

Holy Triune Love: *A Reformulation of Divine Simplicity*

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Abstract: In this paper, I formulate an alternative to the classical doctrine of divine simplicity. Simply stated, God's nature is best understood as Holy Triune Love (HTL), and all attributes are best understood as aspects of HTL. This reformulation will allow us to affirm much of the content of classical simplicity without the *actus-purus* doctrine. This paper will proceed as follows. First, I will define CS and sketch its rationale in God's metaphysical ultimacy. Second, I will defend two critical objections from the incarnation and divine knowledge I take to be decisive against CS. Third, I will sketch HTL in relation to the trinitarian processions and the attributes, showing how HTL best satisfies the doctrinal motivations for CS. Fourth, I will show how HTL responds to the challenges I've raised against CS. I will then conclude by answering five potential objections.

Keywords: Divine Simplicity, Pure Act, Holy Triune Love, Trinitarian Processions, Divine Immutability

The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) has been the subject of intense debate over the past few decades. Its detractors claim it is an indefensible relic of Hellenistic thought, whereas its defenders contend that it is indispensable to a fully robust and orthodox doctrine of God; indeed, it is thought necessary to secure the doctrine of God's metaphysical ultimacy. In this paper, I will attempt to formulate an alternative to classical simplicity (henceforth: CS). I will argue that God's divine nature is best understood as Holy Triune Love (HTL), to which all attributes and properties of God are best indexed. This claim, if successful, will allow us to affirm much of the content of CS *without the actus-purus* doctrine. The paper will proceed as follows. First, I will define CS and sketch its rationale in God's metaphysical ultimacy. Second, I will defend two critical objections from the incarnation and divine knowledge I take to be decisive against CS. Third, I will sketch HTL in relation to the trinitarian

processions and the attributes, showing how HTL best satisfies the doctrinal motivation for CS. Fourth, I will show how HTL responds to the challenges I've raised against CS. I will then conclude by answering five potential objections.

1. Classical Simplicity and God's Metaphysical Ultimacy

What is CS? CS affirms that God does not have any parts—whether spatial or temporal—nor intrinsic accidental properties or real distinction between any essential property or another (Stump 2010). Indeed, every property is, in God's essence, identical with each other since each property is identical to the divine essence itself (Dolezal 2011). What do these terms mean? The claim that God is without any spatial parts is relatively uncontroversial. It amounts to denial that there is no physical composition of any sort in God; he is wholly invisible, unseen, and incorporeal.¹ The claim that God has no temporal parts is the denial of all *sequence* in the life of God. Aquinas, quoting Boethius, defines God's atemporal eternity as the "simultaneously whole and perfect possession of interminable life" (ST, I.q10.a2) It is the claim that God sees all events in one simple gaze, and is present to all events in time at once. This is analogous to looking at a movie strip, with all scenes fixed on the strip, all at once. God is present to *all* time at once, and so does not experience sequence. Creatures, on the other hand, can label time segments of their life. At t1 earlier today, I was not writing this paper; at t5, I am. I experience t1 discretely from t5—I have to "wait", as it were, for t5. To deny temporal parts to God is to deny such "waiting" in God.

What are intrinsic accidental properties? In order to understand this claim, we must enumerate the difference between essential and accidental properties, and intrinsic and extrinsic accidental properties. Essential properties can be summarized in this way: P_e is an essential property of X if X cannot not-have P_e and still be X. For example, a square cannot not-have four sides and still be a square, so "being four-sided" is an essential property of being a square. A property is accidental (P_a) if X *can* not-have P_a and still be X. Returning to the square illustration, a square can be painted "red" or "blue"; and yet, a square can not-have the property of "being red" or "being blue" and still be a square. Therefore, its particular color is accidental. Further still, there are intrinsic and extrinsic accidental properties. Intrinsic accidental properties are simply those properties which are accidental to X, and yet are internal to X. For example, I am six feet tall; I am not six feet tall relative to

¹ 1 Timothy 1:17, Deut. 4:12-15, Jn. 1:1-18. For an excellent defense of God's incorporeality, see (Duby 2019, 31-34).

something else. And yet, I would still be me were I to shrink a few inches. On the other hand, there are *extrinsic* accidental properties which X might bear *in relation* to other things. Thus, I am *taller* than my brother George. Now, suppose George took growth-steroids and become taller than me. Not only would I not cease to be me, but I would have undergone no intrinsic change at all.² To deny, then, that God has any intrinsic accidental properties is to deny that there is something *internal* to God which might have been different. But it leaves open the possibility of Cambridge changes; God's relation to his creatures at t2 may be genuinely different than his relation to his creatures at t4 by virtue of a change in the *creature*, not in God. Indeed, Augustine affirms as much in *De Trinitate*, arguing that properties predicated to God at different times denote changes in the *creatures*, not the substance of God (St. Augustine 2012, V16).³

² These are also called "Cambridge Properties." See (Francescotti 1999).

³ Mullins is simply wrong to claim that Augustine did not allow for extrinsic accidents (Mullins 2013, 186). Rather, he denied any accidents which would entail a "change of his own substance". He denies accidents to the substance of God, but not "accidents of that in respect to which God begins to be called something relatively." While the accident's ontological foundation is to be found in a change in the creature and not God, Augustine affirms what we would now call "Cambridge Changes." He writes,

Certainly it happened to God in time to be at least the lord of man; and to put the issue beyond all doubt, it happens to God in time to be the lord of your soul, seeing that we came to be pretty recently. Well, perhaps even this might be doubtful, given that there is a knotty question about the soul. But then what about his being the Lord of the people of Israel? Even granting that the nature of the soul, which that people had, already existed—how, we will not inquire—yet that people did not yet exist, and we can point clearly to the moment when it began to be. [. . .] How then are we going to be able to maintain that nothing is said of God by way of modification? Well, we say that nothing happens to his nature to change it, and so these are not relationship modifications which happen with some change in the things they are predicated of. [. . .] But when a coin is called the price of something it is so called relationship-wise, and yet in this case no change occurs in it when it begins to be a price; and the same is true of pledge and similar things. So if a coin can be talked of in relationship terms so often without any change in its form or nature as coin occurring whenever it starts or stops being talked of like that, how much more readily should we accept a similar position about the unchangeable substance of God? Thus when he is called something with reference to creation, while indeed he begins to be called it in time, we should understand this did not happen with anything happening to God's own substance, but only to the created, to which the relationship predicated of him refers. *Lord*, says the psalm, *you who become our refuge* (Ps 90:1). God is called our refuge by way of relationship; man makes reference to us. And he becomes our refuge when we take refuge in him. Does this mean that something happens then in his nature, which was worse before we took refuge in him? No, the change takes place in us; we are better in him, but no change at all. So too, he begins to be our Father when we are born again by his grace, because *He gave us the right to become sons of God* (Jn

Further still, the doctrine claims that there are no real distinctions between God's essential properties. In God, wisdom, love, power, knowledge, omnipotence, are all identical in God's essence. According to Dolezal, "in his essence, it is not one thing to be good and another to be wise, another to be powerful and so on. Rather, the reality in virtue of which these things are truly said of God is nothing but his own simple divinity" (Dolezal 2017, 43).

There are several plausible versions of this claim. One such proposal is "Truth-Maker simplicity", claiming that God's own divine nature is the "truth-maker" for the claims "God is good" or "God is wise" (Brower 2008). In other words, in composite things, different features of that composite thing ground or make true particular claims. The table I'm writing on is "square" and "plastic." The state of affairs in which the table is square-shaped does not ground its being "plastic", and vice-versa. But in God, his own simple divinity is the sole truth-maker for the claim that "God is good" and "God is wise." Truth-maker simplicity has precedent in Augustine's writings, as he claims that God is great "by a greatness with which he is himself identical" (St. Augustine 2012, V.11). Arguably, this is also Aquinas' view. In *Prima Pars* Question 13 of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas addresses in article 4 the issue of whether the divine names are synonymous. If goodness and wisdom are identical in God, are the claims "God is good" and "God is wise" in fact synonymous? Aquinas answers negatively; rather, the divine names signify various *conceptions* or *aspects* under which the one simple divinity appears and are represented. For Aquinas, God's own simple being is the basis for the various divine names—which names are spoken as concessions to creaturely capacities (Schartl 2018).

