

Christology From Intra Trinitarian Agency and Distinct Self Consciousness and I Thou via Excerpts from Thomas H McCall

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Begin Excerpts:

The Father-Son Communion and the Issue of Agency

What is implied by an affirmation of intra-Trinitarian love? How should we think about the distinction of the persons? Are the Father and Son distinct in *agency*? Is the Father a distinct person from the Son in the sense of being an “I” in relation to another “Thou?” Are they, or do they have, distinct “centers of consciousness”?

As we have seen, the mainstream Christian tradition has been clear that divine action “outside of God” is always unified and undivided. As traditional Latin formulations put it, the *opera ad extra sunt omnia indivisa*. As long as this is properly understood, there is no reason that the theologian who recognizes the biblical witness to the reality of intra-Trinitarian love and who affirms it as such cannot affirm the traditional dictum as well. But what does it mean to understand it properly? Well, perhaps it will help to clear away a possible misunderstanding. The traditional dictum does not mean that there is no distinction in the divine action. To be “undivided” does not mean “indistinguishable.” And not only is it true (for the mainstream Latin tradition) that the works of God *ad extra* are undivided, but it is also true that these works of God can rightly be said to reach their terminus on one or another of the divine persons.

It is basic to Christian orthodoxy—going all the way back to the rejection of patripassianism—that the Father does not become incarnate, does not suffer, and does not die. Nor does the Spirit. Instead, “one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh.” Only one of the divine persons, that is, actually became incarnate. So we should think of divine action as unified and undivided, but we should not think of it as undifferentiated. A better way of understanding the claim that the *opera ad extra* are undivided is offered by important theologians in the tradition. As Maximus the Confessor puts it, the Father and the Holy Spirit “themselves did not become incarnate, but the Father approved and the Spirit cooperated when the Son himself effected his incarnation.” John of Damascus takes a similar line: “the Father and the Holy Spirit take no part at all in the incarnation of the Word except in connection with the miracles, and in respect of good will and

purpose.” So does Peter Lombard when he says that “it was specifically in the hypostasis of the Son, not jointly in the three persons, that divine nature united the human one to itself.”

When we consider the opera *ad intra*, however, matters are rather different. Here the work of the Father is entirely distinct from that of the Son. For in traditional doctrine, the Father generates the Son—and *only* the Father generates the Son. Whatever exactly eternal generation is may be rather mysterious, but, whatever exactly it is, it is something that only the Father does. The Son does not generate himself. Indeed, on some accounts of the internal relations, the “relations of opposition” are the only real distinctions between the person (*ad intra*). So there is a sense in which the works of one divine person are entirely distinct from those of the other divine persons. Thus it seems not unreasonable to conclude that their agency is distinct in some sense. Indeed, as Scott Williams concludes, the traditional view is that while “some acts are shared among the persons,” it is also true that “some acts distinguish the divine persons. Only the Father begets the Son.”

The New Testament depiction of the relationships between the divine persons leaves little room for doubt about the distinction. The Father uses “I” in relation to the Son (Matt 3:17). The Son uses “I” in relation to the Father (e.g., John 17:1-24). So, if we practice theological interpretation of Scripture and understand the biblical narratives to be referring to the *Triune* God, then we seem to have grounds to conclude that there is a robustly “I-Thou” relationship between Father and Son. Some critics may protest that this move comes too quickly. For if we interpret the New Testament theologically, and, following the tradition, understand it to be referring the *Triune* God, then we should also follow that same tradition and understand that these same personal indexicals refer to the *incarnate* Son. In other words, the critics might aver, these texts refer not to the Son *simpliciter* but to the Son incarnate as the *human* Jesus Christ. In other words, they might remonstrate, it is not simply “the Son” who is the referent of these dialogues but “the Son qua-humanity.”

