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BONUM DIFFUSIVUM SUI:
THE METAPHYSICS OF THE GOOD.
DIONYSIUS, BONAVENTURE, TODAY

1. *Introduction*

The following is intended to be a hybrid exercise in metaphysical research, halfway between historical reconstruction and a systematic essay. It is based on the assumption that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive and that, ideally, they should always be present in the scholar's work. Moreover, one should give rise to the other, with historical reconstruction allowing the contours of the speculative question to emerge from its precise work, while the theoretical approach should spontaneously draw upon the study of sources to nourish its reasoning¹. As a matter of fact, interest in the history of philosophy typically arises from an encounter with a traditional text that piques our interest and our subsequent attempt at historical framing as part of our process of understanding². In other words, one enters the history of philosophy only through a prior theoretical interest, and a mature theoretical orientation knows how to exploit and perhaps even practice the historian's approach. In this respect, the scope and purpose of this essay is at least in part that of identifying a connection between different milieus and figures within the Christian tradition, which share only limited, direct, and objectively identifiable connections. Therefore, the common thread that will be traced by weaving the relationships between these authors will be determined in part by pre-existing historical connections. In part, it will be determined by the speculative and hermeneutic interests of this text. Initially, therefore, the historical texts will be read through a primarily reconstructive approach. This will be done with the goal to clarify the terms and historical context within which a certain metaphysics developed. Secondly, this same

¹ Professor Gregorio Piaia's reflections on the matter are pertinent and stimulating, specifically on the importance of maintaining a historical approach to the study of philosophy: G. PIAIA, *Sull'utilità dell'approccio storico nell'insegnamento della filosofia*, «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia», 53 (1998) 2, pp. 337-350.

² See C. NORMORE, *The Methodology of the History of Philosophy*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*, ed. by H. Cappelen *et alii*, Oxford Academic, Oxford 2016, pp. 27-48: 30-31.

metaphysics will be read doxologically³, that is, brought into contact with the contemporary metaphysical discussion of a traditional problem—that of the relationship between the one and the many.

More specifically, this article will span the Middle Ages, focusing specifically on the figure of Bonaventure and the context against which he stood: the 13th century University of Paris and the early Scholastics. At the same time, it will draw on the Church Fathers, especially the Byzantine Dionysius the Areopagite, and on elements drawn from contemporary reflection on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. More specifically, the argument of this present work focuses on the origins of an expression *bonum diffusivum sui*, which finds its root in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and was inherited by the Parisian Franciscans. Hence, the first goal of this entire undertaking is, first and foremost, to reconstruct how Bonaventure and the early Franciscans articulated the themes just mentioned and what their sources were. Secondly, and on a minor note, the aim of this paper is to reflect on the possible metaphysical implications of this metaphysics. In particular, I shall attempt to show its fruitfulness in relation to the classic one/many problem. Reflections on this connection will therefore be offered, transcending the confines of strictly Bonaventurian and Franciscan thought.

2. *The Dionysian Metaphysics of the Good*

Having established the necessary premises, it is time to turn to the task of reconstructing the origins and meaning of an axiom, originating in the scholastic language of the thirteenth century. This constitutes the key to Bonaventure of Bagnoregio's Trinitarian theology and which is the pivot around which this work revolves. This expression, *bonum diffusivum sui*⁴, finds its conceptual origins in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and could be translated as «goodness naturally tends to spread itself». It describes the fact that every reality identifiable as good has, as such,

³ Ivi, p. 35: «From the Doxological point of view, the past of Philosophy is another vast continent where may be found philosophies not found closer to home which (because the work of developing them has already been done) can be imported for less than the cost of manufacture and, in principle at least, might compete with the local products. They can be assimilated. Such assimilation involves examining such philosophies with the sorts of considerations and the sorts of weighing of such considerations that one would use in constructing or examining some aspect of a contemporary philosophy».

⁴ Concerning the history of this idea, see K. KREMER, *Bonum est diffusivum sui. Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Neuplatonismus und Christentum*, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Bd. 36.2, hrsg. von W. Haase, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1987, pp. 994-1032.

a tendency not to remain closed in on itself. In Dionysius's work, this is especially true of the supreme good, that is, God himself⁵. Of course, to be precise, one should notice how by virtue of his neoplatonic approach, according to the Areopagite God is technically beyond good and can be described as the supreme good only insofar as he is the source of all good⁶. In this regard, Dionysius states that the «sacred authors», by attributing the name of Good primarily to divinity, wanted to emphasize that, «since the Good exists, as substantial Good, [it] spreads its goodness to all beings». «In fact», Dionysius continues, «just as our sun, without thinking about it, nor by free choice, but by the very fact of its existence, illuminates all things [...] so too the Good [...] by its very existence sends forth the rays of its absolute goodness»⁷. Here, then, the biblical word according to which God is the "good" or, more precisely, the one who alone can be called "good", as well as the source of every good gift (Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 10:18, James 1:17) is associated by Dionysius with a solar imagery. The latter is fully biblical but is also rooted in his neoplatonic influences. It is in fact at least in part from authors such as Iamblichus (and in particular with his speculations on theurgy) that the Areopagite develops a propensity to describe God in terms of a source of light, which with its rays dispenses its influence on inferior substances – first and foremost on the rational minds that contemplate it⁸.