Alternatively, one might wish to construe the claim in ontological terms. That is, God's intrinsic goodness and intrinsic wisdom is, in him, one thing (Duby 2016, 80–90). Whereas knowledge and goodness appear and are distinct on the creaturely plane, God's knowledge and God's goodness are metaphysically identical. Saying this need not commit us to saying "God is a property", as Plantinga supposes, insofar as "metaphysical identity" is construed in constitutive terms. That is, to say that God is identical to wisdom is to say that God is wisdom *subsisting in itself*, love *subsisting in itself* and so forth; it is to say that God is *wholly and without remainder*

1:12). So our substance changes for the better when we are made his sons; at the same time he begins to be our Father, but without any change in his substance. So it is clear that anything that can begin to be said about God in time which was not said about him before is said by way of relationship, and yet not by way of a modification of God, as though something has modified him. It is however said by way of a modification of that with reference to which God begins to be called it. (*De Trinitate* V.IV. 203-204)

love, *wholly and without remainder* wisdom, etcetera (White 2016). One might simply avoid Plantinga's objection by denying the assumed ontology—properties are not “things” or instantiated in exemplifications, but rather describe things as they are. Thus, to say God is identical to his love is simply to say that he is wholly love, not that he is identical to an abstract property (Michelson 2022).

Why would one want to affirm CS? In the vast literature, there seems to be a central motivation: the affirmation of God's metaphysical ultimacy.⁴ Dolezal, for instance, argues that if God is composed of parts, then he is dependent on something metaphysically prior to himself. For a composite being requires some principle of composition—some reason or grounding that explains why the parts hang together, as it were; if God were composed of parts, he therefore would depend on some more fundamental principle of composition for the unity of his being (J. Dolezal 2017; White 2022). If God is *a se*, then, he exists from himself and receives his being and perfection from no other. God is the metaphysical “ground zero”, as it were, of all reality, such that all being is a participation in God who is Ultimate Being. All reality outside of God depends on God, whereas God depends on nothing outside of Godself.

But why think that, if God has metaphysical parts of any sort, he is therefore dependent on some non-God thing? Why think that there must be some *ratio* explaining what holds even immaterial parts together as some distinct “thing” from God?⁵ Couldn't one even hold that the whole—God as such—is logically prior to God's parts, such that the parts depend on the whole (Kvanvig et al. 2008, 6:115)? To the latter question, parts depending on the whole do *not* rule out a dependence of the whole *upon* those parts; in this sense, God would still be dependent on some non-God part to be God (Cohoe 2017). The intuition behind the former question requires a bit more unpacking. For Plato, the forms of the Good and the Beautiful are distinct forms which inter-relate (Demos 1937). But this view implies that the forms are part of a larger structure, as it were, which they both inhabit. In other words, neither the forms of the Good and the Beautiful are metaphysically ultimate. Yet if God is good, and if he is metaphysically ultimate, then God must *be* the goodness by which he is good; in other words, his goodness cannot be by participation in “The Good”, lest God's own being be explained by recourse to some non-God thing. This fact motivated Augustine's identification of God *with* the Forms—God *is* the Form of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True (Leftow 2006). In fact, if God is metaphysically ultimate, then the structure of being outside of God is determined by God's own

⁴ For example, see (Duby 2019; Jeffrey Brower 2011; Leftow 2006; Morris 1988).

⁵ This is challenged in (Baddorf 2017).

self-subsisting being. That is, if God *as such* is the explanation for the structure of reality, then God—and not some non-God part of Godself—must be the explanation for all reality. Thus, if the explanation for why God’s attributes (e.g. the Good and the Beautiful) cohere in Godself in the way they do is something other than God’s own being, but a principle constitutive *of* that being, then that *ratio itself* (or the explanation for why the attributes cohere as they do) will be the explanation for all being (since it is the organizing principle of God’s own being). The concern, then, is to ensure that God *as such* is the explanation for all reality, rather than being a part of a larger system of being (White 2022, 228).

But of course, doesn’t the doctrine of the Trinity pose problems for DDS? If there is an explanation for why the *Persons* cohere as they do in God, then won’t that explanation itself—which is not numerically identical to any of the Persons, lest trinitarian doctrine slips into modalism—be ultimate? Not necessarily. Dolezal and White argue, with the broader catholic tradition, that the Persons of the Godhead are *modes of subsistence*. In other words, a divine person *just is* the divine essence subsisting in a particular manner (e.g. the manner of paternity, filiation, and spiration distinctively) (Dolezal 2014). The Father is therefore the divine essence subsisting in the manner of begetting, the Son is the essence subsisting in the manner of begottenness, and the Spirit is the essence subsisting in the manner of spiration (White 2016). God just is, then, the Father begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit (Weinandy 2010, 60).⁶ Thus, the one simple essence subsists in three co-eternal ways.⁷

It is not the case, then, that the Father is the *cause* of the Son or Spirit (contra Mullins), as though the Son and Spirit were logical effects of the Father (Mullins 2017). As Aquinas argues, the Greek term for cause (αἰτία) is broad enough to cover both “causes” and general explanations such as principles (ST. I.q33.a1).⁸ Rather, the Father is a “principle from no other principle”, such that he is not from another, whereas the Son is a “principle from a principle (ST. I.q33.a4)”. Thus, to speak of the Son’s generation is not to speak of the generation of another *thing* as such (Lombard 2007, I, IV, 2(14), §4). Rather, the Son is eternally generated so as to be *internal* to the Father; there is no such thing as a Father without a Son, such that the Father *is* the principle of paternity which contains, in itself, the One begotten (Giles 2012, 160–61). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the Spirit. The Father is not God as a stand-

⁶ While Weinandy’s claim relative to the role of the Spirit in begetting the Son is somewhat novel, his claim that the divine essence is the Father begetting the Son in the Spirit is not. See (Ortlund 2014)

⁷ Importantly, the sense in which the persons are “modes of subsistence” is disputed by Thomists and Franciscans alike, per relational and emanation accounts respectively. We will return to this point later. See (Friedman 2010, 5–49).

⁸Aquinas’s claim is substantiated in (Hankinson 2001).

alone, as it were, but only *with* the Godhead proceeding from him as the *principium divinitatis* (St. Augustine 2012, V.I.6). Of course, the word “*principium*” is doing specific work here. For Aquinas, the term denotes “only that whence another proceeds”, and since the Son and Spirit proceed from the Father, the Father is the principle of the Son and Spirit not from priority but only origin (ST. I.q33.a1). Insofar as the Father is the divine essence subsisting in the mode of paternity, the Son is the divine essence subsisting in the mode of filiation, and the Spirit is the divine essence subsisting in the mode of spiration, the persons are internal to each other by virtue of being the self-same divine essence subsisting according to the mode of the person. In this way, the doctrine of divine simplicity combined with the doctrine of the Trinity entails a strong doctrine of perichoresis, such that the Persons are fully *internal* to each other without losing their distinctiveness (Cotnoir 2017).

Given this sketch, what are some notable problems to CS as stated? I will canvas only two which I take to be the strongest for the sake of space.

2. CS and the Problems of *Potentialis Divinitatis* and the Incarnation

In this section, I will defend two criticisms of CS⁹ by affirming that there is *potentialis divinitatis* (potentiality in God) and show, against the claims of many, that the Incarnation does indeed pose significant challenges to CS.

2.1. *Potentialis Divinitatis from Divine Knowledge*

It seems to me that there is an insuperable problem from divine knowledge that follows from a robust affirmation of God’s freedom. Modal collapse arguments against divine simplicity have been shown to fail *if* one grants that a self-same cause can have varying effects. Thus, God may be pure-act, and yet if a singular cause can give rise to differing effects, then God in a world with creation and God in a world without creation would theoretically be identical (Lenow 2021; Schmid 2022; Pedersen and Lilley 2022). While one might question the notion that a self-same cause can give rise to differing effects (Fakhri 2021), I will put this aside and simply grant that the argument from modal collapse does not work. However, as Schmid has argued, the death of modal collapse arguments raises other poignant questions.

For instance, Mullins and Schmid have raised the Aloneness Argument against Classical Theism. The argument runs as such:

⁹ I am critiquing what I’m calling “classical simplicity” to allow that HTL may be compatible with DDS as such.

