

The Interior Word as a Preamble and Analogy in St. Thomas's Trinitarian Theology

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Abstract: This paper argues that St. Thomas distinguishes between what natural reason can know about the interior Word in God and what can be known by faith alone. I will argue that reason can show that *verbum* names a pure perfection that must exist in any intellectual nature and that *verbum* is therefore, in this sense, predicated properly of the divine nature. Thus, our natural understanding of *verbum* serves as a preamble to faith. But the real procession of the Word within God (and the distinction of persons that follows from real procession) is revealed by faith alone. But even here, reason can be used in the service of faith to show how the procession of the word in the human soul functions as a fitting likeness or analogy to help manifest the procession of the eternal Word.

Introduction¹

In several places St. Thomas constructs what appears to be an argument proving the existence of the second person of the Trinity. *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 11 and *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5 are notable instances, but one can also find similar arguments elsewhere.² The basic structure of the argument is a two-step process. In the first step, St. Thomas argues that every intellectual nature must have an interior word because the act of understanding is completed by the interior word as the object or terminus of the act of understanding.³ In the second step of the argument, St. Thomas argues to a real distinction of persons from the fact that the account or *ratio* of *verbum* implies that it proceeds from another. Since the real procession of a word within God gives rise to real relations between he who understands and the Word he expresses, it appears that reason alone can demonstrate the distinction between God the Father and God the Son. A similar argument can be made with regard to a procession of love which might be taken as a demonstration of the Holy Spirit.

These arguments raise the question of whether natural human reason is capable of demonstrating the existence of the Trinity. From the beginning to the end

of his career, St. Thomas consistently answers “no” to this question.⁴ And his basic argument is the same: natural reason can only come to know God by moving from creatures to God as from effects to their cause, and since the creative power of God belongs to the essence of God, which is shared by all three persons, one cannot come to know the divine persons themselves by natural reason.

Moreover, even the texts cited above from the *Summa contra gentiles* and the *De potentia*—the places where St. Thomas appears to present an argument from natural reason—are prefaced by remarks suggesting that those arguments are not meant to be demonstrative. The prefatory chapters in the *Summa contra gentiles* suggest that the truths of faith can be grasped by means of certain similitudes, but that these similitudes are not sufficient to demonstrate the truths of faith.⁵ At most, they can be used to “manifest” the truth through probable arguments.⁶ The opening paragraph of *De potentia* q. 9, a. 5 contains similar qualifications.⁷

Still, one might wonder about the steps or premises of the argument concluding to the distinction of persons in God. Are all of the premises in the argument merely probable? This is the question I will seek to answer in this paper. I will argue that the answer is no. More specifically, I will argue that the first step of the argument, namely, showing that the perfection signified by the interior word necessarily exists in God, is *demonstrative*. The second step, however, is only probable because it depends upon a likeness or analogy between the procession of the word in the human soul and the procession of the Word in God, which is revealed by faith. As I will argue, the key to seeing the demonstrative character of the first step is to see that the interior word names a pure perfection (a perfection without any defect or imperfection), and that this perfection must necessarily exist in any intellectual nature. The second step, however, does not carry the same conviction because natural reason is not able to see that the perfection that belongs to the Word necessarily entails that it really proceed from another, and only real procession will yield a distinction of persons in God. Nonetheless, the real procession of the Word within God, and the distinction of persons that is founded upon real procession, is known with the certitude of faith within the science of *sacra doctrina*.

The position I am defending is not novel. Gilles Emery, among others, holds this view.⁸ But it has recently been criticized by Michael Higgins.⁹ This paper aims to give a fuller defense of the position. My paper has two parts. In the first part I will give an account of the meaning of the term *verbum* and explain why *verbum* names a pure perfection that necessarily belongs to any intellectual nature. In the second part I will give a fuller sketch of the reasons that the real procession of the interior Word is the proper locus of the mystery of faith.

I. Word as Pure Perfection

Let me turn to the first part of my paper, regarding the meaning of the term *verbum*. I will draw principally on the discussion of “Word” as a proper name of God in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 34, a. 1, *De veritate*, q. 4, aa. 1–2, St. Thomas’s

Commentary on the Gospel of John, ch. 1, lec. 1 (which contains his commentary on the opening lines of the Prologue), and *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5.

The starting point for St. Thomas's philosophical treatment of *verbum* in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 34, a. 1 is a text from Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias* (16a3–7), which describes vocal words as signs of passions of the soul, which St. Thomas takes to be “concepts” in the soul,¹⁰ and this is the basis for St. Thomas's distinguishing different meanings of the word *verbum*. He argues that the human word has three proper meanings (i.e., non-metaphorical meanings): the interior word or concept of the mind, the vocal word, and the image of the vocal word in the imagination.¹¹ Even though the vocal word is what is most commonly and manifestly called a “word,” St. Thomas insists that the name “word” is said first and principally of the interior word of the mind, because the vocal word is said to be a word only because of its signification, not because of the particular vocal sound that is made. The sound by itself, without the signification, is not even truly said to be a word. But the source of the signification is the concept of the mind. So, the most proper meaning of “word” is the concept of the mind, which is also called the “interior word” or “word of the heart.”

Someone might immediately object: if the original meaning of *verbum* is a vocal word, and the meaning is transferred to a new object, we must be dealing with a metaphor.¹² There is some validity to that way of thinking insofar as the word “metaphor” comes from the Greek *metaphero* which means to transfer or carry over. On a very basic level, a metaphor is a word whose meaning has been transferred from one object to another. So, if the name *verbum* is applied originally to the exterior word, and its meaning is later transferred to the interior word in the soul, and then to God Himself, *verbum* is obviously a metaphor, and not a term that can be predicated properly of God.

