

“God is Love”: Personal Plurality as the Completion of Aristotle’s Notion of Substance and Love as the Absolute Ground of the Divine Being

Maria Fedoryka

Abstract: These reflections will, firstly, propose a philosophical solution to the Trinitarian problem of the “three-in-one,” and secondly, show how love is foundational to the divine being. Beginning with the Aristotelian notion of substance, I will show how substance undergoes a first modification in the consideration that substance finds its fullest realization in a person existing in a love-relation with another person. The highest instance of this, in turn, will prove to be found in persons whose very essences are constituted by such relationality and the communion resulting from it. This will force a second modification of substance: the unity of substance will turn out to have its highest instance in the moral unity of a plurality of persons existing in love—which leads to the solution of the “three-in-one” problem. I will end by reflecting on the foundational role of love with respect to absolute being.

I. Introduction

At its zenith, particularly in Aristotle’s metaphysics, non-Christian philosophy arrived at the absolutely foundational nature of *being*. We can hardly avoid circularity in speaking of it, but we can state that every aspect of that which in any way can be thought or referred to depends on being, and is said with reference to it; metaphysically speaking, there is no more fundamental division than that between being and non-being. Parmenides had the merit of gaining insight into the intrinsically absolute character of being, stating simply but profoundly that only “what-is,” is—and everything else “is not.” In the Old Testament, God identified himself with this Being, revealing his changeless, eternal, necessary existence.

But philosophy’s metaphysical horizon was immeasurably enlarged with the coming of Christ. In the New Testament, God unveils himself at a new depth—in his intimate being, as it were—by identifying his very being with love. In this astonishing revelation, completely incomprehensible to the Greek mind, absolute being receives a *ground*.¹ The founding principle of God’s being, and consequently of his

Trinitarian nature, is something that the ancient world could not have imagined. But once it is discovered, particularly in light of the historical Gospel events, it is so luminous as to impress the mind with its high intelligibility, if not necessity.²

With respect to the mystery of the Trinity, “faith has perennially sought understanding,” to paraphrase Anselm. Theologians and philosophers have wrestled on the level of reason with what Michael Rea has called the “logical problem of the trinity” or the “three-in-oneness problem,” which is the problem of “how it is that *numerically distinct consubstantial* beings count as one God.”³ The task I set myself in this paper is to suggest one possible solution to this problem.

Beginning with the Aristotelian idea of substance, I will show the intelligibility, if not necessity, of God’s existing as a community of love. This will set the stage for the main goal of the first section of these reflections: to show that love does double duty in addressing the “three-in-oneness problem,” in that love both accounts for the plurality within the divine being, and at the same time overcomes it. This last point will depend on a crucial deepening of the traditional idea of substance as an individual unity, according to which the unity of a single being will turn out to be but a weak derivative from the exemplary unity found in a communion of persons in love. The substantiality of God will turn out to consist of a moral unity of persons through love.

In the second part of the paper, I will conclude to the sense in which love is foundational in the being of God. Whether or not this position represents a modification of the tradition about the primacy of “being as such” is something that would remain to be considered.

II. Suggesting a Solution to God as Three-In-One

In a major work of metaphysics, Josef Seifert has convincingly argued that being in its highest sense is personal being.⁴ Following Aristotle in his insight that substance is being in the most proper sense, Seifert enumerates the characteristics of Aristotelian substance—and shows that it is in personal being that we come upon the exemplary instance of each. In particular for our purposes, the self-possession of personal being in consciousness and freedom represent the most intensive realization of substance as “that which exists in itself.”

However, Seifert goes on to demonstrate that personhood becomes actualized not simply by virtue of the possession of personal essence, but only by virtue of existing in a *transcendent relation to reality*: a relationship, namely, in which the person relates to reality as it is in itself, in the act of knowledge and in the act of giving the response due to reality on the basis of its nature and goodness or value. The paradoxical situation of personal being begins to emerge here: only in the transcendence of giving the proper response due to reality beyond him, is the personal nature actualized and fulfilled. This idea is not unique to Seifert; it is found in Thomist authors such as Maritain and Pieper.⁵ In an essay from 1990, Joseph Ratzinger expresses the same idea:

[O]penness, relatedness to the whole, lies in the essence of the spirit. And precisely in this, namely, that it not only *is*, but reaches beyond itself, it comes to itself. In transcending itself it *has* itself; by being with the other it first becomes itself, it comes to itself. Expressed differently again: being with the other is its form of being with itself. One is reminded of a fundamental theological axiom that is applicable here in a peculiar manner, namely Christ’s saying, ‘Only the one who loses himself can find himself’ (cf. MT. 10:36). This fundamental law of human existence, which Mt. 10:36 understands in the context of salvation, objectively characterizes the nature of the spirit which comes to itself and actualizes its own fullness only by going away from itself, by going to what is other than itself.⁶

