

Divine Personhood and the Critique of Substance Metaphysics

DOMINIC HOLTZ, O.P.

*Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas
Rome, Italy*

SUBSTANCE, THEY TELL US, has fallen on hard times. According to the narrative presented in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,¹ at least since Descartes, the received Aristotelian account of substance, primary and secondary, has been displaced by new, and ultimately unsatisfactory accounts, leading to a widespread abandonment of the notion altogether. In Descartes, for example, instead of the dizzying array of particulars that are Aristotelian primary substances, or the rich array of natural kinds that are secondary substances, we are left with two things: extended things (the material world) and thinking things (minds, whether human, angelic, or divine). Spinoza, for his part, reduced substance simply to one, which is to say God, or nature, or in any event all that is. In Leibnitz, in exchange for classic Aristotelian substances, we receive the *monads*, basic, fundamental units or “substances” that encompass not only every property they will ever have, but also reflect, each in their own way, the entire universe. Locke seemed puzzled by the whole concept of substance and, while he on some occasions regarded that *something* had to be the bearer of properties, he regarded the notion rather more as a placeholder for the unknown, for

¹ Howard Robinson, “Substance,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2013), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/substance/>.

some deep, but unseen, structure of things that accounted for the way they are. For Hume, substance was, rather like causation, the result of a mistake, the drawing of an ultimately unintelligible conclusion from the perceived continuity of things. For Kant, while we must believe in substances, this has nothing to do with how the world is, but rather by the formal structures by which we cannot but think about the world.

A shorter, but no less damning, narrative has been offered by William Norris Clarke, S.J., what he called “The Sad Adventures of Substance in Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Whitehead”:

The three successive phases of this distortion can be summed up as (1) the Cartesian self-enclosed substance; (2) the Lockean inert substance as unknowable substratum; and (3) the Humean separable substance, rejected as unintelligible—which it indeed is as so understood. All of these have been repudiated—and rightly so—by the majority of late modern and contemporary thinkers. But nothing adequate has replaced them . . . As a result, real being tends to be reduced to nothing more than a pattern of relations with no subjects grounding them, or a pattern of events with no agents enacting them. The fundamental polarity within real being between the “in itself” and the “toward others,” the self-immanence and the self-transcendence of being, collapses into one pole of pure relatedness to others.²

Why should that matter? Why should a dispute over *id quod est* or *esse*, of *quid est* and *quo est* make a difference in our understanding of God, One and Triune? For good or ill (I certainly think for the good), the received tradition of theological, and concomitant philosophical speculation about God has operated with just those terms that have, in the modern era, fallen under various assaults and critiques. One option, of course, would be to join the chorus of critics and reframe the whole discussion. That is certainly possible, however ill advised. Another option would be to continue to use the received modes of expression without a

² William Norris Clarke, S.J., “To Be Is to Be Substance-in-Relation,” in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 103.

care for what others think or say. This, too, is possible, but also, because of the isolation and indeed obscurantism it could produce, likewise ill advised. A third option might well be to try to retain those received discourses but precisely with an eye toward and in light of the worries and critiques that have been raised. This is, of course, a more difficult task, but I think ultimately a more rewarding one.

To that end, this essay hopes to provide a modicum of assistance. As there is, of course, no one, unified “substance metaphysics,” so too there is no one critique of it. So there is no intention here of being even remotely comprehensive. Rather, I will proceed along the following lines. First, I will consider a recent, somewhat representative, account of substance and divine personhood from the world of analytic philosophy in the work of Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz. Second, I will consider the proposal of someone sympathetic to classic, Thomistic accounts of substance, but who sees them to be in need of supplement to account for the full reality of persons, namely the work of William Norris Clarke, S.J., drawing out the implications of such a view in light of the work of Richard Swinburne. Third, I will consider the more radical critique of substance metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas in its relation to Trinitarian ontology in the writings of John Zizioulas. Finally, I will raise questions about the perils of working from divine personhood, or for that matter divine substance, as a way of grounding our understanding of person or substance in the created order.

Substance, Divine Personhood, and Analytic Philosophy

In the narrative I outlined above of the hard times on which substance has fallen, one might well think that no one apart from Thomists or historians of philosophy take the notion seriously. This would be a mistake. Certainly in the world of analytic philosophy there is a lively discussion about what substance is and how one can account for it. In saying this, I am not suggesting that the questions are close to being settled. Fundamental to the analytic approach to substance metaphysics is, not surprisingly, the attempt to find rational grounds for identifying and defining just what counts as a substance. Typically, the question being posed is how, or whether, a *substance* can be distinguished from a *property* or an *event*. Even if it is granted that there are substances and that they

can be reasonably isolated, other questions arise. Some ask the question of independence, namely, just what sort of independence is required for something to count as standing on its own, i.e., being a proper substance. Others ask what provides the unity of a substance. For example, on the bundle theory, substances just *are* the “bundle” of properties that are used to describe them. There is nothing “else” in which these properties “are.” On another view, substances are characterized as having a *substratum*, something that grounds claims about it as a particular this or that. In these discussions, substance tends to be used more generally in the sense of an Aristotelian *primary* substance, that is, some concrete particular, although not to the exclusion of other lively debates about *secondary* substances or “natural kinds.”

