

What does love know? St Thomas on the Trinity

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Thomas's trinitarian theology has a rather bad name in modern literature. He is associated with an artificial separation between the discussion of the one God and the exploration of trinitarian revelation. This, it is said, privileges the most abstract level of talk about God, and inevitably suggests that what reason can know of God as one is prior to what revelation shows us of God's threefold life and action. And indeed, when we turn to the details of the discussion, abstraction is what seems to dominate. A brief visit to the relevant sections of the *Prima Pars* will leave a migrainous blur of processions, relations, notions, essential names, appropriations and much more; a certain impatience with the whole register in which he considers the question sets in well before any of the detail is examined.

What I want to do in this lecture is not to provide a full exposition of this daunting treatise, but to select certain aspects of them that have, I think, been misunderstood or neglected, so as to point tentatively towards a recovery of some of Thomas's perceptions, both for anthropology and for trinitarian thought. And my fundamental concern is to challenge the accusation of abstractness levelled against him. The late Catherine Mowry LaCugna, in her intriguing and influential essay, *God for Us. The Trinity and Christian Life*,¹ treats Thomas as one of her central examples of the dissolution of vital trinitarianism, on the grounds that he separates consideration of God as creator from the treatment of God as trinity, and refuses to accept that the differentiation of the divine persons has anything to do with their relation to the created order. If the name of creator can be given indifferently to any person of the trinity, or if, when we say the Lord's Prayer, we address the trinity as a whole, we lose sight of the concrete impulse that drives trinitarian thinking in the first place. We divide *theologia* from *oikonomia*, God in himself from God in relation to what is made. And 'If there is no basis in the economy to know that there is a differentiation in persons in the creative act of

God, if all we can say on the basis of the economy is that one God creates, then what is the basis for the Christian belief that God is a Trinity of persons?' (p.167).

There are points of detail here that we shall have to return to (especially the issue of the Lord's Prayer); but I think that LaCugna has missed a quite crucial connection in Thomas's text. Qu.xxvii, which begins the treatise *de trinitate*, follows directly upon the discussion of God's blessedness, itself the culmination of an extended treatment of God's intelligence and will. The Christian God is not only capable of understanding and of purpose; he enjoys 'bliss', the characteristic perfection of an intellectual nature, variously described in the articles of qu.xxvi as the knowledge of the good possessed by a subject, being in control of all the acts of which one is the subject, unimpeded contemplation of oneself and all things. God is consciously joyful, and the object of his joy is first himself and secondarily himself as creator and preserver of the universe. This account is, I should argue, a step beyond the Aristotelean commonplace that the contemplative knowledge of the knowing subject is the supremely desirable state. Aristotle's cosmic mind does not rejoice in its relation with anything else; Thomas's God knows himself as cause and end of everything and rejoices in himself as such.

And this makes sense of the starting point of qu. xxvii, 'whether there is procession in the divine life'. 'Procession' is associated with movement towards something external, says Aquinas, and such movement is inadmissible where God is concerned; it implies differentiation, process (as we might say), and God is perfectly simple and cannot be imagined as involved in any process. Yet Christ says he has 'come forth' from the Father (Jn 8.42): here is a divine action enacted in the world and characterised as 'procession'. What is more, as the corpus of the article says, this is no isolated eccentricity in scriptural language. Applied to the divine Son, such language cannot indeed have anything to do with literal motion 'outwards', a differentiation of one thing from another. Nor can it be understood in terms of the 'procession' of cause from effect — as we might say that creation 'proceeds' from God.

We need another category of motion to help us; and that is provided precisely by the conviction that God is intellectual, i.e., that God is in some graspable way conscious. We have just seen it established that God is not only conscious but specifically conscious in joy or bliss of all that he does and is. That consciousness is indisputably, for Thomas, a *movement*, a process; something of which we can say there is an origin and an outcome. Our own acts of understanding involve what we know coming to be in us: they 'live' in us in the sense that their action upon

our receptive sensibility and open mind becomes the action of the mind itself. To understand something is to have the action of our mind follow the contours, as you might say, of the active reality of what's understood. So the object of understanding lives again in us as the active product of the mind — the *verbum*, the inner word, that is the fruit of the encounter between mind and object. There is unquestionably 'movement' involved in this, but no physical change. Mind doesn't leak out of itself to make friends with an object and bring it home. It is just that understanding is the life of one reality in another.