1. God's knowledge is either wholly intrinsic to God, wholly extrinsic to God, or intrinsic to God in some respects but extrinsic to God in others
2. God's knowledge is (i) wholly extrinsic to God or (ii) intrinsic to God in some respects but extrinsic to God in others *only if* God doesn't exist alone
3. Possibly, God exists alone
4. So, possibly, God's knowledge is wholly intrinsic (1-3)
5. Necessarily, God contingently has some knowledge
6. So, possibly, God contingently has wholly intrinsic knowledge (4,5)
7. Whatever is wholly intrinsic to S is either an essential feature of S or an accident of S
8. Nothing God contingently has can be an essential feature of God.
9. So, possibly, God has an accident (6-8)
10. If DDS is true, it is not possible that God has an accident
11. So, DDS is false (9,10) (Schmid and Mullins 2021)¹⁰

The basic intuition is this. If it were possible for God to not create the world, then in such a world, God would have no knowledge of anything outside of himself because there wouldn't *be* anything outside of himself. Yet, if we compare a world in which God alone exists (W_1), and a world in which God and creation exists (W_c), it will be obvious that different sets of truths obtain with respect to each world. So even if knowledge can be an extrinsic relationship—e.g. for God to know Bob is just for God to stand in an extrinsic “relationship of knowing” without being any different intrinsically (Grant 2012)—God nevertheless only contingently has wholly intrinsic knowledge in a world in which he alone exists. This feature can change if God creates and is intrinsic to God since in such a world there *is no* external existent. But any contingent intrinsic feature is an intrinsic accident. Hence, insofar as DDS maintains that God has no intrinsic accidents, DDS is false. While there are responses to this sort of argument which I will not evaluate for the sake of space—for instance, affirming that God has accidental *aspects* rather than accidental properties as such (Sijuwade 2022), or that premises 2 and 5 can be interpreted in a way amiable to DDS (Pawl and Grant 2023)—there's an intuition behind the argument that is theologically flag-worthy.

Suppose one holds that knowledge is a kind of extrinsic relation, such that the “contingent feature” of God is really a kind of linguistic placeholder for the state-of-affairs in which God alone exists, and not God as such (or something to this effect).

¹⁰ Importantly, what they call “DDS” will refer to what I've called “CS”.

Nevertheless, the assumed *metaphysics* of God's knowledge under CS—which the Aloneness Argument brings out—is such that God's intrinsic knowledge is *identical* across worlds with or without creation. In other words, the predication “God knows Bob belongs to Jesus” must be a *non-rigid designator* across possible worlds. To use Kripke's famous example, one can say “the number of planets is necessarily greater than 7”, and this proposition might be true or false depending on the nature of the designation marked out by “the number of planets.” If “the number of planets” just means “8” (or “9” in Kripke's day), then the proposition holds true. However, if “the number of planets” is describing something about reality itself, then the proposition is false insofar as there might be 9 planets in the solar system (or there may have been more or less) (Kripke 1980, 48–50).

But the problem is worse: the phrase “God knows Bob belongs to Jesus” will turn out to be an *opaque* designator, insofar as we simply *don't know* what it is we are referring to in God by the predication. For if “God knows Bob belongs to Jesus” can pick out the same reality that the proposition “God knows Bob doesn't exist” or “God knows Bob doesn't belong to Jesus” (either because Bob doesn't exist or isn't united to Christ) depending on which world is actualized, then it turns out that *we really don't know what we're saying by the proposition* given that these contradictory propositions can denote the same reality. On the other hand, suppose we say that it stands solely and only for the extrinsic relation. At that point, however, DDS will be so far removed from our experience (e.g. the cognitive content of a belief can be the same whilst the belief itself is different) that it becomes unintelligible to speak of God himself *personally knowing* Bob, since what it actually means for God to know Bob as his child will not pick out a reality in God different from God's *not-knowing* Bob as his child. In other words, there doesn't seem to be any analogical point of contact such that we can have *any* sense of what it means for God to know Bob as his child. There's a broader problem, then, that this conception of God delivers for analogical predication in general: without an account of how such predication actually works, it seems that our language devolves into at least a *pragmatic* and *phenomenological* equivocity.

2.2. The Challenge of the Incarnation

In the Incarnation,

The Lord clothed himself with humanity, and with suffering on behalf of the suffering one, and bound on behalf of the one constrained, and judged on behalf of the one convicted, and buried on behalf of the one entombed, rose from the dead

and cried out aloud: “Who takes issue with me? Let him stand before me. I set free the condemned. I gave life to the dead. I raise up the entombed. Who will contradict me? (Melito of Sardis 2001, 65)

The Immortal became mortal for the salvation of humanity. This stunning claim presents significant challenges to how we ought to understand the nature of God. Here, I will briefly summarize arguments that the Incarnation challenges divine timelessness.

The apparent contradictions generated by the Incarnation are well-known (Cross 2005). Indeed, Beall has argued that there is *no* way to reconcile such claims as “the Son is omniscient” and “the Son is not omniscient” whatsoever, and so the Incarnation challenges *even the law of non-contradiction* (Beall 2021)! Yet there are strategies available to avoid such difficulties. One might modify predications of classical theism such that classical theism, at least on the ontological level, is preserved (Gorman 2016). One might make various sorts of *qua* moves (e.g. Christ is ignorant *qua* his human nature, but not *qua* his divine nature) (Gorman 2014). But the particular problem I will raise here is the problem of divine *embodiment* developed by Mullins.

Let us suppose God is pure act. If this is the case, then when the Son becomes incarnate, the divine nature *ad-intra* will need to remain unchanged. Thus, the divine nature *ad-intra* is identical when the Son (who is a subsistence of the divine nature) becomes incarnate to when the Son is not incarnate. Recall above that the way modal-collapse is avoided is to deny the causal principle that self-same causes cannot produce differing effects. In this case, then, the Incarnation will be understood as an *effect* of the purely actual divine nature. But then, what is the relation of the human nature of the Son to the divine nature *such that* Jesus of Nazareth is the Incarnation of God whereas Bob is not? What *accounts* for the incarnation? It would seem that some account of *embodiment* is necessary. But if the Son is a subsistence of the divine nature, and the Son must be embodied in a human nature to be incarnate in a human nature, then it follows that a *subsistence of the divine nature must be embodied in a human nature*. Insofar as this involves a change (e.g. the filial subsistence of the divine nature was not embodied prior to the incarnation, but is embodied post-incarnation), one must reject divine timelessness and thus CS insofar as it affirms divine timelessness (R. T. Mullins 2016, 180–92).

There are a number of ways one might try to get around the problem of embodiment. For instance, one can employ the concept of a “mixed relation” as Gorman does. For instance, if I am thinking of Sophia, then this relation is not merely conceptual insofar as it involves a change in me but not Sophia. In a similar way, the

Incarnation involves an actualization of a potency in the human nature of Christ, but not in the divine nature; yet the filial subsistence of the divine nature (the Son) is the principle of the person of the human nature, such that the person of Jesus of Nazareth just *is* the Son (Gorman 2018). Indeed, as Duby argues, the Son's subsistence is communicated to the humanity of Christ, such that the Son *is* the subsistence of his humanity; his singular act of subsistence now subsists in a twofold way (rather than possessing two subsistences) (Duby 2022, 155–56). The humanity of Christ subsists only in the subsistence of the Eternal Word, such that the subsistence of the humanity just *is* the subsistence of the Word *in* a human nature (Duby 2022, 157–58). But this raises problems for Duby's claim that "only the Son—not the divine essence as such—is the subject who individuates the human nature and is constituted as man by the human nature. It is the person of the Son, then, and not the divine essence, that is constituted by two natures" (Duby 2022, 162). While Duby is right to affirm that the divine essence is not *constituted* by two natures, as though the human nature of Jesus somehow becomes a metaphysical part which constitutes the divine essence as such, nevertheless we must remember that the Son *just is* a subsistence of the divine nature. That is, the Son is the divine essence in its filial mode of subsistence. That being the case, given the unique relation of *embodiment* relative to the Word and the human nature of Jesus, it is the divine-essence-subsisting-filially that is embodied in the human nature of Jesus. Surely, this cannot be a merely *extrinsic* relation since the human subsists *in* the divine-essence-subsisting-filially. This will, it seems to me, involve a change in the divine essence insofar as the divine essence (in its filial subsistence) goes from not-including a human nature in its filial subsistence to including a human nature in its filial subsistence.¹¹

Now, there may be ways to respond to the above arguments. But the responses, it seems to me, will press the concern of whether analogical language is actually meaning-conveying. For instance, if one says that the Son's embodiment can be extrinsic as a *sui generis* case of embodiment, then I confess I have no *idea* what it can mean to be "extrinsically embodied". What is needed is an account of the Divine Nature that preserves the capacity to speak meaningfully (yet analogically), and accounts for the falsity of pure-act and allows for a kind of divine temporality *while also* preserving the thing CS meant to preserve: divine metaphysical ultimacy. Can such an account be given? To this task we turn.

