

The power unto glory: a Bonaventurian critique of Foucault's critique of power

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Abstract

This article puts Michel Foucault's conception of power into critical engagement with that of Bonaventure. For Foucault power is manifested in wills to knowledge or meaning-making in a senseless universe in order to legitimate the drama of dominations. Bonaventure, however, roots his notion of power in the essence of God, so that any act of power from God cannot be classified as domination, but rather donation – a free-willed gift. This is especially evident in Bonaventure's theology of creation and sacrament. As such, Bonaventure provides a way to deal with Foucault's critique theologically without dispensing with it altogether.

Keywords: Bonaventure, Michel Foucault, gift, infinity, power, sacrament

For St Bonaventure the infinite power through which God donatively created *ex nihilo* is the very same infinite power by which God wills to heal and recreate humanity in the sacraments. Thus, sacraments mark the recapitulatory cosmic intersection between a broken humanity and the restorative power of God, which is *de facto* the infinite being of God's own self. This power through which God freely spoke the cosmos into being through cosmic Word by the Holy Spirit also acts through the Word-made-flesh to heal and bring to fruition the divine intention for the gracious gift of all creation. As such, Bonaventure's sacramentology is a fundamental nexus point between God's infinite being, creative power and the centrality of Christ. To wit, for Bonaventure, when speaking of God, power fundamentally bespeaks donation or gift.

Such a conception of power runs against the grain of most contemporary conversations on the topic, which conceive of power as a physical and physiological drama of dominations emerging from a basically senseless vacuity of violence, chance and conflict. This conception is most associated with Michel Foucault who, following the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, produced his own genealogical critique of history, maintaining that our metaphysical ideation and idealisation of a world of significance is really a mask hiding the essential lack of origin, meaning, identity and destiny in earthly existence.

This is a critique of the world the church must answer if Christians are to persist in conceiving the world and history as meaningful interaction with an infinite God – a God who is not a despot, but freely provides creation as gift. By putting these two opposed notions of power, the Foucauldian and the Bonaventuran, into critical engagement, I intend to produce a way of answering Foucault's critique of power without abandoning the insights of his critique altogether.

A contemporary critique of power: Michel Foucault

Any discussion of power after Nietzsche must address Michel Foucault. While not alone in his appropriation of Nietzschean thought with specific reference to the subject of power, Foucault's critique of power has arguably become the most pervasive interpretation of the concept in contemporary thought. For Foucault, to interpret, to make meaning, is fundamentally to exert force, and thus knowledge is ultimately a socially conceived and constructed state of affairs expressing relations of dominations, not essential truth or identity.¹ Now, this is not to say, as is often assumed, that Foucault believed knowledge and power are identical.² Foucault himself said in an interview:

when I read ... 'Knowledge is power', or 'Power is knowledge', I begin to laugh, since studying their relation is precisely my problem. If they were identical, I would not have to study them and I would be spared a lot of fatigue as a result. The very fact that I pose the question of their relation proves clearly that I do not identify them.³

¹ As David Bentley Hart writes: '[The] Nietzschean contour of the postmodern passes from Deleuze most obviously to Foucault: not only insofar as Foucault's philosophical project, at its most fruitful, emulates the model of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, but also insofar as Foucault develops, with such remarkable and persistent historical specificity ... that interpretation or evaluation is an act of power, that the will to knowledge expresses a will to power, and that language and discourse are, before all else, forms of power ... There is violence antecedent to every contingency, history's forms emerge from a struggle of forces, and the course of history comprises merely a concatenation of dominations in which humanity installs its violences'. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 67–8.

² E.g. Jürgen Habermas, 'Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 266–93; and Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 69–102.

³ Foucault, 'Critical Theory/Intellectual History', in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 43.

So what then does Foucault mean by power and its correlation to knowledge? Power, as a concept, represents the identification of force relations that surface out of the constant contests and contentions of human conflicts.⁴ These relations constitute themselves from their own violent legitimation and crystallisation in institutions of 'state apparatus'.⁵ That is, they are embodied in 'the formation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. Power's condition of possibility ... is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.' It is this localised instability that leads Foucault to root identifications of power in the genealogical motion of history – the expression of supposed meaning from the vacant and senseless unfolding of seemingly contiguous events:

The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events. The inverse of the Christian world, spun entirely by a divine spider ... the world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause ... The world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events. If it appears as a 'marvelous motley, profound and totally meaningful', this is because it began and continues its secret existence through a 'host of errors and phantasm'.⁶

⁴ Given space restrictions, I do not intend here to provide a comprehensive account of Foucault's thought on power. For example, Foucault admires certain expressions of power, such as the discipline of military training. As I note below, Foucault does not see power as ubiquitously 'bad' – that would be inconsistent with his overall project. Rather, I mean to specifically latch on to Foucault's thought on power in reference to knowledge/meaning, history and domination.

⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 92–3.

⁶ Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 154–5. Foucault believed that one could isolate the instance of 'entanglement' in our participation in 'discursive formations'. See his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 118–19. As Vincent J. Miller has commented: '[Foucault] asserted that meaning is ultimately a comforting illusion that obscures the real dynamism of history – chance and violence'. Vincent J. Miller, 'History or Geography? Gadamer, Foucault, and Theologies of Tradition', in *Theology and the*

Thus history, contrary to the 'metaphysician's' account, is not an aggregate, linear, intentional and uninterrupted flow of meaningful human or divine expression.⁷ History does not provide identity for individuals or peoples; rather, it fragments the condition of such identities, even when appearing to do the opposite.⁸ While the metaphysician utilises history as an expression of knowledge to justify the dominations of social institutions, history in all reality is simply a will to knowledge that validates the subjection of our bodies, locutionary acts and even our thoughts. As such, violence, coercion, is the expression of power; knowledge, then, is the embodiment of power as (usually social) control, which stifles individuality and panoptically enforces conformity.⁹ The only antidote to this is genealogy, which interrupts and fragments these monolithic expressions of history. So Foucault prophetically declares that 'effective history', which uses genealogy as its proper mode, 'will uproot traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.'¹⁰

Knowledge, then, arises from the interstice between power and history, a 'non-place' where nothing but the 'endless play of dominations' emerges.¹¹ 'humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination'.¹² History, institution, the rules of social behavior themselves, are only empty forms into which the 'successful' qua history inject whatever meaning is required to justify or make sense of their violences, in order to best produce social control.

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious

New Histories: The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 56. For more on the place of Foucault in the history of historical understanding and method, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 113–19.

⁷ Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', pp. 151–5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–2.

⁹ Foucault, 'Two Lectures', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 97–9. See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), esp. pp. 195–228.

¹⁰ Foucault, 'Genealogy', p. 154.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–1.

¹² *Ibid.*

appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations.¹³

Yet, this is not an indictment – necessarily – of power or its functions. As Foucault writes: ‘What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasures, forms knowledge, produces discourse.’¹⁴ While one may use genealogy to locate power functions and thus attempt to resist the social command that suppresses individual freedom and expression, Foucault is eventually placid about the basic reality and function of power: to identify power is, at the end of the day, simply to recognise the physiological condition of the human being and human institutions to exert a will to conquest. It is to realise that ‘the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language; relations of power, not relations of meaning’.¹⁵ Genealogy, as an historical method for isolating moments of power, exposes subjection in its various manifestations, ‘not the anticipatory power of meaning but the hazardous play of dominations’.¹⁶ Genealogy sees history not as the discovery of ideals or the teleological destiny of humankind wrapped in events, but as the dynamic interplay of the will to power and the will to knowledge, which are coextensive but not identical.

The power of Foucault’s account of the world is the explanatory pressure of correspondence or congruity to the world we experience, however disorienting or disconcerting it may be in effect. The cosmos is not saturated with meaning, but rather is simply a senseless interpretive conflict that delineates how we are given to understand our bodies and our putative identities. That is, from a certain point of view, it is easy to see reality as Foucault diagnoses it.

Yet this vision of the world poses an acute problem for Christian thought, namely that in a very real sense and to a great extent, Foucault is right: he aptly elucidates what Christianity would call a fallen world, a world of sin, which fundamentally distorts human relations all and sundry. Yet if one jettisons metaphysics or a meaningful world/history – which Foucault holds we should and the Christian believes we cannot – the pseudo-dynamic carnage of dominations is all that remains. For Foucault, interpretation or

¹³ Ibid., pp. 151–2.

¹⁴ Foucault, ‘Truth and Power’, in *Power/Knowledge*, p. 119; see note 4 above.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 114–15. That is, these relations lack intrinsic meaning.

¹⁶ Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, p. 148.

meaning-making of history is a simply expression of power. This frustrates the Christian account of a God who is primarily love and peace, infinite Being powerfully and effectively expressed in the donation of being beyond itself. For the Christian, power has ontological significance as an unconditional attribute of God: God is powerful. Indeed, God is in the most actual sense power itself, unmitigated and unadulterated.¹⁷ If power, even when we are pleased with its results, is at base a despotic will to conquer and subdue, then the Christian conception of God ceases to make sense, and thus so does history and human existence.

