

BLACKFRIARS

A DIALECTIC OF SELF-GIVING

PRAENOTANDUM

The end of all becoming is being, but not, ultimately, of that which becomes considered by itself: of that which becomes considered as participation in another mode of being which is the mode of being of something which already and really is.

Change means that that which changes is not to be considered by itself.

The end (result) of the body's constant mutations is the successive participation in the potentiality of matter. But this is not the end (finality) of the body's mutations. The end (finality) of becoming can be nothing imperfect.

I think this means that the end of all becoming is the participation of all creatures in the risen humanity of Christ.

BEING is essentially communicable. You don't have to explain *why* being communicates itself, as if it were something being as such were not expected to do. Perfection, what we would call by transliteration the formality of being as such and of actuality, is communicable *per se*, imperfection communicable *per accidens*. Imperfection to be communicated implies a pre-established communication in potential being. Communication of imperfection is the abandonment on the part of those who communicate in it of specific and *diverse* actuality for the sake of that communication in what is potential and common. The communication of perfection is the communication of the diverse *as* diverse in a unity intrinsically proportioned to its participants. We can understand nothing here without the metaphysical principle of analogy.

That which is incommunicable in being is that which, in the individual or person, constitutes it as *this* individual or

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person and no other. (Thisness—Scotus has a word, *haecceitas*.)

It would seem superficially that the higher the degree of personality or of uniqueness in a person or thing the less would be its power of communication and self-giving, since the more markedly unique a thing may be the less would be its power of sharing with others what can only and exclusively belong to itself. This, however, is the precise opposite of the truth.

It remains that no process of becoming has as its term a mode of being which exchanges with another that which constitutes it to be itself. Nature shows the emergence and destruction but not the interchange of identity. To understand the communicability of perfection, therefore, we must expect to find that that which is communicated is not precisely individuality, thisness, selfhood, but is something other; and that the mode of communication is different from material interchange or interpenetration of parts.

It is to be noted that self-giving, communication, fellowship, arises from perfection as such, and is thus founded in an analogue. As such it appears to be coextensive with freedom, personality, intelligence, analogous perfections of spiritual substances. Beneath the level of personal existence, in the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms (which, considered in their unity as an ordered whole, are less in intrinsic unity and perfection of being than a single human person; considered as individuals in their individuality are no more than variations of a scale of infinitesimals) it is difficult to say that anything more than a reflection, a mirroring or a metaphor of self-giving is to be found. Such mirroring is in the interchange of parts in what is barely a whole.

Self-giving therefore pertains to those things whose action is immanent and simple. Clearly self-giving is not and cannot be dissipation of being as transitive action is dissipation of being. Self-giving is not destructive but perfective of the self which gives. Self-giving then pertains to the diverse analogous perfections of being. It is a principle of action, founded in the principle of analogy, by which diverse

spiritual substances participate in the analogue being. It is the condition of participation in the life of God.

For the creature the formula is this: I, Gabriel, archangel, or John Smith, Englishman, do not suffice of myself to be Gabriel or John Smith. You therefore, Jesus Christ, be Gabriel, be John Smith, and I shall be Jesus Christ.

What is startling in the formula as so stated may be explained. To the first objection which may be raised against putting such a confession of insufficiency in the mouth of Gabriel, I reply that as the essence of creaturehood is dependence on God, so the higher a creature may be in the scale of essential perfection, the more intimately is its dependence on God understood in its action, and the more intimately does the creature participate as recipient in the self-giving of God. Humility is the proper attitude of the creature in response to God's self-giving, and is itself an analogical perfection. Stated as a maxim: as the ontological perfection (the unity as such) of the creature is greater, by so much the less is the illusion of independence of God persuasive. But this cannot be worked out by mathematics. We are dealing with an analogue. So when it is said, I do not suffice of myself to be myself, it is the "of-myself" not the self as such which is disclaimed. So true are the divisions of being in metaphysics that the distinction of essence from existence is the basis of perfect prayer.