Two philosophers who have published in recent years defending substance as a helpful notion are Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz. Their theory of substance depends heavily on a relatively complicated account of independence, and it would take us far away from our present task to pursue that account. What is of interest to us is their account of God in their 2007 work *The Divine Attributes*.³ Early in their work, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz assert that, “according to the regulating notion of traditional Western theism, God is *the greatest being possible*.”⁴ They go on to assert that “God is a maximally great *substance*, rather than a maximally great *time, place, event, boundary, collection, number, property, relation, or proposition*.”⁵ Indeed, they hold that classic theism takes God to be not merely a maximally great substance, but also a maximally great *entity*, which they take to be “the *summum genus*, or most general kind, of all categories,” comprising Concrete Entity (Substance, Place, Time, Event, and Boundary) and Abstract Entity (Set, Number, Property, Relation, and Proposition).⁶ From certain properties classically attributed to God, and in particular the power to create, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz not only form an argument for God’s being a substance, but indeed his being a person.

³ Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 (emphasis original).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 (emphasis original).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

Necessarily, everything is either a concrete entity or an abstract entity, and an abstract entity, for example, the empty set, cannot have the power to create. Thus, only a concrete entity can have the power to create. It follows that a necessarily existing concrete entity that intentionally creates good is greater than either a contingent being or a necessary being that does not. Such a necessarily existing creative concrete entity must be a person, since only a person can intentionally create good. Because a person must be a substance, a necessarily existing concrete entity that intentionally creates good must be a substance.⁷

They make a similar argument later in their work, this time from the existence of intellectual activity in God:

Why is God thought to be such a concrete substance? As a being that is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, God has mental attributes such as believing, willing, and desiring. But only a concrete substance of the sort in question, that is, and individual thing, can have such mental attributes. Furthermore, it seems that if an entity is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, then that entity has intentions, beliefs, self-awareness, intelligence, and can perform actions. Such an entity is a person. But persons are a kind of concrete substantial entity. Finally, God is a non-physical soul. Yet, it is also true that nonphysical souls are a kind of concrete substantial entity.⁸

We might fear at this point that such a view is not especially helpful for communicating the Thomist understanding of God either as substance or as person. After all, Thomas has famously reminded us that the divine essence is precisely *not* in the genus of *substance* but above every genus (*De potentia*, q. 8, a. 2, ad 1). Hoffman and Rosenkrantz's placing of God at the top of, but thus seemingly among, all entities seems to conflict with this basic insight of Thomas's that God is *not* simply an entity among entities, however exalted.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 25.

At least as problematic for a Thomist, if not more so, in Hoffman and Rosenkrantz's account is the claim that God just is a concrete substance, in contrast to an abstract one. God, after all, has in himself the perfections of all genera, and so, in radical contrast with all created being, the divine substance also has the perfection of relation. Indeed, Thomas's whole account of the divine persons is predicated on, if not the comprehensibility, at least the quasi-intelligibility of the persons in the Godhead as *subsistent relations*, which is precisely what Hoffman and Rosenkrantz say you cannot have. To be sure, for anything other than God, they would be altogether correct. Thomas himself makes this point in his commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*. There, Thomas points out the fundamental distinction between abstract predication (*esse*) and concrete predication (*id quod est*). However, this distinction between the abstract and the concrete does not apply to the "truly simple" (*vere simplex*), in which case *id quod est* and *esse* coincide. God, then, can just as truthfully be understood in terms properly abstract as he can in terms properly concrete, not because he is the impossible (i.e., both concrete and nonconcrete in the same respect) but because the divine being transcends even those most basic categories in which we want to locate substance or relation.

Substance, Personhood, and Being as Relatedness

One figure who was certainly sympathetic to substance metaphysics—and indeed in light of a Thomistic perspective, rather than a contemporary, analytic mode, but who saw in its traditional form as articulated by Thomas Aquinas a serious need for supplement—was the Jesuit William Norris Clarke. On Clarke's view, Thomas is to be commended for his rich and dynamic notion of being.⁹ However, one fault that Clarke finds with Aquinas's account, and with him the scholastic tradition as a whole, is its failure to exploit the insights gained from the consideration of divine personhood as subsistent relation to an analysis of substance

⁹ Clarke, "Substance-in-Relation," 102, seeks a "retrieval" of "the classical (pre-Cartesian) notion of substance as dynamic, as an active nature, i.e. an abiding center of acting and being acted upon—one of the richest insights . . . of ancient and medieval thought," which "complementarity between substance and relation" presents but is potentially obscured in Aristotle, and was "restored in principle" by "the medievals, especially St. Thomas" (ibid., 103).

as such. Indeed, out of an understandable or even laudable desire to highlight the incommunicability of persons in the doctrine of the Trinity or the clear distinction of person and complete nature in the doctrine of the Incarnation, Thomas, on Clarke's view, tended to downplay the "relational aspect of all substances" as opposed to "the *in-itself* aspect of substance, existing as *distinct* from all others."¹⁰ Nonetheless, Clarke asserts that Thomas's understanding of substance carries with it the resources for a robust account of the intrinsic relatedness of all being and every being.