So, if we are to make a theologically sensible account of the power of God, we must envisage the possibility that divine power is a reality that does not dominate but rather donates, that fundamentally and radically gives – that creates even the condition of gift itself. To wit, power in the ideal or divine sense does not simply order but provides. David Bentley Hart writes:

An ‘aesthetic’ response to a postmodern insistence on the inescapability of violence is adequate only if it gives a coherent account of beauty within the Christian tradition itself: only if beauty belongs already to the Christian narrative ... can the beautiful conceivably mediate Christian truth without the least shadow of violence ... the Christian infinite belongs to an ontology of original and ultimate peace, and as a consequence allows a construal of beauty and of peace inconceivable in terms of the ontology that Christian thought encounters ... in the thought of Nietzsche and his heirs.¹⁸

Hart here explains how ‘the Christian tradition embraces an understanding of beauty unique to itself: one in which the thought of beauty and the thought of infinity uniquely coincide’.¹⁹ Whereas Hart (rightly) locates the intersection of beauty and infinity in peace, I would like to further this claim by also locating in this intersection the notion of gift – truly and essentially creative gift (that is, one precluding necessity), where the act of power and the act of giving uniquely coincide.²⁰ Gift requires power: the operative ability to bring a possibility

¹⁷ This is consonant with the scholastic notion, which Bonaventure upholds, of analogously understanding God as ‘pure act’.

¹⁸ Hart, *Beauty*, p. 4; emphasis added.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

²⁰ I do not mean to say here that Hart does not account for gift in his metaphysics of beauty and peace – he does (see *Beauty*, pp. 260–8). He also connects it specifically with creation: ‘If creation is not to be conceived as the overcoming of something that must be overcome in order for creation to be at all, then it must be conceived as gift’ (*ibid.*, p. 260). I will not here discuss the critiques of gift such as those given by Derrida, as Hart does that quite sufficiently.

into reality, and in a particular way that is utterly without coercion upon the giver, lest it be a brute necessity and so in basic terms not really a gift at all.

Bonaventure is helpful in that he provides an alternative account of the world wherein power can actually be the self-diffusive goodness of infinite, divine being not only in creation but also in sacrament – not only providing being but sufficiently dealing with sin. That is to say, the essence of power structurally flows from a theological standpoint ‘unique to itself’, requiring reference to itself and nothing else. With this account in tow, I will re-evaluate power in terms of donation rather than domination, in the mode of an unnecessary, unwarranted and freely willed gift of being. Bonaventure identifies precisely this kind of donative power in his understanding of God as both Creator and Saviour, gratuitously granting being from nothing and then recreating the cosmos – given the fall – in the restorative power of the sacraments. God’s interaction with humanity in history displays God’s power, which is identical with God’s own infinite and self-diffusive being. And Bonaventure, in a uniquely Christian move, proffers the locus of this donative divine action in the central creative and restorative power of Christ.

Structure and meaning in Bonaventure

In order to properly understand the concept of power in Bonaventure’s thought, one must first understand the basic contours of Bonaventure’s philosophy and theology, because power, as a concept, animates the cosmos and the divine reality as Bonaventure conceives of it. Bonaventure’s intellectual project has not only a system (even in the scholastic sense) but a *theologic*. By ‘theologic’, I mean a mode of doing theology that includes not only method but also form and content, identifiable as a nested network of concepts that functions as the outward expression and internal configuration of Bonaventure’s theology. That is, the form, content and method of Bonaventure’s theology are deeply intertwined. There is an indispensable interlocking of ideas theological and philosophical, which are aligned and driven by a larger logic without which these basic ideas are rendered meaningless.

This is quite clearly elucidated in Bonaventure’s use of compositional structure. Many have noted Bonaventure’s idiosyncratic penchant for tedious literary structuring, with heavy emphasis on numerology. He was himself aware of this proclivity, writing in the prologue to the *Breviloquium*: ‘In order that the following may be elucidated more clearly, I have provided the particular titles of the chapters, to aid the memory and make contemplation of what is said more lucid, which is divided into seven parts and seventy-two

chapters.²¹ However, any person familiar with Christian numerology and scripture will immediately see the conspicuous use of seven and seventy-two. In his numerology Bonaventure's two favorite numerological structures, one can say without qualification, are the triad and the heptad,²² the latter being most significant for my purposes here. One need only briefly consult Bonaventuran works that, like the *Breviloquium*, possess the sevenfold structure, such as the *De mysterio SS. Trinitatis*,²³ the *De scientia Christi*, the *Collationes de septem donis Spiritus sancti*, and the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. That these numerological uses activate our theological intuition is no accident.

