

# THE WORD AS THE CENTER OF MAN'S ONTO-DRAMATIC TASK

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“[T]here is no more decisive expression of the dominion of the world entrusted to man than the task of saying things in an *adequate* way that does justice to their essence and gratuitously, mercifully, elevating them to a mode of existence not given in their essence alone.”



In the creation narrative that stands at the origin of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Adam received a defining task, in several senses of the word: “Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gn 1:19). In the light of this text, many Christian thinkers have sought to interpret the meaning of human existence around the endeavor to articulate the world and the things that populate it, to bring order to this world through reason. It is surely not an accident that, even outside this tradition, in the classic formulation of the specific essence of man, a similar insight comes to expression: Aristotle is generally interpreted as having defined man as the

*zoon echon logon*.<sup>1</sup> Man is distinguished from all other animals, all other embodied souls, through his possessing *logos*—which most translate as “reason,” but some translate as “speech.” Man is the talking animal. But what is so significant about this strange activity, which does not fill stomachs or clothe the flesh, does not clear forests or build bridges? Why should such an apparently ephemeral puffing of air be the heart of human life?

There are some who have taken God’s presentation of the animals to Adam to receive their names to be God’s gift of a certain participation in his creation of the world.<sup>2</sup> It is true, after all, that God’s act of creation itself proceeds by way of a word—“Let it be!”—and, as we eventually come to learn, the whole world was created in and through the eternal Word.<sup>3</sup> Thus, man’s naming of the animals, just like his tending of the Garden, would be, not a bringing to completion of what God was impotent on his own to accomplish, but a sign of the radical generosity of creation, a generosity that gives not only being to creatures, but also gives giving itself—that is to say, gives the capacity to be generous in the reception of the gift so as to “contribute,” as it were, in a real way in the gift of being itself. From this perspective, we could say that man’s naming of the animals is his creative echoing of God’s creating Word. While one might be tempted to interpret this as mere metaphor, not to say poetic exaggeration, Ferdinand Ulrich offers in his great work, *Homo Abyssus*, a substantial metaphysical argument that serves to bring to light the truth in this astonishing statement.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Contrary to common assumption, the phrase is not found in Aristotle in so many words, even if it is often cited as coming from him (see, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 27). Nevertheless, Aristotle clearly takes for granted some such definition of man: see Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a10; *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 13, 1098a1–20.

2. This is often associated with the vocation of the artist: One of the most profound poetic reflections on this point can be found in Paul Claudel, *Cinq Grandes Odes*, in *Oeuvre Poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 219–92, for example: 230. For a recent overview of theological discussion of this point, see Jennifer Allen Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 25–30.

3. Jn 1:1–3; Col 1:16.

4. The presentation to follow springs from section B.II.5.F, “The Word as the Center of the Anthropological Reduction” (“reduction” is meant here not

To understand the central role that Ulrich gives to the *word* in the “drama of the question of being,” it is first necessary to grasp one of the most frequently used expressions in *Homo Abyssus*. Ulrich commonly refers to the act of creation, that is, the coming into existence of the finite world from nothing, as the *Subsistenzbewegung*, the “movement of or into subsistence.” It is important to note that this is not a movement or a “change” in the usual sense, the transition that something undergoes, from potency to act, because the coming to be of the world is precisely *ex nihilo*; it is not an event that “happens” to a reality that is already there. As Aquinas puts it with his customary succinctness, “creation is not a *mutatio*.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, there is *something like* a transition here, something analogous to a movement if it is not a movement in the strict sense, in that, out of nothing, something has come to be, and indeed from another perspective this coming to be of something from nothing is the result of the supremely gratuitous act by which God gives to what is genuinely other than himself a finite share in the infinite perfect being that he essentially *is*. It is especially to this latter dimension that Ulrich is referring when he speaks, as he also does, of the “movement of finitization.” But when he says “movement into subsistence,” he is referring most basically to the intended *destination* of the gift of being. So, what is this “subsistence” into which being moves in the act of creation?

