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A Christian Account of the Rationality of Morality

On Theosis and the Trinity

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Abstract: This article provides a novel solution to the problem of the rationality of morality, which I characterize as the apparent conflict between reasons to respect other persons while pursuing personal well-being. The central concern is that reason may not resolve conflicts between these moral demands. My solution draws on Christian concepts of the Trinity and theosis (the process of becoming like God). Morality's rationality arises from theosis because theosis requires becoming like the Trinity. We cannot resemble the Trinity alone. Instead, theosis requires both individual perfection and forming a loving union with others, a union that recognizes their worth. Together, the individual *and social* aspects of theosis justify the rationality of morality, as individual perfection and social union are part of a single, integrated process. The Trinity and theosis form a new framework for living a rational and moral life.

Keywords: Practical rationality, Morality, The Rationality of Morality, Christianity, Trinity, Theosis

Moral life presents us with a choice between serving ourselves and serving others. Practical rationality and the requirements of morality seem to conflict.

Philosophers have grappled with this problem for millennia, giving us such memorable characters as Plato's Callicles in the *Republic*, Hobbes's Foole, and Hume's Sensible Knave. Henry Sidgwick thought reason could not resolve the conflict between the egoistic and utilitarian points of view.[1] In the 20th century, H.A. Pritchard argued that any proposed account of the rationality of morality would

[1] Sidgwick (1907, Bk.5, ch. 6).

invariably miss the nature of moral reasons.[2] Decades later, David Gauthier argued that instrumental rationality requires that people form and abide by shared moral rules that promote mutual benefit.[3] John Rawls argued that our sense of justice and conception of the good fit together.[4]

I want to solve a version of this puzzle, one rooted in the recognition that we have both person-centered and good-centered reasons for action.[5] Good-centered reasons are reasons to pursue our personal good, whereas person-centered reasons are reasons to treat persons in certain ways, such as with care and respect. The rationality of morality is the problem of responding appropriately to these reasons in a coherent course of life, given that these reasons sometimes seem to conflict. The theist faces an additional challenge that arises from the first. Many theists believe that God must somewhat explain moral requirements, to ground or justify them. If person-centered and good-centered reasons both rest on the divine nature, and the divine nature is a unity, then these reasons should not conflict, maybe not ever. To resolve these puzzles, then, I must explore theistic strategies to resolve the conflict.

I offer a new theistic answer to this puzzle, one that draws on neither natural law theory nor divine command theory. My solution synthesizes two Christian ideas: the Trinity and theosis/divinization. The doctrine of the Trinity is familiar, if obscure: God is three persons, but one substance. The doctrine of theosis requires some explanation. Theosis theorists claim that Christians have two eternal, final ends: to be like God and to be united with or friends with God. Theosis is the process through which we reach those ends. If theosis theorists are correct, all practical reasoning aims to seek the *likeness* of God, which we lost in the Fall (in contrast with the *image* of God, which we have by nature). In achieving the likeness, we resemble *and* befriend God.

Theologians often describe theosis *first-personally*: We become like God when we acquire Jesus' virtues.[6] But, in my view, theosis also has a *second-personal* dimension. Theosis requires that we imitate the Trinity together because God is three persons. Contra *imago Trinitatis* theorists[7], who maintain that a single person can imitate the Trinity, we can only imitate the Trinity together.

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[2] Prichard (1912).

[3] That is, in fact, the conclusion to the overall argument of Gauthier (1986).

[4] Rawls (1999, ch. 9).

[5] Here my use of these terms draws much from Stanley Benn's distinction between person-centered and *value-centered* reasons. See Benn (1998, 6–15).

[6] And, as we shall see, the acquisition of immortality.

[7] Such as Augustine (1991, VII, 12).

If humans cannot fully imitate the Trinity as solitary individuals, but only in community, we have a fundamental practical imperative to *unite with others* by forming and maintaining relationships with them. Part of our flourishing, then, is to appreciate the worth of persons by including them in our lives. So, to unite with and resemble God, we must respond to our person-centered reasons.

Since theosis seeks our final ends, individual and social, theosis is an essentially *integrative* process: practical rationality blends our personal good with respect for others. Theorists can understand this process by reflecting on the nature of one's relationship with God. God integrates us by indwelling within the human person. The divine indwelling, where the Trinity inhabits the human soul, joins the two types of theosis. As we integrate these two modes of resembling God, we choose actions first and second-personally at the same time, even if we do not describe our actions in these terms.

The paper unfolds as follows. I first explain how I think about the rationality of morality in light of Christian doctrine (1). I then lay the groundwork for my solution by explaining the familiar, individual aspects of theosis where we acquire the divine likeness (2) and the less familiar, social aspect where we imitate the Trinity together (3). Next, I demonstrate how these processes integrate through proper parthood, where person-centered reasons operate within good-centered reasons (4). I then show how the divine indwelling actively unifies these processes in a believer's life (5). I end by recasting the moral life as the process of unifying humanity to make us a suitable dwelling for God (6).

1. God-Grounded Reasons and the Rationality of Morality

Ancient ethicists understood morality from a first-person point of view. We grasp moral requirements by acquiring virtue, which drives morally exemplary behavior. We flourish by consequence. The ancients argued that the virtue of justice requires a particular treatment of others. Thus, if we only flourish when we have the virtue of justice, we only flourish when we treat others justly.[8] One can read *The Republic* this way.[9] However, we do not determine what justice requires and then determine what the virtue of justice requires. Rather, for Plato, we consult features of our choosing our good to determine how the just man acts. Moral behavior, then, consists of acting on reasons for human flourishing. As Plato argues:

[8] Annas (1995).

[9] Plato (1997).

