




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inseparable operations and the human operation of Christ

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Abstract

The recent recovery of the teaching that the three divine persons share one operation in their outward works raises the question of whether or in what sense the human operation of Christ belongs to the Son alone. My thesis is that all three divine persons move and support the Son's human operation while the Son alone is the proper subject of his human operation. In order to substantiate this thesis, I will consider two main issues: (1) the relationship between divine movement and human energy and (2) the relationship between nature and person in Christ's human action.

Keywords: Christology; humanity of Christ; inseparable operations; Trinity

The doctrine of inseparable operations affirms that the divine persons share one power and efficient causality by which they always act together in producing the outward works of God. Whenever one person acts, all three are acting. Thus, each person's operation cannot be separated from that of the other two persons – hence the phrase 'inseparable operations'. That language appears in Augustine's *De trinitate*, for instance, where he emphasises that 'the Father and the Son and the Spirit, of one substance, God the Creator, omnipotent Trinity, operate inseparably' or by an 'inseparable operation' even when they are manifested distinctly at Christ's baptism in the Father's voice, the Son's flesh and the Spirit's dove.¹

This doctrine has undergone a recovery of late.² And oftentimes in the shift from the disuse to the recovery of a doctrine, there are clarifications that need to be made about

¹Augustine, *De trinitate libri XV*, 2 vols, ed. W. J. Mountain, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 50–50A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 4.21.30 (1:202–3).

²See especially Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021). See also idem, 'The Incarnation and Trinitarian Inseparable Operations', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016), pp. 106–27; Tyler R. Wittman, 'The End of the Incarnation: John Owen, Trinitarian Agency, and Christology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (2013), pp. 284–300; idem, 'On the Unity of the Trinity's External Works: Archaeology and Grammar', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20 (2018), pp. 359–80; Stephen R. Holmes, 'Trinitarian Action and Inseparable Operations: Some Historical and Dogmatic Reflections', in Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (eds), *Advancing Trinitarian Theology*:

what the doctrine does and does not require from its adherents now that it is back. In the case of inseparable operations in particular, it is important to clarify that it is not so austere as to flatten out all trinitarian distinctions that can be observed in the economy of salvation. For example, each of the divine persons still has his own unique mode of acting in God himself and in the economy: the Father through the Son and the Spirit; the Son from the Father and through the Spirit; the Spirit from the Father and the Son. Furthermore, while there is one efficient causality by which the persons accomplish the works of God, one of God's effects can have a certain relation to just one divine person. At Christ's baptism, the sound of the paternal speech is produced by all three persons, but this effect comes to rest upon the Father or manifest the Father alone. Likewise, the flesh of Christ is produced by all three persons, but this effect comes to rest upon the Son and even subsist in the Son alone. And the dove is produced by all three persons, but this effect comes to rest upon or manifest the Spirit alone.³

Within the context of exploring what the doctrine of inseparable operations does and does not require, I would like to focus here on a question that concerns the incarnation, namely, whether the common operation of the divine persons problematises the notion that the human operation of Christ belongs to the Son alone. At first it might seem as if this question could be answered rather quickly by appealing to the distinction between the divine and human operations of Christ, the former belonging to all three divine persons and the latter belonging to the Son alone. However, some of the material in Adonis Vidu's recent book on inseparable operations draws attention to certain lingering issues that warrant a closer look.

Vidu puts the question this way: 'Who is the subject of Christ's human activity? Are the human actions of Jesus to be attributed to the Son exclusively, or to the whole Trinity?' Or, 'Is there an exclusive causality exercised by the eternal Son, by one of the Trinity, proceeding through his human nature towards his human works, a causality in which the other divine persons do not have a share?'⁴ Vidu asserts, 'There is universal consensus that the human activity of Christ is to be ascribed to the Logos'. 'However', he continues, 'it remains something of an open question whether this attribution is proper or appropriated'.⁵

In seeking to uphold the one causality and operation of the divine persons, Vidu concludes that the human operation or *actus secundus* of Christ is only appropriated to the Son. For Vidu, the human nature and its 'germinal energy' or *actus primus* are proper to the Son (who alone is incarnate). For that reason, the human operation can still be located in the Son and have a distinctly filial mode. At the same time, in Vidu's account, the human operation or *actus secundus*, by which the natural or 'germinal' energy of Christ's humanity is directed toward a given work, is something moved and actuated by all three divine persons and thus only appropriated to the Son. In this

Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pp. 60–74; Ty Kieser, 'John Owen as Proto-Social Trinitarian? Reinterpreting Owen and Resisting a Recent Trend', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74 (2021), pp. 222–34; Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), pp. 520–33; Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022), pp. 202–29.

