We now see that this fruition, this being let into the richness of being, happens, not just historically, but in the very supra-historical constitution of substance. To be sure, according to Thomas Aquinas, substance “subsists,” that is, stands in itself. What I am claiming, however, is that human substance’s standing in itself is best understood as a being let into the richness of being by being, hence, as the act of fruition, seen from its supra-historical “overside.” Once this is understood, it becomes plausible to say that, even for human persons, singularity is constituted within communion. Even for human persons, communion is the context in which their personhood makes sense metaphysically, and not just the desirable endpoint of conscious striving. The question, then, is how this can be the case.

One way to approach an answer to this question is through the metaphysics of creation, understood as God’s generous donation of being. “When” God creates me, we could say, he puts me in my own hands as a gift. As we will see, this is in fact the most fundamental description of the act in which being lets me be “into” itself in the form of fruition. For the time being, however, we can note this: If I am constitutively a gift to myself, then I must come into existence “always already” having received, and just so far enjoyed, the gift of myself. This is why we can speak of a human nature, and can say that it is always underway in me (and as me) towards the full conscious act of love that I am to perform. And yet, what *I* do is significant. If it weren’t, then the whole point of putting me into my own hands as gift would be frustrated. Why? Because to put someone into his own hands as gift is to give him something to give in return: himself. And, unless *he* does in fact give himself back, the original gift is not fully manifest as gift; its “dono-logic” is contravened, or even frustrated.¹⁰ At the heart of what I have been calling

¹⁰When such a contravention of “dono-logic” is *willed* by the receiver, it is the essence of what we call *evil*. Evil can never entirely efface the gift-character of the gift, of course. Indeed, evil itself presupposes this gift-character. Evil, as Aquinas explains, is a privation of one good that, as such, can exist only in another. But that is just the point. If evil is evil, it is because, while riding on the gift, it turns the gift

fruition, then, is fruitfulness: the overflowing of the original gift in a gratitude that becomes a “new” gift in its own right—or rather, is the novelty of the original gift now fully come to term. It is as if being, having let me “into” itself, gives me the joy of replicating—in my own original way—the same dynamic of gift in an answering gratitude both derived from, yet irreducible to, being in its given-awayness.

Someone might be tempted to dismiss this as mere poetry, but I submit that I am simply drawing out the implications of Thomas’ doctrine of *esse commune*. Let me then briefly sketch that doctrine. According to Aquinas, the subject-matter of metaphysics is *ens commune*, roughly translatable as “common being.” In this context, though, being has to be taken as a participial noun, which designates the “subject” of the activity of being, the thing that is, taken insofar as it is. When Aquinas speaks of *esse commune*, however, he refers, not to the *things* that are, but, rather, to the very act of being, the very “izing,” thanks to which those things *are*. *Esse commune* is the act-fullness in which all beings participate insofar as they are beings in the participial-substantive sense of *ens*. As John Wippel helpfully explains:

Thomas constantly refers to finite entities as participating in *esse*. Since he has denied that *ens* can be participated in, and since he has correlated the *esse* in which they participate with their nature or essence as act and potency, it seems clear that *esse commune* also signifies the act principle (*actus essendi*) which is required for any concrete entity (*ens*) to be realized in actuality; but it signifies this act principle considered universally and in its fullness of perfection rather than as received in any given participant.¹¹

against itself. That is, the gift gives the receiver a certain ontological independence—precisely so that the receiver can be a giver in its turn. What happens in the case of evil, however, is that the receiver claims this independence for itself, thus capitalizing on the gift while refusing to acknowledge its gift-character. This refusal, in turn, amounts to a lie, and this lie at the very heart of being is perhaps the core reason for the wickedness of evil.

