

## PERFECTION AND IMPERFECTION OF JOSEF SEIFERT'S THEORY OF PURE PERFECTIONS

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“Now if cattle, horses or lions had hands and were able to draw with their hands and perform works like men, horses like horses and cattle like cattle would draw the forms of gods, and make their bodies just like the body each of them had... Africans say their gods are snub-nosed and black, Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired.”<sup>1</sup> The criticism levelled by the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes against the anthropomorphic way of representing the divine in his era has been constantly reiterated throughout the history of thought. Is it not really man who “created God in his own image and likeness,” as we read on the sarcophagus of the nineteenth-century atheist thinker Ludwig Feuerbach? Is not all idea of God’s being an idol, as the contemporary Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion appears to suggest?<sup>2</sup>

The question as to whether and how a finite understanding like ours can adequately conceive the infinite being of God is perhaps the central problem of philosophical theology and of metaphysics in general. If our knowledge were essentially reduced to analysis of purely inner-worldly being, metaphysics (as a science of being *qua* being as well as a rational science of God) would be completely impossible. To provide an answer to this fundamental problem, Josef Seifert has had the perspicacity to direct his gaze to an ancient doctrine of medieval origin: the so-called doctrine of pure perfections. It is no exaggeration to assert that Josef Seifert is the foremost contemporary defender of this metaphysical theory of *simpliciter simplices* perfections, and the one who has managed to extract the greatest philosophical riches from it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Xenophanes,” Frag. B15, B 16, in Daniell W. Graham (ed. and transl.), *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy. The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109-10.

<sup>2</sup>See Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l’Etre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).

<sup>3</sup>Josef Seifert deals with the doctrine of pure perfections in many of his works, for example: “Gott und die Sittlichkeit innerweltlichen Handelns. Kritische philosophische Reflexionen über den Einfluß anthropomorpher und agnostischer Gottesvorstellungen auf Ethik und

In the following analysis, I propose to carry out three tasks. First, to give a brief account of the essence of pure perfections as described by the first philosopher who grasped them with full philosophical awareness, Anselm of Canterbury, and by the thinker who perhaps entered most deeply into their nature, Duns Scotus. Second, to identify the corrections and clarifications that Josef Seifert has introduced into the traditional doctrine of pure perfections, as well as

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Moraltheologie,” *Forum Katholische Theologie*, I, 1 (1985), 27-47; *Essere e persona. Verso una fondazione fenomenologica di una metafisica classica e personalistica*. Translated by Rocco Buttiglione (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1989), cap. V, 203-49; “Transcendentals and Pure Perfections,” in H. Burkhardt-B. Smith (ed.), *Handbook of Metaphysics and Ontology* (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1991, 2, 909-11; “Essere persona come perfezione pura. Il Beato Duns Scoto e una nuova metafisica personalistica,” in M. Sánchez Sorondo (ed.), *Peri psychēs, De homine, Antropologia: Nuovi approcci* (Pubblicazioni della Facoltà di Filosofia. Pontificia Università Lateranense; Collana “Dialogo di Filosofia” 11, Roma: Herder, 1994), 57-75; “Die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis als menschlicher Zugang zu Gott,” in Franz Breid (ed.), *Der Eine und Dreifaltige Gott als Hoffnung des Menschen zur Jahrtausendwende* (Steyr: Ennsthaler Verlag, 2001), 9-102; *Gott als Gottesbeweis. Eine phänomenologische Neubegründung des ontologischen Arguments* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996, 2000<sup>2</sup>); “The Idea of the Good as the Sum-total of Pure Perfections. A New Personalistic Reading of Republic VI and VII,” in: G. Reale and S. Scolnikov (eds.), *New Images of Plato. Dialogues on the Idea of the Good* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2002), 407-424. “El amor como perfección pura: una metafísica del amor como himno filosófico del amor,” *Humanitas* (Anuario del Centro de Estudios Humanísticos, Universidad Autónoma del Nuevo León) 2004, 65-82; “A vontade como perfeição pura e a nova concepção não-eudemonística do amor segundo Duns Scotus,” *Veritas* (Porto Alegre), 50 (2005), 51-84; “Scotus’ Analyse der ‘reinen Vollkommenheiten’ und zeitgenössische Religionsphilosophie,” in R. Hofmeister Pich (ed.), *New Essays on Metaphysics as “Scientia transcendens”*. (Proceedings of the Second International Conference of Medieval Philosophy, held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Porto Alegre-Brazil, 15-18 August, 2006, Louvain-La-Neuve: Fédération internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, 2007), 249-282. *Erkenntnis des Vollkommenen. Wege der Vernunft zu Gott* (Bonn: Lepanto Verlag, 2010). Spanish translation by Pedro Jesús Teruel, with revisions and additions by Josef Seifert, *Conocimiento de Dios por la vías de la razón y del amor* (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro, 2013).

to indicate the main ways in which he has used or applied this ancient theory. In this way, I shall consider the “perfection” of Seifert’s theory of pure perfections. Third, to indicate issues, which remain open within this metaphysical doctrine and the broad scope Seifert has given to it. In this way, I shall discuss the “imperfection” of Seifert’s theory of pure perfections, not in the sense that it is in any way flawed, but in the sense that there are aspects, which still need to be developed.