This latter characteristic of the Supreme Good is transmitted and replicated by the inferior goods that originate from it. Hence, «because of these rays all the intelligible and intelligent substances, powers and operations came into being [...] and tending towards this Goodness, [they] reach the being and the state of perfection, and [...] become its image and [...] communicate to inferior beings the gifts that they receive from the Good»⁹. Although, as it is clear from the context of the quotation, Dionysius here speaks of substances with specific reference to the angelic hierarchies, a broader principle is implicit, one that can be applied well beyond this particular type of beings. We are facing

⁵ DIONIGI AREOPAGITA, *Nomi divini*, I 5, 593 A; II 1, 636 C; IV 1, 693 B, in *Tutte le opere*, testo greco a fronte, a cura di P. Scazzoso e E. Bellini, Bompiani, Milano 2009, rispettivamente pp. 369, 377, 405.

⁶ See ID., *Teologia mistica*, I, 997 A, ivi, p. 603, where Dionysius begins his *Mystical Theology* calling God the «supersubstantial, superdivine and supergood Trinity» – see G. GERÉBY, *On the Theology of Dionysius*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. by M. Edwards, D. Pallis, G. Steiris, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022, pp. 670-686: 674: «God is not 'good' in the ordinary sense».

⁷ DIONIGI AREOPAGITA, *Nomi divini*, IV 1, 693 B, cit., pp. 404-405.

⁸ C.M. STANG, *Dionysius, Iamblichus, and Proclus*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, cit., pp. 122-135: 126-128.

⁹ DIONIGI AREOPAGITA, *Nomi divini*, IV 1-2, 696 A-B, cit., pp. 405.

then what is potentially a fully-fledged metaphysics of good, according to which everything that comes from God, and rational substances in particular, tends to replicate his characteristic self-diffusiveness. This is the perspective encapsulated by the axiom *bonum diffusivum sui*, when the Scholastics received the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and adopted the Areopagite's interpretation of God's name as *bonum*.

Regarding this last point, it's important to immediately acknowledge that which may be obvious, that is, that the reception of a text never occurs in a *vacuum*, and therefore Bonaventure and his contemporaries did not receive the Dionysius' works *sic et simpliciter*. Rather, they acted as the most recent representatives of an extensive lineage of readers and commentators, stretching back to the time of John of Scythopolis, the author of the *editio variorum* of the *Corpus*, its commentary, and its first collection of *scholia*¹⁰. In other words, the first Franciscan teachers at the University of Paris had behind them a large group of interpreters of the text, both near and far, of whom they were at least partially aware (they were, for example, aware of the work of John, even though they did not know his name¹¹) and on whose results they based their studies. Closer to the Franciscans and certainly more incisive was the contribution derived from the work of study, commentary and elaboration of the *Corpus* done by the exponents of the School of Saint Victor. As highlighted by David Luscombe and Dominique Poirel, it was Hugh of Saint Victor (1096-1141) who was the first to produce Latin commentaries on the work of Dionysius after the Scotian ones of the ninth century¹².

Even more important, however, for the Franciscan and Bonaventurian reception of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, was the figure of Thomas Gallus (also known as Thomas of Vercelli or Tommaso of Saint Victor, ca 1200-1246¹³). The latter was the author of commentaries on the *De Coelesti Hierarchia* and the *Mystica Theologia*, as well as glosses on all four texts of Dionysius. Finally, he produced two works aimed at syn-

¹⁰ On the figure of John of Scythopolis, see P. PODOLAK, *John of Scythopolis interpreter of the Corpus Dionysiacum*, «Augustinianum», 47 (2007), pp. 335-386.

¹¹ For centuries, his work was erroneously attributed to Maximus the Confessor; see H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Das Scholienwerk des Johannes von Skythopolis*, «Scholastik», 16 (1940), pp. 16-38.

¹² D. LUSCOMBE, «The Commentary of Hugh of St. Victor on the Celestial Hierarchy», in *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, ed. by T. Boiadjev, Brepols, Turnhout 2000, pp. 159-175; D. POIREL, «Le "chant dionysien" du IX^e au XII^e siècle», in *Les historiens et le latin médiéval*. Colloque tenu à la Sorbonne, les 9, 10 et 11 septembre 1999, éd. par M. Goullet et M. Parisse, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 2001.

¹³ For an introduction to Thomas Gallus' thought, see B. TAYLOR COOLMAN, *Knowledge, Love, and Ecstasy in the Theology of Thomas Gallus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

thesizing and clarifying the entire *Corpus*, entitled *Extractio* and *Explanatio* respectively¹⁴. The figure and texts of Thomas are particularly relevant to the transition of Dionysian thought, and particularly his metaphysics of good, within the Franciscan context, for two reasons. First, it was the Victorinus who physically introduced the Minorites to the *Corpus*. This occurred primarily in Vercelli, where Thomas had moved around the 1220s to found a monastery. His fame as a scholar attracted the attention of the Franciscans, who moved their Studium from Padua to Vercelli around 1228 precisely to draw on his wisdom, and this exposed them to the influence of Dionysian thought reinterpreted in a Victorine key¹⁵. Indeed, it is said that Thomas became a personal friend of Anthony of Padua (who in Coimbra had trained under the pupils of another Victorine, Achard¹⁶). In this regard, one of the Saint's biographers writes:

The man of God [Anthony], while he was alive, had nurtured a singular and profound affection towards him [Thomas], and in this he was reciprocated. And this is because the holy man, in the past, had explained to him the science of sacred theology, and the abbot in turn had explained to him the very high and devout teachings of the books of Saint Denis¹⁷.