But this transcendence of the person admits of its deepest realization only in the encounter *with another personal being to whom he gives an adequate response*. Referring to Aquinas, Wojtyła, John Paul II, Tadeusz Styczen, and others, Seifert identifies this response as a response of *love*. The only fully adequate response to the person is the self-donation and receptivity proper to love. It is in this most transcendent of all responses that personal selfhood admits of a full achievement: self-donation in response to the other draws upon the deepest self of the person, “crystallizing” his consciousness and freedom in their depths as the person “gathers himself up” to make a gift of himself; this gesture is then completed in the other’s receptivity and reciprocal gift of self. This process results in the paradoxical full achievement of each person’s being, as each person’s “finding of himself” in and through the act of self-donation. Seifert writes:

We finally here come up against the impossibility of simply identifying that which is being in the most authentic sense simply with substance, even if it be personal substance. For the person can be closed within itself. . . . Being in the fullest sense, therefore, cannot be simply identified with the person, but only with the person that loves, transcends itself, which fully realizes its self-possession as person through its personal devotion and self-donation in mutual, personal love, not nihilistically destroying its own life and happiness, but rather securing it thereby.⁷

Here we see that substance understood as “individual” is surpassed, as it were, and undergoes a modification: if person is substance in the highest sense, and person is itself most fully in a relation of love, then substance begins to emerge as a *relational* reality—and not as a self-enclosed, self-complete entity. “To be” in the highest sense is “to be related to another in love.”⁸ This, too, is a theme taken up by a number of well-known thinkers. In the 1990 essay already mentioned, basing his idea on a passage in St. Augustine’s *On the Trinity*, Ratzinger asserts that in order to accommodate this truth about the person, metaphysics would have to recognize the category of “relation” as a third fundamental category, in addition to substance and accidents—and not reduce it to an accident. In a commentary on Ratzinger’s article Robert Conner notes:

[T]he dimension of relation has to be included in the ontological profile, not merely as an accident of substance, but as an equal category of being which is necessary to describe reality. Such an analysis, although provoked by Revelation, would be metaphysical. It would be telling us that the notion of person, besides including substance, must be formally inclusive of relation. The notion of person would take its meaning and fulfillment from love. Person as such could only take place in the plural, in the presence of another.⁹

Now, if we were to look for the most exemplary instance of this law of personal existence, how might it look? There is a long and venerable tradition going back to Augustine that speaks of the persons of the Trinity as *pure relations*: the first person of the Trinity is constituted in his being by the act of self-giving. In the first person, there is no person who exists prior to this relational act, and who then gives himself; rather, he *is* the very act of self-gift. Thus, the name of “Father” as a relational term does not indicate some characteristic superadded to the first person of the Trinity, but is meant to denominate the essence itself of this person. Similarly with the second person: his very identity is captured by the name of “Son”: he is who he is in and through receiving the Father’s gift of himself.¹⁰ There is also a venerable tradition that speaks of the third person of the Trinity as the communion itself between the Father and the Son (we find this expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*): the mutual self-donation and reception taking place between the Father and the Son bears the fruit of a union of persons, and we find that the Spirit, “proceeding” from this mutual exchange of love, is that very communion personified.

While these theological articulations had their origin in revelation, once one has grasped that personhood is realized most fully in the person’s existing in relation, and more specifically, in a relation of love, the idea that “person” within the divinity—that is, the supreme instantiation of personhood—should *be* relation unfolds from the inner logic of this intuition into personal nature. The finite instantiation of this truth in angelic and human persons, whereby the person is constituted in its being prior to any relation to another, with relation superadded to it, appears by comparison as a weaker instance of it.

But in the context of the Trinity, where each person is constituted in its being by relation, we see that substance would have to undergo yet another modification. Ratzinger denies that one can any longer use the category of substance at all in this context: “In God, person is the pure relativity of being turned toward the other; it does not lie on the level of substance—the substance is *one*—but on the level of dialogical reality, of relativity toward the other.”¹¹

This is where I would like to make a contribution to the discussion, one that I believe would contribute to resolving the metaphysical issues surrounding the logical problem of the “three-in-one.” There are two elements to the move that I think should be made. Firstly, it is to notice that the innermost being of each of the three persons are the features that *constitute love itself*: giving, receiving, and the fruit proceeding from them. While all three persons perform and experience the three

constitutive elements of love, each of these elements is realized as the “form”—the “formal cause”—of a personal center of consciousness and freedom through which it is constituted.