³Cf. Augustine, *De trinitate*, 4.21.30 (1:202–3); Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium s. Matthaei lectura*, 5th edn, ed. R. Cai (Rome: Marietti, 1951), 3.2.305 (p. 47).

⁴Vidu, *The Same God*, p. 181.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 193.

respect, Vidu suggests that all three divine persons may be considered the subjects of Christ's human action.⁶

In my judgement, there is a need to pause here and consider further whether the common operation of the divine persons requires the idea that the human operation or *actus secundus* of Christ is not proper but only appropriated to the Son. While it is certainly important to uphold the common essence, power, and operation of the divine persons, a misstep here risks undermining the integrity of Christ's human agency, by which he represents us human beings and fulfils his mediatorial office. I will argue that the common operation of the divine persons does not require the idea that Christ's human operation or *actus secundus* belongs to all three divine persons. Positively, affirming that Christ's human operation or *actus secundus* is proper (not merely appropriated) to the Son is vital to understanding the integrity, personalisation and filial character of Christ's human action. In other words, affirming the human operation of the Son alone is foundational to being able to say that there is *someone*, a new Adam and elder brother, who acts on our behalf.

I take it that Professor Vidu and I are traveling in the same general direction in trinitarian theology, so, if there is an implicit critique in what follows, it is a specific and friendly one. In any event, I will concentrate on offering a positive description of the coherence of the common operation of the Trinity and the human operation of the Son alone. My thesis is that all three divine persons move and support the Son's human operation while the Son alone is the proper subject of his human operation. In order to substantiate this thesis, I will consider two main issues in the subsequent sections: (1) the relationship between divine movement and human energy and (2) the relationship between nature and person in Christ's human action.

Divine movement and human energy

As Creator and first mover, God initiates any movement and action that takes place in the life of his creatures. As Paul puts it in Acts, 'in him we live and move [κινούμεθα] and exist' (17:28).⁷ In other words, it is only by God's sustaining power and prompting that we undertake our various forms of action.⁸ Paul sees this realised in a special way in his own apostolic ministry. After calling himself the least of the apostles in 1 Corinthians 15, he goes on to say, 'But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me came not in vain, but I laboured even more than all of them [the other apostles], but not I, but the grace of God with me' (15:10). Similarly, in Colossians 1, Paul says that when he teaches others he labours 'agonising according to [Christ's] energy which energises in me in power' (vv. 28–29). Moreover, Paul anticipates and discerns the inward movement of God in those to whom he ministers. There are differences of spiritual gifts or works (ἐνεργημάτων) but 'the same God who works [or "energises", ἐνεργῶν] all things in all' (1 Cor. 12:6). One and the same Spirit 'works' or 'energizes' all these things, distributing to each believer just as he wills (12.11). Moreover, the inward movement or energizing of God is the reason that

⁶Ibid., p. 209; see also pp. 200, 202–7, 210, 212–5.

⁷Translations from the Bible are the author's.

⁸The verb κινούμεθα in Acts 17:28 might be taken as middle or passive. If it is in the middle voice (we move ourselves), it is still a moving done 'in [God]' and thus by God sustaining and preveniently moving us. If the verb is in the passive voice (we are moved), the implicit agent by whom we are moved would have to be God, in which case our dependence upon God's prior movement remains clear.

believers actually work out their salvation, for God is the one ‘working’ or ‘energizing’ (ὁ ἐνεργῶν) in believers so that believers themselves go on ‘to will and to energize [ἐνεργεῖν]’ (Phil. 2:12–13).

This biblical material presses us to reflect a little more on what it means that God moves or energises within human beings, who then have energies of their own. Movement is something that can be described from the side of the one moving or from the side of the one being moved. Movement on the part of the mover is an action whereby one somehow affects another; movement on the part of the one moved is a passion or a being-affected so that one goes from a state of passivity or incompleteness towards a state of actualisation or activity.⁹ The nature of movement indicates that the one moved is moved by another. That is, what is moved, which is initially passive and as such produces no action or change, has to be moved by someone else, or at least by another part of itself that is already active (which part, if it too was once passive, must then have been moved or activated by yet another). This is why creatures, who are subject to passivity and are not *a se*, ultimately depend upon the active movement of the eternal God who creates them and moves them to act.¹⁰

Of course, the scriptural material just mentioned reminds us that the eternal God who created us continues to move us. He does not merely move a first creature and then leave that creature alone to prompt subsequent movements and changes in the world. Indeed, God himself sustains all his creatures, who, without God sustaining and moving, would not endure, operate or move others. Thus, whether by himself or by secondary causes, God still moves human beings to act. This is why Paul speaks of God even now ‘energising’ believers.

