

# Transcendentality and the Gift: On Gunton, Milbank, and Trinitarian Metaphysics

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## *Abstract*

This article considers the compatibility between the doctrine of the Trinity and the theory of the transcendental properties by offering an account of the notion of the ‘gift’ as a transcendental term. In particular, this article presents a re-reading of John Milbank’s influential theology of the gift through Colin Gunton’s project of developing ‘trinitarian transcendentals’. Showing how Milbank’s notion of the gift could be systematically understood in terms of what Gunton calls a ‘trinitarianly developed transcendental’ which nonetheless avoids many of the problems found in Gunton’s original project, this article argues that understanding ‘gift’ as a transcendental term not only provides us with new ways of reconceiving the relationship between the philosophy of transcendental properties and various traditional doctrines, it can moreover demonstrate how the traditional and biblical names of the Holy Spirit as ‘the Gift’ and the Son as ‘the Word’ can offer new ways of developing distinctively trinitarian accounts of metaphysics.

## *Introduction*

Recent theology has witnessed a new and growing interest in the theological possibility of developing a ‘trinitarian ontology’.<sup>1</sup> But what does ‘trinitarian ontology’ mean? What might a *trinitarian* articulation of ‘being’ look like? One particular approach to arrive at a ‘trinitarian ontology’ may be through the development of an explicitly ‘trinitarian’ account of the transcendental properties of ‘being’. For if transcendental properties are universal and necessary properties that are possessed by all being, then a distinctively ‘trinitarian’ rendition of the

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<sup>1</sup> See the major international conference *New Trinitarian Ontologies* held at the University of Cambridge in September 2019 (video recordings available at [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLR3AUOTRu-AxyNhJ67Ml6nTKSF6iy2X\\_F](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLR3AUOTRu-AxyNhJ67Ml6nTKSF6iy2X_F)). Vittorio Hösle’s paper at this conference is later published as part of a series of articles on trinitarian theology and metaphysics in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*: Vittorio Hösle, ‘From Augustine’s to Hegel’s Theory of Trinity’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 4 (2020): 441–465. See also Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Einfach Gott’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 4 (2020): 519–542; King-Ho Leung, ‘Ontology and Anti-Platonism: Reconsidering Colin Gunton’s Trinitarian Theology’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 4 (2020): 419–440. Note also the recent publication of the English translation of Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (New York: Angelico Press, 2020).

transcendental properties could be regarded as a trinitarian account of ‘being’ or indeed a ‘trinitarian ontology’. This article offers a consideration of the notion of the gift—a term which has received much interest in recent theology—as a ‘trinitarian’ transcendental property to think about the relationship between ontology and the doctrine of the Trinity as well as some of the promises and limits of the endeavour to develop robust accounts of theological metaphysics.

To explore the possibility of understanding ‘gift’ as a transcendental property, this article offers a reading of John Milbank’s influential theology of the gift through a perspective inspired by Colin Gunton’s attempt to develop a ‘trinitarian ontology’ of transcendental properties in his 1993 book, *The One, the Three and the Many*.<sup>2</sup> While Milbank has not developed a systematic theory of ‘trinitarian transcendentals’ like Gunton’s, by applying Gunton’s framework to Milbank’s work, this article seeks to supplement and further develop Milbank’s programmatic theology of the gift which is presented as his ‘prolegomena’ to future trinitarian metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> After laying out Gunton’s framework of developing ‘trinitarian transcendentals’ and highlighting some of its problems (section one), this article shows how Milbank’s notion of ‘the gift’ can be understood in terms of what Gunton calls a ‘trinitarianly developed transcendental’ which avoids many of the problems found in Gunton’s original ontological project (section two). By reading Milbank’s writings on the gift through Gunton’s framework, this article then argues that understanding ‘gift’ as a transcendental property shows us how the traditional and indeed biblical

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<sup>2</sup> Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See John Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic’, *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 119–161. See also John Milbank, ‘The Soul of Reciprocity Part One: Reciprocity Refused’, *Modern Theology* 17, no. 3 (July 2001): 335–391; ‘The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Granted’, *Modern Theology* 17, no. 4 (October 2001): 485–507; *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003).

names of the Holy Spirit as ‘the Gift’ and the Son as ‘the Word’ can offer us a distinctively *trinitarian* interpretation of being and reality (section three).

In light of the emerging works in contemporary continental philosophy that seek to construct systematic ontologies—which often feature conceptual structures and motifs that echo what Gunton calls ‘the pre-Kantian sense’ of transcendental properties as ‘the necessary notes of being’,<sup>4</sup> a reconsideration of the traditional notions of the transcendentals not only opens up new avenues of conversations between contemporary theology and philosophy, but also illuminates the relationship between speculative metaphysics and revealed dogma. For although the traditional account of the transcendental properties of being is largely associated with the medieval metaphysics of transcendence and theism in general, as Gunton points out, these theories of the transcendentals are often developed independently of the theological doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> By re-examining the relationship between the theory of transcendental properties and the doctrine of the Trinity, we can come to a better understanding of the relationship between ontology and trinitarian theology, which can in turn bring to light some of the prospects but also the risks of the application of trinitarian notions to the articulation of ‘being’, especially with regard to the recent theological interest in developing so-called ‘new trinitarian ontologies’.

### I. Gunton on ‘trinitarian transcendentals’

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<sup>4</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 136. On the (re-)emergence of pre-Kantian style transcendental metaphysics in contemporary continental philosophy, see King-Ho Leung, ‘The One, the True, the Good... or *Not*: Badiou, Agamben, and Atheistic Transcendentalism’, *Continental Philosophy Review* 54, no. 1 (2021): 75–97; cf. Daniel Colucciello Barber, ‘World-Making and Grammatical Impasse’, *Qui Parle* 25, no. 1–2 (2016): 179–206.

<sup>5</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 139.

In *The One, the Three and the Many*, Colin Gunton offers a fierce critique of the (alleged) privileging of the one over the many in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition following Origen and Augustine:

What we see in the Origenist-Augustinian tradition is an elevating of the one over the many in respect of transcendental status. Unity, but not plurality, is transcendental. The elevation of the one is most clearly visible in the thought of Aquinas, whom I shall use as my main illustration of the downgrading of the many.<sup>6</sup>

According to Gunton, this celebration of the one over the many caused the Christian theological tradition to focus on the *one* divine substance over the three particular divine persons, thereby allowing the Platonic or even Parmenidean metaphysics of oneness to displace the emphasis of the threeness and interrelation of the persons in the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> Instead of seeing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as united through one common substance or essence, Gunton argues that ‘the being of God is not a blank unity, but a being in communion’: the triune God exists as ‘a communion, a unity of persons in relation’.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned in the quote above, Gunton argues that the metaphysical affirmation of the one and the consequent focus on the *one* divine substance over the three persons is particularly evident in Aquinas’ doctrine of God and his metaphysical theory of the transcendental properties of being. As Gunton notes, Aquinas teaches that the ontological notions of the ‘one’, the ‘true’, and the ‘good’ are transcendental terms that are coextensive with ‘being’ and universally

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, especially 150, 191–92.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 214–15.

applicable to God and creation in an *analogical* manner.<sup>9</sup> For Aquinas, insofar as God as ‘the One who *is*’ is ‘being itself’, beings have their transcendental properties of oneness, truth, and goodness by virtue of participation in God’s perfect Oneness, Truth, and Goodness which are identical to God’s very own perfect Being.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, although God and all created beings can be said to be one, true, and good, for Aquinas these properties can only be said of God and created beings in a strictly *analogical* matter, where the similarities between the oneness/truth/goodness of God and created beings are grounded in a yet greater dissimilarity.<sup>11</sup>

Gunton notes that the framework of analogy is one of the greatest strengths and achievements of Aquinas’ theology because ‘the relations between finite and infinite are made conceivable, while the otherness of God and the world is also preserved’ with this analogical outlook.<sup>12</sup> However, at the same time, Gunton argues that Aquinas’ analogical outlook is problematic insofar as the Angelic Doctor’s account of the transcendental properties of being are ‘developed independently of considerations of the Trinity’,<sup>13</sup> for the analogical relation between creation and its Creator is conceived as one between composite created beings and the *one* simple divine substance (rather than the *three* divine persons), which Gunton understands to be under the influence of philosophical metaphysics (instead of the doctrine of the Trinity).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 139–40.

