

To Be from Another: Nature, Sexual Difference, and the Gift of Existence

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DOI: 10.17421/2498-9746-03-14

Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between nature, being, and sexual difference and argues that adequate understandings of each rise and fall with each other. The case is advanced that human sexual difference must be understood in terms of a union of modally distinct persons whose union neither destroys nor diminishes their alterity but rather augments it. Human sexual union is thus seen as like the intellectual union of knower of known. The unique and generative distinction that constitutes sexual difference provides a window through which one might look more deeply into nature as constituted of the fruitful union of essence and the Origin of all essence. Hence, the meaning of human sexual difference is found to be bound with the right understanding of nature and to open vistas that reveal the nature of being itself.

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When I was in high school, I became quite intrigued with the television show, *Kung-Fu*. My inclination to this show made me think that perhaps I was meant to be a Buddhist: the power of the warrior united with the peace of the monk was enticing. So, I began my immature study of Buddhism — mostly by conversing with a Burmese friend who knew its teachings from the inside. I soon, however, became troubled, for, if I had understood my friend correctly, it seemed that the ultimate goal of my striving towards enlightenment would have been to realize that the very subject of the striving was an illusion, that my individual identity was only a kind of phantasm. Thus, the prize of my practice would have been to melt into the oneness of being.¹ So began a search for wisdom: what is the relationship between identity and union?

At the same time, I was growing quite fond of the peace prayer of St Francis, and especially the paradoxes that conclude the prayer. In forgiving, I would be forgiven. In giving, I would receive. And, in dying, I would be born. In one proposal, it seemed that, in dying, I would only die and be consumed by the one, while, in the other, in dying, I would somehow paradoxically be born. In losing my life, I would find it. Both involved becoming one with some other. In one case, the union seemed to imply my destruction; in the other my re-birth. I could not help but choose birth.

And so, in this short work, I wish to speak about births — and what brings them about — and I wish to speak about paradoxes: the paradox of births that come from what we might have thought to have been deaths instead: the death of domination or the death of dissolution. I will treat of three themes: union, alterity, and identity. These will be viewed from three perspectives: sexual difference, nature, and being. Drawing upon the wisdom of many, I will defend the position that sexual difference must be understood in reference to a union of modally distinct persons, whose union neither decreases nor destroys their alterity, but rather preserves and augments it. Further, following St John Paul II, I will argue that the dynamics of this union must be understood in terms of what he referred to as the hermeneutic of gift.² I will then attempt to show how this vision of sexual difference is also the proper vantage point from which to understand nature, and even being considered more generally. Thus, my claim is that a right understanding of nature and sexual difference rise and fall together and likewise influence the very understanding of being itself. If we get one wrong, we are likely to mistake all three.

Since much of my past work has centered upon sexual difference, I will

begin there. In this discussion, I will rely much upon the classical and contemporary sources used in my doctoral dissertation.³ I will, however, also draw deeply from the recent work of French philosopher Fabrice Hadjadj whose work on the likeness of the mind and sexual difference will form a kind of foundation for our present exploration.⁴ I will then turn our attention to discussions of nature and being.

1 THE QUESTION(S) OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

I have claimed that right understanding of sexual difference and nature rise and fall with each other. So, how are we to understand human sexual difference? Aristotle holds that, in order to know something, you must know its causes.⁵ He likewise notes how all four causes tend to converge on form.⁶ And, certainly, the first step in understanding anything is knowing what it is. My focus here, however, will be upon the final cause, which, of course is in no way to the exclusion of form. In fact, as St Thomas notes, in considering the final cause we must consider two ends: the end of generation, and the end of the thing generated.⁷ The first of these, the end of generation, focuses on form; for the end is the union of the form and matter that constitute the being of the thing. Thus, we must at least briefly discuss the formal cause of sexual difference. Our principal focus, however, will be upon the end of the thing generated — that for the sake of which the agent brought the form into existence. Let us take a moment to consider form.

Human sexual difference regards the non-identical division of the power of generation, a power which is held individually in most simpler life forms. As is well known, St Thomas thought that this division was a separation of the active and passive powers of generation.⁸ Biology has shown, however, that the essential difference must be found elsewhere. Both male and female hold the same partial power (they both possess the active and passive powers of generation) — but they hold them in different ways. Ultimately, it is this difference that we must understand.

I have argued elsewhere⁹ that human sexual difference, human maleness and femaleness, are forms of composition that center upon possessing the power of generation by means of producing the simpler reproductive cell (spermatozoa) or by possessing this power by means of producing the richer cell (the ova). From this foundational difference, springs a series of ordered determinations of the human substance that together constitute the qualities, the essential accidents, to which we give the names “female” and “male” in the human being. The difference is thus subtler than was thought

by Aristotle or St Thomas: It is not the case that one possesses a power (the active power) that the other lacks. Rather, each possess the same power, but they do so non-identically; the distinction is modal. Thus, human sexual difference refers to essential qualities that are compositions of many elements of varying importance. These compositions center upon distinct ways of possessing the power of generation.

Much more can and should be said about the formal cause — and it will not be forgotten in this work — but we must turn our attention to the end of the thing generated. We must ask ourselves why there is sexual difference. But, this question of the “why” of sexual difference quickly becomes two questions. Nature has chosen to divide the power of generation between two members of species. The first question regards the division: why divide the power of generation? The second question might at first seem odd; for, in our experience, the division of the power generation means an asymmetrical division of that power. There is, however, no *a priori* necessity that requires that the power be divided non-identically. Thus, the second question precisely regards this asymmetry: assuming that the power of generation must be divided, why divide it *non-identically*?