¹¹John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas. From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 123. We have to avoid the temptation to think of *esse* and substance as two things joined at the middle. In principle, or rather, in its Principle, *esse* is both the act of existing and the subject of the act of existing “rolled into one,” as it were: *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* [*esse* itself subsisting]. In creatures, these “roles” are divided

Now, one crucial question that Aquinas' doctrine of *esse commune* poses is this: Is *esse commune* somehow really distinct from the created *entia* whose actuality it is? Martin Bieler gives a qualified affirmative answer:

The perfection of *esse* follows . . . from the fact that its totality has an act-character. Needless to say, the totality we are dealing with here is an all-encompassing one. . . . Finite entities subsist only insofar as they participate in the act of being, which comes forth from God as his creative gift. The creature participates *in* God *through* being. Being (*esse commune*) therefore contains in itself everything "subsequent" to it In this fashion, being, as complete (*completum*) and simple (*simplex*), as the "*prima rerum*

between substance and *esse*, respectively. And yet, the interplay of the two is meant to mirror, although not duplicate, the unity of *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*. Thus, we can think of the unity of a concrete *ens* both as *esse* realizing as much of itself as can be expressed in one substance and as the substance realizing as much of *esse* as it can hold on the basis of its limited essence. And yet, we have to insist at the same time that neither autonomously realizes either the other, or itself through the other, just as the *ens* of which they are the co-principles does not create itself. Whatever "realization" the created act of being does *depends* on the substance—and vice versa. Thus, *esse* does not generate substances out of itself, but is sheer availability to be the act of being of and for whatever substances God wishes to posit in existence. By the same token, substances do not procure *esse* for themselves out of their essences, but are created out of nothing as the subjects of *esse* at the very "moment" that they receive it. It is true that *esse* stands for act and essence for potency, but, in the concrete, each makes over to the other what is proper to itself, so that what results is not a hybrid pieced together from two halves, but a whole that exists by ongoingly receiving its act of giving itself to itself (and to/from others). This fact obviously distinguishes finite *ens* from God, but, as suggested just now, it also makes it an image of God—and, indeed, of the Trinity. For not only does creaturely being include a polarity between substance and *esse* within its unity, but that unity itself is in turn filled out and enriched in overflowing fruitfulness by the polarity—in a way reminiscent of the Holy Spirit, who, as Augustine describes him in *De Trinitate* VI, 10, is the overflowing fruition of the consubstantial embrace of the Father and the Son. Indeed, if the Son is the archetype of created beings, the Spirit is the Personal Guarantor of their actual being as an inexhaustible fruitfulness of oneness-in-difference. And that oneness-in-difference does not occur only within the individual being. Rather, precisely because it occurs within the single being, it inserts the single being into a web of communal giving and receiving. The Spirit, then, is the Agent and Bond of communion, not only in God, but, in some sense, also in the created world as a communion of beings that, through the *communio personarum*, images the Trinity.

creatarum” [the first of created things] (*Exp. super librum De causis* 4), is the fullness of life as given away.¹²

At this point, the mind must overcome a great temptation to conceive of *esse commune* as a “thing” interposed *between* God and the creature.¹³ As Ferdinand Ulrich puts it, *esse commune* is not a *tertium quid* of this sort, but a “pure mediation” [*reine Vermittlung*] of God’s creative giving.¹⁴ Ulrich does not deny, of course, that *esse commune* possesses some sort of transcendent unity. On the contrary, by insisting that *esse commune* is a “pure mediation” of God’s creative

¹²Bieler, “Einleitung,” ix.

¹³“Much less,” Thomas avers, “is *esse commune* itself something beyond all existing things—except in the intellect” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 26). Given that Thomas often says that things participate in *esse commune*, we need not interpret this as meaning that *esse commune* has no “real” unity beyond its instantiations in individual creatures. It is not that *esse* has no transcendent unity, but that this unity is paradoxical. *Esse* has such unity, not in itself, for it has no “self” of its own, but *either* in the Subsistent Being whose self-giving it mediates—or in the created subject that participates in Subsistent Being *through esse*. I would thus propose (in the spirit of creative development) that the above-cited sentence from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* simply registers the fact that the human intellect necessarily approaches *esse* under the profile of a *something*, because its thinking is proportioned to created (and material) quiddities, whose essential content is not *esse*. This suggests, though, that the human intellect is exposed to the temptation to essentialize or hypostatize *esse*, and so to reduce being to the quidditative. Significantly, succumbing to this temptation often leads, not only to the hypostatization of *esse*, but also to the identification of the intellect with that hypostasis. Think of the Plotinian *Nous* or Averroes’ one Agent Intellect. This suggests that at issue in the temptation to hypostatize *esse* is this question: Will thinking grasp, and participate (originally) in, what Ferdinand Ulrich calls the “necessary sense of being”? Will it enter, in other words, into *esse commune*’s “refusal” to gather itself up into a *tertium quid* hovering between God and the creature and so make its own *esse*’s “willingness” to be nothing but the pure mediation of God’s creative giving? What is at issue, in other words, is whether or not thinking will enter into *esse*’s letting be—by letting be God’s gesture of creative donation. And how does one accomplish this letting be? By receiving oneself as gift and, in that same act, letting oneself be taken over as a “place” for all one’s fellow creatures to receive *themselves* as gift. By being a concrete subsistent that brings the given-awayness of *esse* to a “stand,” but does so in such a way as to “stand in” for it in its universal gift-character (which also means: to “stand in” for all one’s fellow creatures). The issue, then, is finally whether or not thinking is loving, where love means embodying being as “vicarious representation,” to borrow a term from the theologians.