Putting this into slightly more contemporary terms, we could say that understanding something is the process of something's appearing in language. To have the means of thinking about something is to 'speak' about it, not necessarily in audible words, but to let it become a moment in the system of speech in which we are aware of ourselves. And — to allude to recent discussion of Bruce Marshall's important study, *Trinity and Truth*² — this is in Thomas's intellectual world to say that the structure of something's active reality directly appears in the structure of language: what is intelligibly said shares in the same action as the life of the object. Speech is in this sense the object's 'action' in us. This is, quite simply, what understanding *is* — not working out concepts that will in some limited way allow us to 'make sense' of what's perceived. But these are larger issues than can be dealt with here. What is pertinent is that Thomas is offering a category of motion, indeed of differentiation, that does not require us to think immediately of movement from place to place, change of state or composition. Language is a self-differentiation, a letting what is other live in me without either the other or myself losing something.

We can see where this is going. God's *verbum* is an inner differentiation, as ours is. But whereas we realise our linguistic being in the complexities of the world, responding to the contingencies of encounter in time and space, God 'speaks' before ever a world is there. The Word is in the beginning. In other words, God 'acts upon' God, God understands God by being present to God, living in God. God as such can have no object that is not God; but if God is intelligent and enjoys bliss, God must 'perceive' God as other, and let that otherness live in the divine mind. We need some caution here, though; it is tempting to collapse this back into an older, Neoplatonic model in which oneness comes first and then knows itself and so becomes plural or differentiated as eternal mind, *nous*. Not so here: Thomas implies in his first discussion of the issue (xxvii) what he spells out later on (xxxiv.1), that the differentiation is in some sense necessarily 'prior' to the understanding. God lives as *verbum* because God is eternally

already in motion, in self-differentiation. There is no primordial singleness. The Father conceives the Word or generates the Son in the eternal act of recognising his own action of self-giving, bestowal of what he is. There is no literal process by which one becomes two or three — which is precisely the clarification brought about by the theological controversies of the fourth century, in their rejection of any sort of *narrative* of divine generation.

What Thomas has to say in xxxiv. I ad 3 is of cardinal importance. The Word is God understanding God. If we want to be more precise, it is the Father understanding what is involved in the divine life, generating in himself that participatory image of otherness that is the effect of the act of understanding. The Father ‘speaks’ in generating the Son or Word. But the understanding involved is an understanding of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and of all the ways in which divine life is imitable by creatures: ‘and thus in the Word, the entire Trinity is “uttered”, as is every creature as well’. So to speak of the Word as the divine act of understanding is not to suggest that the Trinity is a single subject reflecting itself to itself — the familiar caricature of ‘Latin’ trinitarian discourse as some moderns have seen it. Spelling it out invites certain kinds of crudity; but what Thomas seems to be saying is that the Father generates the Son in the act of knowing that he (the Father) is already actively giving what he is to another, and that in knowing that primordial and eternal giving he also knows all the relations in which divine life can stand to anything that is not divine — knows, in Thomas’s idiom, the ways in which the divine act of existence can be participated by specific finite forms. Thus what the Father knows is neither the divine essence as some abstraction from the actuality of divine life, nor ‘himself’ as a divine individual: he knows himself in generative relation to another.