Interestingly, the evolutionists help us bring these questions into sharper focus, for both the division of the power of generation and its asymmetrical division seem to defy evolutionary logic. The division of the power of generation seems at odds with the most fundamental evolutionary reasoning: if an organism has a genotype that is adapted to an ecology, that genotype should be replicated *exactly* — as happens in asexual reproduction.¹⁰ It is precisely the set of traits encoded in the genes that has been successful to the point of reproducing itself within its environment. As such, an exact replica of itself should be produced. Splitting the power of generation and altering an adapted genotype, as happens in sexual reproduction, seems to undermine a pillar upon which evolution is constructed.

Further, even assuming that one can establish the need for dividing the power of generation, doing so non-identically also seems to make little sense: if every member of the species possessed its partial power of generation in exactly the same way, finding a mate would be much easier. With one mating type, any one individual of a species could mate with any other member of that species.¹¹ However, splitting the power of generation into two mating types necessarily limits an individual’s possible mates to half the population. Thus, both these questions must be addressed: Why divide the power? And, why divide it non-identically? As we proceed, we must attend to how proposed explanations of the *telos* of human sexual difference respond to each of these questions.

While it would be interesting, time does not permit us to consider how the evolutionists answer their own questions.¹² Instead, we will consider the response of the philosophers. In particular, we will explore two general, related themes in terms of which sexual difference can be explained: sexual difference and its relation to the *polis*, and sexual difference and its relation to *logos* or the intellect.

2 SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND THE CITY

Aristotle's words at the beginning of his politics are remarkably strong: "In the first place there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and female, that the race may continue."¹³ Male and female must exist together, for without each other the human race would not fully exist. In fact, without the reunification of the essential power of generation, in a short time, the human species would not exist at all. The power of generation is an essential power of any species. But this power is not possessed by any individual of the species. Hence, man is only complete when the power of generation is complete — when male and female join to make it whole. Thus, it could be said that the power of generation is separated precisely so that it can be reunited; for, that reunification becomes the principle of the coming to be new members of the human family and the broader unification of human society.¹⁴

Thus, we have an answer for at least one of our questions: why is the power of generation divided? It is divided to insist upon the communal aspect of human nature. It is not good for man to be alone. By his nature, he is ordered to communion. The intrinsic incompleteness of both male and female demand their reunification — and, in so doing, set the foundation of the city.

It is worth noting, however, that the necessary reunification of the power of generation as a basis for human society does not in and of itself demand that those who are united be different in anything more than number. A symmetrical division of the power of generation would likewise require its reunification. Asymmetry, thus, still demands an explanation. When discussing the friendship between men and women, Aristotle offers some insight into why the power of generation is divided non-identically:

Between man and wife friendship seems to exist by nature; *for man is naturally inclined to form couples — even more than to form cities*, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more necessary than the city, and reproduction is more common to man than with the animals. With the other animals the union extends only to this point, but human beings live together not

only for the sake of reproduction but also for the various purposes of life; *for from the start the functions are divided, and those of man and woman are different; so they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock.* It is for these reasons that both utility and pleasure seem to be found in this kind of friendship. But this friendship may be based also on virtue, if the parties are good; for *each has its own virtue* and they will delight in the fact. And children seem to be a bond of union (which is the reason why childless people part more easily); for children are a good common to both and what is common holds them together.¹⁵

The text is rich. First, he notes the centrality of the bond of husband and wife as the foundation of human community. But he goes on to note the difference between human beings and other social animals, and the difference between man and woman: other animals join *only* for purpose of reproduction, but human union goes further. Man and woman have different gifts which each contribute to the good of the whole. These differences can contribute to their friendship. First, because their different gifts can lead to the lesser friendships of utility and pleasure. The diversity of talents is useful and presumably pleasurable to each. Most importantly, however, Aristotle notes the possibility of true friendship – the friendship of virtue – among them; for, if they are both good, each will delight in the *distinct* virtue of the other. The man will delight in the unique otherness of feminine virtue and the woman delight in the otherness of masculine virtue. Each is drawn to the goodness of the other – and precisely the otherness of that virtue. The child is the fruit of their union and further solidifies the bond that is ideally based upon the unique goodness of each. Hence, the difference leads to a distinction in the mode of goodness which blossoms in a delight that deepens the union that is the very basis of human society. Thus, human society is not like that of other animals in which male and female come together only for the sake of reuniting the power of generation. Sexual difference – along with the children it produces – is the principle for a unique friendship founded upon distinct virtue that is the principle of a lasting union that is the bedrock of the state.¹⁶

3 SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND REASON

The nature of human sexual difference is one reason that the human polis is not like that of other animals. Yet it is not the only reason. Hadjadj draws our attention to Aristotle's insistence upon the uniqueness of the human animal:

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust.¹⁷

Hadjadj notes that the word translated as “speech” is *logos* – reasoned speech.¹⁸ It is *logos* that allows man to move beyond that which is merely expedient to that which is just. To this we might add that it is likewise the possibility of the friendship of virtue – a friendship that demands *logos* – that renders the human state possible. Thus, Aristotle establishes a kind of alliance in the founding of the polis: it is sexual difference infused with *logos* that makes the city possible.¹⁹ It is this alliance that we must now explore more fully.

