

## Norris Clarke and Sarah Borden on the Limitation of Existence or Why We Are Not God: A Response

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*Both Borden and I are suspicious of Clarke's 'thin theory' of essence, the view that essences which limit creaturely existence have no positive reality of their own. I examine Clarke's reasons for holding this position, among which is the desire to avoid a metaphysical monism in which the otherness of God and creation is undermined. Borden thinks problems arise with Clarke's model because of the tendency to over-spatialize it. I think the problem is deeper and originates from the fact that the first concept of the human intellect is a compound one, ens or that-which-is, and Clarke's theory requires that we somehow get below that which is most fundamental in our thinking. Borden wants to ground the reality of essences in the ideas in God's mind, but recognizes this just invites the further question—how do God's ideas differ from God. I suggest a more promising solution lies in construing the relation of divine and creaturely otherness as non-commutative.*

Following Professor Borden's lead, I too would like to begin with a story—a story about the first time Clarke's thin theory of essence struck me with great force. The season was early autumn 1981; the place, Toronto Ontario. I was having coffee with a fellow Ph.D. student, Hannes Jarka, at a little bistro somewhere downtown. We had just gotten out of Kenneth Schmidt's class on Thomistic Metaphysics. Hannes (from Missoula, Montana) and I (from Fort Thomas, Kentucky) were both feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the large, populous, cosmopolitan city of Toronto; but as we sat there, we sheltered ourselves from the bustle by pursuing philosophy. I can't remember my exact words, but my question went something like this: "How can I be and be what I am because I am a composite of the act of existence (which is God) and essence (which is nothing at all)? I am God, and besides that, nothing at all?" I must confess, for a brief moment the thought seemed perfectly sensible to me; but just as I finished speaking and before Hannes could reply, a somewhat unkempt, raggedly dressed fellow with an enormous beard—whom I had noticed sitting at the table behind Hannes—rose from his seat, pointed his finger directly at me, and shouted, "Precisely!" The entire bistro was silent. The bearded fellow went on to give a rather lengthy argument to the effect that the coffee we were all drinking was really hot chocolate. Hannes and I sat there stunned. The other patrons quickly returned to their quiet table conversations and ignored the fellow. I have no clear memory of how the incident ended; incapable; my short term memory was displaced by fright. I did find out a few days later that Toronto had begun the process of de-institutionalizing those who suffered from mental illness.

# 1. What's the problem with Clarke's conception of the limitation of the act (existence) by potency (essence)?

The problem about speaking of the limitation of act by potency is that experience suggests strongly that act is not limited by potency; rather act is limited by some other act. Consider the following image as an exemplification of the relationship between a thing's act of existence and its essence, an image of an inflated spherical balloon at room temperature near the surface of the earth, an image that I shall name, for the sake of convenience Boltzmann's Balloon, after an early pioneer in the kinetic theory of gasses, Rudolf Boltzmann (1844–1906). What appears to be a relatively stable object at rest, the balloon sitting on the desk, is in fact buzzing with activity. We are familiar with the account—the kinetic theory of gases: The average speed of an air molecule at room temperature is about 1100 miles/hour. Most of the time inside the balloon a molecule will hit another gas molecule, but some of the time it will strike the rubber wall of the balloon. All such collisions are elastic, so that—given the conservation of momentum—the frenzied activity of the molecules within the balloon does not cease. When the collective activity of their beating against the balloon's inside wall achieves dynamic, not static, equilibrium with the activity of the atmospheric air molecules beating on the outside wall of the balloon, the balloon does not appear to change size or shape. There it rests upon the desk, buoyant but still; yet in reality it is a furious flutter of activity as the molecules on either side of the wall actively balance each other's forces.

To use this image as a model for Clarke's thin theory of the relationship between essence and existence, we have to stipulate what being (*ens*) is the result the composition of essence and existence. For our purposes, consider the being (*ens*) to be “the air inside the balloon” considered as a whole and as one being. This being has the property—pretend it is an essential property—“spherical.” Its very existence as a sphere is a function of an act (represented by the collective kinetic activity of many thousands of molecules). Its existence is not a static datum; it is not a given. It may be a fact, but—more deeply considered—it is an act. The essence of this being, “spherical,” is not, however, the balloon—at least not according to Clarke's thin theory of essence. The balloon is not air; it is not a part of the air; it adds nothing to the air. All the balloon does is to prevent the activity of the air—local motion/existence—from actually achieving the fantastically many places it could possibly be in a matter of seconds. Its essence, according to the thin theory, is nothing but, as Clarke puts it in his essay “What Cannot be Said” “the inner limit . . . of the perfection that resides properly with the act of existence itself.” In the case of Boltzmann's balloon, this inner limit is the outermost surface of the volume of air in the balloon rather than innermost limit of the balloon's interior surface. Clarke's use of limit here seems to hearken back to Aristotle's notion of place as the outermost limit of a solid, and thus a part of the solid in some sense, as opposed to the Newtonian notion of space, which is a positive reality other than the solid in which the solid resides.