The second objection which may be raised is to the word *be* in the formula where it says, You therefore, Jesus Christ, be John Smith and I shall be Jesus Christ. What does the word *be* mean here? This is obviously the crux of the whole doctrine which is here being considered.

It has already been said that being *as such* is communicable; that being needs no addition to it in order to explain that it may be given; so that that supreme being in which the formal principle of being (and therefore also of unity) is perfectly fulfilled needs not even another on whom to bestow the gift, but is at once supreme unity and perfect fellowship. It has been seen too that communication (which is always in some sense self-giving) precisely in so far as it is self-giving is coextensive with freedom, intelligence, per-

sonality, an analogue of the spiritual world.

But it has also been seen that there remains something ungiven, which cannot be given without destroying the giver and the gift, namely that which ultimately constitutes a thing or person to be this thing or person and no other. But this we are accustomed to call self. So that the essence of this doctrine seems to be that in the act of self-giving the self is not given. Which is absurd.

I reply that the self is offered, but cannot be received by any other in the same way as it belongs to the self who offers it. A man may surrender himself to God or to demons, but God will not cease to be God in order to be this man and nothing more, in the same way as John Smith is John Smith and nothing more; and if this theft and annihilation of being is desired by demons, still John Smith may not cease to be John Smith in order to be a devil.

The gift which is both given and received is in fact nothing transitive, but is an immanent perfection. This perfection is called life. And here it will be seen that the more perfect life is more irresistible and more total in its self-giving. (Ste. Thérèse so soon as she becomes a sharer in eternal life showered herself upon the entire Church with incredible lavishness.) We may remark too that life, being some beginning of immanent activity wherever it is found (in the grassblade or the pool under the hedge) proceeds to perfection precisely by the perfection of its immanence. And this is another instance of what may be thought a paradox, that the life which most spends itself most nourishes and perfects itself, and the same is true vice-versa if it is really life that is nourished; for life, the life of spiritual beings, is of this kind, and if these things are an outrage to us it is because we understand so little of them.

We are still left with the distinction in idea and in fact of that which is given from that which gives. We may follow it in a way parallel with the distinction of *esse* and *essentia* in St. Thomas; and it must be noted that this distinction deeply characterizes all created being. It is that in created being which constitutes it precisely as contingent, dependent, relative; which makes it ultimately impossible to mistake,

even in the most momentary intuition, the Creator for the creature; by which the mode of being of any created thing, even in our limited perception of it, is spontaneously known as non-ultimate and contingent, because it is *a se*.

It is apparent then that that being in which nature and the act of being are not separate but one: one in the integrity and spontaneous perfection of pure act, which is the intrinsic unparticipated being of God; one as source of His own act and His own being, because His act and His being are one; source eternally and vitally new of His own nature, because source, life and nature in Him are one in that perfection which all immanent activity in some degree participates; is at once both the giver and the given in a perfect and unforfeited spontaneity of giving. Yet even here, where all is perfection, light, freedom and unity, there remains something ungiven and a distinction of persons which is before the creation of the world. The utterly indivisible unity of God, a unity infinitely more perfect than the self-identity of any created being, is a trinity of persons, and being a trinity it is a unity beyond which there is no possibility of any other more perfect.

We may consider the Holy Trinity precisely as mystery, as that which can be explained ultimately only in terms of itself; we may consider it as dominating all being and all understanding of existence: *signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui. Omne trinum*—the phrase is a commonplace. It is not sufficient merely to assert it. We have to discover the unity in diversity which is the deepest characteristic of being, not as a logical predicate, but as the inmost actuality of each thing that exists. And we discover in creatures a threefold division of being, namely (to quote technicalities) *suppositum*, *essentia* and *esse*: the own incommunicable self of a thing, which is that *in* which a nature is received and becomes concrete (concretion being for material things the mode of their actuality); secondly, that nature itself, the *titulus habendi esse* or claim to existence, which is valid because it is a specific claim, a determination containing no foolishness, received and particularized in the self of things as that *by* which they participate in being. And nature is

thus an adaptation of the self to existence, and at once a mode or determination in which being may be expressed. Thirdly, that act itself which is a thing's existing. The act of existing, says St. Thomas (I. iii. 4 ad 2.) is the actualization of all that is contained in a nature, and except in relation to it that nature has no real significance. Neither is the *suppositum* or self anything real except in relation to the act of existing by which (through its determinate nature) a thing actually *is*.