### I. The Essence of Pure Perfections as Described by Anselm and Duns Scotus

As Josef Seifert notes, Anselm of Canterbury (also known as Anselm of Aosta) was the first to grasp with philosophical clarity the essence of the so-called pure perfections.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter XV of *Monologion*, Anselm sought a criterion for discerning, among the different predicates we attribute to things, which ones are substantively (*substantialiter*) or properly characteristic of the divine essence.<sup>5</sup>

To find a solution, Anselm first distinguished two basic types of predication: the relative and the absolute. In the relative, attributed perfection is valued in terms of how much and to what degree of excellence an object possesses this quality. With the absolute, the predicated perfection is judged according to the ontological dignity of the quality in question.

Relative predication involves comparing the extent and degree of excellence to which an attribute is possessed by two or more beings. For this reason, no relative or comparative predicate will be able to describe the divine nature adequately. It is certainly true that we can say that God is, in Anselm’s own words, “the *highest* of all beings, or *greater* than those which have been created by Him.”<sup>6</sup> However, this does not describe God’s nature in itself, for if the term of

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<sup>4</sup>See Seifert, “Transcendentals and Pure Perfections,” 910, and *Essere e Persona*, cap V, 216.

<sup>5</sup>For what follows see Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, cap. XV, in *St. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia* (ed. F. S. Schmitt), Edinburgh: apud Thomas Nelson et Filios, 1946, I, 28-29. English translation by Sidney Norton Deane, in *St. Anselm, Proslogium; Monologium; An appendix in behalf of the fool by Gaunilon; and Cur deus homo* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1939), 61-64; and Josef Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap V, 215-218.

<sup>6</sup>Anselm, *Monologion*, cap. XV, 28 (English translation, 61).

comparison, namely everything that has been made by God, never existed, then God would not be the supreme essence at all. Moreover, He would not have lost any of His ontological greatness and dignity. The same is true of other, similar relative predicates.

The positive criterion for the attributes of the substance of the divine essence must be sought, then, within an absolute predication of perfections. Absolute predication, in fact, involves comparing the possession of a perfection by a being with the same being not possessing this quality; in such a way, that we can say it is better (or not better) for this being to have such an attribute than not to have it. Moreover, it is precisely within the absolute predicates that Anselm discovered a fundamental difference. There are, on the one hand, cases where, for some beings, it is better not to have a certain predicate than to have it, even if this predicate is present in its highest degree. Anselm says of a predicate or perfection of this kind that, “in some cases, ‘not to be it’ is better than ‘to be it’ (*non ipsum in aliquo melius est quam ipsum*).” On the other hand, there are cases where it is absolutely better for an object to possess a given predicate than not to possess it. Anselm suggests that, in the case of a predicate or perfection of this type, “*to be it* is in general better than *not to be it* (*ipsum omnino melius est quam non ipsum*).”<sup>7</sup>

The opposition between “to be it” (*ipsum esse*) and “not to be it” (*non ipsum esse*) does not refer to the opposition between a perfection and its respective imperfection, but rather to the opposition between a perfection and its respective absence or privation. Anselm’s discovery specifically involves showing that the absence of some perfections is, in some beings, a perfection, while the lack of certain perfections is necessarily an imperfection. To use Anselm’s own examples, although it might be better for something to be gold, it is better for man not to be gold than to be gold, as man is much better than gold. If he were gold, he would be of lower nature. On the other hand, to be wise is better than not to be wise, “for everything that is not wise, simply in so far as it is not wise, is less than what is wise, since everything that is not wise would be better if it were wise.”<sup>8</sup>

Conditioned absolute predicates, i.e. those it is better in some cases not to have than to have, are termed mixed or limited perfections (*limitatae perfectiones*). The root of the limitation they encapsulate explains the fact that, in some beings, it is better not to possess them than to possess them. On the other

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<sup>7</sup>Anselm, *Monologion*, cap. XV, 28 (English translation, 62).

<sup>8</sup>Anselm, *Monologion*, cap. XV, 28 (English translation, 63).

hand, unconditioned absolute predicates, i.e. those it is unconditionally better to have than not to have are termed pure perfections or perfections in an absolute way (*perfectiones simpliciter*). The fact that possessing them is absolutely better than not possessing them shows that, in fact, these perfections do not contain in himself or herself any imperfection or limitation; they are perfections *par excellence*.