<sup>10</sup> See Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); cf. Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 303–304.

<sup>11</sup> Davison, *Participation in God*, 147. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.28–34.

<sup>12</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 138.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 139–40.

As opposed to Aquinas' analogical account between the transcendental properties of creation and the divine perfections of the *one* divine substance, in *The One, the Three and the Many* Gunton seeks to develop 'a trinitarian analogy of being' where 'the structures of the created world [are understood] in the light of the dynamic of the being of the *triune* creator' and not just some abstract metaphysical principle or eternal substance postulated as the perfection of oneness, truth, and goodness.<sup>15</sup> Gunton argues that his 'trinitarian analogy of being' is 'a similar enterprise to the Thomist analogy, though with a form that is indebted to Barth'.<sup>16</sup> As Gunton notes:

Aquinas' aim is right. We do need to be able to conceive the way in which created structures of relationality are marked by the hand that made and upholds them. In that respect, Barth's programme, too, falls short. He is right to develop his theology of analogy on the basis—foundation—of the implications of God's triune relatedness to that which is not God . . . unlike Barth's analogy of faith [Gunton's trinitarian analogy of being is] not just an approach to predicating qualities of God analogously, but to finding a way of speaking of all being.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Gunton seeks to bring together Aquinas' analogical framework and Barth's emphasis on God's self-revealed 'triune relatedness' to develop a distinctive *trinitarian* analogical account of being that does not have the *one* divine substance as the primary analogue but rather the 'relatedness' between the three divine persons as the key to understanding the structure of all being.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 141 (emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 140–41.

According to Gunton, ‘although [the idea of the Trinity itself] is not transcendental, not a mark of all being, it yet generates transcendentals, ways of looking at universal features of the world of which we are a part and in which we live.’<sup>18</sup> While Gunton presents ‘*perichoresis*’, ‘relationality’, and ‘substantiality’ as three transcendental terms which he argues could be derived from the doctrine of the Trinity,<sup>19</sup> let us focus on Gunton’s use of ‘*perichoresis*’ as it is the only term out of the three which has explicit or indeed exclusively Christian theological origins (following the Barthian emphasis on concrete revelation in Gunton’s formulation of his trinitarian analogy of being).<sup>20</sup> As Gunton boldly notes:

If, as I am suggesting, the concept of *perichoresis* is of transcendental status, it must enable us to . . . explore whether reality is on all its levels ‘perichoretic’, a dynamism of relatedness . . . [The world] is perichoretic in that everything in it contributes to the being of everything else, enabling everything to be what it distinctively is. The dynamism of mutual constitutiveness derives from the world’s being a dynamic order that is summoned into being and directed towards its perfection by the free creativity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

While Gunton proposes to ‘use the concept of *perichoresis* not only analogically but transcendentially’, he nonetheless emphasises that the transcendental conceptual ‘use’ of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 155–231.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, 152: ‘Central here is the notion of *perichoresis*. In its origins, the concept was a way of showing the ontological interdependence and reciprocity of the three persons of the Trinity.’

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 165–66.

*perichoresis* must be strictly *analogical* ‘if due allowance is to be made for the distinction in relation between God and the world’.<sup>22</sup>

Before discussing some of the problems with Gunton’s postulation of *perichoresis* as a transcendental property of being, it is worth considering Gunton’s very own account of his use of ‘analogy’ in some detail:

[W]e must be aware also of the way in which *perichoresis* is—only—an analogy. When used of the persons of the Godhead, it implies a total and eternal interanimation of being and energies. When used of those limited in time and space, changes in the intension of the concept necessarily follow. To be created involves spatial and temporal limitation, so that living autonomously within the bounds of the created order—living according to the law of spatial and temporal being—involves the acceptance of limitation, but not simply the limitation involved in not being God . . . it also involves accepting gladly the limitations of being perichoretically bound up with other human beings and the non-personal universe. Such limitations are both spatial and temporal.<sup>23</sup>

While Gunton seeks to safeguard the ontological difference between God and creation with his insistence on an analogical understanding of the predication of his trinitarian transcendentals, as we can see in this passage, the fundamental difference between God’s divine *perichoresis* and the perichoretic character of creation appears to lie primarily in a difference in ‘the intension of the concept’ when *perichoresis* is predicated of finite creatures: because creatures are limited to space

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 170.



and time, the perichoretic relationships which constitute their being must also be limited both spatially and temporally—as opposed to God’s uncreated perichoresis which is limitless and eternal.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to having a somewhat thinner conception of ‘analogy’ than Aquinas’, Gunton’s very proposal to ‘use the concept of perichoresis not only analogically but *transcendentally*’ raises serious problems for the traditional ontological distinction between God and creation which Aquinas sought to maintain with his analogical framework.<sup>25</sup> As Yonghua Ge argues:

Gunton argues that ‘perichoretic reciprocity’ exists not only in the Godhead but also in the created order: ‘Everything in the universe is what it is by virtue of its relatedness to everything else.’<sup>26</sup> Perichoretic relations exist on both levels—divine and creaturely—and as such, Gunton names *perichoresis* a ‘transcendental.’ However, if we follow this logic to its end, we should ask: if perichoresis exists on two levels, should there also be perichoresis *between* the two levels—God and creation? In other words, if perichoresis is truly transcendental, why stop at the horizontal levels and not apply it vertically? Can there be a certain perichoretic relationship between God and creatures? Gunton is silent on this possibility.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Here one may say that Gunton’s analogy differs rather radically from Aquinas’ insofar as Gunton’s ‘*perichoresis*’ is an ontological property that is shared by both God and creation, as though God and creation both participate in a fundamental metaphysical genus called ‘*perichoresis*’ (or what John Webster calls ‘treat[ing] God and created things as paired, parts which together make a whole’, as quoted below at note 33), in spite of Gunton’s claim that his transcendentals are ‘open transcendentals’ are somehow ‘open and tentative’ (*The One*, 142). On how Aquinas differs from such an understanding of analogy, see Davison, *Participation in God*, 171–93.

<sup>25</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 165 (emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> Citing Gunton, *The One*, 172.

<sup>27</sup> Yonghua Ge, ‘The One and the Many: A Revisiting of an Old Philosophical Question in the Light of Theologies of Creation and Participation’, *Heythrop Journal* 57, no. 1 (2016): 112.