St Thomas Aquinas emphasizes precisely the relationship between sexual difference and reason. In considering the question of whether woman should have been created among the first things, Thomas notes an order in created things: The simplest life forms do not possess the power of generation, but rather must be generated by something differing in species. Plants possess in themselves the complete power of generation. This is because generation is their highest power, and so it is fitting that each individual should have the complete power so they can always engage in it. The case, however, is different for higher beings, and especially in man:

Among perfect animals the active power of generation belongs to the male sex, and the passive power to the female. And as among animals *there is a vital operation nobler than generation, to which their life is principally directed*; therefore the male sex is not found in continual union with the female in perfect animals, but only at the time of coition; so that we may consider that by this means *the male and female are one*, as in plants they are always united; ... But man is yet further ordered to a still nobler vital action, and that is intellectual operation. Therefore there was greater reason for the distinction of these two forces in man; so that the female should be produced separately from the man...²⁰

Generation is not the highest human power. Thus, in the human being, it is for the sake of the exercise of his power of reason that the power of generation is divided and only unified when man and woman are joined to make the power of generation whole. Generation is separated in humans

because he has powers that transcend generation; the division of generation, as it were, makes more room for reason and its operation.

This ordering of sexual difference to reason coincides with what St Thomas concludes regarding the flow of powers from the essence of the soul. Each lower power is for the sake of the higher powers, and these higher powers stand to the lower as both agents and ends. Thus, in man, the power of generation is for the sake of reason and, in a sense, flows from reason.²¹ Ultimately, then, human sexual difference must be understood in terms of its ordering to man's intellectual nature, for the sake of which that difference exists.

There is another curious fact in Thomas's account that seems to underscore a kind of alliance between sexual difference and reason: when speaking of how the powers proceed from the essence, he makes the observation that the orders of generation and nature are inverse:²² the noblest power — that which is the cause of the others — is the last in the order of generation, the last to actually appear on the scene. Thus, the least perfect powers — those we share with all other living things — should be the first in the order of becoming. As such, we see in living things that the powers of growth and nutrition are indeed the first to appear in act. We would expect, then, that reason would be the last power to come to be. However, curiously, it is the power of generation that holds this spot; it is the last power present in act. It seems that, in the natural unfolding of the powers, reason must be present *before* the power of generation. Without reason, the power of generation cannot be what it is supposed to be. So, generation is a unique power both in that it is divided among two members of the species, and in that, in the natural order of things, its operation is subsequent to reason. Thus, it is not only the case that the power of generation is for the sake of reason, but nature saw fit that reason be present before the power of generation be possessed in act.

I shall return to this point about the place of the fruition of sexual difference and the power that defines it, *viz.*, generation, but we must first note that Thomas's reason for sexual difference explains the *division* of the power of generation, but it is not clear how it explains sexual *difference*. It would seem that a symmetrical division would similarly provide the greater space that would facilitate the freer operation of reason and sensation. Hence, while we have an explanation for separation, we need an explanation for asymmetry. So, we must look more deeply into the alliance with reason.

Sexual difference is for the sake of reason in that it frees reason from constant engagement in generation. Thus, it is for the sake of the more facile operation of reason. But, perhaps the alliance between reason and sexual

difference could be deepened by looking both to the demands that sexual difference places upon reason, and to the reality that it presents to reason. In both of these ways, we can look to sexual difference as a kind of teacher, both for the questions to which it demands a reply, and for the answers that it offers. The fact that the power of generation is present in act after reason would seem to provide us justification in seeking out not only how the separation of the power might free the operation of reason, as Thomas suggests, but also how it might help reason in its operation by providing it with an object that will prompt reason to discover that which is most important for it to know.²³

Here, I will only offer a brief summary of some of the points that strengthen the case for the alliance between reason and sexual difference. Again, I take my lead from Hadjadj: He first notes a critical demand that human sexuality places upon reason.²⁴ Unlike non-rational animals, the human being freely chooses to bring new life into the world. While, of course, there is an instinctual drive towards procreation, nevertheless, human beings must choose to bring about new life. Man and woman must therefore have a reason to do so. They are confronted with the question: why give life? As Hadjadj eloquently puts it: “What good is it to keep filling-up cemeteries? What good is it to have children, if it is only to delay the triumph of the dust?”²⁵ The question of whether or not to reunite the divided power of generation is a question about the goodness of our own existence. Implicitly or explicitly, it demands a judgment that is the evidence of either hope or despair. Reason is uniquely challenged by the reality of a divided power of generation.

Hadjadj likewise notes that the generation wrought from sexual union presents the intellect with a paradigmatic instance of cause and effect, the understanding of which provides a foundational principle of knowledge.²⁶ Similarly, sexual difference affords the nascent intellect its primary understanding of difference.²⁷ Though not first in the logical order – where the opposition of being and non-being reign supreme – Hadjadj offers that sexual difference is genealogically the first difference we understand and hence becomes a kind of principle of understanding other differences. Thus, regarding the object of understanding, sexual difference provides the intellect with some of its most fundamental objects: the relation of cause and effect, and the notion of distinction.

However, to see more deeply that which sexual difference presents to the intellect, we must now look more clearly at the nature of sexual union and its likeness to the mind. Hadjadj points us to a famous passage from Emmanuel Levinas:²⁸

The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away. The relationship does not *ipso facto* neutralize alterity but preserves it. The pathos of voluptuousness lies in the fact of being two. The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery.²⁹

Levinas sees in sexual union a right rapport between two who are unified yet remain other. He contrasts this mode of union with two possible errors, both of which, in a way, result in a loss of identity of one or both of those who are in some way made one.

