

THINKING LOVE
AT THE HEART OF THINGS.
THE METAPHYSICS OF BEING
AS LOVE IN THE WORK OF
FERDINAND ULRICH

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Introduction: An unknown master

In a letter written in 1962 to Ferdinand Ulrich, who at the time was just thirty-one years old, Hans Urs von Balthasar expressed a rather astonishing judgment regarding his correspondent's first and fundamental work, entitled *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage* (Einsiedeln, 1961). According to Balthasar, Ulrich's philosophy, "like every other great creative achievement, moves at its ease in the company of all other great intuitions, precisely as a function of its own inseparable unity: It speaks as immediately with Thomas as it does with Schelling, Hegel, and Heidegger. What is more, it has one great advantage over all the other ontologies with which I am familiar: It stands in intimate contact with the mysteries of revela-

tion, offers an access to them, and yet never abandons the strictly philosophical domain. In this sense, it overcomes the baneful dualism between philosophy and theology, and it does so perhaps more successfully than ever before.”¹

A statement such as this, in the mouth of a man as well versed in the whole history of Western thought as Balthasar, cannot fail to capture our attention, especially given the wide-ranging debate about faith and reason that has been underway since Benedict XVI assumed the papal office. For Balthasar’s claim is that Ulrich has developed a philosophy that is perhaps better equipped than any other to mediate between the parties in the strained relation between philosophy and theology, reason and faith. This is no idiosyncratic assessment; Gerd Haeffner, professor of philosophy in Munich, offers substantially the same judgment as Balthasar in a 1976 review of another of Ulrich’s works (*Gegenwart der Freiheit*). In fact, Haeffner goes so far as to suggest that Ulrich may have even “found the ‘principle’ that modern philosophy and theology, torn between immanentism and extrinsicism, between the ‘mirage’ of a *natura pura* and the pantheistic identification of God and the finite, have sought in vain. In vain because it has failed to rethink Greek metaphysics (which underlay all the heresies in the ancient Church and, by the same token, the orthodox dogmas defined to counter them) in light of a more original starting point: the question of being, intertwined with the experience of absolute being as love.”²

So who is the man behind this work that, though judged so important by experts such as Balthasar and Haeffner, has so far largely escaped the notice of the broader community of scholars? Let us begin with a few biographical details. Ferdinand Ulrich was born in 1931 in the Moravian village of Odrau, in what is today the Czech Republic. Driven from his homeland after the War, like so many other long-settled ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe, he eventually settled in what was then West Germany. He attended the University of Munich as an undergraduate, and he received his

¹This passage is found in a letter (currently in my possession) that Balthasar wrote to Ulrich on 28 May 1962. It is partially reproduced on the back cover of the new edition of Ulrich’s main systematic work, *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln/Freiburg, 1998).

²Gerd Haeffner, review of Ulrich’s *Gegenwart der Freiheit*, in *Theologie und Philosophie* 51 (1976): 118–22; the citation is found on page 122.

doctorate at the same university in 1956. Two years later he obtained his habilitation from the University of Salzburg. Since 1958, he has resided in the Bavarian city of Regensburg, where he was professor of philosophy until becoming emeritus in 1996.³

Ulrich's thought is available to the interested reader in a projected edition of his principal works currently being published (in the original German) by Johannes Verlag. Though still unfinished, this edition currently numbers five substantial volumes.⁴ Johannes Verlag has also published a few smaller books.⁵ Finally, Ulrich has written around sixty articles, some of which are the size of small books. A considerable portion of the articles, however, has appeared only in collective volumes or journals in Italy.⁶

At first sight, Ulrich's philosophy appears difficult to approach. It is speculative, in the classical sense of the word, and it has a certain contemplative quality. Ulrich does not just think; he also "beholds," exploring the deepest recesses of reality with seeming effortless, though in constant inner dialogue with the thinkers of the great philosophical tradition. His seemingly "abstract" reflection includes an innate concern for concrete embodiment, and it never forgets the domain of praxis. Ulrich beholds the world in light of the gift of being, but, since the gift can be found and "touched" as such only in the concreteness of finite entities, Ulrich's contemplative gaze has a built-in attentiveness to the real world. Ulrich never forgets man, as he actually goes about achieving his life in action, in the context of the actual world and the actual history in which he finds himself.

³He began his career at the Institute for Education, which was later integrated into the newly established University of Regensburg. In addition, he has also taught at the University of Salzburg as well as (from 1964–1991) at the Jesuit Philosophical Institute, first in Pullach, later in Munich.

⁴(1) *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, 2nd ed. (1998); (2) *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (1999); (3) *Erzählter Sinn. Ontologie der Selbstwerdung in der Bilderwelt des Märchens*, 2nd ed. (2002); (4) *Logo-tokos. Der Mensch und das Wort* (2003); (5) *Gabe und Vergebung. Ein Beitrag zur biblischen Ontologie* (2006).

⁵See, among others, *Der Mensch als Anfang. Zur philosophischen Anthropologie* (1970), or *Atheismus und Menschwerdung*, 2nd ed. (1970).

⁶For a bibliography of Ulrich's works, see my *Mit-Mensch-Sein. Phänomenologie und Ontologie der Gabe bei Ferdinand Ulrich* (Freiburg/Munich, 2004), 533–37.

Ulrich's ontology wells up from an intuition of being as gift. This intuition is in fact "original" in the etymological sense of the word. The same is true, too, of the form of discourse in which the expression of his thought takes shape—so much so that his distinctive philosophical language has sometimes earned him as much incomprehension as approval. He has been accused of hermeticism,⁷ and it has been said that he speaks more like a poet than a philosopher.⁸ Others have charged him with "speculative gigantomachy,"⁹ while still others have wondered whether he isn't more of a theologian than is really healthy for a philosopher.¹⁰

This last accusation suggests a further difficulty that has surely also helped prevent a broad reception of Ulrich's work: Ulrich explicitly understands his philosophy as a "thinking from faith," and he confesses this openly throughout all his writings. Nevertheless, Ulrich is convinced that it is precisely faith that first makes philosophizing (or reason) radically philosophical (or reasonable) in the proper and ultimate sense of the term.¹¹ What follows will help clarify how Ulrich explains and justifies this claim.

Summing up, then, we can say that Ulrich's works call for a patient, effortful study that is at once contemplative and sensitive

⁷R. Feiter, *Zur Freiheit befreit. Apologie des Christlichen bei Ferdinand Ulrich* (Würzburg, 1994), 23.

⁸J. Endres, reviewing *Homo Abyssus* in *Theologische Revue* 60 (1964): 247, writes "Though he certainly wishes to communicate his deep insights to others, this aim would have been better served had he chosen a different form of discourse for expressing and presenting his ideas. It would have been better if he had left the one he has actually adopted to the likes of Rilke."

⁹W. Kern, in a review of *Homo Abyssus* in *Scholastik* 37 (1962): 404.

¹⁰See, for example, the question posed by G. Haeffner in his review of Ulrich's *Gegenwart der Freiheit*, 122. Haeffner wonders whether Ulrich's thought hasn't gone "too far" with the "mutual interplay of . . . the gift of being in its finitization and the gift of the Word of God in his Incarnation."

¹¹See Ulrich's remarks in *Gegenwart der Freiheit* (Einsiedeln, 1974), 40, where he stresses that his philosophy "draws its life from faith." For Ulrich, however, "the presence of grace" in philosophical reflection can be gauged precisely by the fact that it is "no less 'philosophical'" than its non-Christian counterparts. Indeed, "just the opposite is the case! [Communion with faith] is precisely the path along which [philosophy] enters into its own essence, receives authentic possession of itself, and comes to itself." For "*gratia supponit naturam et perficit eam*": Grace presupposes nature—and perfects it precisely as nature.

to the differentiations of discursive reason. Those who accept this challenge can look forward to discovering a philosophical “gold mine,”¹² one that promises to be profoundly enriching for both philosophy and theology. One of the witnesses who vouch for this fecundity of Ulrich’s thought is, again, Balthasar, who, by his own testimony, drew abundantly from the philosophical riches he discovered first in Gustav Siewerth and then in Ferdinand Ulrich.¹³ French philosopher Claude Bruaire is another such witness.¹⁴ A deeper interest in Ulrich’s work has begun to awaken here and there among more recent scholars as well.¹⁵

¹²That is how Martin Bieler puts it in his introduction to F. Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln, 1998), xv.

¹³Speaking autobiographically in *Unser Auftrag* (Einsiedeln/Freiburg, 2004), 39f., Balthasar writes: “thanks to the influence of Przywara’s dialectical interpretation of Thomas’ real distinction, I was later able to enter into the thought of my future friend, Gustav Siewerth . . . and, several years later, of Ferdinand Ulrich. I owe a great deal to the vision of these two men, and my debt extends to the concluding part of *Herrlichkeit* III/1, indeed, to the *Theodramatik* itself. Both of these thinkers, especially the latter, made me sensitive to a certain pattern running throughout the intellectual history of the West and to appreciate the Christian theological background behind the more recent history of philosophy” (emphasis mine). For English translations of this and other works of Balthasar cited here, see the publications of Ignatius Press. See also the crucially important reference to Ulrich at the conclusion of Balthasar’s account of “the site of glory” in metaphysics in *Herrlichkeit* III/1 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965), 38 and 955. In addition, see A. Wiercinski, “Hermeneutik der Gabe. Die Wechselwirkung von Philosophie und Theologie bei Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in W. Kasper, ed. *Logik der Liebe und Herrlichkeit Gottes. Hans Urs von Balthasar im Gespräch* (Ostfildern, 2006), 350–70. Wiercinski writes: “There can be no doubt that Ulrich was Balthasar’s most important interlocutor, especially after Siewerth’s death and during the period when the *Theodrama* was being conceived.” Finally, see R. Carelli’s recent substantial work on Balthasar entitled *L’uomo e la donna nella teologia di H.U. von Balthasar* (Lugano, 2007). Carelli, who devotes considerable attention to Ulrich, states that “to read Ulrich is to understand Balthasar, and to read Balthasar is to understand Ulrich.” According to Carelli, the reason for this reciprocity is that the two shared in a single mission (“*unica missione*”) (ibid., 177).

¹⁴Apropos of Ulrich’s main work, *Homo Abyssus*, Bruaire wrote that it “may just be the herald of a renewal of philosophical questioning and reflection.” This statement occurs in Bruaire’s review of *Homo Abyssus*, in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 19 (1965): 171.

¹⁵One German philosophy of religion textbook recently called Ulrich one “of the most important philosophers of religion” of the twentieth century: S. Grätzel—A Kreiner, *Religionsphilosophie* (Stuttgart/Weimar, 1999), 112. Belgian

Ulrich ceased writing and publishing new philosophical texts in the early 1980s, and his recent publications are actually revisions of manuscripts dating from around that time.¹⁶ Considering the outstanding quality of his writings, this situation is regrettable. On the other hand, I have been able to witness first-hand that Ulrich's present retired existence in the medieval university town of Regensburg is a living exposition of the mystery of gratuitous love to which his writings bear witness. Not surprisingly, he has become an invaluable counselor for many who come to him with questions bearing on both their faith and their lives. Nevertheless, for those who do not have the privilege of knowing Ulrich directly, his writings offer a resource whose quality, as I hope to suggest in what follows, Balthasar did not overestimate.