¹¹ It will not help to say that the "divine nature as such" doesn't change, because the "divine nature as such" is trinitarian and thus subsists in the co-eternal modes of paternity, filiation, and spiration. Its subsistence in the mode of filiation *has* ostensibly undergone a change, given my argument above.

3. God as Holy Triune Love (HTL)

This section will proceed as follows. First, I will articulate an account of the divine nature in view of the trinitarian processions, and then I will show how HTL *is* that of which all other attributes of God are aspects. I will end this section by showing how HTL satisfies the doctrinal concern motivating CS without requiring an affirmation of God as *actus purus*.

3.1. The Divine Nature as Holy Triune Love

My outline of HTL will begin with an account of the Persons as follows:

- 1.) The Father is Deity-Given-To
- 2.) The Son is Deity-Given-Back-To
- 3.) The Spirit is Deity-Given-To-and-Back

To understand what exactly is being claimed here, it will help to give an imperfect analogy. It should be remembered that the point of these analogies is to provide a conceptual *handle*, as it were, by which we can gain a faint glimmer of the Trinity. For instance, a theologian might use the analogy of an extended simple which, while simple, is extended through a region of space-time as a *conceptual handle* rather than a model per se (Pickup 2016). Consider the following line-segment:



Line-segment AB and line-segment BA are numerically identical. They are the same line. However, *conceptually*, we can distinguish line-segment AB from line-segment BA. Conceptually, BA is a different co-temporal way the line segment exists. And yet, BA exists within AB, such that to eliminate BA would be to eliminate AB. The point of this analogy is not to provide a conceptual handle on “origination from the Father”, but on the precise notion that one numerically identical thing can subsist in multiple co-extensive and simultaneous ways. Now, one might argue that since this difference is purely conceptual, the line dot really subsists in multiple different ways.

This is true, but not the point of this illustration. Rather, my point is precisely to prime the conceptual intuition, such that one might *conceive* of a single thing subsisting in multiple co-extensive and simultaneous ways. If, for instance, there

were such things as finite rays, we could conceive of a ray going from A to B, and one going from B to A; the “finite rays” would subsist within the same “thing”, as it were. In a similar manner, I am claiming that the mode of subsistence that the Father is—paternity—should be understood as *deity-given-to*. That is, the Father *just is* the divine essence subsisting in in this “outward” (as it were) direction, and this is what divine paternity *means*. The Son subsists as deity *given-back-to* the Father, as the mirror of the Father. Thus, to be begotten, in the Son, means to be the mirror of the initial movement of deity. The Spirit is deity-in-motion. And just as the line-segment from B to A subsists within the line-segment from A to B, and A to B to A subsists within A to B, the persons subsist within each other. Further still, just as the line segments are conceptually distinct yet co-temporal, the persons are distinct and yet co-eternal. The obvious problem with this analogy, of course, is that the line-segments are only (at best) *conceptually* distinct. The challenge will be to show that this (or something like this) can be actually realized without contradiction. In what follows, then, I will give my own model, drawing elements from Jonathan Edwards, Augustine, Bernard Lonergan, and others along the way.

In an important paragraph from his unpublished discourse on the Trinity, Edwards writes,

If a man could have an absolutely perfect idea of all that passed in his mind, all the series of ideas and exercises in every respect perfect as to order, degree, circumstance, etcetera, for . . . the last hour, he would really to all intents and purposes be over again what he was that last hour. And if it were possible for a man by reflect perfect to contemplate all that is in his own mind in an hour, as it is, and at the same time that it is there in its first and direct existence . . . a man would really be two during that time, he would be indeed double. (Studebaker and Caldwell 2012, 25–26)

To explain this, consider what you ate for breakfast yesterday. Now consider the sensations and circumstances—as best as you can, relive the memory of eating your breakfast. Edwards’ point is that if you could do this *perfectly*, such that you could recall the *total* contents of consciousness—not merely by passive awareness, but by an active intention of the mind (just as you exercise the mind to relive the memory of your breakfast)—there would be a kind of duplication in your mind. There would be “you” who is present in your current surroundings and circumstances, and “you” in the memory (and if a perfect memory, then in the sheer experience) of eating your breakfast.

Applied to the triune God, we might say that the Father eternally contemplates the Supreme Value—all that is beautiful, good, lovely, and excellent. But since the

divine essence just *is* the font of the beautiful, the good, and the excellency of all being, the Father contemplates *himself*. Just as one might “speak to themselves” in their minds, so the Father’s thought recapitulates all excellency to himself. In this way, the Son is the Father’s “grasp”, as it were, of Value—or the Father’s self-utterance (and divine spoken “word”) of the “infinite evidence”, or infinite content, of the excellency of divine being (value) (Dadosky 2016). In this way, the Father is always the first movement of deity-to in the divine essence; he is the divine essence subsisting *to* the Son.

Edwards’ model has been critiqued for an infinite regress problem. If the Father’s eternal and full self-contemplation is the eternal generation of the Son, then—when the Son similarly contemplates himself—why is there not another generation, and another *ad infinitum* (Cunnington 2014)? Here, we might try to give an answer slightly different than the one Edwards himself gave. I suggest that the Son is the *mirror*, as it were, of the Father—the “exact imprint” of his nature (Heb. 1:3). As the Father contemplates himself in the Son, so the Son contemplates himself in the Father. The reason the Son does not generate another person who is his own self-contemplation is precisely because he “already” *has one* in whom he can contemplate himself. In other words, it is because the Son is not the *principium*—the font of divinity—that the Son need only look *back to* the Father, and in this way he mirrors the Father. Per Feingold, the Son is the one who *gives himself back* in love (Feingold 2019)—and he gives himself *back* precisely because he is begotten, and thus is the image of the begetter. Yet we must refine this idea in order to more accurately capture the function of the *circumincession* of the persons, lest the Father and Son are conceived as pure gift-givers without any hope of return (Schindler 2019). When the Father contemplates Supreme Value (e.g. the excellencies of the divine nature)—or himself—this Idea of himself, if it is truly perfect, contains a view of his own self-contemplation. Since the Idea of himself in whom the Father sees his own self-contemplation *is* the Eternal Word (who contemplates *himself* simply by looking *back* to the Father), the Father thus fully contains the Son—insofar as he fully contains his perfect Idea of himself. The Father’s contemplation of himself in the Son thus includes the Son’s contemplation of himself in the Father, while yet being really (not merely conceptually) distinguishable (yet co-eternal) modes of divine consciousness. In this way, the Father is the paternal subsistence of the divine essence which is “toward” another, and the Son is the filial subsistence which is “back-toward” another.¹² In this way, the Father is the paternal subsistence of the

¹² I’ve modeled the language on Aquinas’s notion that a person is a kind of “toward-ness” relation subsisting the divine essence. See (Awad 2012).

divine essence which is “toward” another, and the Son is the filial subsistence which is “back-toward” another.

Whence the Holy Spirit? I suggest that the Spirit is understood as the movement of deity as a whole: deity-given-to-and-back, and thus the movement from Father to Son and from Son to Father. He is the one to whom the Father and Son give themselves to each other. For

The Son comes forth from the Father as his Word that is uttered. The Word then breathes forth love for the Father, giving himself back to him, and the Father likewise by the same perfect impetus gives himself to his Son. The Spirit proceeds thus from the mutual and eternal self-gift of Son to Father and Father to Son. Thus the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the bond of unity. The filioque is not merely an abstruse point of theological speculation, but something that is existentially vital. If the Spirit truly proceeds from a love that is agape, how could that love be one-sided? (Feingold 2019, 513)

The Holy Spirit has long been conceived analogically as a kind of “internal impulse” in the deity—a movement *towards* by which love proceeds and *which is wholly God* (since the Holy Spirit is a subsistence of the whole divine essence) (Levering 2016, 139–40). As we learn from the divine economy that the Spirit rests on the Son from the Father (the Baptism) and is also sent by the Son (John 15:26–27), insofar as the economy is fitting because it reflects the eternal processions, the Spirit is therefore the one *in whom* the Father and Son are made known. Just as the (conceptual) line-segment ABA may go from A to B and back to A whilst being both numerically identical with and distinct from AB or BA, so the Spirit is really the divine essence in the eternal back-and-forth of love. The Father thereby begets the Son in the Spirit, and the Son filially returns himself to the Father in the self-same Spirit; the Spirit is their movement towards each other (Weinandy 2010). In this way, following Lombardo, the Spirit’s act of proceeding just *is* the circular movement from Father to the Son and through the Son back to the Father (Lombardo 2022; Lombardo, 2021).

