

Trinitarian Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation

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Abstract: The present article argues that the doctrine of the inseparable external operations (*opera ad extra*, hereafter OAE) of the Trinity is consistent with the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son alone. To demonstrate this, it will be shown, first, that the assumption of human nature can be ascribed to the Son alone when taken as a state, as opposed to an action. Secondly, I will defend John Owen's claim that the Son is not the "immediate" agent of Christ's actions. Finally, an appeal is made to Trinitarian "missions" to show the coherence of OAE with our having communion with distinct divine persons.

Introduction: Challenging the Inseparability Rule

The doctrine of the inseparable operations¹ of the Trinity affirms that the trinitarian persons act as a single agent in the economy, such that each trinitarian person is co-agent in each other's action tokens.² The ancient pedigree of the *opera ad extra* rule (henceforth OAE) is undeniable. The defenders of the rule suggest that there are good reasons for it and dire consequences to its abandonment. I will only briefly indicate what is thought to be at stake in this doctrine. The principle arose as a perceived entailment of the doctrine of the unity and simplicity of God, as Augustine (1991, 1.7) puts it in *The Trinity*: "just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so they work inseparably."³ If the persons do not partition the substance

¹ This doctrine is variously labeled: inseparable operations, indivisible operations, common operations (but compare (Ayres 2010, 46) on common as opposed to inseparable), the *opera ad extra* doctrine, etc. It is quasi-universally affirmed by pro-Nicene theologians, east and west. Some references here: (Ayres 2004, 280-4 and *passim*); (Prestige 1952, 242-265); for medieval trinitarianism, see (Emery 2007), (Cross 1999; 2002); For Reformed Orthodoxy, see (Heppe 1950); (Muller 2003); for Calvin, see (Baars 2008).

² I am invoking the familiar distinction between action types and action tokens. There is a consensus that the divine persons do not simply accomplish the same type of actions, but they work the very same concrete actions.

³ Augustine also writes at 4.5: 'the trinity together produced both the Father's voice and the Son's flesh and the Holy Spirit's dove, though each of these single things has reference to a single person.' The church fathers consistently apply the inseparability rule to their reading of the Scripture. Cf. (Augustine 2007b; 2007a); (Aquinas 2010), see especially his commentary on 5:19-21; Aquinas's

of God, but are identical to this very substance (as being and existence are identical in God), it follows that they do not work as separate causes in the economy. The ancient notion of co-inherence also implies OAE. If the persons mutually indwell each other, it follows that they produce each other's actions as well. Sharing the same substance means sharing the same will (which is thought to belong to substance), and the same power to act. In fact, as Michel Barnes has shown (2001, 299, 303), the argument from shared power was an essential ingredient in fourth century Cappadocian trinitarianism. But shared power entails shared activity and shared agency.

Now these might seem like metaphysical speculation removed from the language of the New Testament, which seems to distinguish between the persons and their actions. Such a contrast, however, is misguided. The scriptural narratives themselves seem to indicate that there is more to the agency of Jesus than meets the eye.⁴ In responding to Philip's request to be shown the Father, Jesus points out not only the co-inherence of the persons, but also their shared agency: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10 ESV).⁵

A full defense of the scriptural and theological basis of this principle cannot be attempted here. Let me briefly point out what are thought to be the implications of abandoning OAE. First, the specter of tritheism looms, however much one would try to tighten the separate actions of the persons. Second, the vitality of the religious conviction that in Jesus Christ we have the fullness of God also seems to be affected. It would no longer be possible to say that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19 NASB, KJV). If OAE fails to hold, it appears that Jesus only mediates to us a partial presence of the divine, to say nothing about the implications for the atonement generated by such a separation.⁶ Moreover, third, his departure is a real absence and lack of agency, only mediated at a distance through the agency of the Spirit. But the continued presence of the Son of which the New Testament does not tire to speak, is at best a proxy presence.

Now, for all of these pertinent arguments, it may still be the case that OAE is in fact inconsistent with other central doctrinal claims. This paper addresses two distinct problems raised by OAE. The first problem is that:

- (A) OAE appears to entail that if the Son assumes a human nature, then the Father and the Spirit also assume a human nature.

This objection can be divided in two sub-problems:

compilation of patristic commentators, especially Augustine, Hilary, Chrysostom, is also notable: Aquinas, (1874, 180ff.).

⁴ For more on the scriptural basis for OAE, cf. (Ayres 2000); (Claunch 2013).

⁵ See also John 5, 14, and 16.

⁶ I have argued that the work of Christ is caricatured when not adequately correlated with OAE in (Vidu 2015; 2014).

(A1) the action of ‘assuming human nature’ itself seems by implication to be the action of the Father and the Holy Spirit, as well as the Son;

(A2) the “incarnate actions” of the Son (eating, praying, crying), apparently must also be the actions of the Father and the Spirit.

But there is also a second broad objection to OAE.

(B) OAE seems to have deleterious consequences for our ability to individuate divine persons on the basis of their economic actions. If our only basis for individuating divine persons is their work towards us, yet this work towards us is inseparable, we have no real basis for such individuation.

Recent theology has voiced both of these objections in a sustained way. As a result, OAE has been severely revised to denote a mere intentional unity, or abandoned altogether as a workable rule. We may now turn to rehearse some of these concerns.