Literally, subsistence means “to stand under” (*sub-sistere*), to sustain oneself, that is, to maintain oneself in a certain condition.<sup>6</sup> We speak of “subsistence farming,” for example, and what

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in the sense of artificially limiting restriction, but in the literal etymological sense of “leading back”: for Ulrich, man represents in a paradigmatic way the meaning of created being and has the special task of *enacting* this meaning through his existence), though it will draw on the whole book—i.e., it is not simply an exposition of this section. Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being* (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2017), 396–408 (hereafter cited as *HA*).

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 2, 18; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 45, a. 1 (hereafter cited as *ST*).

6. In a sense, the word “subsistence” indicates something not far from the word Aristotle coins to name the way a thing “*be’s*” what it *is*: *entelecheia*, which Joe Sachs translates, for example, as “being-at-work-staying-itself,” or which we might translate, more directly following the etymology, as a sustaining (*echein*) oneself in (*en*) one’s end (*telos*), i.e., maintaining oneself in one’s

we mean by this is the growing of food sufficient to feed one's household so that one relies only minimally on outside resources. Subsistence thus implies a kind of self-containment, or perhaps better, self-possession. Something similar comes to expression at the metaphysical level. In a rare passage in which Aquinas spells out what subsistence means, rather than just using the term as self-evident, he writes the following:

The return to one's own essence is called the very subsistence of a thing in itself. . . . Subsistent forms reach out to other things, perfecting them and influencing them [literally: *flowing into them*]<sup>7</sup>—in such a way, however, that they still retain their immanence and self-possession.<sup>7</sup>

Let me note in this passage a crucial point to which we will return in a moment: Aquinas describes the self-possession that is subsistence as coinciding with a movement out beyond oneself in a manner that is intimate to what is other than oneself (*flows into* it) and brings perfection to the other. Before unfolding that particular dimension, I want first to highlight the self-possession: subsistence implies not just having an essence, but *returning* to one's essence, which is to say a subsistent form, so to speak, takes hold of itself, it exists in such a way that its existence is placed into its hands, so that it does not just "lie there," passively, as so much inert stuff, the accidental recipient of existence that is essentially indifferent to this fact. Instead, a subsisting form is an active receiver of being that takes over into itself its own being. Just as a subsistent or self-sustaining farm enjoys a certain independence in relation to the larger food industry, a subsistent form enjoys perfect ontological independence; it is a form that exists in a paradigmatic way as fully itself, its own being, a unity *per se* (in Hegelian language: being in and for itself).

Now, to characterize the gift of being that is creation as a "movement into subsistence," as Ulrich does, therefore implies that, when God gives being to the world he creates, he *really means it*. To put the point a bit more technically, the creation of things is a communication of being in such a way that it *properly* belongs to

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completed state. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 1999), li–lii.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 2 ad 2 (hereafter cited as *De ver.*).

the things that thus come to exist. As created, being is a *gift*—not a loan, but a gift—which is to say that it is given away in a decisive and definitive, nonreturnable sense.<sup>8</sup> The created world is not an extension of God, hanging from his hands by ontological puppet strings, embarrassed by its own reality, for which it feels a desperate need to apologize, fearfully seeking to disappear into the shadow of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. The world is instead given to be itself. It is crucial to see that this itself-ness, this independence, this subsistence, is *not* a separation from God in any sense that pits the two against each other in a zero-sum game. Instead, subsistence is a fulfillment of God's act, the proper terminus of creation. In this respect, the independence that things enjoy is not in any opposition to their dependence on God, because he is in fact the very source of their independence, and so their "return to their own essence" is not a movement away from God, but a drawing nearer to him, a more complete entrance into his presence.<sup>9</sup> The French poet Charles Péguy describes the loving father whose deepest desire, in all of the work he does to raise his son, is to see him stand, straight and proud, on his own two feet. God the Father gives being to his creatures in such a way as to enable them to stand on their own, to stand under themselves: to subsist.

If subsistence is the ultimate destination of the gift of being in creation, however, we run into a certain difficulty: in the passage cited above, Aquinas was talking about subsistent forms, which he distinguished from nonsubsistent forms, describing these latter as forms that are, "as it were, poured out upon something other than themselves, and are [therefore] not in possession of themselves." As it turns out, it is only spirit that is capable of the "return to its own essence" that characterizes subsistence. The essence of spirit, which distinguishes it from all other kinds of being, is what Aquinas calls the *reditio completa*, the perfect return to self in self-knowledge, or what we would call today "self-consciousness." Self-possession is, we might say, the very structure or logic of spirit. This is why Thomas draws a special connection between the metaphysical notion of person and subsistence.<sup>10</sup> Anything other than spirit, to be

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8. According to Aquinas, "a gift is an unreturnable giving," *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2. Aquinas derives this definition from Aristotle, *Topics*, IV, 4.