It was therefore through the Victorines that the Byzantine father made his initial entry into the Franciscan tradition. This is of specific relevance to the subject of this essay insofar as Thomas advocated a particular form of reading of the *Corpus*, which differs in some respects from others that developed in the same period. In some ways, this reading is a specific hallmark of the way the School of Saint Victor read Dionysius. Thomas developed it from a previous master of his abbey, Richard of Saint Victor, and even earlier from Hugh himself. It also became widespread among the Franciscans. This reading has been defined by contemporary scholars as affective, since it is based on a certain reading of the *Mystica Theologia*, clearly presented in the *Extractio*. Here, we find Thomas affirming that the union with the unknowable God that Dionysius speaks of in his text ultimately occurs through and thanks to our affective faculty, capable of bringing us precisely to the unknowable, where our intellect cannot reach¹⁸. The

¹⁴ B.T. SAMMON, *The God Who is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite*, James Clarke and Co, Cambridge 2014, p. 214.

¹⁵ T. COOLMAN, *Knowledge, Love, and Ecstasy*, cit., p. 9.

¹⁶ L. SILEO, *I primi maestri francescani di Parigi e di Oxford*, in *Storia della Teologia nel Medioevo*, II, dir. G. d'Onofrio, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1996, p. 649.

¹⁷ V. GAMBOSO, *Antonio da Padova. Vita e Spiritualità*, Edizioni Messaggero, Padova 2011, p. 175.

¹⁸ T. COOLMAN, *Knowledge, Love, and Ecstasy*, cit., p. 16.

development of this perspective is closely intertwined with the Dionysian metaphysics of good and exalts its importance: in fact, Thomas states that the *affectus*, which he sees as capable of experiencing those divine attributes that the *intellectus* contemplates¹⁹, it is ultimately directed towards the experience of the *dulcedo* of the *Summum Bonum*²⁰. There is thus an intertwining of the generativity of the Supreme Good, which produces beings whose affection is directed toward the origin from which they sprang, whose sweetness they desire to experience firsthand. Therefore, if the interpretation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* proposed by Thomas called the Franciscans to focus on the erotic aspects of these texts, it inevitably ended up exalting the idea that *bonum diffusivum sui*.

It is therefore no coincidence that in Parisian Franciscanism we find that this intuition was taken up and developed beyond the letter of Dionysius' work²¹. In fact, the Greek father only used in relation to the procession *ad extra* from the Creator of creatures – but he never explicitly employed it to describe the procession of the divine persons within the Trinity. This, as we will see below was the development that took place when Bonaventure and his teachers laid their eyes on the *Corpus*. But before we get to the *Doctor Seraphicus*, we shall first briefly reconstruct how Dionysius' metaphysics of the good was first articulated by the Parisian Franciscan and how the very Latin expression *bonum diffusivum sui* came to be.

3. The use of the expression «*bonum diffusivum sui*» between Philip the Chancellor and *Summa Halensis*

While the content of the expression *bonum diffusivum sui* harkens back to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, this precise wording probably originates in a section commenting the Areopagite's the *De divinis nominibus* contained within Philip the Chancellor's *Summa de bono*. The latter in fact writes: «Item de verbis beati Dionysii, in libro *De*

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 80; see THOMAS GALLUS, *Explanatio in libros Dionysii*, ed. D. Lawell, Brepols, Turnhout 2011, p. 633. This means that for Thomas the *affectus* represents the mystical faculty *par excellence* of the human being, that is, what primarily realizes our «consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God»; see B. MCGINN, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, I. *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Crossroad, New York 1991, p. xvii.

²¹ B. MCGINN, *The Dynamism of the Trinity in Bonaventure and Eckhart*, «Franciscan Studies», 65 (2007), pp. 137-155: 149.

divinis nominibus, in principio tractatus de bono potest extrahi: Bonum est multiplicativum aut diffusivum esse»²². Therefore, the axiom itself is not a direct quote from the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, but rather a phrase that Philip believes summarizes the Areopagite's understanding of the good. Accordingly, it is with Philip and the *Summa de Bono* that Dionysius' understanding of God's self-diffusion as the supreme good-beyond-good in his creatures gets abstracted and generalized as an axiomatic expression regarding any kind of good as such.