An apparent entailment of OAE is that the Father and the Spirit were both incarnate, if all persons share the agency for each action token. But this is obviously false and unorthodox. Augustine addresses the problem when he reflects on the teaching of the Catholic commentators:

It was not moreover this same three (their teaching continues) that was born of the virgin Mary, crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate, rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven, but the Son alone. Nor was it the same three that came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, or came down on the day of Pentecost after the Lord’s ascension [...] but the Holy Spirit alone. Nor was it the same three that spoke from heaven, *You are my Son*, either at his baptism by John (Mk. 1:11), or on the mountain when the three disciples were with him (Mt. 17:5) [...], but it was the Father’s voice alone addressing the Son; although just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably. (1991, 1.4.7)

But this raises an obvious difficulty: if it was only the Son that was born of the virgin Mary, rose again, and ascended into heaven, or only the Spirit that came down as a dove, or only the Father that spoke from heaven, it seems that we have distinct operations that are not shared between the persons. Yet Augustine has a ready answer:

that utterance which was only the Father’s was caused by the three; and [...] that flesh in which only the Son was born of the virgin was created by the same three; and [...] that form of the dove in which only the Holy Spirit appeared was fashioned by the Trinity itself. Otherwise the Trinity does not work inseparably, but the Father does some things, the Son others and the Holy Spirit yet others; or if they do some things

together and some without each other, then the Trinity is no longer inseparable. (1991, 1.2)

His attempted solution is to say: there are a variety of created effects, all of which are brought together by the common divine causality.

This solution has failed to satisfy some recent theologians, in the wake of whose critiques the rule has either faded from the theological subconscious or is being substantially reconfigured. The focus of this paper is provided by these recent reservations with regard to the doctrine as they stem from the doctrine of the incarnation. OAE is thought to be incompatible with the reality of the incarnation of just the Son. Additionally, OAE is thought to have deleterious consequences for our ability to individuate divine persons on the basis of their economic work.

Catherine LaCugna voices the critique:

once it is assumed that the Trinity is present in every instance where Scripture refers to God, and once the axiom *opera ad extra* is in place, no longer, it seems, is there any need for the plurality of persons in the economy. At least it is no longer possible to single out any one person in relation to a particular activity. (1991, 97-98)

LaCugna's premise is that the only way in which we may distinguish between the divine persons is on the basis of separate actions. But if the agency in economic actions belongs equally to all, then the diversity of persons can only become a matter of theological speculation and not one of reflection on the saving revelation of God. Moreover, should OAE hold universally, creatures would be unable to have relations with distinct trinitarian persons, but only (monolithically) with the one God.

It seems to follow from this principle that the created effects God brings about have no intrinsic relationship to any of the divine persons, distinctly. J. P. Mackey laments that:

"Once again a flat and undifferentiated formula, if rigidly applied in accordance with its own logic will yield only the sense that the one God 'creates' voices, clouds, fire, or human flesh, to make visible one of the 'persons' and to reveal them thus in their relationship to one another, but no visible means of manifestation has, or could have, any intrinsic relationship to any particular 'person'". This is, Mackey concludes, "a severe devaluation of the incarnation." (1983, 158)

This impression is only compounded by Aquinas' insistence that any one divine person might have become incarnate. Karl Rahner's complaint against Aquinas' position has been instrumental in turning the tide of OAE's popularity. The consequence of Aquinas's position, he argues, is that the incarnation gives us nothing unique about the Son, if it is merely the effect of the divine efficient causality.⁷ Rahner

⁷ Efficient causality is one of Aristotle's four types of causality, together with material, formal, and final causality.

argues that there are relations between the Trinity and creation, which do not pertain to the common efficient causality. The OAE applies only in those cases where the “supreme efficient cause” is concerned. But, he continues, there are non-appropriated relations of a single person, where we have a “quasi-formal communication of God” (2001, 77).⁸ By “quasi-formal communication”, he means that there is a sense in which a distinct person is not merely the extrinsic cause of an effect, yet without claiming that this divine person enters into composition with another nature.

With regard to the incarnation, Rahner writes: “something occurs ‘outside’ the intra-divine life in the world itself, something which is not a mere effect of the efficient causality of the triune God acting as one in the world, but something which belongs to the Logos alone” (2001, 23). Hence, the particular type of relation between a divine person and a created effect that occurs in the incarnation serves as a model for other relations between created realities and distinct trinitarian persons. The incarnation is “a dogmatically certain instance [...] for an economic relation proper to each person, of the divine persons in the world” (Rahner, 2001, 27).

The incarnation, therefore, seems to be a test case for the validity of the OAE. Can it be affirmed both that every action of God in the economy is equally the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *and* that, to quote Augustine again, “It was not [...] this same three [...] that was born of the virgin Mary, crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate, rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven, but the Son alone”? (1991, 1.4.7).

In what follows I hope to demonstrate that OAE is in fact consistent with the reality of the incarnation. Two aspects of the problem may be identified: (A1) Whether OAE is falsified by the claim that it is the Son alone who has assumed human nature; and (A2) whether OAE is compatible with the ascription of certain “incarnate actions” to the Logos alone: the obeying, the praying, the crying, the dying, etc. I will draw on the resources of the tradition to show that OAE is consistent with both claims. I will end by addressing the claim that (B) OAE makes personal relations to distinct divine persons impossible.

(A1) Is the incarnation an action of the Son?

The inseparability rule stipulates the following: for every token action in which a trinitarian person is subject, the other trinitarian persons are also agents. This rule could be formalized as follows:

⁸ Rahner’s notion of “quasi-formal” causality is difficult to understand. On the one hand, Rahner wishes to affirm a relationship between God and creatures in which God operates not simply as undifferentiated efficient cause. However, the only other available notion of causality—formal—seems to entail that God enters into composition with creatures, which conflicts with divine simplicity etc. Rahner, on the other hand, wants to retain the intrinsicism associated with a formal cause, yet without its implications of composition. Hence the modifier, ‘quasi.’ Rahner expands on this notion in (Rahner 1961, 328ff.). A more accessible discussion is also present in (Rahner 1994). For more on this, see (Coffey 2005, 10-41); (Hill 1982, 293ff); (Galvin 1980).