While Ge stops at observing Gunton's silence on whether there is a 'perichoretic relationship between God and creatures', we may take a step further to note that if *perichoresis* is indeed a transcendental property of all created being, and that the very relation between God and creatures is a product and outcome of God's act of creation and gift of being, then the 'vertical' relation between God and creation must *be* perichoretic insofar as it *has being* and that '*perichoresis*' is coextensive with 'being' as a transcendental term.<sup>28</sup>

If this reading is correct, then there is between God and creation a *perichoretic* relationship—which Gunton defines as an 'ontological interdependence and reciprocity'.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, Gunton's postulation of *perichoresis* as a transcendental property would imply that God and creation are, in Gunton's terminology, 'mutually constitutive' of each other (even if in a contingent and temporally limited manner, as creation's perichoretic being is contingent and temporally limited in character).<sup>30</sup> In other words, creation becomes to God what God is to creation: as long as creation exists (contingently and temporally), it enjoys a 'perichoretic' relationship with the persons of the Trinity just as the divine persons relate to each other.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, to the extent that

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<sup>28</sup> One possible objection to this reading is that its focus on the relation between God and creation mistakenly 'reifies' this 'vertical' relation as a kind of *tertium quid* in addition to God and creation—that such a reading deviates from Gunton's emphasis on the 'concreteness' of both divine and created being (see *The One*, especially 191–92, 196, 201). However, insofar as Gunton insists that 'particulars, of whatever kind, can be understood only in terms of their relatedness to each other and the whole' (37 n.53), and specifically that 'All particulars are formed by their relationship to God the creator and redeemer and to each other. Their particular being is a being in relation, each distinct and unique and yet each inseparably bound up with other, and ultimately all, particulars' (207), it seems that Gunton would admit that the (created) *relation* between God and creation is itself a *being* (cf. 214)—even if its being is constituted by the particular terms of the relation (which are themselves in turn *also* constituted by the relation which they form, in a second-order 'mutually constitutive perichoretic' way). Accordingly, if '*perichoresis*' is indeed a transcendental property, then the relation between God and creation would also necessarily be a *perichoretic* one, just as the 'vertical' relation between God and creation was seen as *one* relationship, a *true* relationship and indeed a *good* relationship according to the traditional account of transcendentals. A parallel problem with Gunton's relational ontology could be found in his critique of traditional accounts of the divine substance, as discussed below in note 76.

<sup>29</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 166, 169, 178, 191.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 182: 'Spirit thus brings God into relation to the world and, reciprocally, the world into relation with God.'

Gunton insists that ‘of both God and the world it must be said that they have their being in relation’ and that ‘the general characteristics of God’s eternal being, as persons in relation, communion, may be known from what he has done and does in the actions that we call the economy of creation and salvation’, Gunton’s trinitarian theology can be regarded as one that prioritises the economic Trinity.<sup>32</sup> As such, perhaps something like the ‘mutual constitutiveness’ of God and creation we find in Gunton’s ontology is what John Webster has in mind when he cautions that theologies which accord primacy to the divine economy often risk treating God as ‘some sort of magnified historical agent acting on the same plane as other agents’, and ‘to treat God and created things as paired, parts which together make a whole and which are *constituted by their mutual relations*.’<sup>33</sup>

In this regard, even though Gunton argues that his theory of ‘the new transcendentals will need to maintain the advantages of the classical tradition and preserve the otherness between God and the world’,<sup>34</sup> Gunton’s perichoretic ontology significantly deflates the ‘verticality’ of the so-called ‘vertical’ relation between God and creatures: if God and creation are in a perichoretic relationship of what Gunton calls ‘mutual constitutiveness’, then there is arguably no qualitative difference between the ‘vertical’ relation between God and creation and the ‘horizontal’ relation between creatures themselves. Indeed, whereas Aquinas teaches that there is an asymmetrical ontological relation between God and creation,<sup>35</sup> the perichoretic relation of ‘mutual constitutiveness’ or indeed ‘ontological interdependence’ between God and creation implied by

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>33</sup> John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, vol. 1: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 8 (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.45.3 ad 1, cf. I.13.7.

Gunton's ontology of transcendental *perichoresis* is one that is radically symmetrical.<sup>36</sup> The ontological or 'vertical' difference between God and creation upheld and emphasised by Aquinas and the classical theological tradition is thereby severely compromised if not 'flattened' and 'horizontalized'.<sup>37</sup>

## II. Milbank on the Gift

Not unlike how Gunton who, as Christoph Schwöbel suggests, 'takes up the sensibilities of post-modernity and reflects them in a trinitarian framework',<sup>38</sup> John Milbank's early theological work in the 1990s is also frequently engaged in critical conversation with the ideas of postmodern

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<sup>36</sup> Although Gunton argues that his ontology in *The One, the Three and the Many* is analogical in character, Richard Fermer remarks that 'it is not clear' that Gunton's ontological notion of perichoretic relation 'is being used as an analogy'. For when Gunton (following John Zizioulas) 'uses the concept of being in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, and then transports the concept to creation, one is left with the implication that God becomes another being among the range of beings, or that God's being and the being of redeemed creation are on the same spectrum . . . The danger here is of a *collapse of the distinction between God and the world*, which threatens Gunton's aim, "to space God and the world in such a way that they can be understood to be distinct, though related, and so truly themselves".' Richard Fermer, 'The Limits of Trinitarian Theology as a Methodological Paradigm', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 41, no. 2 (1999): 173 (emphasis added); citing Gunton, *The One*, 148. Abandoning his affirmation of analogy in his earlier work, Gunton presents an explicitly *univocal* account of perichoresis in his later work, where he makes a clear turn towards Duns Scotus' univocity of being and fiercely argues that 'the analogical system' is not only 'bound up with a hierarchical metaphysic of reality [that] distorts historic revelation', but is moreover 'essentially a form of unbelief, seeking God prior to and other than through the incarnation and sending of the Spirit.' Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Doctrine of the Divine Absolutes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 67, 155. Drawing on Scotist univocity, Gunton argues: 'God's love and ours are precisely the same kind of action . . . And is not that the message of the first letter of John, a text that will prove continually suggestive for our topic? Divine love is a pattern for human love, because it is precisely the same kind of attitude and action. "[S]ince God so loved us, we ought also to love one another . . . if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" [John 1:11–12]. Is not that inescapably a form of univocity?' (ibid., 70). Thus, if divine love is marked by the *perichoresis* between the divine persons, then Gunton's neo-Scotist account of the univocity of love would imply that human love is also *perichoresis* because, to quote Gunton again, 'God's love and ours are precisely the same kind of action'.

<sup>37</sup> It is perhaps because of these difficulties that Gunton in his later work replaces the theory of the transcendentals with Irenaeus' account of the Son and Spirit as the 'two hands' as the mediation between God (the Father) and creation. See Gunton, *Act and Being*, especially 77–8, 139–40. On this development in Gunton's work, see Christoph Schwöbel, 'Gunton on Creation', in *The T&T Clark Handbook of Colin Gunton*, edited by Andrew Picard, Murray Rae and Myk Habets (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 59–75.

<sup>38</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, 'The Shape of Colin Gunton's Theology: On the Way towards a Fully Trinitarian Theology', in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, edited by Lincoln Harvey (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 199.

philosophers such as Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault.<sup>39</sup> Milbank's 1995 landmark article 'Can a Gift be Given?' in this journal is no exception, for this important programmatic essay is very much a critical response to Derrida's account of the impossibility of 'the gift' as a phenomenon.<sup>40</sup> According to Derrida, a 'gift' is something given by a giver without any expectation or possibility of receiving something in return from the recipient. Because in Derrida's view, to receive something—some 'counter-gift'—back from the recipient would constitute a mode of contractual or economic exchange which he deems incompatible with true and pure gift-giving. For Derrida, gift-giving is strictly incompatible with any form of exchange or reciprocity: even the simple recognition or acknowledgement of something as a 'gift' (e.g., to merely say 'thank you') would already count as a mode of returning—*giving-back*—a 'counter-gift' (e.g., the 'counter-gift' of expressed gratitude or indeed *thanks-giving*) which would annul the given thing's status as a 'gift'.<sup>41</sup> As Milbank notes, 'Derrida takes an extreme line here: not simply gratitude for a gift on the part of a recipient, but even acknowledgement of the gift cancels the gift by rewarding the giver with the knowledge that he is a giver'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for Derrida it is formally speaking impossible for a gift to be identified or recognised, for any recognition or even perception of the 'gift' would automatically constitute a minimal form of exchange which would compromise and contaminate

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<sup>39</sup> However, whereas Milbank offers critical (if ungenerous) readings of primary texts by Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and other postmodern thinkers throughout works like *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), Gunton's account of 'postmodernism' in *The One, the Three and the Many* does not engage at all with these thinkers' individual works, but instead relies primarily on David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991). See Gunton, *The One*, especially 69.

