

The “I-Thou” Argument for the Trinity: Wherefore Art Thou?

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THE FOLLOWING THESIS TYPIFIES a recent current of thought in Trinitarian theology: “The living God can . . . be thought of only as Father and Son, while a non-trinitarian, purely monotheistic God would in fact have to be declared dead.” Such an opinion, it would seem, would have struck twentieth-century Jewish thinker Martin Buber as false. After all, the central message of the *Shema* is “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut 6:4, RSV). Buber did not read this prayer as Trinitarian, but he did have “monotheistic” faith in the living God. Were he alive, Buber might register surprise that the author of the thesis is a major proponent of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, Walter Cardinal Kasper. Further, Kasper argues to the thesis by way of a reformulation of Buber’s own claim: “An I without a Thou is unthinkable.”¹ Did Buber simply fail to grasp the universality of his own insight and so apply it to the God beyond the firmament? Or did Kasper overreach?

Kasper presents an iteration of what I call the “I-Thou” argument for the Trinity. The argument is almost always attended by the so-called “Social Analogy,” according to which God is contemplated through the iconic similitude of a community of human persons,

¹ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 188, 243. When necessary, I will offer my own translation from the German edition, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1982). The entire first citation above is, in the German, italicized.

an analogy disfavored by the influential Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J.² The “I-Thou” argument and the Social Analogy are, however, favored by a wide range of recent and contemporary theologians. For example, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, otherwise appreciative of Rahner, embraces the analogy and even utilizes it to defend the proposition that, if God exists, an economy of salvation (without hierarchical structures) will exist.³ Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann argues that the divine unity is not that of a numerically identical substance, but rather, that of the developing relational “at-oneness” of divine persons.⁴ Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae meditates profoundly on subjects and their adequate objects, contending that God cannot exist except in intersubjectivity.⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger writes, “At bottom [only] belief in the Trinity, which recognizes the plural in the unity of God, is [the final] elimination of dualism as a means of explaining plurality alongside unity; only through this belief is the positive validation of plurality given a definitive base.”⁶

The present article seeks to elaborate and then to evaluate the basic structure of the “I-Thou” argument and, to some extent, the Social Analogy. How well does the “I-Thou” argument serve theological science with respect to the Church’s sober confidence about natural reason’s capacities, with respect to the loftiness of faith’s object, and with respect to theology’s remote task of interreligious dialogue? Two critical teachings will serve as norms of the inquiry: (1) natural reason retains the capacity to discover the truth of God’s existence and certain of his attributes, and (2) that the truth of the Holy Trinity is a strict mystery.

² Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 42–45.

³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); see especially chs. 8 and 9.

⁴ See, e.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), esp. ch. 5.

⁵ Dumitru Staniloae, “The Holy Trinity: Structure of Supreme Love,” in *The Experience of God*, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 245–80.

⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 128; for the German, see *Einführung in das Christentum: Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis Mit* (Munich: Kösel, 2007), 166.

Elaboration of the Norms for the Inquiry

The First Vatican Council solemnly defines that human reason can discover the truth of God through creatures. No doubt, due to original sin and actual sins, human reason is darkened from that splendor in which it was constituted by God’s grace. Notwithstanding, natural reason is a real and discerning *light*, not a dominating *volition to power* that by nature fabricates and conceals. The dogma would be beside the point if it regarded human reason only as such and not in its present condition. Moreover, the papal tradition before and after the Council affirms both that natural reason in its present state can come to know God and that such knowledge can be demonstrative.⁷ It can also consist in the informal inference that a farmer makes in wonder at creation; hence, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps 14:1; 53:1). The concrete possibility of knowing God’s existence with certainty helps account for Scripture’s teaching that idolaters and atheists, even those who never encounter God’s special covenants, are without excuse (Wis 13; Rom 1). It is not the burden of this theological article to produce such reasoned grounds for the faith, but rather to judge the “I-Thou” argument by the norm that it is possible to demonstrate God’s existence by natural reason.

On the other hand, the truth that God is triune is a strict mystery, as theological argument and authority attest. Aquinas’s theological argument is compelling: God’s existence cannot be self-evident to natural reason, since his essence cannot be grasped except by the aid of the *lumen gloriae*; hence, natural reason can rise to the knowledge of God only by way of argument, through its natural knowledge of

⁷ See, e.g., Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, §5, and *Humanum Genus*, §17; Pius XI, *Studiorum Ducem*, §16; Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, §29; and John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, §67. The Magisterium prior to the First Vatican Council moved in this direction. See the theses that Bautain was commanded to affirm and that were used by the Congregation of the Index; see Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals, Latin-English* (hereafter, DH), ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed., English edition ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 2751, 2755. The Congregation of Bishops and Regulars also required Bautain to affirm reason’s capacity to demonstrate God’s existence (DH, no. 2765). The Congregation of the Index later required Bonnetty to affirm reason’s capacity to prove God’s existence with certainty, and Pius IX confirmed this teaching (DH, no. 2812). Pope Pius IX presents it as reason’s *present* task to demonstrate and defend the existence and attributes of God so as to prepare men for faith (DH, nos. 2853) and teaches that Scripture affirms the achievement of such knowledge (DH, no. 2855).

creatures. Such an argument consists in the inference that there must exist a cause of such-and-such description to account for the world we experience. Hence, the inference to God's existence and attributes yields knowledge that there exists a sufficient productive cause of the finite perfections we discern. Now, this causality pertains to the divine power, and the divine power is identical to the divine essence, shared commonly by the three persons. Hence, natural reason cannot conclude to the personal distinctions in God.⁸

Theological authorities confirm the truth of Aquinas's conclusion. Vatican I's *Dei Filius* condemns the notion that it is possible to demonstrate strict mysteries from reason. While the Council conspicuously does not identify such mysteries, one is hard pressed to contradict the following statement: "Surely from the sense of the Church, if there is any mystery, the Trinity is the greatest of all."⁹ Moreover, the consensus of theologians since the Council is that the Holy Trinity is one such mystery. Importantly, Kasper and Ratzinger, the contemporaries on whom this article concentrates, explicitly join this consensus. More importantly, revelation itself presents the Holy Trinity as a mystery beyond natural reason's scope (Matt 11:27; 16:17; John 1:18). Finally, the Magisterium teaches that the Trinity is such a mystery. The Holy Office under Leo XIII condemned the Rosminian claim that, after the revelation of the Trinity, natural reason can demonstrate its truth.¹⁰ Theologians describe claims such as Rosmini's—which suggest that revelation can inaugurate a change that allows natural reason to demonstrate a mystery—as semi-rationalism. If semi-rationalism is condemned, then *a fortiori*, so is rationalism.¹¹ In *Studiorum Ducem*, Pope Pius XI praises Thomas for his rational arguments for God's existence. He also praises him for his sound and precise distinction of faith and reason—of nature and grace—noting that such distinctions are crucial to responsible apologetics. He then refers to some "august mysteries," first of all "the intimate life of God,"¹² undoubtedly referring to the eternal generation and spiration. Pope Pius XII lists a number of revealed data that are

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q. 32, a. 1.

⁹ Joseph M. Dalmau, *On the One and Triune God*, trans. Kenneth Baker, vol. 2A, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa* (Ramsey, NJ: Keep the Faith, 2014), 310.

¹⁰ DH, no. 3225. Before this time, Pope Pius VI described the Trinity as a "most august mystery" (DH, no. 2696).

¹¹ The Magisterium during the reign of Pius IX is replete with condemnations of semi-rationalism.

¹² Pius XI, *Studiorum Ducem* (1923), §19.

demonstrable from reason, including “the existence of God, personal and one.”¹³ The formulation precisely avoids inclusion of the mystery of the Trinity yet includes the truths of God being personal and one. The Second Vatican Council, in §22 of *Gaudium et Spes*, describes Christ as revealing “the mystery of the Father.” In his *Mysterium Fidei*, Pope Paul VI describes the Holy Trinity as a mystery.¹⁴ More explicitly, Pope John Paul II teaches in *Fides et Ratio*, “It should nonetheless be kept in mind that Revelation remains charged with mystery. It is true that Jesus, with his entire life, revealed the countenance of the Father, for he came to teach the secret things of God.”¹⁵ He goes on to distinguish what Christ reveals from any product or completion of reason. In *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II differentiates the mystery of the Father revealed by Christ from what is knowable about God through creatures, and after citing Romans 1 to defend the latter knowledge, he continues: “This indirect and imperfect knowledge, achieved by the intellect seeking God by means of creatures through the visible world, falls short of ‘vision of the Father.’ ‘No one has ever seen God,’ writes St. John, in order to stress the truth that ‘the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.’ This ‘making known’ reveals God in the most profound mystery of His being, one and three, surrounded by inapproachable light.”¹⁶

In sum, revelation, the Magisterium, the consensus of recent theologians, and theological argument attest that the Trinity counts among the strict mysteries. That the truth of the Trinity cannot be demonstrated by natural reason is therefore theologically certain, perhaps even proximate to faith.¹⁷ This knowledge of which a Catholic theologian is possessed serves to protect the integrity both of theology and of natural reason, for the theologian knows that any purported demonstration of the Trinity from natural reason must be flawed and that inquiry might establish how.

¹³ Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950), §29, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html.

¹⁴ DH, no. 4522.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), §13, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html, accessed March 31, 2015.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (1980), §2, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

¹⁷ See Dalmau, *One and Triune God*, 310.

Exposition of the “I-Thou” Argument

The first aim of the “I-Thou” argument is to establish that there is a plurality of persons in God. The second aim is to show that there must be more than two persons. A third aim, sometimes undertaken, is to contend for the impossibility of a fourth person. Although the second and third aims are of considerable interest in themselves, the crucial theological moves are made in execution of the first. For this reason, I concentrate on an examination of that first aim, though I shall briefly unpack arguments in service of the second and third.

The various iterations all contend that there are some perfections that a person can have only in relation to a distinct person. Let us call any member of this set “Perfection X.” The rough form of the argument geared to the primary aim is as follows:

- i: Perfection X cannot be realized in Q unless Q is in relation to a person distinct from Q.
- ii: Perfection X is realized in God.
- iii: Therefore, God is in relation to person distinct from God.
- iv: Now, no non-divine (i.e., finite) person is either necessary or sufficient for the realization of X in God (who is absolutely infinite).
- v: Therefore, the person with whom God is in relation must be divine (i.e., infinite).
- vi: It is premised that God is (divine) person.
- vii: Therefore, God is (divine) person in relation to divine person.

The following perfections are found in the aforesaid set: God is a “person”; God is an “I”; God is “absolute good”; God is “absolute being”; God is “charity”; and so on. Let me briefly adumbrate the argument with the term “person” as the perfection. “God cannot be ‘person’ unless he is in relation to person distinct from himself. But God is divine ‘person.’ Now, no non-divine person is necessary or sufficient for God to be person. Therefore, it must be divine person with whom God is in relation. Therefore, God is divine person in relation to divine person.” The discovery further yields awareness that “God” in the initial proposition stands for *one* divine person in relation to

another divine person. The argument runs similarly with the perfection "love": "God cannot be 'love' unless he is in relation to divine person distinct from himself." It is already premised that the subject is also a person. The argument from "God is an 'I'" is similarly structured. Those involving "absolute being" and "absolute good" require more steps but ultimately follow similar lines of reasoning.

A question immediately to be raised concerns human access to knowledge of these perfections: can one know of them only through revelation? Are they strictly mysterious? Many would argue that the perfection "charity" is strictly mysterious, but I will leave this perfection aside until I come to the famous argument of Richard of St. Victor. A reasonable case can be made that the perfection "good" is not strictly mysterious. Consider only Plotinus and Plato. The concept "person" has a genetic origin in intellectual insights forged in Christian theological controversy. Nevertheless, a number of those who stress this origin as a peerless and necessary condition for the discovery of the concept admit that, the concept having been unearthed by theological labor, it is now open to natural reason's contemplation. If the concept is thus open, as the regular public, legal, and philosophical uses thereof attest, it is not a strict mystery. Fathoming its depths as one does those of "good" is beyond natural reason, but genuine access to its formality is not. The perfection "I" goes hand in hand with that of person. The perfection "being" is, needless to say, knowable by natural reason. The availability of many of these perfections to the searching gaze of reason factors into my assessment.