The effect of the argument is that of a conceptual Moebius strip: it isn’t possible, in Thomas’s perspective, to separate out a prior agent (the Father), an act of generation (the begetting of the Son) and the consciousness of that act (the formation of the *verbum* within the divine life). And the Word is not the image of the Father in the sense of being one individual resembling or reproducing another; he is certainly *imago* in the sense that he originates in the act of the Father (xxxv. 1 c), but we have already been alerted to the fact that this act is the comprehensive self-bestowal that *is*, from one point of view, the Trinity, as it is also the entire story of creation, understood as the story of the different levels at which divine life interweaves with what is not divine. Just as it would be a mistake to accuse Thomas of collapsing the personal being of the Word into the self-awareness of the Father, so it is wrong to see him as setting

up a division between God in himself and God as creator. LaCugna claims that by attributing creation to the trinity as a whole, to the divine *esse*, Thomas is connecting creation with what the three persons have abstractly in common, not with the personal act of the Father (165–6). But if we have been reading attentively, I think it should be clear that there is no discourse about the divine *esse* in relation to creation that is not also about the actual life of the three persons. To say that creation is the work of the three is not to say that it is the work of nature *rather than* person. But the confusion is easily made unless you take care to keep the discussion of the divine *verbum* firmly in view when thinking about divine knowledge in general.

This is reinforced when we turn to the account of the third person, initially in xxvii.3 and 4, then in xxxvi to xxxviii. The treatment of the divine perfections in general has already alerted us to the inseparability of intellect and love in thinking life, and so pre-eminently in God: the presence of what is known in us as knowers is always complemented by the presence of what is loved in us as lovers. The discussion of divine bliss reinforces this. We never ‘just’ know; in Thomas’s vocabulary, we ‘tend’ or ‘incline’ to what is known. That is to say, in encountering an intelligible object, we do not simply conform our action to its action in the production of an inner word, we regard it in the light of whether it serves the good or the flourishing of our life. Knowledge is followed by *habitus ad bonum*, the disposition of the mind relative to its good; in plainer language, knowledge brings with it a set of issues about what I am to do in respect of the known object so as to meet my desires or fulfil my purposes (see, e.g., xix. 1 c). Aquinas, like Augustine, does not believe in strictly ‘disinterested’ knowledge, knowledge that can be wholly abstracted from a real or potential attitude to the known. We can speak either of the will’s relation to the object or the will’s ‘projection’ of actions in respect of the object that will realise my purposes through the object.

Thus Thomas is able to make an important distinction in xxvii.4. Knowledge produces an image of the known; the *verbum* is the other reality living in the knowing subject and the act of the subject follows, so to speak, the contours of the act of the object. What Thomas calls intellectual procession results in a sort of repetition in another medium of the known. But the relation of love or will does not produce an image; it produces an *inclinatio*, almost a ‘programme’ for action that is not a repetition of the act of the object, yet is no less a kind of living of the object in the subject, a presence of the beloved in the lover. Something known continues its structured activity in the knower by living in the knower as an intelligible structure. Something loved continues its life in

the lover as a stimulus to motion away from itself, a stimulus to a *kind* of self-abandonment. To put it schematically: knowledge is about the continuity between subject and object, love is about the discontinuity. Knowing is the other coming to be in the subject, love is the acknowledgment that the other remains other, even in the subject. The known object is not exhausted or (to borrow a word beloved of Iris Murdoch) 'derealised' by being known; it doesn't just live in the subject but retains the solid and active resource to change the subject and impel it to new activity.

The *corpus* of xxxvii. 1 makes a further clarification to help us make sense of an apparent terminological muddle. We don't have a word that does for love what *verbum* does for knowledge. When we talk about intellectual activity, we can distinguish the act of understanding from its product, the inner word. But when we talk about love, we lack a word for the 'product', the active presence of the beloved in the lover. We may well talk about this presence as itself 'love' — but love in a rather different sense from the specific activity of lovingly engaging with an other. Hence the confusion in theological language between love as what the entire Trinity does and is, and love as the name of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity.