<sup>40</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), especially 6–7, 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–15.

<sup>42</sup> Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?', 130.

the purity of gift-giving: it is for this reason that Derrida argues that ‘the gift’ is an impossible phenomenon.

For Milbank, Derrida’s work on the gift poses a devastating challenge to Christian theology, for in Milbank’s view ‘gift is a kind of transcendental category in relation to all the *topoi* of theology’:

Creation and grace are gifts; Incarnation is the supreme gift; the Fall, evil and violence are the refusal of gift; atonement is the renewed and hyperbolic gift that is for-giveness; the supreme name of the Holy Spirit is *donum* (according to Augustine); the Church is the community that is given to humanity and is constituted through the harmonious blending of diverse gifts (according to the apostle Paul).<sup>43</sup>

Against Derrida’s radical ‘altruistic’ conception of gift-giving,<sup>44</sup> Milbank argues that the act of gift-giving is not necessarily self-serving:

[O]ne can enjoy giving, not only in the mode of self-congratulation, but also as a kind of *ecstasis*, or continuation of oneself out of oneself. Likewise, the wanting and even demanding to receive back (in some fashion) may be a recognition of ineradicable connection with others and a desire for its furtherance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, ix.

<sup>44</sup> Milbank also argues that Derrida’s purist conception of gift-giving is fundamentally a peculiarly *modern* notion, see Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 132; cf. John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 63.

<sup>45</sup> Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 132.

Accordingly, *contra* Derrida, not only is it *possible* to give and receive gifts, for Milbank, it is even *good* to give and receive—or indeed exchange—gifts.<sup>46</sup>

For Milbank, it is only by understanding gift-giving as a mode of ‘exchange’ that we can properly appreciate God’s act of creation as a gift. According to Milbank, a Derridean conception of the gift not only logically implies the impossibility of true gift-giving, it also suggests that the giver of the gift would be *indifferent* to how, or indeed whether or not, the gift has been received.<sup>47</sup> As such, if creation is an act of gift-giving in the Derridean sense of the pure gift, then God would by this logic be indifferent to the created world (e.g., deism).<sup>48</sup> However, if Christian theology is to maintain that God is intimately involved with and indeed lovingly sustains the created world’s existence at every moment, then a purely unilateralist conception of the gift simply will not suffice.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Milbank argues that only an understanding of the gift in terms of reciprocal exchange can account for Augustine’s (and Aquinas’) doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the divine

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<sup>46</sup> As further discussed below, Milbank follows Augustine and Aquinas in drawing a connection between the Holy Spirit and the names of ‘gift’ and ‘goodness’.

<sup>47</sup> Milbank associates this view with Jean-Luc Marion’s post-Derridean account of the gift. See Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 134.

<sup>48</sup> In *The Gift of Death* (*Donner la mort*), his sequel to *Given Time* (*Donner le temps*), Derrida argues that the only marginal case where gift-giving is possible is when the gift-giver immediately dies after giving the gift, so that the gift-giver is no longer possible to receive anything in return. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 30–31. If one applies this insight to the doctrine of creation, then it would mean that creation could only be understood as a gift from God if God dies as creation comes into being—that God needs to sacrifice Godself in order to allow the created world to *be*. In her reading of Derrida, Agata Bielik-Robson names such a position ‘the disjunctive logic of radical univocity: *either God, or World*’. See Agata Bielik-Robson, ‘The Void of God, or The Paradox of the Pious Atheism: From Scholem to Derrida’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 2 (2020): 109–132 (123). A quasi-theological outlook similar to this position of ‘radical univocity’ can be found in Slavoj Žižek’s Hegelian reading of *kenosis*, as articulated in his critical conversation with Milbank in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> However, a unilateralist unconditional conception of gift-giving is of course found in Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

relation of ‘love’ between the Father and the Son,<sup>50</sup> and as the divine person who is most properly named ‘gift’ (*donum*).<sup>51</sup> As Milbank puts it:

For Augustine, the *donum* that is the Holy Spirit is not only a free one-way gift (though it is also that), but in addition the realization of a perpetual exchange between the Father and the Son. This exchange results from the production of the Son; but equally, the Son is only brought to birth through the procession of the desire that is the Holy Spirit: a desire for communion, and a desire that even exceeds the closed communion of a dyad, looking for infinite and multiple reciprocities.<sup>52</sup>

In fact, according to Milbank, creation exists by virtue of participation not simply in the *one* simple divine being, but more specifically by participation in the perpetual and originary ‘gift-exchange’ of the divine life of the Trinity:

The idea of the Trinity ensures that God is pure giver, pure gift, and pure renewal of gift, without remainder.<sup>53</sup>

[F]or a Christian ontology . . . Being itself, as bound in the reciprocal relation of give-and-take, is for-giving, a giving that is in turn in the Holy Spirit, the gift of relation. And if the created interplay between Being and beings . . . participates in the constitutive distance between Father and Son, then we, as creatures, only *are* as

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<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VI.7, V.12, XV.27; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.37.2.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IV.29, V.12, V.16–17, XV.29, XV.33–36; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.38.1–2.

<sup>52</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x.

<sup>53</sup> John Milbank, ‘The Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics’, in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 200.



sharing in God's arrival, his for-giving, and perpetual eucharist [i.e., perpetual thanks-giving].<sup>54</sup>

In Milbank's view, properly Christianly understood, the ontology of participation is no longer a metaphysical schema that pertains to a merely monotheistic account of transcendent Being, or as Gunton would put it, 'developed independently of considerations of the Trinity', but rather, to use Gunton's words again, an ontology that is fundamentally 'trinitarian in content'.<sup>55</sup>

For if creaturely being is understood as a gift from God, and that the inner life of God is a trinitarian gift-exchange of 'pure giver, pure gift, and pure renewal of gift',<sup>56</sup> then the analogy of being between creation and the triune God would also be an analogy of gift:

It is just because things as created can only be as gifts, just because their being is freely derived, that one has to speak of Creation in terms of participation and of analogical likeness of the gift to the giver—since if his mark is not upon the gift, how else shall we know that it is a gift? . . . Because gift is gift-exchange, participation of the created gifts in the divine giver is also participation in a Trinitarian God.<sup>57</sup>

Accordingly, if both the trinitarian life of God and created being could be *analogically* understood in terms of 'gift', it is then not inappropriate to regard Milbank's notion of 'the gift' as a transcendental property that is convertible with 'being'. Indeed, although Milbank does not

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<sup>54</sup> Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?', 154.

<sup>55</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 139.

<sup>56</sup> Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 200.

<sup>57</sup> Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?', 154.

explicitly lay out a programmatic agenda to develop a set of ‘trinitarian transcendentals’ (*à la* Gunton), he does speak of ‘gift’ and ‘giving’ in terms of a transcendental property at several points across various works:

[I]t is arguable that ‘giving’ is just as ‘transcendental’ a term as ‘being’ . . . Balthasar is right to seek to accommodate a transcendality of gift which overlaps with the transcendality of being. This allows him, beyond Aquinas, to suggest a stronger link between the theological account of *esse* on the one hand, and trinitarian theology on the other.<sup>58</sup>

I have adopted as organizing principles, not the philosophical transcendentals—truth, goodness, beauty, etc., but rather irreducibly theological ones: *verbum*, *donum*. *Verbum* adds to truth the liturgical performance of truth; likewise, *donum* adds to goodness a sacramental dealing with the world of objects.<sup>59</sup>

To the extent that each and every created being only exists as a gift from God—that such created beings only exist by participation in the originary ‘gift-exchange’ of the Trinity, Milbank’s notion of the gift could very well be regarded as what Gunton may call a ‘trinitarianly developed transcendental’ that is ‘universally applicable—to God as well as to everything else’ (albeit in a rather qualified *analogical* manner).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 120, 153.