However, if we wish to identify the closest and most significant historical source from which Bonaventure could draw this saying and the metaphysics of the good it embodies, we must go a step further than the *Summa de Bono*. For this, we must turn to the *Summa Halensis*, the great *compendium* of Christian wisdom compiled by the *Seraphicus* teacher, Alexander of Hales, along with some of his students. Within it, the compilers of the text frequently use the expression *bonum diffusivum sui*. In particular, in the first volume, this is used in connection with certain questions relating to the Trinity²³. Hence, we find here that the axiom *bonum diffusivum sui* has been shifted from God's emanations *ad extra* to the inner-workings of the Trinity. For the purposes of this article, the following passage is of particular importance, taken from a question concerning the problem of whether or not there is a process of generation in God:

Bonum naturaliter et essentialiter est sui diffusivum; unde haec est laus boni, scilicet se diffundere, quia se ponerentur duo bona in omnibus aequalia praeter quam in hoc quod unum suam suam diffunderet, aliud non: constat quod bonum illud, quod se diffunderet, in hoc esset magis laudabile et melius alio bono quod se non diffunderet. Completa ergo ratio boni includit in se diffusionem; ergo ubi est summum bonum, ibi est summa diffusio; summa autem diffusio est qua maior excogitari non potest; greater autem diffusio cogitari could not quam illa quae est secundum substantiam et maxime secundum totam; ergo

²² PHILIPPI CANCELLARII *Summa de bono*, q. I, studio et cura N. Wicki, 2 Bde., Francke, Bern 1985, I, p. 6. See *Brevil.*, pars V, cap. II, III, p. 211.

²³ Z. HAYES, *Bonaventure's Trinitarian Theology*, in *A Companion to Bonaventure*, ed. by J.M. Hammond et alii, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2013, pp. 189-245: 198; see K. OSBORNE, *Alexander of Hales, Precursor and Promoter of Franciscan Theology*, in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, ed. by K. Osborne, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY 2007, pp. 1-38: 13-24. Luc Mathieu writes about this: «Before Bonaventure, Alexander [of Hales] affirmed that the goodness of the Supreme Being is the reason for a multiplicity within the Supreme One, which is necessarily the first Being, and at the same time the reason for the multiplicity of secondary beings. This is the logical application of the Dionysian principle *bonum diffusivum sui*, universally admitted and cited in scholastic theology under the influence of the Neoplatonists of the 11th and 12th centuries» (L. MATHIEU, *La Trinità creatrice secondo san Bonaventura*, trad. it. di P. Canali, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 1994, p. 30).

sumum bonum necessario se diffundit secundum substantiam totam, et in ipso naturaliter intelligitur haec diffusio; sed nihil aliud est virtus generativa nisi virtus diffusiva substantiae suae ad hoc ut producat simile in natura²⁴.

The passage quoted above is crucial for grasping Alexander and his assistants' use of the principle of *bonum diffusivum sui* and for understanding how it paves the way for developments that will later be found in Bonaventure. In particular, three important points emerge from this segment of the *Summa*, which do not appear explicitly in Dionysius' text and which therefore demonstrate the Minorite tradition's creative use of his metaphysics of the good. First, the *Summa* argues in favor of the statement *bonum diffusivum sui* by developing its internal logic and maintaining that, given that the *laus boni* is *se diffundere*, then it follows that *bonum illud, quod se diffunderet, in hoc esset magis laudabile et melius alio bono quod se non diffunderet*, and therefore that *completa ratio boni includit in se diffusam*. This parallels the Supreme Good-Sun simile proposed by Dionysius himself and, in doing so, simultaneously reinforces it. Secondly, in the *Summa* the expression *bonum diffusivum sui* is generalised, making it clearer than it was in *De divinis nominibus* that every good naturally and essentially tends to spread itself²⁵. Thirdly and finally, it is specified that where there is a Supreme Good, there must also be a *summa diffusio*, that is, the full diffusion of its substance. This process of full diffusion leads to the generation of something that is similar in nature to the supreme good that produces it²⁶. It is already evident here how this opens up the subsequent development of the Dionysian perspective, already articulated within the *Summa*²⁷, that is, the recourse to it in order to explain the way in which the Father generates the Son from his own substance.

²⁴ *Summa Halensis*, Liber I, pars I, I, II, t. un., q. I, p. 414.

²⁵ AUGUSTINUS HIPPI., *On Christian Doctrine*, in *On Christian Doctrine and selected introductory works*, ed. by T. George, B&H Academic, Nashville 2022, 1.1.1: «a possession which is not diminished by being shared with others, if it is possessed and not shared, is not yet possessed as it ought to be possessed».

²⁶ The theme of the causality of intelligibles dates back to the origins of neoplatonic thought in the *Enneads*; in *Enneads* V, 1, 6, 30-38, we read the following: «All beings, as long as they subsist, by virtue of the power that is in them, necessarily produce around themselves, starting from their own substance, an external reality, which is connected to them and is like the image of the models from which it was generated. [...] And all things that are now perfect generate» (my translation; PLOTINO, *Enneadi*, testo greco a fronte, a cura di R. Radice, Mondadori, Milano 2002, p. 1183).

²⁷ See *Summa Halensis*, I, nn. 76, 110, 317.