The weakness of the thin theory of essence is that we all know that without a rubber envelope, the air inside the balloon would be all over the place. An airy sphere would no longer exist. The airy-sphere exists not because it is limited by potency, but by an actuality—a spherical

rubber envelope, which—as rubber—actively resists the passage of air molecules into the outer atmosphere, an activity which consists in the robustly real repulsive force of electrical charges.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Why does Clarke propose such a problematic theory as the theory of thin essences?

Given the pervasiveness of the principle “actualities are limited by other actualities” within experience, we should ask what motivates Clarke to argue otherwise in the case of the intrinsic principles of being, essence and existence. I think there are three. The first motivates the distinction between essence and existence as such, whether essence is thinly or thickly viewed. One posits a distinction between essence and existence to avoid absolute metaphysical monism or, conversely, to maintain some real distinction between God and creature.

By ‘God’ I mean the transcendent source of the very being of the items within my experience to which I ordinarily refer as ‘things’. I call such things creatures when they are conceived as originating from this source *ex nihilo*. Thus, for example, a Platonic participant—a dog—is a thing whose reality as a dog originates from the idea Dog-ness; but it differs from Dog-ness inasmuch as it is a reflection of Dog-ness in the matrix—the matrix which is, according to Plato, a reality that exists independently of the Ideas and is capable of reflecting or participating in the Ideas in some fashion. To say that Fido participates in the Idea Dog-ness is just to say the matrix, a reality which exists independently of the Idea, participates in it. Dogs are things, in Plato’s metaphysics, but they are not creatures.

Creaturely being is *ex nihilo*; there is no thing that participates in God that pre-exists the event of participation. Creatures, like Platonic things, are reflections of God, but no other real principle enters their constitution—they are reflections of God and nothing besides. Were it not for the nothing, they would be God. We know they are not God because one thing differs from another. That is, a dog is a partial reflection of the wholeness of God’s perfection (wholeness, for God has no parts); and a newt is a partial reflection of the wholeness of God’s perfection; but dogs are not newts, and this dog is not that dog—so something is missing in each reflection. But what is missing cannot be some thing or the presence of some thing other than God; for God is the source of every thing *ex nihilo*. To account for the difference between God and things created *ex nihilo* by appealing to some thing (like the matrix) that creatures possess in addition to what they have received from God leads to an infinite regress, and each step down this infinite path is a contradiction. What distinguishes each creature from God and from other creatures is not a thing; it is the nothing which becomes manifest in the difference between what it is to be a newt and what it is to be a dog—a difference to which we may conveniently refer as essence.

So Clarke’s first motivation to distinguish essence and existence and then to deny essence any positive reality is to avoid radical, metaphysical monism while advocating a doctrine of

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<sup>1</sup> Borden argues that by assigning some sort of reality to essence, Edith Stein’s “thicker theory” of essence, seems—on the face of it—more plausible; but it really isn’t. Though real, essential being according to Stein is static and a-temporal; it is not actual. Only actual balloons, not the static and eternal essence balloon-hood, can keep the kinetic activity of gasses in check.

creation *ex nihilo*. The second reason for denying essence any positive reality—for adopting, that is, a thin theory of essence—is a rather ‘thick’ view as to the unity of a being. Clarke is foundationally committed to the proposition that to be is to be intrinsically one. In other words, reality is many beings and the relations between them; but, no being—at least at the most fundamental level—is itself a relation between two beings. Boltzmann’s balloon, for example, is not a being even though we speak of it as if it were one thing. For Clarke, we can use the pronoun “it” because the balloon is a unity, but it is an extrinsic unity, “a unity not within the very being of a single real being, but rather between two or more distinct real beings, each with its own distinctive act of existence and center of action, but joined together by bonds of relations.”<sup>2</sup> Armies, bridges, banks, classrooms, cities, hours and days, tables, chairs, computers, and balloons are examples of this sort of entity. Sometimes these relations are so intimate that Clarke ponders adding another category to the traditional list of ten, the category of system, which he defines as “a new mode of unity existing between and binding together individual substances, which is not merely the sum of many different accidental relations but forms a new unity with its own properties that is not reducible to the sum of all individual relations, but is a new mode of unity that resides in all the members at once.”<sup>3</sup> Such a unity is not as strong as substantial unity only because each member of the system continues to exercise its own act of existence.<sup>4</sup>