St. Thomas himself raises this very objection in the *De veritate*.¹³ He answers it by distinguishing the order of imposition from the order of nature.¹⁴ Since we give names to things according to our knowledge, it often happens that we first impose names on those things that are posterior according to the order of nature because they are better known to us, even though the reality signified by the name belongs more properly to those things that are prior in the order of nature. “Being” and “good,” for example, are first used of creatures, and then transferred to God, even though the things signified by “being” and “good” are found primarily in God.¹⁵ The same is true of the name *verbum*. It is first imposed on the vocal word because that is better known to us even though the interior word is naturally prior. St. Thomas concludes that “the word of the heart . . . is said properly of God because it is altogether removed from materiality, corporeity, and every defect, and such things are said properly of God, such as knowledge and the known, understanding and the understood.”¹⁶

This distinction between the order of imposition and the order of nature that St. Thomas appeals to in *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 1 is borne out by St. Thomas's treatment of the divine names in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 3, where he distinguishes

between proper predication and metaphor. St. Thomas's primary concern is not whether a divine name is used according to its original meaning, or first imposition, but whether the perfection signified by the name is signified "absolutely" (free from any defect or imperfection) or whether the perfection signified is necessarily bound up with matter or some other defect. Names that signify perfection *absolutely* can be truly and properly said of God, whereas those names that signify perfection mixed with some defect or imperfection can only be said of God metaphorically.¹⁷ "Wisdom" and "goodness" can be said of God properly because they signify perfections *absolutely*, unmixed with anything material or defective. They are, in other words, "pure perfections." All such names are not only said of God properly (*proprie*), but also primarily (*per prius*) because the perfections signified by these names are found in God in a more excellent way, and flow from God to creatures.¹⁸ By contrast, "rock" and "lion" can only be said of God metaphorically, because these names signify perfections that are necessarily bound up with the body or some defect.¹⁹ It is worth noting that even those names that signify pure perfections (because the thing signified by the name is free from defect), are still entangled in creaturely "modes of signifying" that do not belong to God and need to be removed or separated from the meaning of the name (e.g., the names "wisdom" and "goodness" are signified as accidents inhering in a subject which is not true of divine wisdom and goodness). So even those names signifying pure perfections need to be refined or purified regarding their *modes of signifying*. St. Thomas does not elaborate much on what is meant by modes of signifying, but they include not only grammatical modes (e.g., when I say "God is good," the name "good" appears grammatically as an accident united to a subject), but any sort of corporeal conditions implied by the *way* these perfections are found in creatures.²⁰ So, we can see in a general way that *verbum* names a pure perfection, which, when refined, can be predicated of God.

One might object, however, that the notion of pure perfection is only applicable to names said of God *essentially* (e.g., good, wise, etc.), rather than *personally* (e.g., Father, Son, Word), and that it therefore seems out of place to describe *verbum* as a pure perfection. It is certainly true that in St. Thomas's treatment of the divine names in the *Summa theologiae* he seems to mostly have in mind essential names. He does, however, give at least one example of a personal name that is said primarily and properly of God: the name "Father."²¹ He also appeals to the notion of a pure perfection to show that the name "person" can be fittingly predicated of God even though the name person is a name used to signify a relation in God and is predicated of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²² So St. Thomas does not restrict the notion of a pure perfection to a divine attribute predicated essentially of God. In any case, it is clear from *Summa theologiae* I, q. 34, a. 1 that St. Thomas regards the name "Word" as something that can be said properly (i.e., non-metaphorically) of an interior word or concept of the mind because the name signifies a perfection that is free from anything material or defective.²³

To appreciate fully how the interior word names a pure perfection that not only can be predicated of God but must be predicated of him, we must examine the

psychology of the interior word. What exactly is meant by the “interior word,” how is it distinct from other things found in the soul, and how does it signify a perfection of knowing? I will mainly refer here to the *Commentary on John* (St. Thomas’s most mature treatment of the *verbum*), but the main points I am making are found in many other places where St. Thomas talks about the meaning of the interior word.

In his *Commentary on John*, St. Thomas distinguishes the concept from three other things that are in the soul: the intellectual power, the intelligible species, and the operation of the intellect.²⁴ The concept differs from the intellectual power and its operation because it is something formed by the intellect, through its operation.²⁵ It is a kind of product or terminus of the intellect’s operation.²⁶ What is hardest to see, however, is that the concept differs from the intelligible species.

St. Thomas describes the intelligible species as the principle of the act of understanding and the concept as the perfection or completion of the act of understanding. Why this distinction? There is a twofold process in the human act of understanding.²⁷ The power of the intellect is first made to be in act by being passive and receptive, by being *informed* by some intelligible object. Like the power of sensation, it is made to be in act by receiving a form or species: the power of sensation receives a sensible form or species, the intellect receives an intelligible form or species. Because the intellect is first passive or receptive, it is usually called the possible intellect. But the possible intellect is not simply passive or receptive. Once it has been informed by the intelligible species, it expresses what it knows by forming a concept—the interior word.

The use of the term “mental word” (*verbum mentis*) can be misleading insofar as it suggests that what the intellect *forms* is something altogether simple. It is not. Here is how St. Thomas puts it in his *Commentary on John*:

The intellect forms two things, according to its two operations. For according to its operation which is called “the understanding of indivisibles,” it forms a definition; and according to its operation by which it composes and divides, it forms a statement (*enunciatio*) or something of that sort. Therefore, that which is thus formed and expressed through the operation of the intellect, either through a definition or a statement, is what the exterior vocal sound signifies. Whence, the Philosopher says that the account (*ratio*) which a name signifies is a definition.²⁸

So the first act of the intellect—understanding indivisibles—is not completed by receiving the intelligible species; the intellect must also form or express a definition, which entails a composition of genus and difference. So even though the species “man” is something indivisible in itself, we express our understanding of it by a definition that is composed of logical parts.