<sup>59</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x, see also ix. Cf. John Milbank, ‘Foreword’, in Antonio López, *Gift and the Unity of Being* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014), ix–xiv; John Milbank, ‘The Transcendality of the Gift’, *The Future of Love* (London: SCM, 2009), 352–63.

<sup>60</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 150, 140.

Milbank's emphasis on the dimension of 'exchange' in his account of God's act of creation or indeed the ontological relation between God and creatures may at first appear to be susceptible to problems similar to the relation of 'ontological interdependence', 'mutual constitutiveness' or indeed 'perichoretic reciprocity' between God and creation implied by Gunton's trinitarian ontology.<sup>61</sup> However, as opposed to the ontological interdependence, mutuality and reciprocity we find in Gunton's account of transcendental *perichoresis*, Milbank argues that the relation between God and creation is in fact *not* reciprocal, but is instead a paradoxical '*unilateral exchange*'.<sup>62</sup> To quote Milbank at some length:

[God's gift of creation] is radically unilateral. Yet it is paradoxically *so* unilateral that it gives even the recipient and the possibility of her gratitude. Indeed a radical gift must be of gratitude, since outside gratitude (the worshipping 'return' of all things to their source, from which they alone have existence) there is no finite *esse*. (Aquinas is clear that all creatures as existing acknowledge and praise God in some fashion.) Hence just to the degree that radical gift is unilateral, it is also involved in an exchange . . . This is a kind of 'exchange without reciprocity'. There is reciprocity in the Trinity, and reciprocity within the Creation, but not between the Creation and God, because even though there is 'exchange' in the sense that creatures receive by returning, God properly receives nothing. One can speak then of a paradoxical '*unilateral exchange*'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See, respectively, *ibid.*, 152, 166, 170.

<sup>62</sup> See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 96–102; see also John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 47.

<sup>63</sup> Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 96–7.

Creation is thus what Milbank calls ‘a gift of a gift to a gift’: not only is God’s *act* of creating a gift (‘a gift of a gift to a gift’), and that the created world’s very existence is a gift (‘a gift of a gift to a gift’), but creaturely beings’ very capacity to receive the gift of being *is itself also a gift* (‘a gift of a gift to a gift’).<sup>64</sup> Consequently, creation’s reception and its acknowledgement and recognition of its very own existence *as* a gift from God (which constitutes a ‘counter-gift’ of thanks-giving which creatures ‘give back’ to God) is only possible by the gift of God’s generous act of creation. As Milbank memorably puts it in ‘Can a Gift be Given?’:

[S]ince the creature’s very being resides in its reception of itself as a gift, the gift is, in itself, the gift of a return . . . Not, of course, a return that God receives as a need, since he is replete (Romans 11:35), but a return that constitutes the creature itself, and which God receives by grace . . . The Creature only is, as manifesting the divine glory, as acknowledging its own nullity and reflected brilliance. To be, it entirely honours God, which means it returns to Him an unlimited, never paid-back debt.<sup>65</sup>

To be created is not only to be called to receive the gift of being, but moreover in receiving this gift—and therefore acknowledging created existence *as* a gift in thankfulness—to ‘return’ our thanks-giving to God.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>65</sup> Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 135.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, for Milbank, we are only able to give—or even give ‘back’ to God—because God gave us our being, just as we love—and are able to love God in return—because God first loved us. See *ibid.*, 154: ‘Only if this is the case, if first we really do receive, and receive through our participatory giving in turn, is it conceivable that there is a gift to us, or that we ourselves can give. This is the one given condition of the gift, that we love because God first loved us [1 John 4:19]. It being given that God is love [1 John 4:8, 16].’ Insofar as the acts of creaturely giving and loving are strictly ‘participatory’—that creatures give and love only by participation in God’s ‘first’ giving and loving, for Milbank, the account of love in 1 John 4 is evidently *analogical* (that while creatures *have* love, only God alone

### III. *Quodlibet ens est verbum et donum?*<sup>67</sup>

Although the name ‘John Milbank’ does not appear in the main text of *The One, the Three and the Many*, Colin Gunton’s 1993 book could very much be seen as a response to Milbank’s now classic 1990 work *Theology and Social Theory*.<sup>68</sup> Not unlike the approach of coupling a genealogical diagnosis of the ‘problems’ of modernity with a theological ‘solution’ in trinitarian ontology that Milbank presents in *Theology and Social Theory*, in *The One, the Three and the Many* Gunton provides a theological genealogical critique of modernity as well as a new trinitarian ontology as a way of picturing reality. However, whereas Milbank famously reads Augustine’s *City of God* as ‘a “counter-historical” strategy’ to what he calls ‘the nihilist genealogy’ of ‘Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s reading of Christianity’,<sup>69</sup> Gunton presents a theological genealogy which portrays

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*is love*), which marks a striking contrast with Gunton’s univocal reading of the same passage as mentioned above in note 36.

<sup>67</sup> This section title is of course a variation of the famous scholastic proposition ‘*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum*’ (‘every being is one, true, good’) which encapsulates the medieval theory of transcendental properties. For a discussion of this statement in relation to contemporary philosophy, see Leung, ‘The One, the True, the Good... or Not’.

<sup>68</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Milbank’s seminal book is now in second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), but to correspond to Gunton’s engagement, references below will be made to the 1990 first edition. Indeed, throughout *The One, the Three and the Many*, we find a series of footnotes in which Gunton offers a sustained critique not only of Milbank’s genealogy but also of the ‘ontology of peace’ Milbank develops from Augustine as an alternative to the postmodern ‘ontology of violence’ that Milbank finds in modern and postmodern philosophies. See Gunton, *The One*, 55 n.20, 139 n.12, 162 n.8, 193 n.16, 204 n.37, cf. 202 n.34. Cf. Colin Gunton, ‘Editorial: Orthodoxy’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1, no. 2 (1999): 113–18, especially 115–16.

<sup>69</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 288. See also *ibid.*, 389, where Milbank memorably writes that ‘*The Genealogy of Morals* is a kind of *Civitas Dei* written back to front. And this observation should help us to see that, from a postmodern perspective, Augustine’s philosophy of history appears more viable than that of either Hegel or Marx.’

Augustine as the arch-villain responsible for bringing about the problems of modernity (and postmodernity).<sup>70</sup>

According to Gunton, one of the key faults of Augustine (and Aquinas after him) is his aforementioned (alleged) metaphysical elevation of the *one* over the many to what Gunton calls a ‘transcendental status’, which translates theologically into a supposed postulation of ‘an unknown substance *supporting* the three persons’.<sup>71</sup> In other words, in Gunton’s reading of Augustine, the being of God is not constituted by (the communion of) the three persons, but rather by some unknown fourth entity that is other than the three persons: the true being of God is thus not ‘personal’ but instead some underlying ‘*impersonal*’ substance.<sup>72</sup> For Gunton, Augustine’s theology not only entirely overlooks the ontological significance of the doctrine of the Trinity, with his (alleged) postulation of an ‘impersonal’ or even unknowable ‘abstract’ substance that lies mysteriously behind what Gunton calls ‘the concrete and revealed threeness of *hypostasis*’,<sup>73</sup> Gunton moreover argues that Augustine’s supposed doctrine of ‘the essential unknowability of God’ is ‘one of the causes of Western atheism’.<sup>74</sup> As such, in Gunton’s view, Milbank’s appeal to Augustine and the broader Christian Neoplatonic tradition is in fact complicit in the ‘problem’—and not the ‘solution’—of modern atheism.<sup>75</sup> And, indeed, it is precisely against this ‘impersonal’ conception of reality and the being of God that Gunton presents *perichoresis* as a transcendental

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<sup>70</sup> See Colin Gunton, *The Barth Lectures*, edited by Paul H. Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2007), xxiii: ‘I think [Augustine] is the fountainhead of our troubles.’ See also Colin Gunton, ‘Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 1 (1990): 33–58.