4. *The use of the expression «bonum diffusivum sui» in Bonaventure of Bagnoregio*

Overall, Bonaventure develops a Trinitarian theology that follows the lines established by his Franciscan predecessors by reiterating and deepening their conclusions²⁸. Taken as a whole, this gives rise to a picture according to which the Son can be described as «the objective expression of the communication [of the substance] of the Father»²⁹. This substantial communication is characterized through the use of terms and concepts often pertaining to the Dionysian metaphysics of good³⁰. This is not surprising. J.G. Bougerol had occasion to describe Bonaventura as «one of the most Dionysian among the great masters of the thirteenth century»³¹ and, although as we have seen he was not the first Franciscan to take a lively interest in the work of the Byzantine father, he embraced his thought with «singular enthusiasm»³².

This emerges clearly from the first work in which Bonaventure systematically develops his thought, the *Super Sententias* of 1252. To give an indication of the presence of Dionysius in this text, it is sufficient to mention the fact, which is also relevant for the purposes of this investigation, that it contains 18 citations of *De divinis nominibus* IV 1, 693B: «since the Good exists, as substantial Good, it spreads its goodness in all beings»³³. Taking into account the fact that this statement

²⁸ See A. STOHR, *Die Trinitätslehre des hl. Bonaventura. Eine systematische Darstellung und historische Würdigung*, I. *Die wissenschaftliche Trinitätslehre*, Aschendorff, Münster Westf. 1923; M. SCHMAUS, *Der Liber Propugnatorius des Thomas Anglicus und die Lehrunterschiede zwischen Thomas von Aquin und Duns Scotus*, II, *Die Trinitarischen Lehrdifferenzen*, Aschendorff, Münster Westf. 1930; F. IMLE, J. KAUP, *Die Theologie des hl. Bonaventura. Darstellung seiner dogmatischen Lehren*, Franziskus-Druckerei, Werl 1931; A. DE VILLALMONTE, *Influjo de los Padres griegos en la doctrina trinitaria de San Buenaventura*, in *XIII Semana Española de Teología*, 14-19 September 1953, CSIC, Madrid 1954, pp. 553-557; T. SZABÓ, *De ss. Trinitate in Creaturis Refulgente Doctrina S. Bonaventurae*, Orbis Catholicus-Herder, Romae 1959.

²⁹ L. SCHUMACHER, *Bonaventure's Journey of the Mind into God: A Traditional Augustinian Ascent?*, «Medioevo», 37 (2012), pp. 202-229: 215.

³⁰ See L. MATHIEU, *La Trinità creatrice secondo San Bonaventura*, cit., p. 15: «the “ec-static”, diffusive character of the supreme Good, through which Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite explains the creation of secondary essences, is considered by Bonaventure as the key to Trinitarian theology: if it is proper to the Good to expand, if the supreme Good is a dynamic perfection, it is necessary to grasp this “expansion” in it: independently of any contingent and temporal production, the eternal Good communicates itself eternally» (my translation).

³¹ J.G. BOUGEROL, *Saint Bonaventure. Études sur les sources de sa pensée*, Routledge, London 2017, p. 34.

³² M. TOBON, *Bonaventure and Dionysius*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, cit., pp. 350-366: 350-351.

³³ See *ibidem*, p. 353.

is referred by Dionysius to the «superdivine Divinity» which is differentiated from «all other things» by the «sacred authors» who reserve the name of «Good» only to its existence³⁴, it is evident that it is on the basis of this Areopagitic metaphysics that Bonaventure depicts the Father as a fertile, self-diffusing and self-communicating source, from which the rest of the Trinity flows³⁵. Therefore, we often find in his works statements such as the following: «Pater communicat [...] Filio per fecunditatem naturae»³⁶.

Dionysius's influence is also evident in the way in which Bonaventure articulates the premises underlying his own doctrine of the Trinity. For example, in *quaestio* 1 of *distinctio* 2 of *I Sent.*, «Utrum in Deo ponenda sit personarum pluralitas», as the first reason in favor of an affirmative answer, he offers the following deduction: if one posits that there is a supreme *beatitudo* in God, then it is necessary that in him there is also a supreme goodness, a supreme charity, and, finally, a supreme justice. Furthermore, if there is a supreme goodness in God, it is necessary that it communicate itself supremely, since every good is *diffusivum sui*; from this it follows that the supreme good must be supremely self-diffusive³⁷. From this brief overview of Bonaventure's argument, it clearly emerges how he takes up and deepens the reading of *De divinis nominibus* made by the compilers of the *Summa*, further investing in the logical and rational articulation of the principle *bonum diffusivum sui*.

It is also relevant to underline how Bonaventure offers a definition of *diffusivitas* as the actual communication of an inherent or infused power³⁸. This implies that the *summa bonitas* is structurally open to communicate itself³⁹ and therefore to generate something that shares its power. The generation of the Son is, for Bonaventure, demonstrable also on the basis of two further considerations: if the *summa bonitas* is also a *summa caritas*, it cannot consist in a private love and, for it not to

³⁴ See *ibidem*.

³⁵ Z. HAYES, *Bonaventure's Trinitarian Theology*, cit., p. 206.

³⁶ *I Sent.*, d. 6, a. un., q. 3 (I, p. 128b).