One can dominate the other. Levinas speaks of a kind of battle of contraries in which one or the other opposed pole must prevail while the other yields to that power. In this dominance, the alterity of one is made subservient and effectively destroyed by the other. Another possibility is that the two become fused into some new thing. This fusion, however, necessitates that each be lost in the act of melting into the other and forming a new whole.³⁰ In both the case of dominance and of fusion, union with another results in the loss of the identity of either one or both of those united.

Levinas presents sexual union as a third and paradoxical possibility: a union of two in which the identity of neither is lost, but rather preserved and, in fact, augmented: the more one becomes one with another, the more both become one with themselves. And, even more, Hadjadj notes that this alterity is yet further multiplied in the fecundity of sexual union; for in this union not only does the woman become more herself and the man more himself thus increasing their individual alterity, but the union, to use Hadjadj's phrase, literally leads to "another other,"³¹ the child. This child, in receiving the gift of existence from his or her parents, gives them in turn the gift of the fullness of their generativity in the mode in which they possess it; in a word, the child gives them their motherhood or fatherhood, yet further augmenting alterity. Sexual union offers a unique window into the fecundity of the relation of one with another.

But how does this insight into the nature of sexual union strengthen the notion that sexual difference is ordered towards man's intellectual nature? In many ways, the rest of this essay is an answer to that question. But we must begin with a poignant similarity: Levinas' observation regarding the nature of sexual union should rouse the memory of the student of realist epistemology; for, in intentional union, we see something quite like the vision of sexual difference presented by Levinas. In the progression of the powers of living things we see different modes of possible union with

another.³² The simplest is in the power of nutrition. Like Levinas' description of fusion, when the object of the power nutrition is consumed, it must concede its identity wholly to its consumer. The other — in this case, the eaten object — is wholly lost in the sea of the being of the one who consumed it. Sensation is another mode of union — a union which goes much better for the object. A knower senses the object — the deer senses the wolf — and so is able to bring certain superficial aspects of the being of the object within itself: its scent, color, sound, etc. This kind of union of knower and known preserves the identity of the known, but offers the knower knowledge of only its surface. Through the intellect, however, the knower is able to bring the known within him or herself according to all that the known is — according to its essence, according to the fullness of its being. And so, as Levinas noted of sexual union, the known begins paradoxically, to recede into mystery: for the more deeply one begins to know the other, the more the knower will track that other back to its original cause and find there yet another Other whose being exceeds the mind's capacities to comprehend.³³ Thus, the intentional union of the knower and the known, of intellect and object is like sexual union: it is a union of others in which the alterity of the other is not destroyed, but rather preserved and purified, a union in which the other is neither dominated nor dissipated but rather recedes into the mystery of its being, which is the mystery of its continual union with its Origin.³⁴

This likeness is not accidental. Human sexual difference presupposes the kind of union that only the intellect can make possible. It is a unique instance of this union. In speculative knowing, the relationship is, in a sense, one-sided: the knower is measured by and thus has a real relation to the thing known, but, in classical theory, the thing known is unchanged by being known. The case is potentially different when both knower and known are both at least potentially knowers. This instance — intellectual being knowing intellectual being — affords the possibility of what can be called intimacy. Sexual union adds yet other elements to intimacy: the bodily and generative, as well as the aspect of desire.³⁵ We shall have to return to these themes later, but for now, we must begin to conclude our reflections on the relation of sexual difference to the mind.

From what we have seen thus far, it seems clear that reason and sexual difference are bound to each other. In providing the basis for the city, sexual difference provides the soil in which the seeds of reason may grow, and reason, in turn, along with sexual difference, make the city possible. The separation of the power of generation not only gives space for the operation of reason, but also challenges reason to confront some its most essential

questions. And further, we have just seen how it reveals to reason something of itself and at the same time something that transcends itself in revealing the paradoxical relation of unity and alterity in sexual union. Yet we are still left needing more insight into the question of why the power of generation is divided non-identically. Levinas' insight shows how sexual union manifests a non-reductive, non-destructive union of others. However, more remains to be said as to how precisely to characterize the otherness of those united in sexual union. It is here that we must turn to the work of St John Paul II and his hermeneutic of gift.

Sexuality is, to use Hadjadj's summary, an openness to the other as other.³⁶ But, *how* are these others *other*? Does it suffice for them to be distinct only in number — just any two members of the same species? It seems that it is precisely in regard to the otherness of the other that the work of John Paul II³⁷ comes to the fore. He speaks of a difference that reveals and instantiates a dynamic: the dynamic of gift. Every act of giving involves giving and receiving. Without each, there is no gift. Male and female are equally human. But, in the difference that their bodies manifest, they instantiate the dynamic of giving. For there is an intrinsic order in the gift: one must first offer the gift, and the other must receive the gift. As with the need for a first cause, there must be a beginning; there must be one to offer the gift. That one must move outward to the other, which other must inwardly receive the offeror of the gift. This is the fundamental dynamic of male and female: the outward and the inward. The modulations of the human substance that constitute man and woman write into the human substance the dance of giving and receiving. Hence, the alterity of the others of Levinas' description is not just any otherness, but rather one that reveals the way in which others may be given and received with neither domination nor dissolution, namely, through the logic of gift — a logic which is embedded in the forms of male and female.

It is important immediately to make a further observation: Within the dynamic just described, there is a simultaneous reciprocity: the gift received immediately become a gift that is in turn offered to the original giver. Hence, the first receiver in the act of receiving becomes a giver of a new gift, and, thus, the original giver is now the receiver.³⁸ The masculine manifests the first offering of the gift — the outward movement to the other.³⁹ The feminine represents the active reception of the gift, in which receipt she in turn offers herself to the other who now must receive her. The difference is thus one of an order of priority.