<sup>71</sup> Gunton, ‘Augustine’, 46.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–7, 57.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. For a critical assessment of Gunton’s controversial reading of Augustine, see Bradley Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 55 n.20.

term, so that Christian theology might recover and re-articulate a truly ‘trinitarian’ account of ‘the personal being of God’ as well as the ‘perichoretic’ interrelatedness of all creatures in the created world.<sup>76</sup>

However, while Gunton seeks to offer an alternative to Augustine’s alleged focus on an ‘abstract’ substance behind ‘the concrete and revealed’ three divine persons, one might question whether Gunton’s very own notion of transcendental *perichoresis* is not itself an ‘abstract’ principle as opposed to something ‘concrete and revealed’.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, unlike Gunton’s *perichoresis*, relationality, and substantiality—which have been described by some as ‘*abstract* transcendentals’, Milbank’s notions of *verbum* and *donum* are (to use Gunton’s terminology) ‘the concrete and revealed’ *personal* names of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>78</sup> For Milbank, the ‘addition’ of the trinitarian names of *verbum* and *donum* to the traditional transcendental properties of *verum* and *bonum* (‘truth’ and ‘goodness’) is precisely a theological gesture that ‘personalises’ what Gunton

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<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, especially 179, 213. However, while Gunton alleges that Augustine’s account of the divine substance effectively results in positing some ‘*fourth* element’ which mysteriously exists alongside—or even *prior to*—the three divine persons (see Gunton, ‘Augustine’, 45, 57–8), one may perhaps question whether Gunton’s own ‘transcendentalisation’ of *perichoresis* may likewise be in danger of resulting in a reification or even ‘substantialisation’ of the perichoretic relationship between the three persons into some kind of substance-like or indeed *substantial* ‘*fourth* element’ in the Godhead. While Gunton designates ‘substantiality’ as another one of his ‘trinitarianly developed transcendentals’ (see Gunton, *The One*, 191–208), he argues that ‘According to this teaching, what might be called the *substantiality* of God resides not in his abstract being, but in the concrete particular that we call the divine persons and in the relations by which they mutually constitute one another’ (191). However, if both ‘*perichoresis*’ and ‘substantiality’ are, as Gunton suggests, both transcendental properties, then ‘*perichoresis*’ and ‘substantiality’ would be coextensive terms: the divine *perichoresis* between the divine persons would thus always already be ‘substantial’ or indeed ‘substantialised’ as a kind of divine *substance*—not unlike the ‘*fourth* element’ that he finds in Augustine’s and Aquinas’ trinitarian theology. See Bernhard Nausner, ‘The Failure of a Laudable Project: Gunton, the Trinity and Human Self-understanding’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 4 (2009): 413: ‘since Gunton has abandoned the notion of *ousia* . . . he is forced to anchor the notion of God’s oneness in the universal notion of relatedness. Each person is therefore constituted by relationality and hence eternal relatedness becomes the substance of God.’

<sup>77</sup> Gunton, ‘Augustine’, 42.

<sup>78</sup> See Nausner, ‘The Failure of a Laudable Project’, 420: ‘His abstract transcendentals appear to be a stumbling block rather than a helpful device for spelling out practical implications. This then explains why Gunton is not capable of delivering on his promise to show how everything looks different from a trinitarian perspective and that the doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine with radical consequences for human life.’

perceives as the ‘impersonal’ character of traditional transcendental predications’ focus on the divine one substance as a non-personal entity. As Milbank writes in *The Word Made Strange*:

[T]he key transcendental is neither Being, nor Unity, but the *Verbum* itself . . . When *Verbum* is included as a transcendental, all the transcendentals are transformed into personal, intersubjective, trinitarian categories.<sup>79</sup>

Although Milbank does not explicitly connect his account of the transcendental *verbum* in his poetic Christology in *The Word Made Strange* with his pneumatology of gift-exchange in ‘Can a Gift be Given?’ and other later works, the conceptual connections between *verbum* and *donum* can highlight how the postulation of *verbum* as a transcendental can ‘transform’ all the traditional transcendental properties into ‘trinitarian’ and indeed ‘personal’ notions.<sup>80</sup>

Following Milbank’s agenda of the ‘personalisation’ of the traditional philosophical transcendentals, it may be noted that one important difference between a gift and an ordinary object is that when something is given as a gift, it is given an additional and indeed special personal meaning that is not reducible to the ‘impersonal’ material properties of that object.<sup>81</sup> In other words, to render something a gift is to add to that something a *personal* dimension of meaning that carries certain features that pertain specifically to its giver and its recipient: in Milbank’s non-unilateralist conception of the gift, gift-giving is never ‘impersonal’ or ‘indifferent’, but by definition always relational or even personal.<sup>82</sup> To the extent that a gift or *donum* always carries with it an additional

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<sup>79</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 80. Milbank’s argument for the priority of *verbum* is precisely informed by the doctrine of the Trinity—that there is (interpersonal) ‘difference’ in the Godhead: ‘Because *Verbum* marks a primordial difference in the Godhead, it realizes a perfect tension between Unity and Being . . . and allows no lapse into either a henological totality of system or structure, nor an ontological totality of the isolated subject’ (ibid.).

<sup>80</sup> Cf. John Milbank, ‘Intensities’, *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (October 1999): 482: ‘if the *verbum* and the *donum* are also transgeneric as much as *esse*, then *analogia entis* is also *analogia trinitatis*.’

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Catherine Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 65: ‘A thing becomes a gift if it is also a sign which conveys along with the gift a meaning, just as a sign becomes a gift if it also offers its sign-vehicle as a deployable content.’

<sup>82</sup> See Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 134, 137, 141.



intelligible meaning as it is given to its intended recipient, it may be said—in a para-Derridean fashion—that the gift or *donum* always refers (or even ‘defers’) to a meaning, message or indeed ‘word’ or *verbum* that ‘originally supplements’ the gift itself.<sup>83</sup> In trinitarian terms, the ‘gift’ or *donum* is always ‘originally’ connected to an additional or supplementary ‘word’ or *verbum*, just as the Holy Spirit (as *the Gift*) is always points towards the Son (who is *the Word*).<sup>84</sup> To posit that all things transcendently possess some characteristic of ‘word’ is to imply that everything that exists is already invested with divine meaning as a created gift given by God its loving—and indeed *personal*—creator.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, for Milbank, the way in which the interpersonal relationship between the Spirit and the Son are inscribed into the relation between *donum* and *verbum* fundamentally ‘personalises’ the traditional philosophical account of transcendental properties.

Even though Milbank does not explicitly develop a systematic account of this Christological-pneumatological relation between *verbum* and *donum* as ‘trinitarian transcendentals’,<sup>86</sup> he clearly sees a connection between these two trinitarian names and the

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 309: ‘For Derrida, Being is always necessarily supplemented by meaning, or “sense”, and yet the sense-bearing sign always betrays the being which it is, and is therefore arbitrarily related to Being . . . [However, against Derrida,] it could be argued that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (as Hegel failed to perceive) *is* precisely such a conjecture: the Son who is always given with the Father is the supplement at the origin; the Spirit who is always given with the Father and the Son is the infinite necessity of deferral.’

<sup>84</sup> See 1 John 4:2; John 15:26. Cf. Milbank, ‘Foreword’, xii: ‘*verbum* and *donum* go together—a point that has ultimately Trinitarian implications. Thus the world is given to us, but as signs that we must read and respond to if we want to receive it at all—including ourselves as gifts to ourselves. Conversely, we will misread these signs if we do not understand them as gifts, because then there would lurk no intention behind them.’