> [Morality's] sphere is a person's inner activity; it is really a matter of oneself and the parts of oneself . . . . Once [the just person] has set his own house in order, which is what he really should be concerned with; . . . once he has bound all the factors together and made himself a perfect unity instead of a plurality, self-disciplined and internally attuned: then and only then does he act . . . . In the course of this activity, it is conduct which preserves and promotes this inner condition of his that he regards as moral and describes as fine . . . ; any conduct which disperses this condition . . . he regards as immoral.[10]

The moral person acts to maintain her internal unity. As Sam Scheffler notes, Platonic views seem "to say that what is wrong with killing an innocent person, for example, is that such behavior, or the disposition to engage in such behavior, does not contribute to the well-being of the agent."[11]

Some claim that Plato offers the wrong kind of reason to be moral. Internal unity does not explain why we should not steal, and so cannot explain moral wrongness. We act morally by considering how our actions affect others, not just ourselves—we should not steal because we respect other people. Morality has an intrinsic "victim-focus."[12] Here, I will assume, but not argue, that this concern is correct. This is why I believe that we have distinctively person-centered reasons to act.[13] John should not kill Reba because Reba's dignity prohibits it, much as John should keep his promise to Reba because he respects Reba. In my view, these reasons are as fundamental as reasons to pursue our good. Our reasons to respect others do not depend upon reasons to pursue well-being. Christians should not explain the worth of persons based on their own practical rationality. Instead, I take for granted that the worth of persons is somehow grounded in the divine nature. Our conception of practical rationality should change to accommodate the rationality of respect for persons as image-bearers rather than insisting on an eudaemonist approach.

I characterize the problem of the rationality of morality as follows: we have both person-centered and good-centered reasons for action. Good-centered reasons are our reasons to pursue various goods, specifically our own good. Good-centered reasons thus include our reasons to choose and enjoy basic intrinsic goods like health, knowledge, and religion, as well as character traits like courage, temperance, and prudence.

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[10] *Ibid*., 443c–e.

[11] Scheffler (1993, 116–7). Olson (2004), Hieronymi (2005).

[12] Kamm (1992, 355).

[13] Benn (1988, 6–15).

Person-centered reasons govern our treatment of other persons. These reasons are other-directed. They are thus second-personal in Stephen Darwall's famous sense as reasons that "make and acknowledge claims on one another's conduct and will."[14] Darwall contrasts second-person reasons with third-person reasons to promote everyone's well-being. His famous illustration identifies the two kinds of reasons I have not to cause you pain by stepping on your foot. Pain is bad. That implies that I have a third-personal reason not to cause pain. However, I also owe it to *you* not to cause you pain, which is to say that I have a second-person reason, an intrinsically other-directed reason, to treat you in specific ways.

In contrast with Darwall, I do not understand our person-centered reasons from the idea of a second-person standpoint. Instead, our second-personal reasons arise from an independent fact: human nature resembles and participates in the divine nature. This resemblance constitutes the *imago Dei*, or the divine image in humanity. We then recognize that we should respond to others with reverence, much as we respond to God with worship.[15] In this way, my reason not to cause you pain derives from recognizing your dignity. But dignity arises from possessing the divine image—resembling the divine nature.

It is critical for this essay that both kinds of reasons share a foundation in theism but in distinctive and irreducible aspects of the divine nature. Good-centered reasons rest on God because God created our nature, and our reasons to pursue basic goods are, in part, to realize that nature. Further, since God is Goodness, and so the basis of all goodness by way of participation, to pursue genuine goods is to have a kind of union with God. We have union with God insofar as we enjoy objective goods. In this way, God's nature as the Good explains why we have good-centered reasons.

Person-centered reasons also have a theistic foundation, though of a different sort than good-centered reasons. This foundation lies in God's essential holiness. Following Rudolf Otto and Mark Murphy, an absolutely holy being—God—is holy in that two responses to the holy are apt: we are both drawn to it (*fascinans*) and repelled from it out of sincere fear, awe, or reverence (*tremendum*).[16] God's primary holiness makes it fitting for us to feel unworthy of God's presence. This same holiness merits worship.[17]

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[14] Darwall (2006, 3).

[15] I defend this approach to the worth of persons in Vallier (2024).

[16] Otto (1923, 58–9); Murphy (2021, ch. 2), as discussed in Vallier (2024, 671).

[17] Vallier (2024, 671–2). Murphy distinguishes primary holiness (meriting worship) from secondary holiness (which in my view merits reverence); see Murphy (2021, ch. 4), and Vallier (2024, 668).

In creating us, God imparts derivative or secondary holiness into human nature by fashioning us with a central divine quality: the capacity to love.[18] This resemblance constitutes the *imago Dei*. When that holiness becomes part of human beings, however, we do not feel *unworthy* of other human beings, nor should we worship them. Instead, this derivative holiness merits the *tremendum* response in the form of reverence.[19] And it is here that deontic person-centered reasons find their foundation. Our duties to respect others follow from God's endowment of human nature with this secondary holiness through our capacity to love.[20]

Such holiness-based deontic reasons have special weight because they bind us irrespective of our personal desires or advantageous outcomes. They carry an intrinsic motivating force: to see someone as bearing the divine image is to perceive a secondarily holy reality one must not profane. This explains the robust, deontic dimension of respecting persons. We do not worship them, for worship is due only to God, yet we revere them as bearers of the holy divine image, a status that makes them inviolable and grounds the strong moral claims we call rights.

But secondary holiness also grounds a *fascinans* response, where we are drawn to other persons. Human nature, by inheriting holiness, renders this desire for communion with others an appropriate response to the divine image in us. The *fascinans* response thereby explains why communion with others is a unique good that involves both person-centered and good-centered reasons.

Ancient ethics was not wrong to make our reasons to pursue our own good central to the moral life. We also have good-centered reasons to acquire and exercise virtue and so to flourish. However, person-centered reasons do not derive from good-centered ones. Yes, we enjoy greater goodness when we respond well to our person-centered reasons. But that fact does not imply that person-centered reasons derive from the good. Neither form of reason is more fundamental than the other.

I also adopt the Christian Platonist ideal where God is identical with Goodness, and Goodness always motivates us to act.[21] So when we grasp the divine nature, we are *ipso facto* motivated to seek communion with it. I claim that all God-grounded reasons inherit this attractive power. Person-centered reasons are also God-grounded reasons. When we act on these reasons, we respond to God, given that humans have the divine image. And so, when we grasp these reasons, we also feel attracted to their object. Our attraction to ordinary natural goods is straightforward,

[18] Vallier (2024, 673–4).