There is a long and venerable tradition to thinking this way about the incarnate Son: the God-human is to be understood not merely as human or divine but as human and divine. Since the human nature is not “confused” with the divine nature, we are to understand some things to be true of the Son qua or according to his human nature while understanding other things to be true of and appropriately predicated of the Son qua or according to his divine nature. But whatever we think of this strategy in Christology—and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to pass judgment at this point—it does not change anything about the main point that I am making here. Even if we say that it is *the Son* qua-humanity who is the referent of the “I” in relation to the Father who is the “Thou,” it is nonetheless true that it is the Son qua-humanity who is the referent. For it is not the humanity that is the referent. The humanity itself is *anhypostatic*. It is only the humanity joined to the person of the Son in the incarnation that is *enhypostatic* or “hypostatized.” The humanity itself is not a distinct agent. The humanity itself is not a knower or

doer. The humanity itself is not an “I” that somehow functions alongside of or in addition to the real person that is the eternal Son. Unless we are prepared to embrace a Nestorian Christology, the human nature cannot be considered as a personal entity in and of itself. So even if we say that these personal indexicals refer to the Son qua-humanity (or qua-human nature), it is still the case that it is *the Son*—rather than the Father or the Spirit—who is incarnate. Thus it is the Son—and not the Father or the Spirit—who is the referent of whatever is to be predicated of God qua-humanity.

As we have seen, Ward is sure that prayer is a merely human activity. He admits that “while the fact that Jesus prays to the Father distinguishes Jesus from the Father, it does not seem to reflect a distinction between two persons of the same sort.” For “it is Jesus as a dependent human being who prays to a being of much greater power,” and “it is the suffering and limited human subject, included in the Word though it is, who prays to the Creator.” Similarly, Holmes insists that “prayer is necessarily a creaturely action.” But neither Ward nor Holmes gives us any sustained argument for this conclusion; instead it seems to serve as a presupposition that then functions as the premise of an argument. However, since this is the very issue at stake, to do so without further argument is to risk begging the question. On the other hand, it is not only Jesus who addresses his Father, for the Spirit also “intercedes” for creatures (Rom 8:26). Clearly, the Spirit is not incarnate. So the intercession of the Spirit cannot be counted as something to be taken qua-humanity. Unless the Spirit is a creature, then it seems that intercession is not merely a creaturely action.

In an important contribution to the contemporary discussions, Scott Williams works to retrieve some insights from the medieval Latin tradition. He offers what he refers to alternatively as “soft Latin Trinitarianism” or “Latin Social Trinitarianism.” It is “Social” in the sense that the divine persons love one another, and it is social in the further sense that there are three divine agents. As Williams puts it, “there are three metaphysical agents (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).” And it is “Latin” in the sense that it follows the mainstream Latin tradition in recognizing both the real distinction of the divine persons and the numerical sameness of the divine being. He observes that there is much more diversity in the scholastic Latin tradition than is sometimes recognized, and he makes a strong case for a distinctly “Franciscan” account that follows the lead of Richard of St. Victor. On this account, a “person” is an “incommunicable existent of an intellectual nature,” and “each divine person is constituted by two items: the one and only one instance of the divine nature and an incommunicable personal attribute” (e.g., *begetting*). Each divine person is irreducible to the other two, and the unique identity of each divine person is found only in relation to the others. At the same time, however, they share the numerically same instance of the divine nature (which is the *only* instance of the divine nature).

Williams also argues, however, that the situation regarding the indexical “I” is rather more complicated than it might appear at first glance. Drawing on recent work by David Kaplan and

John Perry, he draws a distinction between “utterances” and “tokens”: utterances are intentional acts of communication, while tokens are “traces left by utterances” and can include speech, writing, symbols, or other gestures. Following Perry, Williams argues that the numerically same token can be used to express different propositions. The various meanings are relative to the different contexts, thus one placard with the words “Vote for Bush” or “I support President Bush” may be used to communicate very different things. Notably, although there is one token, there are different meanings on both ends: the referent of “Bush” may change, and the referent of “I” may change. In Williams’s summary:

“...we see that the referent of an indexical expression like “I,” and the proposition entailed by it, depends upon the person using the token of “I.” Moreover, an indexical expression like “I” *automatically* refers to the person using it. Lastly, we see that numerically the same token of an expression can be relative to diverse contexts and so can be used to affirm diverse propositions....”