The second element of what I propose is to consider the possibility that the unity proper to substance finds a higher instantiation in the moral unity constituted by love than in the unity of a non-relational substance within itself. On this account, the Aristotelian category of substance is not set aside, but doubly surpassed; or, one could perhaps say becomes potentiated. The persons existing in a love-relation are no longer individual substances, or even substances-in-relation; their unity in love itself *constitutes a single substantial unity*. The unity at the heart of substance emerges here in its original, archetypal sense *as a unity constituted by a plurality of persons existing in a communion of love*. The mutual belonging of persons proper to love, realized in personal consciousness and freedom, is an essentially higher, more intensive *kind* of metaphysical unity than the simple unity of a being within itself. The single moral space “enacted” by the persons of the Trinity in their infinite relations of love renders the persons one with each other in a *more meaningful manner* than does the simple identity of a being make a being one with itself. By comparison, the unity of the latter turns out to be a kind of pale reflection of unity found in the unity of love.

If we are to understand this, we must resist the tendency of thinking about love in terms so abstract that we lose a sense of its essential core. The scope of this paper does not allow us to elaborate on the nature of love, but a quote from Wojtyła’s *Love and Responsibility* will serve to make the point that concerns us here:

By its nature, because it is what it is, the person is its own master (*sui juris*), and cannot be ceded to another or supplanted by another in any context where it must exercise its will or make a commitment affecting its freedom. (It is *alteri incommunicabilis*.) But love forcibly detaches the person, so to speak, from this natural inviolability and inalienability. It makes the person want to do just that—surrender itself to another, to the one it loves. The person no longer wishes to be its own exclusive property, but instead to become the property of that other. This means the renunciation of its autonomy and its inalienability. Love proceeds by way of this renunciation, guided by the profound conviction that it does not diminish and impoverish, but quite the contrary, enlarges and enriches the existence of the person. What might be called the law of *ekstasis* seems to operate here: the lover ‘goes outside’ the self to find a fuller existence in another.¹²

This unity also possesses a *value* that far exceeds—one could say *infinitely* exceeds, in a qualitative sense—simple identity. The unity constituted by the generosity of persons existing for another and as wholly surrendered to one another constitutes a perfection all its own, far exceeding the relatively weak perfection of a being’s metaphysical oneness with itself.

St. Augustine seems to refer to just such a unity in one of his sermons on the Gospel of St. John:

‘They had one soul and one heart in the Lord’ (Acts 4:32). If love [*caritas* throughout] made of so many souls one soul and of so many hearts one heart: how great must the love be between Father and Son? Greater, at any rate, than love among these human beings who had a single heart. If, then, the heart of many brothers and sisters is one because of love, are you going to say that God the Father and God the Son are two Gods? If they are two Gods, the highest love is not there. For if, in this world, love is so great that it makes one soul of your soul and the soul of your friend, how, in God, is Father and Son not going to be one God? . . . Many people have many souls and yet, if they love one another, their soul is one; yet they can also be called many souls: they truly can, in the case of human being, because the joining [*coniunctio*] is not so great. But here you can only say, there is one God; you cannot say, there are two or three Gods. In this [unity] you will realize the surpassing excellence and height of love: it is so great that no greater love can exist.¹³

But here, we have arrived at the dogmatic formulation regarding the plurality-in-unity of God: God is three persons in one substance. One can thus speculate that the relations of love subsisting within the one divine essence are the key to the mystery of one God in three persons: love both makes sense of otherness/plurality and simultaneously overcomes it. At the same time, we can understand St. John’s statement that “God is love,” not as a poetical hyperbole, or as a figure of speech, but as a literal truth, that can be taken in a strict metaphysical sense.

I believe that this understanding of substance could change the discourse in discussions on the Trinity. If substance is something “prior to” and in some sense “other than” the persons of the Trinity, then one would need something like Rea’s “constitution model” solution, which makes an attempt to account for the relative separateness from and simultaneous identity of the divine nature with each of the persons.¹⁴ But if the substance of God is defined as a moral unity of love in the way proffered here, then a host of logical difficulties disappear. There would be no need to explain how the three persons share a divine nature—for it is the reality of love, as lived by the three persons themselves in their proper respective gestures, which constitutes the divine nature itself.¹⁵

III. Love as Ground of Absolute Being

The primacy of love, then, comes to the fore in these considerations. Love is not only identical with the being of God, but is most deeply constitutive of it. While all attributes in God are in one sense identical, one could venture to say that there is an order among them in which love is first, analogous to the way in which there is an order among the persons whereby the Father eternally begets the Son and is himself not begotten, while the Son is eternally begotten; and the Holy Spirit, in

turn, proceeds from both Father and Son. Similarly to the way in which the Father is first within the Trinity, love is, perhaps, the attribute of God that “grounds” all his other attributes.