So we can attempt to summarise Thomas's account of the Spirit along the same lines as his discussion of *verbum*, granted that there is a bit of conceptual strain because of the lack of the kind of vocabulary we need. God loves God, loves what is understood in the eternal Word, loves the always pre-existing self-giving of the Father. God is present to God or in God not simply as the self-image generated by knowledge, but as what exceeds that repetition or reproduction, as the stimulus of what a modern (not Thomas) might want to call, tentatively and analogically, desire. God is a movement towards God, God's wanting of God so that God may be fully and blissfully God, may enjoy the 'natural good' proper to divine nature. Insofar as the most fundamental thing we can give to each other, give in the sense of pure gratuity, is the unqualified wanting of another's good, and insofar as love is the ground of such wanting, then the Spirit is as rightly called 'gift' as 'love' (xxxviii.2). The natural good of the divine life is, it seems, something like the state of wanting another's good. If we could imagine a condition of unbroken and unqualified commitment to the good of another, we should have imagined something like the divine life. The Spirit is God's life as it is shaped and directed towards the good of the other by the recognition, the knowledge, of divine life as self-bestowal. Again, we might try and put it rather crudely. God generates the Son as a repetition of his self-bestowing love; and that love loves, longs for, inclines or yearns towards

what it is doing in that act of generation. Thomas Weinandy, in his excellent essay on *The Father's Spirit of Sonship* (p.77),³ rightly notes that Aquinas comes within a whisker of suggesting, as Weinandy himself does, that there must be some sense in which the Spirit's 'impulsion' towards the divine act of self-bestowal allows us to say that the Son's generation is grounded in the Spirit, as the Spirit's outbreathing is grounded in the Son.

And, as with the generation of the Word, we have to be clear that neither Thomas nor anyone else broadly within this tradition is suggesting that the Father's self-knowledge is what the Son is and the Father's self-love is what the Spirit is, as if the Trinity were essentially the inner relations of a single self. The whole language of 'self is unhelpful here, I suspect, though I realise I have been using it. We are at a loss to find useful ways of talking about life characterised by activity that is more like intelligent activity than any other, yet is neither the life of a single subject nor the history of several individual subjects. What is important here, I suggest, is that Thomas is using the clearest language he can about how subjects both internalise and never absorb radically other realities, and applying it to the life of the one God. What do we do with the other? We let it shape our knowing (we bring it into ourselves or ourselves into it, let our action and its action harmonise), and we pursue it in our purposive or loving activity because we have not swallowed it up by knowing; it remains other. This characterisation of otherness as both knowable and unmasterable, like and unlike, is what Thomas wants us to think about as we think of the life of God as such, God beyond the relations he sets up with what is not divine.

I have described the effect of his discussion as the conceptual equivalent of a Moebius strip: at every point in the argument, what is being argued turns out to be what is already presupposed. God knows himself as already a generative God; this knowing is his generating. God loves himself as a generating God; without this love, we could not understand the generation. Love always presupposes understanding of a sort; yet the intellectual act that produces the *verbum* is the apprehension of an act of primordial love, the unqualified commitment to the being and the good of an other. The more we attempt clarification, the more we risk a kind of collapse of the discourse upon itself, and it seems that the risk of accusations of abstractness or arbitrariness intensifies. But you will have noticed that at more than one point Thomas makes the connection between what he is saying about the Trinity in itself and the divine relations to the world. God's 'self-understanding' of how the sameness of divine life can be repeated in an other is the basis of creation; without the act of understanding that is the birth of the Word, creation is not

thinkable. Or, in other words, a God who is not 'intellectual' in Thomas's sense is not capable of being a creator as Jews and Christians understand that word. He cannot be a detached causal agency and still be what the Bible means by 'creator'. Extrapolating a little — not much — from Thomas's text, we could say that God's love of the selflessness of his own love, God's joy or delight in the Father's commitment to the good of the Son, is the basis for anything we could say of the love of God for the universe. Without this act of love, the outbreathing of the Spirit, we could not think through any narrative of divine involvement or redemption. And this, I think, is what prevents the argument becoming a vicious circle or an arbitrary self-enclosed pattern. As Thomas would have agreed, the entire enterprise is rooted in the effort to make sense of what God is supposed to have done in regard to us.