The “referent and content of ‘I’” are relative to the situation; they “are determined by the agent using the token,” thus “The Son’s using this token entails that the ‘I’ refers to the Son and not to the Father.” Accordingly, when the person who is the Father says “I am the Father,” that person uses this token to say that he is identical with the Father. If, however, the person who is Son uses the same token, he uses it to mean that he is numerically the same God as the Father but not the person of the Father. The upshot is this: to have a robustly Trinitarian account of mutual love, one need not insist that “self-conscious acts” are “essential to personhood even if the aptitude for such acts were implied,” and if one wishes to retain only one “I” within the Trinity, then one can do so while maintaining belief in the genuine personal distinctions and even agency of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In an ongoing discussion with William Hasker, Williams is pressed to clarify various aspects of his proposal. Williams recognizes that his “Latin Social model” needs nuance on the matter of whether there is one divine consciousness rather than three of these. He distinguishes between three types of consciousness. What he calls “experiential consciousness” is the “what-it-is-like” consciousness. What he dubs “access consciousness” is “basic awareness of something such that one can interact with that thing.” And what he refers to as “introspective consciousness” is “awareness of one’s own awareness of something.” Armed with these distinctions, Williams maintains that the divine persons hold all their mental tokens in common while also allowing that one divine person’s consciousness may differ from another in some respects. Thus their respective understandings of, say, “God the Father is wise” may not differ at all, but their introspective awareness of, say, “I am wise” will be differentiated. “So, God the Father knows what it is like to know that he (i.e., the Father) is wise; likewise, God the Son knows what it is like to know he (i.e., the Son) is wise, and God the Holy Spirit knows what it is like to know he (i.e., the Holy Spirit) is wise.” As Williams explains, in cases of contingent divine action—such

as the divine Son becoming incarnate rather than the Father or Spirit—“what is shared is numerically the same act of using a divine mental token.” But what “is not shared is exactly the same access consciousness (the proposition of which each is aware), experiential consciousness (what it’s like to be aware of the proposition of which one is aware), and introspective consciousness (one’s being aware of something about oneself).”

In cases referring not to contingent divine action but to necessary truths related to the personal properties (such as the eternal generation of the Son), matters are even more clear-cut. So the Father “has experiential consciousness of what it’s like to beget the Son and is introspectively conscious of his begetting the Son,” and, since this pertains to the Father’s incommunicable property, then this is a case of “experiential consciousness and introspective consciousness [that] cannot be shared with the Son (or Holy Spirit).”

This analysis yields the following conclusion: “depending on the divine mental token being used and the proposition of which each person is aware, the persons are conscious of exactly the same thing or are conscious of something different.” And all of this is consistent with there being exactly one divine substance, for on this account we have numerical sameness without identity. What we have then, are *multiple* ways to affirm the reality of mutual love within the Triune life as well as careful and sophisticated accounts of Trinitarian agency while also retaining belief in the numerical sameness of the Triune God. Thus we need not resort to (R-ST) to affirm the biblical witness to the union and communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whether or not such versions of ST are preferable in an all-things-considered sense is a topic for another day. But what should be clear at this point is that the common, generic-essence versions of Social Trinitarianism are not required to make the theological affirmations required by a proper understanding of the biblical witness.

Conclusion:

As we have seen, Richard Bauckham is certain that Johannine theology supports ST. He contrasts ST with “much of the tradition,” which is said to give “priority to the one divine substance over the three Persons in God” and instead holds that the “three Persons are irreducible.” I think that Bauckham is mistaken in claiming that (much of) the tradition prioritizes the substance over the persons in this way. This is not the place for an extended argument about such a claim, but my observations to this point about major figures in the Latin scholastic tradition (e.g., Richard of St. Victor) should at least provide some counter-evidence. But we should not be distracted by the historical claims and thus miss the constructive point. For surely Bauckham is correct to say that Johannine theology supports the central claim (made with emphasis by the defenders of ST) that the divine persons are irreducible—either to one another or to the divine substance. He is also right when he says that Johannine theology brings us to the

conclusion that the “divine Persons are acting and relating subjects” and further that the concept of coinherence or perichoresis is “of critical importance.”

In this chapter I have engaged with the provocative proposal offered by Keith Ward as a way into broader considerations pertaining to the communion of love shared between Father and Son within the Holy Trinity. After working to sort out various conceptions (and misconceptions) of the label “ST,” I turned attention to the significant alternative to it offered by Ward. Here I introduced his position as well as his arguments against ST and for his own position. I argued that the case for his proposal is incomplete and flawed with respect to the theological exegesis of relevant biblical passages; here I noted some shortcomings with his own exegetical case and presented a counter-argument that appeals to Johannine theology. After offering some theological analysis of Ward’s constructive proposal, I argued, contra Ward, that we both can and should affirm that there is mutual love within the Trinity. This much, at least, is a basic theological desiderata. We need not—although we can—resort to (R-ST) to affirm it. But Christian theologians who take the Johannine depiction to be a window—however shadowy and narrow it may be—into the life of the triune God should not hesitate to confess that God is love.

End Excerpts.

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