I. The metaphysics of being as love

1. To the sources of the question of being

In his 1998 encyclical on faith and reason, *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II expresses his earnest hope that philosophy will recover its role in helping to show “that man is capable of attaining a unified and organic vision of knowledge.” In this context, the pontiff also calls on philosophy to defend the “interior unity” of man against a “splintered approach to the truth” that results in “the fragmentation

philosopher Emmanuel Tourpe writes that Ulrich is “an absolutely unavoidable reference point for a metaphysics of being as love and freedom as gift” (E. Tourpe, “La liberté comme don. A propos d'un ouvrage récent de M. Bieler,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 54 [June 1998]: 411–21; 412). See also the following monographs: Feiter, *Zur Freiheit befreit. Apologie des Christlichen bei Ferdinand Ulrich* and M. Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe. Ein schöpfungstheologischer Entwurf* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna, 1991).

¹⁶For example, Ulrich's book *Gabe und Vergebung* originated from a course that Ulrich gave at the beginning of the 1980s. The revision and publication of the manuscript was motivated, among other things, by the wish to honor the 100th birthday of Balthasar, who in both personal conversations and letters had repeatedly urged Ulrich to allow him to publish the text. Clearly, Balthasar was keenly aware of the unique character of this work, which offers us a rare example of a philosopher deploying the methods of his discipline in a sustained interpretation of a biblical text (in this case, the parable of the Prodigal Son).

of meaning.”¹⁷ The center of such a philosophy, John Paul insists, must be metaphysics, which is called to “play an essential role of mediation in theological research.”¹⁸ To be sure, the pope “do[es] not mean to speak of metaphysics in the sense of a specific school or a particular historical current of thought.”¹⁹ His concern is rather with what he himself terms “Christian philosophy,” at whose center he places a rational reflection on being in light of creation, a reflection that both presupposes, yet is not reducible to, Revelation. For, John Paul explains, this “Revelation clearly proposes certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason. Among these truths is the notion of a free and personal God who is the Creator of the world, a truth which has been so crucial for the development of philosophical thinking, especially the philosophy of being.”²⁰ This relationship between the personhood of the Creator and the originality of being, which stands at the intersection between philosophy and theology, brings us to the heart of Ulrich’s metaphysics, to which we now turn.

Ulrich’s understanding of being [*Sein*] is a fundamental key to all of his writings. *Homo Abyssus*, his first published work, is a systematic essay in ontology that develops a comprehensive account of being as love.²¹ All of Ulrich’s subsequent writings on more specific topics consistently presuppose this account or present it from new, more deeply researched angles. The passage from Haeffner that

¹⁷*Fides et ratio*, 85. All citations from the encyclical are taken from the version available on the Vatican’s website (<http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/PG.HTM>). Although it would be interesting to read Ulrich’s work in light of Benedict XVI’s emphasis on the (non-rationalist) rationality of faith, I will concentrate here on *Fides et ratio*, inasmuch as it makes a powerful case for the mediating role of a metaphysics of being informed by, but not reducible to, theology.

¹⁸*Fides et ratio*, 83.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 77.

²¹This book, whose first edition appeared in 1961, is an abbreviated and revised version of the thesis Ulrich had submitted for his habilitation at the University of Salzburg in 1958. The title of the thesis was *Versuch einer spekulativen Entfaltung des Menschenwesens in der Seinsteilhabe* [Toward a Speculative Unfolding of the Essence of Man as Participation in Being].

I cited above already contains important clues to a fuller understanding of Ulrich's ontology.

The first point to notice is that Ulrich thinks we need to begin with the question of being, and that his reasons for thinking so are in some respects similar to Heidegger's. He agrees, for instance, that Heidegger's verdict of "forgetfulness of being" holds for large tracts of Western philosophy.²² At the same time, Ulrich insists on the existence of *at least* one crucial exception: Thomas Aquinas, who, in Ulrich's view, is not affected by Heidegger's critique (even as Thomas' metaphysics of *esse* provides a tool for rethinking the speculative intention behind Heidegger's rather different account of *Sein*).²³

Aquinas, as Ulrich reads him, contemplates being from a more original starting point than much of Western thought before or since his time. In light of this starting point, Thomas is able to perceive being as sheer act,²⁴ as the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections ("*actualitas omnium actuum*," "*perfectio omnium perfectionum*"²⁵). Created being is the fullness of actuality from which all that is actual comes forth; itself sheer perfect-ness, it accounts for the perfection of everything else.

For Thomas, being, *esse*, is neither simply identical with entities [*Seiendes*], with the things-that-are, nor, again, is it (the content of) a purely univocal concept that supposedly enables us to punch through the wall of finitude to reach God (under the guise of "being" in its "absolute" form), and which, in so doing, perverts metaphysics into a formalistic tool of what Heidegger chastised as

²²See Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*, in *ibid.*, *Wegmarken*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt, 1978), 335.

²³The case for Thomas' immunity to the Heideggerian critique has been made by a long line of scholars reaching back to, for example, Gilson in *Être et essence* (Paris, 1948); Gustav Siewerth, *Das Schicksal der Metaphysik von Thomas zu Heidegger* (Einsiedeln, 1959); J. B. Lotz, "Sein und Existenz in der Existenzphilosophie und in der Scholastik," *Gregorianum* 40 (1959): 401–66.

²⁴*De Veritate* 1, 1, ad 3: "*Cum dicitur: diversum est esse, et quod est, distinguitur actus essendi ab eo cui actus ille convenit. Nomen autem entis ab actu essendi sumitur, non ab eo cui convenit actus essendi*" [In saying that "to be" and "that which is" are diverse, we distinguish the act of "to be" from that to which it is fitted. But the substantive "a being" is derived from the act of "to be," and not from that to which this act of "to be" is fitted].

²⁵See *De Potentia* 7, 2, ad 9.

“onto-theo-logy.” Neither a mere cipher for actualized essences nor some reified unit alongside of them, the Thomistic *actus essendi*, as Balthasar writes echoing Ulrich’s reading of Aquinas, is “the streaming plenitude of God’s being in the state of having been given away to finite receivers.”²⁶

The philosopher’s journey back to the origin of the things-that-are must, for Ulrich, take Thomas’ understanding of being as its privileged path. At the same time, Ulrich—who engages in vigorous dialogue and debate with modern philosophy, especially (but far from exclusively) with Hegel and Heidegger—is thoroughly involved in the “present.”²⁷ This is why he can take Heidegger’s notion of “ontological difference” seriously, even as he re-thinks Heidegger in light of Thomas, who himself re-thinks the difference between being and essence that had been the object of much reflection in the previous tradition.

It is important to note, however, that, on Ulrich’s reading, Aquinas himself already goes beyond the difference between being and essence. That is, Thomas is aware of the distinction that Heidegger will, within the horizon of his own thought, formulate in terms of *Sein* and *Seiendes*. Only Aquinas, on Ulrich’s account, understands this distinction as one between created “to-be,” *esse*, and finite substance(s). This does not mean, of course, that Ulrich ignores the significance of the distinction between being and essence in Thomas’ metaphysics. On the contrary, this distinction plays an important role in Ulrich’s own work. Nevertheless, Ulrich sets it against the background of what he calls the “finitization” [*Verendlichungsbewegung*] of created *esse*, and in this context it serves as a transition to the more encompassing difference between being and subsistence.

Indeed, contrary to the prejudice that Thomas engages in a reifying “metaphysics of substance,” the Angelic Doctor himself already interprets substance itself in light of its radical origin. His interpretation of substance, in other words, places it in the context of what he calls the *esse habens* (the “that-which-has-being”), which has received the gift of being, hence, is itself a gift given to

²⁶Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III/1, 961.

²⁷For example, Ulrich’s philosophy is open to fruitful discussion with thinkers as diverse as Derrida and Habermas, as I have tried to show in my *Mit-Mensch-Sein. Phänomenologie und Ontologie der Gabe bei Ferdinand Ulrich*.

itself—and, as such, has its own ground in itself (“subsists”).²⁸ “For this reason, the mere difference between being and material essence, or else the difference between act and potency, is incomparably less ‘sufficient’ for the event of the finitization of created being as love than the ontological difference that distinguishes being as love from the *subsistence* it attains in finite entities.”²⁹

A further point to keep in mind is that Ulrich, like Thomas, makes a fundamental distinction between God, who is subsistent being itself, *ipsum esse subsistens*,³⁰ and created being, *ipsum esse* that, as created, precisely does *not* subsist.³¹ Rather than being the Creator, then, *esse* is “the first of all created realities.”³² It is first in the sense that every creature proceeds in some sense from its superabundant plenitude.³³ God creates by giving things being.³⁴ By the same token, nothing can be outside of being itself except non-

²⁸*In Libros Metaphysicorum* 12, 1, 4: “*ens dicitur quasi esse habens, hoc autem solum est substantia, quae subsistit*” [That-which-is is called that in the sense of *that-which-has-being*. But only substance, which subsists, is that]; *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 75: “*singularia autem sunt entia, et magis quam universalia: quia universalia non subsistunt per se, sed sunt solum in singularibus*” [now, singulars are *things-that-are*, and they are such more than universals, because universals *do not subsist* in their own right, but are only in singulars]. All emphasis in citations from Aquinas, both in this and in all remaining footnotes, are mine.

²⁹Ulrich, *Logo-tokos. Der Mensch und das Wort*, 59; emphasis original.

³⁰*De Potentia* 7, 2, ad 5: “*sicut dicitur in libro de causis, ipsum esse Dei distinguitur et individuatur a quolibet alio esse, per hoc ipsum quod est esse per se subsistens, et non adveniens alicui naturae quae sit aliud ab ipso esse. Omne autem aliud esse quod non est subsistens, oportet quod individuetur per naturam et substantiam quae in tali esse subsistit*” [as it is said in the *Book of Causes*, the very to-be of God is individuated and distinguished from every other to-be by the simple fact that it is to-be subsisting by itself, and not advening upon a nature that would be something other than to-be itself. But every other to-be, since it is not subsistent, has to be individuated by a nature and a substance that subsists in that to-be].

³¹*De Potentia* 1, 1: “*verbi gratia esse significat aliquid completum et simplex sed non subsistens*” [for example, “to be” signifies something complete and simple, yet *not subsistent*].

³²*In de Causis* 4: “*prima rerum creatarum*” [the first of created realities].

³³*Summa Theologiae* I-II, 2, 5, ad 2: “*sic enim esse praehabet in se omnia subsequencia*” [for thus to-be pre-contains in itself everything else as following upon it].