The key premises in the "I-Thou" argument are (i) and (iv) above. Defenses thereof vary according to the perfection at hand. I shall treat the argument from the perfection that God is a person, an "I." As we have seen, the founding premise is, in its epistemic formulation, "An I without a Thou is unthinkable."¹⁸ Put metaphysically, the premise runs: "Nothing can be a person except it be in relation to another person, a 'thou.'" Kasper defends the universal claim by appeal to recent philosophy: "Personalism, as represented by M. Buber, F. Ebner, F. Rosenzweig and others, has made it entirely clear that person exists only in relation; that in the concrete personality exists only as interpersonality, subjectivity only as intersubjectivity."¹⁹ Human experience, he says, corroborates this: "Even though

¹⁸ Kasper, *God*, 243; see also *ibid.*, 267.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

the person is a unity that cannot be communicated to a higher unity, its existence is nonetheless possible only in co-existence with other persons. The human person is possible only in the plural; it can exist only in reciprocal acknowledgement, and it finds its fulfillment only in the communion of love. Persons thus exist only in mutual giving and receiving.”²⁰

Kasper considers that this experience and the philosophical labor concomitant with it now constitute a present “worldview” or pre-apprehension within which anyone will conceive the perfection “person.” Ratzinger agrees concerning the existence of such a worldview, forthrightly describing it as revolutionary and submitting that its roots are found in Christian theology of God.²¹ This worldview is now available to human reason. It consists in a new way of viewing being and sets tasks for philosophy.²² In light of this worldview, Kasper reasons, God cannot be thought as person except in relation to another person: “Within the horizon of this modern understanding of person, an isolated, [impersonal] God is inconceivable. Thus it is precisely the modern concept of person that offers a point of contact for the doctrine of the Trinity.”²³ The reader will note the appearance, in epistemic form, of proposition (iii) above, which is the conclusion to the first half of that argument. The conclusion is: The personal God must be in relation to a person.

Of what nature is this person with whom God is in relation? Could a non-divine person meet the exigence that divine person be in relation to another person? Kasper responds with variations on premise (iv) above: no non-divine (finite) person is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for God to be a person. First, to posit a non-divine person as God’s necessary counterpart would contradict the revealed doctrine of free creation, according to which all that is non-divine is contingent: “If man were God’s sole *vis-à-vis*, then man would be a necessary partner of God. Man would then no longer be the one who is loved with an abyssal free and gracious love, and God’s love for man would no longer be God’s gracious act but rather [God’s

²⁰ Ibid., 306.

²¹ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 121–27.

²² Ibid., 130–32.

²³ Kasper, *God*, 289. O’Connell’s translation incorrectly uses “unipersonal,” whereas the German has “unpersönlicher” (*Gott*, 353). While “unipersonal” is incorrect as a translation here, it is an accurate translation in *God*, 299, for what Kasper rejects, meaning any consistency in a conception of God as “unipersonal” (translating “einpersönlichen” on *Gott*, 364).

own need and his own perfection].”²⁴ Since belief in free creation is shared by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the contradictory of the premise is heresy to each of these. Some would even hold this belief to be deducible by natural reason.²⁵ Second, that for which a finite (non-divine) person is necessary cannot itself be absolutely infinite (divine) because the absolute infinite (act unlimited by potency) cannot need the finite (act limited by potency). Third, nothing finite can even suffice for the realization of an infinite perfection, since the absolute infinite cannot be perfected. So, if one posited that a finite person could suffice for God’s realization of being a person, then, one would imply that God is a finite person. Kasper shares this line of thought, although he sometimes argues to the conclusion from a different starting point. He sometimes argues for premise (iv) by way of a *reductio ad absurdum* regarding an anthropological point of departure. Supposing anthropology as a starting point, he contends that, were we to conceive God simply as the necessary counterpart for *man*, we would finitize God. Consequently, we would conceive God as one more being *in* the realm of beings (within *ens commune*, as the scholastics would put it). The territory that each occupied would be univocally common; God and creatures would be in competition with one another. The being, action, and glory of God would be in inverse proportion to the being, action, and glory of man:

If we imagine God as the other-worldly counterpart of man, then despite all the personal categories we use we will ultimately think of him in objectivist terms as a being who is superior to other beings. When this happens, God is being conceived as [a finite reality that] comes in conflict with finite reality and the modern understanding of it. Then we must either conceive God at the expense of man and the world, or conceive the world at the expense of God, thus limiting God in deistic fashion and finally eliminating him entirely with the atheists.²⁶

Kasper here lucidly shows the absurdity of an anthropological “onto-theology” that considers God *only* in function of securing man’s place. His argument can be converted in the way anticipated above:

²⁴ Kasper, *God*, 243 (*Gott*, 297: “sondern Gottes eigenes Bedürfnis, seine eigene Vollendung”).

²⁵ *ST* I, q. 44, a. 1.

²⁶ Kasper, *God*, p. 295 (*Gott*, 359: “endliche Größe”).

finite man could not suffice, much less be necessary, for God's perfection unless his being were univocally common with God's, in which case God would be finite.

Richard of St. Victor utilizes the perfection of "charity" in another line of argumentation for premises (i) and (iv).²⁷ He unfolds the first variation of his argument for these premises in chapter 2 of book 3 of his marvelous *De Trinitate*. (Subsequent variations, though at first apparently repetitive, in fact develop this theme in new ways. The intricacy of his argumentation, reminiscent of the notes of friendship remarked by Aristotle and Cicero, cannot be given due treatment here.) In God exists the entire plenitude of goodness. Where there is the plenitude of goodness, there must be supreme charity. But what is charity? Here, we encounter Richard's defense of premise (i), a definitional insight: charity is love of another (person).²⁸ Although some loves are not love of another (person), charity is, by definition, love of another (person), since "no one is properly said to have charity on the basis of his own private love of himself."²⁹ Therefore, we must hold

²⁷ I take the English translation from Richard of St. Victor, *Book Three of the Trinity*, in *The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Gover A. Zinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). The critical Latin text is *De Trinitate*, ed. Jean Ribaillier (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958; hereafter, "Ribaillier"). A French-Latin edition is available as *La Trinité*, ed. Gaston Salet, Sources Chrétiennes 63 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1959; hereafter, *La Trinité*). When necessary, I will offer my own translation in lieu of the above English translation. For the latest English translation, see Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity: English Translation and Commentary*, trans. Ruben Angelelli (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

²⁸ Although I would add a key qualification, what Dennis Ngien says about Richard's prior premise, that nothing is better than charity, applies here: "[Richard] sees no need of providing proof of this proposition, but merely asks that we accept it as an ontological given, rooted in human experience. . . . The reflection of the absolute good in human experience is not to be grasped by deductive proofs, but by internal analysis of self-consciousness"; see Ngien, "Richard of St. Victor's Condilectus: The Spirit as Co-beloved," *European Journal of Theology* 12 (2003): 80. The qualification is that the necessity of the truths Richard ponders cannot be gathered from self-consciousness, but only from profound supernatural revelation of the Trinity. Nico den Bok's analyses are more accurate and penetrating than Ngien's. See den Bok, *Communicating the Most High: A Systematic Study of Person and Trinity in the Theology of Richard of St. Victor* (†1173), *Bibliotheca Victorina* 7 (Paris: Brepols, 1996).

²⁹ Richard, *Book Three*, ch. 2: "Nullus autem pro privato et proprio sui ipsius amore dicitur proprie caritatem habere" (p. 374; Ribaillier, 136, ln. 8f; *La Trinité*, p. 168). Sources of this definition are Gregory the Great, *XL homiliae in evangelia* 1.17 (PL, 76:1139A) and St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 8.12 (alt. number-

premise (iii), that God is in relation to another person. Richard is now in position to argue for premise (iv), that no non-divine person can suffice as this “other” with whom God is in charitative relation. The reason is that the one who is supreme goodness must love in a supreme and orderly way. Yet, if the object of God’s charity were not divine, God could not love in a supreme and orderly way. Either the charity would be supreme and not ordered (because, to follow out Richard’s hint, God would will a finite person to be infinite), or the charity would be ordered but not supreme (because God would not will an infinite good to his beloved). Kasper’s and Richard’s arguments are aimed to establish the conclusion (v) that the person with whom God must be in relation is infinite and divine. Since it is premised that “God” is person, the final conclusion is that God is divine person in relation to divine person.

On the basis of this approach, Richard cogently presents another argument that there are more than two persons in God. Without a third divine person, the first two divine persons would exchange love only with each other. They would not enjoy the experience of *sharing* the exchange itself, of having a co-beloved with whom to open their friendship itself. Now, the friendship itself of two who are generous brings great joy, for each loves the other and each delights in this blessed reciprocity. Still, those who are generous wish to share everything, and therefore, they wish to share also this boon of friendship. However, if the two were not willing to share their very friendship, they would lack true generosity and could not have supreme charity. Therefore, since they are supremely good, they are willing to share their friendship. Since they are divine, they are able to share it. Their willing sharing of friendship constitutes supreme generosity, supreme magnanimity, and supreme joy. Since divine power is not less than divine desire, there is a third person in God with whom the two share their love.

The natural question at this point is: “Why not four, or five persons? Why stop at three?” Richard has already laid the grounds to answer this question on the basis of his Social Analogy. Nevertheless, he does not utilize book 3’s argument for three persons to answer the question. Rather, he argues for only three (a) from the character

ing 8.8)(*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 50:287, lns. 19–27; hereafter, *CCL*) and *In Ion* 14.9. However, Ribailier points out in his notes that Augustine states the opposite at *De Trinitate* 9.2 (alt. numbering also 9.2), lns. 1–7. Den Bok offers a good treatment of the historical development of this claim at *Communicating*, 285–96.

of the processions³⁰ and (b) from the (resultant) differences of properties assignable to the love that each person is.³¹ While the latter argument resonates with the Social Analogy, book 3's argument for a *condilectus* contains the resources to conclude to only three persons. The argument for a third person rests on the need *precisely* for an adequate "co-beloved" of the first two. To be adequate, such a sharer must be capable of fully sharing in divine friendship. Clearly, only a divine person is capable of this. Therefore, the adequate co-beloved is divine. Observe that, for Richard, the required *ratio* is a divine or infinite co-beloved. Now, if it were possible or necessary for a fourth person to contribute towards the fulfillment of this *ratio*, the third person would have failed to be the *infinite* co-beloved, since nothing finite can suffice, much less be necessary, for the fulfillment of unrestricted act.³² Likewise, if the third person did not satisfy the *ratio* exhaustively, then no number of finite persons could do so. Why not? Firstly, an actual numerical infinity of persons seems impossible.

³⁰ In *De Trinitate* 5.11–15, Richard argues from various angles that there can be only three persons: One who proceeds from another but from whom no one proceeds, one who proceeds from another and has one proceeding from him, and one who proceeds from none.

³¹ According to the latter argument, supreme love, though identical with the divine substance and with each person, is distinguishable by three properties: purely gratuitous, purely indebted, and both gratuitous and indebted. The Father's love is solely gratuitous in that, while he takes his divinity from no one, he lovingly produces; the Spirit's love is solely indebted in that, while no divine person proceeds from him, he lovingly takes divinity from Father and Son; the Son's is both indebted, since he lovingly takes his divinity from the Father, and gratuitous, since he lovingly produces the Spirit (see Richard, *De Trinitate* 5.16–21).

³² Den Bok correctly grasps that the *ratio* at stake in securing a third person is one and the same with that for securing a fourth or fifth person, but he fails to see that this identity of *ratio* does entail completion at three and only three divine persons: "It would be the *same* reason (wanting a 'condilectus') requiring the third and all subsequent persons, and the restriction of the number of persons to three is not required by this reason; on the contrary, why would love not be more complete and the persons sharing love be more communicative, if there could be a fourth, fifth, etc.?" (den Bok, *Communicating*, 319). To the contrary, only finite love would be more perfect were there more than three (finite) persons. Just as den Bok (rightly) suggests that Richard's argument for two persons rests not only on the essence of love but also on the requirement of order (*ibid.*, 309–311), so, I suggest, Richard's argument can be developed so as to secure three and only three divine persons by the consideration that the love under consideration is infinite. Such development presupposes the soundness of the prior argument, however.

Secondly, and more importantly, not even an infinite set of finite persons could fulfill the *ratio*. Every finite person is a limitation of act by potency, but no accumulation of limited actualities constitutes Pure Act.³³

Evaluation

The above is but a sketch of the structure of the "I-Thou" argument. There are many riches hidden in the argument and in its attendant Social Analogy; I shall indicate some along the way. My object, however, is to evaluate the strategic role and configuration of the argument for theological science. I will expound certain defects of various iterations of the "I-Thou" argument in a progressive and dialectical manner, anticipating and responding to objections in the process.

Danger of Rationalism

First, some iterations of the "I-Thou" argument rhetorically appear to be attempts at rational demonstration because the first premise is presented as knowable by reason. The initial premise (i) reads: "Perfection X cannot be realized in Q unless Q is in relation to person distinct from Q." If the first premise is universally true and knowable as such by natural reason, the conclusion is rationally demonstrated. If not, then it is not so demonstrated.