¹⁴See, for example, Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 20–26.

giving, Ulrich is able to maintain that it is not a thing that could be divided up into so many particularized packets, so that it necessarily retains a certain completeness and simplicity relative to its instantiations. On the other hand, Ulrich is equally insistent that *esse's* status as pure mediation also means that it cannot gather itself up into a quidditative *tertium quid* standing halfway between God and the creature. It is, rather, given over, without reserve, to creatures, so that *they* might be so to say “in its place.” It is precisely in its given-awayness, and not as an essentialized hypostasis, Ulrich wants to say, that *esse commune* has the transcendent unity by which it mediates the presence of the Giver *as* Giver. Its self-being is selflessness—not as a destruction of selfhood, but as the position of it in “others.” Being, in other words, is love, and whatever participates in being is *ipso facto* drawn up from its very roots into the same logic of love. The task now is to explain in more detail how this is so. I will address myself to this task in six stages in the following section.

III. Singularity and Communion

(1) Ulrich sums up his interpretation of Thomas' doctrine of *esse commune* using a rich sentence from the *De Potentia*: “*Esse significat aliquid completum et simplex, sed non subsistens*” [*esse* signifies something complete and simple, but not subsistent].¹⁵ One of the implications that Ulrich draws from the non-subsistence of *esse* is that it is not the subject of the creative act, the efficient cause of creatures' existence. At the very moment that *esse* causes the created substance to be, it “inheres” in that substance quasi-formally, and there is never a moment when *esse* exercises its (quasi-formal) causality outside of that inherence. *Esse*, you might say, causes, not by itself being the *creative* subject of creatures' existence, but by letting *them* be the *created* subjects of their own existence. Inasmuch as *esse commune's* letting be is not “its” free act, it is a sign of the creatureliness that distinguishes it radically from *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. And yet, created *esse* is for the same reason wholly transparent to God. In this respect, *esse's* paradoxical mode of causing by depending not only distinguishes it from God, as *esse creatum* from *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, but also reveals and makes present—through a greater unlikeness, to be

¹⁵Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia*, I, 1, ad 1.

sure—God’s being-as-love. Indeed, it is that being-as-love—shared “outside” of God. Which means that *esse creatum* is not only the principle of creatures’ self-being. It is this principle, to be sure, but only on the condition that, and insofar as, it builds into creatures’ self-being a participation, realized in analogous modes, in the self-giving love carried in God’s act of donating *esse* to creatures. Being is love, then, not only for God, but also, by participation, for the creature.¹⁶

(2) How does the creature manifest this ontological love? Ulrich speaks in this context of a “*Verendlichungsbewegung*,” a movement of finitization, whereby *esse*, which in God is subsistent, “becomes” non-subsistent in creatures. Ulrich does not mean, however, that the act of creation is a literal conversion of the subsistent divine being into a non-subsistent form. On the contrary, Ulrich agrees with Thomas that the act of creation is not a mutation, and that God creates by a simple, timeless act of his will that is totally responsible for the entire being of creatures. By the same token, he knows that *esse creatum* comes forth from God immediately and integrally (hence its completeness and simplicity), and so as always already non-subsistent. And yet, for this very reason, Ulrich can say that *esse*, in its non-subsistent act-fullness, is what God’s simple, timeless creative decision “looks like” *ad extra*. To put it another way, *esse creatum* is how God, without any loss or diminishment,