³⁴*I Sententiarum* 37, 1, 1: “*creare autem est dare esse*” [but to create is to give to-be]; *In De Divinis Nominibus* 4, 3: “*universaliter autem omnes substantias creat, dans eis esse*” [but he creates all substances, as their universal cause, by giving them to-be].

being.³⁵ This means that the communication of being is itself what produces the receiver in its actual be-ing. At the same time, being is what is most interior to each thing; it is the inmost core of each creature's actual being,³⁶ which reflects the fact that created being has been genuinely communicated in distinction from the subsistent being of the Creator.

Created being is not God himself, but is, as Thomas says, a similitude of the divine goodness.³⁷ If this is correct, then our first step cannot be to approach being as the object of a technical, much less technological, control, as if we could exhaustively capture it within the bounds of some precise conceptual definition. Rather, we must understand being primarily in *personal* terms: Created being is not a neutral "it," but a self-communication of the Creator. It is not a person, of course, but it is the personal self-communication of a (tri)personal God.

Created *esse* is not the creative act itself, to be sure. Nevertheless, it is the "proper effect" of this act. By the same token, it is the (created) means by which the Creator makes himself personally present to the inmost depth of his creatures, thereby liberating them into their own self-being that is perfectly distinct from his own. Now, this creative self-communication is a form of *personal love*, which is just what self-diffusing goodness becomes when it rises to the level of intellect and will. By the same token, we can say that created being is this personal love of God. Not, of course, insofar as it is substantially identical with the divine essence, but insofar as it is communicated to creatures, where it is distinct from, though ineffably immediate to, the personal love that *is* substantially one with God's own subsistent being.

Created being, then, is *love*. Ulrich, gathering up numerous indications of Aquinas himself, uses the notion of gift to elucidate the sense in which this is so. Being, Ulrich affirms, is the self-gift of the absolute, infinite Giver (the Creator)—a gift given away radically to the finite receiver, which is both each creature singly

³⁵*De Potentia* 7, 2, ad 9.

³⁶*Summa Theologiae* I, 8, 1: "*esse autem est illud, quod est magis intimum cuilibet et quod profundius omnibus inest* [but to-be is what is most interior to each thing and what is most deeply in all].

³⁷*De Veritate*, 22, 2, ad 2: "*esse est similitudo divinae bonitatis*" [to-be is a similitude of the divine goodness].

and all creatures collectively (and the creature that receives the gift is itself gift, as we will see below). If to create means to share being (*communicare esse*), then creation is a “dialogical” act of self-gift. And it is therefore not at all absurd to ask “*who* is being as love?” Or: “*who* is the ontological difference, the blueprint of creation, the pure form of created reality?”—as we will see when we come to the anthropological implications of Ulrich’s thought.

If, therefore, we interpret the ontological difference between being and entities³⁸ in this horizon, we realize that the differences between being and essence, or between being and entities, are surpassed in another direction. In the direction, that is, of a finite entity capable of adequately receiving, and responding to, created being as love in a fully personal manner: the finite freedom of man. Man is created dialogue, the personification of the creature’s reception of, and answer to, the gift of being as love (in the unity of receptive spontaneity and spontaneous receptivity).

When man appears on the scene, so, too, does the *dialogical difference* between I and Thou, indeed, between I-Thou-We. Ulrich’s ontology of being as love always transcends itself toward this difference, yet without either being dissolved into, or dissolving, anthropology (there is a reciprocal illumination, without reciprocal imperialization, between metaphysics and anthropology for Ulrich). The interpretive paradigm in light of which the ontological difference of created being as love can be adequately read and in which it is meant to achieve its full form is the dialogical difference of I-Thou-We. The central interpretive paradigm for metaphysics is the “communional we-form” (the *Wir-Gestalt*, the “we-form,” as Ulrich calls it) of finite freedom, whose heart contains the presence of the absolute Giver of being as love.

2. The finitization of being

In the first creation narrative of the Book of Genesis, we read that “God saw all that he had made and, behold, it was very

³⁸Always present within this difference between being and entities is the difference that distinguishes created being from God, as well as the difference within God himself. For, Thomas says, the processions of the persons are in some sense the *ratio creationis*.

good” (Gn 1:31). Can this approach to reality be made fruitful for philosophy? Can we unfold its implications for philosophical intelligence? Can we show that, at its core, the reality of all things is good, that it is a pure “Yes”? Even in the face of, precisely in the face of, experiences that seem to suggest the contrary, such as evil, suffering, and death?

Ulrich’s thought unfolds out of an original insight that echoes the teaching of the Book of Genesis: Being is, in truth, love, love radically given away. Now, Ulrich is a Christian whose faith enables him to recognize the identity between the God who created the world good at the beginning and the God who redeemed it on the Cross. It is therefore fitting that his *philosophical* account of created being as love, while not derived from the theology of the Cross, should nonetheless fully display the radicalness of its implications in light of that theology. Balthasar makes the same point: “Might it not be the case (as Ferdinand Ulrich has tried to show) that the mystery of the end—God’s *kenosis* in Christ—is analogically prefigured in the mystery of the beginning, namely, being as the theme of metaphysics? Might it not be the case that being, whose luminous clearing is coextensive with its noughting, mediates the radiance of the divine only insofar as it is a kind of prophecy pointing ahead to the uttermost humility of the Cross?”³⁹

There is an analogy, then, between being and the kenosis of Christ, insofar as the former reflects the character of the latter: Christ does not cling to his glory (wealth) as if it were something to be grasped at, but empties himself (poverty) in obedience to the point of death on the Cross (Phil 2:6–8). Ulrich explains this analogical mirroring by means of a speculative unfolding of the profound insight of Thomas that created being is “*completum et simplex, sed non subsistens*” (complete and simple, but not subsistent).⁴⁰ This sentence (which pithily expresses a consistent doctrine in Thomas) touches, so Ulrich, the mystery of created being as love. Being is wealth, unity, plenitude, light, life, goodness: pure, simple act (*completum et simplex*). Nevertheless, *as such* it is always given away radically. In this sense, it can be thought of as poverty, refusal to cling to self, expropriatedness, emptiness (the emptiness of love).

³⁹Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III/1, 38.

⁴⁰*De Potentia* 1, 1.

From this point of view, created *esse* is in a special sense nothing (not-a-thing), inasmuch as it does not subsist (*non subsistens*), does not stand as a thing in its own right next to God and above finite entities, does not have a foundation in itself, and, in short, is “not its own master.” It is just here that we glimpse the analogical prefiguration of the poor Christ, who, tortured, crucified, indeed, dead (*unigenitus Patris sepultus*: the only-begotten of the Father, buried) embodies in person the overflowing glory of God’s love. We can think here of Bethlehem: the infant in the manger, who as yet cannot utter a word (*Verbum in-fans*: the unspeaking Word), is in person the eternal Word of the Father, the Logos of the One.

The love embodied in the figure of the Redeemer, then, is the key that finally unlocks the full experience and understanding of the divine love already manifested in being as gift when it flows forth from the hands of the Creator. This brings us back to the relation between philosophy and theology, reason and faith. Ulrich is asking us, in fact, to entertain the following argument. Created being originates in, and is, a self-communication on the part of the Creator. By the same token, created being must be understood “personally”: not, of course, as a person, but as communicating the divine person(s) responsible for created being. Now, Christ is a divine Person who becomes incarnate along the path of the creative donation of being that he, as a divine Person, creatively authors. By doing so, Christ enables us to recognize and enact, by means of faith, the full depth and radicality of the “personal” character of created being as the identity in love of wealth and poverty, fullness and emptiness. Given all of this, says Ulrich, then metaphysics, with its question about being, comes fully into its own precisely when it pursues its account of being in light of this radical christological depth. Which, Ulrich adds, is possible only in the place where salvation is offered through faith in the redemption wrought by Christ: *Maria-Ecclesia* (more on this below).

That having been said, it remains the case that the sort of metaphysics Ulrich envisages is not revealed theology. Consider, among other things, the fact that created being is a gift. This means that it is in very deed *totally given*. It is radically *finitized*, hence, non-divine; it is not that divine Person who brings us revelation in the strict sense. Only so, indeed, is it totally transparent to the Giver precisely in its “natural,” created character. This transparency, in

turn, makes it a fit vehicle for the Incarnation to reveal in a new way the depths of the divine love already concealed in it *ab initio*.

It is important to stress that, for Ulrich, the event of “finitization” does not shatter the unity of being as complete and simple. If finitization involves poverty, this poverty is at the same time the deepest revelation of the wealth of the gift. Being cannot be pinned down somewhere beyond finite entities; it is not some hypostatized *tertium quid* stationed between Creator and creature. On the other hand, the creative act does not leave it at the mercy of entities, a helpless prey to be swallowed whole by them. Every entity, everything thing-that-is, exists and operates in and through the gift of being as love. The finitization of being as gift, in short, does not destroy the plenitude of its unity, but rather limits, unveils, and manifests it epiphanically.

Ulrich goes on from this insight to develop a speculative account of the event of creation as a donation of being. As we have seen, the mystery of the gift of being, which consists in the selfsameness and unity of wealth and poverty (“being” and “no-thing”), occupies the center of Ulrich’s metaphysics.⁴¹ Now, this being is always given—always “present”—only in concrete finite entities. Ulrich therefore takes these finite entities as his starting point. Stepping backwards, as it were, from that platform into the abyss of

⁴¹For this reason, Gustav Siewerth’s claim (in *Der Thomismus als Identitätssystem*, 2nd ed. [Frankfurt, 1961], xxviii) that Ulrich is his disciple (or even his epigone) is incorrect. To be sure, Ulrich’s thought has an affinity with that of this great Catholic metaphysician. Still, as we have seen, Ulrich’s central and basic intuition is that plenitude and no-thing-ness are one, are intrinsic to each other’s identity, in created being because created being is love. And this intuition implies a partial critique of Siewerth, who interprets the “nothing” in being as contradiction (ibid., 196ff.). Indeed, if Ulrich benefitted from Siewerth, there are good reasons to think that Siewerth benefitted even more from Ulrich. On this point, see Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 21–26. Balthasar, in his foreword to Siewerth’s posthumous opusculum on the doctrine of original sin (*Die christliche Erbsündelehre* [Einsiedeln, 1964], 7), seems to corroborate this claim: “The development of Siewerth’s work moved ever more decidedly in this direction. Perhaps we could say that his thought was enriched by a greater integration of the heart (of the whole man) into the understanding, though without any prejudice to the dialectical acuity of the speculative side of that thought. A reasonable guess is that this transfiguration (which truly deserves the name “Christian”) had something to do with the influence of the ideas and writings of Ferdinand Ulrich, who stimulated Siewerth’s thinking in the same unobtrusive yet unmistakable way that Franz von Baader fecundated the thought of the late Schelling.”

the Giver's absolute love, Ulrichian speculation asks how it is that being has made its way to the things-that-are in the first place. How, in other words, do we make sense of the fact that the simple, permanent, integral (*completum et simplex*) plenitude characteristic of being gets finitized, expropriated (*non subsistens*), and made present in the form of gift in the concrete entities in which, to speak with Thomas, it "inheres"⁴²?