If this is true, we can now see more deeply into the dynamic described by Levinas: the more deeply one becomes a giver, the more profoundly the

other receives. The reciprocity of the relationship leads to an ever deepening dynamic in which alterity and intimacy paradoxically and proportionally grow. Hence, sexual distinction reveals a dynamic of difference and union that eschews the paradigms of dominance or fusion that too often seem to haunt our contemplation of the possibility intimacy.

We have now finally reached some conclusion regarding the “why” of sexual difference and the two questions we posed: the power of generation is divided precisely so that it can be reunited. This reunification, in conjunction with *logos*, is the principle of human community. The division is also at the service of intellection; and this in at least two ways: first, as Thomas notes, the division of the power, as it were, makes more room for reason and thus facilitates the operation of the intellect. However, it is also at the service of the intellect in what it reveals to the intellect and what it demands from the intellect. The free nature of the reunification of the divided power of generation demands that man make a judgment about the nature of human life and whether there is any hope in it. It also reveals to the human person the nature of intimacy and otherness, and the possibility of union without the destruction of alterity. The power of generation is thus divided non-identically — for its asymmetry manifests a dynamic of gift that explains the modal distinctions that are male and female. Sexual difference reveals a rhythm of giving and receiving that, as Aristotle witnessed, is to the delight of each as they love the unique otherness of the other and, in so doing, grow in their alterity as their union deepens. These differences fructify in the coming to be of the child in which the dynamic of gift is, as Hadjadj notes, expanded from the sexual difference to the generational difference.⁴⁰ In receiving the man, the woman is given her motherhood. In being received, the man is given his fatherhood. And in receiving his or her being, the child gives both motherhood and fatherhood. Yet, for all this, that which sexual difference has to reveal is not spent. To see this, however, we must turn our attention to another realm of births: we must turn to nature.

4 NATURE: THE GIFT OF BIRTH

Does nature reveal a dynamic of gift? As sexual difference must be understood in terms of the non-reductive, non-destructive union of two who manifest a reciprocal dynamic of giving and receiving, might nature also be best understood in these terms? Like sexual difference, nature regards births.⁴¹ “Of things, some exist by nature, others through other causes.”⁴² Principal of those other causes is art. But art cannot bring about a birth in the same

way that nature can. Art can give new being; art can produce another. But, it cannot do so radically; it cannot produce a new substance. It cannot produce a brand-new way of being in the world — something with its very own principle of operation, whose ends and actions arise from what it is in itself. Art can give the gift of arranging parts according to a meaningful order. Nature can give the gift of form that separates a thing from non-being. This is gift *par excellence*.

Hence, nature is paradigmatically a giver of gifts, gifts which we call natures. Each substance subject to motion has its own nature, which is its birth-right. But, the implication of nature being a birth-right is that the it must be given by another. Thus, in being about births, about becomings, nature is about that which is given by another.

The path we now walk down is one that splits into at least five: the Five Ways of St Thomas. Considerations of nature as gift lead us inevitably to consider the giver of the gift and so lead us to the First Cause. Explanation by means of univocal causality becomes impossible. The other from whom one's nature is received cannot ultimately be another who is like oneself. As the sexes must be different, so this other must be different. Philosophy leads us to some mysterious Other, who gives movement but himself is without movement, to one who gives form radically in the sense of substance, but to whom form was not given; for form is eternally and perfectly possessed in him.⁴³ Thus, we are led to see nature itself as the gift of the divine giver, which in turn points us, once again, to the intellect, but this time to the divine intellect and the divine ideas. It is consideration of the divine ideas that will allow us to further see the relation of sexual difference with nature.

I would like first, however, to note how the errors that Levinas observed in regard to sexual difference are likewise the general errors that tend to develop regarding nature. As with sexual union, we can begin to see our relationship with nature in terms of either fusion or dominance rather than a dynamic of gift. How do the one and the many relate? Some thinkers — paradigmatically, Parmenides — answer this question by denying difference. Being is fused into one whole in which apparent difference is illusion. Thus, for Parmenides, all is one. There is simply that which is. Alterity is illusion; apparent distinctions dissolve into the oneness of being. We might also think of Spinoza for whom there is only one Substance. Difference is not the distinction of being truly other, but rather that of being the accident of one substance. Thus, *Deus sive Natura* are interchangeable; their identities are not distinct and thus they bear the same name.

If the tendency to fusion is strong, the tendency to dominance is stronger. Though the otherness of nature is not seen as mere illusion, it

is rather seen as something to be dominated, if not destroyed. In one way or another, the posture of dominance towards nature seems to be the dominant stance of modernity and post-modernity. Nature is not something to be received as gift. It is something that must bend – be it to man’s practical or epistemic needs. Bacon seeks to subdue her. Descartes will only accept that which will satisfy his need for certitude. Kant finds her unknowable. Sartre would be her god. All are forms of dominance which deny the dynamic of gift and interestingly do so by denying the possibility of intentional union with nature as given in herself. Thus, the judged inability to receive the other in its otherness within the self leads to dominance of that other, in seeking to make its form bend to one’s own will. Thus, one seeks to dominate the otherness of nature, or to simply deny otherness all together. The errors in understanding nature are the same errors in understanding sexual difference.