The immediate corollary of this notion of dynamic substance [i.e., the "notion of substance as dynamic self-identity expressing itself in action" ("Substance-in-Relation," 107)] is that every substance, as active, becomes the center of a web of relations to other active beings around it. For action by its very nature generates relations with those on which it acts and from which it receives action in turn. Action, in fact, is the primary generator of real relations within the community of real beings. An existing substance, therefore, in St. Thomas' universe, as active, self-communicating presence, cannot *be* what it is without *being related* in some way. To be a substance and to be related are distinct but complementary and inseparable aspects of every real being. The structure of every being is indissolubly dyadic: it exists both as *in-itself* and as *towards others*.¹¹

For Clarke, the revealed truth that the divine persons just are subsistent relations, and the fact that all created being participates in and imitates the divine *esse*, ought to have enriched the account of created substances in general, and the account of personhood in particular. He writes,

The explicit philosophical thematizing of the relational, interpersonal dimension of the human person had to wait until the existentialist and personalist phenomenologies of the twentieth century for its full highlighting and systematic development. It

¹⁰ Ibid., 104.

¹¹ Ibid., 107–8.

is one of the paradoxes of intellectual history, however, that St. Thomas and the other medieval scholastics did indeed develop a relational notion of the person for use in the theological explanation of the Trinity. But for some reason they did not exploit this remarkable intellectual achievement for the philosophical explanation of the person.¹²

Indeed, Clarke also recalls that, for Thomas, “the person is not something added on to being as a special delimitation; it is simply what being is when allowed to be at its fullest, freed from the constrictions of sub-intelligent matter. So the notions of being and person can each throw much light on the other when brought together on the level of being itself.”¹³ Said simply, for Thomas, on Clarke’s reading, “to be fully is to be personally.”¹⁴ His argument here merits quotation at length:

Being is not just *presence*, but *active* presence, tending by nature to pour over into active self-manifestation and self-communication to others. And if personal being is really being itself only at its supra-material levels, then it follows that to be a person as such is to be a being that tends by nature to pour over into active, conscious self-manifestation and self-communication to others, through intellect and will working together. And if the person in question is a *good* person, i.e., rightly ordered in its conscious free action, then this active presence to others will take the form of willing what is truly good for them, which is itself a definition of *love* in its broadest meaning, defined by Thomas as “willing good to another for its own sake.” To be a person, then, is to be a bi-polar being that is at once present *in itself*, actively possessing itself by its self-consciousness (its substantial pole), and also actively oriented *towards others*, toward active loving self-communication to others (its relational pole). To be an authentic person, in a word, is to be a *lover*, to live a life

¹² Clarke, “Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19, no. 4 (1992): 602.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 601.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 609.

of *interpersonal* self-giving and receiving. Person is essentially a “we” term. Person exists in its fullness only in the plural.¹⁵

Clarke takes this fundamental insight to be confirmed in the doctrine of the Trinity of persons in the Godhead. From the Thomistic claim that persons, that is, individual substances of a rational nature, are highest, the most perfect of beings, and joining that to the theme that being, as such, is not merely related, but relational, Clarke holds that this very structure of being continues up even to the where being is found most “intensely,” that is, in God himself. He writes,

It is thus of the very nature of being at its supreme intensity to pour over into self-communicative relatedness. And since God is the ultimate paradigm of being, of which all creatures in their distinctive ways must somehow be images, it follows that self-communication and relatedness to others must belong to the very nature of all being as such, and especially to persons as such.¹⁶

Clarke, without denying that the Trinity is in fact a revelation, that is, without trying explicitly to naturalize the knowledge of the Trinity of persons in God,¹⁷ does all the same place the tripersonal nature of God as a sort of supreme instance of a general feature of all being, created or otherwise.

Thus in its highest and purest form, echoed analogously and proportionately, with increasing imperfection, down through creation, the radical dynamism of being as *self-communicative* evokes as its necessary complement the active, welcoming *receptivity* of the receiving end of its self-communication. Authentic love is not complete unless it is both actively given and actively—gratefully—received. And both giving and receiving at their purest are of equal dignity and perfection. The perfection of being—and therefore of the person—is essentially dyadic, culminating in *communion*.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 609–10.

¹⁶ Clarke, “Substance-in-Relation,” 109.

¹⁷ Ibid., 108–9.

¹⁸ Clarke, “Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” 613.

What Clarke would have us hold is not that substance is inimical to personhood, but rather that the doctrines of the Trinity and Creation, when considered together, will inevitably, necessarily, “flower out” into a plurality of persons—person because personhood just *is* substance at its perfection, and persons (in the plural) because only in communion can persons succeed at doing what all being does, that is, to be not only in-itself, but also toward, and indeed more perfectly *for*, others.