- (I)
 If (1) Son ϕ s,
 and (2) ϕ is an external action,
 then
 (3) Father ϕ s,
 and (4) Spirit ϕ s⁹.

The difficulty posed by the incarnation is now obvious: Let us take ϕ to stand in for the action 'becoming incarnate.'

It then follows that

- (II)
 If (5) Son assumes a human nature,
 then (6) Father assumes a human nature,
 and (7) Spirit assumes a human nature.

But (6) and (7) are obviously false.

There are two possible ways to defuse this problem. First: it might be denied that 'assuming' is an action that is external (*opera ad extra*), and instead catalogue it as an *opera ad intra*.¹⁰ But this is obviously unorthodox, since it would entail that (a) the identity of the Son is determined by a relation he has to created reality; and (b) the personal property of the Son includes more than simply his procession from the Father.¹¹ For these reasons, such an option is not open to the tradition.

There is a second way of solving this dilemma and it involves denying that 'assuming' is an action. On a broadly accepted definition of action, there are two necessary conditions of actions. First, a change needs to take place. An event has to take place where there is a change from one state to another. The change need not be material, but it can be a change in consciousness (e.g., counting, memorizing). The second condition is more interesting: responsibility for the particular change must be ascribable to an intentional agent. As such, actions are widely (though not unanimously¹²) regarded as a sub-class of events. In other words, a particular description of the event needs to be possible, such that, 'An ϕ ing has taken place' because 'X ϕ d'. MacMurray captures well the distinction between actions and non-agential events: "What is done in action would not be at all but for the doing of it" (1938, 75). In this case, the action so identified is ascribed to the agent who caused or brought about the change, the event. It is his action and no one else's, even though other agents might be involved in the event.

⁹ Where ϕ is a token action.

¹⁰ The tradition uniformly holds that while *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* [external Trinitarian operations are indivisible], the *opera ad intra sunt divisa* [internal operations are divisible].

¹¹ The reaction to the OAE tradition does in fact gravitate towards the blurring of the line between works *ad extra* and *ad intra*, and these entailments are not obviously false. See, for example, (Pannenberg 1991, 308-319, esp. 317-319) who argues that the relationships between Father and Son are constitutive of the very identity of both trinitarian persons. For a vigorous rebuttal of this, see (Marshall 2009), (Molnar 2014).

¹² Cf. (Bach 1980).

Take for example the example of a butler dressing a lord. The thing could be exemplified as 'the dressing of lord Y, by butler X'. Here X is the active agent, while Y is the passive object of the action. The action of the dressing is ascribed to X, while to Y is ascribed the event of 'being dressed.' This example will prove quite analogical to my demonstration, so I shall return to it momentarily.

The event identified above as 'the dressing of Y by X' can be described either in terms of intentional or unintentional agency (e.g., 'X dresses'), intentional or unintentional patiency (e.g., 'Y is being dressed'), or without making appeal to agency, e.g., 'the dressing of Y.'

Let me add some detail to the imagined case. Let's assume that Y is not entirely passive in the event, but also takes an active role: Y inserts his feet into the shoes, his arms into the sleeves, and so on. In this case, the agency belongs to both X and Y, yet it is still only Y that is being dressed. The following descriptions will apply:

- (8) X is dressing Y
- (9) Y is dressing himself with the help of X
- (10) Y is being dressed by X

Note the use of different kinds of verbs in these descriptions. We have "performance-verbs" ('dressing'), and we have "state-verbs" ('being'). It is non-problematic to observe that the former designate performances (which, together with activities, are a sub-class of actions¹³), while the latter designate states.

What particular kind of event does the 'assumption' refer to? The tradition understands by this a particular relation which obtains between the human nature of Jesus and the second person of the Trinity. The relationship is understood to be one of dependence, whereby the human nature of Jesus depends on the person of the Word for its existence. We thus say that the human nature is *sustained* by the person of the Word, which "indwells" this human nature, to use the terminology of Scotus. Now this relationship is initiated by an agency. Hence, the event of 'the incarnation' can be described both in terms of the agency which brings about this relationship, and in terms of the relationship itself. But this is a description in the double terms of action and state.

We thus have a *prima facie* plausible way of resolving the dilemma raised by the incarnation: "assuming" human nature names an event, which has both active and passive components. There is an active agency involved here, insofar as an agent is causing the assumption of the human nature. There is a patient too, though, insofar as the assumption is predicated of a particular person. Aquinas, as usual, is sensitive to our *modus significandi* in this case as well. He applies this dual dimension of actions (as activity and passivity) to the assumption: "In the word 'assumption' two things are signified, namely the principle of action, and its end term" (1948, 3.q3.ad2).

¹³ Anthony Kenny (1963, 171-186) distinguishes between state-verbs, performance-verbs, and activity-verbs. For our purposes I will only distinguish between states and actions, paying no attention to two sub-classes of actions: performances and activities.

Thomas writes: “Hence what has to do with action in the assumption is common to the three persons; but what pertains to the nature of the term belongs to one person in such a manner as not to belong to another; for the three persons caused the human nature to be united to the one person of the Son” (1948, 3.q3.ad4).