¹⁶In the Trinity, each divine Person is himself, in his unmistakable singularity, and, at the same time, wholly a “place” for two other Persons. The perfection of his personal singularity includes what we can think of only by comparison to ourselves as a “not-ever-having-clung-to-self.” But this trinitarian consideration sheds a surprising light on created *esse*’s not-clinging-to-itself, which, we now see, expresses “outside” of God something of *ipsum esse subsistens*’ (trinitarian) not-clinging-to-itself. This is precisely why created *esse*’s not-clinging-to-itself is not opposed to its act-character, but inwardly fills it out. The plenitude of actuality is love. Of course, because created *esse* is the pure mediation of God’s creative act, it is in no sense the hypostatic subject of its own self-outpouring. Thus, it is radically distinct from the Trinity. And yet, this radical distinctness is precisely what enables the world to be, not the Trinity, but in some sense an *image* of the Trinity. This does not mean, of course, that creation is in any way necessary for God. Only the trinitarian processions are necessary. But for this very reason, God’s free decision to create must refer to, and get its intelligible structure from, his trinitarian being. Created being as love must bear somehow a seal of its trinitarian origin and archetype.

gives, not only his being, but *the very act by which he gives that being*.¹⁷ Created *esse* is God's being, and his act of giving his being—given away, without alteration or diminution.¹⁸ And for this reason, just by dint of exercising the act of being, every created substance *to some degree* shares in the love with which God loves creatures into being—which love is, again, inscribed within the *actus essendi*—and does so *in the modality of gift*. Let us examine this last point more closely.

(3) So far, we have seen that, even for creatures, to be is to love in the form of gift. We can now add that this gift occurs in two dimensions at once.

(a) The first dimension, internal to each individual creature itself, occurs in connection with what Aquinas calls “subsistence”: substances’ constituting itself as an *ens* through the exercise of *esse* in itself. Now, insofar as created substances are not self-derived, but owe their very existence to God’s liberal bestowal of *esse* in creation, we can say that their self-constitution presupposes, and is itself structured from top to bottom by, ongoing reception of the gift of *esse*. But, if what we saw in the previous point is true, and if *esse* is essentially a mediation of God’s very *giving* of being, then we can add that created substances’ receptive self-constitution is how God allows them to share in that giving of being—in this case by letting them share in the act of giving them to themselves. Created substance’s very self-constitution, in other words, is a self-giving—of itself to itself—that occurs by way of participation in God’s giving of the giving of being through the non-subsistent act-fullness of *esse*.

(b) Ulrich shares Thomas’ doctrine of “secondary causality,” according to which the universe is an analogical community of beings tied together within a vast web of causality, understood as the mutual giving and receiving of being within the all-pervasive divine creative act, and as a participation in the latter. An important implication of this Thomistic doctrine of secondary causality, Ulrich

¹⁷“That, namely, the created thing might have from God, not only that it be and be good, but also that it might liberally give [*largiretur*] being [*esse*] and goodness to others” (Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 5, 8).

¹⁸Without loss or diminishment, not because God jealously holds himself back, but because to give oneself without loss is the condition for giving oneself wholly, which means: in such a way that the recipient is a whole in its own right that, precisely as such, manifests the presence of the Giver as the one who gives unstintingly.

notes, is that no creature can adequately represent God's giving of being *alone*. Indeed, not only can no one creature adequately represent the divine giving of being, but no one creature *should* do so. In other words, even if, *per impossibile*, one creature could manifest God's goodness alone, this solitary display would not be desirable. What is to be represented, or manifested, after all, is just the divine Goodness in its unity of being and loving. Such a unity, however, requires more than just one creature for its full display—just as, *mutatis mutandis*, the unity of being and loving in God requires more than just one person for *its* full display. In other words, if God gives the giving of being, then, just by being, creatures are caught up in the act of giving—not only vis-à-vis themselves, as we saw above, but also vis-à-vis one another within that web of secondary causes known as the universe. Indeed, we can go so far as to say that creatures' reception of God's giving of the giving of being must, in some sense, be a *joint act*, which, at any given moment, all existing creatures perform at once, and whose content is for each to give and receive being (and the giving of being) to and from all (and vice versa). Not only does each creature give itself to itself, as we saw above, but, at the very moment in which it does so, it must also be giving itself to, and receiving itself from, all other creatures.