Movement on the part of the mover, then, is an energy or action, an application or use of the agent’s power to the production of a certain effect.¹¹ But it is not to be overlooked that the God who energises within human beings – in the sense of acting to prod them from passivity to activity – in so doing produces a resultant energy or activity, an *actus secundus*, that is proper to a human subject. By God’s *creative* action, there is a created nature’s act of being, which, historically, is called *esse* or *actus primus* (existence). And, by God’s *moving* action, there is within a created nature (and then issuing from it) the creature’s application of its powers to the production of certain effects, which, historically, is called energy, action, or *actus secundus*.¹² Following on the

⁹See further Aristotle, *Aristotelis Physica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), 3.1.200b–3.2.202a; John of Damascus, *Dialectica*, in vol. 1 of *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, ed. Bonifatius Kotter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), fus. ξβ’ (pp. 129–31); Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaria in octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, in vol. 2 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn. (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1884), 3.2.4.1, 3–5 (pp. 109–10); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [hereafter *ST*], in vols 4–12 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn. (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1888–1906), I-II.9.1, 3 (6:74–5, 77–8).

¹⁰Cf. e.g. Aquinas, *In Phys.*, 2.1.3 (p. 56); Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. M.-R. Cathala and R. M. Spiazzi (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1950), 5.14.955 (p. 256); 9.1.1776 (p. 425); 9.7.1848 (p. 444); Aquinas, *ST*, I.2.3 corp. (4:31).

¹¹When the terminus or effect remains within the acting subject, it is called an ‘immanent’ action. When the terminus or effect is produced outside of the acting subject, it is called a ‘transitive’ action (see e.g. Aquinas, *In Metaphys.*, 9.8.1865 (448); Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [hereafter *SCG*], in vols 13–15 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn. (Rome: Typis Ricardi Garroni, 1918–30), 2.1 (13:271); Aquinas, *ST*, I.27.1 corp. (4:305); Johann Alsted, *Metaphysica* (Herborn, 1613), 2.6 (pp. 263–4)).

¹²See e.g. Aristotle’s distinction between the actuality of form (ἐντελέχεια) and the exercise of a power or habit (ἐνεργεῖν) in *Aristotelis De anima*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: OUP, 1956), 2.1.412a. See also Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, in vol. 2 of *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al. (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1965), 1.1 corp. (pp. 8–9); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.3 (p. 48); 1.13 (pp. 123–4, 132). Sometimes

prevenient movement of God, this action or *actus secundus* is facilitated and shaped by the creature's nature and by any subsequent qualities the creature may have acquired. In this respect, while God does act to prompt the action or *actus secundus* of a human being, that person's human nature is the formal cause of the *actus secundus* and thus that person himself or herself, operating according to the person's own counsel, is the subject of the *actus secundus* (i.e. the one who thinks, wills, eats, drinks, obeys and is responsible for doing so).¹³

There are of course places in Scripture where God is said to do something that a creature does (e.g. 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1; Isa. 53:10; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). Those places attest that God enables and moves creatures to act and directs their actions towards the accomplishment of his purposes. But that is still different from God being the proper or immediate subject of human actions. While the word 'subject' can have various significations, in this case it denotes an individual substance that subsists by itself, terminates its nature and is constituted within a certain kind by its nature.¹⁴ Though God can be said broadly to support and sustain created natures (so Acts 17:18; Col. 1:17), the proper subject of a human nature and consequent human actions is a subject who terminates and is actually constituted a human being by the human nature.¹⁵

'energy' can be associated especially with immanent (rather than outward or transitive) acts. For example, John of Damascus discusses 'energy' as the 'natural power and movement' that is 'implanted' in every essence – 'energy' as 'fundamental energy' (ἡ τροπή ζώου ἐνέργεια) or 'life itself, which, for rational creatures, includes rational thought. John also calls this 'simple and unrelated energy' (ἀπλή και ἄσχετος ἐνέργεια) in contrast to outward 'actions' (πρόξεις) (e.g. speaking and walking) (*Expositio fidei*, in vol. 2 of *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, ed. Bonifatius Kotter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 2.23 (p. 93); 3.15 (p. 145)). However, when the primary actuality of nature itself (*esse, actus primus*) is distinguished from all consequent immanent and outward acts (*actus secundi*), it is typical to link the term 'energy' with the latter (including both immanent and outward secondary acts).