Among the more pronounced examples of an adoption of premise (i) as rationally knowable is Richard's great work. Early in his masterpiece, he announces his aim "to adduce not merely probable but even necessary reasons for that which we believe."³⁴ It appears that neces-

³³ Within the context of his own argument, Staniloae marvelously defends completion at three persons. The Holy Spirit instantiates, vis-à-vis the other two persons, the horizon of being for them. If that horizon is infinite person, the love of the two can maintain itself as personal; if not, then it cannot. *Were* there room for more than a third, the horizon could not be infinite person (see Staniloae, "Holy Trinity," 270).

³⁴ "Erit itaque intentionis nostre in hoc opere ad ea que credimus, in quantum Dominus dederit, non modo probabiles, verum etiam necessarias rationes adducere et fidei nostre documenta veritatis enodatione et explanatione condire" (Richard, *De Trinitate*, 1.4, in Ribaillier, 89, lns. 4–7; *La Trinité*, 70). Gaston Salet, the editor of the volume in *Sources Chrétiennes*, notes that this phraseology is rooted in Anselm (*La Trinité*, 70n2). Salet unfortunately attempts to see Thomas agreeing that "necessary reasons" can be urged for the truth of the Trinity, offering as evidence a citation of *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 9, ad 1. In this reply, Thomas is indicating that the truth of the Trinity has its necessary reasons but that these are unavailable to pilgrim man.

sary reasons are a goal also of book 3, the crucial book arguing for God's triune character. Richard's motive is, of course, supernatural love. Yet, even his prayerful beginning expresses his quest "to show these things clearly from reason."³⁵

It is widely known that recent Richardian scholarship contends that the phrase "necessary reasons" does not imply rational demonstration. Dennis Ngien writes, "the phrase 'necessary reasons' does not carry the modern sense, a hard-line rationalistic attempt to prove the existence of mysteries, totally independently of faith. Instead the 'necessary reasons' are the resultant fruit of human understanding transformed by contemplation, or more precisely by love."³⁶ In short, Ngien holds that the argument is from faith and for faith.

In his editorial and introductory remarks in the Latin-French edition of Richard's *The Trinity*, Gaston Salet presents a defense of Richard with nuance. First, he concedes that Richard may give the impression of arguing that a uni-personal God is an absurdity. However, Salet remarks, Richard has only believing readers in mind.³⁷ Second, Salet indicates that Richard is following Anselm and contends that Anselm did not consider his own arguments for the Trinity and the Incarnation to be necessary conclusions from reason. Salet points to a disclaimer in *Monologion* 1.1 to the effect that, if an argument from reason proves R to be the case but no greater authority asserts R, then Anselm will regard R not as absolutely (*non omnino*) necessary but as able to be regarded as necessary by him for the time being.³⁸ This is a peculiar locution. Salet suggests that Anselm hereby differentiates his argument from an apodictic syllogism.

Jean Ribailier, editor of the critical text, offers various suggestions. First, he suggests that the "necessary reasons" constitute a negative rather than positive proof: "'Necessary reasons' obviously do

³⁵ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.1 (*Book Three*, 373; "ex ratione convincere" in Ribailier, 135, lns. 17–18; *La Trinité*, 164).

³⁶ Ngien, "Condilectus," 78f.

³⁷ See *La Trinité*, 39–42.

³⁸ St. Anselm, *Monologion* 1.1: "In quo tamen, si quid dixero quod maior non monstret auctoritas: sic volo accipi ut, quamvis ex rationibus quae mihi videbuntur, quasi necessarium concludatur, non ob hoc tamen omnino necessarium, sed tantum sic interim videri posse dicatur [If, however, I say something that a greater authority does not teach, I wish it to be accepted as follows. Although the conclusion seems to me to follow from the reasons as though of necessity, it is, however, not said to be entirely necessary for this reason. Meanwhile, it can be regarded as necessary]"; in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann, 1968), vol. 1, p. 14, lns. 1–4 (translation my own).

not mean that the mysteries of faith are accessible to man but rather that man is capable of judging that there is no contradiction between the requirements of reason and the data of revelation." Second, he suggests that Richard's demonstrations are arguments of fittingness, carrying not demonstrative rigor but moral and psychological force.³⁹ Third, he adds that Richard's mode of reasoning is concrete and inductive, involving an appeal to (contemplative) experience, not to a rationalistic *a priori*.⁴⁰ Fourth, he remarks that Richard's notion of knowledge is indebted to the Platonic tradition of illumination: for Richard, both the authority of Scripture and the achievements of reason are, in the end, gifts from the Father of Lights.⁴¹ On the other hand, Ribaillier thinks that, in *De Trinitate*, Richard does not avail himself of his own distinction, articulated in the work *Benjamin Major*, between truths within the reach of reason and truths beyond the reach of reason.⁴² Ribaillier also concedes that Richard *approaches* Abelard's position that natural reason can demonstrate God's Trinitarian character. Still, he notes that Richard was less adventurous than others at this time, including Abelard and Achard of St. Victor.

These and other interpretations of Richard can be countered as follows. First, whether Richard has a believer in mind is significant but not dispositive. Granting that a Christian is in better circumstances from which to grasp the argument, it either is or is not an attempted demonstration from natural reason; it either is or is not an exercise in natural theology. Many proponents of natural theology, for instance, acknowledge that their discipline is constructed with the judicative and sapiential guidance of the light of faith. Notwithstanding, the means of demonstration in natural theology must be knowable by natural reason.

Second, Anselm, expressly constructs his arguments with respect to the objections of and resources available to unbelievers. Thus, there is already a tradition before Richard of attempting to demonstrate revealed truths from reason. Importantly, as Salet admits, Anselm wants to offer something more than a probable account.⁴³ Now, non-sophistical arguments are either probable or demonstrative. Hence, if an argument is not merely probable, it must be demonstrative. Could it then be that, in this remark, Anselm commits to hold

³⁹ Ribaillier, 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20–22.

⁴¹ Ibid., 26–27.

⁴² Ibid., 15f.

⁴³ *La Trinité*, 466.

the conclusion only with the certainty that the argument warrants insofar as there is lacking any higher attestation? If so, the conclusion could truly, although not in every way (*non omnino*), be known to be necessary. Such, at any rate, appears to be the meaning of a similar turn of phrase in chapter 2 of book 1 of Anselm's *Cur deus homo?*: "If I shall have said anything which higher authority does not corroborate, though I appear to demonstrate it by argument, yet it is not to be received with any [other certainty], than as so appearing to me for the time, until God in some way make a clearer revelation to me."⁴⁴

Note also that the pronouncement of an authority regarding the truth of the conclusion of a non-demonstrative argument does not render the argument demonstrative. Hence, if Salet is correct, Anselm hereby abandons all hope at rational demonstration, which seems quite unlikely. After all, Anselm concludes book 1 with the remark that, if T is shown true by necessary reasons, then T must not be doubted, even if it is not yet grasped *how* T is true.⁴⁵ In short, there can be demonstration *quia* that is not *propter quid*. Now, one does not grasp in every way the truth of anything unless one grasps its reason for being. What, then, of Richard? Following the standard logical divisions of the time, he divides arguments into sophistical, necessary, and probable, the last group including both rhetorical and dialectical arguments.⁴⁶ Since he seeks "not merely probable" arguments, and surely not sophistical arguments, how can he not seek necessary, that is demonstrative, arguments?

Third, Richard precisely measures his arguments in *De Trinitate*. In book 1 of *De Trinitate*, for instance, Richard repeatedly argues that it is necessary that there be a being that is "of itself" (*a semetipso*), adducing as evidence that we experience beings that are not of themselves.⁴⁷ In this context, he differentiates his certitude regarding this conclusion from that regarding the Trinitarian question. Richard pronounces at this stage that it is "probable" that the being that is "of

⁴⁴ *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S.N. Deane, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), 195. The Latin reads: "Videlicet ut, si quid dixero quod major non confirmet auctoritas—quamvis illud ratione probare videar—, non alia certitudine accipiatur, nisi quia interim ita mihi videtur, donec deus mihi melius aliquo modo revelet," St. Anselm, *Cur deus homo*, 1.2, *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 50, lns. 7–10.

⁴⁵ "Quod enim necessaria ratione veraciter esse colligitur, id in nullam deduci debet dubitationem, etiam si ratio quomodo sit non percipitur," *Cur deus homo* 1.25, *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 96, lns. 2–3.

⁴⁶ See den Bok, *Communicating*, 184fn132.

⁴⁷ See Richard, *De Trinitate* 1.4–11.

itself” is eternally productive or has an eternal product, remarking that he will return to the topic later in the work.⁴⁸ In book 4, he concedes that the reader might consider only “probable” a certain argument concerned with the differentiation of divine persons by way of origin.⁴⁹ Similarly, in chapter 1 of book 4, he confesses defense of the non-contradictory character of God’s unity and triunity to be difficult to fathom. Hence, he is fully capable of rendering the (currently) desirable nuance regarding his arguments in book 3.

Fourth, that Richard sees all thinking as a gift from God accounts considerably for his procedure but does not determine the issue. Both nature and grace are gifts from the Father of Lights, albeit not in the same way. One might contend that the distinction between nature and grace had not adequately been worked out at that point. True, Philip the Chancellor (†1236) helped theology more adequately distinguish nature and grace. For this very reason, theology after this insight ought to reflect more thoroughly on its method, identifying what it knows by faith and what it knows by reason. Further, notwithstanding Philip’s significant advance, theologians had long differentiated indemonstrable mysteries from demonstrable religious truths.⁵⁰

Fifth, Richard speaks of “experience” with regard not only to mystical realities such as the friendship of God but also with regard to ordinary objects.⁵¹ Hence, “experience” does not necessarily mean only graced experience. In fact, it is experience of the existing world of non-necessary things that grounds Richard’s deduction of the existence of a necessary thing.⁵² Nico den Bok has amply confuted the reduction of book 3 to arguments from experience.⁵³

Sixth, and most importantly, in book 3, Richard describes his core conclusions—that there is more than one person and that there are more than two persons—as one would describe a demonstration from reason. Some evidence in the form of citations is in order. “See how easily reason clearly shows that in true Divinity plurality of persons cannot be lacking.”⁵⁴ Again, “What the fullness of goodness clearly

⁴⁸ See *ibid.* 1.9.

⁴⁹ See *ibid.* 5.2 (Ribaillier, 197, lns. 29–31).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1.1.

⁵¹ See Richard, *De Trinitate* 1.7.

⁵² See, e.g., *ibid.* 1.10.

⁵³ Den Bok, *Communicating*, 189f.

⁵⁴ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.2 (*Book Three*, 375; “quam de facili ratio convincit” in Ribaillier, 137, ln. 31; *La Trinité*, 170).

shows and proves concerning the plurality of persons, the fullness of happiness demonstrates by a similar reason.”⁵⁵ Again, “From this, therefore, we gather and grasp by indubitable reasoning that fullness of happiness excludes every defect of charity, whose perfection demands a Trinity of persons.”⁵⁶ He concludes: “Behold now we have proved by open and manifest reasoning how true that is which we are commanded to believe, namely, that we venerate ‘one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.’”⁵⁷

Conversely, Richard considers those who reject the reasoning in book 3 to be foolish and mad. “Behold, concerning the plurality of divine persons, we have presented our teaching with such transparent reasoning that whoever wishes to oppose such a clear confirmation would seem to suffer from the disease of folly.” In the same chapter, those who fail to follow the individual steps are blamed for “madness,” for being “weak in mind” and “devoid of reason.”⁵⁸ Toward the end of book 3, Richard repeats the claim: “Behold in the affirmation of the Trinity, so great, so firm a witness to truth occurs everywhere that a person for whom so much assurance is insufficient seems to be mad.”⁵⁹ Now, one can charge with folly or madness only a person who rejects something self-evident to all, easily inferable by all, or demonstrated with plain and easily understood reasoning.⁶⁰ In sum, Richard both states that his arguments are plain and obvious and implies that the truth of the conclusion is either self-evident, easily inferable, or demonstrated plainly and simply.

⁵⁵ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.3 (*Book Three*, 375; “quod . . . plenitudo bonitatis convincit et probat, plenitudo felicitatis simili ratione approbat” in Ribaillier, 137, lns. 4–5; *La Trinité*, 170).

⁵⁶ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.12 (*Book Three*, 386; “colligitur et indubitata rationeprehenditur” in Ribaillier, 148, ln. 24; *La Trinité*, 196).