In this light, it is easy to establish a positive criterion for the perfections, which correspond properly or substantively to divine nature. Anselm himself explains it as follows: “As it is impious to suppose that the substance of the supreme Nature is anything, than which what is not it is in any way better, it must be true that this substance is whatever is, in general, better than what is not it.” The essence of God can be seen, therefore, as all pure perfections in the highest degree. “Hence,” Anselm concludes, “this Being must be living, wise, powerful, and all-powerful, true, just, blessed, eternal, and whatever, in like manner, is absolutely better than what is not it.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Josef Seifert, Duns Scotus is the philosopher who perhaps explored the essence of the pure perfections in the most depth and, through progressive refining, attempted to distinguish the pure from the mixed perfections most clearly.<sup>10</sup> As Seifert states: “Scotus’ subtle analyses of the pure perfections remain as the most significant historical contribution to a phenomenology of the pure perfections.”<sup>11</sup>

Duns Scotus summarises the description of the nature of pure perfections offered by Anselm in these terms: “A pure perfection is said to be something which is better in everything than what is not it (*Perfectio simpliciter est quae in quolibet est melius ipsum quam non ipsum*).” Alternatively - “A pure perfection is that which it is better to possess than not to possess in whatever possesses it (*Perfectio simpliciter est quae in quolibet habente ipsam melius est ipsam habere quam non ipsam habere*).”<sup>12</sup> In the opinion of the Subtle Doctor, however, two

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<sup>9</sup>Anselm, *Monologion*, cap. XV, 29 (English translation, 64).

<sup>10</sup>See Seifert, “Transcendentals and Pure Perfections,” 910, *Essere e Persona*, cap V, 218 and “Scotus’ Analyse der ‘reinen Vollkommenheiten’,” 251-262.

<sup>11</sup>Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap V, 231.

<sup>12</sup>The first definition is found in *Tractatus de primo principio*, cap. IV, Tertia conclusio; the second one in *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 5, n. 13. For what follows see, besides the mentioned passages of Duns Scotus’s works, Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 218-20 and

possible misunderstandings obscure the true meaning of these Anselmian formulae.

The first possible ambiguity concerns that which is to be considered a pure perfection and that which is not. Anselm himself had already considered this possible misunderstanding, at least implicitly. The question is that the opposition between “to be it” (*ipsum esse*) and “not to be it” (*non ipsum esse*) cannot be understood as a contrary opposition, that is, as an opposition between something positive and something negative. If it were understood in this way, Anselm's description would be false and even absurd. Rather, the opposition between *ipsum* and *non ipsum* has to be understood as an incompatibility between something positive and another something, which is also positive. This latter is called *non ipsum* only on the grounds of its incompatibility with the former. In order to avoid this confusion, Duns Scotus proposes a more appropriate characterisation of a pure perfection as that which, in any being, is better than everything else is impossible or incompatible with it (*in quolibet melior quocumque sibi impossibili*).

The second possible misunderstanding refers to that to which a pure perfection is ascribed, to the “bearer” of a pure perfection. The question is that the term “in any being” (*in quolibet*) in Anselm's description cannot be interpreted as meaning “for any being” (*cuilibet*). If this were the case, Anselm's formula would be false. According to the famous example by Duns Scotus, it is no better for a dog to be wise than not to be wise. Interpreted in this way, Anselmian description would mention the relationship of a pure perfection to a certain nature, which, by its own limitation, may be incompatible with such a pure perfection. The excellence of such perfection prevents the nature in question from being such a nature, so to speak. Therefore, Anselm's statement has to be understood in the sense of a relationship between a pure perfection and a nature not yet determined, which the Subtle Doctor, following the scholastic tradition, calls substance or subject (*suppositum*), i.e. something which subsists (*subsistens*), but whose subsistence is considered independent of the nature in which or of which it is a substance. To avoid this ambiguity, a pure perfection can be more properly defined as that which, in any substance, regardless of its subsistence as

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pp. 232-41 and Allan B. Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (St. Bonaventure-New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1946), 162-8.

determined by a particular nature, is better than anything incompatible with it is.

In the light of these considerations, Duns Scotus can summarise the results of his research with a new characterisation of the essence of pure perfections. This description, which Scotus considers more appropriate to the thing itself and less equivocal than that proposed by Anselm, reads as follows: “A pure perfection is whatever is absolutely and without qualification better than anything incompatible with it (*Perfectio simpliciter est quae est simpliciter et absolute melius quocumque impossibili*).”<sup>13</sup>

The essence of pure perfections described in this way leads Duns Scotus to make four new discoveries concerning the essentially necessary properties of pure perfections.

First: *All pure perfections are mutually compatible*.<sup>14</sup> The argument advanced by the Subtle Doctor develops as follows. No pure perfection can be incompatible with another pure perfection because, if this were the case, the same perfection would be both better and worse than the other, and vice versa. The impossibility that one and the same thing could be less perfect than it could indirectly proves the fact all pure perfections must be compatible.

Second: *All pure perfections admit of infinity*.<sup>15</sup> The proof of Duns Scotus is as follows. If a pure perfection does not admit of infinity, then it would have to exceed or be better than what is infinite, since a pure perfection is better than what is incompatible with it. However, nothing can exceed or be better than what is infinite. Thus, all pure perfections admit of infinity.

Third: *Pure perfections are irreducible simple (simpliciter simplices)*,<sup>16</sup> that is to say, they cannot be reduced neither to anything simpler nor to each other, and are therefore indefinable.