<sup>85</sup> In this way, Milbank poses an alternative ontology to the instrumental ‘disenchanted’ outlook of ‘a world empty of personal meaning’ that Gunton attributes to modernity which he also sought to overcome with his own trinitarian ontology (Gunton, *The One*, 16).

<sup>86</sup> While Milbank draws specifically on the traditional transcendentals of *verum* and *bonum* in his discussion of *verbum* and *donum*, this does not mean he rejects the transcendental status of *unum* as Gunton does. See the account of transcendental unity in John Milbank, ‘History of the One God’, *Heythrop Journal* 38, no. 4 (1997): 371–400, especially 395: ‘only the Trinitarian idea of God as unified infinite self-expression (and desire for such expression) secures God as a transcendental unity which is not inimical to his revealed diversity. Both the case of the Trinity and that of the incarnation reveal the possibility of thinking of unity as *gift* or *love*: that is to say as a transcendental unity

traditional transcendental properties of *verum* and *bonum*—as Milbank notes in *Being Reconciled* (quoted in full above): ‘*Verbum* adds to truth’ while ‘*donum* adds to goodness’.<sup>87</sup> Here we find an interesting contrast with Gunton’s attempt to replace the traditional ‘impersonal’ transcendental properties with *new* personal and relational notions derived from the doctrine of the Trinity: whereas Gunton seeks to *displace* altogether the traditional transcendental properties such as ‘oneness’ with a new set of his own original ‘trinitarianly developed transcendentals’, Milbank’s theological account of ‘the word’ and ‘the gift’ simply proposes to *add to* the traditional transcendental properties.<sup>88</sup> To this extent, Milbank’s schema of ‘addition’ very much reflects his view that faith and reason, and by extension theology and philosophy, are ‘successive phases of a single extension’,<sup>89</sup> as opposed to Gunton’s neo-Barthian account of the ‘antithetical’ opposition and ‘essential difference’ between theology and philosophy.<sup>90</sup>

However, despite his Barthian emphasis on ‘concrete revelation’, Gunton’s ontology of transcendental *perichoresis* is perhaps ironically much closer to a natural theology than Milbank’s ontology of the gift: for whereas to predicate all things as ‘gifts’ would imply that there is an

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that one *is* one through making (the necessary “other”) one.’ Although Milbank does not draw a connection between *unum* with God the Father here—somewhat following Bonaventure (and arguably Aquinas)—one could suggest that it is the transcendental unity as portrayed here which enables (or even ‘generates’) the ‘other’ transcendentals (which are other ‘unities’).

<sup>87</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x.

<sup>88</sup> Despite Milbank’s critique of the Franciscan tradition (see, e.g., *Beyond Secular Order*, 32–6), his association of *verum* and *bonum* with the Son and Spirit is broadly in continuation with what Jan Aertsen calls ‘the trinitarian motive’ which he identifies as a distinctive feature of Franciscan accounts of the transcendentals. See Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 145–47, 675–76; cf. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, I.6; *Summa Halensis*, I, n. 89. See also Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas’s Way of Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 380–81, where Aertsen also seeks to trace this appropriation of transcendental properties to the three persons of the Trinity in Aquinas; cf. Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 1.1 *sed contra* (5), 1.4 *sed contra* (5), and 21.4 *sed contra* (5). However, Aquinas’ ‘trinitarian’ expositions of the transcendental properties technically only appear in *De Veritate* in the ‘*sed contra*’ components instead of Aquinas’ own *responsio*.

<sup>89</sup> Milbank, ‘Intensities’, 451.

<sup>90</sup> Colin Gunton, ‘Indispensable Opponent: The Relations of Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Religion’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38, no. 3 (1996): 302, 306

originary or even personal ‘giver’ of all things, to postulate that all being is ‘perichoretically’ interrelated (that ‘Everything in the universe is what it is by virtue of its relatedness to everything else’) does not necessarily suppose the existence of an uncreated eternal divine source of all *perichoresis*—indeed, Gunton even argues that ‘many scientists have spoken the language of *perichoresis* in their descriptions of the universe’ presumably without the need of ‘concrete’ divine revelation.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, as opposed to Gunton’s ‘extra-biblical’ notions of *perichoresis*, relationality, and substantiality,<sup>92</sup> Milbank’s proposed transcendental terms of *verbum* and *donum* are of course traditional names of the Son and the Spirit that are notably found directly—or indeed to use Gunton’s terminology, ‘concretely revealed’—in the Bible.<sup>93</sup>

To this extent, even though Milbank is sometimes criticised for paying insufficient attention to Scripture,<sup>94</sup> one may say that his theological ontology of the gift is nothing less than an attempt at a metaphysical explication of the biblical narrative of God’s self-revelation in

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<sup>91</sup> Gunton, *The One*, 172.

<sup>92</sup> In addition to this trio, ‘sacrifice’ is also proposed by Gunton as a transcendental term in his earlier work, namely Colin Gunton, ‘The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices: From Metaphor to Transcendental?’, in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, edited by Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 210–29. Unlike the three ‘trinitarian transcendentals’ in his later work, the notion of ‘sacrifice’ is obviously a biblical one. And indeed, at first glance, Gunton’s proposal of ‘sacrifice’ as a transcendental even appears to resemble Milbank’s account of the gift—as Gunton notes: ‘sacrifice, in this concrete realization of the transcendental, is the expression and outworking of the inner-trinitarian relations of giving and receiving . . . of love construed in terms of mutual and reciprocal gift and reception . . . Sacrifice *means* the offering of the perfected creation back in praise to God’ (221, 226). However, to the extent that Gunton argues that ‘sacrifice has to do with creation, fall, and redemption, that is, with relations to God’ (215), and yet at the same time that ‘the notion of sacrifice takes us not only to the heart of the being of God, but also to the heart of creaturely being’ (226), he seems to believe that this ‘sacrificial’ pattern of the fall or even death can be attributed ‘to the heart of the being of God’ (226), which marks a striking contrast with Milbank’s insistence that Christian trinitarian theology is an ‘ontology of peace’ (see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, especially 380–434). Indeed, by making ‘sacrifice’ and not ‘gift’ a transcendental term, Gunton’s account implies an ontological primacy of ‘sacrifice’ over ‘gift’, whereas Milbank argues that there is a theological primacy of ‘gift’ over ‘sacrifice’. See Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 198–99; *The Word Made Strange*, 226–28; *Being Reconciled*, 155.

<sup>93</sup> See, for instance, in the Vulgate, John 1:1 for the Son as *verbum*, and John 4:10 and Acts 8:20 for the Holy Spirit as *donum*.

<sup>94</sup> For example, J. Todd Billings, ‘John Milbank’s Theology of the Gift and Calvin’s Theology of Grace: A Critical Comparison’, *Modern Theology* 21, no. 1 (January 2005): 98–9.

Christ's incarnation as a gift 'added' to the 'first' gift of creation as a 'gift upon gift' or even 'grace upon grace' (John 1:16): for if creation is a gift from God and if to be created by God is also to be created *to receive* from God, then created being (marked by the universal transcendental properties of *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum*) is in some sense created *to receive* further *additional* gifts from God—precisely what Milbank calls 'a gift to a gift'.<sup>95</sup> To put this in terms of the transcendental properties, the 'natural' transcendental properties of *verum* and *bonum* are created to anticipate and to receive the 'supernatural' *addition* of the trinitarian names of *verbum* and *donum*; the *revealed* names of the Trinity are 'added' or indeed 'gifted' to the 'natural' transcendental properties of creation.<sup>96</sup> As such, Milbank's 'trinitarian ontology' of the gift should not be seen as simply an attempt to craft Christian responses to the metaphysical questions of the one and the many or the nature of substance and relations, but a committed theological or even biblical outlook which not only draws on (what Gunton calls) 'the concrete and revealed' names of Christ as the *verbum* (John 1:1) and the Spirit as the *donum* (John 4:10; Acts 8:20), but also (what Gunton calls) 'the concrete history of salvation' in which the 'fullness' of God is revealed through the 'truth and grace' that is given through the incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit *to creation* as a story of 'grace upon grace' or indeed 'gift to a gift' (see John 1:14–17).<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 48, 51, 96.