For Ulrich, the speculative re- and co-enactment of the donation of being in the event of creation retrieves what he calls the "movement of finitization," or the "movement of subsistence." Of course, Ulrich immediately adds that this "movement" is not a *motus*, a transition from potency to act; it is not the actualization of a possibility by some already actual entity (*ens actu*) in measurable time.⁴³ For even in its non-subsistence, in its finitized gift-character—indeed, precisely therein—being always remains pure act.⁴⁴ This means that, in one and the same act of creation, the gift of being is given to the receiver along with everything that proceeds from this gift.⁴⁵ The receiver is actualized (and not simply actual) by means of the very gift of being in its givenness.

A corollary of the foregoing is that the act of creation, in giving being, *simultaneously* brings forth the spatio-temporality of

⁴²*De Potentia* 7, 2, ad 7: "*intellectus autem noster hoc modo intelligit esse quo modo inveniuntur in rebus inferioribus a quibus scientiam capit, in quibus esse non est subsistens sed inhaerens*" [Our intellect, however, understands *esse* in the mode in which it is found in the lower things from which it gets knowledge, *in which things esse does not subsist but inheres*].

⁴³*Homo Abyssus*, 44: "The movement of subsistence is being's own already traversed 'path' into its status as the being of some *thing* that is. Clearly, this movement is not any sort of *motus*."

⁴⁴See *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 17: "*creatio non est motus neque mutatio*" [creation is neither a movement nor a mutation]; "*motus enim omnis vel mutatio est actus existentis in potentia secundum quod huiusmodi*" [for every movement or mutation is the act of something existing in potency insofar as it is as such].

⁴⁵*De Potentia* 3, 1, ad 17: "*Deus simul dans esse, producit id quod esse recipit*" [God produces that which receives *esse* simultaneous with his giving *esse*]; *De Potentia* 3, 5, ad 2: "*ex hoc ipso quod quidditati esse attribuitur, non solum esse, sed ipsa quidditas creari dicitur: quia antequam esse habeat, nihil est, nisi forte in intellectu creantis, ubi non est creatura, sed creatrix essentia*" [by the very fact that *esse* is allotted to a quiddity, it is not just the *esse*, but the very quiddity itself that is said to be created. The reason is that, before it has *esse*, it (the quiddity) does not exist at all—except, perhaps, in the intellect of the Creator, where it is not a creature, but the creative essence].

material entities, thus manifesting a mysterious dimension hidden within that gift itself.⁴⁶ But, as we have seen, created being as gift is “*non subsistens*,” hence, nothing in a very special sense: not-a-thing. This no-thingness is due to the fact that it is radically given away, once and for all, so that it can never eliminate the traces of the mysterious fact that it “is” being only qua given away. Since being is “*non subsistens*,” then, it is also “pure mediation.”⁴⁷ All of which means that man, perusing the question of being, always finds access to that being *only* where the gift *has been*: given away and expropriated. And that is in the concrete entities that *are*.

3. *Being as gift?*

Now, the exegesis of being that we have laid out here must grapple with a crucial difficulty. On the one hand, Thomas contemplates the finite substance, seeing in it that which has, from the first moment of its existence, *already received being*.⁴⁸ There must, then, be some sense in which the substance precedes being “before” it can receive that being. Substance must somehow be pre-*supposed* as prior to being. On the other hand, however, created being is non-subsistent *plenitude*. It is out of this plenitude that everything else proceeds.⁴⁹ “Outside” of this fullness there is . . . nothing.⁵⁰ Being

⁴⁶This point cannot be unfolded within the limits of the present article. Let me simply refer, then, to the important discussion of spatio-temporality in *Homo Abyssus*, 169–85. One could show, on the basis of this discussion, that Ulrich answers crucial questions left open by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.

⁴⁷“*Reine Vermittlung*”: *Homo Abyssus*, 15. Ulrich’s characterization of being as “pure mediation” is a point of accord with Gustav Siewerth. See Siewerth, *Der Thomismus als Identitätssystem*, 75ff., 131.

⁴⁸*In Libros Metaphysiconum* 12, 1, 4: “*ens dicitur quasi esse habens, hoc autem solum est substantia, quae subsistit*” [that-which-is has the meaning, as it were, of “that which *has esse*.” But the only thing that has *esse* in this sense is the substance, because it is what subsists].

⁴⁹*Summa Theologiae* I-II, 2, 5, ad 2: “*sic enim ipsum esse praehabet in se omnia subsequentia*” [for in this way *esse* itself pre-contains in itself everything that comes after it].

⁵⁰*De Potentia* 7, 2, ad 9: “*Nihil autem potest addi ad esse quod sit extraneum . . . nisi non-ens*” [But nothing can be added to *esse* that would be outside it . . . except non-being].

is the first of all created realities.⁵¹ It must therefore *precede* everything else, including every finite substance. This leads to the difficulty mentioned above, which no less an authoritative interpreter of Thomas than Etienne Gilson saw clearly and put into the form of a question (that he himself was not able to settle in any decisive manner): “The proposition that creation is a gift of being is also misleading, since how can you give something to someone who does not exist? It hardly improves matters to say that creation is a reception of being, since how can something that doesn’t exist receive anything? Let us by all means, if we must, speak of creation as a sort of reception of existence. But let us not claim to be able to form any idea of what this means.”⁵²

Ulrich sees the matter differently. First of all, he does not claim that “being” actively produces creation, or that creation is a gift given by being. Rather, being is a gift by which the absolute Giver, God, creates. Being is the non-subsistent similitude of the love of God. Thus, it is not the Giver, not some free-standing center alongside God out of which creation could proceed. By the same token, neither the “reception” of being nor the receiver itself stands in any kind of opposition to the gift. Rather, it is itself a really distinct presupposition of the gift, even as it is the gift itself that (again: by virtue of the Giver present in, but distinct from, the gift) establishes the receiver as its prior condition. The gift of being, as the mediation of God’s creative love, establishes the receiver of the gift as a prior condition of the very gift itself. A glance at Kierkegaard helps bring us closer to an understanding of this point.

In his *Works of Love*,⁵³ in fact, Kierkegaard ponders what, at bottom, is the mystery of the ontological (and, therefore, dialogical) difference as the heart of love. According to Kierkegaard, love, insofar as it “builds up,” always acts in such a way as to presuppose—and, in so doing, to let itself be given—what it itself creatively achieves. This means that when love’s self-gift arrives somewhere, what is given turns out somehow always to have been there already. Love is somehow always “present” already in the

⁵¹*In Librum De Causis* 4: “*prima rerum creatarum*” [the first of created things].

⁵²Etienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme. Introduction à la philosophie de saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 6th ed. (Paris, 1986), 143.

⁵³S. Kierkegaard, *Der Liebe Tun* (Gesammelte Werke, 19th division) (Düsseldorf/Cologne, 1966).

thing or person to whom it gives itself over. “The lover presupposes that love is present in the heart of the other person, and it is precisely in presupposing this that he, the lover, builds up love in the beloved—from the very foundation, since the lover presupposes that love is present already in that foundation.”⁵⁴ And: “Love builds up by presupposing that love is present.”⁵⁵

In other words, the fact that the receiver is presupposed by the working of love does not stand in contradiction to the other fact that “outside [of the gift] there is nothing except non-being.” On the contrary, that presupposition is the epiphany of the total comprehensiveness of the gift itself. “There was nothing in me that preceded all his gifts or could serve as a vessel to receive them. The first of his gifts, which laid the basis for all the others, is that which I call my self: God has given me this self.” “The God who created me has given me myself.” “Everything is gift: He who receives the gift is himself first a gift to himself that he has received.”⁵⁶

Excursus: the pedagogical act

The teaching of children offers a paradigmatic example of this. Suppose that an educator (who is by office a lover) recognizes in a child a special gift, which for the time being remains undeveloped. Such an educator will attempt to foster the child, to communicate enthusiasm to the child, above all to stimulate the child from within—precisely at the point where the child can discover, cultivate, and perfect his gift *by and in himself*. It goes without saying that this process must be helped along at first through a judicious use of external means. For example, an educator will normally have to keep intervening “from the outside,” sometimes with a certain (pedagogically sensitive) pressure, to move a child with, say, a gift for the piano to start practicing in a (self)disciplined manner. Nevertheless, the pedagogical act only finally succeeds when the child begins to discover in himself what the educator does for him out of love. He must discover it as a creative capacity of his own

⁵⁴Ibid., 241.

⁵⁵Ibid., 247.

⁵⁶Fénelon, MS 108.

freedom, which he thus experiences as gift; he must freely enter into a communion of action with the teacher and so begin to bear fruit. It is only then that the child experiences the step from law (“you must practice the piano”) up into the realm of freedom (“I, myself [!], actually like to play the piano”).

Notice that what the educator does for the child (in this case, awaken the child to his own talent) becomes (already is) the primordially proper act of the child himself. The pedagogical event, then, is not a relation of cause and effect (mechanically understood), but rather of a generative donation in the freedom of love. The actuality lying at the term of the process as a kind of ontological future was always there already in the child as a kind of ontological past. It therefore blossoms at the juncture where the gift is at once totally received and totally the child’s own, in “freedom’s *present* tense.”⁵⁷ The child brings forth entirely “by himself” the very same thing that the educator proposed to him as a kind of “future.” The child could do this because the proposal preceded him, lying as it did in the freedom of the educator. At the same time, however, what the child brings forth had always lain in him, was always the presupposition of the educator’s love. We thus return to Kierkegaard: Love presupposes that what it achieves in the other is already there. Such love alone is the true fruitfulness of freedom that is in accord with the being of both educator and pupil. For it is only when the unity of free giving and free receiving has come into being that the educator’s gift of nurturing attention is at last truly given: totally and in freedom.

It is important to keep in mind in this context that love presupposes the beloved precisely as the *unique other* that he is, rather than understanding him as the prolongation of the lover’s own will. If the child really plays the piano only because the educator wants him to; if the child is not moved to do so by any enthusiasm that comes from within himself, then the relation between them is a purely external, loveless concatenation of (mechanical) cause and effect. If the educator thinks that the child must play, but does not love the child enough to consider the child’s own good or to affirm the child in himself, then the educator ultimately fails to presuppose the child in his personal uniqueness as another freedom. Rather, the

⁵⁷This is meant to evoke a title of one of Ulrich’s books: *Die Gegenwart der Freiheit* [The Presence of Freedom].

educator regards the child as a stage for the performance of his own monological will to power, as if the child were simply there in order for the educator to act out his own ideas. This would be a violation of the ontological difference in its dialogical form; it would be a way for the stronger party (the educator) to force the difference into a violent closure.