¹³John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 3.15 (p. 144); Aquinas, *ST*, III.19.1 ad 3 (11:241); Bartholomäus Keckermann, *Systema logicae, tribus libris adornatum*, in vol. 1 of *Operum omnium quae extant* (Geneva: Petrus Aubertus, 1614), 1, sect. prior, 17 (p. 624); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.27 (p. 222); Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, 3 vols., 2nd edn (Geneva: Samuel de Tournes, 1688), 14.2.3 (2:412); Peter van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, 2nd edn (Utrecht: van de Water et al., 1724), 5.4.13 (p. 540). The notion that essence or form is what shapes and facilitates actions is granted conciliar status at the Council of Chalcedon, where Leo's letter to Flavian affirms that 'each form [of Christ] does what is proper, with the communion of the other', and at the Third Council of Constantinople, where the exposition of the faith affirms Leo's teaching and speaks of Christ's 'two physical energies' and of each nature 'energizing proper things'. See Council of Chalcedon, 'The letter of Pope Leo to Flavian', in Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils – Volume One: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 79; Third Council of Constantinople, 'Exposition of faith', in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, pp. 128–9.

¹⁴On different senses of the word 'subject', see e.g. Aristotle, *Aristotelis Metaphysica*, ed. W. Jaeger (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 7.13.1038b (p. 156); John of Damascus, *Dialectica*, fus. ιζ' (p. 86); Aquinas, *In Metaphys.*, 7.13.1567–8 (p. 378); Amandus Polanus, *Logicae libri duo* (Herborn: Corvinus, 1590), 1 (pp. 21–3); Keckermann, *Systema logicae*, 1, sect. prior, 20 (pp. 631–3); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.24 (pp. 180–2).

¹⁵So e.g. Bonaventure: 'a person acts by virtue of nature, whence that virtue and operation belongs to a certain person' (*Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, vol. 3, in vol. 3 of *Doctoris seraphici s. Bonaventurae opera omnia* (Florence: ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1887), 3.5.1.3 corp. (p. 126)). Cf. e.g. Aquinas, *ST*, I.77.1 ad 3 (5:277); III.19.1 ad 4 (11:241); Aquinas *Compendium theologiae*, in vol. 42 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn. (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1979), 1.212 (p. 165); Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Hanover: Johannes Aubrius, 1615), 6.15 (p. 374).

This line of thought is maintained in early Reformed accounts of divine providence that make use of concepts like ‘physical premotion’, ‘precursus’ and ‘concurus’.¹⁶ All three of those terms convey something about God moving creatures to act. *Praemotio physica* signifies God exciting a creature to action or *actus secundus*. The same act of God exciting is also sometimes called *praecursus*, for it is a matter of God ‘running before’ the creature to lead the creature into action. And the same act of God (or a closely related act of God) is also called *concurus*, for it is a matter of God sustaining the creature’s activity through to the point of producing an effect.¹⁷ Though such descriptions of divine providence acknowledge that God’s action and the human person’s action are finally unified with respect to their terminus (one and the same effect), it remains that only the human person is the proper subject of the human action.¹⁸ In this regard,

God cannot be said to produce the actions of secondary causes, for example, to heat or to walk. Because those actions belong to God only efficiently, but [they belong] to creatures not only efficiently but also formally and subjectively, in which manner creatures are better denominated by [those actions] than God himself.¹⁹

For the purposes of this essay, the point is that God’s moving action and the creature’s subsequent action or *actus secundus* remain distinct. The creature alone is the formal cause and proper subject of his or her *actus secundus*. Accordingly, since each divine operation, including God’s movement of creatures, is shared by all three divine persons, all three divine persons move, support and accomplish things through Christ’s human

¹⁶See e.g. Gisbertus Voetius and Engelbertus Beeckman, *De libertate voluntatis*, in *Disputatio philosophico-theologica* (Utrecht: à Waesberge, 1652), 4 (no pagination); Turretin, *Inst.*, 6.5 (1:557–61); Maastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, 3.10.10, 29, 33 (pp. 390–1, 395–6, 398–9). My thanks to Professor Andreas Beck for providing a copy of the text of the Voetius disputation cited here, which Professor Beck discovered several years ago.

¹⁷In debates about the relationship between divine and human action, some theologians express concern that the term *concurus* literally suggests that divine and human action occur in the same order of being, implying that they might be in competition with one another. A very brief description of some of the underlying concerns can be found in Taylor Patrick O’Neill, *Grace, Predestination, and the Permission of Sin: A Thomistic Analysis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), pp. 96–102. Happily, however, the Reformed authors’ discussions of divine and human action cited above make clear that divine and human action do not take place in the same order of being and thus do not stand in competition with one another. This makes their use of the term *concurus*, if somewhat confusing in certain circles, nevertheless materially unobjectionable to those who want to stress that God can and does move and act through creatures as subordinate causes.