In this pneumatological context, we may be able to make sense of Balthasar’s notion of “Super-Kenosis.” For Balthasar, the incarnation of the Son has an eternal prototype in the Father’s “Super-Kenosis”, in which the Father gives himself *without reminder* entirely to the Son; the Son’s divinity is the gift of the Father-fully-given (Balthasar 1994, 194). Balthasar seems to characterize this self-gift as a “risk”, such that “there are no in-built securities or guarantees in the absolute self-giving of the Father to Son, of Son to Father, and of both to the Spirit” (Balthasar 1998, 245). We need not follow him here. Rather, we might state the idea alternatively as such: in the Godhead, paternity is such that the Father is deity-given-to in its *totality*, wholly,

and fully, such that there *would* (per impossible) be a self-annihilation if there were no return. The Son, as the mirror of the Father, is deity-given-*back-to*, thus mirroring the Father's primal movement towards himself. This movement of Father to Son and Son to Father *is* the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Father's mode of subsistence—the “moment” of his giving-to—simply *is* the Son's self-same moment of giving-back-to, and the Spirit's moment of giving-to-and-back-to *is* the movement of the Father towards the Son and Son towards the Father, such that there is relative non-identity but numerical identity (e.g. the analogy of the line). Thus, since the Son *is* deity-given-back-to the Father, and that movement *is* the movement of the Father towards the Son, the Son is not moving from potentiality to actuality. In other words, there is no proto-Father who is the Father because he begets a Son, but rather is the Father *just in* the begetting of the Son (Friedman 2010). Similarly, the Son *is* the movement back-to the Father, which movement “completes” (as it were) the movement of the Spirit. On my account, then, while the Father is co-constituted by the Son and Spirit, he nevertheless maintains the fitting predicate of the “font of divinity” insofar as it is the Father's movement-towards, and not the Son and the Spirit's, which is the “initial” movement that contains and is the movement of Son and Spirit; his movement-towards provides the movement with which the movement of Son and Spirit are identical.¹³

Thus far, my claim has not been wholly without precedent and may be compatible with CS. Insofar as one accepts the account above, then I think one may plausibly accept the second part of HTL.

3.2. *All attributes in HTL*

If the account given thus far is correct, then it seems to me to follow that the divine nature *is* the singular act in which the Father begets the Son in the Spirit in whom the Son returns to the Father (and in this sense, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, with the Father as the sole *principium* whose “initial” movement contains the movement of Son and Spirit). In other words, God *is* the Father begetting the Son who breathes from and returns the Holy Spirit.

If all of God's works *ad-extra* reflect his life *ad-intra* (Vidu 2021), then it will follow that God's works *ad-extra* fittingly reflect the singular eternal act in which the Father gives himself to the Son in begetting the Son in the Spirit, who is returned to the Father by the Son in the Son's self-giving to the Father. All works proceed from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit; but this “in the Spirit” clause should be

¹³ Which fits, I think, with how the monarchy of the Father is sketched in (Lombardo 2022).

understood, then, to encapsulate *both* the Father's movement to the Son and the Son's movement to the Father. And in fact, we find exactly this in the claim of apokatastasis insofar as the Son *returns creation* back to the Father by the power of the Spirit (Gibson 2008). The *exitus-reditus*, theme, present in Aquinas, (Lombardo 2011) is thus the mirror in time of the triune essence in eternity. We should expect, then, all the works of God *ad-extra* to have a kind of *exitus-reditus* shape to them. Others have shown this to be the case (Arcadi 2020; Rorem 1992). To say that the Father does all things through the Son and "in the Spirit", then, is to say that all things proceed from the Father through the Son and *back to* the Father through the Son *in the Spirit*.

In this vein, I suggest we should understand the attributes of God all to describe aspects of this triune movement.¹⁴ That is, "wisdom", "power", etcetera, are all aspects of the Father's love for and with the Son in the Spirit. By "aspects", I mean to reference Sijuwade's aspectival account. Sijuwade, appropriating Donald Baxter's discussions of aspects, argues that a thing can have "aspects" which, while numerically identical, are qualitatively different. He gives the example of David, a philosophy professor, who both wishes to deliver a philosophy paper on a given weekend and wishes to be with his kids. David, *insofar as he is a philosopher*, is numerically identical with David *insofar as he is a father*, even though these "aspects" are qualitatively different (Sijuwade 2022). Baxter uses the notion that one who is numerically identical with themselves may have differing *aspects* simultaneously to defend the notion that aspectival difference does not eliminate numeric identity (Baxter 2018). Sijuwade applies this to God's nature to argue that every predication—divine wisdom, divine love, etcetera—is an aspect of God who is essentially omnipotence.

My model appropriates the nature of aspects to offer something a bit different: every predication is an aspect of God as Holy Triune Love. That is, divine wisdom, divine omnipotence, divine power, etcetera, are all "the Father begetting the Son in the circular movement of the Spirit" (HTL) insofar as HTL is able to display the Father's love for the Son in the Spirit, or wise enough to do so, etcetera. These "properties", following Vanhoozer, are in fact our descriptions of the *pattern* of divine activity in time—a kind of schematizing which provides an organizing frame through which we understand God's actions in time (theo-drama) as a unified and

¹⁴ One anonymous reviewer has expressed worry that this view negates the Roman Catholic affirmation that the Trinity is a mystery of revelation, unknowable by reason. For if a creature can know aspects of the triune life from creation without being a Christian, then are they able to deduce the Trinity? I don't think so. Rather, my claim is simply that anything we know of God through creation *is in fact* an aspect of the triune life, not that *we know it as such*.

thematically consistent whole (Vanhoozer 2010). These patterns are *described* by us in terms of divine “power”, or “wisdom”, etcetera, but correspond to God’s being insofar as each attribute is Holy Triune Love insofar as HTL is wise, powerful, etcetera—insofar as the Father loves the Son in the Spirit.

To understand how the attributes (the schematic patterns or conceptual labels by which we organize and understand God’s attributes in time) are aspects of HTL in eternity, it will be necessary to give a brief account of how *all created being* is in fact an emanation of HTL. Since God is metaphysically ultimate, all created being—and thereby all the perfections of created being—are derived from God’s being. This will mean that creaturely being is *all the way down* a participation in God’s being, insofar as there is no creaturely being which does not have God as its foundation and source. God knows all creatures by knowing himself precisely because all creatures are various ways the divine nature is imitable in created reality (Luke 2024; Soars 2021).

Historically, this (or something like this) train of thought has led to the doctrine of divine ideas. According to this doctrine, God knows all creatures by knowing himself prior to creation precisely because a creaturely life *just is* a possible way God’s own life may be communicated and represent in creaturely being (Wippel 2000, 130). Mark McIntosh specifically connects the divine ideas to God’s knowledge of creatures as manifestations of his infinite existence and life as the Father begetting the Son in the Spirit (McIntosh 2021, 13–14). The doctrine of divine ideas has been appropriated uniquely to the eternal *Word*:

Because the Word is the perfect expression of the Father, and because the world is created to this same Word, the world not only expresses the Word who is its exemplar but also, in its inner structure, ceaselessly represents the Word’s own expressive or exemplary quality. (McIntosh 2021, 28)

Insofar as God contemplates all creatures *in the Word*, the Father’s contemplation of any creature *just is* the Father’s contemplation of his own radiance insofar as that radiance is contained in the eternal Word. The actions of God in creation—conceived within the divine ideas, since God’s works in creation are part of the temporal fabric of creation—are therefore to be schematized as certain modes of the Father’s acting towards the Son in the circular movement of the Spirit.