[19] Vallier (2024, 672). This idea connects with Otto's conception of *tremendum* but reserves reverence for the secondarily holy.

[20] See the account of our capacity to love in Vallier (2024, 675–6), which I follow here.

[21] For a discussion of the sense in which God is the Good, see Stump (2016).

but our attraction to other people is much more complex. We seek union with others, but our aim is not necessarily to maximize our total friendships. So, person-centered reasons grounded in the *fascinans* response are, in some respects, good-centered reasons, but of a fundamentally different sort.

One might object that person-centered reasons collapse into good-centered reasons. For example, when John responds to Reba's dignity, John promotes his own flourishing, and so good-centered reasons suffice to justify morality. I will argue below that our person-centered reasons form part of some of our good-centered reasons, such as John promoting his flourishing by respecting Reba's dignity. But the relationship is one of proper parthood, where person-centered reasons retain their distinctive normative character despite their integration with good-centered reasons.

Person-centered reasons remain distinct because they have different foundations. Good-centered reasons arise from our natural desire to pursue and participate in goods, which realize our God-given nature and deepen our union with God. Both types of reasons have a theistic foundation, but they are irreducibly distinct ways of responding to the divine nature as manifested in creation.

Based on this account of our moral reasons, here is our question: can we reconcile good-centered and deontic person-centered reasons? My good-centered reasons justify pursuing my good, yet deontic person-centered reasons mandate respecting persons apart from what is good for me. The puzzle? Good-centered and deontic person-centered reasons can appear irreconcilable. Perhaps we cannot synthesize these reasons into a coherent moral life.

Another part of the puzzle is that the conflict between good-centered and person-centered reasons *must* be illusory because they are God-grounded. Both share a foundation in the divine nature. Since the divine nature is internally consistent, so it would be odd if the reasons grounded in the divine nature recommend contradictory actions. In my view, the answer lies in the regenerative process of perfection, which the Christian East calls *theosis*. Through theosis, I argue, we reconcile and integrate good-centered and person-centered reasons. As we progress towards our highest good, we must respect the divine image in others. From here, my argument focuses on these deontic person-centered reasons, as the telic variety poses no such puzzle.

2. Personal Theosis: Where the Likeness Approaches the Image

Theosis is the process of acquiring the *likeness* of God to such a degree that we become divine.[22] As Athanasius famously puts it, "God became man that man might become god-like."[23] Or as Pseudo-Dionysius declares, "Deification [theosis] is the attaining of the likeness of God and union with him so far as is possible."[24] Theosis is a Biblical idea. Psalm 82:6 states that "You are gods; sons of the Most High. Jesus draws our attention to this passage in John 10:34: Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, "I said, you are gods"?'" 2 Peter 1:4 notes that we are "partakers of the divine nature."

Here, we must distinguish, with Scripture and tradition, between the *image* of God and the *likeness* of God.[25] As Norman Russell notes, "the majority of the [Church] Fathers make a distinction between the image and the likeness, seeing the image as referring to the rational nature we were born with, while the likeness refers to contingent qualities we acquire in the course of our Christian life."[26] And as a central theological text of Eastern Orthodox Christianity stresses, "the image lies in our mind and will. The Fall destroyed the likeness in us. But because we retained the image, we still have the basis for regaining [the likeness]."[27] Human beings have the divine image because our human nature resembles the divine nature through our capacity for reason and free choice. The Fall cannot remove the divine image from our nature. But the Fall did remove the likeness of God in that we fell from perfect moral virtue to a vicious state.[28]

Theosis theorists agree that recovering the divine likeness involves retrieving the divine attributes, but they emphasize different qualities. Some stress immortality: through baptism, we inherit eternal life.[29] Others highlight recovering moral virtue and compliance with the moral law. With grace and good works, we approach perfect virtue and obedience so we resemble God. This "ethical" approach to theosis "takes deification to be the attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and

[22] For an excellent overview of the Christian doctrine of theosis, see (Russell 2004).

[23] Athanasius (2011, 54.3).

[24] Pseudo-Dionysius 1988, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* I.3.

[25] Genesis 1:26–28: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness."

[26] Russell (2009, 77).

[27] *Ibid*., p. 80. Also see Stăniloae (2000, 226).

[28] That is, once God makes grace available for us to make these choices effective in acquiring the divine attributes.

[29] Russell (2004, 54–7, 102–5).

philosophical endeavor, believers reproducing some of the divine attributes in their own lives by imitation."[30]

I focus on the moral dimension of theosis, which I shall call *moral theosis*. Many Church Fathers held that moral theosis is central to the Christian life. According to some, "through moral progress the human soul may . . . come to participate in some of the divine attributes."[31] For Irenaeus, the path to theosis "depends on our moral behavior."[32] Cyril of Alexandria articulates an intimate relationship between virtue and participation in the divine.[33] Gregory of Nazianzus distinguishes three features of theosis: "ethical (the ascetic endeavor), corporate (progressive union with God), and social (sharing in the divine life)"; these features describe a single, unified process.[34] The doctrine of moral theosis reaches maturity in Maximos the Confessor.[35] For Maximos, theosis produces "the unification of human nature," that is, "the healing of the will of fallen humanity, which pulls us in contrary directions."[36]

While the doctrine of theosis has less influence in the Latin West, Augustine and Aquinas adopted aspects of it.[37] Further, the idea of imitating Christ, or "Christification," is common in the Christian West today, and becoming like Christ is another way of talking about theosis.[38] Moral theosis is thus the inheritance of all Christians, not merely the Eastern Orthodox.