This leads us to see that there is yet another way that we can speak of the centrality of love to God’s being. As I said above, the recognition of love as an attribute of God immeasurably expanded the horizon of Christian metaphysics. As long as God is understood simply as “He Who Is,” the deepest question of metaphysics remains in some way unanswered: the question of *why* he *should* be.¹⁶ The “why” here refers to the specific cause which Plato recognized as the deepest one, namely, that which *justifies* a being in its existence. To say that Absolute Being is *by necessity* in some sense truly answers the question in a synthetic, non-analytic way, to resort to Kantian terms. And yet this answer leaves the mind thirsting for more; one experiences that one has not grasped on to the deepest reason for its being. One can go in another—and deeper—direction in seeking an intelligible ground for Absolute Being, and ask why it should *make sense* that this being is necessarily.

Plato recognized the significance of this question in having posited a distinct cause which carries the burden of justifying a being in its existence.¹⁷ The content of this cause was for him *the good*: a thing not only is, but *ought* to be, or “has the right” to exist, because it is *good*. For Plato, the good was the cause possessing the greatest explanatory power, beyond which one no longer had to seek any reasons. But the reality of love has even more explanatory power, providing a yet more adequate justification for God’s being, and as such brings the mind to rest in regard to its reason-seeking. God is, *because He is Love*. Love is the highest perfection—the “pure perfection” (to use Anselm’s term) *par excellence*.

This justification turns out to be simultaneously existential as well as ontological—a consideration that shows in yet another way the centrality of love to God’s being. To explain: while they did not explicitly hold the position I am here offering, many classical thinkers articulated certain dimensions of personal existence that lead us to its threshold. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and others recognized that *person* is the highest entity among beings; thus, metaphysics in the most proper sense—as that which seeks for being in the most authentic, fullest sense—is a “divine science,” with God as its object.¹⁸ On the other hand, one of the central tenets of their anthropology and ethics is driven by the recognition that the existence of a personal being entails a certain way of being, if its existence is to make sense. At the heart of their anthropology and ethics is the conviction that *happiness* is the only possible end-state for the personal soul, the only state in which the soul is not driven onwards to some new activity which is always a means to something beyond itself.¹⁹ Only in a happiness that fully realizes and corresponds to all the faculties of the rational being, can a rational soul be *at rest*. Implicit in their insight is the fact that a personal being *as centrally characterized by subjectivity* gives rise to a metaphysical demand, namely, that there be an end-state for that being in which that being [in his subjectivity] is “filled up” with beatitude.²⁰ It is only existence in love that affords the personal being the beatitude corresponding fully to its capacities as personal.²¹

Without love, the existence of a person becomes absurd. Here, again, the existential and metaphysical coincide, in yet another way. A metaphysical injustice follows from the idea of the existence of a personal being that possesses no possibility of existing in a state of happiness. Love once again emerges as in a real sense *metaphysically prior to being*, standing in a founding relation with respect to it. If being in the fullest sense is personal being, only love, in turn, provides a fullness of meaning to personal existence—and hence to being itself.

In conclusion: when referring to “Being Itself,” to Absolute Being, we can say more than simply, “God *is*, by necessity.” We can say, “Absolute Being is, *because* it is love.” “To be” is justified only if “to be” *means* “to be as relations of love.” Love emerges in some real sense as the foundational principle of being itself. The richest, most complete meaning of “to be” is “love,” understood as the state of moral union of persons constituted by mutual belonging.

Ave Maria University

Notes

1. By “ground” I simply refer here to the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason, in the aspect of it which points to the metaphysical requirement that everything that exists, exists for some intelligible reason.

2. One well-known instance of this is Richard of St. Victor’s rational demonstration for the necessity of a Trinitarian God. *On the Trinity*, Book III, c. II. Bonaventure makes another such attempt in his *On the Mystery of the Trinity*, q. 1, a. 2—though he ultimately concludes to the impossibility of such a demonstration.

3. Michael Rea, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook for Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 703.

4. *Essere e Persona* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1989). Unpublished translation by Kateryna Fedoryka, with permission). I will here draw on c. IX of this work.