Understood as such, whenever God honors a creature, the Father expresses his love to the Son and his movement towards the Son insofar as the Father’s movement towards a creature in the Spirit is a temporal reflection of his eternal movement towards the Son. And insofar as a creature participates in the Word (which all creation does, to greater or lesser extents), creation experiences something of the self-

offering of the Son back to the Spirit. God's retributive justice, on the other hand, should be understood as the Father's *rejection* of anything that distorts the likeness of the Son in creation in the power of the Spirit, and *thereby* (insofar as a lover's rejection of the besmirching of the beloved speaks of the lover's love for the beloved) expressing the trinitarian life in time. God's judgment of evil is his judgment of all that distorts, mars, and perverts the image of his Beloved Word executed in the Spirit. Resourcing the aspectival account, we can therefore speak of the qualitatively different divine aspects as aspects of one numerically identical thing: the eternal trinitarian act of processing love.

3.3. *The Aseity Concern*

How does HTL satisfy the central motivation behind CS? HTL affirms (with CS) that the divine persons are *subsistent relations*—co-eternal modes of existence—of the singular divine essence. The divine essence subsists in three co-eternal ways or modes of being, to use Barth's suggestion (Barth 2010). Further still, the persons are utterly interior to each other, insofar as deity-given-to is the *same* eternal "moment", as it were, as deity-given-back-to, and deity-given-to-and-back (which are the Father, Son, and Spirit respectively). The divine essence is the singular eternal act in which the Father begets the Son in the circular movement of the Spirit (e.g. movement from Father to Son and Son to Father). All of the attributes, then, are aspects of the Father's love for and with the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Son's return to the Father is temporally executed in the *reditus* of creation back to God in cosmic theosis. The attributes are *our* temporal schematics through which we understand various aspects of the eternal triune love.

Recall that Divine Aseity stipulates that God is the source of all being, such that all being outside of God depends on God; He alone is metaphysically ultimate. On my model, this implies that the eternal divine essence which is the eternal act of the Father begetting the Son in (the circular movement of) the Spirit *is* the metaphysically ultimate foundation of all reality. Aseity is thus a predicate of the triune God as such, and creaturely being is therefore conceived of as a freely willed emanation and expression of the triune divine movement. The divine love for a creature—which is an echo of the eternal Word (Williams 2018)—is therefore the Father's delighted movement towards that creature, enfolding them into the Son who offers them back to up the Father in the Spirit. The divine wrath is the opposition to anything that distorts or disfigures the excellencies of the Word in created reality.

We might say, then, that God's delight in creation as a whole—the symphony of creation's history—is nothing other than a temporal mode of *God's delight in himself*. To understand what is meant, the *Silmarillion* proves a helpful tool. In *The Silmarillion*—the mythos behind Tolkien's fictional world of Middle Earth—the world's history is created via song. God (Iluvatar) calls the Ainar together to sing a tune of his own design. The Satan-figure Melkor subverts this tune by departing from God's design, but God sings new harmonies that, as it were, *resolves* the disharmonies created by Melkor's rebellion and thereby *incorporates* Melkor's rebellion into the overarching song of creation (Tolkien 2022). The tune sung by the Ainar then materialize, as it were, into the story of history. We might similarly say that the Father sings creation in accordance with an archetype—the Word—as a singer might sing in accordance with the idea of the song in her mind. The song is sung *of* the Word, just as Beethoven often intended to compose his symphonies to communicate some ideal. Furthermore, just as Beethoven might communicate an ideal *in* the language of music, so God communicates his triune delight *in* the language of sun, moon, stars, and the whole course of created history.

The upshot, here, is that we need not say that God *gains* being given that the fact of potentiality in him. That is, even if God delights in himself in a temporal mode in creation, and hadn't done so prior to creation (marking a real, ontological change), this need not entail an *increase* of being but rather a *communication* and *modulation* of being in God. God, in other words, God enacts in time who he is in eternity: delight in his excellencies. While the mode of his delight changes, it does not mark an increase or decrease—but *simply* a difference in the way God delights in himself via creation. Thus, as Barth argues, divine immutability is best construed in terms of God's faithfulness to himself rather than as an absolute changelessness. Who God is in time is *entirely faithful* to who God is in eternity (Jones and Nimmo 2019). God is not another in his works than the One he is in eternity (Barth 2010, 260–61).

But if God can be actualized in new ways, then doesn't this entail that God *is not* the fullness of being in himself? For, per Aquinas, that which is moved from potentiality to actuality is moved by some *external thing's actuality*, and so there would need to be some external thing to God's new actuality in order to actualize him (White 2022). Space precludes a full treatment of this issue, but suffice it to say that—while I find Aquinas's deduction of some ultimate foundation of reality compelling—his argument for God's pure-actuality would destroy the possibility of agent-causation and, therefore, non-determined freedom. For if all reductions from potency to act must be actualized by *some prior thing* in act, then any agent who wills a particular good must have their will reduced from potency to act *by some prior thing* already in act. For many Thomists, this logically prior thing was a “divine aid”—the

doctrine of pre-motion, in which a divine aid from God is responsible for the creaturely determination of the will in its particular determinations (Castrillejo 2022). One might, on the other hand, affirm that a cause identical across two possible worlds might give rise to differing effects, even if everything about those possible worlds are identical up to the moment of that decision. But this affirmation leads to the problems sketched above. Rather, so long as one concedes that a genuine libertarian freedom is at least *conceivable*, then there is a conceptual possibility that one might be genuinely *self-moved*.

If we are allowed the possibility of a genuine libertarian freedom, in which the agent's choice *just is* the explanation for why an agent, identical across two possible worlds up to the moment of decision, might actualize different effects, then we may conceive the affirmation of divine aseity as such: God is the only agent who is *utterly* and *completely* self-moved, conditioned by *nothing* external to himself. God's being is thus self-moved being, such that in God's self-movement he is utterly faithful to who he is in eternity (Barth 2010). In choosing to be in relation to creation, God is *not* gaining being but simply *modulating* his own being. In other words, just as the amount of being between line segments AB and BA might be identical, but simply modulated differently, so God does not gain any perfection he does not already have in himself when he creates. Furthermore, any changes God undergoes in time ultimately have their *ratio* in God's free and gracious will, as he (on my model) decrees the whole scope of history.¹⁵

Let's summarize the picture. God is HTL and creates the world as the freely-willed emanation of his excellencies (Edwards 1998) *as* Father begetting the Son in the Spirit, in whom the Son returns himself to the Father. Divine aseity, on this model, should therefore be understood as a predicate *of the triune divine nature*. That is to say that, just as "being trinitarian" is not predicable of any individual person but of God as such, so "being *a se*" is predicable of the deity who *is* the divine act of the Father begetting the Son in and with the Spirit. Thus, deity as such is nothing else than the *triune God*—the act of divine procession from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Each Person possesses numerical identity with the single divine immaterial object, and yet is a co-eternal way that single immaterial object subsists, in an analogous way to how the conceptual line-segment from A to B subsists dually as AB and BA, which each subsistent mode being the whole "stuff" of the line. All of history, as a willed emanation of this triune life, is thereby designed to communicate the beauties and richness of God's inner life, as a symphony might

¹⁵ For an account of how this might be compatible with human freedom without conceding to Molina's doctrine of middle-knowledge as such, see (Luke 2023).

transpose emotion into a different medium. God can thereby undergo changes (e.g. from knowing that “Bob does not exist” to knowing that “Bob does exist”) *ad-intra* without gaining or losing being, insofar as God in his state of knowing anything about Bob is, in fact, a temporal enactment of the Father’s loving movement towards the Son who moves back in the Spirit. God’s love for Bob, in other words, is a mirror in time reflecting a HTL in eternity. God’s real-time emotions towards creation are, then, the experience of his life in time of who he is in eternity. How do emotions like grief fit into this picture? In the same way that the kind of grief a man might experience having been apart from his wife for three years might *constitute* the joy of their reunion—insofar as that joy somehow contains and is deepened by that grief—so God’s eternal life, experienced in an eternal moment of triune back-and-forth bliss, is refracted in a temporal mode as history progresses towards eschatological redemption.

4. Divine Knowledge and the Incarnation

Recall from above that, even if one were to give some conceptually coherent answer to the Aloneness Argument by showing that knowing can be a purely extrinsic relation (though I am doubtful on this score), any solution will raise a central problem for the possibility of theological language. If “God knows Bob belongs to him” (W_1) is an opaque-designator which actually picks out the same reality as the proposition “God knows Bob does not belong to him” in a different world (W_2), then I do not see how we can have *any* analogical point of contact in understanding what we mean by the proposition “God knows Bob belongs to him.” For evidently, the exact same reality can be picked out by two contradicting propositions. This raises a problem of phenomenological equivocity. HTL allows one to bite the bullet and concede that there is potentiality in God which *God himself* actualizes.