This second stage in the process of understanding indivisibles is not something that happens all at once—at least not for us human beings: “When I wish to conceive the account (*ratio*) of a stone, I must arrive at it by reasoning.”²⁹ St. Thomas talks about the intellect casting about for the right expression, thinking it over before

it arrives at an appropriate expression for the intelligible species, which has been received or impressed upon the mind. The human mind does not move all at once to a complete expression but does so by degrees, moving from a vague and confused expression of what it knows to an expression that is more specific and distinct.³⁰ That the mind expresses its intellectual impressions in different ways and moves from less perfect expressions to more perfect expressions is a matter of common experience. From a single intelligible species of a man, I can form various concepts: substance, animal, featherless, biped, risible, rational. Of course, these concepts do not all equally capture or express what a man is, which is why the process of formulating a definition takes time.

What is worth noting is that St. Thomas only considers the perfect or complete expression of the intelligible species to have the full ratio of a *verbum*:

As long as the intellect, by reasoning, casts about this way and that, the formation is not yet perfect until it has perfectly conceived the account (*ratio*) of the thing. Then it first has the account (*ratio*) of the thing perfectly, and then it has the account (*ratio*) of a word. Hence, in our mind there is thinking (*cogitatio*), signifying the discourse that belongs to an investigation, and a word (*verbum*), which is formed according to a perfect contemplation of the truth.³¹

We see then that the intelligible species is a principle or beginning of the intellect's act of understanding, but not its completion. The intellect is first passive and receptive like the external senses, but the act of understanding is not complete until it actively forms or expresses what it knows in an interior word.

But why is the *expression* of a word necessary to complete the act of understanding? Granted that the human mind moves from potency to act by attempting to express ever more distinctly what is known in the intelligible species, why exactly does *expressing* a word complete our knowledge? To answer this question, it is helpful to look at another distinction that St. Thomas makes in the *Commentary on John* between the intelligible species and the *verbum*: the intelligible species is that "by which" the intellect understands, whereas the *verbum* is that "in which" the intellect understands:

What is thus expressed, namely that which is formed in the soul, is called an interior word, and therefore it is compared to the intellect, not as that by which (*quo*) the intellect understands, but as that in which (*in quo*) it understands, because in what is expressed and formed it sees the nature of the thing understood.³²

What exactly does St. Thomas mean by saying that the concept is that "in which" the intellect "sees the nature of the thing understood," and how does this differ from the intelligible species? For human beings, knowledge begins in the senses, because the natures that are in things are intelligible and that intelligibility is present in

potency in their sensible forms and in the phantasms of those things. It is rendered actually intelligible by the agent intellect, so that the possible intellect—the intellect which thinks and knows—can be impressed by, or receive, the intelligible forms or species of things outside the mind. Since the intellect is made to be in act by the intelligible species, the intellect is said to understand by the intelligible species; it is the principle or origin of the act of understanding. Notice, however, that the initial motion of the mind is *from* things outside the mind and results in an impression. But since the things known or understood are outside the mind³³ (because the mind does not simply know its own ideas), the mind needs to turn back to the things outside the mind, to go out to them.³⁴ This is why Aristotle and St. Thomas insist that the intellect needs to turn to the phantasms, because the act of understanding ultimately terminates in things outside the mind.³⁵ The thing precisely as understood is in the mind, but it nonetheless reaches out to the things outside the mind. This is where the concept or interior word comes in: it *represents* or *manifests* the thing understood precisely as something outside the mind. This is why St. Thomas will sometimes refer to the concept as an intention, because it reaches out to the extra-mental things.³⁶ So the concept, unlike the intelligible species, or impressed species, is essentially related to the extra-mental things that are the ultimate object of understanding. This is also why the *verbum* is a quasi-terminus.³⁷ It terminates the interior act, but it does so by serving as a kind of medium through which the things outside the soul are represented or manifested.³⁸

So, what is the takeaway from St. Thomas's account of the interior word? First, it perfects or completes the act of understanding by representing or manifesting the thing understood. This is perhaps the most universal way of describing the role of the *verbum* in the act of understanding. And since the *verbum* names what the intellect forms according to a perfect contemplation of the truth, there is no question that the *verbum* names a pure perfection. This is why St. Thomas asserts in the *Commentary on John*, and elsewhere, that there is a word in every intellectual nature.³⁹

Still, our notion of the interior word must be refined; when we apply *verbum* to God, we must be careful to remove any creaturely defects: 1) St. Thomas will argue that the divine Word must always be in act, i.e., there is no movement from potency to act as is found in the expression of a human word;⁴⁰ 2) Because the divine Word is absolutely perfect, all of God's knowledge can be expressed in a single word, whereas we must form many imperfect words through which we express separately all that we know⁴¹; and 3) The divine Word is of the very same nature as God, unlike our words, which are accidents of our soul.⁴² Nonetheless, despite the need to remove some features belonging to the way that the interior word exists in the human soul, these creaturely defects do not belong to the notion or *ratio* of the interior word absolutely.

My thesis, that we can know by natural reason that the perfection signified by a word exists in God, finds additional support from *De potentia* q. 9, a. 5, which appeals more directly and explicitly to a pure perfection argument. Here is how St. Thomas introduces his argument that word signifies a pure perfection:

It is necessary to attribute to God every perfection that is in creatures, according to that which is of the account (*ratio*) of that perfection absolutely, but not according to the way (*modus*) by which it is in this or that thing. For goodness or wisdom is not in God as an accident as it is in us, although in Him is supreme goodness and perfect wisdom.