¹⁸The *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, for example, states that God concurs with creatures ‘so that by his own action he immediately flows into the action of the creature, so that one and the same action from the first and second cause is said to proceed, to the extent that from this one work or ἀποτέλεσμα exists’ (Johannes Polyander et al., *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, 4th edn (Lugduni Batavorum: Elsevier, 1652), 11.13 (p. 111)). Voetius remarks that physical premotion is treated either as a ‘principle exciting’ and thus distinct from our action or as an action ‘virtually going over [going forth with our action to an effect]’ and thus identified with our action (*De libertate voluntatis*, 4). Turretin writes that it is not absurd to have two causes for the same effect when those two causes, both ‘totally acting’, are ‘of a diverse order’, and when ‘the action of each cause is, in the end [demum], one, by which they concur to the effect’ (*Inst.*, 6.5.15 [1:562]). It seems to me that Turretin’s word *demum* is important here, for it implies that the divine and creaturely actions are not totally identical but are, instead, unified in a particular way, namely, with respect to their endpoint (one and the same effect).

¹⁹Turretin, *Inst.*, 6.5.14 (1:561).

operation, but only the person who subsists in the flesh and is constituted a man (the Son) can be the proper subject of that operation. Though the person of the Son is an antecedent person – a complete person before the incarnation – he is nevertheless constituted a man by the assumption of his human nature.²⁰ Indeed, he alone of the divine persons is constituted a man. Therefore, he alone can be the proper subject of his human actions. This claim can be filled out more by considering the relationship between nature and person in Christ's human action.

Nature and person in Christ's human action

In order to confirm that the Son alone is the subject of Christ's human action, it will be useful to elaborate on the relationship between the human nature and the person of the Son. First I will try to clarify what the term 'nature' means, and then I will try to connect this explanation to Christ's human operation.

The word 'nature' (φύσις) as it appears in both biblical and philosophical literature is multi-faceted.²¹ 'Nature' can signify 'birth' or the endowments and conditions that follow from birth (see Rom. 2:14, 27; 11:21, 24; Gal. 2:15; Eph. 2:3; cf. 2 Pet. 2:12; Jude 10).²² Relatedly, 'nature' can also signify the essential constitution of something, or what something is (cf. Gal. 4:8; Jas. 3:7; 2 Pet. 1:4), treated especially as a principle of motion, operation and orientation towards an end.²³ The term 'nature' can also signify more broadly the divinely appointed order of things (see Rom. 1:26; 1 Cor. 11:14).

Nature as essence or quiddity – 'what-ness' with a view to action – is the most relevant usage for the present line of thought. It can be treated in at least three ways. First, nature

²⁰See Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de unione Verbi incarnati*, in vol. 2 of *Quaestiones disputatae*, 10th edn, ed. P. Bazzi (Rome-Turin: Marietti, 1965), q. un., a. 4 corp. (p. 432); Aquinas, *ST*, III.3.1 ad 3 (11:53–4).

²¹The brief account offered here is indebted to Aristotle, *Physica*, 2.1–2.192b–194b; *Metaphysica*, 5.4.1014b–1015a (pp. 91–2); Boethius, *Contra Eutychen*, in *The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart et al., Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 1 (pp. 76–81); John of Damascus, *Dialectica*, fus. μϑ' (p. 107); Aquinas, *In Phys.*, 2.1–2 (pp. 56–60); Aquinas, *In Metaphys.*, 5.5 (pp. 221–4); Aquinas, *De unione Verbi incarnati*, q. un., a. 1 corp. (p. 422); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.3–4 (pp. 41–53). Further discussion of the diverse use of 'nature' can be found in Johannes Zachhuber, 'Nature', in Mark Edwards (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 27–40.

²²Cf. Frederick William Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 1069.

²³On the one hand, nature as a principle of motion can be taken as that by which someone will gravitate toward certain things and be affected in certain ways. On the other hand, nature as a principle of motion or, more particularly, a principle of operation can be taken as that by which one produces actions and effects in pursuit of an end. See further John of Damascus, *Dialectica*, fus. λϑ' (pp. 93–5); μϑ' (p. 107); John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 2.22 (p. 88); 3.15 (pp. 144–5); Aquinas, *In Phys.*, 2.1.4–5 (pp. 56–7); Aquinas, *In Metaphys.*, 5.5.809–15, 819 (pp. 222–3); Aquinas, *De pot.*, 1.1 corp. and ad 9 (pp. 8–9); Aquinas, *De unione Verbi incarnati*, q. un., a. 1 corp. (p. 422); a. 5 ad 4 (p. 434); Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, 1.212 (p. 165); William Ames, *Theses logicae*, in *Philosophemata* (Amsterdam: Janssonius, 1651), 58 (p. 165); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.3 (p. 43). John of Damascus in particular distinguishes between a 'movement [κίνησις] in one [that is caused] by another' (i.e. passion) and an 'effective movement' (κίνησις δραστηκή, i.e. action) wherein something is moved 'of itself' or has in itself 'active power' and the 'cause of energy' with which to affect another (*Dialectica*, fus. νγ' (p. 123); *Expositio fidei*, 2.22 (p. 88); 2.23 (p. 94)). In this connection, one can say that the energy or active movement of the created agent is caused by God, but then, in virtue of now being activated, the creature is itself determined to be an efficient cause with respect to another created being and thus directs its powers to that undertaking.