Indeed, quite the opposite: in Bonaventure's thought and corpus, structure is not incidental but meaningfully expresses Bonaventure's philosophical and theological aims.²⁴ That is to say, structure for Bonaventure conveys *meaning* – it shows the reader what Bonaventure is up to, and according to Bonaventure, shows the rational creature what God is up to. It is also particularly noteworthy that, in each of the heptads, Christ occupies the middle space. This reveals the elegant approach of Bonaventure's theologic. The dialectical movement between triadic and heptadic moorings showcase the dialogical movement between christological and trinitarian metaphysics. The dynamism of Bonaventure's theology creates a robust ontology that allows Bonaventure to root the entirety of reality – from things to words to concepts – in a peculiar theological nexus, a trans-cosmological point, wherein both dialectical aspects meet to mediate between the Creator and the creation. That is, all things flow from the Father through the Word, the grand Mediator, out into creation (as the very act of creation). This divine emanatory flow moves into the central *medium* of creation in the incarnated Christ,²⁵ and is brought back and thus culminated by the Spirit as all things

²¹ *Breviloquium* (hereafter *Brev.*), prol. 6. All translations of Bonaventure's works are my own. For the Latin text, I have utilised the standard Quaracchi critical edition, *Doctoris seraphici S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, vols. 1–10, ed. the Fathers of the Collegium S. Bonaventurae (Ad Claras Aquas: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902). All cited texts can be found in vol. 5, except those from the *Commentaria Sententiarum*, or *Commentary of the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, which are located in volumes 1–4.

²² In fact, the heptad, as a 1-4-7 structure, is a further elucidation or even emanation of the triad, with an origin point, a middle or mediating term, and an end.

²³ While the *De mysterio* has eight questions, the first is considered preliminary, as prolegomena, to the seven attributes discussed in questions 2–8.

²⁴ Joshua C. Benson, 'Structure and Meaning in St. Bonaventure's *Quaestiones Disputate De Scientia Christi*', *Franciscan Studies* 62 (2004), p. 70.

²⁵ This should not be confused with pure Neoplatonic emanationism, which is often understood to hold that God or the One emanates according an extrinsically necessary act, thus making creation a necessary and determined act of the divine.

are reduced (*reducere*) back through the Word into the Father, thus completing the trans-cosmic cycle.²⁶

Structure and meaning in the *Breviloquium*

In the *Breviloquium*, the heptadic structure can be easily detected in the text's organisation into seven parts. Yet what does this structure tell us? The context in which it was written provides a clue: Bonaventure composed the *Breviloquium* after he ascended to the position of Minister General of the Franciscan order.²⁷ Scholars have agreed that it represents a kind of 'summa' of Bonaventure's theology,²⁸ but cast in brief easy-to-remember and easy-to-carry form, to aid friars in their homiletical charism: a book that friars could easily access in their ministry wherever they might be, especially in the vocation of preaching.²⁹

But more importantly, the structure of the *Breviloquium* itself impresses upon the reader what I will call a cosmological and narrative motion that elucidates the centrality of Christ: the seven distinctive parts are not isolated, but flow into each other, providing the story of the cosmos, beginning with God as the *primum principium*, moving out through creation and fall, reaching the central point of the incarnation of the Cosmic Word.³⁰ This story then returns to the beginning point by discussing the giving of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments and finally the last things (see Figure 1).

What we can adduce here is the *exitus/reditus* structure of Neoplatonic Christianity, with Christ acting as the lynchpin upon which the cosmos turns. This is helpful, too, in understanding Bonaventure's notions of the *Verbum Increateum* (the Cosmic Word), the *Verbum Incarnatum* (the Word-Made-Flesh) and the *Verbum Inspiratum* (the Inspired Word),³¹ this last where Christ

²⁶ 1 Sent. d. 31, p. 2, dub. VII.

²⁷ This happened in 1257. For more on the chronology of Bonaventure's life, see Jay M. Hammond, 'Dating Bonaventure's Inception as Regent Master', *Franciscan Studies* 67 (2009), pp. 179–226.

²⁸ E.g. Dominic Monti, 'Introduction', in *Breviloquium*, trans. Dominic Monti (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), pp. xiv–xxii.

²⁹ Cf. Timothy J. Johnson, 'The Franciscan Fascination with the Word', as well as the other very helpful articles in Timothy J. Johnson (ed.), *Franciscans and Preaching: Every Miracle from the Beginning of the World Came about through Words* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 1–14.

³⁰ Or as Bonaventure would conceive of it, 'salvation history'. For Bonaventure, history is not a meaningful concept until one perceives the destiny and thus the aim and intention for history. Cf. *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* (hereafter, *Hex.*) 1.10 ff., *De reductione artis ad theologiam* 1, et al.

³¹ This distinction in Bonaventure's thought is generally referred to as the 'Triplex Verbum'; cf. *Hex.* 2.

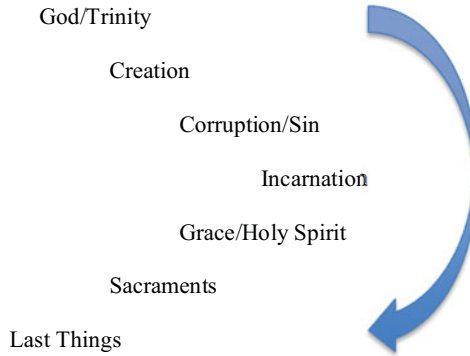


Figure 1. Structure of the cosmos in *Breviloquium*

acts as the reductive agent that brings creation back through the Spirit into the infinite and radically unified folds of the Creator God.³² As such, this heptadic structure tells us that something theological is going on in the entire cosmos, centred on and around Christ. Christ is the centripetal force about which every created thing, according to hierarchical status, turns toward, inward and finally upward.