Communicable being is being in act precisely in so far as it is in act. That in which we participate by the communication of self-giving is actuality. The perfection of self-giving is therefore perfect actuality, pure act, which is God; who by the mode of His existence *a se*, by his perfect, integral and immanent actuality is infinitely removed from any composition with any creature: who as Holy Ghost is gift *par excellence* to every creature. After this gift, to adapt St. Paul, all giving in heaven and earth is named. Now how in the world can such giving be received? For it is precisely the offering of such things as are radically incapable of acceptance which is forbidden us when it is said we should not cast pearls before swine.

We return to what was said in the beginning: being as such is communicable. We do not have to explain how this may be in order to know that it is so. But still we have to explain. Secondly, the end of all becoming is being—but not the being of that which becomes considered by itself. Change means that that which changes is not to be considered by itself. But change implies a mode of being in which it is resolved, an actuality dominating the transitions of becoming. That actuality dominating all change is God precisely as perfect, as pure act. But change also implies in the same mode of being in which it takes place a giving which is spendthrift and a taking which really takes away. Not even the most exalted of beings in whom its essence is other than its act can escape in its activity some trace of dissipation and of insufficiency. And this is to say that change as such implies a hierarchy in the universe both above and below the creature which changes, because it

implies both division and unity of being, the first with a movement towards resolution, a shedding of something that was, the second with a movement towards community, a participation in perfection that binds together in its diversity everything that is. And as the *was* belongs to time the *is* belongs ultimately to eternity and gives confidence to our expectation that all things whatsoever which *are* will be discovered by us in the life which is shared by the community of the saints.

Being, precisely as perfection and as actuality, is communicable *as such*; is that which is given and not lost, received and not consumed. But being, considered absolutely as such, as subsistent perfection and act, is God; for God alone *is* His own existence. For the rest, the being of the creature is a participation in actuality which implies the existence and the self-giving of God. But there are two modes of this self-giving: that, firstly, which gives to the creature the being by participation of which it *is*; by which it is *creature*; by which it is *this creature*. And that is the first donation by which God gives to the creature what belongs to it. It is not merely a dole of justice; for the suppositum, that in which being is received, and the nature, that by which it is claimed, are also the gift and the creation of God. But it is a gift in which there is intrinsic proportion of the mode of its existence to that which, by the act of giving, receives existence. It is this self-giving by which things are created in that mode of existence which belongs to them as things. By it men are made in their own being as men. And by this it will be seen that by participation in the actuality of being (identified ultimately *secundum rationem formalem actualitatis* in God) we are not made parts of God but beings, with the mode of being which is proper to us. And, far from this doctrine of participation implying any pantheistic taint or trend, it implies both that that which participates being is by definition *not God*, and that the being which is participated is, precisely *as participated* not God's but its own. God's gift is, in short, really given. But nothing is lost or added to God by giving it. Being *as such* is communicable. Perfect being, whose

mode is immanent, is most productive of effects *because* it is perfect, and without loss to its perfection. What may be questioned is whether creation as such is rightly described as self-giving. I offer the description with diffidence, aware that creation is only a shadow of that eternal immanent self-donation which is the life of the Trinity. But nevertheless a real shadow, and a shadow of no less than that.