⁵⁷ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.25 (*Book Three*, 397; “Ecce jam manifesta et multiplici ratione probavimus quam verum sit quod credere jubemur,” in Ribaillier, 159, lns. 31–33; *La Trinité*, 222).

⁵⁸ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.5 (*Book Three*, 378; “tam aperta docuimus ratione, ut insaniae morbo videatur laborare”; “quis enim, nisi insanie morbo,” “nisi mentis inops,” and “nisi rationis experts” in Ribaillier, 140, lns. 4–10; *La Trinité*, 176).

⁵⁹ Richard, *De Trinitate* 3.20 (*Book Three*, 393; “tam rata veritatis at<t>estatio undique occurrit, ut mente captus videatur cui tanta certificatio satisfacere non possit” in Ribaillier, 155, lns. 17–19; *La Trinité*, 212).

⁶⁰ One might object that Newman found human practice to justify assent without demonstration. On the contrary, Newman contended that certain rationally discernible signs can, in their convergence, constitute what is tantamount to a demonstration.

In the face of this evidence, I concur with den Bok, who writes, “Richard is not satisfied with making some points in trinitarian theology acceptable, he intends to *prove* the most important statements of the *Quicumque*. He is convinced that the rationality implicated in some important things we believe to be true about God is a *strict* rationality.”⁶¹ Den Bok recognizes that Richard does not use the phrase “necessary reason” to describe any particular argument in book 3. Still, he writes: “Since (a) Richard is convinced that eternal things have necessary reasons and the divine *persons* are eternal, and (b) he does not indicate a shift in the status of argumentation between *De Trinitate* II and III, whereas he usually does indicate such a shift, I conclude that Richard considers his arguments in *De Trinitate* III to have the highest epistemological status: For him they are ‘necessary reasons.’”⁶²

With regard to the existence and attributes of God in books 2 and 3 of *De Trinitate*, Richard offers necessary arguments. Whereas he does not hesitate to measure his Trinitarian claims in books 1, 4, and 5, he does not do so in book 3, but instead clearly implies that the arguments are necessary and from reason.

Richard’s claim, then, materially conflicts with the theological and papal consensus regarding the concrete application of Vatican I. Still, nineteenth- and twentieth-century magisterial clarity does not imply a posthumous, formal condemnation of Richard. There is no need to defend Richard by reinterpreting his own self-understanding. Matthias Scheeben’s is perhaps the soundest hermeneutic, which simply acknowledges in Richard a deep immersion in the triune Love, an immersion that rendered such close *contactus* with the divine as to impede advertence to the particular spring whence he drew such knowledge. Such inadvertence led to an unwitting conflation of faith and reason. Thus, with Scheeben, we can praise Richard for this higher than scientific *sapientia*, because *contactus* is the one thing that matters (*terminus quo*). Nevertheless, in contemporary catechetical instruction, in dialogue with non-Christians, and in theological science itself, one desires rigorously precise statements issued with responsible and accurate methodological awareness. Mystics are people of prayer; their words ought to be taken as invitations to feast on divine truth, not as sanction for theological error. One goes through the words of mystics to the truth. Richard’s is a deep medi-

⁶¹ Den Bok, *Communicating*, 186f.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 190f.

tation, the fruit of prayer and intellectual labor. With the benefit of a clearer distinction between the lights of faith and natural reason, theological science is also called to a higher rigor and the believer to deeper gratitude and intellectual modesty.

The Church's condemnation of rationalism entails that reason cannot construct a sound argument for the truth of a strict mystery. What, then, is faulty about the purported demonstration? At least this much is: Pilgrims cannot by the light of reason assert with certitude the universality of the first premise (i). Insight into human love can exhibit that true love cannot exist in a man who does not love another, but the light of reason cannot discern herein that even God requires another person in order to be Love Itself. Similarly, insight into finite person may yield the judgment that a finite person cannot achieve second act (personal maturity) unless encountered by another person (ultimately, divine person), but the light of reason cannot discern herein that God requires another person in order to exist as person. Therefore, Christian apologetics of the Trinity ought to avoid all appearance of a deductive syllogism concerning God based on a premise whose universality cannot be asserted by natural reason.

Of course, Ribailier, Salet, and Ngien may well object that Richard's initial premise (i) rests on a definition of love disclosed only through faith: Charity and the truth that God is charity are revealed realities. Thus, the argument is entirely theological, not philosophical. In reply, this suggestion does not do justice to Richard's stated intent, repeated remarks, and proclaimed achievement. Further, it does not seem that a Christian could deduce, even from charity as a revealed truth, the doctrine of the Trinity. A full treatment of this doubt would, however, take another essay. Rather, it seems that the truth of the Trinity and the revelation of charity mutually illuminate each other as though by the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum*, §12) but do not ground theological deductions of either from the other.

Danger of Semi-Rationalism

Another objection is more to the point and leads to a second or revised criticism. It suggests that appreciation of the universality of the initial premise (i) is remotely grounded in the impact of revelation on intellectual history. Without such revelation, natural reason would never have discovered or appreciated this premise. However, revelation has made possible such discovery and appreciation. Kasper commits to this proposition at times, for he contends that Christianity inaugurated an intellectual movement that finally achieved a

pre-apprehension of being according to which it is no longer possible for contemporary man to think "person" without thinking of that person as being in relation to another person. Ratzinger suggests something similar with regard to contemporary approaches to being in physics and philosophy, although he hints at the need for caution.⁶³ There are two Christian origins of the concept "person," Trinitarian and Christological. The breakthrough achieved by Christian theology was, he holds, the insight that person is not substantial, but rather relational. Ratzinger finds this insight to be in harmony with the contemporary scientific appreciation that light exhibits characteristics of both wave and particle. Thus, contemporary thought holds being to be equi-primordially substance and relation. Ratzinger is suggesting that the faith has occasioned new insights, disclosing an ontology according to which God can no longer be conceived except as interpersonal. Indeed, the faith has overturned prior rational conviction. For his part, Richard notes that, in order to understand, one must first believe.⁶⁴ He remotely affirms here the necessity of faith. Significantly, though, he does not consider the faith to undermine prior rational conviction.

This objection, while not rationalist, is semi-rationalist, for it implies that a strict mystery unavailable to reason's search before revelation can, after the event of revelation, be demonstrated or known by natural reason. For semi-rationalism, the Trinity is not absolutely, but only relatively, a mystery vis-à-vis natural reason. Kasper performatively exhibits a semi-rationalist conception, for he repeatedly presents his final claim—propositions (v) and (vii)—as a *conclusion* the contradictory of which cannot be affirmed except at the cost of a *false* or even *absurd* conception of God. That he attributes this impossibility (of contemporary man affirming the contradictory of his conclusion) to the effects of revelation in intellectual history implies semi-rationalism.

Without repeating statements to this effect by Kasper reported above, I wish to cite a number of others in order to exhibit that this is not a passing unfortunate locution, but a refrain:

⁶³ "In the realm of matter such a suggestion may well be physically, and in any case philosophically, highly contestable. But it remains an exciting simile for the *actualitas divina*, for the absolute 'being-act' of God, and for the idea that the densest being—God—can subsist only in a multitude of relations, which are not substances but simply 'waves', and therein form a perfect unity and also the fullness of being" (Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 124).

⁶⁴ See Richard, *De Trinitate* 1.3.

“If God is not to be understood as a solitary narcissistic being who (to put it paradoxically) would be highly imperfect by reason of his very perfection and would inevitably suffer from his own completeness, then God can only be conceived as co-existent. On the other hand, if God is to remain God and not become dependent on the world or man, then he must be co-existent within himself.”⁶⁵ Again, he has written earlier:

Love cannot be thought of except as personal and inter-personal. The person, therefore, cannot exist except in self-communication to others and in acknowledgement by others. For this reason, once God is thought of from the start as personal, the oneness and unicity of God cannot possibly be conceived as [solitude]. *Here we have the deepest reason why the theistic notion of a unipersonal God cannot be maintained.* Such a view will be compelled to look for a counterpart for God, find it in the world and man, and, by setting up a necessary relation between God and the world, be unable any longer to preserve the transcendence of God and his freedom in love.⁶⁶

Again, “God can only be conceived as co-existent,”⁶⁷ and again, “[the Church] even maintains that the doctrine of the Trinity is the only possible and consistent form of monotheism and the only tenable answer to modern atheism.”⁶⁸ We may bypass here the odd ascription of this thesis to “the Church,” which apparently has spoken through the mouth of Karl Barth.⁶⁹ Then there are Kasper’s rhetorical questions: “Without such a multiplicity in unity [i.e., Trinity] would God not be an utterly isolated being which would need the world for a counterpart

⁶⁵ Kasper, *God*, 306 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 299. Here, “unipersonal” is correct (“einpersönlichen Gott” in *Gott*, 364). Earlier in this citation, I have emended the English edition’s “a solitary God” to “solitude”; the German is simply “Einsamkeit.”

⁶⁷ Kasper, *God*, 306.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 295.

⁶⁹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1, pt 1, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 351f. Barth himself, however, is considerably more subtle than Kasper and, at the same time, both less Trinitarian and less supportive of the role of reason in the current enterprise than are either Kasper or the Catholic faith.

and thereby lose its divine status?"⁷⁰ He likewise asks, "is the radically conceived unity of God thinkable at all without at the same time thinking of a differentiation within God himself that does not cancel out the unity and simplicity of God, but on the contrary is required to make these meaningful?"⁷¹

Such presentations conflict with Kasper's explicit avowals, in themselves salutary, that he is not attempting a demonstration from reason, but rather exploring faith theologically. Ratzinger, though more cautious in his formulations, proposes something similar: "The confession of faith in God as a person necessarily includes the acknowledgement of God as relatedness, as communicability, as fruitfulness. The unrelated, unrelatable, absolutely one could not be person ["könnte Person nicht sein"]. There is no such thing as person in the categorical singular. . . . In other words, if the absolute is person it is not an absolute singular. To this extent the overstepping of the singular is [necessarily included] in the concept of person."⁷² To this, Ratzinger adds the qualifier, "of course, we shall have to say at the same time that the acknowledgement that God is a person in the guise of a triple personality explodes the naïve, anthropomorphic concept of person." To this qualification, it must be replied that the analogical differentiation either vitiates or does not vitiate the inference.

Kasper's (and to some extent Ratzinger's) claim is that, within the horizon of contemporary thought, any conception of God other than as a plurality of persons (more precisely, as triune) is false or unthinkable. Now, there are four possible ways of construing this claim, some of which are compatible:

- (1) The claim "God is personal but not triune" (a non-precise affirmation coupled with a precise negation) is false.
- (2) The claim "God is personal but not triune" (a non-precise affirmation coupled with a precise negation) is unthinkable.
- (3) The claim "God is personal" said of the one God (in a non-precise manner) is false.
- (4) The claim "God is personal" said of the one God (in a non-precise manner) is unthinkable.

⁷⁰ Kasper, *God*, 241.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 129 ("Insofern ist die Überschreitung der Einzahl im Personbegriff notwendig eingeschlossen" in *Einführung*, 167).

In this section, my second criticism (the danger of semi-rationalism), I shall treat statements (1) and (2), leaving the next two statements for my third criticism.

A precise proposition involves a judgment regarding a concept taken precisely. So, a precise negation involves a negation of a precise concept: “that is not a labrador.” A non-precise proposition involves a judgment regarding a concept taken more broadly or vaguely. So, a non-precise affirmation involves an affirmation of a concept taken broadly or vaguely: “that is a dog” or “that is something.” Crucial to note, a non-precise affirmation entails neither a precise affirmation nor a precise negation: the statement “that is a dog” implies neither that it is a labrador nor that it is not a labrador. An example of a non-precise affirmation coupled with a precise negation is the following: “that is a dog, but not a labrador.” The possible meanings of Kasper’s claim can now be analyzed.

Christian faith knows that a precise negation of the Trinity is false, as statement (1) asserts. Nevertheless, the falsity of such a conception is disclosed only to faith, not to natural reason, not even to a reason whose intellectual history is impacted by revelation. Reason’s light so fails with regard to the question concerning God’s triunity that it can responsibly neither affirm nor deny it. If reason attempts to argue for a precise negation of the Trinity, its argument must somehow be faulty.