as essence or quiddity can be treated as an abstract universal, an idea in the divine intellect or a concept in the human intellect. Second, nature as essence or quiddity can be treated as something present in individuals of the same kind but understood as common to all of them. Third, nature can be treated as essence or quiddity just in a particular individual.²⁴

Nature or essence treated in the first way, as an abstract universal, does not exist in its own right, so of course it does not perform actions. For example, humanity as a universal separate from individual human beings does not exist or perform actions. Nature or essence treated in the second and third ways is really the same, the only distinction being that in the second way the intellect conceives the nature's commonality across multiple individuals. And even in the case of nature as it is present in an individual, nature *per se* does not perform actions. Strictly speaking, we do not say, for example, that Peter's humanity denied Jesus while Jesus' humanity obeyed the Father. Instead, we say that *Peter* denied Jesus while *Jesus* obeyed the Father. That notion is captured in the axiom *actus sunt suppositorum* (actions belong to individual substances or 'suppositis').²⁵

On the one hand, human nature itself supplies a human being's rational intellect, will and various other powers common to humankind. Human nature itself establishes a human being's telos, limitations and initial aptitudes. On the other hand, it is the person constituted a human being by the human nature who exercises the faculties and powers of the nature. That is, someone of a human nature determined in a unique mode of being (with a unique portion of matter, unique act of existing, unique accidents and disposition) is the one exercising the faculties and powers.²⁶ This arguably applies

²⁴John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 3.11 (p. 131); Aquinas, *In Metaphys.*, 7.13.1570–1 (p. 378); Aquinas, *ST*, III.4.4 (11:82–3); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.3 (pp. 43–4); 1.16 (pp. 143–6).

²⁵The same judgement expressed in similar language can be found in Bonaventure, *In Sent.*, 3.5.1.4 (p. 127); Aquinas, *In Phys.*, 2.1.3 (p. 56), but the particular axiom *actus sunt suppositorum*, with small variations, is present in, e.g. Aquinas, *ST*, I.39.5 ad 1 (4:405); 40.1 ad 3 (4:412); 77.1 ad 3 (5:277); II–II.58.2 corp. (9:10); III.3.1 corp. (11:53); III.19.1 ad 3 (11:241); III.20.1 ad 2 (11:248); Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, 1.212 (p. 165); Polanus, *Syntagma*, 6.15 (p. 374); Alsted, *Metaphysica*, 1.3 (p. 53); Johannes Maccovius, *Loci communes theologici*, 2nd edn, ed. Nicolaus Arnoldus (Amsterdam: Elzevirii, 1658), 30 (p. 242); Turretin, *Inst.*, 14.12.7 (2:478). The statement that actions pertain or belong to suppositis or 'singulars' is sometimes attributed to Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 1.1.981a (p. 2): οἱ δὲ πρόξεις καὶ οἱ γενέσεις πᾶσαι περὶ τὸ καθ' ἑκάστὸν εἰσὶν ('actions and generations all are concerning the individual'); cf. e.g. Aquinas, *ST*, III.20.1 ad 2 (11:248). In context, Aristotle's point is that experience pertains to individuals, making it apparently superior to practical knowledge of universals, since acting upon and generating or producing things is directed toward particular beings, not toward universals *per se*. Aquinas' commentary on the *Metaphysics* may provide a clue as to why he and others think this text in Aristotle is relevant to claiming not only that actions are *directed toward* particular beings but also that actions are *produced by* particular beings. If 'universals are not generated or moved, except *per accidens*, inasmuch as this belongs to singulars' (Aquinas, *In Metaphys.*, 1.1.21 (p. 9)), then it would logically follow that it is never the universal but only the individual who has the universal that will perform actions. On a somewhat different note, for Aquinas, the notion *actus sunt suppositorum* applies even when, strictly speaking, an action is most directly performed by one part of the composite person (e.g. the eye or the hand) (*ST*, 75.2 ad 2 (5:197); II–II.58.2 corp. (9:10)). See also the counterbalancing point in Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, 1.89 (p. 112), where it appears that one part of the person (e.g. the soul) is more directly and properly called the subject of an action. This is discussed further in Brian T. Carl, 'Action, Supposit, and Subject: Interpreting *Actiones Sunt Suppositorum*', *Nova et Vetera* 17 (2019), pp. 545–65.