A final note on the detail of Thomas's argument: as is well-known, he defines the divine persons as 'subsistent relations', a term that has puzzled many modern theologians. It derives from the vocabulary of Augustine, but Thomas gives it a more precise technical twist, so much so that a not very sympathetic Eastern Orthodox commentator, Vladimir Lossky, can accuse him of simply identifying person with relation, and thus evacuating any content for the persons as real agents. For Lossky (*Mystical Theology*, p.57),³ to describe the divine persons as subsistent relations is to make them inner differentiations of a logically prior divine essence, which in effect is treated as a divine individual. Enough has been said by now, I hope, to make us question the idea that Thomas is covertly treating God as an individual reflecting on his subjectivity; but does the language of subsistent relations have the problems someone like Lossky identifies? The corpus of xxix.4 is a dense argument, but it does clarify this issue more than Lossky allows. A divine relation is not something added on to the divine essence, because there is in God nothing 'added on'; what it is is the divine life, no more, no less. That is what Thomas means by talking of 'subsistence' here; these are relations that exist in the same way as the divine essence exists, or, indeed, *are* themselves how the divine essence exists. Whatever God is and does is what God is. We can make 'grammatical' observations about what kind of life the divine life is in general, but we are no less saying what God is when we say that God is Father. That is, God as generating the eternal otherness of the Son is God, living concretely and actively; God being *verbum*, the presence of the other in the mind (to use the nearest human language we can manage) is God, living concretely and actively; God being the impulsion of love towards the unexhausted difference, the generating and 'imaging', of his own life is God, living concretely and actively. God being 'fatherly' is God the Father, says Thomas

(*paternitas divina est Deus Pater*, xxix.4 c); and so for the other persons. Or, as he puts it in xlii.4 ad 2, the essence that in the Father is 'fatherliness', *paternitas*, is 'sonship', *filiatio*, in the Son; the difference is that in one that essence exists in the mode of being given, in the other in the mode of being received.

This is evidently not quite the same as saying that the essence as it were comes first, and is then differentiated within itself. What it is for God to be God in grammatical or abstract terms is actually and concretely the act of giving and receiving and loving that giving and receiving. There is nothing that is *not* trinitarian in God, though *what it is* that is trinitarian can be discussed for certain purposes in its own right, because we need to have some means of knowing that it is really *God* we're talking about. The language of subsistent relations is simply a way of saying that the actual reality of the 'essence' (what it's like to be God) is nothing other than the threefold pattern of relation that we begin to grasp if we put together the history of revelation and the logic of considering God's life as 'intellectual', in some sense self-aware. God acts thus and thus in our history, is discerned through and identified in terms of the scriptural narrative; and God enjoys the bliss of self-awareness. Work through this, and the trinitarian relations come into focus. But what this emphatically does not say is either that we could work out the Trinity from general considerations about intellectuality, or that the Trinity is a kind of extended metaphor for the self-consciousness of a transcendent individual. Revelation tells us that God is intellectual — not just in pure Aristotelean terms, as the thinking of his own thought, but as purposively involved in the world of particulars. But then, by prodding us towards the recognition that this intellectuality is intrinsic to the life of God, not dependent on the world's existence as object for God's knowledge, it leads us to ask what intellection could possibly be for a life that has no objects external to itself. If the God of revelation is radically committed to the love and understanding of what is substantively other, what must be true of God in God's self for this to be possible? The trinitarian analysis offered by Thomas is the answer to this kind of question, struggling to think through what there is in God that is in its own mode as 'other' as the world itself, asking how the central categories for thinking about the presence of the other in the same that we use in reflecting on human consciousness might then hold in respect of God.

What about the discussion of the Lord's Prayer (III.xxiii.2) that caused LaCugna such unease, though? Isn't this a sign that Aquinas really does believe ultimately in a sort of individual essence in

heaven? I suspect that we have to do here with what I have elsewhere called a 'revealing mistake', a conceptual tangle that, as we try to understand how it arose, tells us something intensely significant. Thomas is fully aware of the strain that arises from denying that the Paternoster is really addressed to God the Father, in the light of the undoubted witness of Scripture. But he is trying to make two points. The first is that we are God's children by grace, not nature; that is, whatever our relation to God the Father is, it absolutely cannot be another case of the relation between the Father and the Eternal Son. Our 'filiation' is an image of this eternal filiation, but is significantly discontinuous with it. The generation of the Son is the Father's act in a way that our adoption as children of God cannot be (xxiii.2 ad 2). Thus the second point emerges: whatever happens in the created order in response to the act of God happens because the whole Trinity is active; and Thomas quotes Jn 5.19 in support of this ('Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise').