In his work *The Christian God* (1994), Richard Swinburne presents to us what might most charitably be called a remarkable argument that claims to establish if not necessary, then at least probable grounds for God as a Trinity of persons.¹⁹ Without proceeding any further (i.e., without yet noting the content of his argument), we might well take such a claim to be stunning in its audacity, and we would surely be justified in doing so. My aim in presenting Swinburne’s account, however, is not simply to set him up as an easy target. Rather, there are features of his “proof”²⁰ that highlight some of the real dangers in certain accounts of being as, just as such, relational, and indeed interpersonal. That is, what might someone, seriously committed to the belief in the Trinity and who also holds to the intrinsically social nature of at least those substances who are persons, opine when thinking about God?

The first striking thing about Swinburne’s Trinity of persons is that, while accepting that there is only one God, Swinburne denies that the conciliar claims about God’s oneness preclude the possibility of multiple divine *individuals*. What the councils meant to do, rather, is to deny “that there were three *independent* divine beings, any one of which could exist without the other, or which could act independently of each other” since

¹⁹ Richard Swinburne, “The Trinity,” in *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 170–91. He also provides a summary version of the same argument in *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 343ff. The former, being the more detailed, will provide the basis for the discussion here.

²⁰ Swinburne, *Christian God*, 191, rejects Thomas’s argument that God’s existence can be known, and with certainty, but that God’s *Triune* nature can only be known by revelation, since “only fairly strong inductive arguments can be given for the existence of God.” Rather, he asserts that “arguments for there being a God and a God being ‘three persons in one substance’ will be of the same kind” and that “the data which suggest that there is a God suggest that the most probable kind of God is such that inevitably he becomes tripersonal” (ibid.). We must attend to this view of his when considering what he thinks he can “prove” about the Trinity of Persons.

“if ‘there is only one God’ mean[s] ‘there is only one divine individual,’ then the doctrine of the Trinity would be manifestly self-contradictory.”²¹ What Swinburne suggests is that the Trinity is not an individual, certainly not an individual substance, but rather a *collective* of three divine persons, a “moderate form of social Trinitarianism but one that stresses both the logical inseparability of the divine persons in the Trinity, and the absence of anything by which the persons are individuated except their relational properties.”²² On his view, the one divine person, himself not (actively) caused, can bring into being another divine person (i.e., one possessed of everything that is means to be God), and then together these two divine persons, one (actively) uncaused and the other (actively) caused, can bring into being yet another, who also enjoys possession of all divine attributes but is distinct in being *co*-caused, and the (active) cause of no other divine person.

The “first” person, the one not actively caused by the other divine persons and whom Swinburne identifies as the Father of Christian revelation, has a kind of relative priority. Indeed, on Swinburne’s view, there must be some means to account for how any community of divine persons could coexist without raising insuperable difficulties with regard to competing, and incompatible, exercises of their omnipotence. Problems of conflicts between divine beings are

avoidable if one divine being sees as part of his perfect goodness that he should confine his causation to one sphere of activity, while the other confines his causation to a different sphere. That can be ensured if one of the divine beings actively causes the other to exist at each period of time on that condition, while the second being only passively causes the existence of the first being (that is, does not stop him from existing), at each period of time. In virtue of this asymmetry of dependence, the second being recognizes the authority of the first being to delimit their spheres of activity. The existence of one more divine being is possible given an asymmetry of dependence, and I cannot see how else it is possible. For only thus would each divine being

²¹ Ibid., 180.

²² Ibid., 188.

recognize who had the right to define the spheres of activity of each. Clearly this same process could be repeated to allow for more than two divine beings.²³

Clearly indeed!

Yet, while the Father has in this scheme a kind of relative priority, Swinburne does not hold that he is, in that sense, independent or greater than the other persons. Why not? In part, this is because Swinburne holds that the other divine persons, while not actively causing the Father, do nonetheless *permissively* cause him. The Father is understood to be granted a kind of priority by the Son and the Spirit in that he is allowed to, for example, set the agenda for their common exercise of divine power, to which they give their consent and so all three act as one. However, while the Son and Spirit are both actively caused, they themselves can be said to cause the Father *permissively*, which is to say, they allow him to continue in existence and do not, for example, use their almighty power to cause him to cease to exist. This kind of permissive causation, Swinburne argues, would be mutual, that is, the Spirit permissively causes the Father and the Son, the Son permissively causes the Father and the Spirit, and the Father permissively causes the Son and the Spirit, even though the Father actively causes the Son, and with the Son actively causes the Spirit.

To be sure, this by any normal definition would look like mere tritheism, but Swinburne denies that this is the case. As he argues,

This collective would be indivisible in its being for logical reasons—that is, the kind of being that it would be is such that each of its members is necessarily everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about or been brought about by the others. The collective would also be indivisible in its causal action in the sense that each would back totally the causal action of the others. The collective would be causeless and so (in my sense), unlike its members, ontologically necessary, not dependent for its existence on anything outside itself. It is they, however, rather than it, who, to speak strictly, would have the

²³ Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 344.

divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.; though clearly there is a ready and natural sense in which the collective can be said to have them as well. If all members of a group know something, the group itself, by a very natural extension of use, can be said to know that thing: and so on. Similarly this very strong unity of the collective would make it, as well as its individual members, an appropriate object of worship. The claim that “there is only one God” is to be read as the claim that the source of being of all other things has to it this kind of indivisible unity.²⁴

That is, for Swinburne, such a collective would “count” for any meaningful purposes as “one God.”