5. See Josef Pieper’s essay “The Philosophical Act,” and Maritain’s *Existence and the Existent*.

6. Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” in *Communio* 17.3 (1990): 439–454, at 451.

7. *Essere e Persona*, c. IX. In his *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948) Jacques Maritain writes: “Only by love does [personal subjectivity] attain to its supreme level of existence—existence as self-giving.”

8. Ratzinger makes person-in-relation and substance mutually exclusive, which I would not do at this point.

9. Robert Conner, “Notes and Comments: Relation, the Thomistic *Esse*, and American Culture: Toward a Metaphysic of Sanctity,” in *Communio* 17.3 (1990), 455–464, at 455.

10. In “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology” Ratzinger writes: “In God, person means relation. Relation, being related, is not something superadded to the person, but it *is* the person itself. In its nature, the person exists only *as* relation. Put more concrete-

ly, the first person does not generate in the sense that the act of generating a Son is added to the already complete person, but the person *is* the deed of generating, of giving itself, of streaming itself forth. The person is identical with this act of self-donation.” One could appropriate Aquinas’s concept of “subsistent relation” to describe this personification of the gestures of love, though he himself did not originally use it for this specific relation. (See *ST I*, q. 27–29.) I am aware that this way of understanding the persons of the Trinity is not universally accepted (see for example Rea, “The Trinity”), but resolving this issue is not material to my considerations here.

11. “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” 444. Ratzinger says that this is true even on the level of the human person. If this is so, it would be in a sense analogous to what is true of God, and its exact meaning would have to be worked out.

12. Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 125–126. Conner quotes Norbert Hoffman in this connection: “The Father attains to his subsistence as an ‘I’ only in the radicalness of his relationship to this ‘Thou,’ and to his self-possession as person only in his unreserved self-abandonment to the Son.” “Notes and Comments,” 463.

13. *Sermons on John*, 14, 9; *Corpus Christianorum*, 36.147–48, as quoted by Michael Waldstein in “John Paul II and St. Thomas on Love and the Trinity,” part II, *Anthropotes* 18 (2002): 269–286, at 274–275.

14. Michael Rea, “The Trinity,” 710ff. Rea proposes the following: Every being is a compound of matter and form, according to Aristotle. Starting with an analogy, he takes the case of a piece of marble which is simultaneously a statue and a pillar: the two share the same matter while having their own forms. He likens the situation of the Trinity to this: the divine nature occupies the place of matter, while the three persons are three forms that the divine nature has simultaneously. On this account, the three persons share the same substance, which is wherein the divine nature is located. Thus one has three compounds, whose constituents are a shared divine nature and differing person-defining properties.

15. I believe that this way of conceiving things would also avoid both modalism and tri-theism.

16. “Metaphysics, moreover, does not ask only the question of what is being in the most proper sense, but also of what is its foundation; it is therefore also aitiology.” Josef Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, c. VIII.

17. See especially the *Phaedo*, 98bff, but also *Republic*, Book VI.

18. Seifert points out that though for Plato in one sense the *eidos* of the good is the highest being, among real beings, he recognizes person—the demiurge—to be the highest being. See *Essere e Persona*, c. IX.

19. I would assert that this does not mean that happiness is the *motive* of all of one’s actions, as particularly Aquinas seems to hold. At most, it implies that the absence of beatitude can signal that one is not living properly. The main point I wish to make is that *objectively*, the being possessing subjectivity can come to rest only in a state of beatitude.

20. Richard of St. Victor makes such an argument for love as the condition for the highest happiness, and thus for the necessity of a plurality of persons within the Trinity. (*On the Trinity*, Book III, c. III.) He recapitulates his argument by saying, “For who, except someone suffering from the disease of madness, would say that there is lacking in the supreme goodness that than which nothing is more perfect, and nothing better? Who, I ask, except

someone weak in mind, would deny that there is in the supreme happiness that than which nothing is more joyful and nothing sweeter? . . . Certainly nothing is better, nothing is more joyful, nothing is more magnificent than true, sincere and supreme charity, which he knows does not exist without a plurality of persons." (Book III, c. V).

21. Again, from Richard of St. Victor: "Certainly . . . nothing is sweeter than charity; nothing more pleasing than charity. The life of reason experiences nothing sweeter than the delights of charity; enjoys no pleasure more pleasing than this. [God] would lack these delights in eternity if He remains all alone on the throne of majesty because He lacks fellowship." *On the Trinity*, Book III, c. IV. And in c. XVII he writes that if there were not a plurality of persons within God, "whence would abound for him those supremely sweet delights which . . . are accustomed to be drawn from the heart of another rather than from one's own heart?"