5 THE DIVINE IDEAS: CREATIVE UNION

But now let us move the argument even further. In discussing how sexual difference leads to transcendence, Hadjadj bids us to contemplate our underbellies and to see in the navel a sign that we are *from* another, and in the genitals a sign that we are *for* another.⁴⁴ At this point, we must see that all existence, as it were, has a navel. All existence, with the exception of the first cause, is from another. And so, we are led back to considerations of the intellect: we spoke of how the union of truth, the intentional union of the thing and the intellect is like sexual union in that there is oneness without the dissolution of alterity, and further that there is a kind of dynamic of giving and receiving. But union of the thing with the human intellect is only a secondary sense of the union that is truth; truth is said primarily of the union of the thing with the divine intellect.⁴⁵ In the conformity of the thing with the human intellect, the thing is able to give the form that it was given to the knower, without losing its form. In the truth of the thing in the divine intellect, the union of the thing and the divine intellect is responsible not only for the becoming of the thing but for its very being. This is true not only of natural substances, but of *all being* that is not God. A thing exists only because it exists in the divine intellect, because it is being given by God.⁴⁶ And, again paradoxically, the deeper this union, the greater is the existence of the thing, the more the thing is itself. The more a thing is able to receive from God, which is to say the more profound that its essence is, the deeper its oneness is with God.⁴⁷ The more God is giver, the more

the other is receiver. On the level of being, that receptivity is essence and its otherness is the reality of substance. Thus, against Spinoza, the more the thing is one with God, the more it is other, the more it is substance. Substance is the radical alterity that is born of the union of the thing with the divine intellect. It is the dynamism of Genesis: God beholds the thing and sees that it is good. His embrace of the thing, however, causes its very existence.⁴⁸ The act of being as it were embraces the essence into existence. In this embrace, the otherness of the thing — its substance — is constituted, which otherness is the foundation of the relation to the Giver, to God.

This dynamic of alterity and intimacy seems to help resolve some of the questions of the centrality of relation and its standing in reference to substance:⁴⁹ without the union of the thing — anything — and the divine intellect, the thing does not exist. Thus, St Augustine famously wrote that God is more one with us than we are with ourselves. Yet, the very fruit of that intimacy is the radical otherness of the being of that other that is substance. The nature of the dynamic of gift demands the primacy of substance, even though the very existence of the substance depends at every moment upon the one from whom it continually receives its existence. At times, we can think of substance and relation as somehow opposed. In considering a substance as something that exists in itself, we may tend to think of it as something that exists *by* itself or *from* itself. Nothing could be further from the truth: it is the union with the other that gives the substance its being. And it is that union that precisely gives the creature its otherness, which, in the case of substances, is the profound otherness of nature — possessing a nature that is all its own and hence has intrinsic ends that are all its own. It is this profound alterity of substance that makes possible the relatedness of creature to creator. Without the profound “thingness” of substance, which implies essence and act of existence, there would be no-thing that was in relation to its maker. Again, the substantiality of the thing does not imply an isolation in its existence. This is the paradox of which we have been speaking: the more the thing is one with its creator, the more the thing is itself, the more it is other, the more it is a substance. In this way, the dynamic of union, otherness, and gift revealed in sexual difference manifests a dynamic that is at the heart of all caused being and its relation with its creator.

6 INTIMACY: HUMAN AND DIVINE

Before concluding, it is worth making a few observations about the dynamics we have just outlined and likewise suggesting a few theological implica-

tions.

In noting how sexual union is like the intentional union in the intellect, we have considered two ways of speaking of truth: truth as the correspondence of the human intellect with the thing, and correspondence of the thing with the divine intellect. In both of these cases, the relation between knower and known is a one-way relation: when the human intellect knows the essence of a horse, the intellect is changed, but the horse is not.⁵⁰ There is a real relation in the knower, but there is not a real relation in the horse. The situation is reversed regarding the divine ideas: there is a real relation in the creature to its creator, but there is not a real relation in the Creator.⁵¹ Thus, the alterity of the creature grows in its union with the creator, but the Creator does not become more himself in the union.

What we call human intimacy, of which sexual intimacy is a paradigmatic example, however, is a union in which both parties have a shadow of the creative role that exists in the union of thing with the divine intellect: each helps the other become more other, more who they are, in the union. The sexual difference in the body manifest a kind order in which he who is the first giver then becomes a receiver as the gift is returned in a unique way by the original receiver. Thus, in human intimacy the relation is two-way; each is changed by the other. It is a union that demands a spiritual faculty; it demands the possibility that an immaterial faculty provides: to take in, to become one with the fullness of the other, without destroying the other. Intimacy likewise demands the spiritual faculty of love, which is the principle of union.⁵²

Interestingly, when we then move to consider what could be called divine intimacy, in the sense of intimacy with God, here we again find a relation in which we, the bride, are changed, but the bridegroom, in His divinity is not changed. However, it is also interesting that within Christianity, God reveals His love for the bride precisely by taking on a human nature that can be moved and thus share in the dual dynamism of the relationship. Christ, as Bridegroom in His human nature is moved by His bride.

Thus, we see a kind of alternation of reciprocity of gift: in the union of the human object with a known thing, the relation is non-reciprocal. In the relation of human intimacy, the dynamic of gift is reciprocal. In the union of the created thing with the creator, the dynamic is non-reciprocal. However, switching to theological considerations, we see that the Incarnation provides a kind of bridge instance: the Eternal Word remains eternally unchanging; but, in His human nature He has a real relation to His bride. But considerations of the Eternal Word bring us to our what is another instance of the reciprocal dynamic of gift.