Now there is obviously much one could say about this account, and very little of it, I imagine, would be charitable, certainly not from any even remotely orthodox Christian believer. What is worth attending to, however, is the reason Swinburne provides that such a collective would obtain in the first place. That is, even if, as Swinburne thinks, there must be at least one divine person, why presume that there should be more than one? Moreover, if more than one, why should there be only three persons, rather than any number? One of the reasons Swinburne produces to account for three, and only three, divine persons has to do with the logic of the individuation of divine persons and the structure of their causality. Divine individuals, Swinburne argues, cannot possess “thisness.”²⁵ Simply put, Swinburne holds that any divine being brought into being by another, if it had some quality that made it *this* God rather than another, would have to possess some feature that provided an “overriding reason” to bring it about, rather than some other divine person. “Yet,” he continues, “if divine individuals have thisness, there will always be possible divine individuals which have the same essential properties (those essential to divinity and any further individuating properties), and so no reason for bringing about one rather than another . . . If divine

²⁴ Swinburne, *Christian God*, 180–81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

individuals have thisness, there cannot be reason to bring about one rather than another.”²⁶

In light of this claim, Swinburne argues that any individuation of divine persons would have to be the result of “properties of causal relation” such that unique, and unrepeatable, properties ensue. So, if one divine individual produces a second, then the first has the unique and unshared relational property of being the uncaused, active cause of another divine being. Yet this could not be repeated, since any second or otherwise subsequent caused divine individual would have nothing to distinguish it, relationally, from the first such caused divine person. “A third divine individual could only be different from the second,” he argues, “if he had different relational properties, and so if the active cause of his existence was different from that of the second individual.”²⁷ That different active cause would be the *co-causing* by more than one divine person. The resulting set of individuals would include, then, one who is himself (actively) uncaused but the active cause of others, a second who is himself actively caused and, co-operatively with the first, the active cause of another, and a third who is himself actively co-caused, but the active cause of none.

While Swinburne thinks that the argument outlined above shows how one can have multiple divine individuals, it does not provide the “overriding reason” for the first person to produce any other divine individual at all. The reason Swinburne advances is that a divine person would see that *love* is the “supreme good,” which demands more than one individual. “Love,” says Swinburne, “involves sharing, giving to the other what of one’s own is good for him and receiving from the other what of his is good for one; and love involves co-operating with another to benefit third parties.”²⁸ Because of his goodness, the first divine person, the Father, simply and inevitably produces the second, and they, “co-operating with another to benefit [a] third part[y],” will likewise inevitably cooperate in producing a third. Since a fourth or any further person would not add anything qualitative to the “sharing and co-operating in sharing” that constitute love, any further person would not be

²⁶ Ibid., 176.

²⁷ Ibid., 177.

²⁸ Ibid.

necessary, and so would be produced merely by an act of the will.²⁹ However, “any being created by an act of the will might (metaphysically) not have existed, and so could not be divine.”³⁰ So, while he does not regard this account as definitive, he does think it probable: “the most probable kind of God is such that inevitably he becomes tripersonal.”³¹

It is not my suggestion here that the reading, or more properly the rereading, of substance in Aquinas by William Norris Clarke leads somehow inevitably to the quirky theology of the kind theorized by Richard Swinburne.³² Even so, it is certainly easy to see the dangers inherent in trying to conclude from the necessarily relational character of being to the irreducibly dyadic nature of all being as substance-in-relation and from this to the claim that, at its most intense level, that is, in God himself, the subsistent relations serve not as a revelation beyond human comprehension and anticipation, but as a kind of pleasant but expected surprise, a confirmation of the nature of all substance to “pour over into self-communicative relatedness.”³³ It is, admittedly, an extreme expression of the theme, but it is hard to see how Clarke’s approach to substance can precisely avoid at least some kind of natural anticipation of the Trinity, as opposed to a grace-filled response to revelation by which, the Trinity already having been revealed, we can see, albeit imperfectly, imitations of the Trinity in the created order. Moreover, if the perfection

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 191.

³² To be fair, Swinburne makes an extended argument to square his account of the Trinity with the dogmatic tradition of orthodox Christian creeds and the Fathers of the Church; cf. *ibid.*, 180–91. In particular, he finds his own views echoed in the explicit arguments made by Richard of St. Victor in his *De Trinitate*, viz. “that perfect love involves there being someone else to whom to be generous; and also that perfect loving involves a third individual, the loving of whom could be shared. The Father needs *socium et condilectum* (an ally and one fellow-loved) in his loving” (*ibid.*, 190). Indeed, he posits that this same view is continued, with specific mention of Richard of St. Victor, in the works of later medievals, including Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure (*ibid.*, 191n29). Whether Swinburne’s account can be squared with Richard of St. Victor’s, or Alexander’s or Bonaventure’s, would require another study than this one. Minimally, however, it seems as though the kind of social Trinity of three divine individuals, each a god but not simply the one God, for which Swinburne advocates would be as hard to justify on the basis of the Victorine tradition as it would be on the Thomist one, or the Patristic one, Greek or Latin.