I turn now to statement (2): the claim “God is personal but not triune” is unthinkable. Why should it be unthinkable? It is, of course, impossible for a Christian to hold that “God is not triune,” for a Christian is one who confesses the truth of the Trinity. But why should it be *unthinkable* for natural reason, even in the contemporary context, to affirm a non-Trinitarian God (non-precise affirmation coupled with a precise negation)? Why should God *as not triune* be something impossible to conceive? There are three ways in which something can be “unthinkable”: it can lack actual intrinsic intelligibility (e.g., prime matter); it can surpass the grasp of finite mind (e.g., the divine); or it can be absurd (e.g., a squared circle). If Kasper intends statement (2), in what way does he propose that a non-Trinitarian God is “unthinkable”? God does not lack intrinsic intelligibility, so a non-Trinitarian God cannot be unthinkable in the first way. Further, all Christians acknowledge that God is *most* unfathomable in his Trinitarian character. Therefore, if a non-Trinitarian God were unthinkable because transcendent, all the more would a Trinitarian God be unthinkable. Therefore, if he endorses statement (2), Kasper

can mean only this: the claim "God is personal but not triune" is absurd.

But why should it be absurd? Only faith, which is always free, discloses the truth of the mysteries we believe. Therefore, natural reason is free to assert the contradictory of what faith alone discloses, but it is not free to assert an absurdity. In short, if there are no *rational* grounds for stating that a conception of God *as not triune* is false, much less are there any for stating that such a conception is absurd.⁷³ Arguments for such grounds fall prey to either semi-rationalism or rationalism.

Errors in Scientific Theology Impinging on Interreligious Dialogue

My third criticism is that statement (3) is false. Statement (3) reads: the claim "God is personal" said of the one God (in a non-precise manner) is false. To the contrary, the claim "God is personal" is a non-precise affirmation. The perfection "being personal" is comprised of the following: intellectual character and hypostatic character. "Hypostatic character" is comprised of the following: (a) existence not in another but in itself; (b) existence not as a part but as what is perfect/whole; and (c) distinction from all other hypostases. Natural reason can recognize that, in all being, hypostasis is most perfect and that, of all hypostases, those that are intellectual are most perfect. So, natural reason, which can know that God is perfection without limitation, can affirm that God is personal.⁷⁴ It can also affirm that God is one. Neither of these affirmations contradicts Christian faith.

What, however, of the complex affirmation "God is one person"? Is this akin to the affirmation "God is one being"? The latter affirmation regards an essential attribute, so the conjunction "one being" presents no contradiction to the faith. On the other hand, "God is one person" seems explicitly to contradict the faith. Is this the same proposition that natural reason affirms, together with ancient Jewish faith and Islamic belief, but that Christian faith denies?⁷⁵ If so, faith

⁷³ The believer has only remote grounds, since the "signs of credibility" that accompany the Christian message as a whole testify to its divine origin but do not disclose to reason the truth of any strict mystery itself.

⁷⁴ The argument, though architectonically in service of faith, is affirmable by natural reason. The argument in the *responsio* of *ST* I, q. 29, a. 3, makes no appeal to revelation. In this connection, see also Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, bk. XII, lec. 8, pars. 2539–44.

⁷⁵ Ratzinger rejects Thomas's assertion that the proposition "God is one person" is conceivable from a rational viewpoint if one abstracts from the precision of Christian faith. Ratzinger contends that the early Church considered such a

and reason would be in contradiction, the Old Covenant would contradict the New, the dogma of Vatican I would crumble to the ground, and interreligious dialogue would lose an essential foundation. Clearly, a distinction must be drawn.

Perhaps natural reason can simply make two affirmations—"God is personal" and "God is one"—without having competence as to how to unite them. Pius XII's formulation may be open to such a reading. On the other hand, even on this reading, the question remains as to in what manner "God is personal" is affirmed. Would not an affirmation of "personal" as an essential predicate contradict the faith? The question concerning the affirmation "God is personal" may, therefore, be tantamount to the question concerning the affirmation "God is one person." Since the latter affirmation appears all the more in contradiction to the faith, it may be best to tackle the former first—the solution to the difficulty presented by the latter can be contemplated in light of the solution to the difficulty of the former. Catholic theology, at this juncture, is pressured by its own norms to seek a resolution to the tension.

Now, what forces the distinction between an essential and a personal predicate is Christian faith. Hence, short of that faith, reason cannot draw this distinction. Natural reason, therefore, cannot affirm anything of God as precisely essential or precisely personal. Natural reason has competence only for non-precise affirmations. Of course, natural reason cannot discover the personal distinctions. So, everything that natural reason affirms of God must regard the perfection of the divine essence shared commonly. It seems, then, that the perfections natural reason discovers must be essential, though non-precisely so. Hence, when natural reason contemplates God as personal, it contemplates his intellectual excellence and his distinct and perfect subsistence. Natural reason wittingly distinguishes this subsistence from all other subsistences. Hence, natural reason, together with ancient Jewish faith and Islamic belief, judges God to be, to be intellectual, and to be distinct from all finite hypostases. These judgments are all true. Natural reason does not recognize the Christian precision that divine hypostasis is also distinct from divine hypostasis.⁷⁶ However, Christians almost always speak chiefly in a precise mode. Hence, they predicate "hypostasis" and "person" of

thesis heretical. See *ST* III, q. 3, a. 3, ad 1, and Joseph Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," trans. Michael Waldstein, *Communio* 17 (1990): 439–54, at 454n12.

⁷⁶ This is how I read Thomas's *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 4.

God not vaguely (non-precisively) and quasi-essentially, but strictly properly of each person. If, with an eye to the Christian precision, one were to negate the precise judgment that divine hypostasis is distinct from divine hypostasis, one would err. Yet, natural reason can speak only non-precisively.

All are aware that *ho theos* almost invariably stands for the Father in the New Testament. Some might wish to argue on this basis that what natural reason knows is God the Father, but this too would seem to be an error. The Church dogmatically taught at Florence that all things are one except insofar as the relations distinguish.⁷⁷ Now, the Father is constituted as distinct by that paternity that is in relative opposition to filiation, neither of which natural reason can know. Even if one wishes to contend with the Florentine axiom, knowledge of the Father as Father implies knowledge of the generative act. So, natural reason knows God as existing and intellectual, distinct from all limited essences, but not as hypostasis distinct from divine hypostasis. Here, theology helps natural reason appreciate its limits. The cloud of unknowing that overshadows reason's competence includes its incapacity to pronounce precisely on the divine attributes. At the same time, appreciation of this limitation defends reason's genuine and ongoing competence concerning things divine.

Especially in interreligious dialogue, should not the Christian also be able to affirm, non-precisively, that God is personal? Else, would not the Christian pit reason against faith and the Old Covenant against the New? To be sure, in truth, the removal of what distinguishes one divine hypostasis from another necessarily entails the removal of the initial hypostasis because they *are* relatively opposed. Still, one can consider the divine nature as subsisting intellectually, distinct from finite hypostases, without considering the distinctions between the divine hypostases.⁷⁸ The ontological basis for the legitimacy of such a consideration is treated below.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Council of Florence, Bull of Union with the Copts (1442): "These three persons are one God not three Gods, because there is one substance of the three, one essence, one nature, one Godhead, one immensity, one eternity, and everything is one where the difference of a relation does not prevent this"; in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 570f.

⁷⁸ One can still conceive the divine nature remaining apart when one abstracts from the hypostases. Thomas offers various explanations of how this may be accomplished but is at least of the opinion that it can be done (see *ST* I, q. 40, a. 3, and *Compendium theologiae* I, chap. 62).

⁷⁹ See *Danger of Circular Logic and Ideology* below.

Whereas natural reason and ancient Jewish believers affirm that God is one and personal non-precisively, how should Christians in interreligious dialogue interpret statements of contemporary Jewish and Muslim thinkers to the effect that “God is one person”? Explicitly, this is a precise negation of the Trinity, and the adequate Christian response to it demands nothing short of evangelization, a task of paramount importance. For all that, a truth can be disengaged from the falsity of the Jewish and Islamic judgment. To accomplish this disengagement, the statement “God is one person” must be treated not *qua* explicit and precise rejection of Christian revelation, but *qua* a non-precise affirmation of divine personality and unity. In short, the Christian must attempt to unearth the prior Jewish and Islamic claims, which he himself also accepts, from the explicit heresy. Again, the predicated perfection would be comprised of the elements of intellectual nature, hypostatic perfection, and divine unity, abstracting from the distinctions between divine hypostases. Such a non-precise affirmation would entail neither a precise affirmation nor a precise negation of God as “only one person” stated personally. Or perhaps the statement should be divided into two: “God is one” and “God is person.” Such statements could form a basis of interreligious dialogue, since they would entail neither a precise affirmation nor a precise negation of God as triune.⁸⁰ At any rate, a Christian has no business burdening the non-Christian with the quip “either God is a narcissist or God is the Trinity.” This is sound neither apologetically nor theologically.

Statement (4) reads: The claim “God is personal” said of the one God (in a non-precise manner) is unthinkable. This statement manifestly contradicts the testimony of the Western intellectual tradition and the divine character of the revelation of the Old Covenant. Therefore, statement (4) is also false. Statements (3) and (4) are not only false; they also do injury to natural theology and obstruct the foundation of interreligious dialogue with fellow monotheists.

Inadequate Understanding of Analogy

A fourth objection to my line of critique can be registered. Kasper, Ratzinger, and others recognize that human frailty cannot fathom how these truths obtain in God. Read in light of the *via negativa*, the

⁸⁰ I suggest that Aquinas’s subtle discussion in *ST* III, q. 3, a. 3, offers grounds for this way of reading Jewish and Islamic statements concerning God.

"I-Thou" approach makes only analogical predication of concepts⁸¹ and, thus, cannot be considered rationalist or semi-rationalist.

So, this objection involves an imprecise grasp of the nature of analogy and, thus, cannot alleviate the difficulty. Analogy and the transcendence of God do not make demonstration impossible; otherwise, contrary to the declaration of Vatican I, there could be no argument for the existence of God. Not proper, but improper, analogy (i.e., metaphor) vitiates demonstration. Metaphor, though rhetorically indispensable, is not methodologically ingredient to scientific discourse because it is not proximately disposed for precise and determinate judgment; its employment of the term does not involve the entire meaning of the term. "God is a lion" and "God is good" are very different kinds of statement. The meaning of "lion" cannot be applied to God, whereas the meaning of "good" can. (The proper analogy of which I am treating is that of so-called intrinsic attribution.) The reason is that the *res significata* of the first imports defect whereas that of the latter does not.⁸² Now, Kasper does not operatively employ a distinction between proper and improper analogy. He simply acknowledges that the unity and distinction of persons is only analogically common to God and man and, hence, that these must be "greater" in God than they are in man. This is an appeal to Lateran IV: "Between the creator and the creature one cannot note a similarity without also noting a greater difference between them."⁸³ This teaching does not settle the distinction between metaphor and analogy, since both metaphors and proper analogies involve a "greater" difference and since one cannot responsibly use it to condemn Scotus's doctrine of univocity. Now, Kasper's and Ratzinger's conviction concerning the universal reach of the initial premise (i) bespeaks an attempt to employ proper analogy. Since proper analogy does not vitiate demonstration, the objection does not solve the problem.

On the other hand, if the claim were softened, it could accomplish an important goal for Kasper and Ratzinger. Softened, the claim could suggest that reason presents us with perplexities or difficulties (which would not, for all that, be absurdities), such as the unity of

⁸¹ See Kasper, *God*, 289f, 299, 308f. See also Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 128f. Similarly, Salet highlights Richard's appreciation of the fragility of human language and the ineffability of God (see *La Trinité*, 40f).

⁸² See Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 30.

⁸³ "Inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda" (DH, no. 806).

divine attributes, the puzzles arising from contemporary physics, the freedom and necessity of love, the one and the many in being, and so on. In considering these difficulties, reason would be, albeit unknowingly, searching for that which can ground a satisfactory reconciliation of these tensions. However, this search would be blind to that to which it ascends. Only a Christian, by the light of faith, could reflectively discern that this search is vestigially suggestive of the Trinity. This unknowing search would be met, illuminated, and fructified, by the kiss of divine revelation.⁸⁴ Such a softened view would resemble a disciplined presentation of the harmony of faith and reason found in Bonaventure. For Bonaventure, reason bids one conceive of God in the loftiest and most pious manner. Revelation declares the minor premise: to be able and willing to beget is better than not to be able and willing to beget. Theology draws the conclusion: the one who would think of God in the loftiest way holds that he is able and willing to beget.⁸⁵

Danger of Circular Logic and Ideology

Fifth, it can be asked whether the worldview (or worldviews) according to which God can be conceived only as triune is indebted to circular reasoning and whether it is false. The following would constitute circular reasoning: one affirms the worldview as true because, if true, it implies the truth of some dogma; subsequently, one adduces the truth of the dogma as warrant for holding the worldview. Moses Maimonides accused Christians (and Muslims) of such apologetic strategies:

In order to prove the dogmas which they thus desired to establish, they were compelled to resort to certain hypotheses. . . . The earlier Theologians, both of the Greek Christians and of the Mohammedans, when they laid down their propositions, did not investigate the real properties of things; first of all they considered what must be the properties of the things which should yield proof for or against a certain creed; and when this was found they asserted that the thing must be endowed with

⁸⁴ For a marvelous example of just this approach, see the work of the much-maligned Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange in *God: His Existence and His Nature: A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, trans. Dom Bede Rose (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1934), 2:131–43.