(4) The two dimensions of giving that we have just seen are not separate, either in time or in space (we are talking about the supra-temporal constitution of substances, after all). They are, rather, two simultaneously occurring sides of one and the same receiving of created *esse* as the divine gift, not only of being, but also of the giving of being. To have a share in *esse commune* is at once to give oneself, and one's giving, to oneself and to others—and to receive oneself, and one's giving, from others. This does not mean, of course, that creatures fuse into one another in the ontological haze of *esse commune*. Because the act of being does not subsist, it can be “realized” only in so many individual things, each of which, indeed, in some sense “particularizes” *esse commune* into “its own” *actus essendi*. Nevertheless, the non-subsistence of *esse* equally prevents us from conceiving of this “particularization” as a *division* of the actuality of being into a number of discrete ontological packets. If such a division were to occur, in fact, each being would be its own universe, rather than sharing one universe with all other beings. And that is just the point: *esse commune* establishes a shared order of being, of which each thing is a member simply by dint of being. To be is to share being with others—not, however, by performing in

numerically one exercise of the *actus essendi* with the others, but, rather, through mutual giving and receiving. Nor does this mutual giving and receiving touch merely the surface. Rather, it reaches to the very subsistence in which creatures constitute themselves. This does not lead to mass ontological confusion, of course, but, in a world where *esse commune* is *gift*, it does not have to. In such a world, in fact, creatures are one, not because they fuse into sameness, but because their exercise of being, their self-constitution as subsistents, coincides with their involvement in a network of mutual giving and receiving. Each thing, in receiving itself from God according to the “logic” of gift, at that very moment disposes itself as an “ontological place” in which other things can receive *themselves* from God—and *this very disposing is, or is included within, their original subsistence*. Even for creatures to be is to love, and to love is not to fuse with the beloved, but to be in a relation with him in which each is a “place” for the other—and, just so, incommunicably *himself*.

(5) Our reflection on *esse commune* has brought us to the point of recognizing that subsistence, which is to say, a substance’s very standing in itself, its self-constitutive exercise of its “own” *actus essendi*, coincides with its participation in the “logic” of being as gift, and so in a universal communion. Now, if, as Aquinas holds, subsistence is the key to metaphysical singularity, then we can say that the singular exists within communion—even in the case of created persons. To be a person, then, is to be a partaker in a *communio personarum*. Which means, in turn, that persons’ *communio* cannot simply be the result of their conscious acts, but must also be the condition of the possibility of their consciousness itself. In examining the communal constitution of singularity, in fact, we find that it displays precisely the structure of what we can only call—to pick up the thread of Section One—a “shared fruition”: an ecstatic standing out into being together with others. But consciousness is just that, shared fruition, and not the lonely self-reflection of the Cartesian ego. Our communal account of the metaphysical constitution of personal singularity is thus also an account of the metaphysics of consciousness. And what this account shows is that consciousness itself is love, and that its birth is enfolded in that supra-temporal “moment” when the person is constituted—constituted already broken out of himself, “into” the richness of being and in

communion with others: both as a gift and a task, as a *fait accompli* and as a mission to be performed freely, and creatively, in time.¹⁹

(6) Personal singularity is constituted within communion, but this does not mean that persons are in any sense automatic unfoldings of some overarching pre-personal communion structure. Although, like all creatures, persons owe their being to *esse commune*, the latter's non-subsistence makes that owing wholly transparent to the divine freedom. Thus, like all other creatures, persons, while rooted in *esse*, are not mere necessary emanations from it, but trace their origin to God's freedom. By the same token, the person is not just a "living mirror of the whole" (Leibniz); he also surpasses the whole . . . into God, with whom the unique mystery of personal freedom is preserved for all eternity. The created person, while a part of the universe, is also immediate to God, and it is this God-immediacy that is the ultimate ground of personal singularity for the creature.

That having been said, it remains true that what John Paul II calls man's "original solitude" vis-à-vis the rest of the material creation is itself, and from its very core, co-participation in a shared order of being—in a communion of persons. Characteristic of this communion is a reciprocal, asymmetrical, embodied, and fruitful giving and receiving that both brings the communion character of (visible) reality to its highest expression and opens it from within to its trinitarian archetype.²⁰ Not only is communion the matrix of

¹⁹To say that human persons are communionally constituted from the first moment of their existence is not to say that they begin their existence as fully conscious agents of communion. To affirm this would be to blur the distinction between created persons and the Father, Son, and Spirit. True, we come into being already participating in communion, but our participation is something God brings about in us before it is something that we actively take over. However much we image the Trinity by nature, we do so from beginning to end as creatures who are not the Trinity. And yet, for the very same reason, our Yes is not a superfluity. Indeed, not only is it true that our Yes ratifies what was "always already" the deepest truth of our being. It is equally true that it is only when we say this Yes that the deepest truth has "always already" been the deepest truth of *our* being.