By affirming that there is potentiality in God, such that God in W_1 actualizes a different potentiality in himself than he does in W_2 , I am not affirming that God is *conditioned* by any external reality. For Bob, in whatever world he exists and together with the world in which he exists, is nothing other than an emanation of the divine excellences of HTL. God, in actualizing his way of being in W_1 , is not conditioned by an external reality precisely because the *whole* history of W_1 is freely decreed by God and ontologically expresses God’s excellencies. Furthermore, God’s way of being in W_1 is completely and wholly faithful to who he is in eternity, and is also simply the expression of who God is in eternity (per its complete faithfulness to who he is in eternity). Thus, I can end up conceding the intuition—that God has potentiality in his knowledge and contingent features of his being (e.g. potentialities)—affirming

that God's actualization of those potentialities proceeds *wholly* from his freedom, and that furthermore those potentialities are only the potentialities of HTL to be in time what HTL is in eternity. HTL, for all its similarities to CS, does not carry any commitments that prevent one from affirming such potentiality in God.

Our predications of God, then, can have an analogical contact point. One might think that I've traded equivocity for univocity, but I do not believe this is the case. In human existence, wisdom and power are separable features (wisdom and *knowledge* are arguably separable features!). But in God, all that he is in time are aspects of HTL (e.g. triune love insofar as "x divine predicate"). We have glimpses of what this is like in human experience, but only glimpses. For instance, my delight in my spouse *includes* knowledge of her. In relation to my spouse, then, knowledge is a characteristic feature of my delight in her. Yet this analogue is a faint shadow to the manner in which delight exists in God. God's wisdom, power, etcetera, always are fully characterized by HTL—the Father's love for the Son in and with the Spirit. Hence, while we may identify the analogical point of contact via our predications, this affirmation comes with the traditional affirmation that the manner in which any predication exists in God is pre-eminent, perfect, and complete.

The second problem addressed above is the challenge of the Incarnation. I've argued that the divine essence must be *embodied* in a particular human nature in order to be incarnate in that nature. In this sense, I agree with Barth that the deity of God includes his humanity (Barth 1960, 45–55). Yet, to preserve God's aseity, it is crucial to affirm that the Incarnation is an utterly *free* act, such that the Word conditions the human nature of Christ and not the other way around.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the assumption of the human nature of Jesus *in* the divine subsistence of the Word *is* a change in the divine nature, insofar as the divine nature goes from not-including the humanity of Jesus to including the humanity of Jesus.

But if there is a change in the divine nature—the self-same divine nature of which the persons of the Trinity are subsistences—then how can the human nature of Jesus be appropriated to the *Word*? In other words, in what sense is the *Word uniquely* the One embodied in humanity *and not* the Father or the Spirit? I argue that Jesus is the filial subsistence of the divine nature embodied. In other words, the human nature of Jesus must be understood to embody the movement of the divine nature "deity-back-to", such that the humanity of Jesus is *included within* the movement of the

¹⁶ (Barth, Bromiley, and Torrance 2010, 136–49) Barth may not have been fully consistent with himself, per (Habets and Tolliday 2011) However, this will be irrelevant to my project here as I simply seek to "show my work", as it were; I am appropriating elements of trinitarian thought from various thinkers into (what I hope is) a self-consistent view explicated here. HTL may or may not be consistent with any or all of these thinkers.

Word “back-to” the Father *and not* within the movement of deity-given-to. The Incarnate humanity of the Word, in other words, is the program of cosmic theosis—apoktastasis—embodied in a human being. Whereas created reality in general is an *echo* or *expression* of God’s life ad-intra, the incarnate humanity of Jesus is *included in* God’s life ad-intra insofar as the Word’s filial relation is not merely imitated but embodied in Christ. This differentiates the humanity of the Word from the humanity of anyone else. And because the human nature of the Word is included within the movement of deity-given-back-to, this human nature is *not* included within the movement of deity-given-to (the Father) or deity-given-to-and-back.¹⁷

Contra Ward (2019), this inclusion of humanity in the divine life, although a change, is not an *augmentation* or a “change in the nature of divine love” as such. Rather, the change is *strictly* located in the way divine love expresses itself, since the humanity of Jesus is nothing other than the emanations of God’s excellencies ad-intra and is the filial subsistence of the Word embodied in a human nature. What the Word “adds” is not some additional thing, but an appropriation of a *limited expression* of his own infinite life. The potentiality actualized does not describe the realization of God’s potential as agape, as though that potential were not already actualized in God’s infinite life, but rather the actualization of the potential to be *in time what God already is in eternity*. God thus does not gain being he does not already possess in himself, but simply expresses and embodies in time the eternal plentitude and nature of his triune being.

Does the inclusion of the human nature of Christ within the divine nature make it a proper “part” of the divine nature? First, the human nature is not a part of the divine nature insofar as the latter is in any sense *constituted* by the former. Constitution would involve the former being an essential “part” of the latter, and

¹⁷ One anonymous reviewer has expressed worry concerning patripassianism. But if this strategy outlined above succeeds, wherein the humanity of Jesus subsists in the divine subsistence of deity-given-back (the Son), then the usual Chalcedonian resources can apply (e.g. partitive exegesis) so as to predicate suffering of God the Son with respect to his human nature. Thus, the human nature of Jesus is included in the unique movement of deity in which the Word returns himself to the Father; post the incarnation, this eternal-return includes the return of *humanity*, which is instantiated (to my lights) as the Son’s intercessory self-presentation of himself to the Father as the True High Priest. The humanity of Jesus is not a constitutive part of the subsistence of the Word, but nevertheless subsists *in* the subsistence of the Word. In this way, like on CS, the humanity of Jesus is only in the Father *through the Son*, insofar as the humanity of Jesus subsists uniquely by embodying the subsistence of the Word. However, since embodiment is a direct relation, and it’s the subsistence of the Word alone that’s directly embodied (since the humanity of Jesus subsists directly in the subsistence of the Word), it’s the subsistence of the Word alone that is incarnate (with the predicates rendered possibly by the Incarnation thus applying uniquely to the Word).

hence the human nature of Christ can in no sense constitute the divine nature (Evnine 2011). Second, given Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, we ought not to say that the human nature of Christ is in the divine nature such that the *distinctiveness* of each nature is eliminated. Each nature must be preserved in its integrity. And yet, it seems to me that a thing can be *in* another thing without being a *part* of that other thing (e.g. if I have a cherry pit in my mouth, it is in me but not a part of me, and I have lost nothing of my body if I spit out the cherry pit) (Brüntrup, Göcke, and Jaskolla 2020, 128–29).¹⁸ Similarly, the human nature of Christ is in the Word without being part of the Word.¹⁹ For this reason, certain predications can still apply to the Word with respect the human nature by virtue of that nature subsisting in the subsistence of the Word (and not as a *constitutive part* of that subsistence) via standard *qua-moves*.

Yet HTL, so conceived, allows that God is *not* pure actuality, but *self-moved*. The divine nature actualizes its potential to be incarnate, and thus to live out in time what the triune God is in eternity. This is not, however, an augmentation of being or an increase of perfection, but a temporal expression of God's timeless perfection. Furthermore, all potentiality in God is conditioned solely by who God is in eternity, such that God actualizes such potential via his free and sovereign choice, and such potential is *only* the potential to live out his eternal life in time with his creatures. God can thus change with respect to the knowledge he chooses to actualize corresponding to the world he chooses to actualize and change in dynamic interaction with time without being *conditioned by* some external reality or some novum which he himself has not already decreed. He is not pure act, but purely Holy Triune Love.

5. Anticipating Objections and Coda

There are at least five objections that might be raised to this proposal. First, in positing that there is potentiality in God and rejecting CS, one might argue that my account of the Trinity cannot hold. For the doctrine of divine simplicity safeguards the affirmation of monotheism. Second, one might argue that my attempts to stave off the notion of *progression* in God fail, because if God changes at all, then who he is has, by definition, progressed from one state of being to another. Third, one might (in a rather different vein) argue that HTL is not radically different than CS, and so does not advance the conversation. Fourth, those who are less amiable to CS than I am might argue that, in positing the Father as the *principium*, I thereby make the

¹⁸ One might think of this suggestion as a panentheism with respect to the human nature of Christ; and that might be right or wrong depending on how “panentheism” is defined.