This point takes us well beyond philosophy. I had noted that all being – other than God – is being from Another and has its being in virtue of its union with this Other. The being of the thing begins in the divine intellect and is, as it were, loved into existence. God, however, is the one “being” who is not from another. Christianity, however, offers a remarkable addendum to these reflections, for it seems that this pattern of intimacy and alterity reaches into the Godhead itself. The Trinity displays the dynamic to an infinite degree: the intimacy of Father and Son is such as to be the same substance.⁵³ Yet the Father is not the Son.⁵⁴ Their alterity is preserved even in the union of one substance. There is also the dynamic of gift; for the Son is from the Father. And, in a sense, the Son, in his filiation, gives the Father his fatherhood. Thus, the dynamic of alterity and gift appears at the very origins of being itself.⁵⁵ Obviously, the above has been an area of intense recent theological work. My intention here is only in passing to draw our attention to a kind of cascade in this order of intimacy, alterity, and gift.

7 CONCLUSION

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.⁵⁶

Is union with another the death of otherness? Union can seem a kind of death, as we confront the need to cede control, to let the other be. Our fear is that the other will either dominate or digest us, that, in one way or another, identity must give way to subjection or dissolution. What we have seen though is the resurgence of a paradox: The deepest form of union leads to the most radical form of identity. Intimacy and alterity are not opposed, but rather flourish together. Sexual difference provides a window into the paradoxical dimension of union: in becoming one, each becomes more other. This paradox of union and alterity is manifest in the gift of nature. The radical alterity of substance is born of the union of the receptivity of essence with the infusion of creative *esse* – an embrace with the Other that bears the fruit of the becoming and being of nature. The dynamic displayed in this creative union is that of gift, with its rhythm of giving and receiving.

Thus, infused in sexual difference we can find a dynamism that reaches to the heart of reality: a mystery of birth and death. Union can seem to be a death. And, if that union is one of dominance or dissolving, it will only be a death. But if the union is that of the bride and the bridegroom in a creative intimacy that not only unites without destruction but moves beyond itself into yet deeper being, then what might seem death resolves in birth, our birth.

NOTES

1. It was only many years later, when teaching the philosophy of the person, and reading James Reichmann's summary of the different modes of union of a living thing with another being that it struck me that what my friend was speaking of seemed more like the power of nutrition; it was as if to reach enlightenment was to be digested by the universe — to become one with it, but in such a way that *I* would no longer be able to make a claim to individual existence. See J.B. Reichmann, SJ, *Philosophy of the Human Person*, Loyola Press, Chicago, 1985, pp. 58-60.
2. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Michael Waldstein [trans.], Pauline Books and Media, Boston, 2006, 13:3.
3. T.P. Fortin, *Fatherhood and Perfection of Masculine Identity*, EDUSC, Roma, 2008.
4. I am much indebted to the work of Prof. Hadjadj. I first became aware of his work on sexual difference through a talk given in New York City, January 18, 2014: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWOoPLsHYdM&t=2565s>) [Accessed, March 28, 2017]. Much of the work alterity and sexual union and the relation between sexual difference and reason was influenced by this presentation. Unfortunately, I did not become aware that an expanded, written version existed until after this work was largely complete. Hence, I was not able to adequately incorporate the written version in this work. In fact, I found that Prof. Hadjadj and I had often expanded the original work in very similar manners. I have tried to update my work to reflect this. The written version can be found in the following: F. Hadjadj, *Qu'est-ce qu'une famille? Suivi de La Transcendance en culottes*, Salvator, Paris, 2014, pp. 51-109. I am also much indebted to the work of David L. Schindler. A sampling of his thought on this matter can be found of the same presentation in New York City referenced earlier in this note.
5. Aristotle, *Physics*, H.G. Apostle [trans.], The Peripatetic Press, Grinnell, 1980. 194b 19-20.
6. Aristotle, o.c., 198a 23-30.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *The Principles of Nature*, R.P. Goodwin [trans.], Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1965. P. 22, Ch. 4.
8. See, for instance, *Summa Theologiae* [ST], I, q. 98, a. 2.
9. See T.P. Fortin, *Finding Form: Defining Human Sexual Difference*, "Nova et Vet-

- era”, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2017), pp. 397-431, and, T.P. Fortin, *Fatherhood and the Perfection of Masculine Identity*, cit., Ch. 9.
10. See Bernice Wuerthrich, *Why Sex? Putting Theory to the Test*, “Science”, Volume 281, Issue 5385 (September 25, 1998): pp. 1980-82.
 11. See Laurence D. Hurst, *Why are there only two sexes?* “Proceedings: Biological Sciences”, 263:1369 (April 22, 1996): p. 415.
 12. For a discussion of some of these theories, see David Geary, *Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Differences*, American Psychological Association, Washington, 2006, pp. 15-55.
 13. Aristotle, *Politics*, B. Jowett [trans.] in, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon [ed.], Random House, New York, 1941, 1252a 26-28. For an insightful discussion of this text see F. Hadjadj, *Qu’est-ce qu’une famille?*, cit., pp. 65-68.
 14. See T.P. Fortin, *Fatherhood and Perfection of Masculine Identity*, cit., pp. 362-365.
 15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, W.D. Ross [trans.], in, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon [ed.], Random House, New York, 1941, 1162a 16-29. Emphasis added.
 16. We could also speak here in terms of the necessity and anomaly of paternal investment in offspring among humans. Evolutionists speculate that it is the continued involvement of a child’s father and the unique contributions he can make in the life of a developing child that made the evolution of the human brain possible. The incredibly long developmental period of human children demands that the father provide security and richly nutritious foods that would not be possible for a mother on her own. (See D.C. Geary, op. cit., 118.) Hence, as Aristotle noted, it is the diverse gifts of each that together allow for the flourishing of children. See also T. Fortin, *Fatherhood and the Perfection of Masculine Identity*, cit., pp. 408-437.
 17. Aristotle, *Politics*, cit., 1253a 7-15. See F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 68-72.
 18. F. Hadjadj, o.c., p. 68.
 19. We also might note an interesting reciprocity: while it is reason that makes the city possible, it also the city that makes reason possible. Without the city and the security and leisure it affords, man is forced to live more like a wild beast. For a discussion of this relationship, see, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno*, Bk 1, Ch. 1.
 20. *ST I*, q. 92, a.1. Emphasis added.
 21. See *ST I*, q. 77, a.7. We should note, however, that, for Thomas this, is true for all of man’s powers other than reason: every power that is less noble than reason is for the sake of reason and flows from reason. As we shall see, though, generation has a unique relationship with reason regarding the order in which these powers come to be.
 22. *ST I*, q. 77, a. 4.
 23. I do not wish to imply that there are not other reasons for the power of generation being present in act only after reason. In fact, it can be argued that the nature of human motherhood and fatherhood also demands that reason be present before man and woman bring new life into the world. See T. Fortin, *Fatherhood and the Perfection of Masculine Identity*, cit., pp. 408-419.