9. See Ulrich's connecting of God's loving presence to the subsistence of being in bonicity: for example, *HA*, 104 and 127.

10. See Aquinas's definition of person as "subsistent individual of a rational

sure, represents a *kind* of redition to its essence in some degree insofar as it is a being at all, a substance. Aquinas basically accepts Aristotle's notion of *ousia*, substance, which indicates a kind of being that exists to some degree *per se*, as standing in itself in relative self-containment (in contrast, for example, to accidents, which have their being only *in* some other—specifically in some *substance* that has being in itself). Along these lines, Aristotle ascribes substantiality more to natural beings than to artifacts, which lack the ontological unity of a genuine substance. As is well known, Aristotle defines nature as an intrinsic principle of motion and rest. This definition is an explication of *reditio*: a form that comes out of itself, but not in such a way as to be lost in what is other than itself; instead, it proceeds from itself in a way that re-enforces its selfhood: a subsistent form is an intrinsic principle of motion and rest.

What this implies is that natural being is a kind of imitation of the essential act of spiritual being, an imitation that, so to speak, succeeds only to various degrees according to the level of being in Aristotle's hierarchy of being. Elements are natural substances, but they exhibit fairly minimal self-possession, or selfhood; plants have a self that expresses a certain return to essence in the activities of growth and reproduction, and animals still more in their additional capacities for perception and locomotion. But actual substantiality, the subsistence of a *complete* return to essence, occurs only at the level of the rational soul. We are accustomed in the modern age to think of nature and spirit more or less as opposites, which have almost nothing to do with each other. For the classical tradition, which Ulrich defends, the spiritual existence of the rational soul represents by contrast the flourishing of nature, the most complete instance of what all natural being is—and, indeed, since natural being is the paradigm of substance, we can say what *all* being *tout court* strives to be or at least to imitate as far as possible.<sup>11</sup> This will turn out to be a crucial point later on.

Before we attend to this point, it will be helpful to return

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nature" (*ST I*, q. 29, a. 3); cf., *I*, q. 29, a. 4 (a "divine Person is a relation as subsistent"); the three Persons of the Trinity are otherwise known as "three subsistences" (*ST I*, q. 29, a. 2 ad 2). God is appropriately called "person" even though the word does not appear in Scripture in reference to God, Aquinas explains, because "he is the supreme self-subsisting being" (*ST I*, q. 29, a. 3 ad 1).

11. Aquinas says that "person is what is most perfect in all nature" (*ST I*, q. 29, a. 3).

to the essence, so to speak, of Ulrich's argument in *Homo Abyssus* and see where things stand. The first part of the book, more or less its first half, is an exposition of the meaning of being, founded, as we have suggested, on Aquinas's metaphysics of creation, but developed in dialogue with modern philosophy, above all with the great German philosophers Hegel and Heidegger. The second, somewhat shorter, part of the book is essentially a reflection on man, on human nature, specifically on the ontological structure of human existence. But it is a mistake to think of these as two separate halves, each treating a different theme, which, when put together with the other, forms a general picture. Instead, the two parts are profoundly related to each other, so much so that we can say they are reciprocally dependent on each other. We have already seen that the distinctively personal mode of being that man represents—the *reditio completa* of spirit—is revelatory of the meaning of being more generally. But man does not simply represent the general structure of being in the structure of his own existence; according to Ulrich, the revelation of the meaning of being is *given* to man as his most essential task.<sup>12</sup> In what we might properly describe as an “onto-drama,” man co-decides the meaning of being in the particular way that he receives creation, that is, in the way that he enacts his own existence. It is in just this enactment, as we shall see in a moment, that the significance of the *word* stands forth.