As seen above, theosis involves acquiring the divine likeness. Moral theosis, the individual aspect of this process, terminates when we become like God and unite with God—our final ends. For Aristotle, a final end is a kind of goal: it justifies all our other goals and projects and unifies them in one life plan. The end is final because we desire the end for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Our final end is also complete: it lacks nothing.[39] When a person achieves her final end, she wants nothing else, such that wanting anything more is irrational. Aristotle said our final end is happiness (eudemonia). Eudemonia is not a felt psychological state

[30] *Ibid*., p. 2.

[31] *Ibid*., p. 77.

[32] *Ibid*., p. 109.

[33] *Ibid*., p. 192.

[34] *Ibid*., p. 224.

[35] *Ibid*., p. 237. Maximos, following Pseudo-Dionysius, reclaimed the doctrine of theosis for the Byzantine Church centuries after it fell into obscurity.

[36] *Ibid*., p. 268.

[37] For an account of Augustine's doctrine of deification, see Ortiz (2019, 169–189). For Aquinas's approach, see Spezzano (2015).

[38] Ortiz (2019) reviews Latin doctrines of theosis.

[39] Aristotle (2000, I.7).

but rather a mode of being. Humans can flourish without realizing it or, in some cases, without being able to know it, as Aristotle argued.[40]

To achieve eudemonia, we must fully express our nature as rational animals. Our nature requires exercising virtue. The virtues include courage, temperance, prudence, justice, and the supernatural (God-given) virtues of faith, hope, and love.[41] A virtuous life is best because virtue is an excellence of the rational part of the soul.[42] Humans reach eudemonia by acquiring virtues, which requires choices that congeal into habits. These choices direct our passions toward right reason.

I understand virtues as skills in adhering to certain practical norms.[43] With Aquinas, virtue is a skill that "disposes an agent to perform its proper operation or movement."[44] And since reason is our proper operation, virtues as skills drive us to reason well. Virtuous action chooses a line of conduct for good reasons.[45] It is also helpful to distinguish between natural and supernatural virtues, also following Aquinas.[46] Natural virtues are excellences that we acquire through our own effort and discipline, such as the cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice. Supernatural virtues—faith, hope, and love (charity)—come to the believer through God's infusion of grace. Both sets of virtues are essential for achieving the divine likeness, but while natural virtues only perfect our rational nature, supernatural virtues fulfill our nature by orienting us toward union with God.

All virtues aid eudemonia as instrumental or constitutive means.[47] An instrumental means achieves an end that is not part of our end. A constitutive means is part of the end: we only *count* as fulfilling the end when we employ the constitutive means. Take the goal of playing a piano piece. Sheet music is an instrumental means, whereas playing a particular pattern of notes is a constitutive means. You can play the piece without the sheet music, but you can only count as playing the piece if you play a particular pattern of notes. One may read the *Republic* as arguing that the virtue of justice partly constitutes eudemonia.[48] One cannot

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[40] *Ibid*.

[41] Aquinas has the most developed account of the seven virtues and their unity; it is the aim of the entirety of Aquinas (2016, IIa–IIae).

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] Annas (1995). Here I prefer the language of skill to habit as a skill implies a habituated capacity of rational exercise, whereas a habit can describe any engrained behavior, rational or not.

[44] Aquinas (2016 IaIIae 49.1).

[45] The skill analogy to virtue is stressed in Annas (1995).

[46] Aquinas (2016 I–II, q. 62).

[47] This distinction draws on the idea of an "inclusive end" in interpretations of Aristotle. See Ackrill (1980).

[48] Irwin (1995, 193).

count as fully happy unless she is just. Acting justly can be instrumental in reaching eudemonia, but Plato arguably adopted a constitutive strategy.

If Christianity is true, eudemonia occurs when we resemble and befriend God. Moral theosis is the process that produces eudemonia. We become like God because theosis makes us morally perfect, and we become friends with God because supernatural virtues are intrinsically relational. Faith, hope, and love are God-directed virtues. Consider love. To love God is to unite with God since God loves us, too. Our love is mutual. And if we love God perfectly, we achieve perfect union with Him because God loves us perfectly. Our mutual love unites us.

Moral theosis presupposes that we have a supernatural final end of union with God. Most eudemonists think we have a final end by nature. We can flourish as mere rational animals. We might reach that end even if we do not unite with God.[49] Yet our supernatural end is also natural in a meaningful sense. Reaching it is best for us. Now, most Christian theologians teach that we cannot achieve our supernatural end without divine aid. This claim makes the supernatural end appear unnatural since God must reveal Himself and provide us with enough faith, hope, and love to unite with Him. Nonetheless, we retain our supernatural end even if we need God's help to reach it. We also need help, at least from other humans, to reach our natural end.

Having explored how moral theosis addressed good-centered reasons through the pursuit of the divine likeness, I now turn to social theosis, which addresses person-centered reasons by requiring respect for the divine image and the imitation of the Trinity.

3. Social Theosis: Acquiring the Likeness of the Trinity

Through social theosis, we jointly acquire the likeness of the Trinity by participating in a shared moral life with others, as I outline here. I begin my explication by stressing that the idea of resembling the Trinity is ancient. Some theologians following Augustine teach that one person can acquire the "image" of the Trinity (*imago Trinitatis*) through the faculties of the soul: memory, understanding, and will (*memoria, intelligentia, voluntas*).[50] [51] If a rational soul integrates these powers, it

[49] Aristotle (2000, Book X).

[50] Augustine (1991, VII.2). Augustine argues that each individual person has mental attributes—specifically memory, understanding, and will (*memoria, intelligentia, voluntas*)—that together reflect the Trinity. While influential, this view of an individual *imago Trinitatis* should not preclude the argument for social theosis developed here. For discussion, see Emery and Levering (2011, 415).

[51] For a review of the development of the Latin doctrine of the *imago Trinitatis* after Augustine, including the views of Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, see Slotemaker (2020). A doctrine of an

imitates the Trinity, since the Trinity has these powers as a unity. The soul then bears the *imago Trinitatis*.