We see St. Thomas in this text appealing to the notion of a pure perfection, a perfection signified absolutely, without any defect or imperfection. It necessarily excludes what St. Thomas called the “modes of signifying” in *Summa theologiae*, q. 13, a. 3 and which he refers to here simply as “the mode by which it [the perfection] is in this thing or that thing.” In other words, anything that belongs, or seems to belong, to a perfection according to the way it exists in creatures must be excluded.

St. Thomas goes on to argue in *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5 that the very ratio of understanding, absolutely considered, includes a concept of the intellect, and his argument covers much of the same ground covered in the *Commentary on John*. He first argues that the ratio of understanding must include *one who understands* (*intellegens*) and *the understood* (*intellectum*). He goes on to argue that what is *primarily* and *per se* understood is the concept of the mind. He does this by distinguishing the concept of the mind from the ultimate object of understanding, namely, a particular *thing* such as a stone or animal. Because the *thing* known by the intellect is at one time only potentially understood and outside the mind, it cannot be the primary and *per se* object of the understanding because “it is necessary that the understood be in the one who understands, and one with him.”⁴³ He also distinguishes the object understood from the intelligible species, which is the principle of the act of understanding rather than its *terminus*. He concludes:

Therefore, that which is understood primarily and *per se* is what the intellect conceives within itself about the thing understood, either a definition or proposition, according to the two operations of the intellect posited in *De anima*, III. That which is thus conceived by the intellect is called the interior word and is signified by means of the vocal word.

Once he arrives at the interior word in the human soul as naming a concept of the mind, insofar as it is that which is understood primarily and *per se*, he draws the conclusion about the existence of a word in God: “Therefore, since in God there is the act of understanding, and by understanding himself he understands all other things, it is necessary to posit that there is in him a conception (*conceptio*) of the intellect, which is absolutely of the *ratio* of the act of understanding.”⁴⁴ Thus, we see that the *De potentia* is clearly invoking a pure perfection argument for the existence of a word in God. At this point, Thomas has made no mention of the Word as something that proceeds from another, which he will get to in due course later in *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5. In fact, immediately after concluding to the existence of a word in God, he signals a shift in the argument by noting that, despite natural reason’s ability to see the existence of a word in God, the way (or mode) in which the

word is found in God is beyond reason: "If, however, we were able to comprehend what (*quid*) and in what way (*quomodo*) the divine act of understanding is, just as we comprehend our own act of understanding, the conception of the divine Word would not surpass reason as neither does the conception of the human word."⁴⁵ It is only *after this point* that St. Thomas turns to the procession of the Word within God and the distinction of persons. This raises the question of whether natural reason is able to see real procession as something that belongs to the *ratio* of word *absolutely*—free of any creaturely imperfection—or whether it belongs to the *ratio* of word according to the way that it exists in this thing or that thing.⁴⁶ This question is the focus of the second part of my paper.

Here I must note an important qualification of the thesis I have been arguing in the first part of this paper. I have almost spoken as if one can isolate St. Thomas's argument for the existence of a word in God, as if "word" in its most proper sense can be predicated of God whether or not there is a real procession of a word in God. Strictly speaking, however, the full *ratio* of *verbum* includes two distinct elements: 1) word signifies the perfection or completion of the act of understanding, which is a pure perfection, and 2) word signifies something that proceeds from another. Since the full *ratio* of *verbum* includes both elements, reason alone—absent revelation—cannot demonstrate even the *existence* of a *verbum* in God, speaking most properly (*proprie*). But St. Thomas—though he never steps altogether outside of revelation—does seem to speak as if we can posit a word in God simply on the basis of seeing that word signifies a pure perfection.⁴⁷ St. Thomas must mean that, using *verbum* in a broader sense, we can posit a word in God apart from the consideration of whether the Word proceeds from another.⁴⁸ Speaking more properly, however, we would say not that reason apart from faith can show the existence of a *verbum* in God but that it can show the existence of a pure perfection in God that is signified by the name *verbum*, namely, the perfection or completion of the act of understanding (or the primary and per se object of the act of understanding).

II. Real Procession of the Word as Locus of the Mystery

Let me turn to the second part of my paper, in which I give reasons to think that the real procession of the Word in God is known by faith alone, and that real procession is in fact the locus of the mystery of the Trinity. Let me first point to the textual basis for thinking that this is St. Thomas's position, before turning to more substantive considerations.

Which features or elements of St. Thomas's teaching on the divine Word can be demonstrated by natural reason and which must be revealed by faith is hard to sort out because Thomas proceeds in different ways in the various places he considers the divine Word. In the *Summa contra gentiles*, and elsewhere, he seeks to manifest the Trinity by constructing probable arguments, and in these places it can be especially hard to sort out which premises are known with certitude by natural reason and which premises natural reason sees as merely probable—and are therefore known with certitude only under the light of faith. This is why it can be helpful to turn

to the *Summa theologiae*, which proceeds under the formality of *sacra doctrina*, as a theological science whose principles are received by faith. His treatment of the Trinity in the *Summa theologiae* does not take the form of a probable argument where natural reason strains to grasp at the mystery. Instead, it takes its bearings immediately from principles that are known with certitude under the light of faith.