Fourth: *Every pure perfection is “communicable,”*<sup>17</sup> that is, several subjects can share a pure perfection.

Finally, Duns Scotus considers that pure perfections are properly “Transcendentals,” not in the sense of being properties coextensive with being, but rather in the sense of being properties not limited to spheres or categories of

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<sup>13</sup>John Duns Scotus, *Tractatus de primo principio*, cap. IV, Tertia conclusio.

<sup>14</sup>See Scotus, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 5, n. 8.

<sup>15</sup>See Scotus, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 5, n. 9.

<sup>16</sup>See Scotus, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 1, n. 4.

<sup>17</sup>See John Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, I, dist. 2, q. 7, n. 39.

beings and in the sense that they lack essential limitations or restrictions. In this way, Scotus classifies these Transcendentals into three groups: properties which characterise all beings (such as *ens*, *unum*, *verum* or *bonum*), properties which only some beings possess but which are in themselves formally infinite (such as being a person, knowledge, freedom, etc.) and properties which can only be ascribed to the Infinite Being (such as necessary real existence, absolute infinity, omniscience and omnipotence). Thus, as Seifert says, “all Transcendentals are necessarily also pure perfections, and all pure perfections are *eo ipso* Transcendentals.”<sup>18</sup>

## II. The “Perfection” of Seifert’s Theory of Pure Perfections

What corrections or clarifications has Josef Seifert introduced to this traditional doctrine of pure perfections and how has he used and applied it? I will discuss the “perfection” of Seifert’s theory of pure perfections by giving a brief account, in order, of his nine major contributions to this theory.

1. The *first contribution* concerns the need for a more precise and exact determination of the *nature* or *essence* of pure perfections.

In the first place, Seifert notes that Scotus’ distinction between *in quolibet*, or *suppositum* (substance), and *cuiuslibet*, or specific nature, is superfluous and misleading in the way it is applied to the description of pure perfections. There are indeed certain limited subjects, not just their specific natures, for which possessing a pure perfection is not necessarily better than not possessing it. For example, it would be absurd for the subject of human nature (*in quolibet*) to possess rather than not to possess a pure perfection such as eternity. Besides, although it is true, to a certain extent, the same *suppositum* can be the bearer of different natures, this “plasticity” or “flexibility,” so to speak, is not infinite. No finite subject can bridge the gap between finite and infinite nature. Therefore, in Duns Scotus’ formula, the expression “anything incompatible” (*quocumque incompossibile*) with a pure perfection must leave open the question of whether it is a subject or a nature, or both.<sup>19</sup>

In the second place, Seifert notes that the Scotus’ description of a pure perfection as that which is better than anything incompatible with it can only be

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<sup>18</sup>Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap V, 212.

<sup>19</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 220-2.



understood by considering the perfection in question in itself, and not in relation to other possible pure perfections. An intelligent nature, in Seifert's example, is certainly more perfect than an unintelligent or less intelligent nature, but only with regard to intelligence. The most intelligent but evil nature is less perfect than a less intelligent nature which is nevertheless morally good. Seifert therefore gives the following formula for describing a pure perfection: "A pure perfection is such, that the being which possess it and which is compatible with it is, from the point of view of that perfection, necessarily more perfect than a being which in fact does not possess the given perfection, or by essence cannot possess it."<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in the third place, Seifert thinks that it is possible to provide a new description of the pure perfections, which more adequately encapsulates the essential characteristic of their absolute goodness or their absolute "being better," i.e. the fact that they are better in an absolute way. The proposed formula says, "A pure perfection is such that it is impossible to surpass it without possessing it."<sup>21</sup>

2. The *second major improvement* Seifert made in the theory of pure perfections concerns the ways in which the actual *existence* of such perfections can be identified.

Josef Seifert begins by noting that pure perfections possess an objective, essential necessity. They are indeed *Urgegebenheiten*, irreducible realities. Thus, their existence can be ascertained, according to Seifert, in two ways: indirectly, by a negative proof, and directly, by a positive insight.

The negative proof for the existence of pure perfections is, as Seifert calls it, a sort of objectivist "transcendental deduction." It is because, since pure perfections are irreducible data, they are also "undeniable truths" in the sense that every negation of them necessarily entails a contradiction, by reintroducing the datum in question. To hold that there are only mixed perfections, or surpassable attributes of being as such, implies defending that it is absolutely better to possess a surpassable perfection than not to possess it, or that it is absolutely better to be limited than to be unlimited. However, this is tantamount to saying that a pure perfection is not really a pure perfection. This contradiction therefore provides indirect proof of the fact that there are indeed pure perfections.<sup>22</sup>

However, definitive evidence which refutes any denial of the existence of

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<sup>20</sup>Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 222.

<sup>21</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 224.