Power, infinity and gift

Bonaventure opens his discourse on the sacraments in the *Breviloquium* with a helpful quote from Isidore's *Etymologies*: 'Concerning the origin, therefore, of the sacraments, this ought to be held: that sacraments are sensible signs divinely instituted as remedies in which "under the cover of sensible realities, divine power operates in a hidden manner"'.³³ But how does Bonaventure understand the concept of power – at least in reference to the sacraments and the divine? What kind of power is this?³⁴

Here, Bonaventure's text *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (hereafter DMT) is essential. Bonaventure argues that divine power and divine being are radically identical in essence due to the infinite and metaphysically simple

³² Cf. 1 *Sent.* d. 31, p. 2, dub. VII.

³³ Bonaventure here, following Peter Lombard's error, believes he is quoting Gregory the Great; cf. Lombard, *Liber 4 Sent.* 13.1.

³⁴ Bonaventure deals very specifically with God's power and omnipotence in 1.7 of the *Breviloquium*. It is worth noting that Bonaventure correlates sections 7–9 of this book to his privileged triad of 'power, wisdom, and goodness'. This further maps onto his notion of emanation, exemplarity and consummation discussed above. Bonaventure's commitment to the logic of trinitarian structuring is relentless.

nature of God. That is, the absolute attribute of God's transcendent infinitude must indicate, given necessary transcendent simplicity, that God's power and God's being are one in the same. So immediately we can see that Bonaventure does not mean by power what we mean by it today, and especially not what Nietzsche or Foucault mean by the term. For Bonaventure power is first and foremost expressed by divine being, not by anthropological or creational relations, and it is expressed by capability before a fact, not by analysis after a fact. Bonaventure uses Aristotelian categorical logic and Neoplatonic ontology to extrapolate: 'Because God is supremely simple, the divine being and power are infinite insofar as the infinite denies any limit concerning quantity of power.'³⁵ Both simplicity and infinity, as absolute attributes of the divine being, are *actual* or *proper* predications of God. As such, they properly and incontrovertibly speak to what God is capable of, and thus bespeak, in essence, divine power.

In this way, God's power is an essential expression of the divine being and so, like all other divine attributes, infinite.³⁶ That this power is infinite is particularly witnessed in God's unique ability to create *ex nihilo*: 'Power and being are identical in God on account of God's supreme simplicity. But the divine power is infinite, because it is omnipotent and can surpass infinitely distant extremes, as it made clear in the production from nothing. Therefore, the divine being is simply infinite.'³⁷ The logic is that something and nothing, from a metaphysical standpoint (or really any standpoint, at least grammatically speaking), are infinitely distant from each other in virtue of being fundamental, conceptual opposites.

Because [the divine being] is supremely simple, it is therefore supremely unified in itself and in its power. And because it is most unified in itself, it therefore has nothing constricting it, nothing limiting it, nothing determining it, and nothing confining it in genus [or category]. It is beyond all things and above all things. Because again it is most unified with respect to power, being and power are therefore entirely identical within it. So wherever its being is, there is also its power. And where its being is, there is the center and origin and font of its power. And where the font and origin and center of its power is, it is always able to do more. And therefore, wherever it acts, it is always able to do even more

³⁵ DMT q. 4, a. 1, concl., emphasis added.

³⁶ It should be kept in mind that Bonaventure views all of these attributes as essentially interchangeable.

³⁷ DMT q. 4, a. 1, fund. 10.

and greater things. And so the [divine] power and being also necessarily possesses infinity.³⁸

In other words, infinite being by definition bespeaks power, and any act subsequent to that being would accordingly exhibit and provide the conditions of power to be reckoned as such.

Given that this infinite being logically and effectively requires nothing, because it is purely and infinitely actualised within itself, if it were to create a reality external to itself, this act of power could not in any comprehensible sense be considered an act of domination.³⁹ In point of fact, it could *only* be regarded as donation: it is a logical impossibility for a being to dominate nothing, and it is likewise an attendant logical impossibility for unqualified Being to efficiently cause something to exist from nothing as a dominative act, as though a non-existent entity could be ‘dominated’ or ‘controlled’ into existence. Indeed, even if it were possible to conceive of an act of bringing something into existence from nothing solely for the purpose of domination, this would still necessitate: (1) the initial and efficient act of power to give being, which cannot be reckoned as dominative, as argued above; but more importantly, would require (2) the contraindicative condition of an infinite, self-sufficient being creating with the purpose of dominating without any conceivable extrinsic or intrinsic value or gain to itself. Put plainly, if an infinite being gives anything at all (not least existence itself), this being gives so simply because it wants to. This is why Bonaventure, following Dionysius, conceives of God as the ‘self-diffusive Good’.⁴⁰ To speak of infinite being acting creationally in a will to power, knowledge,⁴¹ or otherwise, as a will to dominate is philosophically and theologically absurd.