Notice that my project explores how we acquire the divine *likeness*, not the image. The *imago Trinitatis* differs from the divine likeness and cannot produce it. The image might *define* which capacities require perfection and unification, but skillful exercises of memory, understanding, and the will do not produce the divine likeness alone. To acquire the image of the Trinity, we must change our perspective. A single person cannot imitate the Trinity because the Trinity is a trinity of persons. One person cannot imitate three persons, only three or more persons can. Acquiring the Trinitarian likeness is intrinsically social.

Here's an objection: human personhood cannot participate in divine personhood.[52] At least in Latin views of the Trinity, divine persons are mere relations with one another, and they lack separate wills.[53] But *human* personhood requires a distinct will.[54] By contrast, I claim that humans can participate in the Trinity precisely because divine persons love one another. Humans participate in the loving nature of the divine persons when we love each other. Human and divine love surely differ, but my argument only presumes that human love resembles divine love enough that we can participate in it.

My argument uses the account of love advanced by Aquinas and revived by Eleonore Stump.[55] *Aquinas-Stump* love consists of two desires: a desire for the good of the beloved and a desire to unite with her.[56] As Aquinas says, "the movement of love has a twofold tendency: towards the good which a man wishes to someone (to himself or to another) and towards that to which he wishes some good."[57] Love also includes a normally effective drive to satisfy both of these desires. But doesn't mutual love require the union of two wills, whereas God only has one will? No. Divine persons are so close to each other, their desire for unity so perfect, that they

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individual *imago Trinitatis* also exists in the East; see Gregory Palamas, discussed in Emery and Levering (2011, 220).

[52] As Marilyn McCord Adams objected to combining my view with a Latin notion of the Trinity.

[53] Though they may have distinct conscious states.

[54] I have addressed this objection elsewhere.

[55] Stump (2012, 91). See Aquinas (2016, I–II q.26, a. 4).

[56] I will sometimes speak of desiring unity with the beloved or union with the beloved. But the desire is a desire for unity of will, the essence of interpersonal harmony.

[57] Aquinas (2016, 1.2.26.4). For a development and defense of Aquinas's account of love, see Stump 2012, p. 91. I will also take the Aquinas-Stump account of love to specify *agape.* Agape covers Biblical passages where Jesus and the Apostles speak about loving other humans. They do not mean romantic love (eros) or the love of friends (philia) or mere affection (storge). For the famed discussion of these kinds of love, see Lewis (1960).

share one will. Inter-divine love includes a desire for unity of will eternally and necessarily fulfilled. Divine love thereby serves as the standard of human love. Such intimate inter-divine love explains how lovers become, as Scripture says, one flesh.[58] Perhaps humans can form a *general will* along related lines.[59] Social theosis then requires cultivating a desire for unity of will with other persons grounded in love, which is not unlike the general will concept.

Here's a brief argument based on the premises established above. Theosis involves resembling a God that *is* love. So imitating God requires becoming as loving as possible, bound only by human nature. Second, Aquinas-Stump love is perfect only if we desire the unity and good of all and act accordingly. These desires should shape all our other desires and actions. A maximally loving person prioritizes the unity and good of all in her choices. Thus, when we desire the unity and good of all, we acquire a share of God's likeness by exercising our God-given image—our capacity to love. John thus prepares to imitate the Trinity by becoming a *node* for human unification. He cooperates with God to unify with others in love. As Jacques Maritain put it, John qua person is an "open and generous whole."[60] In my view, John unites with others when he follows shared rules or prepares to follow those rules if others do likewise.[61]

When John unites with others, this unity must be founded on *reverent* love, love that responds appropriately to the divine image of others. Our unity is impossible if it is not a meeting of free wills; without a joint will for union, love between persons disappears. In this way, our love must revere the unique personhood of every human being. That means this union in reverent love is a response to both kinds of person-centered reasons, our reasons to have relationships with others, and our reasons to treat them with respect as image-bearers.

Part of the purpose of introducing the idea of social theosis is to depict how our final end of imitating God arises from a social process where we detect and respond to our person-centered reasons. Social theosis responds to person-centered reasons by leading us to draw near to others and to adopt shared rules of social life while simultaneously driving us to revere others by complying with rules that we can jointly adopt. And given that our ultimate good consists in theosis, we thereby

[58] Genesis 2:24, Genesis 4:1, 1 Cor 6:16, Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:8, Ephesians 5:31. Admittedly, one could argue that these passages refer only to sexual intercourse.

[59] Not unlike Rousseau (1997, 84–88). Though, unlike Rousseau, the general will participates in the general will of the Trinity.

[60] Maritain (1994, 49).

[61] We retain this desire even if we know that others do not reciprocate. We hope their hearts will soften with time.

respond to our most powerful good-centered reasons, at least when we integrate the individual and social dimensions of theosis. Social theosis will thus explain how and why we should integrate our responses to both kinds of reasons.

I want to stress that the idea of social theosis is not novel. Fr. David Meconi describes Peter Chrysologus's theological anthropology as hinging,

> . . . entirely on his strong assertion that the human person has been created to be a participant in God himself. This is the essential nature of the human person and the only true means of his ultimate flourishing, in that no person has been created simply to be measured by an earthly good or goal, but to become an eternal citizen of the heavenly court.[62]

Citizenship in heaven is an intrinsically social relationship that involves advancing the good of others and honoring them. God created us to join with others in this way.[63] Here Chrysologus is far from alone. Dionysius and Maximos think theosis plays a part in God uniting everything in shared love. According to Norman Russell, Dionysius believes that the "destiny and fulfillment" of everything "lies in returning to their cause as fully as is consistent with their separate identity and created status. Deification . . . represents the process of return to the supreme cause conceived of as *theos*."[64] This process involves the unity of all human beings. For Maximos, "under divine providence the created order is moving from a state of fragmentation to one of unification, and the power which is effecting this unification is love." Through the unifying function of love, says St. Maximos, "God and man are drawn together in a single embrace."[65] If one wants to imitate the Trinity, she must extend her reverent love to all, and so desire universal unity. Those who share this desire thereby form a shared will that respects each person's uniqueness.