<sup>22</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 225-8.

pure perfections, as Seifert points out, consists of rendering “intuitively evident that the *perfectiones simpliciter* really do include perfections in an absolute sense higher than any which are possible in natures or beings which lack these pure perfections or which are incompatible with them.”<sup>23</sup> In this case, we are not dealing with a simple psychological impossibility of thinking something “higher than...” Rather, we are referred back to the objective material lawfulness, which we encounter in perfections such as being a person, being wisdom or simply being.<sup>24</sup>

3. The question of the existence of pure perfections leads us to the *third* major *development* introduced by Josef Seifert in the metaphysical theory of pure perfections. It concerns the problem of *knowledge* of these perfections.

At this point, Seifert separates drastically from the Scotistic epistemological conception. Duns Scotus maintains that the human spirit first grasps the *essential form* or *ratio formalis* of a pure perfection by experience, and then abstracts from the experienced perfection all the limitations it finds. The human mind then ascribes the purified essential form to God in a most perfect manner (*perfectissime*). Seifert simply considers such a conception impossible. He asks how the human spirit can abstract from the limitations he finds in experience without in some manner knowing how to distinguish the limited instances in which a pure perfection is realised from the pure perfection itself?<sup>25</sup>

Far from any idea of grasping essential forms contained in the *phantasmata*, Seifert, in accordance with his manifold epistemological investigations and inquiries on the methods of realist phenomenology, defends an intuitive knowledge of pure perfections. This intuitive knowledge is certainly not direct, but mediated “in the mirror” of others. This “mediated immediate” knowledge is, in Seifert’s own words, an “indirect knowledge in which other, originally hidden essences, are reflected and co-given in what is more immediately present to us, sometimes as their perfect form, other times as their intelligible ‘opposites’.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, in the world, we only experience immediately finite forms of pure perfections, but at the same time, we understand the formal essence of these pure

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<sup>23</sup>Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 229.

<sup>24</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 228-30.

<sup>25</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 231.

<sup>26</sup>Josef Seifert, *Discours des Méthodes: The Methods of Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology*, (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2009), 34.

perfections in their purity and infinity. Using a distinction by Bonaventura, in the same way as Seifert, we can say that pure perfections are not ‘intuited’ as such in the immediate objects of our concrete experience, but ‘contuited’ on that intuitive contact with reality. Alternatively, as Seifert himself says, “the perfect form of the pure perfections is only *co-given* to our human mind with the finite and imperfect forms of them which we experience immediately.”<sup>27</sup>

4. This conception of knowledge, both of the existence and the essence of pure perfections, gives Josef Seifert occasion to understand more deeply some of the *essential characteristics* of the *perfectiones simpliciter*, especially their admission of the infinite. This is his *fourth* major *advance* in the doctrine of the pure perfections.

It is not just the case that every pure perfection is not essentially limited and is therefore compatible with the infinite, but above all that a pure perfection is only fully itself when it is infinite. Our co-given insight into a pure perfection allows us to understand that its essential form definitively contradicts all those limitations in which the pure perfection in question is accessible to us. The primary and genuine form of every pure perfection is its infinite form. According to Seifert, by rejecting a certain positive knowledge, albeit indirect, of the archetype of a pure perfection, in the final analysis the Scotistic epistemology of pure perfections is not able to justify this important insight: that the pure essential form of a pure perfection is formally infinite, even if we can only access it in its finite forms.<sup>28</sup>

In this light, the mutual compatibility of all pure perfections is evidence that the pure perfections are not merely *compossible* with each other, but rather that there is a profound inner union between them, in such a way that in the Infinite Being all perfections are united.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, the irreducible simplicity of pure perfections means they are ultimate and simple data, which cannot be reduced to something else. Pure perfections, as far as they are absolutely infinite, and not merely “infinite within the finite,” are in no way composed of parts or moments.<sup>30</sup>

5. The *fifth* major *achievement* within the theory of pure perfections involves

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<sup>27</sup>Seifert, *Discours des Méthodes*, 35.

<sup>28</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 238-41.

<sup>29</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 232-4.

<sup>30</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 244-5 and 235-7.

Seifert's arguments to prove that properties like *life, free will, to be a person and love* are in fact pure perfections.

Life is a pure perfection where it is seen not as *bios*, that is, not as organic vegetal, animal or human life which is inseparable from a body, but rather it is understood in the sense of 'zoe.' That is, the most universal essence of life, for it is absolutely impossible to surpass any limited form of life in perfection without living. For this reason, according to Seifert, Aristotle himself attributed life to "the unmoved mover."<sup>31</sup>

Following the deep insights of Scotus, Seifert demonstrates that free will is also a pure perfection because of both its object and its motivation. The object of free will is not restricted to any particular good, but is extended to good itself. Besides, free will can be motivated not only by the only subjectively satisfactory, but also by the intrinsic value.<sup>32</sup>

To be a person is certainly absolutely better than not to be it. The perfections of being, in other words actuality, self-possession, autonomy and self-sufficiency, are fulfilled in the person in a higher way than in non-personal beings. Thus, the person is the being in the primary and archetypal sense. Moreover, the perfection of being a person admits infinity in such a way that even God must be a personal being. For, as Seifert asks: How could a non-personal being create us? How could God be a just judge and have mercy on us without knowing and loving, acts which only persons can carry out?<sup>33</sup>

Finally, love is also, according to Josef Seifert, a pure perfection. Among the various arguments he brings forth in favour of this thesis, I will mention only one direct insight: love in the sense of self-donation of one person to another is a perfection absolutely insurmountable by a being incapable of love.<sup>34</sup>

6. Seifert's *sixth* major *contribution* to the doctrine of pure perfections is his defence of the thesis, which suggests that knowledge of pure perfections is a *necessary condition of any knowledge of God*.