²⁶A human being will act, then, not only in virtue of what is natural or common to human beings but also in virtue of certain factors unique to this or that particular human being. In attempting to recover the important notion that human beings are and ought to be governed by their God-given nature even in a 'postmodern' age, it is important to remember that human beings are also not totally reducible to their common nature.

even at the level of basic, subconscious acts such as breathing and digesting. It applies all the more with respect to a human being's exercise of free choice, not least when one human being, the man Christ Jesus, is exercising free choice virtuously and meritoriously for the benefit of others.²⁷

The preceding section about divine movement and human energy emphasised that one must in fact be human in order to be the proper subject of human actions or *actus secundus*. To complement that point, this present section is emphasising that it is not a human nature *per se* but rather an individual person (i.e. a human nature determined in a certain mode of being) that will be such a subject performing human actions. How does all of this connect to Christology and the question of the human operation of the Son? I think at least two important points follow.

First, this line of thought entails that in the incarnation it is not the human nature *per se* that performs human actions. Nor is it the case that all three divine persons wield a bare human nature through which human effects might come into being. Rather the person of the Son, and the Son alone, exercises the capacities of his human nature and performs human actions. This is attested in the Christology of John of Damascus, for example. On the one hand, when John speaks about Christ's two wills and theandric energy, he is careful to specify that will and energy themselves pertain to natures, so Christ has two natural wills and two natural energies.²⁸ In order to distinguish the two natural energies, there are even points at which John might give the impression that Christ's two natures *per se* perform actions.²⁹ On the other hand, however, John is equally careful to state that, since there is the one ὑπόστασις of Christ, it is 'one and the same willing and energising naturally'.³⁰ The will and energy *per se* do not will and energise, but each of these is a power 'according to which' (καθ' ἣν) Christ wills or energises.³¹ Thus, John points out that there is a distinction to be drawn between 'energy' and 'the one energising' (ἐνεργῶν). While energy goes forth from the 'energetic' nature, the ὑπόστασις is nevertheless the 'the one energising' and 'the one using' (ὁ κεχρημένος) the energy.³² This sort of distinction between the power or energy that accompanies nature and the one who exercises or uses such power and energy is expressed later by the distinction between a *principium quo* and *principium quod* – a principle 'by which' one acts and a principle or agent 'which' does the acting.³³

Second, nature by itself does not contain a proper mode of being or acting. The proper mode of being and thus the proper mode of acting is supplied by a person or that which individuates a person. As John of Damascus puts it,

²⁷Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, III.4.4 corp. (11:82).

²⁸John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 3.13 (pp. 136–7); 3.14 (pp. 137–8); 3.15 (pp. 146–7); 3.19 (pp. 160–2).

²⁹*Ibid.*, 3.15 (pp. 145–6, 150–1); 3.19 (pp. 160–2). Cf. also Leo's letter taken up at Chalcedon, where he remarks that 'each form [of Christ] does what is proper to it'. However, Leo also states that the acts and sufferings of Christ are *of* and *in* one nature or the other, which leaves room for the clarification that it is, strictly speaking, the person of Christ who is the acting and suffering subject in the incarnation ('Letter of Pope Leo to Flavian', pp. 79–80).

³⁰John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 3.14 (p. 137).

³¹*Ibid.*, 3.14 (p. 138); cf. 3.15 (pp. 146, 150–1).

³²*Ibid.*, 3.15 (p. 144).

³³See e.g. Aquinas, *De unione Verbi incarnati*, q. un., a. 5 corp. (p. 434); Aquinas, *ST*, III.3.2 ad 3 (11:56); Keckermann, *Systema logicae*, 1, sect. prior, 20 (p. 633); Ames, *Theses logicae*, 73 (p. 166); Turretin, *Inst.*, 14.2.2–3 (2:411–2); Maastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, 5.4.13 (p. 540).

to will and to will in a certain manner [θέλειν καὶ πῶς θέλειν] are not the same thing. For, on the one hand, to will belongs to nature just as also to see (for it is present in all men), but, on the other hand, to will in a certain manner does not belong to nature but to our judgment [γνώμη], and to see in a certain manner, well or badly (for not all men will likewise or see likewise). This we will grant also about energies. For to will in a certain manner, to see in a certain manner, to energise in a certain manner belongs to the use of the willing and the seeing and the energising, which is present in only the one using [them].³⁴

Accordingly, if *per impossibile* a bare human nature were the subject of the human action in the incarnation, there would be no filial mode of the human action. Moreover, if, hypothetically, all three divine persons had taken on flesh and were the subjects of the human action in the incarnation, there would be no distinctly or exclusively filial mode of the human action. It must be that the Son himself, ever existing and acting within his relation to the Father, is the subject of Christ's human action in order for there to be a distinctly filial mode of acting in the incarnation.