Before we turn to the *Summa theologiae*, however, let us look first at the *Summa contra gentiles*, which does provide some indication of which features of the divine Word are knowable by natural reason and which are known by faith by adverting to the structure of the work as a whole. St. Thomas tells us that the first three books of the *Summa contra gentiles* present things about God that are knowable by natural reason, whereas Book IV treats of those things revealed by faith. This structure fits with our division of the two features of the *verbum*. St. Thomas seems to arrive at the knowledge of the existence of a word in God in Bk. I, ch. 53 but waits until Bk. IV to treat the procession of the Word and the distinction of persons.⁴⁹ Moreover, when he commences his argument for the distinction of persons in *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 11, he reminds his reader that he has already demonstrated the existence of a divine word back in *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 53: "Because the divine intellect does not pass from potency to act, but is always existing in act, as was proved in the first book, from necessity he must have always understood himself. And from his understanding of himself it is necessary that his word is in him, as was shown. It is necessary, therefore, that his word always existed in God."⁵⁰

Let us now turn to the treatise on the Trinity in the *Summa theologiae*. In the prologue to the treatise on the Trinity, St. Thomas tells us that he is beginning with procession because "the order of doctrine" requires it. Here is his explanation:

Having considered those things which pertain to the unity of the divine essence, it remains to consider those things which pertain to the Trinity of persons in God. And because the divine Persons are distinguished according to relations of origin, according to the order of doctrine the first thing to be considered is origin, or procession, second, relations of origin, and third, the persons.

Since the divine persons are distinguished by relations of origin, and relations of origin presuppose real procession in God, the "order of doctrine" points to procession as the root of the mystery of faith. This is borne out when we turn to *Summa theologiae* I, q. 27, a. 1, which begins with scripture, in the revelation of divine procession. In this first article of the treatise on the Trinity, St. Thomas shows that the procession revealed in scripture must be understood as an interior procession—a procession within God Himself—otherwise we will end up in either the Arian or the Sabellian heresy. Because scripture itself reveals a Trinity of persons, we know by faith that there must be real procession in God. In the latter half of q. 27, a. 1, he shows us how analogy assists our understanding of the mystery of the Trinity: only the intellectual creatures offer a fitting similitude of God's interior processions. Divine procession is to be understood "according to intelligible emanation, as the

intelligible word proceeds from the speaker but remains in him . . . thus the Catholic faith understands procession in God.” The conclusion of the article is noteworthy: St. Thomas seeks to ground the whole treatment of the Trinity in what is understood under the light of faith. Even the procession of the word in the human soul which is proposed as a similitude of divine procession is put forth as a likeness sanctioned by faith. Reason may help us explain or unpack the analogy, but the analogy itself is confirmed by faith. I think it is clear that St. Thomas especially has in mind the prologue to John’s Gospel, but one can also find several places in the Old Testament wisdom literature that seem to reveal an intelligible emanation in God.

Another text that is especially helpful in showing that, for St. Thomas, procession is the root of the mystery of the Trinity is found in the *De potentia*:

No other origin is able to be in God except one that is immaterial, and which is consistent with an intellectual nature, of which sort is the origin of word and love. Whence if the procession of word and love is not enough to introduce a personal distinction, no personal distinction will be possible in God. Whence John both in the beginning of his gospel and in his first canonical letter uses the name “Word” for the Son, nor ought one to speak otherwise about God than Holy Scripture speaks.⁵¹

As this text makes clear, for St. Thomas the procession of word and love within God is the sole basis for the distinction of persons within the Trinity. This text also shows that Thomas sees the prologue to John as confirmation of that fact.

We can also find textual support for procession as the root of the mystery of the Trinity by looking at what St. Thomas says about the human being as *imago Dei*. According to Thomas, “in man there exists the image of God both with respect to the Divine Nature and with respect to the Trinity of Persons, for also in God Himself there is one nature in three persons.”⁵² He goes on to explain that man contains the image of the divine nature according to his intellect and his will, but he contains the image of God with respect to the Trinity of persons according to the *processions* of word and love: “in rational creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity.”⁵³ This image of the Trinity is most perfect when the human mind knows itself: “But in the knowledge by which our mind knows itself there is a representation of the uncreated Trinity according to analogy. It lies in this, that the mind, knowing itself in this way, begets a word expressing itself, and love proceeds from both of these, just as the Father, uttering Himself, has begotten the Word from eternity, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both.”⁵⁴

I would like to end by articulating a more substantive reason why procession in God can only be known with certitude under the light of faith. It is this: that the *verbum* is *from another* does not clearly signify a perfection. It is true that in the human soul a word is formed in such a way that it is something really distinct from the mind that expresses it, but reason cannot see that real procession belongs to God himself, who is maximally perfect. This consideration is raised by St. Thomas

himself in *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2, where he is addressing the question of whether *verbum* is a personal name of God. Having already argued that *verbum* is predicated properly of God insofar as it signifies a pure perfection (*De veritate*, q. 4, a.1) he turns to the question of whether it is a personal name. Here is what he says at the beginning of the *corpus*:

Viewed superficially, the question seems to be very clear, because the word implies a certain origin according to which the persons in God are distinguished. Considered more deeply, however, the question is found to be more difficult, since we find in God certain things that imply origin, not according to reality (*secundum rem*), but according to reason only (*secundum rationem tantum*), as the name “operation” undoubtedly implies something proceeding from the one who operates, yet that procession is according to reason only. Whence, operation in God is not said personally but essentially, because in God essence, power, and operation do not differ. Whence, it is not immediately evident whether the name “word” implies a real procession, as the name “son,” or a procession of reason only, as the name “operation,” and so whether word is said personally or essentially.⁵⁵

St. Thomas goes on to argue that *verbum* is a personal name—principally for theological reasons, but this text shows that, from the standpoint of natural reason, one cannot conclude that *verbum* as a pure perfection in God entails a real procession any more than one can conclude that the divine operation entails real procession. Absent revelation, natural reason would more likely conclude that in God the perfection signified by the word *verbum* is simply identical to the other divine perfections owing to the divine simplicity and that there is no basis for a real distinction within God himself.