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<sup>31</sup>See Josef Seifert, *What is Life? On the Originality, Irreducibility and Value of Life* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, Value Inquiry Book Series, 51, 1997), 20-4.

<sup>32</sup>See Seifert, "A vontade como perfeição pura," 78-80.

<sup>33</sup>See Seifert, "Essere persona come perfezione pura," 66-75, and *Essere e Persona*, cap. 9, 326-408.

<sup>34</sup>See Seifert, "El amor como perfección pura," 68-78, and *Conocimiento de Dios*, 202-213.

According to Seifert, on the one hand, mixed perfections are primarily and in a certain sense exclusively realised in finite beings, whereas pure perfections, by being formally infinite, can only be properly realised in God himself, the Infinite Being. On the other hand, whereas no pure perfection can be fulfilled in an absolute sense in any finite being, mixed perfections can be attributed to God only *via negationis* and *via supereminentia*. In other words, God does not possess them directly, but He does retain every perfection present in them. In this sense, as Seifert notes, mixed perfections are attributed to God *via negativa*, and to creatures *via affirmationis*, whereas pure perfections are attributed to God *via positiva*, and to finite beings *via negativa*.<sup>35</sup>

This is the basis upon which Seifert responds to the argument, commonly presented by philosophers today, that all statements about God are anthropomorphic. They cannot preserve God's "absolute transcendence," either with respect to our knowledge or with respect to His actions in the world.

This view can be countered by the argument that pure perfections which are attributed to God *via positiva* cannot entail anything "human, all too human" because they are, by essence, infinite. Moreover, applying the *via negationis* to God, far from being an anthropomorphic way of speaking about Him, involves denying that mixed perfections exist in God, because of the imperfection which these perfections carry in themselves. Finally, as Seifert explicitly states, the ultimate consequence of the thesis that all statements about God can only be anthropomorphic is "not only the old deism, but a more radical agnosticism, which, by its abandonment of any claim to objective knowledge about God, can no longer be clearly distinguished from atheism."<sup>36</sup>

7. Josef Seifert's *seventh* major *development* within the theory of pure perfections involves proposing a new defence of the famous *quarta via* of Thomas Aquinas. He bases this on the discovery of the constitutive essence of pure perfections.<sup>37</sup>

Far from regarding this proof as the weakest of Aquinas' five ways of proving the existence of God, as is usually the case, Seifert suggests that this

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<sup>35</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 241.

<sup>36</sup>Seifert, *Erkenntnis dês Vollkommenen*, 171. See also "Scotus' Analyse der 'reinen Vollkommenheiten'", 262-282.

<sup>37</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 12, 488-503, and *Erkenntnis dês Vollkommenen*, 147-50.

proof constitutes the core of any cosmological argument. As is well known, the proof is taken from the gradation of perfections to be found in the worldly beings, and is built on the concept that “‘more’ and ‘less’ are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum.”<sup>38</sup>

Aquinas, in Seifert's opinion, does not clearly distinguish in his formulation of the proof between a relative and an absolute maximum, or between necessarily limited perfections and pure perfections which are potentially infinite, but which appear only to a limited degree in the beings of our experience. However, his proof is completely valid in the sense that not only the essential limitation of mixed perfections but also the limitations of the embodiment of all pure perfections in the world necessarily imply both the contingency of essence and the contingency of existence of worldly beings. Why is this particular being limited in this precise way, rather than in any of an infinite number of other possible ways? Moreover, if this particular being can have more or less of any of the perfections it possesses, why does it exist instead of not existing at all?

In this way, Seifert argues, the fact that it is impossible to explain limited degrees of perfection in terms of limited beings proves the existence of an infinitely good God. Only an infinitely perfect Being, “something than which nothing greater can be thought”, can be the ultimate explanation for being.

8. It is precisely this conception of God's Being as “that greater than which nothing can be thought” which leads us to the *eighth* major *improvement* made by Seifert in the theory of pure perfections. I refer to his sound defence of the so-called ontological argument, which he regards as the strongest proof for the existence of God, though also the most difficult to comprehend.<sup>39</sup>

God 's essence, Seifert suggests, contains all pure perfections, all those attributes it is absolutely better to possess than not to possess, and those which it is better to possess than to possess anything incompatible with them. Thus, God's perfection includes not only the absolute plenitude of reality and of being, but all personal and moral perfections. God is not only “that *greater* than which nothing can be thought,” but also “that *better* than which nothing can be thought.”