³⁷ «Ex prima suppositione arguitur sic: si est ibi summa beatitudo; sed ubicumque est summa beatitudo, est summa bonitas, summa caritas et summa iucunditas. Sed si est summa bonitas, cum bonitatis sit summe se communicare, et hoc est maxime in producendo ex se aequalem et dando esse suum: ergo etc. Si summa caritas, cum caritas non sit amor privatus, sed ad alterum: ergo requirit pluralitatem. Item, si summa iucunditas, cum «nullius boni sine socio sit iucunda possessio», ergo ad summam iucunditatem requiritur societas et ita pluralitas» (ivi, d. 2, a. un., q. 2, p. 53a).

³⁸ See J.G. BOUGEROL, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Bonaventure*, Desclée, Tournai 1961.

³⁹ E. DEZZA, «Itinerarium mentis in Deum»: una lettura guidata, «Forum». Supplement to «Acta Philosophica», 4 (2018), pp. 243-273: 113.

be such, it is necessary that it be expressed within a plurality⁴⁰. Finally, if the *summa bonitas* is also a *summa iucunditas*, then it is necessary that there is a plurality that makes it possible, because the *iucunditas*, in order to exist, necessarily requires that there is a *societas*⁴¹ – by the same token Bonaventure argues for the logical necessity of the procession of the Holy Spirit.

Both of the arguments just quoted further emphasize how the Father's supreme self-diffusion cannot in fact exist unless it expresses itself in a plurality of divine hypostases. From this comes the next step: given that, as Bonaventure argues elsewhere, the Son has within himself the ideal world and therefore the paradigms of creatures, and therefore implicitly holds within himself the procession of creatures from the Creator⁴², the same *diffusivitas* that is involved in the logical and necessary multiplication of the one-many that is the Trinity, will be involved in bringing into being the inferior goods. Therefore, the «ec-static» character of the supreme good not only explains the multiplication of the divine persons but also the creation of the «second essences»⁴³. The latter is not necessary, but the fruit of nothing other than God's free choice to bring into being that one-and-many or many-in-one that is the created cosmos. Indeed, if the perfect diffusion of the good in the Trinity is «actual and intrinsic, substantial and hypostatic, natural and voluntary, free and necessary, indefectible and perfect»⁴⁴, that of the second essences will instead be «temporal and free, contingent and extrinsic, accidental and imperfect». Even so, it proceeds «from the identical, fruitful freedom that pushes the supreme Good to communicate itself» and therefore presupposes the «first and perfect diffusion»⁴⁵.

In other words, we could say that, since the Son is the full expression of all that the Father is, the relationship between the first and second

⁴⁰ See *Myst. Trin.*, q. II, a. 2 (V, p. 65a): «perfectior est unitas, in qua cum unitate naturae manet unitas caritatis; sed “caritas ad alium tendit”: ergo includit distinctionem diligentis et dilecti: ergo si divina unitas est perfectissima, necesse est, quod habeat pluralitatem intrinsecam; nam extra se nihil habet, quod sit summe amabile».

⁴¹ See note 37. Bonaventure reinforces this point by quoting Seneca's letters to Lucilius; see *Myst. Trin.*, q. II, a. 2 (p. 67b): «distinctio dicitur perfecta dupliciter: vel intensive, vel complete. Primo modo non oportet quod ponatur in Deo, sed secundo; et sic est ibi, quia tanto perfectior est res, quanto minus ab unitate recedit. Quia igitur pluralitas illa non recedit ab unitate summa, hinc est, quod ipsa sola est pluralitas simul vera et perfectissima».

⁴² J. JOHNSON, *The One and the Many in Bonaventure Exemplarity Explained*, «Religions», 7 (2016), p. 15 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7120144>).

⁴³ L. MATHIEU, *La Trinità creatrice secondo san Bonaventura*, cit., p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Itin.*, cap. VI, n. 2 (V, p. 310b).

⁴⁵ L. MATHIEU, *La Trinità creatrice secondo san Bonaventura*, cit., p. 16.

person of the Trinity stands as a model and basis for every other kind of relationship⁴⁶ – including the procession of the Holy Spirit. With respect to the latter, using Dionysian terminology, one could state the following: the Father, who is the *summum bonum* and is characterized by a *summa diffusio*, generates the perfect image of himself, the Son, also endowed with the same substance and therefore the same goodness and supreme capacity for self-diffusion. This leads to the procession of the Holy Spirit as the outcome of the same self-diffusion that led to the generation of the Son, a procession which, like the relationship of generation, implies a full communication of the divine substance. In this respect, the Son, receiving the fullness of paternal love, transmits it exactly as he received it, simultaneously communicating the same divine substance from which he was generated. Therefore, the Holy Spirit, who is the full manifestation of the love that proceeds from the first two persons, ends up being in turn a perfect image and reflection of the «previous» hypostases⁴⁷. This ensures that there is a Trinity of hypostases in a single nature, supremely good and supremely self-diffusing. We therefore have a coexistence of plurality and unity, made possible by a process of self-diffusion that ultimately does not resolve within itself but which, on the basis of divine *caritas*, chooses to express itself also *ad extra*, bringing into being a universe of creatures. In conclusion, if in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* Bonaventure states that «Being» is the name of God as unity, it is clear from the above why in the same work he adds that the name of God as Trinity can only be «Good»⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ See *Brevil.*, pars V, cap. 3 (V, p. 212a); see I. DELIO, *From Prophecy to Mysticism. Bonaventure's Eschatology in Light of Joachim of Fiore*, «Traditio», 52 (1997), pp. 153-177: 171: «The Son is the perfect image of the Father and humans are created as images of God in that they are created as images of the Son, the one true Image. Indeed, it is precisely the notion of the Son as the perfect image of the Father that Bonaventure uses to explicate, from the point of congruency, the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity»; Delio says this with particular reference to human beings, but the same principle can be extended to any other kind of creature.