According to Aquinas, and in contrast to certain other major Christian thinkers, such as Scotus, who had difficulty integrating this implication of Aristotelian anthropology, the rational—that is, the intellectual or spiritual—soul is the form of the human body<sup>13</sup>: man incarnates, so to speak, the intersection between the highest mode of being, namely, spirit, which transcends all finite things in a reflection of what Ulrich calls the “super-essential” aspect of *esse*, and the lowest mode of being, matter, existence within the particular limits of a given time and place. As not only embodied *soul* but embodied *spirit*, man is in himself a paradigmatic expression of what Ulrich calls the “movement of finitization,” that is, the restriction of infinite act within the limits of finitude. But man is also the full expression of the “movement

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12. See *HA*, 1; 69–71; 286–2; 339–42.

13. Ulrich discusses this notion in *HA*, 297–301.

into subsistence”: he is *embodied* spirit, but he is embodied *spirit*, which is to say that, even in his life in the flesh, he attains to the self-possession, the self-consciousness, the *reditio completa* of which only spiritual beings are capable. Like no other creature, man is both “in the world,” able to encounter other creatures *in the flesh*, to lay his hands on them and so to exercise care for them, to “reach out,” literally, to perfect and influence them as Aquinas says in his description of subsistence, and he is not “of the world,” insofar as in his engagement with other beings in the flesh he “still retains immanence and self-possession.”

This complex configuration of aspects or modes of being comes to expression in the distinctive powers of the human soul. On the one hand, man displays a whole spectrum of sensible powers, both those of perception and those of appetite, whereby his embodied condition makes itself manifest. On the other hand, however, he possesses the specifically spiritual powers of intellect and will, which are acts that are able to penetrate more deeply *into* the things of the world than the sensitive powers and are able more fully to bring the things into the soul without displacing the self, as it were, and so compromising self-possession.<sup>14</sup> In intellection, man reaches all the way out into the very being of things (*intus-legere*), because, as Ulrich interprets it, the intellect is most essentially just that, an openness to being.<sup>15</sup> This reaching out coincides with a profound intimacy, a taking of things *into* the soul, in which the soul in fact in some basic way *becomes* what it knows.<sup>16</sup> In complementary fashion, the will represents the movement outward, into the world, by which the soul takes

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14. See *ST I*, q. 75, a. 5: “The intellectual soul knows a thing in its nature absolutely: for instance, it knows a stone absolutely as a stone; and therefore the form of a stone absolutely, as to its proper formal notion, is in the intellectual soul. Therefore the intellectual soul itself is an absolute form, and not something composed of matter and form. For if the intellectual soul were composed of matter and form, the forms of things would be received into it as individuals, and so it would only know the individual, just as it happens with the sensitive powers which receive forms in a corporeal organ.”

15. See *HA*, 408–11. Ulrich speaks of the intellect as spontaneously, by its very nature, reaching out into being as being in a “foregrasp” (see 98–99).

16. See *ST I*, q. 87, a. 12, ad 3. Ulrich presents an extraordinarily profound account of this in an unfinished “fragment” he wrote on “Death in Knowledge and Love,” which was published in *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1999), 147–99.



itself *to*, or indeed *into*, things other than itself. Aquinas describes the will essentially in the Aristotelian language of “intellectual appetite”<sup>17</sup>; Ulrich expands the usual interpretation of this phrase, showing that, because “intellectual” means most basically openness to being, and “appetite” most basically indicates a movement out toward the other (*ad-petere*), the will as intellectual appetite culminates in the affirmation of things in their very being, which is the most basic act of love.<sup>18</sup> To love, Josef Pieper famously explained, is to say to the other, “It is good that you exist!”<sup>19</sup> When in *Homo Abyssus* Ulrich takes over the Heideggerian definition of the will as *Freiheit zum Grunde*, “Freedom open all the way to the ground,”<sup>20</sup> he transforms it in this Thomistic sense as the act of love that participates in its particular way in the ground of all things, which is God’s creative act, the absolute, effective, and definitive declaration to the world and all things in it: “It is good that you exist!”

Now, as Ulrich goes on to show, the drama of the human powers in man’s existing *in* but not *of* the world, finds its point of convergence in the *word*.<sup>21</sup> No doubt by virtue of the illumination of the faith, St. Augustine deepened beyond the normal Aristotelian psychology the importance of what he called the “procession of the word” in the human act of understanding: we do not attain to a complete act of understanding of any particular thing simply through the interiorization of the intelligible species in the innermost being of the soul; instead, that act of interior-

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17. *ST I*, q. 82, a. 5.