¹⁹The concept of “nested relations” is applied to the Incarnation in (Davis 2022, 15–16)

Father the unique ontological principle of the divine essence and therefore the “real” God-behind-God, as it were. Finally, one might say that, given my project pulls on an admittedly eclectic collection of theological voices—whose thoughts are incommensurate with each other at significant points—my project cannot hold.

First, in positing potentiality in God, I see no reason to affirm with Dolezal that apart from CS, one might say that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three parts of God or unified by some other principle of unity (Dolezal 2017, 105–7). My account still affirms that there is only one indivisible divine nature, and that the persons of the trinity are co-eternal ways in which that one divine nature subsists (three modes of subsistence in the divine nature). Because my account still affirms that the persons are subsistent relations, a strong doctrine of perichoresis does not devolve into an exotic tri-theism for the same reason that, on CS, perichoresis does not conflict with monotheism: because the one divine nature subsists in three co-eternal ways or modes (paternity, filiation, and spiration). This insight does not *need* CS in order to stand. But one anonymous reviewer worries that, if on my model, there is more to Deity *simpliciter* than each individual person (e.g. the Father is deity-given-to), doesn’t his make each person a proper part of God? Here, insights from Henry of Ghent and Michael Rea and Jeffrey Bower prove helpful. According to the latter, material constitution serves as a kind of intuition-pump for thinking about the Trinity. If we imagine a bronze statue of Athena, the statue is materially the self-same object as the lump of bronze that constitutes it. Yet if part of that lump is replaced with, say, nickel, then the statue of Athena remains while the lump of bronze does not. This demonstrates a kind of non-identity (Brower and Rea 2005). Ghent’s thought proves useful in strengthening this account by pointing out that a *relatio* can be numerically identical to a *res* (“thing” or “object”) while being distinguished; a *relatio* is a way that *res* exists. We might illustrate Ghent’s point with the line segment from A to B referenced above. In the Trinity, it is being-toward-another—the *res* toward another, depending on the Person we’re speaking of (e.g. the Father is deity-given-to, and thus toward the Son for instance) (S. M. Williams 2012). My account, similarly, would contend that the divine essence is *numerically* identical to each Person, while the Persons are distinct and co-eternal *relations* in which that self-same “object” of the divine essence subsist. Given my affinity with Edwards, I would argue that God is fundamentally an immaterial object. Thus, the Persons are the self-same immaterial object subsisting according to the mode of the Person. The Persons are, as it were, different loci from which that one immaterial life is experienced and shared, such that the Persons are wholly interior to each other. In this way, there is no “more” (e.g. more “stuff” or more of a “thing” or *res*) to deity *simpliciter* than any individual Divine Person.

Second, some argue that any change whatsoever is necessarily a “gain” in God, since God gains an experience he previously lacked (Dolezal 2017, 38–39). Since any change will involve a change into a state previously lacked, that state therefore marks a “gain” in the thing changed with respect to the gain of a new experience. Hence, any notion of change whatsoever will mean that

a man can be profitable to God, a righteous man can produce pleasure in him that He would otherwise be lacking, and it is gain to God if we make our ways perfect . . . these outcomes would not be any less real if God should simply choose to place himself in this position of being acted upon by his creatures. (Dolezal 2017, 38)

Dolezal’s objection here rests on the fallacy of equivocation. By “gaining a new experience” with respect to a sheer temporal change, Dolezal simply means that God has a new experience which he did not have before. But why think that this should be a “gain” in the sense of an *enrichment* of being? Dolezal doesn’t say. Rather, he simply assumes that a “gain” of a new experience is identical to an enrichment—a contribution of joy in God which he did not otherwise have. But as I’ve argued above, it’s possible to affirm that the joy God gains from his creatures *is not* joy God does not already possess in his own eternity but is simply God’s delighting in himself *in a temporal way*. God, in other words, experiences in time what he does in eternity, such that the only difference is the temporal-timeless frame of his joy, and not the being of that joy as such.

Third, one might alternatively argue that HTL is not incredibly different from CS, and so contributes nothing. On one level, if one were to argue this, then I’d be delighted—for it would show that I *have* set forth a doctrine recognizably like CS which, I hope, has a shot at securing the same aims for which CS was formulated. That said, it should remember that HTL differs from CS by accommodating the denial that God is pure-act and concretely naming that with which all divine attributes are identical: the Father’s begetting the Son in and with the Spirit. Hence, it neither affirms that God is pure-act nor that God’s attributes are identical to each other and the divine essence, as though love were just one among many attributes with which the divine essence is identical and is not *that* with which all other attributes are aspects *as* the divine essence. According to many Thomists, this move is anathema. However, since DDS has been cashed out in many ways through history (Ortlund 2014), it might be the case that HTL still qualifies as a form of DDS. Pursuing that specific question is of historical interest, but is less interesting to me than examining whether HTL accomplishes exactly what CS does by way of divine aseity and ultimacy without the trappings of the *actus purus* doctrine.

Fourth, those opposed to the traditional affirmation that the Father is the *principium* of divinity will surely oppose my proposal on grounds that it seemingly makes the *Father* the real God, insofar as the Father alone is the metaphysical principle structuring the divine essence and thus at the root of all reality (Mullins 2017; Mullins 2023). On the contrary, as I've argued above with Aquinas, the notion of a "*principium*" in the divine essence *only* denotes a "from which" relation. Thus, the Son and Spirit are from the Father, and this "from-ness" *just is* what it means for the Father to be the "*principium*". However, the Father is not the *principium* in the sense of being some "external" principle to the Son and Spirit, since the latter are *utterly interior* to the former. The Son and Spirit are not exterior entities to the Father, on account of the fact that the persons are subsistent relations of one singular essence (and thus on account of the consequent doctrine of perichoresis). To remove the "Son" and "Spirit" is to remove the Father, since the Son and Spirit are the Son and Spirit of the Father, without whom there is no Father. Just as the line segment from BA is interior to the segment from AB, so the other two persons are interior to the Father. The Father is thus not a "cause" in the sense that the Son and Spirit are logical effects, but the $\alpha\iota\tau\alpha$ of the Godhead (which is a far broader term than "cause", and which Aquinas narrows down to the notion of from-ness).

In citing someone like Aquinas alongside Barth, Edwards, Balthasar, and many others whose trinitarian projects are undoubtedly incommensurate at certain points, one might think that my project also contains a fundamental instability. However, this impression would be mistaken. I have not attempted to *reconcile* these voices, but appropriate *facets* of their theology and wisdom into a view which, I think, is more coherent and does what these thinkers were trying to do anyway. I undoubtedly stand on their shoulders. But my project aims to synthesize *select* insights rather than to reconcile entire trinitarian projects. I've cited these figures, however, to give credit to those facets which I am appropriating. HTL stands or falls, then, on whether the view itself is a coherent proposal.

HTL may be summarized as such. The divine nature just is the Father begetting the Son in the circular movement of the Spirit, in whom the Son returns all that he is back to the Father. The persons *are* subsistent relations of:

- 1.) Deity-given-to (paternity)
- 2.) Deity-given-back-to (filiation)
- 3.) Deity-given-to-and-back (spiration)

All attributes of God which we predicate of him are, in fact, schemas through which we understand the pattern of divine activity. They are all aspects of the Father's love

for the Son in and with the Spirit. HTL is the principle in eternity which “organizes”, as it were, all attributive predications of God in time, such that all predications are “HTL insofar as x divine predicate”. Aseity thus becomes a predicate of the triune God as such—of the Father begetting the Son in and with the Spirit—just as “being triune” is a predicate of the triune God as such. In the Incarnation, the peculiar subsistent relation of the Son is embodied in the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, such that the filial relation of deity-given-back-to *is* the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Incarnation is thus the unique divine *embodiment* of the movement “deity-given-back-to” in the divine essence, whereas all of creation other than Jesus’s human nature *imitates* that dynamic without embodying it.

Given that all of creation is the expression of the divine excellencies—the excellencies of the Father’s love for the Son in and with the Spirit—God’s relation to creation is just the temporal enactment of God’s life in eternity. His movement towards creatures mirrors God’s movement in himself, such that God’s delight in his creatures *is just* his delight in himself in a temporal modality. As such, God does not “gain” something he does not already possess in his own infinite life; in no sense is God enriched by his creatures. Rather, in creating, the *only* change God experiences is the change of the temporal *frame* in which God delights in himself. Thus, “all things are from him, through him, and to him” now and to eternity.

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