By attributing to essence some distinct reality other than existence, one runs the risk of destroying the very possibility of any thing’s being intrinsically one. The reality of essence, and thus the distinction between a thing’s existence and its essence must be less than the distinction between two complete beings; so, Clarke argues that essence and existence are “co-relative co-principles or co-constituents, each incomplete by itself, within the enveloping unity of the one complete being, distinct but inseparable, i.e., the one cannot exist alone without the other.”<sup>5</sup> Clarke calls this relation a “real metaphysical composition.” It is real because essence and existence are “objectively irreducible”<sup>6</sup> to one another; it is metaphysical because the distinction is “less than the strong real distinction between two complete beings,” and necessarily less real if one is to explain the intrinsic “unity of the real beings [of our experience] that are the data to be explained.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to a rejection of absolute metaphysical monism and a commitment to the intrinsic unity of the primary beings within our experience, Clarke’s “thin theory” of essence is also motivated by a “thick” theory of existence—a theory that is summed up in the Thomistic dictum that existence is the perfection of perfections or, to put it into Clarke’s words, “nothing real or positive can be added on to existence from without.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, a “thick theory” of

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<sup>2</sup> Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 65. Hereafter *OM*.

<sup>3</sup> *OM*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> *OM*, p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> *OM*, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> *OM*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> *OM*, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> *OM*, p. 83.

existence can be seen as a consequence of a “thin theory” of essence. Clarke does argue in this fashion: Essences cannot add to existence from without for 1) “what is added must already be real, have existence within it; otherwise it is adding on nothing real;”<sup>9</sup> but 2) essences are thin, they have no being apart from existence. Therefore, 3) essence can add nothing to existence. Yet Clarke also has reason to hold a thick theory of existence independently of and prior to a thin theory of essence in that he holds that God is most appropriately described as the subsistent act of existence itself. And since there is nothing in creaturely being and perfection which is not already actually, even if eminently, contained in God’s being, existence pure and simple must contain any perfection that we perceive as belonging to any created thing’s essence. It is good to be a dog, to have the perfection to which we refer as the essence of the dog, but this perfection, as created *ex nihilo*, must already exist or be actual in God in some way—since the reality of the effect is contained in its cause. So, Clarke concludes, “The relation of essence to existence can thus be only one of subtraction, not addition: Existence -essence 1, -essence 2, etc., each of which is a distinct partial negation of the total fullness of existence possible.”<sup>10</sup>

### 3. On modeling Clarke’s beings—what is the root of the problem?

How are we to imagine Clarke’s beings? How can we model them? Let me borrow but alter an image from Nicholas’ Cusanus<sup>11</sup>: if the act of existence is likened to the kinetic motion of the gas molecules in Boltzmann’s balloon, then the function of essence is to limit their possible positions. That is to say, the balloon prevents their passing from inside to outside itself. Were it not for the balloon, they would soon actually be in the many places in which they can only possibly be while trapped in the balloon. Were any of these moving molecules God, then it would exist actually everywhere it could exist at any time all at once. But—according to the thin theory of essence—there is no thing other than God which causes an oxygen atom to be less than God; unlike the balloon-thing which, as an actual entity, can limit the motion of molecules, essence is not a thing. Yet, without this non-thing which is essence, an existing oxygen atom would be God, that is, existence unlimited by essence or subsisting existence itself. What has gone wrong with this model? How might we fix it or come up with a better one? This is the question Professor Borden has asked us to focus upon.