18. The way that Ulrich tends to express this is that the will brings the *crisis* of being, which has been opened by intellect, to decision (which implies that it keeps being in crisis, rather than allowing it, so to speak, to come to rest in a self-withholding hypostasis), and so reaches the *bonicity* of beings in their concrete subsistence (*ens*): see *HA*, 451–52, for example.

19. Josef Pieper, *Faith–Hope–Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 207.

20. The expression comes from Heidegger (see “On the Essence of the Ground,” in *Pathmarks* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 97–135), who explains it in a more transcendental-philosophical way as the “thrown-projection” of *Dasein*, the peculiar transcendence that allows things to provoke and respond to the basic questions of reason. For Ulrich’s account (which is more metaphysical than transcendental), see *HA*, 359–65.

21. See, again, *HA*, 396–408.

ization itself comes to completion only in a movement outward, once again, whereby the species is formulated as a *concept*, which Augustine, and Aquinas after him, calls beautifully the *verbum mentis* or *verbum cordis*, the mental word or word of the heart.<sup>22</sup> We come to *possess* knowledge of something only when we take it to heart, finding *words* for it, so that we can meditate upon it and not simply have it in us “blindly,” so to speak. Augustine gave the word what in the Middle Ages became an authoritative definition: the word is *notitia cum amore*, knowledge with love.<sup>23</sup> What this definition highlights is that the procession of the word, though it is the completion of the act of understanding, does not unfold simply inside of the order of understanding alone. Instead, it represents a point at which the intellect and will intersect: the word is a “place,” as it were, wherein a thing understood enters into the human soul and wherein the soul comes out of itself to meet the thing; the word is a unique place of encounter.<sup>24</sup>

In his own interpretation of the word and its philosophical significance, Ulrich goes beyond Aquinas in two respects (neither of which is *contrary* to Aquinas). On the one hand, Ulrich emphasizes that the word does not come to a definitive rest simply in the heart. Instead, a word is meant to be spoken.<sup>25</sup> With an indirect allusion to the role of the Holy Spirit in the eternal Word’s taking on flesh in Mary’s womb, Ulrich insists that the *verbum cordis* must take on the flesh of the human voice, and be breathed, “spirated,” forth in an act of speech. In actual speech, where understanding reaches its most proper completion, we discover the convergence not just of intellect and will but these spiritual acts precisely *as* embodied. The whole human soul is involved in the speaking of a word. On the other hand, the second way he goes beyond the letter of Aquinas is that Ulrich also emphasizes that the form of the word—that is, as *notitia cum amore in corpore*—ought not to be separated from

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22. *De ver.*, q. 4, a. 1; cf. *ST I*, q. 27, a. 1.

23. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX, 10. Aquinas refers to this in *De ver.*, q. 4, a. 3 ad 3.

24. Ulrich lays this out in a succinct way in “Zur Ontologie des Menschen,” in the *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* VII (1963): 40–41.

25. See Stefan Oster, *Mit-Mensch-Sein: Phänomenologie und Ontologie der Gabe bei Ferdinand Ulrich* (Munich: Karl Alber Verlag, 2004), 445–51. Ulrich presents the importance of “letting go” the word in “Mythos-Logos-Erfahrung,” in the *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* XIV (1970): 188n2.

the content. It is not just the *act* of speaking that is important, but also *what* is said. Man, as the *zoon echon logon*, is meant not just to speak, but to speak properly, to say the *right* word, the word of love, the word that is not only just but also merciful. The right word is a word in which the *content* adequately expresses the *form*. As we have seen, a word is the simultaneity of knowledge and love, which is breathed forth, sent on its way, spoken to and with others. Thus, a proper word is a word that articulates the *essential truth* of things, it does so in a manner that affirms things in themselves, in their own reality, their intrinsic goodness, and, finally, it shapes this knowing affirmation in a fitting way, which makes it accessible to others as what we might call a common good.<sup>26</sup>