From an action perspective, the agency in the case of the incarnation/assumption belongs to the Trinity as a whole. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are together *causing* the assumption. In other words, they are together bringing it about that a relationship of dependence obtains between this human nature and the person of the Son. However, from a state perspective, it is said that the action terminates on the Son. In other words, from a state perspective the action results in a state that characterizes the Son alone.¹⁴ Thus, Augustine’s “reference to a single person” means that in this particular case, the human flesh is really united and made dependent on the person of the Logos.

The dressing analogy is helpful here. The state of being dressed (with these particular clothes) is predicated of Y alone, while both X and Y have caused this particular dressing. There is therefore no contradiction in saying that “The Son alone assumed human nature,” as long as ‘assuming human nature’ does not designate an action, but the state resulting from the action.

The distinction between an action and a state has also been expressed by the medievals in terms of causality. Richard Cross notes that “the medievals all argue for the possibility of just one divine person’s becoming incarnate by noting that the state of being incarnate does not in itself place an incarnate being in any sort of causal relationship with anything external to that being” (2002, 152-3). Where such a causal relationship exists (i.e. where God produces effects in creation), the causality belongs to the Trinity as a whole. In this case, however, the second person of the Trinity does not exercise a unique causality in relation to the human nature. Even ‘assumption’ is not an *action* unique to the Son, since it is not an action. No effects are uniquely caused by the Son, such that this might be designated as an action of the Son.

Scotus advances two reasons why the dependence relationship between the human nature and the second person of the Trinity is not causal: “it is not the relation of ‘caused thing to cause,’ because that relation is common to the whole Trinity—nor is it a relation of ‘what is caused later to what is caused earlier,’ because the Word is not anything caused [...]” (2015, 3.1.1).¹⁵ On the one hand, all creatures have a relationship of causal dependence upon God and hence the dependence of Christ’s human nature would be indistinguishable from the broader relation of human

¹⁴ Sometimes the Angelic Doctor captures this distinction with the contrast between union and assumption. He points out that the one who unites is not the same as the one who assumes: “For whatsoever Person assumes unites, and not conversely. For the person of the Father united the human nature to the Son, but not to Himself; and hence He is said to unite and not to assume” (1948, 3.q2.ad8.).

¹⁵ Scotus also argues his claim on the basis of the incommunicability of the persons: “since there is a twofold idea of entity, namely quidditative and hypostatic, then, just as it belongs to quidditative entity to give being of itself, because it is of itself communicable, so it belongs to hypostatic entity not to be an act giving being, because as ‘that in which,’ it is of itself incommunicable” (2015, 3.1.2. n. 183); Cf. (Cross 2002, 123).

dependence on God. Secondly, where causality is concerned, this belongs to the whole Trinity.

It is tempting to caricature Scotus' theology, together with most of the medieval tradition, as making the claim that it is God's nature which acts. But this claim conflicts with the Aristotelian claim that actions belong to their respective supposita. Scotus writes that "essence qua essence as a principle of acting acts only after the manner of nature [i.e. necessarily]. Now God causes nothing extrinsic to himself in this fashion" (1975, 8.1.1). God's nature—as nature—does not act externally. Divine persons do, on the basis of that nature.

To express the conclusion in light of our initial notation: (II) is a misapplication of (I), since 'assuming human nature' is not an external action, but a state.

Interlude: the meanings of 'terminus' in the literature

As we have noted, the medievals employed the distinction between principium/terminus as a way of solving the "incarnation objection" to OAE. However, this distinction is not uniformly understood. It also serves the purpose of highlighting the way in which personal properties are present and manifested in inseparable operations. Each action ad extra is said to be caused by the whole Trinity, yet to terminate in an individual person. Some clarity needs to be attempted on just what this means.

We may distinguish between three senses of "terminus".

1. *Terminus*₁: One person is the terminus of the action in the sense that such a person, besides sharing in the common trinitarian causality (and thus agency) is also the passive recipient of this action, as this action necessarily involves an external term. In such a case, the conceptuality of "terminus" seems to fit best with the Aristotelian origins of Aquinas' philosophy of action. As Aristotle puts it in the *Metaphysics*, "an end or purpose is the end of some action" (1984, 1574). Aquinas too: "the end of human acts is their terminus, for that in which a human act terminates is that which the will [of the agent] intends as the end" (1948, II-I.1.3). What is interesting here, though, is that, as Stump notes, "the state of affairs sought after as the end of the action must be in some sense intrinsic to the action itself" (2003, 82). And Aquinas: "the end [of an act] is not something altogether extrinsic to the act because the end is related to the act as its principle or terminus" (1948, I-II.1.3.ad1). In other words, the formal quality of the act is determined by its end, or by the terminus. To take a mundane example: compare the action of clapping my hands in order to trigger a light switch with the action of clapping my hands in appreciation of a musical performance. The two actions look identical for an observer, but they are obviously distinguished by their ends. Thus, their formal quality is distinguished by the ends

they intend to bring about. In the case of the “humanation,” or “incarnation,” the end that is brought about is the existence of a relationship between a divine person and a created reality (the Word’s *esse secundarium*).