Let's consider some objections. Objection 1: No one, including John, should prioritize the unity and goodness of everyone over his own. Humans have a natural inclination to preserve themselves, which renders overly demanding any insistence that people place such great priority on serving others. In reply, I argue that love is a complex enough emotion to take such factors into account. Societal love can adopt rules that assign people moral space to maintain themselves. Such love also requires that society furnish its members with the resources necessary to pursue their

[62] Ortiz (2019, 203).

[63] Much contemporary Christian social thought echoes this. See De Koninck (1997), Zizioulas (1985), Ratzinger (1990), Volf (1998).

[64] Russell (2004, 252). Pseudo-Dionysius (1988, *Divine Names*, I. 3).

[65] Russell (2009, 45). See Louth (1996, 90).

flourishing. If John and others seek union in reverent love, they must will rules that they can all accept based on their assessment of one another's good. We thereby secure the good of others by adopting rules that protect their pursuit of their good. Call these *jurisdictional rules*. Such rules protect our attempts to organize our piece of the social world in line with our values.[66]

Objection 2: our desire for unity contains conflicts, such as the conflict between making a new friend or nurturing an ongoing friendship. Our desire for unity doesn't tell us how to make this choice, which means it is too indeterminate. The proper Christian account of the rationality of morality must give more concrete guidance. In response, as I have noted, the desire for unity does not direct John to maximize his number of friends, but to adopt and observe social rules that help everyone form closer relationships again rooted in reverent love. But within that range, the unity desire allows for diverse responses because it allows people to choose which relationships to develop and maintain. Interpersonal morality provides discretion or personal prerogative in choosing our relationships. If so, diverse people will allow one another to pursue different projects rule-based framework of mutual respect. Some indeterminacy in the unity desire therefore poses no problem, as rules address indeterminacy by giving people space to love others in their own way. People acquire the authority to determine what is indeterminate at the level of principle. Further, other moral reasons may help resolve the competing demands of our relationships, in particular our desire for the good of all, which can include the goods that come from resolving disputes in a loving and respectful fashion. The desire for the good of all, conjoined with a good theory of the human good, adds content to the unity desire.

Objection 3: John's desire for union with God is enough to count as willing unity, given the great good of unity with the divine. John need not desire harmony with human beings. Suppose that John is a hermit who lives a solitary life of constant prayer. He thus manifests great faith and love of God. If so, John is both united with God and possesses the likeness, and this is despite the fact that he lacks rich social relations with others.

In reply, attend to how real Christian hermits live. Hermits pray for the good of all and so unite themselves with others in prayer, an act of love towards others. Hermits seldom live entirely alone either. Some make and sell crafts, so they do not become a burden to others. Many hermits also welcome visitors who seek their counsel. The hermit's life requires virtues and norms that govern their social interactions. Despite their seclusion, hermits relate to other persons. Accordingly, in

[66] Gaus (2011, 370–386) discusses jurisdictional rights in the sense, an account I follow.

my view, they participate in the Trinity when they unite under shared rules. They, too, undergo social theosis.

Consider the reverse case, where we have unity with other persons but not with God. Imagine a society of atheists who express deep mutual love for one another. In my view, these atheists resemble God in their love but lack union with God, and thus fail to fully achieve the likeness of God. The atheist society's common good is incomplete. If members of the community befriended God, they would augment their good. Nonetheless, atheists may still relate to God without realizing it. After all, they love one another, and God is love: "love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4: 7–8). Here John appears to say that love includes loving other people, and non-Christians could relate to God by loving one another, if imperfectly.[67] They can also respond appropriately to the divine image in persons even if they do not understand the source of our natural worth.

In sum, social theosis detects person-centered reasons, including deontic reasons, because responding to these reasons appropriately is required to imitate the Trinity via union in reverent love. The next section explores how to integrate social theosis with moral theosis. After all, they might conflict.

4. The Rationality of Morality as Social-Moral Theosis: The Proper Part Strategy

Why is it rational to be moral? The theosis approach indicates an answer: being moral allows us to resemble God as much as we can—individually and socially. In moral theosis, we follow eudaimonistic good-centered reasons and thereby imitate God's character, thus pursuing the likeness of God, and pursuing union with God. In social theosis, we follow person-centered reasons and thereby become like the Trinity, both in drawing near to others and revering them. Yet theosis is one process, and Christian tradition has never separated them. I will call this integrated process *social-moral theosis*. In this integrated process, our actions reflect both forms of theosis, as we become morally perfect persons who create perfectly loving communities. The rationality of morality hinges on the possibility of this integration.

[67] Thomas Ward objects to allowing persons to resemble God without knowing it. If so, God does not play the proper role in a theistic moral theory. Human morality must originate in divine agency, such as God's will or desires. In my approach, morality does derive from imitating the Trinity. God does not exercise agency in a way that explains inter-human moral requirements. But divine action is required to make both moral and social theosis possible. So, hopefully, that is enough divine agency for my purposes.

A challenge looms: moral and social theosis can appear to conflict. Social-moral theosis, for example, may reveal conflicts between good-centered and person-centered reasons. And not a few of them, either. If so, these forms of practical reasoning might seem irreconcilable, not unlike Sidgwick's failed harmonization of egoism and utilitarianism.[68]

Consider the case of Joan, a Christian living in a pluralistic society whose members disagree about virtuous behavior. They disagree about whether supernatural virtues even *exist*. How can Joan unite with those who do not share her moral and theological views? One way is for Joan to advocate and adopt rules that allow everyone to pursue virtue as they understand it, while upholding respect for persons. Here, she respects others' secondary holiness and seeks to unite with them under common rules. In this way, Joan undergoes social theosis. But these "liberal" rules may seem to undermine Joan's moral theosis, as secular citizens may insist on rules that foster practices that foster sin as Joan understands it. But does pursuing social unity really require sacrificing individual moral perfection?