This commitment to the human operation of the Son alone is upheld in accounts of the Son's humanity as an instrument of deity.³⁵ In Aquinas' explanation of the instrumentality of the Son's humanity, he observes a distinction between an 'external' and 'common' instrument like an axe and a 'conjoined' and 'proper' instrument like a human hand is to a human soul. The former can be used by many, but the latter belongs properly to the one whose hand it is. This latter illustration is the one that applies to Christ's humanity.³⁶ To be sure, identifying Christ's humanity as an instrument of deity emphasises that the humanity is 'moved and ruled by the divine'. But even in the 'use' of the human operation by the whole Trinity, there is still a 'double action' to be noted: one action of the humanity according to its proper form and virtue and another according to the fact that the humanity is moved by another.³⁷ Who, then, is the subject of the distinctly human operation that is utilised and ruled by the whole Trinity? Aquinas is abundantly clear about this when he commends the teaching of Dionysius in the work *De divinis nominibus*:

in these things, which pertain to [Christ's] human operation, 'the Father and Holy Spirit share in no way unless someone will have said "according to the most kind and merciful will"', namely, inasmuch as the Father and Holy Spirit from their own mercy have willed Christ to do and to suffer human things....So it can be seen, therefore, that his human operation is one thing, in which the Father and Holy Spirit do not share except according to the agreement of their own mercy. And his divine operation, insofar as he is the Word of God, is another thing, in which the Father and Holy Spirit share.³⁸

Not sharing in the *human* operation of the Logos except in divine agreement and sharing fully in the *divine* operation of the Logos – that is the right description of the

³⁴John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 3.14 (p. 138).

³⁵For more discussion of the Son's humanity as an instrument in dialogue with Cyril of Alexandria, John of Damascus, and Aquinas, see Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, pp. 157–61.

³⁶Aquinas, SCG, 4.41 (15:141–2).

³⁷Aquinas, ST, III.19.1 corp. and ad 1–2 (11:239–40).

³⁸Aquinas, ST, III.19.1 ad 1 (11:240). Cf. Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, 1.212 (p. 165).

involvement of the Father and the Spirit, and it is good news for us who need a mediator who is man and authentically acts as man on our behalf.

Conclusion

In this attempt to bring together the teaching of inseparable operations and the human operation of the Son alone, I have sought to clarify the coherence of these two elements of Christian doctrine by examining the relationship between divine movement and human energy and the relationship between the human nature of the Son and the person of the Son in Christ's human action. While all three divine persons always move and work together in the case of creaturely operation, this movement produces a resultant energy and energising within the creature. The formal cause of that resultant energy and energising is the created nature, which entails that only the one constituted by that nature is the proper subject of the operation. Thus, while all three divine persons move and work in and through creaturely operation, only the Son, who is not a creature but is constituted a man by his human nature, is the subject of his human operation. In addition, while the human nature of Christ is the locus of Christ's human powers of acting, it is the person of the Son, and the Son alone, who exercises these powers and does the acting. A subject who is himself human is the one who exercises these powers, which secures the integrity of Christ's human action and thus the integrity of his mediatorial work. And that acting subject is God the Son in particular, which secures the filial mode of the human action, a filial mode by virtue of which Christ discloses the Father to us and, in uniting us to himself, conforms us to himself as the exemplar of our sonship (see e.g. John 8:28; 17:26; Rom. 8:29; Gal. 3:26–27).³⁹

It seems to me that this examination of how to utilise the doctrine of inseparable operations may contain some broader implications for theological study. In our day, retrieval of earlier accounts of Christian doctrine is widespread, which is, in my view, a salutary development. For a case can be made that theologians of earlier centuries were very often wiser and more biblical than we are. However, in order to listen well to earlier accounts of Christian doctrine, it is necessary to distinguish between what was taught in the past and what might seem most forcefully opposed to contemporary trends that one wishes to combat. With that distinction in place, it may be that our recoveries of historic doctrines will be more biblical, more capacious and more calibrated to address the theological and spiritual needs of the people of God today.

³⁹Cf. e.g. Bonaventure, *In Sent.*, 3.1.2.3 corp. and ad 2 (p. 30); Aquinas, *ST*, III.3.8 (11:70).