However, the article following ('Whether being adopted is the distinctive property of rational creatures') does seem, in the corpus, to say that the highest state of a rational creature is to be assimilated to the Son's unity with the Father, which certainly does not suggest that the relation of the redeemed to God is simply a relation to undifferentiated divine unity. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is some confusion in Thomas's argument. To say, as he does in xxiii.2's *sed contra* that calling God 'Father' in the Lord's Prayer is on the same footing as other names 'spoken of God relative to creation' is in obvious tension with the idea that we are conformed specifically to the Son's relation with the Father (even if we'd not call the Father 'Father' in the same sense that would be proper for the eternal Son). The important and perfectly defensible point that our adoption as children of God is *effected* by the whole Trinity, especially as it is explained in xxiii.ad 3, seems to be entangled with the indefensible notion (indefensible on Thomas's own presuppositions as expressed elsewhere) that praying to God as Father is somehow not Christologically determined, or that the sense given to the word 'Father' in such a prayer is focused on the general relation of God to creation. I don't think the latter is what Thomas is saying, even here; but the language is puzzling. The central concern—and this is where we can talk of a 'revealing' mistake—is to insist upon the *gratuitous* character of adoption: to become God's child as a creature is both the highest gift a creature can hope for, a fulfilment of what we're made for, and also a wholly free gift. Behind the argument about the Lord's Prayer, in fact, is a complex of issues

about nature and grace; Thomas is implying that only if we are clear about the difference between the Son's filiation and ours, only, therefore, if we are clear about the unity *ad extra* of the trinitarian action, can we secure the freedom of grace. Taking care of our theological exactitude about the 'immanent' Trinity becomes part of our care for the divine freedom.

It is one of the not infrequent points at which Thomas touches the concerns of Barth, and where both alike range themselves definitively against the persistent modern pull towards introducing into the divine some element of dependence upon creation. Throughout this paper so far, I have been attempting to suggest that we radically misunderstand Thomas's trinitarian theology if we ignore the way in which he repeatedly grounds what he wants to say in the exigencies, as he sees them, of what has emerged in our historical encounter with God as set out in Scripture. How must God be if this is how God acts? If the way God acts is at some level or in some way determined by what's happening in the world, the divine action becomes the result of God's negotiating with what is not God, and thus becomes an agency among agencies; it cannot have about it that absolute gratuity that the very conceptions of creation and redemption require. The doctrine of the Trinity is how we declare that God is by nature free to do what God does; that his action towards us is the expression of radical, uncaused love, the willing of the good of the other without reserve, and thus always and necessarily at an angle to the causal processes of the universe.

The doctrine is about divine gratuity and other-centredness; and it is articulated in a conceptual strategy both complex and risky. If this is the nature of God's freedom, if this is what God must be free *for* (bestowal, life in the other), then God, quite independently of the world, must exhibit something like otherness, something like gratuity. Hence the intricacies of the analyses outlined above. As I have said, Thomas uses the most basic and strong experiences of the other that finite rational subjects are familiar with to characterise the relations within divine life. God must be sufficiently other to God for the metaphor of 'intellection' to make sense; God must be sufficiently free in his loving of his own love for the language of gratuity to make sense. As Athanasius had long before noted, the question, 'Does God generate out of freedom or out of necessity?' is not one that can be sensibly answered in the terms in which it is put; God is neither constrained by some external force to generate, nor moved by some arbitrary impulse. Rather he freely 'enacts' what is natural to him; and that nature is best thought of in terms of causeless self-giving than

anything else.