2. *Terminus₂*: There is a second sense of terminus encountered in the literature, though. Here the terminus is the divine person at the far end of a divine agential chain. Bruce Marshall writes, “Depending on the action—especially the actions of the divine persons in relation to one another [...]—any of the divine persons might be the primary agent (the one with whose *propria* the action has the greatest likeness) or the immediate agent (the one whose role terminates the action)” (2000, 260). In this sense of the notion, it is the Holy Spirit that seems to invariably serve as the terminus of divine actions, since he is the perfecting cause, in addition to the originating (or efficient) cause (Father) and “moulding” (or formal) cause (Son).¹⁶ As perfecting cause, the Spirit applies the agency of the three persons, and is thus in a certain sense, most proximal to its terminus. Care must be taken, however, not to imagine this “agential chain” as a descending ladder of intermediaries, for, as Nyssen writes, “every good thing and every good name, depending on the power and purpose which is without beginning, is brought to perfection in the power of the Spirit through the Only-begotten God, *without mark of time or distinction (there is no delay, existent or conceived, in the motion of the divine will from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit)*” (2007, 335; emphasis added).¹⁷
3. *Terminus₃*: The third and final sense of “terminus” has to do with the appropriation of various actions to distinct persons. In this case the personal property of one of the persons has a special affinity to the end that is brought about by the action of all.¹⁸ Aquinas explains that although the dispensation of spiritual gifts is appropriated to the Spirit, there is a double appropriation of specific gifts in light of their particular nature: “Although all the gifts, considered as such, are attributed to the Holy Ghost, forasmuch as He is by His nature

¹⁶ The language of ‘agential chain’ or what appear to be different kinds of causes should not obscure the fact that these are distinctions, not separations within the single and simple divine causality. The persons are not separate causes, but their contribution to divine agency is distinct, such that an over-determination of the effect is avoided.

¹⁷ See also Witsius’ rejection of the distinction between mediate/immediate principles of operation, since it implies intermediate causes (Muller 2003, 4:263).

¹⁸ I am suggesting that the language of appropriation and of terminus are in this context interchangeable. An action is appropriated to one divine person if that action terminates in that person. Conversely, an action which is appropriated to a person (in view of an affinity between that person’s *propria* and the created effect) is also said to terminate in that person. For more on this cf. (Muller 2003, 4:260).

the first Gift, since He is Love, as stated above (Q. 38, A. 1), some gifts nevertheless, by reason of their own particular nature, are appropriated in a certain way to the Son, those, namely, which belong to the intellect, and in respect of which we speak of the mission of the Son"¹⁹ (1948, I.43.5.ad.1). Thus, acts that result in human knowledge are said to terminate in the person of the Word; acts that terminate in human sanctification are said to terminate in the person of the Holy Spirit, and so on.

We should observe that these senses of "terminus" are not mutually exclusive and allow for the predication of different "termini" (in their respective senses) for selfsame divine actions. Thus, the action of the incarnation can be said to terminate in the person of the Son in the first sense of terminus, but also in the person of the Spirit in the second sense of terminus. Emery clarifies that, according to Thomas, a selfsame action can be appropriated to the three persons respectively, when considered under a different aspect: "it is thus that, for instance, our filial adoption is appropriated to the Father who is its author, or to the Son who is its model, or to the Holy Spirit, who engraves it in our hearts" (2007, 335f.).²⁰

The fact that we can assign different terms (in different senses) to different persons risks rendering the distinction useless. The whole point of the distinction was to enable us to identify for indivisible actions a sense in which these actions belong primarily to a particular person, such that the recognition of the persons is still possible on the basis of their actions in the economy.

However, understanding the variety of possible uses of the term alerts us to the complexity of the unfolding of triune identities within each divine action. Also, the various senses also prevent us from univocal explanations of the structure of divine actions (such as cooperation, or chains of intermediaries). The slippage of the "terminus" between the various persons is a natural consequence of the way in which the persons are truly sharing the 'principium' of the action.

A perichoresis of action follows from a perichoresis of persons, such that for every action token, including the action of assuming and, as I will show, incarnate actions, there is an entanglement of roles and terms. While this is an ordered entanglement, we should resist assigning neat "roles" and "functions," or a superficial mapping out of the structure of economic works. The bottom line here is that the terminology of principium/terminus, together with the language of appropriation, is not intended as a univocal way of parsing out the ontological structure of divine actions, as much as it is a heuristic device to facilitate our communion with distinct persons through reflection on their indivisible actions. It is not a principle of individuating particular "roles" persons play in action tokens. To say that an action

¹⁹ Cf. also (Emery, 336 n. 91).

²⁰ See also (Aquinas 1948, III.23.2.ad.3).

terminates in this or that person is relative to the way in which the action is being described.²¹

(A2) Incarnate Actions

If 'assuming human nature' is understood as a state, what about actions performed by the incarnate Son of God? The following argument seems to be implied by the inseparability rule:

- (III)
 If (11) Son dies on the cross,
 then (12) Father dies on the cross,
 and (13) Spirit dies on the cross.

(12) however amounts to Patripassianism, while (13) is also surely wrong.

But is 'dying on the cross' an action? While 'killing oneself'²² and 'surrendering oneself to one's faith,' are indeed actions, dying is not in itself an action. But are there any other actions which the Son effects on (or through) his human nature? Hence, (III) is invalid since condition (2) (ϕ is an external action) is not fulfilled, because 'dying' is not an action.

However, the argument could be reformulated in terms of unambiguous external actions:

- (IV)
 If (14) Son is praying to the Father,
 then (15) Father is praying to the Father,
 and (16) Spirit is praying to the Father.

Or,

- (V)
 If (17) Son is surrendering himself to death,
 then (18) Father is surrendering himself to death,
 and (19) Spirit is surrendering himself to death.

Or,

- (VI)
 If (20) Son cries,
 then (21) Father cries,
 and (22) Spirit cries.

²¹ In other words, *terminus* is an intensional term. Our descriptions individuate this or that person and this or that (appropriated) personal action, but this is done on the basis of the intension rather than the extension of those descriptions.

²² See the excellent discussion of self-killing in (Lombardo 2013, 91, 132).