³³ Clarke, “Substance-in-Relation,” 109.

of substance is to be found in those substances we know as *persons*, and if we take personhood as such to require *plurality*, it is hard to see either how God could help but be tripersonal or else, minimally, could help but produce a world with created persons with whom he could interact, and indeed fulfill his personhood by establishing the “we,” the fullness of the person that Clarke insists can only be found in the plural.³⁴

Substance, Personhood, and Trinitarian Ontology

Probably one of the most noted opponents of substance metaphysics whose opposition is posed in defense of what he takes to be the Orthodox faith in the Trinity of persons is John D. Zizioulas. On Zizioulas’s view, “person” as we know it today, whether in theology or philosophy, owes its existence entirely to the revelation of the Trinity, which he takes to have been most perfectly expounded by the Cappadocian Fathers, but whose insights he fears have been lost or undone by the tradition of Latin theology epitomized by, if not reducible to, Thomas Aquinas. Taking his cue from Heidegger, Zizioulas gives an account in which the discourse of *ousia*, of “substance,” plays the role of the villain. In Zizioulas’s narrative, the ancient Greek world found itself in a dilemma from which it could not escape, namely, an incapacity “to endow human ‘individuality’ with permanence and thus to create a true ontology of the human person as an absolute concept.”³⁵ The dilemma was exemplified by the very theatrical world that gave us the word *prosopon*, the mask worn in Greek drama. In tragedy, as indeed in comedy, the *prosopa*, the characters, seek to assert their freedom, but always fail to do so. Their failure is rooted in the larger structure of the world—fate and the gods—which put an end to the brief rebellion of the person against inevitability. Zizioulas thinks that something similar can be seen in the Roman world that gave us the word *persona*, person. In this case, “person” takes on a social or legal character, a *rôle*, and thus, while seeming to provide a legal space or platform for authentic, free action, does so only by inscrib-

³⁴ In this regard, I am more or less in agreement with John D. Zizioulas (about whom I will speak below) on the relative unhelpfulness of more recent attempts to posit “the idea of *relational substance*” to account for Trinitarian theology, although for quite different reasons.

³⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 29.

ing the person precisely in a larger whole, the society that is understood to precede, to be the necessary precondition for, the rise of the person. Understood more broadly, Zizioulas sees this as the imprisoning notion of *ousia*, of substance, taken to be the universal and all-pervasive condition of being that precedes and thus limits and confines all authentic human freedom, which is the hallmark of personhood.

The turning point comes, Zizioulas thinks, with Cappadocian Trinitarian theology, and precisely with the identification of *person* and *hypostasis*. As he writes,

- (a) The person is no longer an adjunct to a being, a category to which we *add* a concrete entity once we have first verified its ontological hypostasis. *It is itself the hypostasis of the being.*
- (b) Entities no longer trace their being to being itself—that is, being is not an absolute category in itself—but to the person, to precisely what *constitutes* being, that is, enables entities to be entities. In other words from an adjunct to a being (a kind of mask) the person becomes the being itself and is simultaneously—and a most significant point—the *constitutive element* (the “principle” or “cause”) of beings.³⁶

This is so because, on Zizioulas’s reading of the Cappadocian Fathers, the Trinitarian formula *mia ousia, tria prosopa* (one substance, three persons) is not understood to root the unity of God in a common substance, what God is “first,” and to which are added the personal relations of the Trinity. This, he thinks, is the classic Western error. Rather, for Zizioulas, what “grounds” the ontology of the Trinity is precisely the Father, who *freely* begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit and so freely constitutes the divine substance. As Zizioulas writes, “Thus God as person—as the hypostasis of the Father—makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God.”³⁷ If God is substance, it is because he is first hypostasis or person, the Father, and he is so not out of necessity, not out of the logic of a substance that conditions and sets limits, but out of his superabundant freedom.

³⁶ Ibid., 39 (emphasis original).

³⁷ Ibid., 41.

The manner in which God exercises His ontological freedom, that precisely which makes Him ontologically free, is the way in which He transcends and abolishes the ontological necessity of the substance by being God as *Father*, that is, as He who “begets” the Son and “brings forth” the Spirit. This ecstatic character of God, the fact that His being is identical with an act of communion, ensures the transcendence of the ontological necessity which His substance would have demanded—if the substance were the primary ontological predicate of God—and replaces this necessity with the free self-affirmation of divine existence. For this communion is a product of freedom as a result not of the substance of God but of a person, the Father—observe why this doctrinal detail is so important—who is Trinity not because the divine *nature* is ecstatic but because the Father as a *person* freely wills this communion.³⁸