In the defence presented by Seifert, this description of God's Being is not a mere idea or simple, nominal definition. It is instead true knowledge of God's

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<sup>38</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2, a. 3.

<sup>39</sup>See Seifert, *Gott als Gottesbeweis*, especially V. Teil, 527 ff.

nature, however imperfect and indirectly obtained from our experience of the world this knowledge may be. Moreover, because God is God, and actual existence is inseparable from the highest perfection, God necessarily exists. Anselm's immortal insight that a pure idea of supreme perfection would not be "that greater and better than which nothing can be thought" if it did not actually exist, is interpreted by Seifert as follows: God's infinite perfection, which includes full possession of the *ratio formalis* of all pure perfections in their infinite form, would not be perfection at all if it did not really exist as a perfection. God really exists simply because God is God as proof of God's existence.

9. Finally, Seifert's *ninth* main *contribution* to the theory of pure perfections is of special significance to Christian philosophy. Based on his understanding of love as a pure perfection, Seifert considers it possible to justify, in a purely philosophical way, the central claim of Christian revelation that God is "love" itself.<sup>40</sup>

By using better reasons than those proposed by Ariston in the Platonic *Symposium* to prove that love is something divine, Seifert shows that, because God is a person and pure perfections in the person can only be fully realised through love, God must be love. Besides, God's absolute and infinite perfection means that the creation of the world cannot be understood in terms of God's self-realisation, and only one intelligible way of explaining the free act of creation remains: love, which must be identified with the divine essence.

Josef Seifert has, in fact, made many other contributions to the development of the theory of pure perfections. He has proposed, for example, a phenomenological and personalistic reading of the Platonic Idea of the Good as the sum-total of pure perfections.<sup>41</sup> He has also offered a valuable assessment of Thomas Aquinas' original contribution to this issue by explaining the Thomistic distinction between the name, which expresses a pure perfection, and our finite mode of expressing it in language.<sup>42</sup> However, the nine major contributions are considered sufficient to account for the importance and scope of Seifert's investigations on pure perfections.

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<sup>40</sup>See Seifert, *Conocimiento de Dios*, 202-213.

<sup>41</sup>See Seifert, "The Idea of the Good as the Sum-total of Pure Perfections," 407-424

<sup>42</sup>See Seifert, *Essere e Persona*, cap. 5, 242-3.

### III. The “Imperfection” of Seifert’s Theory of Pure Perfections

What remains to be done in terms of perfecting the doctrine of pure perfections? I particularly consider a more extensive treatment of two issues to be of paramount importance. As far as I know, Josef Seifert has never explicitly addressed the first of these issues, at least not adequately. The other issue, however, arises from distinctions expressly proposed by Seifert himself.

1. The first issue refers to the *relationship* between *pure perfection* and *value*.

As is well known, Seifert follows Hildebrand’s axiology, according to which the term value can only be properly applied to “the intrinsically important,” to the positive importance of what is intrinsically good and precious. Hildebrand and Seifert both distinguish four types of the intrinsically important and, therefore, four kinds of specifically distinct values. (1) Qualitative values, which include the family of moral values (characterised by the basic and intrinsic importance of moral goodness), the domain of the so-called intellectual values (such as intellectual acuity, wit, intellectual depth and brilliance), and the realm of aesthetic values (centred on the intrinsic importance of beauty). (2) Ontological values, that is, values “rooted” or “embodied” in the specific nature of beings. (3) The values of perfection or technical values, which are based on the immanent perfection of a capacity. (4) The formal value of “being something.”<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand, the notion of value or intrinsic importance does not seem to

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<sup>43</sup>See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972), Part I (English original edition: *Christian Ethics*, New York: David McKay Company, 1953. Definitive German edition: *Ethik*, in D. v. H., *Gesammelte Werke*, hrsg. von der Dietrich von Hildebrand Gesellschaft, (Regensburg-Stuttgart: Josef Habel-W. Kohlhammer, 1971-1984, 10 vols., vol. II, 1973) and *Ästhetik I* (*Gesammelte Werke*, vol. V, 1977). See Josef Seifert, *Erkenntnis objektiver Wahrheit* (Salzburg-München: Universitätsverlag Anton Pustet, 1972<sup>2</sup>), 274-290, *Was ist und was motiviert eine sittliche Handlung?* (Salzburg-München: Universitätsverlag Anton Pustet, 1976), “Being and Value. Thoughts on the Reform of the Metaphysics of Good within Value Philosophy,” *Aletheia* I, 2 (1977), 328-336, “Dietrich von Hildebrands philosophische Entdeckung der ‘Wertantwort’ und der Grundlegung der Ethik,” *Aletheia* V (1992), 34-58. See also Rogelio Rovira, “On the Manifold Meaning of Value according to Dietrich von Hildebrand and the Need for a Logic of the Concept of Value,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 89 (2015), 115-132.



be identical to the notion of pure perfection, to “being better” in such an absolute way that it is impossible to surpass it without possessing it. Although all pure perfection entails a value, not all-pure perfection is properly a value. Love is, according to Josef Seifert, a pure perfection, and it definitely has a value. However, love is not properly a value, but an “affective response” to value. Moreover, it is also clear that not all value is a pure perfection. The qualitative value of the “beauty of the visible and the audible,” for instance, is not a pure perfection, and the same is true of intellectual depth, the energy of the will or the ontological value of the corporeal living being.