This example of the child who is no longer loved as a unique, unmanipulable other, but is only the passive object of the educator's self-assertive will, confirms negatively the value of successful pedagogy. And when we transpose that positive value back into the metaphysical contemplation of being as love with the negative case in mind as a foil, we glimpse what it means to say that creation is a donation of being that lets the recipient of the donation *be*. We also begin to understand why that letting-be must include the gift of freedom, which liberates the other in the uniqueness and fruitfulness of its own self-being.

Reply to Gilson

Perhaps we are now in a position to understand better how to respond to the difficulty expressed by Gilson. Being is sheer obedience to the Giver. It is pure gift and, at the same time, pure mediation. On the one hand, then, everything proceeds from being. On the other hand, the "everything" that so proceeds is not simply a prolongation of being, but is a really distinct other that is presupposed by the being thus given. In its obedience to the Giver, created being is a sheer "letting proceed" of *all things* out of itself as fullness of love (*completum*). It gives itself to the receiver in one and the same act in which it flows forth from God (*non subsistens*); better, it does not so much give itself as it is given away, expropriated of all selfhood in order to be the act of being by which the receiver exists as a "self" in its or his otherness.

Moreover, the other, having received the gift of being, is enabled, by virtue of this being it has received, with its simultaneity of being and being given, to be fruitful. In this fruitfulness, the recipient "brings forth" the selfsame gift from itself—precisely by enacting itself as a freedom that from its very roots is a gift to itself. Being, the similitude of the love of God, "builds up" the substance by presupposing the substance and by presupposing that it has

already received the gift. Being is given in such a way that, as soon as it is given, it was “already” in the receiver. This brings us closer to understanding how Thomas can say in the same breath both that the substance is the proper receiver of being and that everything that exists proceeds from being, inasmuch as nothing is outside being except: non-being.

The point may perhaps become clearer when we consider what it means to “be alive.” Consider how we speak about life. We often use expressions that suggest that life is in some sense a unity that individual living things share in, indeed, a dynamic fullness out of which every living thing has somehow *proceeded*. The intuition underlying such expressions seems to persist even in a post-Darwinian world: “Life has evolved,” we often say. This intuition, I would argue, grasps something essential about the nature of being alive, since, as Aristotle tells us, *living* is just what *being* looks like on the level of living things.⁵⁸ And being is in some sense a unity in which all existing things share.

At the same time, of course, “being alive” is not some (living) *thing* that exists alongside individual living things. In a certain sense, in fact, there is no such thing as “being alive”—unless, that is, individual living things bring forth the activity of living by means of their own concrete nature, that is, by being what they are, by achieving themselves *as themselves*. That, in fact, is just the point: To be alive means, among other things, to be the one who is “making a living” for oneself, even as “making a living” is an entelechy, a constant, self-recursive activity of maintaining oneself as the kind of thing one is. And it is just in this entelechy that being (here: the being of the living entity) manifests itself in its difference from the receiver of being.

The same thing holds analogously, then, for being. Created being is an overflowing fullness, yet it has been radically given away. Expropriated, being is utter poverty, in that it does not exist for

⁵⁸Aristotle, *De Anima* II, 4. Compare Thomas I *Sententiarum* 8, 5, 3, ad 3: “Vivere est ipsum esse viventibus” [To be alive is what to-be itself is for living things]; I *Sententiarum* 8, 1, 1: “esse inter omnes alias divinae bonitatis participationes, sicut vivere et intelligere et huiusmodi, primum est, et quasi principium aliorum, praehabens in se omnia praedicta, secundum quemdam modum unita” [to be is the first among all the other participations of divine goodness such as to be alive and to be understanding and the like. It is a sort of principle of the others, pre-containing in itself all the aforesaid participations united according to a certain mode].

itself, but is always already handed over to the other that has proceeded from it. There is never a moment, then, when being is not yet available as the actuality by which this other exists in its own right and comes into its own. So much so, in fact, that the creature itself brings forth the activity of *be-ing* from itself. Being is in things; it is the actuality of things insofar as it “results” from their constitutive principles (in this sense, then, it “proceeds” from essential form and matter), just as the light is the act of the luminescent object.⁵⁹ Thomas illustrates this with the image of running: Being *does not exist*, just as running does not run.⁶⁰ But the runner runs, indeed, the runner *brings forth running!* Unlike running, of course, being does not just “result” from the inner principles of things; it also precedes those very things and their principles. The point is simply that it manifests its precedence within the logic of love, presupposing as (secondary) source the very thing that proceeds from it (insofar as it is the pure mediation of the creative act).

The idea that creation is a *donation of being* is not “misleading,” then, but is actually the key to an account of how being can both precede and result from the recipient substance that is “presupposed” by it. For the category of donation or gift brings into play the notions of giver and receiver, or, more deeply, of lover and beloved. But if being is love, then it is the logic of love that illumines how being can presuppose what it actualizes in the creature (even as pondering this simultaneity of created being’s preceding and resulting from the creature helps us understand what it means to say that being is love). The creative act, as a donation of being, becomes fully accessible to our understanding and participation when we ponder this act as a mystery of personal, creative love (and vice versa). Seen in light of this love, the notion of creation reveals a deeper fruitfulness—also and precisely for metaphysics as such.

⁵⁹III *Sententiarum* 6, 2, 2: “*esse est in re, et est actus entis resultans ex principiis rei, sicut lucere est actus lucentis*” [be-ing is in the thing, and it is the act of that-which-is, resulting from the principles of the thing, just as shin-ing is the act of the shining object].

⁶⁰*Summa Theologiae* I, 50, 2, ad 3: “*ipsum autem esse est quo substantia est, sicut cursus est quo currens currit*” [now, the activity of be-ing is that by which the substance is, just as the activity of runn-ing is that by which the runner runs].

4. *The donation of being means man*

If we agree that the paradigm for interpreting being is the personal relationship between lover and beloved (even as the latter illuminates the former in turn), then it becomes plausible to say, as Ulrich does, that God's creative donation of being ultimately aims at man. For with the appearance of a rational, free creature such as man, God finally has a substance that can receive and requite his personal love in a fully personal fashion. In a certain sense, then, man is the reference-point in relation to which God has brought the entirety of pre-personal creation into being.

If Ulrich is right, then the entire creation is a gift to itself by the simple fact that it has received the donation of being. Moreover, the creature is given to itself in order to achieve itself, and, to the extent that the creature succeeds in this task, it is a response to the gift of being. For the creature to be is for it to thank God for its being. The heart of creation is ontological gratitude.⁶¹

The gift of being is the gift of ontological freedom; it is the gift of liberation into one's own subsistence. Subsistence, for its part, is the beginning of a self-achievement in virtue of the gift; subsistence is a thing's giving itself to itself within its act of receiving the gift of itself from God. It is ontological gratitude for the gift of being that the subsistent has received.

Nevertheless, it remains that subsistence is not yet complete on the sub-human level alone. To be sure, every creature is a gift given to itself, and every creature in some sense takes over and achieves the gift as it were in its own name. Nevertheless, this event rises to its intended completion only with the appearance of a creature who takes over and achieves the gift of being by means of a fully conscious, loving response to the Creator.⁶²

⁶¹In this sense, the ontological constitution of creation is transparent to the mystery of the Eucharist. Substance is intrinsically open to trans-substantiation in the personal medium of being as love. It goes without saying that this openness does not mean that the substance can achieve trans-substantiation on its own initiative and by its own innate resources.

⁶²These considerations could serve as a basis for a critical dialogue with scientific, particularly, biological, thought, which is characterized by the idea of development and evolution. Ulrich himself has undertaken this sort of dialogue in, for example, "Evolution—Geschichte—Transzendenz," in *Evoluzione e storia umana. Atti del XXI. Convegno internazionale del Centro di Studi Filosofici, Gallarate 1967* (Brescia,

Animals are not endowed with choice. They achieve their self-being, of course, but their achievement is bound to a set course dictated by their given nature. True, man, too, has a nature, but this nature is self-conscious and rational. For this very reason, human nature is not merely something man “*is*”; it is also something he *has*. In a certain sense, man attains full possession of himself in and through his nature; his nature enables him to be present to himself in the full sense. But this very self-presence enables man to hold himself freely in a certain relation to his own nature, as well as to his fellow creatures (who are also gifts to him), and, in both, to his Creator.⁶³

This suggests that only the person subsists in the proper and full sense of the term, inasmuch as the person is the only subsistent whose self-being includes the capacity for awareness of the gift of his own being *as* gift. The person not only stands on himself as the ground under his feet, but this subsistence of his includes the ability to recognize himself *as* himself, and (in principle) to recognize himself *as* given to himself. In the words of Johann Baptist Lotz:

In virtue of self-consciousness, [the person] distinguishes himself from everything else and places himself over against it. He takes possession of himself and rests in himself. For this reason, the person is free-standing, containing in himself the ground he stands on, and that in a unique sense. The person’s disposal over himself intensifies this self-possession; because he is free, in fact, the person rises above the influence of external impetus and preserves his independence from them. Indeed, the person himself becomes a source of such impetus, thus guiding events in a direction they never would have taken without his initiative. Personal freedom completes the sense in which the person is a free-standing self.⁶⁴

1968), 253–321.

⁶³*Summa Theologiae* I, 59, 3: “*ubicumque est intellectus, est librum arbitrium*” [wherever there is intellect, there is also freedom to judge among courses of action].

⁶⁴J. B. Lotz, *Der Mensch im Sein. Versuche zur Geschichte der Philosophie* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna, 1967), 361. We must not forget, of course, that to be oneself is first to be thanksgiving for the gift of one’s being. To be oneself is not simply a matter of being in oneself, or of standing on the ground of oneself. Self-being includes these qualities, of course, but only in virtue of the fact that we are anteriorly sustained in being by the Creator from moment to moment. Subsistence

The act of creation is a donation of being whose goal is man. But man is called to receive the gift—and so be(come) himself in freedom. Man is not just ontologically obedient like all sub-human creatures. His ontological obedience takes on a form proper to him because he receives the gift as embodied spirit. Paradoxically, this specific form of ontological obedience gives man's way of receiving being a universal significance that mirrors the universality of the gift of being itself. Man is a privileged, paradigmatic reflection of the gift of being.⁶⁵ Man belongs in a special way to being.⁶⁶

Man's intellectual soul, while finite, is opened by its very essence into the *super*-essential dimension of being (super-essential insofar as it is distinct from the essential order, hence, not a thing, even as it is the source of things). "In accord with his essence," writes Ulrich, man performs "the act of transcendence into the infinite horizon of being,"⁶⁷ which is to say: into the act of being,

is intrinsically and primarily self-reception from, and self-return to, the Creator.