<sup>96</sup> See Milbank, 'Foreword', xi: 'The gift character of reality that philosophy is able to ponder only receives an adequate clarification in terms of supernatural revelation.'

<sup>97</sup> Gunton's terms are taken from Gunton, 'Augustine', 42, 37. See also Milbank's exposition of various scriptural passages (especially Romans) in 'Can a Gift be Given?', 145–50.

### *Conclusion*

This last point on the use of Scripture is of course crucial to any endeavours in theological reflection. Although Milbank's 'trinitarian ontology' of *verbum et donum* may be arguably more scripturally rooted than Gunton's, one may wonder whether Milbank's theological work on the Trinity and his critique of secular modernity may at times sound similar to Gunton's appeal to trinitarian doctrine as a 'solution' to the problems he identifies in modern society and modern culture—an approach which has been described as 'an enterprise of social criticism on a metaphysical level'.<sup>98</sup> While one can undoubtedly draw socio-cultural, economic or even environmentalist implications from a theological postulation of 'gift' as a transcendental term,<sup>99</sup> it is important to bear in mind that the primary task of developing a trinitarian ontology or metaphysics should not be to facilitate some critique of secularity or modernity, but rather to first and foremost help us understand the relation between God and creation as revealed in Scripture and tradition.<sup>100</sup>

As opposed to deriving some socio-economic programme of gift-exchange or some political praxis of gift-giving from a 'trinitarian ontology' of the gift, perhaps the key contribution of treating 'gift' as a transcendental is the foregrounding of the role played by the Holy Spirit as *the Gift* in theological or indeed trinitarian metaphysics. Following his Augustinian account of the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son or indeed 'the gift of relation', Milbank's anti-Derridean insistence that '[all] gift *is* gift-exchange' entails an ontology that is not simply

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<sup>98</sup> Nausner, 'The Failure of a Laudable Project', 420.

<sup>99</sup> For an insightful discussion of the environmentalist implications of Milbank's theology of the gift, see Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 133–57.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Milbank's caution against 'the secular positioning of theology' by social theory—and by extension also secular society—in *Theology and Social Theory*, 1–2.

focussed on entities or substances as ‘gifts’ that are impersonally alienated from their giver,<sup>101</sup> but rather one which emphasises the act of gift-giving in the relationships it presupposes and cultivates: to this extent, Milbank’s trinitarian outlook is no less a relational ontology than it is a substantial metaphysics.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, one of the most notable and interesting features of Milbank’s trinitarian ontology of ‘gift-exchange’ is his aforementioned suggestion that creation ‘participates in the constitutive distance between Father and Son’,<sup>103</sup> that creation participates in ‘the *donum* that is the Holy Spirit [who is] the realization of a perpetual exchange between the Father and the Son’.<sup>104</sup> As opposed to common accounts of participation in God the Father or participation in Christ, such an account of participation in the Holy Spirit is highly unusual among theological construals of participatory ontology.<sup>105</sup> In placing pneumatology at the very centre of Christian metaphysics, Milbank’s neo-Augustinian formulation of the Spirit as the exchange of love between Father and Son does not, as anti-Augustinians such as Gunton claim, ‘lead to a subordination of the Spirit to the Son’.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, contrary to charges posed by Gunton and other critics of Augustine, the Augustinian position we find in Milbank does not envision the Spirit as ‘a link in an inward-turned circle’ which supposedly gives rise to a conception of ‘the inner-trinitarian love . . . in terms of self-love’.<sup>107</sup> Instead of being ‘a closing of an eternal circle’ (which Gunton claims) ‘closes’ and

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<sup>101</sup> Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 154 (emphasis added).

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 112.

<sup>103</sup> Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 154.

<sup>104</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1. See also John Milbank, ‘The Second Difference: For a Trinitarianism without Reserve’, *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (April 1986): 213–234, especially 228; reprinted in *The Word Made Strange*, 171–193, especially 186.

<sup>106</sup> Colin Gunton, ‘God the Holy Spirit: Augustine and His Successors’, *Theology Through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 111.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

cuts off the triune Godhead from the world,<sup>108</sup> the Spirit is for Milbank not simply the ‘link’ or ‘exchange’ between Father and Son but moreover also—*analogically*—the mediating ‘link’ or ‘exchange’ in which all created beings participate as created gifts of God.<sup>109</sup>

Just as the predication of all beings with the transcendental properties of oneness, truth and goodness implies their analogical participation in the perfect Oneness, Truth and Goodness of God, to recognise—and indeed transcendently predicate—all creatures as ‘gifts’ implies their participation in the Holy Spirit who is *the* Gift. And to the extent that the Spirit is the ‘perpetual exchange’ who always refers to—and indeed constitutes—the Father and the Son, to participate in the Spirit is *also* by definition and by extension to participate in the Father and the Son. Created beings’ participation in the Spirit is always already also a participation in the entire Trinity. As such, to understand ‘gift’ or *donum* as a transcendental property is not simply to recognise that all creatures only have their created existence by participation in God, but moreover and more specifically to understand the metaphysics of creation and participation in pneumatological and indeed trinitarian terms. In this regard, the postulation of ‘gift’ as a transcendental term is a theological proposition which intimately brings together the ontology of creation *ex nihilo* and the doctrine of the Trinity: it would be, so to speak, a thesis of ‘a *trinitarian* ontology’.<sup>110</sup>

One of the possible worries one may have about the contemporary enthusiasm for developing ‘trinitarian ontologies’ is that such endeavours may be overly engaged in metaphysical

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 127–28: ‘The Holy Spirit . . . seeks to involve the other in the movement of giving and receiving that is in the Trinity: that is, *to perfect the love of the Father and Son by moving beyond itself*. . . The third person of the Trinity is the one whose function is to make the love of God a love that is opened towards that which is not itself . . . It is the particular being and function of the Spirit to be the dynamic of that love, both in itself and towards the world. We thus come full circle to a revised version of Augustine’s position.’ It is worth noting that Gunton arrives at this pneumatology by way of an engagement with Milbank’s ‘Second Difference’ (*ibid.*, 111–12, 124–26).

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 80.

speculations which veer far from Scripture. As we see in the example of what has been described as the ‘collapse of the distinction between God and the world’ in Gunton’s perichoretic ontology, bold speculative attempts to construct trinitarian ontologies could easily lead to a number of problems which the theological tradition sought to avoid.<sup>111</sup> Reading Milbank’s account of the gift in light of Gunton’s theological project reveals that Milbank’s commitment to the traditional and indeed scriptural names of the Son and Spirit as the Word and the Gift is a key way in which his attempt to develop a trinitarian metaphysics avoids many of the pitfalls found in the ambitious ‘new trinitarian ontologies’ presented by Gunton and others. This adherence to Scripture and tradition not only provides safeguards for theological ventures into metaphysical speculation to remain within purviews of orthodoxy, moreover, as this article has sought argue with the case of Milbank’s rendition of *verbum et donum*, these very ‘safeguards’ could at same time also be powerful mechanisms which open up new ways of attending to how God’s word is revealed in the world and indeed to the gift of being that has been given to us.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Fermer, ‘The Limits of Trinitarian Theology’, 173.

<sup>112</sup> I would like to thank Robyn Boéré, Patrick J. McGlinchey, Elise Morrison, and especially Adam T. Morton for their comments on an earlier version of this article, as well as the anonymous readers for the journal who made some extremely helpful suggestions.