On the other hand, can there conceivably be a difference between the absolute goodness of the intrinsic importance and the absolute goodness of the “being better” belonging to the pure perfection? How are we to understand a relationship between value and pure perfection, which is different to that of identity? Is there really a difference between the goodness or excellence proper to value and the goodness or excellence in being?

In short, we can clearly see that the notion of value and the notion of pure perfection do not seem to be identical, yet we cannot see a difference between the axiological goodness or positiveness of value and the ontological goodness or positiveness of pure perfection. Here we touch on a new aspect of the mystery in the relationship between value and being, which deserves further investigation.

2. The second issue refers to the question of the *communicability of pure perfections* and the *incommunicability of the person*.

Josef Seifert accepts Duns Scotus’ thesis that every pure perfection is communicable, i.e. shareable by more than one subject. This thesis, however, poses a difficult problem for Seifert’s conception of to be a person as pure perfection.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, to be a person always involves incommunicability in terms of the individual being, because only a unique being, incommunicable and profoundly individual, can be a person. How, then, can to be a person be a pure perfection and thus communicable?

In his response to this objection, Seifert begins by distinguishing between to be a person and to be this or that person. The former, but not the latter, is a pure perfection, for the essence of the person involves a personal identity and being an inalienable, irreplaceable individual, but not being this person instead of that one.

Seifert then makes a further distinction between pure perfections and

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<sup>44</sup>See Seifert, “Essere persona come perfezione pura,” 68-75.

properties, which are neither pure nor mixed perfections. To be *this unique* person rather than *another* one, Seifert asserts, is neither pure perfection, which it would be absolutely better to have than not to have, nor mixed perfection. This *haecceitas*, or uniqueness, is a type of perfection, which, in Seifert's own words, "is beyond the difference between pure and mixed perfection."<sup>45</sup>

Josef Seifert even grants a theological significance to this philosophical distinction between pure and mixed perfections on the one hand, and perfections, which are beyond this distinction, such as in the above case of specific personal identity, on the other hand. He considers it the "key" to a little better understanding of the Trinitarian mystery, where no divine person lacks any perfection, yet each divine person is distinct from the other.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, the ontological status of perfections, which are "beyond" the difference between pure and mixed perfections, raises some problems.

What does it mean to be "beyond" the above distinction? On a logical plane, we can understand the concept of perfection without taking into account the difference between essentially unrestricted perfection and essentially limited perfection, in the same way as we can represent the notion of animal without regard to the difference of "rational" and "irrational." However, all animals, which actually exist, are necessarily either rational or irrational. Can there really be an actual perfection, which is neither capable of infinity nor incapable of infinity? Can a perfection, which is by nature "indifferent," so to speak, to the distinction between the infinite and the finite, be predicated of the divine persons?

Moreover, how can the nature or essence of perfection be characterised, such as the individual identity of each specific person, if this perfection is, according to Seifert, "beyond" the distinction between pure and mixed perfections? Is the essence of this perfection communicable to each person? If so, how can this perfection explain the individuality of this particular person? Alternatively, is the essence of this perfection, in fact, radically incommunicable? In this case, how can we understand its nature as a perfection? Why do we call it perfection?

The *aporia* presented by the communicable nature of the pure perfection involved in being a person, and the inherent incommunicability of each individual person therefore requires further thought. Moreover, theologians must explain a further problem: the *aporia* of the difference between finite persons, who exist in

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<sup>45</sup>Seifert, "Essere persona come perfezione pura," 71.

<sup>46</sup>See Seifert, "Essere persona come perfezione pura," 72-3.

individually different natures, and the divine persons, who exist in one numerically indivisible nature.

Josef Seifert's analysis on pure perfections is extensive, precise and full of deep insights and sharp distinctions. He has recognised, perhaps more than any other contemporary philosopher, that these ultimate data of reality play as essential a role in metaphysics as the science of being. Moreover, in Seifert's analysis of pure perfections, his astute assessment of the contributions of earlier philosophers goes hand in hand, in an exemplary way, with careful attention to the things themselves. For all these reasons, Josef Seifert is worthy of the title, I am pleased to bestow upon him: *Doctor Perfectionum*. Seifert's doctrine of pure perfections is clearly not perfect, in the sense of it being complete and finished. It is, certainly, *perfectibile*. As a true philosopher, always attentive to the voice of reality, Josef Seifert has not offered us a closed system of thoughts about pure perfections. He prefers reality to develop in an ongoing dialogue rather than silencing it by trapping it in a system. The example offered by Josef Seifert invites us to continue to perfect the theory of pure perfections by hearing the voice of reality