⁶⁵In my opinion, Heidegger's thought aims at articulating a similar intuition. In *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (*Gesamtausgabe*, Section I, volume 3 [Frankfurt, 1991]), 320, Heidegger writes: "The problem of the foundation of metaphysics is rooted in the question about the existence of man, which is to say: about man's inmost ground, about the understanding of being as by essence existent finitude. . . . Accordingly, the foundation of metaphysics has its ground in a metaphysics of *Dasein*" [*Das Problem der Grundlegung der Metaphysik findet seine Wurzel in der Frage nach dem Dasein des Menschen, d.h. nach dessen innerstem Grunde, nach dem Seinsverständnis als der wesentlich existenten Endlichkeit Demnach gründet die Grundlegung der Metaphysik in einer Metaphysik des Daseins*].

⁶⁶Heidegger makes a similar point in *Identität und Differenz*, 11th ed. (Stuttgart, 1999), 18: "Now, the quality that makes man stand out from everything else rests upon his nature as the entity that thinks. As such, he is open to being, placed before being, permanently related to being, and, in this way, he corresponds to it. Properly speaking, man *is* this relation of correspondence, and he is nothing but this relation. 'Nothing but'—this implies, not a limitation, but an excess beyond measure. In man there is a belonging to being that works its will. This belonging is an obedience to being, because this belonging is handed over to the ownership of being" (emphasis mine) [*Aber das Auszeichnende des Menschen beruht darin, daß er als das denkende Wesen, offen dem Sein, vor dieses gestellt ist, auf das Sein bezogen bleibt und ihm so entspricht. Der Mensch ist eigentlich dieser Bezug der Entsprechung, und er ist nur dies. 'Nur'—dies meint keine Beschränkung, sondern ein Übermaß. Im Menschen waltet ein Gehören zum Sein, welches Gehören auf das Sein hört, weil es diesem übereignet ist*].

⁶⁷F. Ulrich, "Über die spekulative Natur des philosophischen Anfangs," in F. Pöggeler, ed. *Innerlichkeit und Erziehung. In Memoriam Gustav Siewerth—Zum*

in virtue of which existing things are called *entia*, “beings.”⁶⁸ For this reason, it is these *entia*, these things-that-are (and not some “being” suspended above them like one of the hypostases that populated Gnostic mythology) that provide both the starting point and the end point of all our understanding: “*quod primo intellectus concipit quasi notissimum, et in quo omnes conceptiones resolvit, est ens*” [that which the intellect first conceives, as if most known, and in which it resolves all of its conceptions, is *ens*, that-which-is].⁶⁹

The word “*ens*” articulates something which the mind finds itself already pregnant with (“*concipit*”: conceives) at every point. All human inquiry into what is unfolds within an always prior realization that entities *are* (this is “*quasi notissimum*”: most known, as it were). *Ens*, and the understanding of this *ens* that wells up in light of the *actus essendi*, permanently enable and underlie all thinking. And not just all thinking, but also all striving as well. For, according to Thomas, there are *two* basic capacities *for being* that spring up in the intellectual soul in the context of its relation and ordination to *ens*: intellect and rational appetite or will.⁷⁰

Man’s intellectual soul extends its reach to the *very totality of being*. For, as Thomas, following Aristotle, says, the intellectual soul is in a certain sense all things: *anima quodammodo omnia*. From its very origin, it is created to agree with all that is: “*natum. . . convenire cum omni ente*” [born . . . to come to an agreement with every *ens*].⁷¹ For the same reason, says Thomas, man cannot not know (at least implicitly) what it means for being to be being.⁷² If this is the case, however, it must be because the *anima intellectiva*, the intellectual

Gespräch zwischen Pädagogik, Philosophie und Theologie (Freiburg, 1964), 27–72; 33f. Compare *Summa Theologiae* I, 76, 5, ad 4: “*anima intellectiva, quia est universalium comprehensiva, habet virtutem ad infinita*” [because the intellectual soul has the ability to grasp universals, it has the capacity *for an infinity of things*].

⁶⁸*De Veritate*, 1, 1: “*hoc nomen ens . . . sumitur ab actu essendi*” [this noun ‘being’ . . . is derived from the act of be-ing].

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*De Veritate* 11, ad 3: “. . . oportet quod . . . praesciamus . . . rationem . . . ipsius entis, quae nobis ignota esse non potest” [it is necessarily the case that we know in advance what it means for an entity to be a being. This is a matter that cannot be unknown to us].

soul, is awakened *a priori* by the light of being itself, in which it is created for an unlimited openness to everything that exists.

On the other hand, the human person concretely subsists, not just as spirit, but as embodied spirit. Every human being is a unique incarnation. Precisely for this reason, man's *a priori* aperture to being *cannot* be separated from his *a posteriori* experience of his embodied, individualized, historical being-in-the-world. There is never a moment, in fact, when man does not find himself, prior to all choice, amidst a manifold of relations on account of his body and his senses. There is never a moment when he does not find himself engaged with the things of the world, as they present themselves to him in all their material, sensible, and historical concreteness. Thus, while the original accord of the *anima* with all entities as such is given *a priori*, this accord is not some sort of "ready-made," self-contained structure that guarantees any immediate actual possession of all being. The point is rather that the soul's original accord with *ens* is a *gift* that is also a *task*, a task whose achievement will be the soul's most personal and proper enactment of its own life.

Significantly, Thomas says that the *anima humana* is "born apt" to come to agree with all entity as such. The accord with *ens*, in other words, does not simply happen in an immediate fashion. Rather, it is the achievement of the cognitive and appetitive powers that well up from the essence of the soul. The first of these powers, the intellect, tends toward *ens* insofar as it something true, while the second of these powers, the will, tends toward it insofar as it is something good.⁷³ Nevertheless, the intellectual soul needs more than just the mediation of the powers that well up from its essence in order to attain the world in this way. Since the soul is united with the body—which we therefore both are and have—"in one and the same being,"⁷⁴ it also needs the mediation of its own embodied,

⁷³*De Veritate* 1, 1: "in anima autem est vis cognitiva et appetitiva. Convenientiam ergo entis ad appetitum exprimit hoc nomen bonum, ut in principio ethic. dicitur: bonum est quod omnia appetunt. Convenientiam vero entis ad intellectum exprimit hoc nomen verum" [Now, in the soul there is a cognitive power and an appetitive power. Therefore, the accord of that-which-is with the appetite is expressed by this substantive "the good," as Aristotle says at the beginning of his *Ethics*: "The good is what all things strive to attain." The accord of that-which-is with the intellect, however, is expressed by this substantive "the true"].

⁷⁴See *De Anima* 1, ad 1: "licet anima habeat esse completum non tamen sequitur quod corpus ei accidentaliter uniatur; tum quia illud idem esse quo est anima communicat corpori,

sensitive nature. By the same token, the soul never attains the horizon of *ens* as such, or enjoys its original openness to the whole of reality, in pure isolation (not even when it is doing metaphysics). Its attainment of *ens* as such always coincides somehow with its accomplishment of the task of knowing and loving finite, material *entia* in all their multiplicity within the concrete, material reality of the world.

A crucially important consequence of the foregoing is that man's intellect, receptive vis-à-vis being, places him in the *same* movement of finitization (and materialization) that characterizes created being as the Creator's gift. True, man is the full revelation of the character of created *esse* as *completum et simplex*, inasmuch as he is open to the entire fullness of existing things thanks to his intellectual soul (as "*quodammodo omnia*"), which is like a flower unclosed from its roots toward the whole of being. Nevertheless, as we have just seen, man can touch being as such only where it is present—always already—in its finitized, materialized form. That is, he can reach being only in his concrete, embodied, and historical engagement with what is other than himself. In this sense, man fully reveals the character of created *esse* as *non subsistens*.

Man, we have been saying, both recognizes the finitization of created *esse* and embodies it in that very recognition. Looking at man, we understand what it means to say that created being is both complete and simple, but non-subsistent.

Ulrich, ever the realist, does not simply present the ideal, but also tirelessly unmask man's failure to attain being as love, just as he ceaselessly enumerates the countless ways in which human thought is tempted to go astray in this matter. On the one hand, man endeavors time and again to usurp for himself the role of *being as*

ut sit unum esse totius compositi" [although the soul has a complete *esse*, it nevertheless does not follow that the body is united to it accidentally; first because the soul communicates to the body that very *esse* by which it, the soul, is, so that it may be the one *esse* of the whole composite]; *De Potentia* 6, 6, ad 8: "*nam anima hoc modo corpus vivificare potest, in quantum habet esse infimum, quod sibi et corpori potest esse commune in composito ex utroque*" [for the soul can make the body be alive in this way: insofar as it has a low-level *esse* which can be common in the composite formed of both body and soul]; *De Potentia* 3, 9, ad 20: "*in homine non est duplex esse*" [there are not two *esse*'s in man]—which means, among other things, that man is not formed by adding together a "*res cogitans*" and a "*res extensa*" in the fashion of Descartes.

being, to establish his reign, as it were, in the place of (what he imagines to be) a hypostatized being. Man tries, in other words, to establish himself in himself, to create his own subsistence, and to repress the memory of having received. By stifling the voice of ontological thanksgiving in himself, he hopes to spare himself the “little way” (as Thérèse of Lisieux called it) of loving expropriation in and for the other. On the other hand, man may succumb to the opposite temptation. He perverts being’s “nothingness” (*non-subsistens*), as if being simply disappeared into the things that are. The result of this perversion is the decomposition of the unity of being, a decomposition that excludes any comprehension of the multiplicity of concrete entities in light of being’s mysterious oneness. Positivism degrades things to the level of mere objects mutely available for a high-handed reason that seeks to reign in splendid isolation.

Nevertheless, even these temptations confirm, negatively, that the finitization of being is fully revealed in man and in his achievement of himself as a gift to himself. Man is the “basic pattern” of the gift of being and the final form at which it aims. In saying all of this, however, Ulrich is not attempting to dissolve ontology into anthropology. Ulrich’s point is just the opposite. Man, Ulrich says, is called to accomplish the donation of being *according to a normative pattern*, which is to say: he must fulfill the donation of being as a lover. Let us unpack the meaning of this claim.

Man is called to achieve his creatureliness through thanksgiving. Precisely when he does so, however, he makes manifest that being is pure gift, the pure *gratis* of love, which is communicated by the Creator in absolute freedom to all that is. Insofar as he loves, man himself freely gives, and freely gives *freedom*; insofar as he loves, man lets be. That man “lets be” means that he affirms things, saying “Yes” to their being as gift (to themselves) from the Creator. He learns to perceive the whole of creation in the light of its gift-character. True, love makes him rich because it enables him to give himself. In one and the same act, however, love also makes him poor, because it opens him to let himself be given the gift of the unique other (which or whom he presupposes as a freedom in its or his own right). This movement of love is a replaying, indeed, a participation in, the gesture of creation. For not only does this love presuppose the unique other and, in so doing, give the other the gift of freedom. In this very act, love simultaneously consents to, and

affirms, the more original, that is, anterior donation of being, thanks to which the other has always already been presupposed by God himself—as a gift of freedom put into its own hands by the Creator. It follows from this that the other is always a gift that I must receive, but that I never simply have at my beck and call, just as I am a gift to myself and to the other.