It is precisely in this light, which is both metaphysical and anthropological, that we can understand the essential task assigned to Adam to give names to the animals, which even God will henceforth use. Our exposition thus far allows us to see how this task can be a genuine participation in God's act of creation. We saw that the act of creation terminates not just in things, but in things enacting their proper existence, which is to say that the basic coming to be of things is a movement into subsistence. But we have also seen that, properly speaking, it is only spiritual beings that subsist because only such beings are capable of a *reditio completa*, a movement outward "perfecting and influencing things" other than themselves in a manner that coincides perfectly with a retention of immanence and self-possession. Now, it would seem to follow that subhuman, and so non-spiritual creatures do *not* subsist, that they have only an imperfect existence, that they are capable only of a *reditio* that remains incomplete, to a greater or lesser degree according to where they fall in the hierarchy of being. But such an inference would follow only if we conceived of subhuman nature as having its essence, its proper and most natural definition, *outside* of relation to and in isolation from man. According to Ulrich, subhuman creatures do indeed come into their own subsistence, but—and here is the rub—they do so precisely in and through the human word! If such creatures do not return to their own essence simply on their own, they *do*

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26. It would be possible to develop this point further to show how the poetic word—whether spoken or (by analogy) written—can *form* a people and open up a distinctive world for them, as we see in Homer, for example, or in Dante, Shakespeare, and so forth.

*return to their own essences . . . in the human soul*, and indeed in relation to the culture generated in and through human speech.<sup>27</sup> In other words, things enjoy the truth of their own subsistence in some respect for the first time in the world opened up by man's logos. At its deepest level, speech is the offering of space, a *Spielraum*, to use Ulrich's term, in which things can show themselves for what they are in truth.<sup>28</sup>

Such a paradox makes sense only if we recall that the subsistence of the human soul is not a self-sealed self-containment, but a radical turn inward that coincides with a radical turn outward. As Ulrich interprets it, human existence has the fundamental shape of generosity, that is, of love. The implications of this conception of the human soul are vast, and we can only indicate a basic direction for unfolding them in conclusion. The key is to see how wonderfully the human word represents a point of convergence (in an even more marvelous reflection of the centrality of the Divine Word in and through which all things "hold together"<sup>29</sup> and find their gratuitous redemption). Man comes to his own most proper subsistence in speaking, which is of its very nature a social act, an act that comes to be only inside of human community. But at the very same time, this subsistence does not belong to man alone, as a treasure to be hoarded and kept safe from others, but is a gift he gives to the things of the world, perfecting them and flowing into them, as Aquinas puts it. In our speech, we allow the world, as it were, to show forth and achieve its truth, its goodness, and its beauty. In this respect, there is no more decisive expression of the dominion of the world entrusted to man than the task of saying things in an *adequate* way that does justice to their essence and gratuitously, mercifully, elevating them to a mode of existence not given in their essence alone. This task lies at the heart of human existence, which is why

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27. Ulrich insists that this does not in the least imply any "subjectivism" or "idealism," wherein the world would be seen as constituted by or projected by man, or contained simply in his own consciousness. This misunderstanding in its various forms, he explains, is ultimately due to a failure to grasp the "super-essentiality" of being, to which man's intellect is *essentially* related: see *HA*, 387–88.

28. See *HA*, 399.

29. Col 1:17: τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.

there is almost nothing more fulfilling than a good conversation among friends, in which we manage, through our exchange, not just to chat idly, but to get to the heart of some matter, to bring to light some essential truth, in an affirming and radiant way.

In the contemporary world, in which “talk is cheap,” in which words are taken lightly if not held most basically in suspicion and contempt, there are few things more important than recalling the original human vocation inscribed in man at creation and understanding that vocation in the proper ontological depth. We tend to think of Christian love exclusively as doing things, carrying out projects of improvement in relation to which the work of the understanding is wholly instrumentalized. But the work of the understanding is already in itself a work of love, and in a certain respect the most perfect one. At the center of human life lies the task of deepening reality—not just human reality but the reality of all things in the world—through a profound understanding for which we fashion the right word and offer it up in careful speech.

It is in this context, I submit, that we ought to approach Ferdinand Ulrich’s remarkable work *Homo Abyssus*. It is, to be sure, a difficult *word*, but its aim in the end is to bring to light the meaning of being, to affirm the intrinsic goodness of the world in the most profound way it can, in *notitia cum amore*.\* □

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