It should be noted, however, that once one accepts by faith that there is a real procession of the divine Word in God, divine simplicity plays a key role in explaining how this procession is a kind of divine generation. It is because the interior word is identical to the divine intellect, and to the very essence of God, that one can see that the divine Word that proceeds from the Father shares the very same essence with the Father—not only one in species, but one in number. Nonetheless, without faith divine simplicity would not lead us to conclude that there is either a real procession or real distinction in God.

Before concluding my paper, let me raise a possible objection to my thesis based on a text that might appear to pose a difficulty for my interpretation. In *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 12, St. Thomas answers an objection to the position that there are real relations in God following the interior actions of understanding and willing. The objection is pertinent because the objector argues that, if real relations follow such actions, natural reason would be capable of demonstrating the Trinity of persons. Here is the objection:

Man's natural reason is able to come to a knowledge of the divine intellect: for it has been demonstratively proven by philosophers that God is an intelligence. If, therefore, real relations follow from the action of the intellect, which in God is said to distinguish the persons, it seems that the Trinity of persons would be able to be discovered through human reason, and thus it would no longer be an article of faith, for faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Heb 11:1)⁵⁶

Here is St. Thomas's reply:

Although natural reason is able to come to show that God is an intellect, nevertheless it is not able to discover sufficiently his mode of understanding. For just as we are able to know *that* God is but not *what* he is, so we are able to know that God understands, but not by what mode he understands. To have the conception of a word in the act of understanding pertains to the mode of understanding: whence reason is unable to prove this sufficiently, but from what is in us it can in some way conjecture by a likeness.⁵⁷

At first glance, St. Thomas's reply would seem to undermine the thesis that I have been arguing in this paper: that natural reason can see the need to posit the existence of a word in God as a pure perfection rather than something that belongs to a peculiarly human mode of understanding.

In answer to this difficulty, we need to make a distinction between a concept or interior word and the *formation* or *expression* of a concept, which is nothing other than the *procession* of an interior word. The reply cited above is clearly referencing the latter and there are three reasons for saying this. First, when St. Thomas says that "the conception of a word" belongs to the mode of understanding he is clearly referring to the *formation* of a word. If he meant the mere presence of a concept in God, why say the "conception of a word"? Since "word" is another name for concept, if "conception" means nothing more than "concept," then "conception of a word" means "concept of a concept" which makes little sense. It makes more sense, then, to take "conception" to mean the *formation* of a word.

Second, in the objection to which St. Thomas replies, the objector claims that the distinction of persons can be discovered by natural reason because "real relations follow from the action of the intellect." But since real relations only follow from a *real* procession, the objector must be asserting that natural reason can know that there is a real procession in God, otherwise the conclusion that the objector draws (that reason could know the Trinity of persons) would not follow. Hence, the only reasonable interpretation of St. Thomas's answer to the objection is to take his claim that "the conception of a word in the act of understanding pertains to the mode of understanding" as referring to the real procession of a word in God.

Third, if St. Thomas's reply in *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 12 is taken to deny the mere *presence* of a concept in God, then he would contradict himself in *De potentia*,

q. 9, a. 5, where he asserts that “it is necessary to posit that there is in him [viz., God] a conception (*conceptio*) of the intellect, which is *absolutely* of the ratio of the act of understanding.” If St. Thomas’s reply in *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1 is consistent with *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5, then we must take him to mean that the mere existence of a word in God is knowable by reason (because it belongs absolutely to the ratio of the act of understanding), but that the *mode* of God’s understanding, as entailing the real procession of a word in God, is beyond natural reason. St. Thomas’s reply, in other words, is consistent with the position I have been arguing, that the *existence* of a word in God is knowable by reason (because it is a pure perfection that is found in every intellectual nature), but the *real procession* of a word in God is beyond reason. Reason can form a conjecture about the procession of the Word in God, but it can only be sufficiently known with the certitude of faith as revealed in the Gospel of John.

Conclusion

St. Thomas’s theology has been singled out as a paradigm for how faith and reason can both be utilized in the search for truth, especially the truth about God himself.⁵⁸ But the interplay between faith and natural reason in the work of St. Thomas is so subtle, and faith and reason are often so finely woven together, that it can be hard to sort out the distinct roles that they each play. Philosophic reasoning is employed as a handmaiden to theology throughout St. Thomas’s account of the divine Word, but it functions in different ways depending upon the two different aspects or features of the *verbum*. Insofar as reason sees the notion of the *verbum* as a pure perfection that must be attributed to God, the *verbum* functions as a preamble to faith—a preamble to the other aspect of the interior word—the Word as something that proceeds from another. Though the second aspect of the divine Word is known only by faith, reason can help manifest the mystery by seeing the procession of the word in the human soul as an analogy or likeness of divine generation. So, there are two distinct and important ways that philosophy functions as a handmaiden to sacred theology when treating of the highest mystery of the Christian faith—the mystery of the holy Trinity.⁵⁹

Notes

1. I am grateful to Brian Carl for his comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

2. For other instances, see *Lectura Romana* 1, d. 2, q. 1, a. 4; *Lectura super Iohannem* [*Super Ioan.*], lec. 1, no. 25; and, to a lesser degree, *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 37–40.

3. St. Thomas calls the word a terminus in *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1 and q. 9, a. 5, and in *De veritate*, q. 3, a. 2; q. 4, a. 2, ad 7. In *Summa contra gentiles* [*SCG*] I, ch. 53, he calls it a quasi-terminus.

4. St. Thomas explicitly raises this question in these texts: I *Sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 4; *In Boeth. de Trin.*, q. 1, a. 4; *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 13; and *Summa Theologiae* [ST] I, q. 32, a. 1.