⁸⁵ See St. Bonaventure, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, q. 1, a. 2. See also his *In I Sent.*, dist. 3, p. 1, q. 4.

those properties; then they employed the same assertion as a proof for the identical arguments which had led to the assertion, and by which they either supported or refuted a certain opinion.⁸⁶

With respect to the “I-Thou” argument, is the initial premise (i) embraced as true because of its inferential power to yield the conclusion (vii) and the conclusion presented as evidence for the truth of the premise? It would be circular reasoning if a theologian were to affirm contemporary hypotheses regarding the constitution of material being—for instance, that it is equi-primordially relation and substance—because their “truth” yields analogies suitable for the Trinity and then verify their truth by the supposition that a Trinitarian Creator would leave his Trinitarian mark. Of course, it may be objected that the circularity is a matter of insight into the correlation between creaturely and divine being or that the verification of the premise resembles accepted practices of verification in science, for instance, the reasonable affirmation of the consequent. A scientist, for instance, proposes some hypothesis to account for the data. He tests the hypothesis by its power to predict yet more data. The logic of verification works as follows: if the hypothesis is true, the data will be A, B, C; now, the data are A, B, C; thus, the hypothesis is true. The argument suffers the fallacy of affirming the consequent, but all recognize that the argument is reasonable provided it not be construed as demonstrative.

So, does the insight or worldview constitute an accurate reading of being, or rather a misreading? If the latter, a viciously argued acceptance of these hypotheses would be, however unwittingly, ideological. I suggest that the early Ratzinger’s hypothesis that all substance is equally primordially relation is false. *A fortiori*, the hypothesis that substance is simply relation is false. With regard to finite being, relation cannot obtain unless things related obtain. In short, relation depends on act, on substance-in-existence. Thus, if there are no *relata*, there are no relations.⁸⁷ What would a creature as “pure relation” be?

⁸⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, pt. 1, ch. 71, trans. M. Friedländer, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1956), 109.

⁸⁷ Steven A. Long briefly, but incisively, remarked recently on this issue in his *Analogia Entis: On the Analogy of Being, Metaphysics, and the Act of Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 9–10. Maritain astutely saw that, as the pseudo-philosophical interpretation of Newtonian mechanics was deterministic, so the “new physics” will, in addition to correcting that pseudo-philosophy, occasion its own pseudo-philosophical interpretation; see

Sheer dependence on God? But *what* is thus dependent? What differentiates a man from a squirrel? Since a man can love or not love God, what is a man (first act) such that he has the potency for fruition in God (second act)?

Ratzinger acknowledges Aquinas's notion of divine person to be an advance beyond the tradition. More precisely, it should be added, it was an advance beyond Augustine. In fact, Augustine took the term as absolute and could not conceive of a relation as subsisting. By contrast, Aquinas made bold to acknowledge that faith compels us to hold that in the divine relation subsists.⁸⁸ His argument is that, since person is what is distinct in any (rational) nature, and since, in God, only the relations distinguish, person in God must be subsistent relation. After obliquely praising Aquinas for contributing to the Christian breakthrough, Ratzinger laments that he did not apply the definition of person achieved with respect to the divine persons to human persons as well: "The contribution of Christian faith to the whole of human thought is not realized; it remains at first detached from it as a theological exception, although it is precisely the *meaning* of this new element to call into question the *whole* of human thought and to set it on a new course."⁸⁹ Ratzinger implies that a reconstituted metaphysics of being must no longer be worked out in terms of Aristotelian logic, substance metaphysics, and so forth. Instead, it must be worked out in terms of a dialectical tension of "complementarities."⁹⁰

Contrary to Ratzinger's reading, the Angelic Doctor does not merely neglect to apply the definition "subsistent relation" to creatures; with good reason, he rejects such application. "Subsistent relation" is a definition of person *proper* to the divine and, thus, not analogically applicable to any hypostasis of diverse substance. Only the vague definition of person as rational hypostasis analogously applies to both divine and human persons. Why can no creature be defined as "subsistent relation"? This question misplaces the burden. The burden that faith places on the intellect is to affirm that it is *possible* that a relation can subsist—in the divine. Natural reason's

Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 203f.

⁸⁸ In his essay "Notion of Person," Ratzinger fails to note (a) that Augustine resisted the notion of person as relation and (b) that Aquinas took courage to go beyond Augustine's notion of person as *merely* absolute. For Augustine, see *De Trinitate* 7.11 (alt. numbering 7.6); in *CCL*, 50:261 (ln. 27)—262 (ln. 33).

⁸⁹ See Ratzinger, "Notion of Person," 449.

⁹⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 124.

initial estimate is grounded in its connatural affirmation that relation is ontologically and logically posterior to hypostasis, the fundamental seat of existence. This posteriority remains even for the relation of "createdness." Natural reason first affirms the being of a finite primary substance. It subsequently argues and concludes to the existence of Being Itself Subsisting. Finally, natural reason grasps the former's relation to Being Itself Subsisting. Here, relation is logically posterior. Further, natural reason understands that, ontologically, the relation of dependence is in the orders of efficiency and formality, *which relation* obtains because the essence is actualized by a finite act of existence.⁹¹ Hence, "createdness" obtains in the creature because the creature obtains.⁹²

What, then, mandates, and what permits, one to think divine hypostasis as subsisting relation? The faith mandates it. The purity of the notional acts, generation and spiration, permits it. Any purported objection can in principle be shown to lack the force of necessity. Nor could any but the divine nature have operations with such purity. In generating, the Father communicates his very substance so that it (the same in number) exists *as received in a begotten manner*. In spirating, the Father and Son communicate their very substance so that it (the same in number) exists *as received in a manner of procession*. In the divine life, the receiving principle is not other than what is received. By contrast, material finite being involves individuality distinct from essence and both spiritual and material finite being involve essence distinct from act of existence. Thus, reception in the divine life diverges from all modes of createdness. Further, only in the triune life is the very substance of the principle itself communicated to the recipient, so that it is not possible to distinguish one divine hypostasis from another on any basis except relation. In sum, in all beings except the One that transcends the categories entirely, the genus "relation" stands outside

⁹¹ For the purposes of this essay, this pronouncedly Aristotelian conception is presumed. It is not non-Platonic, but it is a reading of Platonic "participation" as a true meta-narrative description of the situation that can be explanatorily mapped only through (Aristotelian) causal analysis. The task of contending against an anti-Aristotelian reading of participation would require a further essay. In these remarks, I am indebted to the insights of Steven A. Long's address to the Academy of Catholic Theologians on May 2015, entitled "Pruning the Vine of *La Nouvelle Théologie* in the Garden of Thomism: Regarding the Thomistic Corrective to '*La Nouvelle Théologie*.'"

⁹² See Aquinas, *In II Sent.* d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4.

the genus “substance.”⁹³ Therefore nothing but divine person can be “subsistent relation.”

Moreover, Thomas does not construe even his own definition of divine person in the way Ratzinger reads the tradition that reaches its clarity in Thomas. A critic of substance metaphysics, the early Ratzinger suggests that the deity subsists precisely on account of the relations: “In its nature, the person exists only *as* relation. . . . The persons in God . . . are nothing but the act of relativity toward each other.”⁹⁴ The divine act of being “can subsist only in a multitude of relations, which are not substances but simply [*nichts als*] ‘waves,’ and therein form [*bilden*] a perfect unity and also the fullness of being.”⁹⁵ Ratzinger misconceives the matter. Aquinas reasons that the divine persons *subsist* not insofar as they are relations, but insofar as they are the divine essence. Here, Thomas is at one with Augustine.⁹⁶ The persons are *distinct* insofar as they are relations: “Although the divine relations constitute the hypostases and thus make them subsistent, they do this inasmuch as they are the divine essence: because a relation as such neither has nor can give subsistence, for this belongs to a substance alone. On the other hand the relations as such distinguish.”⁹⁷ Thomas is, of course, differentiating the terms “relation” and “essence” with respect not to the reality for which they suppose (the “thing” to which they refer), but to the aspect under which they target that for which they suppose.⁹⁸ Thus, each person *is* the divine essence, and each person *is* a relation. Each person is a subsisting relation.

Paradoxically, the danger of this false worldview may be linked to Kasper’s and (the early) Ratzinger’s low estimation of natural reason’s scope and certainty. Kasper does affirm that natural theology has a place, but his labor in this field is radically construed through an already Trinitarian lens. As such, it no longer can be an effort of (right) natural reason thinking the real. Further, neither Ratzinger

⁹³ Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, q. 9, a. 4, ad 11.

⁹⁴ Although he does not expressly attribute the thesis to Aquinas, Ratzinger suggests that this is the authentic Christian understanding (“Notion of Person,” 444).

⁹⁵ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 125 (*Einführung*, 162).

⁹⁶ See Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7.9–10 (alt. numbering 7.4–5); in *CCL*, 50:259(ln.136)–261(ln. 26).

⁹⁷ Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, q. 8, a. 3, ad 7; in *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1932–1934).

⁹⁸ For more on that distinction, see *ST*, q. 13, a. 4.

nor Kasper seem to consider arguments for God's existence worthwhile. Kasper contends that a natural theology that is not Trinitarian is ultimately counterproductive. He contends that atheism was a reaction to the "heresy of theism,"⁹⁹ the view that there is a "unipersonal God who stands over against man as the perfect Thou or over man as imperial ruler and judge."¹⁰⁰ He alleges that Enlightenment deism's denial of the Trinity, of special divine providence, and of a personal God resembles post-Tridentine Catholicism's forgetfulness of the Trinity. Post-deistic atheism simply argued for man's rights in the face of the appearance—given by the Christianity of the time—of divine hegemony, in the face of a God within being who competes with the human race. Thus, contends Kasper, additional apologetics for the "One God" would simply reinforce this view of a God within being competing for divine rights; such apologetics are, therefore, of no avail. The only way out is explicitly Trinitarian thinking. The early Ratzinger goes further, implying that natural reason cannot achieve knowledge of God: "Even the reality 'God' can [come into consideration (*in den Blick kommen*) only for him] who enters into the experiment with God—the experiment that we call faith."¹⁰¹ He proposes that Christian faith "explicitly negates the divine monarchy in the sense of antiquity";¹⁰² "The concept of mere substance (=what stands in itself!) is shattered."¹⁰³

Arguably, we here encounter a subversion of natural reason by faith and even a contradiction of Vatican I.¹⁰⁴ Sometimes associated with the aforementioned worldview is a deprecatory judgment concerning all self-love. Dennis Ngien voices this judgment: "Self-love is a defect, which cannot be attributed to God."¹⁰⁵ From affirmation of personal distinction to denial of essential perfection! The ultimate trajectory in this line of thought, which cannot be pursued here, is

⁹⁹ Kasper, *God*, 295.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 294.

¹⁰¹ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 125 (*Einführung*, 163). This statement is in tension with the First Vatican Council's declaration *Dei Filius* (DH, no. 3026).

¹⁰² Ratzinger, "Notion of Person," 453.

¹⁰³ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 137.

¹⁰⁴ One appreciates Ratzinger's criticism of radical individualism. The solution is to avoid proposing a metaphysics that blurs first and second act, a confusion that seems to found Ratzinger's proposals: man "is a fellow being and only subsists in the collective entanglements that follow from the principle of corporality" (Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 186).

¹⁰⁵ Ngien, "Condilectus," 82. By contrast, see the sensible judgment of den Bok, *Communicating*, 310–12.

the embrace of love without wisdom. In what follows, Ngien states the truth that he rejects concerning Richard: “The unquestioned premise of [Richard’s] argument [for premise (iv)] is that God’s love must not be an ‘unordered’ love.”¹⁰⁶

Danger of Finitization of Divine Persons

Sixth, the “I-Thou” argument unwittingly implies and/or presupposes the finitude of divine person. The implication rests on the grounds for the induction of the initial premise (i): “Perfection X cannot be realized in Q unless Q is in relation to a person distinct from Q.” Proponents of the “I-Thou” argument point to the experience that no human person can exist without another. What grounds the induction?¹⁰⁷ The recognition of imperfection or need in any human person does so. For instance, a finite person awakens to his powers of personal acting only by being actually known and loved by another person—for instance, the baby smiles in response to the mother’s smile.¹⁰⁸ This is a marvelous image, but, Ratzinger astutely observes, if the initial premise (i) is read as implying the sufficiency of another *human* person, an infinite regress would result. Hence, it must be that every human person requires another *person* in order to act personally. Since every human person requires another person to account for his personal being, no human person can suffice as a Final Account for the existence of all human persons (in second act). Ultimately, man’s need for another person

¹⁰⁶ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 654, cited by Ngien, “Condilectus,” 89. Even Pope Benedict XVI does not sufficiently see the problem in this worldview. Addressing Nygren’s claim, he writes in *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), §7: “Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, *admirable perhaps*, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life” (emphasis mine; available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html). There is nothing at all admirable about such a view; Benedict’s diagnosis and prescription could be significantly deepened.