The gift-character of reality, manifested already in the mystery of substance (or subsistence), becomes fully articulate for the first time in the subsistence that has attained the level of conscious freedom. At the same time, man's achievement of his own subsistence is a replay of the finitization of being as love. Consequently, man is not really given to himself as a lover in the full meaning of the word until he stands face-to-face with the freedom of another person. It is not until he lives in relation to a "Thou" that man is given the full access to his own innate freedom to love and so can reveal the goal that was the *raison d'être* of the finitization of being as love (hence, of the creative act as a donation of being): "love thy neighbor as thyself." The existence of this love depends wholly on the presence of the absolute Giver in the gift that we his creatures receive. We can love in this way only if God has eternally taken the first step in loving us. And he has done just that. So absolutely that we can find no deeper or more comprehensive position from which to call into question that we are loved by the Creator.

II. Philosophy and Theology

1. Grace perfects nature

It is now time to return to the question of philosophy and theology. The foregoing has, I hope, shed some light on Ulrich's claim that it is faith that first makes philosophy philosophical in the full sense of the word. God is the absolute Giver of created being as love. His act of giving being is at the same time an act of giving freedom; it is a liberation of the creature into the self-achievement proper to it. These truths eliminate any lingering suspicion that, contrary to appearances, at bottom the gift might still be "stuck" to the Origin. On the contrary, being has been completely ("*completum*") given. So much so, in fact, that an abyss of difference between Giver and gift opens up out of the ground-less liberality of the

Creator and the gratuity of his gift. This difference radically pulls the ground out from under any (pseudo-) metaphysical thought bent on using its own putative precomprehension of differenceless being in order to capture God as the “*summum ens*” lying at the top of some pyramid of “*entia*.”

It is well-known that Heidegger critiqued this approach to God as “onto-theology,” which amounts to an attempt to make being fully comprehensible as an instrument for taking possession of the Absolute.⁷⁵ The foregoing should have made it clear that Ulrich’s thought is immune to this critique. Indeed, Ulrich’s philosophy draws its life from having received the gift of being as love *gratis*. Its roots, then, lie in an original experience of creatureliness, so that it is permeated with an expectation of the mysterious “ad-vent” of being as gratuitous gift. Its rootedness in gratuity gives this philosophy its freedom. Because it acknowledges, and lovingly participates in, the donation of being, the kind of philosophy Ulrich exemplifies is free and fruitful. On the one hand, it is unfettered by any compulsion to hypostatize being’s simple completeness in order to bring being within our intellectual grasp. On the other hand, it is equally free from the constraint to pervert the poverty of being’s non-subsistence by treating being as an abstract “nothing”; it resists positivism’s temptation to bury being in the things-that-are, which then become the empty material out of which a loveless science forces concrete subsistence to emerge as the result of its own autonomous experiment. Avoiding both these extremes, Ulrichian philosophy is able to accept and ponder all that is in light of its being as gift.

Now, insofar as it does ponder all that is in light of being as gift, the sort of philosophy Ulrich proposes is free in relation to revelation and theology. It is free because, already saturated with the awareness of being a gift to itself precisely as philosophy, it is unburdened by any need for self-defense. It has no need to maintain a constant tense watch over its closed borders, lest any faith invade its autonomous heartland. It has no need to remain within the circle of its own inner monologue, lest anyone suspect that philosophical reason has contracted some undue dependence on theology or faith. Philosophy, on Ulrich’s account, is not obliged to draw a precisely

⁷⁵For a *locus classicus* of the Heideggerian critique of onto-theology, see Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*.

fixed, autonomous border around itself as a tactic to secure its proper philosophical profile—in order then (perhaps unconfessedly) to fill up this empty form with all sorts of theologoumena, as has often been the case particularly in modern philosophy, despite its declarations of independence from theology. Ulrich proposes philosophy as thinking in thanksgiving (perhaps we could say: thinking in the living form of a thinking that *is* thanking and vice versa). A thinking that is captive “in obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), but which precisely this service has freed to be itself as philosophy.⁷⁶

Philosophy, of course, falls within the domain of “nature” (in the ontological sense), and its performance is the achievement of “natural” thinking. But the presence of the grace of the Incarnate Logos within nature rescues this natural thinking from its servitude and frees it for its perfection as philosophical, precisely by including it within a larger horizon of faith. Grace presupposes nature, perfecting, rather than destroying, it.⁷⁷ What, then, might this “perfected” philosophy look like?

The first thing to note is that a philosophy, such as Ulrich’s, that accepts and ponders all that is in light of the gift of being is a discipline that unfolds with rigorous consistency out of an original intuition (i.e., that being is gift). In such a philosophy, the living texture of the whole retains a primacy over the individual arguments. This does not mean, of course, that philosophy can dispense with rational discourse. The point is rather that such discourse flows from, remains within, and returns to, one and the same original intuition (of the simultaneity of wealth and poverty in created being as love). By the same token, philosophy, as Ulrich understands it, is in an important sense inaccessible to anyone who, avoiding the risk of the question of being, insists on the “objectifying” (but not truly objective) posture of the supposedly external, neutral observer.⁷⁸

⁷⁶On this point, see *Homo Abyssus*, 6.

⁷⁷*Summa Theologiae* I, 2, 2, ad 1: “*sic enim fides praesupponit cognitionem naturalem sicut gratia naturam, et ut perfectio perfectibile*” [for faith presupposes natural knowledge as grace presupposes nature, and as perfection presupposes the perfectible]. See also *De Veritate* 14, 10, ad 9; *Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 8, ad 2.

⁷⁸One reason why Ulrich’s work has not encountered more of an echo in the guild may be that it presents the task of pondering the question of being as a risk that involves the whole person. For, when looked at from the outside, anything

For Ulrich, in fact, philosophy is not simply one more interesting intellectual game among others. Rather, philosophy is the pondering of being as love. But, if man is the personal representative of the finitization of being itself (as we saw in the previous section of this essay), it follows that philosophy, so understood, makes a demand on the whole man. Thinking in this sense is therefore demanding. It requires decision. This is not a mere metaphor: If created being is God's personal self-communication, then the thinking of being—philosophy—is *saturated with a personal, demanding "call,"* and it is in being held "captive" by this call that thought will be liberated into its own freedom.

It is important to stress that Ulrich's philosophical ideal is nonetheless far removed from any sort of ready-made ideology. Ulrichian thought is not about comfortably settling down to the complacent enjoyment of the amenities of any self-sufficient rational system. It is not about judging everything and everyone from the lofty height of such a hybrid total view of the universe. After all, one of the key insights of Ulrich's philosophy is precisely that there is no univocal concept of being that an "abstract science" could possess among its stockpile of intellectual resources. By the same token, a philosophy that renounces such a pseudo-metaphysical yardstick is hardly going to try to apply it to other philosophical projects, as if, by measuring their distance from the "truth," it could assign each one its place, in relation both to the others and to the whole of the ultimate "abstract" system that would result from this. Such an undertaking, again, would hypostatize being "alongside" the Giver and "above" the finite. But unless we affirm the finitization of being, unless we say "Yes" to the gift as given and receive, we betray being as love.

Of course, the sort of philosophy at stake here makes judgments about other philosophical positions. Nevertheless, it judges along the path of love. It traverses the "little way" of patience and hope. Knowing that it is "not yet" in full possession of the truth of being as love, it joins the thinkers it judges in searching for the (hidden) presence of that truth in their thought. In so doing, it seeks

that calls for this involvement can appear to place one peremptorily before an all-or-nothing decision. Seen from the inside, however, Ulrich's thought has nothing to do with any such peremptory demand. His philosophy is precisely that: thought, and not ideology.

to bring this truth (which is perhaps obscured by layers of misrecognition) to light. It seeks to serve the epiphany of this truth and its victory in all. For “*verum est index sui et falsi*”: The truth shows both itself and the false (but not vice versa). It is in this spirit that Ulrich dialogues with a host of thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Hegel, Heidegger, and others.

If we ask what this “truth” is, then we can say that it is man himself insofar as he loves, for in loving man achieves his task as *Dasein*: the personal presence (*Da*) of the gift of being (*Sein*) finitized, received, and thanked for. At the center of philosophy, so Ulrich, there thus stands man as the inner “blueprint” or pattern of the event of creation as the gift of being. And (to return to the theme of philosophy and theology), this center of philosophy opens into the center of theology, and vice versa.

Since created being is already as “nature” the expression of the personal self-gift of the living Transcendent, its reception by man is the precise “place” where the center of philosophy and the center of theology open up to each other in the sense suggested just now. Let me end this section by briefly suggesting a way of understanding this mutual openness.

Consider, in fact, that Christ is the icon of the Father, not just as God from God, but *also as true man*. This has two important implications. It implies, on the one hand, that Christ’s revelation of God gives us the deepest insights, not only into the mystery of God, but also into the mystery of who man is. Christ sheds the most powerful light on the reason for man’s existence and on his relationship to God, his fellow men, and to himself within the world. In faith, hope, and love (all three theological virtues form one supernatural gift of eternal life to man), man sees who he originally is in truth and who he is to become.

The original pattern at which the entirety of man’s being aims is Christ, through whom and in whom everything has been created: Christ is the New Adam (1 Cor 15:45). Thus, when a man lives by faith in Christ, he takes his stand (he subsists) trustingly on the fact that the gift of being has been truly *given*: “If you do not believe (trust), you *are not*” (Is 7:9; cf. Jn 8:24). Having said this, we see the second of the two implications mentioned just now: Faith in Christ reveals the depths of man because it reveals, indeed, *is*, the most concrete form of his reception of the gift of being. Faith is the

unsurpassable recapitulation and sealing of man's embodiment of the finitization of created being as love.

According to Thomas, in fact, when man knows and loves another (person or thing), man becomes that other in some sense.⁷⁹ At the same time, man's identification with the other is simultaneous with his becoming more himself; in the act of becoming the other, man also achieves himself. He completes what Thomas calls his "return" to himself.⁸⁰ Moreover, at that very moment, he touches the absolute Origin of the gift both of his own being and of that of the other person whom the Origin has entrusted to him. To be lovingly present to the unique other and to be oneself, with one's own grounding in oneself, are two sides of one and the same act, and in and through this same we touch being as gift, and, in touching being, touch the absolute Giver who is present in his gift.

This account of "natural" knowledge and love suggests that the "supernatural" love of God and neighbor, while the fruit of grace, both presupposes and brings to completion the "natural" act of touching *being* and the Giver of being in other things and other people. This is why the dialogical character of Ulrich's philosophizing, which I sketched earlier in this section, is so important. For Ulrich's attempt to journey with, say, Nietzsche or Heidegger, to the point where man receives the gift of being as the "theme" of creation, is *simultaneously an act of Christian love of neighbor and of rigorous philosophical analysis*. And the point I have been trying to make in this section is precisely that it is the one because it is the other, and vice versa. Faith fecundates philosophy, even as it presupposes (according to the logic of gift) and enhances philosophy as an expression of man's freedom, whose ontological intensification consists precisely in the fruitfulness born of the acceptance and

⁷⁹*Summa Theologiae* I, 87, 1, ad 3: "*intellectus in actu est intellectum in actu*" [the intellect in act is the thing intellected in act]; *De Malo* 6, 1, ad 13: "*amor dicitur transformare amantem in amatum, in quantum per amorem movetur amans in ipsam rem amatam*" [love is said to *transform* the lover into the beloved, inasmuch as, by love, the lover moves into the very thing loved].