²⁰The human person's nature as a representation or summation of the universe—as a microcosm—is not lost or repudiated when he transcends the world into God. But what does man represent if not the universe as a community of beings? And how could he do this alone? Just as no creature can represent the divine Goodness alone, but only as part of a universal community of beings, so, too, no person can mediate between that universal community of beings and its Triune Principle alone, but only in and as a communion of persons.

consciousness, but so, too, are the concrete communions in which the human person exists: the family, the couple, the political community, and, embracing all these, the Church. To be a person is to be a member of a *communio personarum*.

It is tempting for us to play personal singularity and communion off against each other. Communion, we easily tend to think, is an impersonal collectivity, whereas singularity is an ultimate individuality that cannot be wholly captured within the confines of such a collective structure. One of the main points of this article has been to challenge this either-or between singularity and communion. Singularity, in fact, is not just individuality. It is a kind of unity that in principle transcends the dichotomy between particular and universal. Of course, such a unity belongs first and by right to God. But it also shows up, albeit in a participated form, in created persons by reason of their special immediacy to God. Now, because of this God-immediacy, the singular person possesses an unsurpassable perfection inside himself. And yet, the perfection of the singular person is ultimate precisely because he participates in the Ultimate by a special immediacy, “sticking up” into the divine order of being, the order of infinite, primordial (tri)personality. For the same reason, it is part of the person’s very perfection in himself never to be confined just to himself, but, in some real sense, to share his very self—and vice versa—with all the other persons that, together with him, “stick up” into the realm of divine (tri)personhood. Communion is not the opposite of personal singularity, but is itself how singularity has and fulfills its unsurpassable perfection as (shared) participation in the triune communion.

A Theological Conclusion

With that, we return to our starting-point: the Trinity. Although the triune God is induplicably unique, he is also the Archetype of all reality. In him, then, we see that being and love are coextensive in the communion of persons. For the same reason, the Trinity reassures us that communion is the context in which personal singularity makes sense. Singularity, the Trinity shows us, is not bare, self-clinging individuality, but a uniqueness whose unicity consists in being able to be universally available without loss of identity. Now, the more universally available a trinitarian Person is, if we can put it this way, the more unique he is. Not only are the other persons unable to enjoy *his* availability unless he is, and remains himself, but they themselves do not even want him to make himself available

except in the utmost freedom of gift. Indeed, precisely because the divine Persons are one with the Good, and so supremely blessed, their mutual enjoyment of one another is not a greedy and needy voracity, but is pervaded by a serene confidence of not needing to cling or grasp in order to possess. So much so, in fact, that the Persons can regard one another with something that we can only think of as an admiration, a wonder, even, that as it were steps back to make room for the other to be himself, in an infinite “*pathos* of distance,” as Nietzsche would say. Only, the divine Persons do not spatially retreat before one another. Rather, they *are* their making space for one another. Their being is a “being for”—it is the intra-trinitarian foundation of the way of being person that, in the economy, is manifested in Christ’s “*Stellvertretung*,” his “vicarious representation,” as Balthasar would put it. This “substitution” is not, however, the elimination of the Persons’ incommunicable hypostatic existence, but the inner ground of it. Because the divine Persons do not “divvy” up the divine substance, but share it totally and unreservedly, they are all free to be perfectly one with it, and so to stand each on his own with his own as a perfectly distinct hypostasis, even as the content of their distinctness is nothing other than a way or direction of sharing with the other two in an infinite, yet ordered exchange of being/love.