(IV)-(VI) are examples of possible inferences, based on the inseparability rule. Do they work? The key lies in the question of whether ‘praying to the Father,’ ‘surrendering himself to death,’ and ‘crying’ are actions that can be ascribed uniquely to the Son. Should the Son of God be the agent in those actions, it would follow that the Father and the Spirit must be co-agents in those token actions.

Interestingly, John Owen follows the tradition of inseparable operations²³ and argues that apart from assuming human nature there is no other action that the eternal Word *immediately* effects upon his human nature.

Owen’s precise relationship to the OAE tradition has been a topic of recent controversy. It is undeniable that Owen affirms crucial components of “Latin trinitarianism.” For instance, he affirms the definition of a divine person as “nothing but the divine essence upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner” (1965, 2:407). Naturally, then, he shares the classic patristic consensus on the singular unity of trinitarian willing, locating the will in the essence of God (1965, 1:229-30; 3:93). Each person has the divine will, he writes, “not as that person, but as the person is God” (1965, 2:407). The will, therefore, is an essential property “modally appropriated” to the three: “The will of God as to the peculiar actings of the Father in this matter is the will of the Father, and the will of God with regard unto the peculiar actings of the Son is the will of the Son; not by a distinction of sundry wills, but by the distinct application of the same will unto its distinct acts in the persons of the Father and the Son” (1965, 18:88).

Despite these clear badges of Latin trinitarian identity, Owen also provides reason for a number of writers to claim that he departs in a significant sense from the inseparability doctrine.

Alan Spence, for instance, has argued that Owen has made an exception to the rule and “through this analysis Owen overcame a real impasse in traditional trinitarian thinking” (2007, 133). Owen argues that certain works are assigned to individual persons by appropriation,²⁴ while others by “peculiar condescension of any person unto a work, wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent” (1965, 3:94).

Owen provides a single such example, and it is precisely the assumption of human nature by the Son. However, Spence is wrong to consider this an exception to the rule, as Tyler Wittman convincingly argues. Invoking the distinction between principium/terminus, Owen in fact argues that “The Son’s assumption of human nature is the terminus, or end, of the undivided trinitarian act of the incarnation” (Wittman, 298). Thus, “Far from innovating or weakening the received grammar of trinitarian theology, Owen is in basic continuity with the Augustinian tradition as it came through Aquinas and was articulated by Reformed Orthodoxy” (Wittman, 298).

So close was his adherence to this tradition that Owen went as far as to claim that “The only singular immediate act of the person of the Son on the human nature was the assumption of it into subsistence with himself. Herein the Father and the

²³ For Owen’s debt to medieval scholasticism, especially Aquinas, see (Trueman 1998, 111ff.) Cf. (Cleveland 2013).

²⁴ Owen does not use the language of appropriation specifically, preferring the terminology of ‘eminence.’

Spirit had no interest nor concurrence [...] ‘but by approbation and consent,’ as Damascen speaks [...]” (1965, 3:160). He further notes that “the only necessary consequent of this assumption of the human nature, or the incarnation of the Son of God, is the personal union of Christ, or the inseparable subsistence of the assumed nature in the person of the Son” (1965, 3:160). What this means is that the incarnation does not *require* that the Son be the immediate agent of Christ’s actions: “all other actings of God in the person of the Son towards the human nature were voluntary, and did not necessarily ensue on the union mentioned” (1965, 3:161). In fact, Owen insists, the Holy Spirit “is the immediate operator of all divine acts of the Son himself, even on his own human nature” (1965, 3:162).²⁵

Now, while Owen seems to be supporting my claim that even incarnate actions do not belong immediately to the Son, he does seem to treat the Son’s assuming of human nature as an action, rather than a state. I grant that Owen is not availing himself explicitly of the distinction between action and state. However, he is implicitly suggesting something precisely like this. It is clear that Owen does not create exceptions to the OAE, as we have seen. If that is the case, however, either Owen is inconsistent in suggesting that there is an “action” that is not shared by the Son with the other persons, or that he is uncaring in his terminology. In his *Christologia*, Owen clarifies that even the assumption is the “act of the divine nature, and so, consequently, of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” as regards “original efficiency,” but “as unto the term of the assumption, or the taking of our nature unto himself, it was the peculiar act of the person of the Son” (1965, 1:225). This closely parallels my distinction between action and passion, as well as the sense of *terminus*₁. In terms of the causality of the action, all persons are acting. Yet the effect of the action is only united to the second person. Admittedly, Owen is somewhat imprecise in the use of “action,” or “act,” to denote the receiving by the Son of the human nature in hypostatic union. Yet he remains unequivocal that even that assumption is efficiently caused by the divine nature as a whole.

So Owen does not really depart from OAE. But, is refusing to ascribe the agency uniquely to the Son in (14), (17), and (20) a way out of the dilemma? Or does it lead to affirming precisely what we have been trying to avoid, namely that the Father and the Spirit cry, that they are praying to the Father, or that they are surrendering themselves to death?

What is, in other words, gained by saying that the Trinity acts as a whole on and through the human nature of Jesus over the claim that the three persons are co-agents in the actions of Christ’s human nature? Why, to put it differently, is it repugnant to say that the “Father cries,” yet desirable to say that he is co-agent in producing the crying? Haven’t we thus dismantled our understanding and definition

²⁵ Owen appeals specifically to the *opera ad extra* principle to clarify that “the immediate actings of the Holy Ghost are not spoken of him absolutely, nor ascribed to him exclusively, as unto the other persons and their concurrence in them” (1965, 3:162). Now, if the Spirit were a separate agent, this would have the counterintuitive consequence that the Holy Spirit is the immediate agent of another person’s actions. This would indeed make little sense, for then these actions would not be this other person’s, but the Spirit’s. But the Spirit’s actions on the human nature are not the Spirit’s alone. What Owen has in mind is something more akin to the Spirit’s being the proximal cause, or the perfecting cause of all that God works.

of action as the production of an effect by an agent? For we seem to be suggesting that the father is co-producing the effect (i.e. crying), yet the Father isn't crying.