⁴⁷ L. SCHUMACHER, *Bonaventure's Journey of the Mind into God*, cit., p. 215.

⁴⁸ M. TOBON, *Bonaventure and Dionysius*, cit., p. 358. See *Itin.*, cap. V, n. 2 (V, p. 363b): «Primus modus primo et principaliter defigit aspectum in ipsum esse, dicens, quod qui est est primum nomen Dei. Secundus modus defigit aspectum in ipsum bonum, dicens, hoc esse primum nomen Dei. Primum spectat potissime ad vetus testamentum, quod maxime praedicat divinae essentiae unitatem; unde dictum est Moysi: Ego sum qui sum; secundum ad novum, quod determinat personarum pluralitatem, baptizando in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti. Ideo magister noster Christu, volens adolescentem, qui servaverat Legem, ad evangelicam levare perfectionem, nomen bonitatis Deo principaliter et praecise attribuit. Nemo, inquit, bonus nisi solus Deus. Damascenus igitur sequens Moysen dicit, quod qui est est primum nomen Dei; Dionysius sequens Christum dicit, quod bonum est primum nomen Dei».

5. *A final suggestion: the Trinity and the problem of the One and the Many*

In the final section of this short essay, I will briefly address the way in which such a metaphysics of the good and an understanding of the Trinity as it has been previously outlined can be put to use in order to illuminate possible solutions to metaphysical quandaries. Specifically, I will sketch out the possible application of the former to the problem of the one and the many. Norris Clarke describes this problem as follows:

Unity [is] an essential property of every real being: it is impossible to exist without being internally one, coherent, unified. This unity allows for a multiplicity of parts or components within the same being, but unity must dominate multiplicity for there to be a distinct substantial being. [But how can beings], compared to one another, be simultaneously many and different from one another and yet share the common attribute of actual existence[?]⁴⁹.

In other words, it seems that somehow the whole of reality simultaneously shares the quality of being one and of being many⁵⁰. This creates an apparent paradox, which Norris Clarke does not hesitate to define as the «ultimate paradox of being and the deepest and most fundamental problem of all metaphysics, [that is] the one that characterizes every intellectual attempt to achieve a total and unified vision of all reality»⁵¹. In the recent history of Christian philosophy – though in fields not directly related to Bonaventurian studies and/or the Franciscan tradition – the hypothesis has been advanced that the doctrine of the Trinity can provide a solution to this classic paradox⁵². This proposed solution can be presented starting from the following questions: assuming that the first principle of reality is one, how is it possible that it can give rise to the multiplicity that we find in the created world⁵³? In other words, how can something that is one transmit to its origin a property, namely, multiplicity, which it seems not to possess? How can the cause transmit to the effect what it does not possess within itself? Based on a Trinitarian vision of the first principle, it is possible to propose the following

⁴⁹ W. NORRIS CLARKE, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2001, p. 74.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² See B.A. BOSSERMAN, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til*, James Clarke, Cambridge 2015; V.S. POYTHRESS, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg 2018.

⁵³ J. JOHNSON, *The One and the Many in Bonaventure Exemplarity Explained*, cit., p. 1.

solution, which for reasons of time and space can only be a conclusive suggestion for now: since the first cause is one, triune, and therefore multiple, it can replicate this coexistence of unity and multiplicity in its effects (although, obviously, they show only a limited and imperfect, that is, created impression of this coexistence of properties). This can be also stated by quoting Hamann's suggestion that the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*⁵⁴ does not describe a dynamic unique to the Incarnation (as much as its expression in the Incarnation is unique), but is rather the «fundamental law and the master-key of all our knowledge and of the whole visible economy»⁵⁵. Following this line, we can therefore affirm that this coexistence of unity and multiplicity would be transmitted to the reality of the cosmos as part of the exchange of properties that binds the Creator to created substances. In other words, created reality would be simultaneously unique and multiple while in fact being configured as an intertwining of these possibilities, by virtue of its imitation of the creative reality of which it is the analogy⁵⁶. In the words used by Luc Mathieu, this means affirming on the one hand «following the ancient philosophers» that «the cause must be manifest in its effects» and on the other following «Christian logic» that «everything we affirm about God through reason and faith will have its reflection in each of the divine productions»⁵⁷, so that the mystery of creation and that of the Trinity end up illuminating each other⁵⁸.