¹⁰⁷ Although Kasper on the one hand denies that he is employing an induction from philosophy, he points to contemporary *personalism* as the site of this insight.

¹⁰⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams, vol. 5, *The Glory of The Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 615–18.

argues for the existence of infinite person.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, Ratzinger may actually affirm an achievement of natural theology.

Theological modesty should cause us to stop with this ultimate inference: If there is an actually acting finite person, there must be an infinite person. At this point, the “I-Thou” ontology has spent its strength. Its capital was the imperfect reality of finite person. To attempt to bring the premise to bear also on the divine and conclude that any divine person needs another divine person presupposes imperfection in the divine person. Either one would presuppose this or one would imply this by the act of bringing divine person under the scope of premise (i), the inductive origins of which lie in imperfection.¹¹⁰ However, no set of imperfect persons can yield the God who, for the classical Jew, as well as the Muslim and the classical philosopher, is the Account that needs no further account because he is Act absolutely without potency. Thus, the imperfection of divine person presupposed in or implied by the argument undercuts its stated aim. Ratzinger’s and Kasper’s explicit endorsement of divine perfection notwithstanding, their adoption of premise (i) already risks the finitization of divine person.

Moreover, I would argue that Kasper again presupposes the imperfection of divine person in his defense of premise (iv). Premise (iv) runs thus: “No non-divine (i.e., finite) person is either necessary or

¹⁰⁹ Digging more deeply, Ratzinger argues that the human person is not made in God’s image primordially by way of horizontal relationships with other human persons. A man’s horizontal relationships are a consequence of his being made in the image of God as an individual person. The human person is primordially in the image of God by a *vertical* relationship with God through the covenantal life of faith, hope, and charity. This vertical relationship is the condition for the possibility of being in good relation with any human “thou.” So, Ratzinger argues, a creature can rightly constitute a “thou” for another—and perceive the other as “thou”—only if affirmed by a divine Thou; see Joseph Ratzinger, “Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, trans. W. J. O’Hara, vol. 5, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 121–23. Ratzinger’s comments can be complemented by a Thomistic/Augustinian insistence that one cannot spiritually relate to another, whether to a human or a divine person, except through spiritual faculties. So, presupposed even to one’s relating to God is the spiritual *capacity* for society, comprised in part by the powers of intellect and will. Second act requires first act. This parallel can serve as yet another reply to the unfounded anti-Aristotelianism in Ratzinger’s *Introduction*.

¹¹⁰ See ST I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2.

sufficient for the realization of X in God (who is absolutely infinite).” Recall Kasper’s contention that, if man were God’s adequate dialogue partner, “God’s love for man would no longer be God’s gracious act but rather [God’s *own need and his own perfection*].”¹¹¹ Here, Kasper finds the implication problematic because it would be *man* that completes God. He does not express that the problem would be that *God* needs completion; indeed, presupposed is that a divine person needs completion on the order of perfection. If so, the first divine person is not Infinite Act. On the contrary, the Son receives the infinitely perfect godhead from the Father, in whom are, simply and undividedly, all the attributes of Infinite Act. Better, the Son is that infinite godhead perfectly received. To uphold this point serves the honor of Almighty God and avoids the needless alienation of religious and philosophical monotheists.

Of course, insofar as one proceeds to deny of God those experienced imperfections that support the induction of the chief premise (i) with respect to finite beings, as Kasper salutarily does, one distances God from the reach of the initial premise (i). Whereas a finite person requires another person on account of its finitude, what can be said of the divine? Heed the greater dissimilitude between God and creature on this point and the proper analogical connection regarding that premise is sundered and the inference to premise (iii) obstructed. The familiar light of the opening premise no longer illuminates the dark brilliance beyond the firmament.

Even as an Analogy of Faith, It is Improper, Not Proper

Seventh, suppose one nonetheless insists that something in the initial premise (i) pertains also to God. On what grounds can one so insist? On grounds *other* than those on account of which one grasps the truth of the premise with respect to finite persons. With regard to finite persons, the grounds are need and imperfection. With regard to God, one can, for instance, appeal to the divine *bounty* or *exuberance* or *fecundity*.¹¹² So conceived, the Trinitarian plurality is grounded not in need but in *excess*, and this abundance is affirmed by faith, not by reason’s fathoming, which by its own lights can only stammer towards the affirmation of a personal First Cause. Of course, Kasper at times makes precisely these distinctions.¹¹³ Observe that, thus remodeled, the claim

¹¹¹ Kasper, *God*, 243 (emphasis mine; “sondern Gottes eigenes Bedürfnis, seine eigene Vollendung” in *Gott*, 297).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

now appeals to Trinitarian *faith*. Such an appeal should therefore call for caution in communication with a non-Christian dialogue partner. Nor should a Christian be given false impressions here. What Christians take to be faith's affirmation of abundant divine life might be received as reason's blasphemous assertion that a less than infinitely perfect divine one needs a consort.¹¹⁴ I am reminded of an astute remark by a Muslim woman in my class. After we had studied Richard's argument for some time, she remarked, "Richard presupposes a divine person who is finite." Of course, such a presupposition contradicts Christian faith!

On the other hand, if we consider the perfection of man in second act—man fully alive—we observe relationships as the very fabric of fruition: loving, serving, embracing, contemplating, and so on. The object is always, ultimately, another person. These activities are not oriented toward the good of the self in a utilitarian way. Hence, they share to some extent in the character of the good, which is self-diffusive. Once come to perfection, a thing tends toward the diffusion of itself, toward a giving of self. If this pattern can be seen in the created order, it forms the basis for a Christian to perceive some resemblance between creaturely self-giving and divine self-giving.

Still, significant qualifications must be registered with respect to the resemblance. The specified relationality is man's perfection in second act, but the definition of human person regards the perfection of man in first act. Of course, first act is ordered to second act: man in union with God. So, a definition through final causality would include relationality. Nevertheless, although not reductively utilitarian, this relationality is shot through with need and, thus, testifies to man's finitude in several ways. First, the distinction itself between first and second act finds no place in God, and so, one cannot conclude that, since man requires relational fruition in second act, so does God. Second, the relational fruition of creatures once again attests to finitude. Your existing in my mind intentionally attests to my *not* being or having your substance within me "ontologically." My good expands by knowing you. Also, in our vital interpersonal communion, we achieve a good greater than the sum of the parts, even the sum of parts *in second act*. As a result, in none of the relationally flourishing universe do we find any sufficient testimony that Unoriginate Pure Act must beget Begotten Pure Act (and thus be not simply unoriginate but also, and precisely, unbegotten). Pure Act suffers no division of first and second act; Pure Act is utterly free of

¹¹⁴ See the Qur'an, 3:64.

all need; and no Hypostasis of Pure Act is transcended by a greater communion. The analogical resemblance between the relationality of human personhood in second act and that of divine personhood is discernible only through the eyes of faith. Further, this resemblance is fraught with a fragility that renders it an improper, rather than a proper, analogy.

Implicit Tritheism

Eighth, the foregoing weaknesses converge with those rooted in the attendant Social Analogy to occasion the danger of an unwitting tritheism.¹¹⁵ “Unwitting” cannot be stressed too much, as should go without saying in a fraternal, albeit serious, theological engagement. Kasper, Ratzinger, and Richard, of course, all confess the unity of God. Richard even unpacks the consequences of this unity in Augustinian fashion: there are three who are good, but there is only one goodness.

Notwithstanding, the danger remains as the following factors converge. (1) As briefly indicated above, contemporary proponents of the “I-Thou” argument exhibit a general distaste for the once standard prolegomenon to theology, natural theology, which typically concludes to the divine monarchy and monotheism, contemplating inferentially the divine attributes. This distaste is contemporary, not classical. Richard, for instance, treats the divine substance and properties in his first two books. Achard of St. Victor proceeds in the same manner.¹¹⁶ John of Damascus, in the macroscopic structure of the relevant sections of his great *On the Orthodox Faith*, first treats arguments for God’s existence and unicity (with discernibly Aristotelian influences) and subsequently engages the revelation of the eternal generation. Further, on the microscopic level this text repeatedly undulates from consideration of the one essence to consideration of the three hypostases. Gregory of Nazianzus endeavors in his *Second Theological Oration* to establish the existence of God through an examination of the world of experience available to reason. Then, precisely in service of the ineffability and incomprehensibility of the divine nature, he establishes certain attributes of God by the process

¹¹⁵ This criticism can be maintained with at least as much force as the converse criticism is maintained against the so-called “Psychological Analogy,” a treatment of which requires a separate article. The converse criticism is that the “Psychological Analogy” gives us only a mono-personal understanding of God. This charge is completely false, as I hope, in the footsteps of Bernard Lonergan, to demonstrate in a subsequent essay.

¹¹⁶ See the editorial comments in Ribailier, 27–28.

of elimination through the *via negativa*. The endeavor concretely requires ordered passions (*apatheia*), prayer, devotion, and desire. It is, nonetheless, objectively geared to natural reason. The same structure can be discerned in the *Address on Religious Instruction* by Gregory of Nyssa and in the *Mystagogical Catechesis* by Cyril of Jerusalem.¹¹⁷

(2) The “I-Thou” arguments treated above are equipped to expound the teaching *that* God is triune, but they are not as readily equipped to treat *how* multiplicity emerges from the harbor of unity—the Trinitarian processions from an underived Father. Such proposals as that of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Social Analogy might be exceptions, in that these identify the radical self-giving of the Father as cause of the Trinity.¹¹⁸ Of course, this deficit does not prevent proponents from wielding two approaches in their labor. First, it does suggest that, in itself, the “I-Thou” argument and Social Analogies generally, with some exceptions, cannot bear the work of shoring up both divine unity and divine plurality adequately. Perhaps this is because the power of metaphor is limited and its issue, piecemeal. An intelligible account of divine unity and of the production of multiplicity, if given, seems to be only juxtaposed to, not organically united with, the “I-Thou” argument and the Social Analogy.¹¹⁹

By contrast, I would maintain, the “Psychological Analogy” can intelligibly account for unity, multiplicity, and the reason for

¹¹⁷ Therefore, as many have already noted, Rahner’s thesis, which he attributes to Théodore de Regnon—that only with Thomas do we get a *De Deo Uno* presented materially as defensible by reason before we get *De Deo Trino*—is false. Furthermore, the common reading of de Régnon is mistaken; see, for example, Kristin Hennessy, “An Answer to de Régnon’s Accusers: Why We Should Not Speak of ‘His’ Paradigm,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007): 179–197). Den Bok contends that Richard does not distinguish the two treatises (*Communicating*, 189), but den Bok is here simply contending that Richard does not differentiate the treatises according to what reason can demonstrate and what only faith can demonstrate. In a way, one could suggest that Richard aims to extend reason’s reach into the treatise *De Deo Trino*.

¹¹⁸ Ngien argues that Richard’s meditations on three modes of love are a further development of his prior arguments (see “Condilectus,” 86). Den Bok more convincingly maintains that Richard’s argument for the processions is independent of his argument concerning love (see *Communicating*, 315). Den Bok also contends that Richard’s argument for the identity of divine substance is independent of that concerning love (see *ibid.*, 320).

¹¹⁹ A Bonaventuran iteration might constitute an exception to this rule. Nonetheless, that iteration begins not with the usual narrative of “need” but rather with “abundance.” Thus, it is set on a different footing and clearly ensconced, at least in its best instantiation, in a strictly theological framework.

multiplicity. The entire enterprise of the “Psychological Analogy” is explanatory, albeit hypothetical and not demonstrative. It aims to account for given facts, not to establish them, yet its account secures both the unity and the distinctions.

(3) The neglect of natural theology is frequently left without remedy in Trinitarian theology proper because, as Bruce Marshall has recently lamented, few contemporary Christians even take up the task of articulating, much less defending, divine unity.¹²⁰ When the divine substance is abandoned in favor of relations and when essential perfections are neglected or denied, the problem is exacerbated.