The only possible way out of this conundrum is to remember that the effects produced by the three exist in and through the human nature of Christ. But this human nature is united with the person of the Son alone. Thus the effects are referred to the Son alone, and that is why (14), (17), and (20) are appropriate, without denoting actions that are unique to the Son.

Now, the language of effects might seem like a changing of the subject rather than as a solution. It can be objected that, for example, 'crying' understood as an effect is not the same as 'crying' understood as an action. In normal situations this objection would be devastating. There is an obvious difference between the action of a bully who is making a kid cry and the kid's crying. But in this particular case, the effects that are produced are not similarly external to the agent, but terminate precisely in one of the persons of the Trinity. An action is the production of an effect. We individuate an action by casually assigning effects to agents. In this case the action is identified as the bringing about of these effects by this agency, in this particular manner. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are making the Son ϕ . Yet the Son is not merely the passive and external recipient of the effects, but also their own agent.

In a certain sense, then, the actions done through the human nature have the Son as both agent and patient. The 'crying,' then, is brought about through the efficient causality of the whole Trinity, yet it is experienced by the Son in his human nature. The Son is not patient, though, in the sense of any potentialities being actualized, but only as the term of a relationship to a dependent human nature.

Note that this does not make the Son into a mere passenger of a human nature that is otherwise animated by other forces. The Son is equally an active part in the animation of that human nature, yet not directly, or uniquely.

However, the denial that the Son continues to act upon or through his human nature raises some serious issues. Oliver Crisp is concerned that Owen's proposal "has the consequence that God the Son is one step removed from his human nature" (2011, 101). "If the human nature of Christ is 'owned' by the Son, it seems very strange that he is not the divine person *immediately* acting upon, or through, his human nature" (102). Crisp fears that the intermediary role played by the Spirit removes the Son one step away from his nature.

There is a potential OAE-based counterargument, which Crisp acknowledges: "So even though the sustenance of the human nature of Christ is a Trinitarian act that devolves upon the Spirit in a peculiar manner, it is still a work of all three persons of the Godhead—God the Son included" (102). The OAE-based reply attempts to remove the problem by suggesting that even though the Spirit is the person that *immediately* sustains the human nature of Christ, the Son is also involved in that same action and thus the perception of remoteness is false.

This response, however, does not assuage Crisp, since "it constitutes an inappropriate application of the *opera trinitatis ad extra* principle" (105). He continues: "this principle safeguards the doctrine of the Trinity whilst allowing for actions that terminate on particular divine persons. But it cannot be used to justify the agency of the Spirit in the incarnation at all moments after the Son assumes

human nature *precisely because the Incarnation is the work that terminates upon the Son*" (105; emphasis added).

This is an important but not a fatal objection. I will invoke the distinction between the various senses of 'terminate' in response to it. Crisp is in essence arguing (amongst other things) the following:

Because

(21) the incarnation terminates in the Son,

(22) at least some of the incarnate actions have to belong *immediately* to the Son.

We may begin by noting a terminological equivocation here. Crisp's use of "immediate" seems to follow Marshall's distinction between primary and immediate agents, and not so much Owen's distinction between eminent and immediate agency. By "immediate" agency Owen means actions accomplished by just one of the persons, in whom the other have no concurrence, but by approbation and support. There is only one such "action," our objections to Owen's language having been noted, and this is the assumption of the human nature. Marshall's notion of "immediate agent" closely parallels the subject of our "terminus₂." It refers to the person at the end of the trinitarian agential chain, the person most proximate to the effect.

If Crisp truly does use Owen's particular sense of "immediate," he would be in effect undermining the OAE, or at least creating exceptions to it, which it is not apparent that he wishes to do.²⁶ In this case, (22) would imply:

(23) at least some of the incarnate actions of the Son would not have the concurrence of the other persons (i.e. they are exclusively the Son's).

If Marshall's sense is what Crisp has in mind, then (22) is not particularly threatening to the OAE since it only insists that there are incarnate actions which, although enacted through the common agency of the three, are nevertheless most proximate to the Son. But these actions would still not belong immediately to the Son (in Owen's sense). Hence Owen's insistence that the incarnation only requires a single immediate action of the Son—the assumption of the human nature—seems to be warranted.

However, one obstacle needs to be overcome in Crisp's objection. He is suggesting that OAE cannot be invoked to parse the action of the incarnation precisely because the incarnation "terminates" on the Son. It is difficult to understand this particular objection. On the one hand, Crisp may be suggesting that the incarnation is not simply a work of divine efficient causality (something like Rahner's objection) and thus its agency cannot be ascribed to all trinitarian persons. It is doubtful that Crisp wishes to distinguish, à la Rahner, between acts of efficient causality and acts of quasi-formal causality. On the other hand, he may be holding that the incarnation is an action that has already been "assigned" to the Son. But what does this mean? It could

²⁶ Crisp nowhere advocates either abandoning OAE, or creating exceptions; on the contrary, he consistently affirms it throughout his work, although he holds that Owen misapplies the rule in this particular case.

mean that the incarnation is that “segment” of an “external operation” that is accomplished by the Son. But this is also wrong, for in this case, divine actions are after all divided and apportioned neatly to distinct persons. As I have noted, the idea that a given action “terminates” in this or that person should not be turned into a principle of individuation.²⁷

To say that the incarnation is a work that terminates in the Son does not rule out other modes of the same action that may be said to terminate in other trinitarian persons. The language of principium-terminus is not an ontologically univocal way of differentiating between divine actions. Rather, it belongs to our *modus significandi*, such that for self-same actions we are able to distinguish (under different perspectives), different persons which terminate, and to whom these actions are appropriated.