While complex situations require careful attention, the theosis approach carries with it assumptions about the divine nature that suggest integration. First, God may prevent irresolvable conflicts between moral and social theosis through divine providence. God might ensure that our lives never include a choice between one process against the other, even if such a choice is conceptually possible. Second, we should expect conceptual unity between these processes. Social-moral theosis requires resembling God through God's unity and sociality. Yet God is one, so we should doubt that two processes of becoming like God fundamentally conflict. Conflicts between these modes of moral development, then, are likely epistemic. We must resolve *merely apparent* conflicts.

Metaphysically, one could also resolve apparent conflicts between moral and social theosis by identifying their metaphysical relation of fit. I argue the relation is proper parthood.[69] A is a proper part of B when A is part of B, B is not a part of A, and A is not identical with B. If we employ proper parthood, we can say that responding to deontic person-centered reasons is a proper part of responding to some of our good-centered reasons. Similarly, the process where we increasingly grasp and respond to our person-centered reasons fits like a module within the process where we increasingly grasp and respond to our good-centered reasons. This seems manifestly true for our person-centered reasons to pursue relationships; such integration is manifest. However, this addresses only half the picture. To see

[68] Sidgwick (1907, Bk 4, ch. 6, 506–9), Crisp (2015, 227–234).

[69] Varzi (2016).

how our deontic person-centered reasons also integrate through proper parthood, an example can illustrate this.

Consider the good of friendship.[70] Having friends is good for us (a good-centered reasons), but being a friend requires a shared perspective where we pursue common values. If we impose friendship norms on others when they disagree, the friendship will decay or end. Indeed, relations of friendship may degrade into domination. Friendship then requires that we respond correctly to our deontic person-centered reasons by respecting the friend's worth. We have a person-centered reason to want what is best for our friends and to respect their worth as secondarily holy beings. To maintain the friendship, then, we must honor our person-centered reasons. Yet, in doing so, we also honor our good-centered reason to support the friendship as constitutive of our own flourishing. Responding to the deontic reason partly constitutes acting on the good-centered reason.

Person-centered reasons operate inside good-centered reasons because respecting, say, others' dignity constitutes rather than merely causes human flourishing. Responding to deontic person-centered reasons, we are simultaneously pursuing our own good. This integration is not a reduction or a collapse of one kind of reason into the other. Deontic reasons possess their unique normative force. Proper parthood means that person-centered reasons operate as an essential element within the greater structure of good-centered reasons.

Proper parthood relations abound in the Christian spiritual life. Recall Jesus' teaching that if we love God, we will obey God's commandments (John 14:15) and the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31). Loving God is the greatest good, so we have a decisive good-centered reason to obey God's commands. Since God commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves, we have a decisive reason to love our neighbors. Loving our neighbor becomes a proper part of loving God. If we love God, we must love our neighbor; if we fail to love our neighbor, we fail to love God, thereby frustrated our ultimate good. Along the same lines, if we disregard our deontic person-centered reasons, we miss our eudaimonist good-centered reasons. Similarly, our fundamental good-centered reasons include and require responding to our person-centered reasons.

Return to Joan. Suppose Joan is friends with Emma, a committed atheist. Joan knows that Emma's life lacks supernatural virtue (and so lacks the likeness), which grieves Joan. Yet Emma is courageous and just; she fights for the rights of workers and the poor and so has natural virtues that reflect the divine image. Joan shares

[70] For an account of basic goods, see Murphy (2001, 96–136). Gaus argues that acting on deontic reasons is a proper part of mature friendship. See Gaus (1990, 287–292).

Emma's values, and so their friendship involves advancing these values. But Joan's friendship with Emma requires spending less time in church and cultivating fewer friendships with her fellow believers, perhaps risking opportunities to cultivate the likeness. Hasn't Joan sacrificed part of her supernatural good to pursue the friendship? I admit that Joan's social life requires her to sacrifice, but Joan's sacrifice may not lessen the overall level of supernatural good she enjoys. Her friendship and their common project of serving the poor partake in divine love, allowing Joan to develop charity and deepen her love for God, enhancing her personal theosis.

Joan might face further constraints. Suppose that at the outset of their friendship, Emma drew a boundary with Joan not to try to convert her. Joan cannot count as a good friend unless she respects Emma's wishes, even if she believes Emma would benefit from conversion. Joan has a deontic person-centered reason to respect Emma's boundaries, grounded in her secondary holiness, which morally limits how she can help Emma realize her supernatural good. Friendship contains internal norms such as honesty, aid, and respect. These norms define friendship; violating them harms or even ends the friendship. When someone violates these norms, moral repair becomes pressing, a process requiring forgiveness and reconciliation. When friendship norms are massively violated, the friendship dissolves. This norm-respecting friendship has great value because it is a form of human love that participates in divine love. When Joan respects Emma's boundaries, she realizes the good of friendship, which in turn participates in divine friendship. Joan's patience thus manifests a form of divine love. Crucially, Joan's good itself includes appropriately responding to these deontic person-centered reasons. The process in which we grasp and respond to person-centered reasons thus integrates into the process by which we grasp and respond to good-centered reasons via proper parthood. In short, moral theosis contains social theosis: they are one practical process.

5. The Rationality of Morality as Social-Moral Theosis: The Indwelling Strategy

Section 5 argued that social theosis is metaphysically united with moral theosis via proper parthood. But how does this integration occur in the life of the believer as an active developmental process? The short answer is that God drives social-moral theosis because divine indwelling unifies the believer's practical reason. To understand the divine indwelling, recall Jesus' teaching in John 14:23: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." Or as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 3:16: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in

you?" And as 1 John 4:12 claims, "if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us." The Godhead indwells in the soul by creating an intimate shared mental life with the indwelt.

Consider William Alston's "partial-life sharing" model of indwelling. Indwelling is a proper merging. It is a "mutual interpenetration of the life of the individual and the divine."[71] God shares the divine self with a human. God thereby shares the divine mind, such that the indwelling creates a shared mental life. This psychological union has cognitive and conative dimensions. God grants, say, Joan, access to the mind of God where Joan's mind can bear it. Joan then experiences divine thoughts as her own thoughts. This relationship is causal. God's presence introduces something new into Joan's experience, such as new mental events, attitudes, and beliefs.