Borden’s hope is that “the objections to the Thomistic claim are themselves pseudo-problems” which arise only when one tries to imagine being using an inappropriate model [Borden, p. 15], and her hypothesis is that typical models for the essence-existence relation fail because they are overly spatial: “It is easy to imagine material things; it is simple to come up with models and illustrations for making sense of ideals that are based in spatial models. And thus we might think of being itself as the sort of thing that could be spread out on the table, with

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<sup>9</sup> *OM*, p. 83

<sup>10</sup> *OM*, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> See Cusanus’ *De Possest* available in Jasper Hopkins’ *A concise introduction to the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978). Cusanus’ image is a child’s top that is spinning at an infinite speed such that every point on the circumference of the top’s flat upper-surface is actually every point it can be in its circular path at the same time.

potencies as various sorts of cookie cutters used to limit being and make finite beings. We might, of course, acknowledge that each of us has our own act of existence, that none of us is a piece snipped off of the being of God, that all kinds of immaterial beings are, etc., but such qualifications can work to mask the ways in which our fundamental model is nonetheless spatial.” [Borden, p. 15] She is not sure that such models should dominate our thinking of being for they “to use Heidegger’s words, tempt us to confuse being with beings, the ontological with the ontic.” [Borden, p. 15]

I think that Boltzmann’s balloon bursts as a model for being, and its bursting confirms Professor Borden’s hypothesis. Spatiality pervades the model. Existence becomes motion, the passing from one place to another. Existence limited, or essence, becomes being somewhere rather than somewhere else. God, as unlimited existence, turns out to be everywhere all at once, which means He is either moving infinitely fast, not at all, or that the distinction between motion and rest has collapsed, and with it, the coherence of the model itself.

However, I think there is a much deeper issue than spatiality at play here—an issue to which Professor Borden alludes by recalling Heidegger’s distinction between the ontic and the ontological. To phrase the issue in good ‘ole’ Thomistic English, the problem is that the first concept to fall within the human intellect, the concept of which every other concept and/or judgment is somehow a reflection, is being, a present participle, a verb form that can serve as a noun, and therefore a composite concept which is generally unpacked as that which (noun) exists (verb). Given both that being/*ens* is the first concept after which all other concepts are fashioned and that being/*ens* is a composite concept—it is that which (essence) is (exists)—we cannot help but think of the intrinsic principles of things as if these principles were things themselves. Though thinking of these principles as if they were things is mistaken, it is difficult to see how we can correct the mistake if in fact the first concept, from which or through which human thinking arises, is a composite one? How can we think what is behind that place from which all thinking begins (spatial metaphor intended)?

#### **4. Getting behind the Beginning or On Pushing the Limits**

Clarke’s thin theory of essence attempts to do just that, to get behind the first concept from which human thinking begins. Consider again, the passage that Professor Borden quoted from “*That which Cannot be Said*,” the passage I’ve also partially quoted above. Clarke says that essence is:

nothing but the interior limiting principle, the inner limit or partial negation ... of the perfection that resides properly within the act of existence itself. The act of existence, accordingly, *as thus limited*, becomes the very subject which exists.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Borden, footnote 12.

One might put the point another way: there is no subject of the act of existing other than the act itself. Things are dynamic activities of existing. Though a sentence like “squirrels exist” suggests, in virtue of its grammatical structure, that there are things called squirrels and that, among the many things that squirrels do, there is included the act of existing, Clarke claims that the very subject of existing is not some thing other than existence itself as limited. The verb “exist” is fundamental; the noun “squirrel” is a mode of existing, an adverbial qualification of some event or act of existing. Rather than say, “a squirrel exist there,” one should say, “lo, existing squirrelyly there,” in which phrase existing is not to be considered as a substantive; rather, existing is to be considered a present, progressive participle modified by the adverb “squirrelyly”.

Clarke continues to push the inner boundaries of our thought by insisting that existing, as act, is inseparably united to other existents in relation. To be, as he puts it, is to be substance in relation; to exist means to make a difference for another. “It is the very nature of real being, existential being”, says Clarke, “to pour over into action that is self-revealing and self communicative.”<sup>13</sup> Existence is not a “static state”; it is an “act of standing out from nothing and actively presenting oneself to the community of real being.”<sup>14</sup> Self-presentation to the other is the mark of existence itself; whether one is speaking of “the tiniest sub-atomic particle lasting for only a fraction of a second” or the “infinite eternal fullness of God,” to be is to exist, to exist is to act, to act is to relate so that, Clarke concludes “relationality is . . . an equally primordial dimension of being as substantiality.”<sup>15</sup>