This is not to deny that the Son eminently accomplishes (in Owen’s sense) actions upon the human nature. But these are not immediately (or uniquely, exclusively) caused by the Son, but brought about through the same indivisible agency that belongs to the three persons together.

The actions that are accomplished “through the human nature” of the Son are in fact actions of the whole Godhead, yet these are actions that are accomplished through a capacity possessed by the Son uniquely, or rather, in virtue of a relationship of dependence between the Son and a human nature.

(B) Missions and Knowledge of the Triune Persons

To what extent, then, do we gain a knowledge of the Son through the incarnation? Precisely to the extent that the human nature of the Son is indwelt and sustained by the Son himself. It is specifically the Son (and not the Father, or the Holy Spirit) that is sent in the human nature of Jesus. But a trinitarian person’s being sent does not amount to that person’s ceasing to exist at the immanent level as a person that perichoretically communes with the other two.

The misconception that should be corrected is that somehow the Trinity acts monolithically in the economy. We have seen that the best of the Western trinitarian tradition successfully avoids this. Each divine action contains a threefold modality, through which the various modes of the operation²⁸ of the trinitarian persons may be experienced.

Lonergan, responding to the objection “that God operates externally not according to the relations, but according to the common nature,” answers “with a distinction”: God is not a natural agent “that could produce only something similar in nature, as fire always produces heat and water always causes moisture.” Rather, God is an intellectual nature, hence “just as God by the divine intellect knows the four real relations, so also by his divine intellect, together with the divine will, God can produce beings that are finite, yet similar [to the four real relations] and absolutely supernatural” (2007, 451). Lonergan argues that the inseparable operation of the

²⁷ For more on this, see (Marshall 2010, 69ff). For an alternative perspective, cf. (Awad 2011).

²⁸ For the terminology of “modes of working,” cf. (Muller 2003, 4:267ff).

triune God is actually conducive to a distinct created participation in the four real trinitarian relations (paternity, filiation, active spiration, passive spiration). The common operation does not obscure the persons.²⁹

On the contrary, while the common actions of the Trinity are “appropriated” to this or that divine person, the missions are proper and not so appropriated. A mission, Aquinas shows, is nothing but a relationship to a created term added to a procession. In other words, while the actions of the incarnate Christ are in a certain sense “merely” appropriated to the second person, the second person truly is sent and given to us in his *esse secundarium*. As Neil Ormerod puts it, “The inner relatedness of the divine persons becomes the basis whereby a contingent created reality or temporal effect can become a term for the procession. The incarnation truly is the incarnation of the Son; grace truly is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit” (2014, 70). Lonergan and Ormerod both drive the point (the latter not independently of the former) that the created effects are what they are precisely because of the inner-relationality of the Trinity, and thereby because of the unique personal identity of each of the persons.

There is a very real sense, then, in which the effects truly reveal the distinctness of the persons. Whereas Rahner invokes a “quasi-formal communication of God” (2001, 77), such a notion is both problematic³⁰ and unnecessary.³¹ It is unnecessary because the persons are glimpsed through ‘exemplary causation,’ or an external imitation of divine tri-personal form. In this way, the divine substance does not inform the effects, which nonetheless bear a resemblance with and thus mediate knowledge of the distinct divine relations.

Emery explains this through a distinction between the ontological and the intentional dimensions of grace. Ontologically, the common operation of the Trinity works and effects grace. Intentionally, however, the persons come to be in us (as exemplars) through their becoming the object of our reflection and practices (2007, 404). The ‘descent’ of the Trinity in its missions corresponds an intellectual ‘ascent’ through reflection on their created effects. It must be remembered, though, that the persons are truly given in these effects, even as the latter are the work of common causality. The Father, Son, and Spirit are truly present the Son to us in his secondary (human) nature; they truly present the gift of the Spirit to us in (created) grace. Moreover, it is precisely the non-appropriated missions that are the transcendental condition for our (appropriated) knowledge of the persons. There is thus no

²⁹ Both Lonergan and Owen insist on the possibility of having relations with distinct persons of the Trinity. Interestingly, for this reason too, both have been suspected of deviating from OAE. Cf. (Spence 1990) for Owen and (Hefling 2007, 643) for Lonergan. For excellent work on Owen’s theology of distinct relations, see (Kapic 2007, 161). Robert Letham especially sees a focus ‘more characteristic of the East’ in Owen (2012).

³⁰ Emery, for example, tangentially critiques the notion for creating ‘confusion between God and the world—since a form is by definition inherent in a creature’ (2007, 348-9). Neil Ormerod argues that the category ‘blurs the distinction between the divine person and the divine nature, and the relationship of each to the concrete human being Jesus Christ, who remains nonetheless God-with-us. By speaking of the incarnation in terms of a formal cause, however “quasi,” the focus shifts from the personal or hypostatic character of the union, to a formal or natural union, something on the level of the natures involved’ (2005, 128).

³¹ See (Ormerod 2014, 72).

insurmountable contradiction between the claim that the Trinity acts indivisibly in the world and the claim that we are brought into communion with distinct Trinitarian persons through their common work.³²

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