5. "Human reason is so situated toward the knowledge of the truth of faith, a truth which can be most known only to those who see the divine substance, that it can gather certain likenesses (*verisimilitudines*) of it, which nevertheless do not suffice so that the aforesaid truth may be comprehended as if it were understood demonstratively or through itself" (SCG I, ch. 8, no. 1).

6. "[W]e shall proceed to the manifestation of that truth which surpasses reason, answering the objections of its adversaries and declaring the truth of faith by probable arguments and by authorities" (SCG I, ch. 9, no. 3).

7. "I answer that the plurality of persons in God is among those things which are subject to faith, and natural human reason is neither able to investigate nor understand sufficiently; but we hope to understand in heaven when we shall see God in his essence, and faith will be succeeded by vision. Nevertheless, the holy fathers on account of the objection of those who contradicted the faith, were forced to discuss this and other things that look toward faith, yet modestly and reverently, without presumption of comprehending. Nor is such an inquiry useless, since through it the mind is elevated to take hold of something of the truth which suffices to exclude error. Whence Hilary (*De Trin.* ii) says: 'Believing this,' namely the plurality of persons in God, 'begin, run, persevere, and though I may know that I will not arrive, nevertheless I shall rejoice in the progress. For he who piously pursues the infinite, although he will not ever reach it, will nevertheless make progress by going forward.'"

8. See Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria College, 2003), 98–100. Emery thinks that natural reason can see the existence of a word in God, although not the real distinction of the Word from God the Father: "St. Thomas certainly does not claim that the real distinction between the divine Word and the Father who utters it can be proved by reason (that would mean proving something which only faith can teach us), but the reasoning showing the existence of a Word in God (irrespective of the form which its reality in God takes, that is, of the problem of its personality and of its real relationship with the entity from which it proceeds) would however seem to include all the rigor of mature Thomistic thinking" (98). Moreover, Emery sees the attribution of a word in God as a foundation to what faith reveals about the Word, namely, its real procession and distinction from the Father: "Thomas is thus able, and by rigorous argument, to propose a word in God in terms of a divine 'attribute,' by analogy. This exposition lays the foundation upon which Trinitarian theology will be able to base its understanding of the first procession" (100). See also *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 82, note 44: "Philosophical thought can discover the presence of a word within the divine mind . . . but it cannot reach the personal distinctiveness and hypostatic subsistence of this Word . . ."

9. Michael Joseph Higgins, "On the Open Question of 'Necessary Reasons' in Aquinas's Trinitary Theology," *Angelicum* 97, no. 2 (2020): 177–212; Michael Joseph Higgins, "Perfection and the Necessity of the Trinity in Aquinas," *New Blackfriars* 102, no. 1097 (2021): 75–95. These two essays raise many interesting and provocative questions about the relationship between faith and reason in the trinitarian theology of St. Thomas. Although this essay offers a response to the position outlined in these two papers, it is beyond the scope of this paper to respond in detail to all the arguments and texts that Michael Higgins discusses in these two essays.

10. *STI*, q. 34, a. 1, q. 85, a. 5, sed contra; *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1; *Sententia super Perihermenias* I, lec. 2.

11. *STI*, q. 34, a. 1; *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 1.

12. John O'Callaghan maintains that word is only a metaphor when used to signify the concept or interior word. See John O'Callaghan, "Verbum Mentis: Philosophical or Theological Doctrine in Aquinas?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 74 (2000): 103–119.

13. *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 1, obj. 10.

14. *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 1, resp. and ad 10.

15. The name "light" is another example where the original meaning of the word is transferred from something sensible to something spiritual. In fact, St. Thomas argues against St. Ambrose who held that "light" was predicated of God metaphorically. Thomas grants that the original meaning of light has been extended (and in that limited sense could be called a metaphor), but he insists that "light" can be said properly of spiritual things. Indeed, he insists that the thing signified by the name "light," namely, that which makes something manifest, belongs primarily to intelligible light. See *STI*, q. 67, a. 1; *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 3, no. 89.

16. *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 1.

17. *STI*, q. 13, a. 3, ad 2. See also *SCG I*, ch. 30, no. 1–2. In *I Sent.* d. 22, q. 1, a. 2, St. Thomas says that a perfection signified absolutely is a perfection that is "simply and altogether better that it be rather than not be (*simpliciter et omnino melius est esse quam non esse*)," referencing St. Anselm's description of a pure perfection in *Monologian*, ch. 15.

18. *STI*, q. 13, a. 6.

19. *STI*, q. 13, a. 3 and a. 6.

20. See *STI*, q. 13, a. 3, obj. 3 and ad 3; *SCG I*, ch. 30, no. 3.

21. *STI*, q. 13, a. 6, sc.

22. Pure perfection argumentation is used to defend the name person in *STI*, q. 28, a. 3.

23. It is important to note that the name "Word" can be properly predicated of God not only because it names something immaterial (a concept of the mind), but also because signifies a perfection that is free from anything defective. This is clear from *STI*, q. 34, a. 1, ad 2 where St. Thomas notes that the name "thought" (*cogitatio*), unlike *verbum*, cannot be properly predicated of God because it names something proper to discursive reason, namely the human mind's search for truth, and is therefore something unstable and imperfect. See also *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 26, *De potentia* q. 9, a. 9.

24. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 25.

25. Ibid. See also *STI*, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3; *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1; *SCG I*, ch. 53; *Quodlibet V*, q. 5, a. 1.

26. See *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1; q. 9, a. 5; *De veritate*, q. 3, a. 2; q. 4, a. 2, ad 7. In *SCG I*, ch. 53, no. 4 and *SCG IV*, ch. 11, no. 13, he calls it a quasi-terminus.