Zizioulas contrasts this Trinitarian ontology as the priority of person over substance with what he calls “the Augustinian solution”:

according to this, monotheism is safeguarded by the one *substance* of God, the *divinitas*, which logically precedes the three persons. In this case, monotheism survives at the expense of Trinitarianism. The Trinity is not the way in which the one God *is*, that is, in the sense of a primary ontological category, but rather indicates relations within the one God, that is, instances of his one nature, realized and expressed mainly in psychological or moral terms, as the memory, knowledge and love of a certain *individual* substance. This is followed faithfully by Aquinas, for whom, when we generalize or abstract from the Trinitarian persons, what remains for thought is the one divine nature which is in general to be called “God,” not the three persons or only one of them. Such a solution makes it difficult logically to reconcile the one and the three in God, and must be counted responsible for the eclipse of Trinitarian theology in the West for such a long time. It may also account

³⁸ Ibid., 44 (emphasis original).

for the emergence of modern atheism, particularly of the existential type, which has rejected the substantialist approach to God and thus God as such.³⁹

To be sure, Zizioulas has received a fair amount of criticism over the years,⁴⁰ and it would take us far afield to pursue the careful reading of the Fathers that others have done to determine how faithfully—or not—Zizioulas has represented the theology of the Cappadocians. What interests us here, rather, is his critique of the “Augustinian solution,” and particularly its expression in Thomas Aquinas, and with it his anxieties about substance metaphysics. Specifically, we want to see whether there is any merit in his concerns about Thomistic metaphysics and divine personhood. Moreover, and on an irenic note, we will want to see whether or not Thomas has resources to respond to the kinds of concerns that Zizioulas raises about substance metaphysics in general, and how it relates to the ontology of person in particular.

To respond to Zizioulas’s worry, we must turn to what he regards as the smoking gun, the clear evidence of Thomas’s confusion about divine persons, and so likewise his confusion about substance, namely *Summa theologiae* III, q. 3, a. 3, “Utrum natura [divina] possit assumere [naturam creatam], abstracta personalitate.” In this question, Thomas continues his exploration of the union of the two natures in the Incarnate Word. Throughout the question, Thomas will outline a basic principle of the metaphysics of Incarnation, namely, that while a person is properly the *terminus* of the assumption of a created nature, the act of assuming itself, being an act of divine power, is common to all three persons in the Trinity. He will use this distinction to consider various hypothetical possibilities of Incarnation, namely, whether the Word might have been incarnate more than once, whether another person might have been incarnate, wheth-

³⁹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 150–51.

⁴⁰ Cf. André de Halleux, “Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire chez les Pères cappadociens?,” *Revue théologique de Louvain* 17 (1986): 129–55, 265–92; Thomas Weinandy, “Zizioulas: The Trinity and Ecumenism,” *New Blackfriars* 83 (2002): 407–16; Lucian Turcescu, “Person’ versus ‘Individual’ and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa,” *Modern Theology* 18 (2002): 527–39; Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 205–10.

er all three persons might have been incarnate, and so on, culminating in a consideration of the fittingness (*convenientia*) of the Incarnation in the Son. The third article, however, is a trifle curious. Here Thomas asks whether the divine nature, after having abstracted the distinction of persons through the intellect, could assume a created nature.

In the first two objections, Thomas appeals to principles already clarified in the first two articles. It belongs to persons, not to natures, to assume. Therefore remove the persons, and there is nothing left to assume. The third objection would seem to be the one that should warm Zizioulas's heart. The objector says, "it was said in the first part that, in the Godhead, when personality is abstracted, nothing remains. But, what assumes is something. Therefore, when the personality is abstracted, the divine nature cannot assume (*in prima parte dictum est quod in divinis, abstracta personalitate, nihil manet. Sed assumens est aliquid. Ergo, abstracta personalitate, non potest divina natura assumere*)."

In other words, the objector seems to share precisely Zizioulas's view that the Trinity of persons is what constitutes the divine nature, not something that flows from it, and thus logically after it. No persons, no divine nature.

Where things at first look like they might confirm Zizioulas's worry—namely, that Thomas takes substance to be, for God, a kind of primary ontological category, to which the divine persons are posterior—is in the opinion *sed contra*. Here it is asserted that the threefold personal properties of Paternity, Filiation, and Procession, if abstracted by the intellect, still leave God's omnipotence behind, and it is by divine power that the Incarnation is accomplished, so it can still happen even without the three divine persons. Or is that reading quite right?

The key to understanding what is going on in this article is made explicit in the response, but is announced from the beginning. This is not, as such, an exploration of God in himself, but quite explicitly God *as understood by the human intellect*. In other words, it is our confused knowledge of God's nature and of the divine persons that is under consideration, the kind of quasi-concept of God that is had by the human mind, and thus a concept of something with distinctions and divisions, parts and composition, which is how the human mind must inevitably approach the mystery of God. Indeed, Thomas is all too ready to assert that, if the question were considered of God himself—or rather, what the intellect knows him to be just as he is—it would ultimately be im-

possible to think of taking any “part” away from God. Likewise, and more to the point, it would be impossible to take away one person and leave anything of God intact, since the persons are distinguished only by relations. In other words, even without being able in any way to comprehend the Trinity, we can know, even *in via*, that the scenario envisioned by the question raised in this article offers an impossibility, and so the mind rightly refuses it.