Clarke’s notion of substance is ‘verbalized’. To be a substance is not so much to be some thing which underlies its attributes—the “inert” and “static” substance of Locke; nor is it the “isolated” and “self-enclosed” substance of Descartes.<sup>16</sup> Rather, to be a substance is to be “a unit of action”<sup>17</sup> which is “intrinsically ordered toward expressing and fulfilling itself through its operations and relations.”<sup>18</sup> The unity of substance is itself a dynamic act. “If we reflect more deeply on what unity is actually like in the concrete,” says Clarke,<sup>19</sup> “at work inside of real existents, it reveals itself, like being itself, as a positive energy by which being actively coheres within itself holding its parts together—if it has any—in a dynamic self-unifying act.” “Even in a spiritual being,” he continues, “with no physical parts, its unity is not static but a self-cohering activity through self-embracing love . . . . And this dynamic act of self-cohesion will be expressed proportionally—similarly but diversely—more strongly or less, more perfectly or less perfectly, more intensely and interiorly or more weakly or precariously, according to the nature and level of each subject exercising the unifying power of being as act of existence,”<sup>20</sup> whether the subject in question be an atom or God.

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<sup>13</sup> *OM*, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> *OM*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Clarke, *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993), p. 15. Hereafter *PB*.

<sup>16</sup> *OM*, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> *OM*, p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> *OM*, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> *OM*, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> *OM*, pp. 63–64.

To conceive of an atom not simply as sub-stance, the underlying stuff that bears certain properties in much the same way as Mr. Potato Head bears his plastic features, but rather to conceive of the atom as an active subject and agent possessing, however mutely, some degree of interiority and as achieving fullness in and through its presence to and for an other may strike some of us as hopelessly anthropomorphic, and yet it is the ultimate direction in which Clarke pushes our thinking. To be a person, according to Clarke, “is not some special mode of being added from the outside, so to speak. It is nothing but the fullness of being itself, existence come into its own, allowed to be fully what it is ‘by nature’ when not restricted by the limitations proper to the material...”<sup>21</sup> To consider any use of the activities of subjective agents in one’s model of being to be *de jure* fallacious and anthropomorphic is itself to beg the question about the nature of being; it is to commit one might say the ‘disanthropomorphic’ fallacy, the fallacy which supposes without argument that some beings should be completely devoid of all traces of subjectivity and that our models of them are all the more accurate and objective the more devoid of subjectivity they are.

## 5. Borden’s Model: Virtues, Problems, and Prospects

Having been pushed by Clarke in these directions, one can better appreciate the virtue of Professor’s Borden’s model of being in which existence is to essence as is a child’s diffuse longing for the good is to the toy race car whose absence gives more determinate shape to his or her desire. Longing, the interior act of a subjective agent which, as intentional, bears within itself an intrinsic ordered-ness to relationship with the other (longing is always a longing for) is just the sort of model appropriate to Clarke’s metaphysical analysis of being. I also think it demonstrates, at least with regard to an account of the nature of finite beings (that is, the sort of beings we encounter in experience broadly construed) that the Thomistic analysis—as it has been creatively retrieved and completed by Clarke—is converging upon the neo-classical analysis of being as it has been articulated in the speculative schemes of Whitehead and Hartshorne: schemes involving actual entities as prehending subjects shaped by subjective aims arising from an entity’s conceptual feeling of God’s ideas, that is, of the possible modes of fulfillment in and through the intrinsic relatedness of each individual to every other individual and to the universe as a whole—but this is a matter for another day.

With respect to my initial problem, however, the problem of how it is that I am other than God, how this otherness might arise, and in what principles it might be grounded—here I am afraid, as Professor Borden pointed out, her model simply pushes the problem one step back. The question—given her model—is not what makes me different from God; the model answers that—it is God’s idea of me for which my existence is a longing. The question becomes “what makes God’s idea of me different from God?” The choices here are limited. There seem to be three: 1) We can, faced with the task of explaining the existence of really different creatures, posit some primordial otherness to which God stands in relation—whether it be the matrix of Plato or the upsurge of Whiteheadian creativity. This is the neo-classical option. 2) We can

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<sup>21</sup> *PB*, p. 25.



attempt to ground creaturely otherness in some intrinsic differentiation within God himself—a divine plurality consistent within divine unity. This would be a sort of philosophical trinitarianism to be developed at a purely philosophical level. Or 3), we can concede that since essence is the principle of difference and since God’s existence is unlimited by essence, then, though I may surely be said to be other than God, God is not some thing other than me. God’s otherness, that is, is not like that of one finite thing’s being other than another finite being. God is not a thing; He is the no-thing of Meister Eckhart and the non-other of Nicholas Cusanus. Otherness is, in the case of a creature’s otherness than God, a non-commutative relation. This, I think, is the ultimate trajectory of classical theism. Each of these paths has its problems; along them either enlightenment, or heresy, or madness may lie. “Precisely!”