Power and nothingness

So in Bonaventure’s discussion of power, wherein God’s being and power are both one in infinite essence and *esse*, the disjunctive relation between Creator and creature is that between infinite, self-sufficient being and finite,

³⁸ DMT q. 4, a. 1, concl. Here again Bonaventure calls upon the Philosopher, Aristotle (though actually Pseudo-Aristotle): ‘This conclusion agrees with what is said in the *Liber de causis* [Proposition 17]: “Every power is more infinite to the degree that it is more unified”’.

³⁹ This indicates the completeness and order of the divine power. See *Brev.* 1.7.2–3.

⁴⁰ *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (hereafter *Itin.*) 6.2; cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia* 4.

⁴¹ This is because infinite knowledge would, of course, be cointensive with infinite being and power. This further addresses Foucault, because it provides knowledge with an ontological, intrinsic ground in the divine essence.

dependent being. Bonaventure, as we have seen, holds that the infinitude of God's power can be deduced from God's unique ability to make something from nothing – that is, to create. Thus, any created thing constitutes the very epitome of finitude. And moreover, the rational aspect of this finite creation – namely image-bearing souls – fell away from the intention of the infinite Creator. Thus Bonaventure accounts for creaturely existence in two special but distinct ways, both involving the concept of nothingness.

First, since we are creatures, we constantly walk upon the precipice of nothingness.⁴² In the first question, first article, of the disputed questions *De perfectione evangelica*, Bonaventure states that:

Because wisdom is 'cognition of the highest and primary causes' ... all things, whatever has been made, which have been made from nothing, flow from the one Principle; in truth, wisdom is that by which one truly recognizes the nothingness of itself and others and the sublimity of the First Principle. No one comes to a full knowledge of God except through a true and right notion of oneself.⁴³

Creatures are, in Bonaventure's view, always in an utterly crucial way referential to the nothingness whence they emerged and only God's unique, infinite power could make any such created reality occur.⁴⁴ This is because when Bonaventure speaks of nothingness, he really means it in the ultimate metaphysical sense: 'nothingness' as a concept is a counterfactual abstraction – the concept of 'true' nothingness evades us: we cannot even really comprehend it, because creation is something and thus the opposite of true nothingness. Even our attempts to imagine nothingness are still circumscribed within spatio-temporal relations.⁴⁵ This further elucidates Bonaventure's conception of God's creative act as pure gift.

But second, this nothingness has deeper implications when we consider the effects of sin. Due to Bonaventure's strict adherence to Augustinian

⁴² But not in the Sartrean sense, of course.

⁴³ Q.1, a.1, concl.; cf. *Brev.* 7.7.2.

⁴⁴ Timothy Johnson, in his chapter 'Poverty and Prayer' (in *The Soul in Ascent: Bonaventure on Poverty, Prayer, and Union with God* (St Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 2012), pp. 34–5) calls this 'ontological poverty'. Katherine Wrisley Shelby makes excellent use of this categorisation in her discussion of grace in the *Breviloquium*; see 'Part V: "On the Grace of the Holy Spirit"', in Dominic V. Monti and Katherine Wrisley Shelby (eds), *Bonaventure Revisited: Companion to the Breviloquium* (St Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 2017), pp. 215–43.

⁴⁵ For example, when one tries to mentally consider nothingness, one will still see in the mind's eye a blank or black space. But nothingness is the absence even of space and time itself.

privation theory, sin and evil are not substantive realities but rather are contrary to being itself, an absence or dimming of being, pulling us creatures back to the nothingness whence we came.⁴⁶ 'Because [the creature] was made from nothing and so imperfect, it could fail to conduct itself on behalf of God, and so could act for itself and not for God ... And this is sin ... which, because it is a defect, does not have an efficient cause, but a deficient one, namely a defect of the created will'.⁴⁷ The cosmic struggle between good and evil, it may be more rhetorically put, concerns the sufficiency of being itself, *scilicet* the will of God to creatively pronounce and sustain the finite being of a fallen creation. And not only that, but to then *again* produce something out of nothing. The remedial function of the sacraments represents God's re-create power to make humanity and all of creation with it whole – actual – again. The reason for this, as Bonaventure is keen to continue noting, is 'our restorative Principle', the *Verbum Incarnatum* or the Christ.⁴⁸