Even so, Thomas does not end there. He continues, to the annoyance of Zizioulas, to examine the question in accord with the human intellect’s way of knowing, that is *multipliciter et divisim id quod in Deum est unum*. Said differently, even knowing, by revelation, that God just *is* the Trinity of persons, our mind cannot, here and now, “see” that this is so. We are perfectly capable of thinking of God only as one, but in that one possessed of everything else we know about him, such as his goodness and his wisdom. More than that, we can still think of God, even if entirely ignorant of the Trinity of persons, as subsistent, and of having an intellectual nature, that is, possessing an intellect and will, and so, by that fact, we can think of God as *a person* (ad 1). Indeed, this kind of obscure knowledge of God—that is, knowledge of God but without knowledge of the Trinity—is precisely what Thomas takes to be the position of the Jews who, it seems, justifiably (even if incorrectly) conceive of God as *a person*.

What is crucial to note here, with regard to Zizioulas’s critique, is that Thomas precisely rejects what Zizioulas claims him to affirm. That is, on Zizioulas’s reading, Thomas imagines that there is something, the divine substance, which in some way “is” such that it could, at least hypothetically, survive the removal of the divine persons. However, Thomas’s claim here is something quite different. Thomas’s aim here is to reveal just how far our intellect is from grasping how the divine persons and the divine nature, the subjects of the first two articles, relate. We might imagine, that is, because of the formula that makes the person the *terminus* but the nature, in the sense of what is common to all three persons, the principle of the act of assumption, that persons and nature are somehow detachable. Thomas, in response to this, gives us a twofold lesson. On the one hand, he reminds us that this distinction does not apply to the divine persons in God. Each person just *is* the one God, the divine substance, and each person is, *just as* related to the other persons and not merely as constitut-

ed by someone else, but being the very relation subsisting. On the other hand, he reminds us just how distant our intellectual grasp of the Trinity is from the divine reality. The fact that we can, without difficulty, think of God without adverting to the Trinity of persons we know him to be, and still conceive of him as a person recalls to us that we simply do not apprehend, in any lasting or successful way, how the divine nature, which is also to say the Trinity of persons, “works.”

Ironically, Thomas’s fundamental notion of what makes a person to be a person should also be attractive to Zizioulas, rather than worrisome. As we recall, for Zizioulas, one of the principal marks of a person is freedom: freedom *from* the limiting determinations of substance, freedom *for* generation and creation. Yet, despite Zizioulas’s worries, this is just what Thomas wants us to understand about persons. As he tells us, what characterizes particular individuals in rational substances from other sorts of things is that they are not merely acted upon, moved by the great causal nexus from the *primum mobile* down to the humblest rock, but have “dominion over their acts . . . and act *per se*” (*ST* I, q. 29, a. 1). Precisely as intellectual, and thus spiritual, persons, even those persons who are animals and thus have material bodies, are, in their intellects, “potentially all things,” not determined, as are merely sensory beings, by the limits of matter to receive sensible forms. In their wills, persons are oriented not merely to sensory, and thus limited, constrained, and relatively determined goods, but rather to the good as known, to the good as such. It is just this indeterminacy in intellect and will that provide rational animals and intellectual substances, that is, persons, their dignity. It is in this sense that persons are like God who, in a supereminent way, exceeds all categories and limits, while having in himself all perfections. While created persons do not possess all perfections and are, by their natures, constrained in some sense, the fact that they are not determined to this or that, and that, being spiritual, are free from all coercive governance (at least in their will), means that persons for Thomas exhibit just that freedom and spontaneity that Zizioulas worries, without justification, is lost to the Western intellectual tradition.

It should be clear, however, why Thomas would not be sanguine about the prospect of trying to found the ontology of God around the notion of the divine persons, and why we should be cautious about attempts to adjust our metaphysics to meet a perceived need to some-

how “include” or make room for the dynamic of subsistent relations. As Thomas reminds us (cf. *De potentia*, q. 9, a.5), the plurality of persons in the Godhead falls under those things pertaining to the faith and can neither be sought out by natural human reason nor sufficiently understood. Similarly, the very doctrine of simplicity forestalls any attempt to make divine subsistent relations, or for that matter the divine *esse*, which is at once the divine *id quod est*, a useful starting point *for us* in making sense of the world. We see this manifest in Thomas’s allowance that God can justifiably be called “person,” not by virtue of what we know revealed about the Trinity of persons, but by what we can know about him even by reason, or by incomplete revelation as to the Jews, namely of his possessing, by analogy, an intellectual nature. What is curious here is that we can know by faith that God is not one person, but three, but there is nothing at all in our way of knowing *in via* that would prevent our reasonably seeing God as personal just in his unity. *Pace* Zizioulas, real things can be known about God apart from the revelation of the Trinity of persons, and it is less than obvious that the one God who is known is the person of the Father (whose *personalitas* must be revealed to us by the Son in any event). As much as we might sympathize with the desire radically to reassess our metaphysics in light of the sublime truth of the Trinity, the very modesty that Thomas calls us to in handling this most central, but therefore most difficult to grasp, doctrine points rather away from grounding our intellects on such truths. We must, if we want to talk sensibly, use those categories that make sense to us, however much the truths about which we speak stretch our sensible talk in unaccustomed and occasionally uncomfortable directions. 