24. F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 70-72.
25. F. Hadjadj, o.c., p. 71. English translation taken from Hadjadj's presentation at the New York Encounter, January 18, 2014.
26. F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 72-73.
27. F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 81-83.
28. See F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 57-60.
29. E. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, Richard A. Cohen [trans.], Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 1987. p. 86.
30. E. Levinas, o.c., p. 85-86.
31. F. Hadjadj, o.c., p. 60.
32. See J. Reichman, o.c., pp. 60-61, 102-107. and F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 74-77.
33. For reflections on this movement, see L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, John Zucchi [trans.], McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1997, pp. 100-109.
34. I do not wish to imply here that the known object is altered in the act of speculative knowing. However, I will later offer that the intimacy of two intellectual beings — an example of which is human sexual union — is perhaps a mode of human knowing that is more like the way that we are known by God. More precisely, it is a mode of knowing and being known that is, as it were, creative, in that it does lead to the greater alterity and being of the other.
35. It is difficult in the connection of sexual intimacy and the intellect not to think of what can be referred to as Plato's erotic dialogues. See F. Hadjadj, o.c., pp. 62-65. For discussions of intimacy and interiority see also: K.L. Schmitz, *The Geography of the Human Person*, "Communio", 13 (Spring 1986) pp. 27-48. And K.L. Schmitz, *The First Principle of Personal Becoming*, "Review of Metaphysics", 47 (June 1994), pp. 757-774.
36. "La sexualite est l'ouverture a l'autre en tant qu'autre, sans le jamais reduire a soi." F. Hadjadj, o.c., p. 74.
37. John Paul II, o.c., 13:3-17:6. I, however, came to the understanding St John Paul's understanding of gift through the work of David L. Schindler. Much of what follows in this section is fruit of reflecting upon his work. For instance, See D.L. Schindler, *Catholic theology, gender, and the future of Western civilization*, "Communio," 20 (Summer, 1993), pp. 200-239. D.L. Schindler, *The Embodied Person as Gift and the Cultural Task in America: Status Quaestionis*, "Communio," 37 (Fall 2008), pp. 397-431. D.L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2011, pp. 242-274.
38. This dynamic was first manifest to me in a class by David L. Schindler at the John Paul II Institute in Washington DC entitled "Space, Time, and Gender." Schindler references Balthasar's application of a kind "reciprocity" in the Trinity in D.L. Schindler, *Catholic theology, gender, and the future of Western civilization*, cit., pp 206-208.
39. In my first conversation with Prof. Schindler, when asking him about the nature of sexual difference, he bid me consider the outward and the inward. That counsel proved very fruitful. Hadjadj also takes up the theme of the internal and external: F. Hadjadj, op. cit., pp. 92-94.

40. F. Hadjadj. op. cit., p. 60.
41. See S.L. Brock, *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas: A Sketch*, Cascade Books, Eugene, 2015, pp. 28-30.
42. Aristotle, *Physics*, cit., 192b 9.
43. Again, Giussani is helpful here: L. Guissani, op. cit., pp. 100-109.
44. F. Hadjadj op. cit., pp. 53-54.
45. See A. Llano, *Gnoseology*, Sinag-Tala Publishers, Inc, Manila, 1983, 21-25.
46. *ST I*, q. 15, a. 1.
47. Here, I am drawing from Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, Ch. 5.
48. *ST I*, q. 104, a. 1.
49. I am thinking most immediately of an exchange of ideas between David Schindler and Michael Waldstein. See D.L. Schindler, *The Embodied Person as Gift and the Cultural Task in America*, cit., pp. 417-423. And, M.M. Waldstein, "Constitutive Relations": *A Response to David L. Schindler*, "Communio", 37 (Fall 2010), pp. 496-517.
50. See *ST I*, q. 13, a. 7.
51. *ST I*, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1.
52. For an incisive discussion of intimacy see K.L. Schmitz, *The Geography of the Human Person*, cit., pp. 40-48.
53. See K. Schmitz, *The Geography of the Human Person*, cit., p. 33.
54. Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 28, a. 3.
55. Helpful here is D.L. Schindler, *Catholic theology, gender, and the future of Western civilization*, cit., pp 206-208.
56. T.S. Eliot, *The Journey of Magi*.

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