Stump has defended a related account of the divine indwelling, which she characterizes as "union with a triune God [that] involves all three persons of the Trinity."[72] This union involves a "kind of mutual and shared second-personal presence."[73] The God-who-indwells and the indwelt person have "rich shared attention and mutual closeness."[74] For Christians, "the personal presence generated by mind-reading and empathy are also possible for God, and so is the shared attention needed for significant personal presence."[75] This presence is real "in-ness," intimacy so great that even human lovers cannot experience it. The indwelling also implies union with the persons of the Trinity themselves."[76] Stump claims that the indwelling means that God and the human person are "united in love."[77]

The divine indwelling drives moral and social theosis at once. And it does so in two ways. The Trinity (i) causes virtue, and (ii) its presence *is* virtue. The Trinity also (iii) causes persons to unify, and (iv) its presence *is* a kind of union. The indwelling causes and *counts as* virtue, and it unifies and *counts as* unity.

(i) *Causing Virtue*. God relates to us by creating experiences and beliefs via ever-greater intimacy and implants virtue to the degree that we cooperate with His efforts. Moral theosis-as-indwelling will make us good by making us morally perfect. As Alston says, the indwelling involves the "transformation of the believer

[71] Alston (1988, 246).
[72] Stump (2018, 118).
[73] *Ibid*., 132.
[74] *Ibid*., 123.
[75] *Ibid*., 132.
[76] *Ibid*., 139.
[77] *Ibid*., 132.

into a 'saint,' into the sort of person God designed him or her to be."[78] For Alston, then, "God's basic intention for us is that we should become like unto him." Stump argues that all virtue is second-personal since God is goodness; virtue entails a relationship with God, one uniquely crafted by grace: "A life in [God's] grace is a morally excellent life."[79] Acquiring virtue and relating to God interweave because God infuses us with virtue through a life of grace.

(ii) *Being Virtue*. Divine indwelling entails an intimate relationship with God. Again, God is Goodness, and when God indwells, God brings goodness in tow. Personal goodness then includes supernatural virtues, especially the love of God (charity), so God's presence thus *guarantees* the existence of virtue. Here the indwelling creates virtue by necessity.

(iii) *Causing Unity*. For Alston, becoming like God means becoming a social being. The indwelt can "enter into a community of love with him and with our fellow creatures."[80] The same goes for Stump. Virtue,

> . . . requires not a particular set of unusually excellent intrinsic attributes on the part of an individual. Rather, it requires a particularly powerful metaphysical mutuality of indwelling among persons. Deification is irreducibly interpersonal on this account. Neither deification nor deity is anything that an individual person could have in isolation, not even a divine person, since there is more than one divine person in God.[81]

For Alston and Stump, the indwelling moves us into closer relationships with others, both with God and other human beings.

(iv) *Collective Relationship*. The indwelling is the joint inheritance of humanity. As St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:19–22, we are all "being fitted together," growing "into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." God not only indwells in the individual believer, but dwells in us as a community. And corporate indwelling means that humans share God's presence. Corporate indwelling exceeds individual indwelling. When humans unite under common rules, they together become a place for God to dwell. Indeed, that is how the Trinity fully indwells: in multiple persons and not merely in a single person.

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[78] Alston (1988, 121).
[79] Stump (2018, 210, 218).
[80] Alston (1988, 123).
[81] Stump (2018, 167).

Scripture connects morality to an intimate relationship with God. Jesus teaches in John 15:10: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and abide in His love." Consider John 14:23 again: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home within him." But a central part of Jesus' word is the second love command: to love others. A God that indwells within us fulfills our unity and goodness desires.

In his autobiographical account of his spiritual development, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, St. Sophrony writes: "Painful as it may be to keep His commandments, we cannot relinquish the goal before us - to become for all eternity the habitation of His Light."[82] Christians should keep Jesus' commands for many reasons. Sophrony says that the Church becomes a place where God can dwell. So when we ask Plato's question—Why be moral?—we have an answer: to become a home for the Trinity.[83] The more we unite with others in love, the more we indwelt we become. Indwelling causes this psychological change. It *is* social-moral theosis. The indwelling produces virtue and drives us to connect with others.

One could object that our reason to become a home for the Trinity is the wrong reason to be moral. We should treat others with respect according to their person-centered reasons. Period. But I acknowledge we have person-centered reasons to respect others and not mere good-centered ones. Instead, I identify a process where we grasp person-centered reasons. Yet, this process forms a proper part of our becoming good. Thus, if reason requires that we choose the good, we must also choose to respect persons. We still act for person-centered reasons: morality has, again, a victim focus. The key is that our good provides *no grounds to doubt* that we should act for those person-centered reasons. And indeed, our good offers a decisive basis to act for those reasons. Our good-centered reasons demand that we observe our person-centered reasons, for our final end includes the acquisition of the divine likeness through union with others.

6. Morality as Being Built Together

By illuminating both moral theosis (pursuing the divine likeness) and social theosis (imitating the Trinity through reverent love), we can vindicate the rationality of morality. Our fundamental practical imperative is to be like God and become friends with God, so we must resemble God both as a unity and a community. The divine

[82] Sophrony (2012, x).

[83] People talk about the indwelling of the HS, but Jesus says the Son and the Father will make their home in you.

indwelling helps us respond to our eudaimonistic good-centered and person-centered reasons simultaneously because it drives the integrated processes of social-moral divinization. The divine nature (as both Goodness and as a Trinity) and the divine indwelling gradually unite these aspects into one rational and coherent moral life.

Our ultimate good includes establishing terms of social life that extend unity through reverent love to more and more people (and perhaps animals). Moral life requires that humans pursue reconciliation wherever they can, for the virtuous person deepens and heals her relationships with others. We only flourish when we draw ever nearer to others in reverent love, as we draw ever nearer to God.

I see this ideal of a *dynamic* moral life in Ephesians 2:14–22:

> Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Morality has a *social telos:* to lay the foundations for a great drawing near. Humanity grows together through loving God and each other. The moral life is one where God renovates us into His home.

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