27. See *STI*, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3; *De veritate*, q. 3, a. 2.

28. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 25. The reference to the philosopher is to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4, ch. 7, 1012a23–24. See also *Metaphys.* IV, lec. 16, no. 733; *ST I*, q. 13, a. 1; a. 4, ad 1; a. 8, ad 2.

29. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 26.

30. See *Phys.* I, lec. 1, no. 10.

31. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 26.

32. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 25.

33. *ST I*, q. 85, a. 2; *SCG II*, ch. 75, no. 7.

34. *ST I*, q. 84, a. 7. See also *De Anima III*, lec. 8, no. 712–713, 718.

35. *Ibid.*

36. The interior word is called an *intentio* in *SCG I*, ch. 53, no. 3, IV, ch. 11, no. 13.

37. *SCG I*, ch. 53, no. 4, IV, ch. 11, no. 13.

38. *ST I*, q. 34, a. 1, ad 3; *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1; *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2, ad 3.

39. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 25. See also *SCG IV*, ch. 14; *Lectura Romana* 1, d. 2, q. 1, a. 4; *Compendium theologiae I*, ch. 43.

40. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 26.

41. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 27.

42. *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 1, no. 28.

43. *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. This is a critical point that is overlooked by Michael Higgins, who seems to conclude that reason alone can arrive at the distinction of persons in God simply because the *ratio* of *verbum*, according to St. Thomas, includes real procession and therefore real distinction. See Higgins, “Perfection and the Necessity of the Trinity in Aquinas,” 86.

47. This is certainly the way St. Thomas seems to proceed in *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5; *SCG I*, ch. 53, no. 3; *SCG IV*, ch. 11, no. 9; and *Compendium theologiae I*, ch. 37.

48. I think that this is what Gilles Emery means to say when he says that reason can show “the existence of a Word in God (irrespective of the form which its reality in God takes, that is, of the problem of its personality and of its real relationship with the entity from which it proceeds)” Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas*, 98. Emery knows that, according to St. Thomas, procession from another belongs to the full *ratio* of *verbum*. Indeed, he points it out on the previous page of this same book. But, using the broader signification of word, we can posit that there is a word in God apart from the consideration of whether such a name is a personal name or an essential name. Indeed, St. Thomas appeals to word used in the broad sense (*communiter*) in *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2, to explain how one might predicate word of God essentially, rather than personally. Although St. Thomas rejects word as an essential name, he does seem to leave room for a broader sense of “word” that allows him to speak about a word existing in God while bracketing, at least temporarily, the question of whether it is an essential or a personal name. Of course, St. Thomas consistently held that “Word,” properly speaking, is a personal name, not an essential name (*Super Ioan.* I, lec. 1, no. 29;

STI, q. 34, a. 1; *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 9, ad 7; *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 4, ad 4; *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 1, ad 10; *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2, resp. and ad 1–2). Emery follows St. Thomas in this and affirms that the name Word can only be taken as a personal name of God, rather than an essential name.

49. St. Thomas's argument for the existence of a divine word in *SCG I*, ch. 53, is similar to his argument in *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5. The argument hinges on how the external thing that is understood by the mind exists *in the one understanding*. Like the argument in the *De potentia*, St. Thomas distinguishes between the intelligible species as the principle of the act of understanding and the word as the terminus, or quasi-terminus, of the act of understanding which he here calls an "intention" or "understood intention." St. Thomas manifests the need to posit an interior terminus by appealing to our own experience: "[T]he intellect, having been formed by the species of the thing, by an act of understanding forms within itself a certain intention of the thing understood . . . this is necessary because the intellect understands indifferently a present thing and an absent thing . . . [and because] it understands a thing as separated from material conditions, without which a thing does not exist in reality. But this could not be unless the intellect formed for itself the aforementioned intention" (*SCG I*, ch. 53, no. 3). The ability for the mind to know an absent thing, and to know something without material conditions, manifests that the *per se* and primary object understood by the mind is not the thing outside the mind, but an interior terminus of the act of understanding which St. Thomas calls an "intention" of the thing understood and also a "concept" or "word." Michael Higgins claims that this argument fails to demonstrate the existence of a word in God: "God, however, knows all things—including all material things—through His own essence, which is never *absent* from Him, and which is already *immaterial*. Thus, the features of our intellect which, according to this argument, make a word necessarily present in *our* acts of understanding do not hold in the divine intellect. This passage, therefore, tells us nothing about the existence of a Word in God" (Higgins, "The Open Question," 185). I think Higgins has missed the point of St. Thomas's example. The reason for noting that our intellect understands indifferently something present or absent, and something separated from material conditions, is to manifest that the object understood is not the thing *outside the mind*, but something *inside the mind*, namely, the understood intention. This basic point is equally applicable to God: If God knows all material things through himself, this can only be the case if within God there is an "understood intention" or concept that manifests or represents the material things that are, in some sense, on his mind. The material things are certainly not *physically* present to God the way that a sensible object is present to us; it is rather that the material things known by God are present *intentionally*, in a divine word or concept.

50. *SCG IV*, ch. 11, no. 10.

51. *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 9, ad 7.

52. *STI*, q. 93, a. 5.

53. *STI*, q. 93, a. 6. See also *SCG 4*, ch. 26, no. 7: "in our mind is found a likeness of the divine Trinity with respect to procession, which multiplies the Trinity."

54. *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 7.

55. *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2.

56. *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1, obj. 12.

57. *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 12.

58. In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, §78, Pope St. John Paul II singles out the thought of the Angelic Doctor: “In his thinking, the demands of reason and the power of faith found the most elevated synthesis ever attained by human thought, for he could defend the radical newness introduced by revelation without ever demeaning the venture proper to reason.”

59. These are two out of the three uses of philosophy listed *In Boeth. de Trin.* q. 2, a. 3.