⁸⁰See Thomas on the coincidence of knowledge of the other with the completion of the "return into oneself," about which Aquinas writes, in *Summa Theologiae* I, 14, 2, ad 1; "*Redire ad essentiam suam nihil aliud est quam rem subsistere in seipsa*" [For a thing to return to its essence is nothing other than *for it to subsist in itself*].

grateful affirmation of being as gift. *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed praesupponit et perficit eam.*

2. "Pure finitude"

So far, we have presented Ulrich's contemplation of the mystery of being as love and have described the ideal human being called in God's plan for creation to assume this mystery in love. This description led us in turn to the correspondence between God's intended anthropological ideal and the person of Christ. In light of these considerations, we can now add, it becomes clear that philosophy, as Ulrich understands it, occupies a very particular "stand-point." This stand-point is necessarily a personal one; it can only be the place where Christ is believed in truth. In a word, philosophy, as Ulrich understands it, exists in the heart of the Church, that is, in *Maria-Ecclesia*.

The reception of created being as love is ultimately meant to be embodied in the experience of a person. By the same token, if the Church, in its faith, is the reception of the incarnate Logos that recapitulates the mystery of being as love, then the Church, too, must be understood primarily in personal terms.⁸¹

Being is a similitude of the goodness—of the love—of the Creator, and this similitude is fully unveiled in the divine Logos, in the crucified love of the Redeemer. The mystery of created being as love is fully revealed only with the loving self-surrender of the divine Logos on the Cross. But it is not just being that comes fully to light here. Man, too, is revealed, even as this revelation implies a task: Man has to achieve in himself, to live in flesh and blood, the finitization of being as love within its paradigmatic recapitulation on Calvary.

In this sense, the Cross reveals the intact wholeness of man's freedom to be truly himself. Nevertheless, this intact humanity is, in a certain sense, "prior" to the Redeemer himself. In his absolute love, Christ has *presupposed* it; he has accepted created freedom as a *precondition* of his own coming, without which he cannot appear from within humanity as its Savior. Love presupposes what it achieves, and this is nowhere truer than in the economy of the Redemption.

⁸¹See on this point Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Wer ist die Kirche?* in id., *Sponsa Verbi. Skizzen zur Theologie. II* (Einsiedeln, 1961), 148–202.

Of course, fallen man, who is a sinner doomed to death, has disobeyed God and rejected his love. He has refused to be God's dwelling-place. Left to himself, then, sinful man is unable to receive the gift that is God himself. He cannot lovingly pronounce a pure and clear "Yes" to God's own self-expropriation in love. Such a response on the part of man is possible only if the Creator himself presupposes an intact, unbroken, pure freedom that receives him in gratitude (Eucharist) and by that very fact is fruitful with a fecundity that glorifies the Giver. Once again, we encounter here the mystery of love, which presupposes that what it works is already present.

The Redeemer, then, presupposes a created unity of freedom and love, setting it himself as the prior condition of his own coming into the world and to man. And in and through this same unity, fallen human beings, who, by their sin, have slipped below the level of their own humanity, experience the presence of salvation and the intact wholeness it restores. They receive, that is, their true self-being, and through it they attain to the source of their life.

Ulrich contemplates this created freedom as the "*archê*" in which God dwells; in it, the Word has resided from the beginning. This beginning is pure love, *ex nihilo*; the personal answer to the Creator, drawn out of nothing. It is the "condition of the Unconditioned," the "limit of the Unlimited," the "container of the Uncontainable." It is the mystery of the selfsameness of wealth and poverty in created being as love—in *person*.

The figure Ulrich has in mind, then, condenses the whole of man's personal answer to God's love. It, or rather, she, is the personal embodiment of created being as love in the selfsameness of wealth (she is the Mother who *has* received and conceived) and of poverty (she is the unattached Virgin). In one sense, this *Virgo-Mater* exists in the form of the Church⁸²—and, in another sense, she is fully identical with the one person of the Immaculate Conception—Mary.

Now, it is only in the zone of salvation inaugurated by this personal figure, which this figure originally is in person, that the Redeemer himself is present. It is only in this space that he dwells, and only *through* it that he gives himself to the world. By the same

⁸²This is why Ulrich can see the *Virgo-Mater* as the fulfilled "communional figure of freedom," or "*Wir-Gestalt der Freiheit*": literally, "the we-shape of freedom." On this central concept, see Ulrich, *Gegenwart der Freiheit*, 75–158, and, above all his later work, *Gabe und Vergebung*, 738–90.

token, it is in the end only in this space that being can be experienced as love. Man, lost and in need of redemption, recovers his true creaturely freedom only in the pure creation that is *Maria-Ecclesia*.⁸³ By the same token, it is only in *Maria-Ecclesia* that philosophy is possible. Ulrich's philosophy is like a gloss, *ante litteram*, on John Paul II's claim in *Fides et ratio* that

*between the vocation of the Blessed Virgin and the vocation of true philosophy there is a deep harmony. Just as the Virgin was called to offer herself entirely as human being and as woman that God's Word might take flesh and come among us, so too philosophy is called to offer its rational and critical resources that theology, as the understanding of faith, may be fruitful and creative. And just as in giving her assent to Gabriel's word, Mary lost nothing of her true humanity and freedom, so too when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel's truth its autonomy is in no way impaired. Indeed, it is then that philosophy sees all its enquiries rise to their highest expression. This was a truth which the holy monks of Christian antiquity understood well when they called Mary "the table at which faith sits in thought." In her they saw a lucid image of true philosophy and they were convinced of the need to philosophari in Maria.*⁸⁴

Conclusion: Giving the gift of forgiveness

Even after having given the foregoing argument a hearing, some readers may still harbor the suspicion that a philosopher whose thought has passed through the "narrow gate" of faith in "captivity to Christ" is thereby limited in his intellectual possibilities. In reply, I would like to conclude by suggesting how Ulrich's thought provides resources for showing that, far from imposing any undue

⁸³This intuition gives us, on the one hand, new access to the venerable doctrine that holds that there is no salvation outside the Church, "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*," since the absolute love of the Redeemer cannot be present outside of this created unity of freedom and love. On the other hand, however, Ulrich's thought enables us to set aside purely exclusivist accounts of the doctrine, inasmuch as *Maria-Ecclesia* receives, and gives thanks for, the gift of being in an act of substitution on behalf of all of humanity, indeed, on behalf of the whole of creation.

⁸⁴*Fides et ratio*, 108. The reference to Mary as "the table at which faith sits in thought" is from Pseudo-Epiphanius, PG 3: 493. Italics mine.

narrowing, the interpenetration of faith and philosophy opens up vast new horizons for the latter.

Ulrich himself has impressively developed one of these possibilities in his recent book *Gabe und Vergebung. Ein Beitrag zur biblischen Ontologie* (2006) [Giving the Gift of Forgiveness. A Contribution Toward a Biblical Ontology]. In this 800-page interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Ulrich acts as a sort of philosophical pilgrim who explores the landscape of the New Testament parable. To be sure, Ulrich makes no secret of the fact that he endeavors to ponder being as love precisely within the Church (understood, of course, in personal terms as the *Virgo-Mater*, the redeemed unity of freedom and love). Nonetheless, he seeks, from this very standpoint, to meet this Word of God that comes “from above” precisely by proceeding as it were “from below.” If the “grace” of redeeming love makes itself dependent on the very flourishing of “nature” that it freely creates, then Ulrich’s method is exactly suited to uncover and shed light on precisely the deepest natural truth about man’s existence, life, and knowledge, which truth is, after all, the prior condition—by God’s grace—of the Word’s coming among us. This claim about the aptness of Ulrich’s method is borne out, I would argue, precisely by the intellectual fecundity of *Gabe und Vergebung*, whose wealth of insights also contains much that, by a kind of recoil effect, could enrich biblical exegesis in very fundamental ways as it attempts to listen to God’s Word.

As he moves through the parable, Ulrich presents the relationship between the father and his two sons as a similitude of man’s dramatic struggle with God in history. Both sons, then, represent basic patterns of failed (or converted) forms of human existence in relation to God. Nor does the reader remain a mere spectator; he himself becomes a participant in the drama. How the reader engages with the parable (as the Word of God) is itself a revelation of his own role and position in it.

In all of this, however, the book remains predominantly philosophical. For one thing, Ulrich’s interlocutors here, as elsewhere in his work, are figures such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Ulrich seeks to show, in fact, how each of these thinkers is an actor in the drama of acceptance or rejection of being as love (with all of the possible aberrations this entails): each of them wrestles with the question of what it means to be human (for example, Marx is concerned with what he calls “positive human-

ism”), which, at least implicitly, involves him in the above-mentioned drama. On the other hand, Ulrich offers us a paradigm of the correlation and communion between philosophy and theology, reason and faith (nature and grace). The “for-giveness” brought by Christ both fully reveals, and presupposes (in the logic of love), the depths of the original “givenness” of the gift of being. The formal object of theology lies—by grace—at the heart of the formal object of philosophy, and vice versa.

That Ulrich should ponder the gift of being in light of the mystery of forgiveness is typical of his philosophizing. The gratuity of divine pardon, which comes through the “pointlessness” of the Cross, both recapitulates and depends on the gratuity of divine creation, whose reception is achieved precisely in the acknowledged “pointlessness” of our existence, which is sheer gift. Unfortunately, we cannot delve further into the argument in *Gabe und Vergebung*; the exploration of the mystery of divine paternity underlying the unity of creation and redemption as gift would require a (long) article of its own. Let me conclude, then, by suggesting that the fecundity of Ulrich’s work, here as in his other writings, is the best and principal test of his claim that doing metaphysics within this unity, far from robbing it of its freedom and integrity, enhances and fulfills both.

Ulrich’s work responds with singular success to John Paul II’s call for a metaphysics that comes into its own precisely in dialogue with the Word of God. Such a metaphysics is, of course, crucially important not just for philosophy, but also for theology itself: “The word of God,” writes John Paul, “refers constantly to things which transcend human experience and even human thought; but this ‘mystery’ could not be revealed, nor could theology render it in some way intelligible, were human knowledge limited strictly to the world of sense experience. *Metaphysics* thus plays an *essential role of mediation* in theological research.”⁸⁵ If we need Ulrich’s philosophy of being as love today, then one reason is surely that it exercises in a paradigmatic fashion this mediatorial function of metaphysics in the theological exploration of the Word of God in its personal communication to man.—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.* □

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⁸⁵Ibid., 83.