(4) The unwittingly presupposed imperfection of divine persons—the grounds for the induction of the initial premise (i) that ever haunt the “I-Thou” argument—unites with these first three deficits. The result is unwitting tritheism.

Of course, Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger are explicit monotheists. Nevertheless, they tend to conceive the divine unity as the *communion* of persons, as the *bond* of persons in love. Ratzinger writes: “To him who believes in God as tri-une, the highest unity is not the unity of inflexible monotony. The model of unity or oneness towards which one should strive is consequently not the indivisibility of the atom, the smallest unity, too small to be divided up; the authentic acme of unity is the unity created by love [*welche die Liebe schafft*]. The multi-unity which grows in love [*Vieleinheit, die in der Liebe wächst*] is a more radical, truer unity than the unity of the ‘atom.’”¹²¹ Similarly, Kasper writes: “What kind of unity is meant? Evidently not a rigid, monolithic, uniformist and tyrannical unity, which excludes, absorbs or suppresses every kind of otherness [*jegliches Anderssein*]. A unity of that kind would be an impoverishment. God’s unity is fullness and even overflowing fullness of selfless giving and bestowing, of loving self-outpouring; it is a unity that does not exclude but includes; it is a living, loving being with and for one another. This trinitarian understanding of unity as communion has implications for the political sphere.”¹²²

In these statements, the divine unity is portrayed as a result of the relationality of the persons; more, the unity is achieved by *perichoretic* activity. The dogmatic teaching of the Church, however, is that the unity is constituted by the identity of substance. As Kasper elsewhere

¹²⁰ See Bruce Marshall, “The Unity of the Triune God,” *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 1–32, at 7f.

¹²¹ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 128 (*Einführung*, 166).

¹²² Kasper, *God*, 307 (*Gott*, 373).

rightly acknowledges, unity is not achieved as a result of *perichoresis*. Rather, the divine unity is precisely the simplicity and unicity of the divine essence. To use the Greek aphorism, the essence unites and the relations multiply. That is to say, the divine unity is what it is, even were there, *per impossibile*, no relational distinctions. A crucial qualification must be added, one that grounds a certain truth in the insights in these citations: since God is triune, his essence is more perfect than it would be if, *per impossibile*, God were not triune. As Bonaventure marvelously puts it: revelation teaches that “to be able to beget” is a pure perfection. Still, it is *revelation* that teaches this, and, arguably, the power of generating is common, although enjoyed by each in his proper subsistence.

The Social Analogy presented by Karl Rahner’s sympathetic antagonist, Hans Urs von Balthasar, may be an exception to the general rule that the Social Analogy does not itself account for the emergence of plurality from unity. On the other hand, and thankfully, Balthasar does not, to my knowledge, suggest that he is arguing rationally towards the triunity of God. Salutarily, he suggests that a balanced theological approach should utilize both the Social and the Psychological Analogies, which, he says, converge in eternity.¹²³ Unfortunately, however, Balthasar’s analogy, as do many a Social Analogy, falls prey to its own unwitting tritheism. He proposes that “each Person surprises and surpasses the Others by coming up with a ‘divine ever-greater,’ a divine ‘heightening’ and ‘exuberance.’ The unanimity of the decision expresses the unity of a [living] love.”¹²⁴ The Father lets the eternal Son “go free”; the eternal persons “pray” to one another; and the eternal Son “obeys” the Father. In Balthasar’s defense, some of his followers have taken up the thesis that Trinitarian ontology alone allows an intellectual escape from the otherwise rigorous Platonic thesis that participated being must involve a “fall” insofar as it is other than unparticipated being.¹²⁵

¹²³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2, *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 37–43.

¹²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 89.

¹²⁵ See, e.g., D. C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004). See also Schindler, “What’s the Difference? On the Metaphysics of Participation in Plato, Plotinus, and Aquinas” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5 (2007): 583–617, and my response: “Participation and Theology: A Response to Schindler’s ‘What’s the Difference?’” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5 (2007): 619–46.

These assertions are either metaphorical, in which case the standard interpretation of Balthasar by his disciples ought to be abandoned, or they are properly analogical. If they are properly analogical, they imply a multiplicity of intellects and wills, since one and the same intellect cannot know and not know the same thing in the same way and since one and the same will cannot will and not will the same thing in the same respect. But diversity of intellects implies (at least numerical) diversity of substance. Hence, Balthasar implies numerically three substances. Further, since what is divine is omniscient, none of the three persons Balthasar presents, each of whom is surprised by the others and, hence, in some way ignorant, can be infinite and divine.¹²⁶ Therefore, read as intending a proper analogy, Balthasar implies tritheistic atheism.

A Muslim or Jew, a philosophical monotheist, and a Christian theologian should all reject a divine unity conceived as less than substantial, as achieved through the relationality of subsistences in communion. Indeed, in such a conception, the subsistences stand within a common horizon—the unattainable reach of *ens commune, qua* possible—and are oriented towards their coming actuality! This is not the triune God at all but a community of, albeit powerful, persons working out their relationships in love within the horizon of *ens commune* and confronting a future of drama without end.¹²⁷

What, then, is the point? And who shall their Shepherd be? This is the last thing that the aforementioned theologians intend. I am reminded of Rahner's concern about possible misunderstandings of the term "person" in the contemporary context: "The danger . . . of believing that there exist in God three distinct consciousnesses, spiritual vitalities, centers of activity, and so on."¹²⁸ Clearly, these implicitly tritheistic tendencies pose grave difficulties for interreli-

¹²⁶ Balthasar, *Last Act*, 79f.

¹²⁷ "The drama of the Trinity lasts forever"; in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 327. If Balthasar, Kasper, and Ratzinger unwittingly gut the substantial unity of God, others more openly reject the numerical identity of substance. See, for instance, Moltmann, *Trinity*, 148–50; Joseph A. Bracken, *The Triune Symbol: Persons, Process and Community*, Studies in Religion 1 (Lanham, MD: The College Theology Society, 1985); and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 319–27. For a good, if rough-hewn, inquiry concerning this ubiquitous problem in Trinitarian theology, see den Bok, *Communicating*, ch. 1.

¹²⁸ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 43.

gious dialogue. Importantly, I would note (pace Ratzinger) that the primary Muslim objection to Christian faith concerns, not difficulties regarding the historical Jesus, but the perception that Christians fail consistently to uphold the unity of God.¹²⁹

Inadequate Employment of Essence-Person Distinction

Ninth, at the source of much of the difficulty is a failure to employ adequately the distinction between essence and person. The “I-Thou” argument narrates an *increase* in divine perfection obtained *by* the multiplicity of persons. The weakness in this approach resembles that of a noble Patristic apologetic against both Arianism and Islam: God cannot be without his Wisdom; therefore, the Son, who is Wisdom Hypostatically, “is God.”¹³⁰ While this apologetic may be appealing to believers, and while it is the fruit of deep meditation, it is nonetheless, as articulated, unfortunate. Augustine demonstrates in *De Trinitate* 7 that wisdom is an essential perfection common to all three persons. After all, what lacks wisdom cannot produce wisdom. The Father must therefore essentially be wise if he is to beget subsistent wisdom. So, when Scripture attributes wisdom to the Son, it does not exclude wisdom from the Father, but predicates it of the Son by way of “appropriation.” That is to say, although it is an essential predicate, wisdom has special affinity with the Son because of the unique manner of the Son’s being the Godhead. The Son is the radiance of infinite intellectual light from infinite intellectual light. Now, just as I conceive in my mind the expression of what I know, and as it were “speak wisdom” within my heart, so does the Father speak his wisdom by begetting the Son. Therefore, as my “word” exhibits any wisdom I may have, so the Father’s Word exhibits his infinite wisdom.

Had insights such as Augustine’s been appreciated, perhaps the

¹²⁹ See the document published by Muslim intellectuals entitled “A Common Word between Us and You” (2007), esp. the Qur’anic references to the unity of God in no. 3. See also Sandra Toenies Keating, “‘Say not Three’: Some Early Christian Responses to Muslim Questions about the Trinity,” *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 85–104. Contrast this to Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 141.

¹³⁰ John Damascene digs deeply from the Patristic wells in his apologetic for the Trinity against Islamic objections. As Toenies Keating suggests, “he answers that to strip God of life and word is to make the divine being more akin to a stone, and this is much worse than to say God is like human beings in trying to explain the relationship between God’s life, word, and being. John’s obvious point here is that if God is who Christians believe he is, one, living, and communicating to creation, then the Spirit and the Word must be God” (Toenies Keating, “Muslim Questions,” 92).

late Patristic response to Islam might have been less unsuccessful.¹³¹ The Damascene's words can be preached to a Christian who knows that the Son is not the only divine person enjoying "wisdom," but to address these words to a non-Christian can give the impression that the divine perfections are isolated one from another and parceled out to the distinct persons. However, if power is not wise, it is weak. And if wisdom is not love, it is foolish. Therefore, the appearance of segregation of the perfections leads to the appearance of their imperfection. Consequently, unless one subdues one's rhetoric, even the Christian may take the words in this way and be led into error, thinking of God as a set of imperfect substances in a vital communion that supposedly overcomes the imperfection.

The way toward a correction is the tried distinction between person and essence: claims about perfection pertain to essence; claims about what is distinct pertain to the persons. Reason at its height, exercised rightly, can arrive at knowledge of a supreme First Cause and even *Ipsum esse subsistens* as personal. Faith discloses not the imperfection of the First Cause, but an explosive communication of the *one* divine perfection from underived divine person unto the eternal subsistence of (therefore derived) divine persons.

Conclusion

I have contended that, in its various iterations, the "I-Thou" argument for the truth of the Trinity is flawed for several reasons. The argument smacks of an attempted demonstration, whether (materially) rationalist or semi-rationalist. It presupposes imperfection in the deity. It occasions miscommunication with non-believers and confusion in a believer's mind. It implies that natural reason must inherently be in error with regard to any conception of God other than that of him *as triune*. It seems indebted to viciously circular logic and is committed to a view of reality that is, quite probably, false and ideological. It implies tritheism. It fails adequately to employ the distinction between nature and person. And it has serious defects for theological science in both its intramural and extramural tasks.

These defects notwithstanding, the insights connected with "I-Thou" arguments have great potential and have produced much

¹³¹ Toenies Keating defends the Patristic responses while noting that they had little utility in persuading Muslims. My contention is that the Patristic rhetoric—were God not a Trinity, he would not be wise, etc.—is not only a needless scandal for Muslims who uphold divine unity (*tawhīd*) but also contrary to Christian theological science.

fruit. Responsibly reconfigured, they and the Social Analogy can provide genuine illumination for believers, both scientifically and morally. Their typical power is already felt in the moral sphere by those who convert mixed blessings to sound advice: persons achieve maturity when loving other persons; love’s proper object is another person; a rational subject maintains its true subjectivity only in dialogue with another subject; true friends share their very friendship with others; living material beings, when mature, beget offspring; marital love is a sexual friendship ordered to and crowned in fecundity; and so on. There is no question that many a Christian benefits from such implications of these arguments and the Social Analogy.

Further, as Matthias Scheeben noted, apropos of Richard’s meditations, these arguments and the Social Analogy become, in a way, explorations of self-evident truth to Christians steeped in contemplation of the Trinity as they “come down” and perceive refracted images thereof throughout creation.¹³² For them, the Social Analogy illuminates all existence with its radiance. The Christian knows that, *in fact*, “every person *is* in relation to another person.” Yet, if we examine the principles of this knowledge, we see that the Christian knows this by faith as it illuminates reason. Reason discovers that there are many human persons, each in need of another person and ultimately in need of divine person. Faith teaches that God is three persons. Thus, the Christian can hold the thesis “there is no person that is not in relation to another person” by way of an enumerative induction. He does not actually hold the thesis as a self-evident truth—not until the Vision. Nor does he hold that divine person is in relation to another divine person as a deduction from an insight into being achieved through metaphysical reflection.¹³³ Rather, God’s relational character as superabundant vitality is a primary datum of faith that ought never dislodge natural reason’s awe that Pure Act *is*. This datum is a Christian’s greatest joy, bedewing all experience of both need and excess with the oil of gladness that falls down upon the beard, uniting brothers. This truth makes us wonder at the refracted beauty of Your Divine Life, O Lord, in your wounded people.¹³⁴

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¹³² See Matthias Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, part I.

¹³³ I was pleased to note that Gaston Salet affirms this as well (see *La Trinité*, 43).

¹³⁴ I would like to thank Steven Long, Br. Ansgar Santogrossi, O.S.B., and anonymous reviewers for their considered advice regarding this essay.