The structure of Bonaventure's sacramental cosmos

This is the fundamental structure, the theologic, of Bonaventure's sacramental cosmos. Bonaventure writes in part 6.3.1: 'Concerning the division and number of the sacraments of the New Law ... there are seven corresponding to the sevenfold gift [namely, the Holy Spirit],⁴⁹ which through the seven epochs reduces us to the principle, repose, and circle of eternity, as though an eighth day of universal resurrection.'⁵⁰ The sacraments themselves share a special correlation to the creation itself,

⁴⁶ Brev. 3.1.1: 'Sin is not another essence, but a defect and corruption, in which namely the mode, species, and order of the created will is corrupted. And this corruption of sin is contrary to the Good. It possesses no being [on its own] except in something good, nor arises [from its own source] except from something good'.

⁴⁷ Brev. 3.1.3. Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 12.7: 'Let no one seek the efficient cause of an evil ... for it is not efficient but a deficiency ... to abandon what supremely exists for what is lower ... to wish to discover the causes of these deficiencies ... is as if someone should wish to see darkness or hear silence ... But let no one seek to know from me that of which I know I am ignorant, unless perhaps to learn not to know what must be known to be unknowable.'

⁴⁸ In every chapter of book 6, Bonaventure provides Christ as the *ratio* of restoration to uphold the specific aspect of sacrament he is addressing: Christ as the 'Restorative Principle' (1.3; 2.2; 3.2; 4.2–3 and whole chapter; 5.2; 6.2; 7.3; 8.2; 9.2; 10.2; 11.2; 12.2; 13.2).

⁴⁹ Cf. Rev 1.

⁵⁰ Brev. 6.3.1; cf. Hex. 3:31: 'The [seventh] day does not have evening. And after it, an eighth day follows, which is not from those preceding it, but is a reiteration of the first day, when the soul again takes up its body.'

Source	Variation	Distinction	Institution	Administration	Repetition	Integrity
Conceptual Typology of the Sacraments			Christ culminates previous sacraments, institutes new sacraments	Actual Application of the Sacraments		

Figure 2. The heptadic structure of the sixth part of the *Breviloquium*

their heptadic structure aligning with the whole of the created order. They manifest the intersection between human woundedness and divine grace, traversing in an essentially proper sense the distinction of Creator and creature. Yet this traversing is only possible through the God-man, the Cosmic Word becoming the Word-made-flesh and thus the restorative principle of creation.⁵¹

So, in line with the rest of Bonaventure’s theology, the sixth part of the *Breviloquium* has the same nested network of concepts and relations: seven aspects or ways to view the seven sacraments that both recapitulate the heptadic structure of the *Breviloquium* and place Christ firmly in the centre of the sacramental motion (see [Figure 2](#)).

Here we can see that the center of the seven aspects is ‘institution’ – paralleling incarnation – but that Christ is also at the center of each aspect in *distincto* and at the centre of each of the seven sacraments themselves. This is why without fail in every chapter of the sixth book, Bonaventure refers to the ‘reason for this’, which is *always* the same: ‘Christ, our restorative principle’ or ‘the principle of our restoration’.

So the logic and expression of each sacrament represent Christ as the principle of our restoration. The seventh and final category of ‘integrity’ is the starting place for discussion of each individual sacrament. And even still, it is uniquely and fundamentally Christ who, through each sacrament, secures the healing of humankind. This sacramental healing is a cosmic process, which Bonaventure calls *reductio*. Reduction is the mode through which the *reditus* or the return to God is accomplished, finally bringing creation into beatific unity with the Creator.⁵²

⁵¹ See J. A. Wayne Hellmann and T. Alexander Giltner, ‘Part VI: “On the Sacramental Remedy”’, in Monti and Wrisley Shelby, *Bonaventure Revisited*, pp. 245–72.

⁵² Bonaventure speaks of reduction quite frequently in the *Breviloquium*, although this is obscured by the custom of translating *reducere* as ‘tracing/leading back’, an unfortunate practice, as this befores the technical import of this term for the Seraphic Doctor. Guy

This is the crucial point of intersection between grace and the sacraments, divine infinity as the radical identification between power and being, and the centrality of Christ. In the fourth aspect of institution of the sacraments, which tellingly holds the same structural place as the incarnation in the cosmological narrative of the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure declares: ‘Christ instituted seven sacraments of the Law of Grace as the mediator of a new covenant and especially as the bearer of the Law, which he called forth according to the eternal promises’.⁵³ Bonaventure continues: ‘Because the Word is coequal and consubstantial with the Father, he is the Word of the supreme power, supreme truth, and supreme goodness, and through this also of the highest authority ... and by virtue of his supreme power, he established the supporting sacraments.’ This is the only place where Bonaventure calls not only on the incarnation but on the Christ’s divine being and essence: that is, the infinite power and being of the Word. And yet: ‘Because the restorative principle is not only the Word as such, but also the Word Incarnate, which by being incarnated, he offers himself to all as knowledge of the truth, and to all who approach him worthily, he gives himself as the grace of healing’.⁵⁴ As Bonaventure says earlier on:

The first creative principle of all things could not have been and should not have been anything less than God. Now it is surely no less important to restore created things as to give them existence, for the well-being of things is no less significant than for them simply to be. And so it was most fitting that the restorative principle of all things should be God Most High. Thus, just as God had created all things through the Uncreated Word, so he would restore all things through the Incarnate Word.⁵⁵

H. Allard provides an excellent discussion of *reductio* in ‘La technique de la Reductio chez Bonaventure’, in Jacques Guy Bougerol (ed.), *S. Bonaventura 1274–1974*, vol. 2 (Rome: Collegio S. Bonaventura Grottaferrata, 1973), pp. 395–416. It is crucial to note that by reduction Bonaventure does not mean annihilation. Rather, the more something is reduced and brought back to its source, the greater it becomes. That is, while not in a temporal way, everything moves through the *ratio* that gives rise to its instantiation back to its source, thus more fully actualising what it is. Thus, reduction as a theological concept for Bonaventure is not only a methodological movement but also an ontological reality, through which all things are fundamentally returned in every possible way through Christ to God, specifically the Father. Cf. 1 Sent. d. 31, p. 2, dub. VII.

⁵³ Brev. 6.4.1

⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.4.3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.1.2.

Coalescing

I averred above that the verisimilitude of Foucault's account of the world is its explanatory power. Its prevalence as a methodology across disciplines and subjects alone clearly indicates its ability to explicate the relationship between knowledge and power: that meaning-making affects a dominative force into the world, and that this force is almost exclusively wielded by the privileged of any given society. To deny this would be to deny a great deal of testimony from collective human experience. The question arises: does Bonaventure's theological account of the world nullify Foucault's, despite the deep resonance of the Foucauldian critique?

Not exactly. Foucault's metaphysics – or lack thereof – would by nearly any Christian account be reckoned as erroneous. However, the robustness of Bonaventure's notion of the fall and of human existence itself, with its imperfection and propinquity to the nothingness whence it was brought, actually draws forth striking parallels with Foucault's account. The grievous reality of a fallen world is that all too often knowledge is indeed (ab)used, as Foucault quips, 'for cutting'. In a fallen world, the tawdry dance of dominations shapes much of human experience. In this way, I want to suggest that Foucault's understanding of the world on the ground fills out – often very concretely and so indispensably – the ill effects of the fall, even if it is ultimately unsatisfactory when applied the broader and deeper state of affairs proclaimed by Christian narratives.

What a theological account like Bonaventure's provides is a way of reckoning with Foucault's critique of power without dispensing with the notion completely. From the perspective of creation, Christ and the sacraments, the Foucauldian play of dominations is often the way the world works, but not the way it fundamentally is, nor ought to be, nor how it will be in its final consummation within the folds of divinity. I recognise of course that this is a critique Foucault himself would not accept, or even entertain. But it nevertheless gives a theological account of power that bears internal coherence and basic consonance with the Christian worldview. It is an aesthetic account that is 'unique to itself',⁵⁶ self-sufficiently 'belonging to itself ... [mediating] Christian truth without the least shadow of violence'; yet it is consistent with the world as it manifests itself both concretely and abstractly.

Conclusion

When one sees the power and importance of structure in Bonaventure's thought, one can see how the *Breviloquium* is the drama of the universe and its

⁵⁶ See n. 19 above for David Bentley Hart's use of this criterion.

restoration unfolded. The sacraments occupy in a special, mediating space through the 'restorative Principle' (i.e. Christ), which acts as the bridge between the source of creation and the culmination of this cosmic drama in the eschaton. By God's will, creation came forth from nothing into being. It was brought back to the precipice of nothingness in the fall. Its restoration, at least in essential part, is the remedial power of Christ continually re-enacted in the sacraments. Because all of these acts were wrought by an utterly self-sufficient being of infinite essence and power, these phenomena of power are gifts unmerited yet freely offered by a loving Creator and Saviour of infinite being and power.

According to neo-Nietzschean accounts like that of Foucault, power is primarily understood as relational plays of dominance, effected by the winners of 'history' to narrate the ideology of a society and so creating a framework of knowledge that deters critiques of the 'establishment' and engenders social control. For Bonaventure, divine power is truly self-giving and sacramental. It does not signify domination but rather donation, the creative and re-creative gift of other-being born out of a mysterious, unitive, pure and just love. This sacramental power is specially located in the God-man, the one who reconciles all things to himself, 'reducing' them into union with God. This is the power that leads to glory. That power is Christ, and that glory is God.