The risk is, in speaking of intellection, to give an impression of individual self-contemplation; in speaking of gratuitous love, to assimilate what happens in God's life to God's gratuitous relation to creation. But Thomas attempts to avoid the first danger by describing the Son as the self-knowledge of the Father precisely in the Father's generativity and (could we say?) 'ecstatic' movement; the second, by distinguishing the eternal freedom of God's action upon God from the *willed* freedom of the act of creation and God's relation to the created order.

What does love know? I have suggested that this is a cardinal question for understanding Thomas's trinitarian thought because it simultaneously tells us what, in Christian theology, God is (love) and warns us against trying to think through love without thinking through thinking as well. By holding together love and understanding in speaking about God, we are reminded that what we want to say about the subject and the other always requires a complex interplay between doing justice to the 'participatory' element, the life of the other in the subject, and doing justice to the abiding difference, the exploratory element, the invitation of the other to the subject. In God, the doctrine tells us, that is, in the reality that is formative of the entire universe, there is perfect reflection or participation, and there is endless invitation, the stimulus of difference; *as if* (you can say no more) God is utterly familiar to God and utterly 'strange' to God. Love knows divine life as bestowal and self-emptying; it knows a bestowal and self-emptying so complete, in the relation of Father and Son, that it knows there can be no 'terminus' to the act of self-giving. Its perfect repetition in the Son is the ground of its overflow and excess in the Spirit. The Spirit as love is what comes from seeing that the Father's understanding of the Son or of himself in the Son is not an enclosed mutual mirroring, a fixed self-reflection, but the understanding of a life that moves inexhaustibly in gift, even dispossession.

It should be clear why a trinitarian theology that takes Thomas seriously will be cautious about some kinds of claim for 'social' doctrines of the Trinity. The language moves in and out of our 'normal' idioms for talking of persons; it is recognisably about what I have been calling the theme of the subject and the other, but, by constantly undermining any possible suggestion that there are identities prior to relation and gift, it makes it strictly impossible to speak of any kind of independent agency or even, in the usual sense, independent subjectivities that might be some sort of model for

interpersonal relation. It is inevitable that such a theology will insist that the acts of the Trinity *ad extra* are indivisible (even though this can lead to other sorts of confusion, as we have seen in looking at Thomas on the Lord's Prayer). But if there is a consequence to be drawn for how we understand ourselves and our finite relations, it is perhaps most clear in the tight interweaving of love and knowledge. Our relations to the other are continuous with and reflective of an eternal act; so much is implicit in the doctrine that we are made from nothing and made in the divine image, and in the connected recognition that all finite intelligent action is *activated* by the fact that God is eternally engaged in something like understanding. But this eternal engagement is never a possessing, because it is the act (the knowledge) of love; what is understood prompts and grounds something other than 'simple' intellection. That something other is not just an attitude of consent or approbation, but a movement to which desire is analogous — self-projection, intention, what Thomas calls impulsion. If this is grasped about God, as the irreducible structure of God's *esse*, it puts to us various questions about how we understand our understanding: it suggests that instrumental reason in the sense of shaping conceptualities so as to resolve problems is always imperfect *qua* understanding; that knowledge which allows no sense of an 'inviting' excess above and beyond the recognition of structure is abortive. It alerts us to the risks of knowledge, as a process in which the life of the other lives in me — and not only lives in me, but, as loved, not just known, also lives in me as a provocation to further action, which in finite realities means change. Perhaps one of the more paradoxical results of thinking through Thomas's trinitarian theology with the question of my title in mind is to raise (not for the first time) the suspicion that Marx's apocalyptic gulf between those who seek to understand and those who seek to change the world is already bridged by Thomas. And it is not only Marx who would have been startled to be told that such a bridge could be built from a reflection on the absolute transcendent and changeless integrity of divine action, the somewhat maligned and misunderstood immanent Trinity, the always realised bliss of God in himself.

1 San Francisco, 1991.

2 See the Book Symposium on this text in *Modern Theology* 16 (2000), pp. 502–507.

3 Edinburgh, 1995.

4 *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge, 1957.