In Bonaventure's terms, this means recalling the fact that creatures are vestigia and images of God and therefore demonstrate his nature, including his multiplicity in unity and unity in multiplicity. In particular, among creatures will be the human being, who, existing «as an image [...] testifies that God is triune». In fact, from the «creative Trinity», an expression that Bonaventure takes from Alexander of Hales, comes the «created trinity», which, in Augustinian terms, is memory, reason and will⁵⁹. Hence, rather than finding a way to make unity and

⁵⁴ This is the theological doctrine according to which «while the human and Divine natures in Christ were distinct, the attributes of the one may be predicated of the other in view of their union in the one person of the Saviour»; see *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by E.A. Livingstone, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013³, p. 128.

⁵⁵ J.G. HAMANN, *The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross: Concerning the Divine and Human Origin of Language*, in Id., *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. by K. Haynes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 96-110: 99.

⁵⁶ B.A. BOSSERMAN, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, cit., p. XVIII.

⁵⁷ L. MATHIEU, *La Trinità creatrice secondo san Bonaventura*, cit., p. 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

⁵⁹ *Glossa Halensis*, I, d. 3, cap. 1.9. Alexander himself seems to be quoting Bernard

multiplicity come together in the overarching singularity of each substance, we should assume that every creature is essentially a unity in multiplicity that manifest the work of the Creator on reality. From the foregoing, we can conclude that the Trinitarian development of the principle *bonum diffusivum sui* by the Franciscans, and by Bonaventure in particular, can be read as one way a Christian metaphysics can respond to the problem of the one and the many. In other words, to argue for the creative Trinity to be traversed by an original self-diffusivity and circulation of the Good which illuminates its three-in-oneness, is to argue for a corresponding diffusivity and circulation of (finite) goods that describe created realities and their one-in-maniness.

Moreover, in referring to the Dionysian axiom, we come to see how the Trinitarian solution to the problem of the one and the many goes beyond the purely transcendental perspective. In other words, such a way of working this quandary out exceeds the simply logical level of trying to explain how it is possible for unity and multiplicity to coexist as intrinsic elements within the definition of every substance. To try to solve this issue by appealing to a vision of the Trinity as a self-diffusive, perfectly circulating, totally communicating Good that exceeds its boundaries and pours itself *ad extra*, is to offer a solution to this problem that beyond the edge of pure logic and into the realm of the ethical. Specifically, the one-and-many problem is solved by pointing to the original coexistence of one-with-the-many (in the three-in-one) in such a way as this coexistence is an ec-static and perfect giving of oneself. Given all of the above, just as the coexistence of oneness and maniness, also this self-giving quality existence becomes an essential element of any substance. In other words, beings come to be seen as, in this order, essentially good, self-diffusive, one-and-many.

Conclusion

Having reached the end of this essay, it is now time to summarize what has emerged during this investigation. From a purely historical and reconstructive perspective, we have traced the origins of a certain scholastic axiom, *bonum diffusivum sui*, to the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite. This axiom implicitly carries with it a metaphysics of good that would later be articulated in Latin circles, particularly among the first Franciscan teachers at the University of Paris – among whom, of course, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio stands out. The presence and development of this tradition have thus been identified in some of the

of Clairvaux; see L. MATHIEU, *La Trinità creatrice secondo san Bonaventura*, cit., p. 18.

major works of the *Doctor Seraphicus*, highlighting how it constitutes the core of his Trinitarian theology.

From a more theoretical and constructive perspective, we have attempted to connect the legacy of Bonaventure's thought with some more recent developments within Christian thought. This was done with the intention of demonstrating how the Franciscan and Bonaventurian vision of the Trinity can contribute, by further embodying it, so to speak, to a certain hypothesis for solving the metaphysical problem of the one and the many. In particular, contemporary authors have argued that the Trinity itself, as a vision of an original coexistence of the one and the many, may be the key to proposing a satisfactory answer to this dilemma. Generally, this would be achieved by the fact that these two attributes are already reconciled in their simultaneous existence from the beginning of all things. Although this thesis is not specifically Bonaventurian and actually arose in circles outside of the study of Franciscan thought, the position that I have briefly put forward in this paper is that a Dionysian, Franciscan, and Bonaventurian vision can be read in this light and can strengthen this proposal.

More specifically, it has been argued that the coexistence of unity and multiplicity in the Trinity, and consequently in creatures, is described and justified from a metaphysical perspective by reference to the natural self-diffusiveness of every good, and in particular to the supreme diffusiveness of the Supreme Good. In this sense, the metaphysical problem of the one and the many is resolved because unity and multiplicity are coexisting from the very beginning in the essence that is the source of every other essence. This, from a transcendental-theoretical perspective, guarantees the non-contradictoriness of the qualities of unity and multiplicity, making it possible for both to be simultaneously predicated of a single and identical substance. At the same time, from a more transcendental-practical perspective, this hypothesis provides us with a vision of reality as composed of substances that, from their first cause, receive the characteristic of being self-diffusive goods.

Eventually, the problem of the one and the many appears as one path, among many possible, that leads to the heart of Bonaventure's metaphysical and theological thought. Meditating on it, it becomes possible to retrace the entire course of the Doctor Seraphicus' thought, right down to the themes that constitute the core of his metaphysics and, more specifically, his theology, such as the Trinity and the nature of good. More generally, it adds to the list of dilemmas that the human mind naturally develops in the course of its experience of reality, and which can only find a definitive resolution by adopting a perspective inspired by Christian revelation.