It has not been my intention in this paper to argue that we can elide the difference between trinitarian and human personhood. Nor has it been to endorse any anthropomorphizing projection of human personhood onto God. I have, however, proceeded on the conviction that one of the advantages of such an account, if it is executed properly, is its capacity to illumine the ways in which Christianity has decisively affected the problem of anthropomorphism in “God-talk.” If, in fact, there had been no revelation of the Trinity, if there had been no Incarnation and Resurrection, then it would be tempting, if not impossible, to deny personhood to God. Why? Because the only model of personhood available to us would be our own, and, in its fallen condition, our individuality is both a fortress and a prison that keeps us from fully realizing our original communal character. And yet, the genius of Christian revelation is to have shown that our embodied individuality is *not* this fall out of communion into the coldness of egotism. How did it show this? By displaying the trinitarian model of personhood precisely from within the constitutive limits of an embodied, individual human life. What this suggests, though, is that, if God is not a human individual

writ large, the human individual can be, or, at least, can become, a person fit to partake of trinitarian communion. Indeed, faith in the Resurrection teaches us to expect that the whole of us—body and soul—will rise, together with the material cosmos, and will expand into the dimensions of God’s deathless, infinite life, yet without our ceasing to be the embodied selves we are.

True, as Saint John tells us, we do not yet know what we will be. We cannot imagine what our personhood will be like in the next life, much less the trinitarian Personhood to which it will, at last, be conformed. We will have to wait until the *eschaton* to know ourselves, and others, for the persons that we are. Which means, in turn, that we will have to die in some sense to the present form of our existence in order to rise into the new one promised us. And yet, precisely because it is *we* who will rise, however much transformed, it must also be the case that this transformation preserves the seed of our original nature, and, indeed, is (also) that seed’s full flowering. In this sense, we can venture to affirm that the trinitarian way of being persons in communion, participation in which is the goal of our existence, is also somehow the model of our natural being—and that we can discover traces of that modeling in our very original ontological constitution itself. In other words, because communion is our destiny, it also shapes the law of our nature, *hic et nunc* in this world of space and time, which, after all, is also destined to rise with us into the trinitarian *communio*.

To be sure, the perichoretic simultaneity of the divine persons reminds us of how infinitely short we human persons must fall of the triune identity of being, freedom, and love. For we, unlike they, come into being, and, on top of that, must experience a time-lag between our coming into existence and our full conscious act of letting be, a time-lag that exposes us to the risk of failing to love, which, of course, is utterly excluded from the fullness of the divine being. Nevertheless, if the foregoing argument is correct, then this temporal gap is not itself the failure to love. Indeed, its primary significance is fundamentally positive: it is a divinely contrived means for giving the community of creatures precisely “time” to unfurl in themselves the intention of love inscribed in their being as gift. The interwovenness of our individual being with time and “space,” which, at first sight, seems to be an argument against the mutual immanence of personal singularities, and, therefore, against a communal account of their constitution, can also be seen as a first step towards the full, conscious, and creative recapitulation of

communiality. Time and “space” do not just separate; they also bring into relation. Space, in fact, is not an empty container for mutually exclusive monads. Aristotle came closer to the truth when, instead of space, he spoke of “place.” Space is not space, but place: the support that surroundings give to what is in them, and this support implies a coincidence of boundaries that is already the beginning of the mutual immanence that higher up on the scale of being will take the form of a reciprocity of consciousnesses. True, we do not yet enjoy the mutual, non-destructive immanence of place to place, and of time to time, in which the risen body will exist as a partaker of the Spirit, the Bond and Agent of communion. And yet, precisely by forcing us to make room for one another, time and place put us on the road, willy nilly, towards that fullness of communion. The rude experience of being displaced *by* one another is our school for learning how to be the “places” *for* one another that we are made to be and that, in some real sense, we already are.

In sum, then, the time-gap separating our conception from our full conscious love is a sign that, while not the Trinity, we are made to be gathered up into its bosom for all eternity. This supernatural calling does not, of course, implant in us any ontologically hybrid “supernatural existential” located halfway between nature and grace. What it does do, however, is require a nature that is apt for trinitarian communion and, therefore, already communal to some extent in itself. True, separated in space and time, we are unlike the Trinity. And yet, not simply unlike, for spatio-temporal separation is itself not a guilty fall away from unity, but the pledge of a perfect communal oneness-in-difference that we will reach through space and time, not in order then to leave them behind, but rather in order to lift them up with our risen bodies into the bosom of the Trinity. Even for us human creatures, wayfarers in space and time, personal singularity is constitutively communal, and it is just so an image of the Trinity. □

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