The second mode of self-giving is that of Grace. Here it is at once apparent that the gift exceeds the proportion of the receiver, and on that account it is called supernatural. The original formula "I do not of myself suffice to be myself; do you therefore, Jesus Christ, be John Smith and I shall be Jesus Christ" is further elucidated. I do not suffice to be myself—not only because my need to be preserved in being is an imploration of dependence, but also because my finality as a finite being and as a not-made-for-nothing creature is an aspiration for the life of God. My life is a tending and a movement impelled by the inspiration of this finality. And this finality is truly the cause of my existence, and causes me to *be* because it adequately causes me to be-in-movement-towards-God, which is the only kind of being which I as a creature and as an *être de tendance* may have. In this way the child of grace is a new creature, because the end of his supernatural life includes, and alone in fact *is*, the cause of his natural life. Grace perfects nature by subsuming it into a higher mode of being which includes nature,¹ and the distinction for the theologian can never be considered as separating two ends each adequate and alternative. Man's end is supernatural. There is no such

¹ The concept of finality thus enables the metaphysician to avoid the superficial metaphor for grace as the smile of a face which would still have been a perfectly good face in repose. It is precisely the revelation of grace which has introduced into metaphysics a dynamism and a movement which its own principles left at the Aristotelian level could hardly have discovered. And this revelation sheds light on the problems themselves of the metaphysician: The end of becoming is being, but not ultimately of that which becomes considered by itself. Change means that that which changes is not to be considered by itself. The end (result) of the body's constant mutations is the successive participation in the common potentiality of matter. But this is not the end (finality) of the body's mutations. The end (Finality) of becoming can be nothing imperfect. I think this means that the end of all becoming is the participation of all things in the risen humanity of Christ.

thing as a natural fulfilment of man's finality. The distinction, under the aspect in which it is considered here, is of two modes of the divine self-giving; the one which gives to the creature that which makes it creature, the other which gives to the creature a sharing in divine perfection precisely as divine.

It is by virtue of the gift of supernatural grace that we are made adequate to receive it. The gift of God is not fore-claimed. Nevertheless it is needed. Without it, as fallen creatures, we are not capable adequately of being men. The effect of original sin is that man is no longer sufficient of himself to be man save with the being of God and in the person of Jesus Christ.

We have to consider here the supernatural need in which alone a natural need could be formulated or satisfied. Our natural need could not explain the gift of God. Is it to sheer nothingness or is it to God that we must turn for the analogue of our need of him in which alone our natural need is intelligible? Nothing needs nothing. Good is not explained by its lack. Being, truth, goodness, are essentially communicable. Their communication is its own explanation. Nothing then, but God's superabundant giving underlies our need of Him.

But God, by His existence *a se* is at once necessary being and the perfect analogue of freedom: and we know that in the Trinity of Persons the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who is Love, is himself Gift *par excellence* after whom all giving in heaven and earth is named. And we know that it is the Spirit who cries out in each creature with unspeakable groanings, asking for not what we want but what we need. It is gift then, God's gift of himself which is our need of God. God is our need of God. The Holy Spirit is the need which cries in us because He is the gift which Christ has given us. And this is true because we are one with Christ.

God's self-giving is to identify himself with us, not as ceasing to be God, but as becoming man. Hence our identity with God, the term of God's perfect self-giving, is our incorporation in the Mystical Body of Christ. And it is in the person of Christ that we are received into the life of

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God to be receivers and not only shadows of the self-donation of the most holy Trinity in which perfect communion and perfect unity are three Persons and one God.

We are considering the creature, that is ourselves, as interposed (though the fact is so much more daring and more intimate than the word) in the life of the Trinity, a movement between a divine desire and a divine fulfilment, and a real term between really distinct persons. By metaphysical considerations alone we utterly fail to understand the needs of our spirit. Nevertheless they remain true but ancillary to a life which is at once drama and divine. Nothing but God can underlie our need of God.

And this means that all movement under heaven is centripetal and Christocentric. It means that the abyss of our need is utterly identified in the abyss of the Heart of Christ. It means that our indigence has touched the extremities, the heights and the depths of the being of God. It means that the least stirring of a divine desire moving through the creature is a bending of the neck of Christ upon the bosom of the Father. And as a corollary, removed but recognisably in its place, it means that the end of all becoming is the participation of all things in the risen humanity of Christ. It means too that from the process of becoming itself are not absent divine desires and divine identifications.

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