I. Gift's Originary Experience

Originary experience opens up a seldom pursued but uniquely fruitful path for pondering the form of the unity of being. In part because of the troubled history of the concept, and partly because of the contemporary use of the term "experience," originary experience may seem a doubtful starting point. "Experience," in fact, has been described as the "most deceitful" and "most obscure" of terms.[1] Nevertheless, if by originary experience we mean the engagement of the whole of our being with the whole of reality and with God, who is their innermost and transcendent center, originary experience, despite its difficulties, can help us perceive from within life itself the unity of the concrete singular and its dynamic unity with and difference from God. Originary experience represents an encounter with truth that takes place beyond the dualism between subject and object. It involves, as John Paul II illustrated, objectively informed subjectivity.[2] The person knows himself in knowing finite beings and their respective link with God. Experience therefore opens up access to the truth of self, world, and God without abstracting the person from what gives itself to be known or the act itself of knowing, and without the knower absorbing or being fully measured by what is known.

Originary experience also allows us to see that the unity and difference within the concrete singular and its intrinsic relation with God is a gift. In

1. The first adjective is from Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 16. The second is from Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 346ff.

2. See, for example, Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, 3–22. John Paul II's reflections on the nature of human love are built upon this understanding of experience. To him, there are three original experiences: original solitude, original unity, and original nakedness. These are three inseparable dimensions of the person that have to do with the discovery of what is specifically human through one's encounter with the world and the human other. For John Paul II, "original" is intended in the twofold sense of "in the beginning" and at the source of every human being's daily experience (John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 146–78). See also the fine introduction of Anderson and Granados García, *Called to Love*.

this sense, originary experience grants access not only to the truth of the unity of being but also to the perception of its goodness as gift. The singular being is not only good in itself; it is a gift. Its goodness, in other words, bears the memory of its origin from another and also the intimations of its destiny, its being for someone other than itself. The term "gift" offers a synthesis of what we learn through our originary experience: first, that our origin lies permanently with another, and so in a certain sense we belong to that other; second, that we can enjoy our own being and give of ourselves because, within that prior having been given, we are truly our own; third, that the relation with the permanent origin of our being is constitutive of our nature. Finally, since it is primarily through our own originary experience that we learn what gift means, this knowledge is not an abstract reflection; it is rather a lived awareness of oneself, the world, and God that involves all of our history.[3] As historical lived awareness, originary experience allows us to savor the beauty of being given since the truth and goodness of being are radiated through one's own concrete existence.

This approach to the nature of what is by way of man's originary experience rests on a crucial methodological decision: rather than an analysis of being that considers all singular beings equally (meta-*physics*), we begin here with an exploration of the human person. Anthropology will lead to ontology. A note on a difference introduced since the advent of modern science can serve to justify this anthropological starting point: for modern man, physics is no longer what the Greeks intended by the term but is rather the science of the material world. Contemporary science, with its technological understanding of reason, relates to the world, that is, considers and manipulates it, in a way that presupposes a thorough reconfiguration of the world's own nature. If at first early modern thinkers reinterpreted "nature" to mean blank, finite matter, sheer data that was open to manipulation, it is now the case that the "restlessness" of science, as Hans Jonas shows, understands matter as "an always reopened challenge for further penetration," a theoretical and practical pursuit that can only be accomplished if science generates "an increasingly sophisticated and physically formidable technology as its tool."[4] The concept of nature (*physis*) as having an intrinsic,

3. Rather than approach the meaning of gift from a sociological (Mauss, Godelier, Weiner), phenomenological (Heidegger, Marion), ethical (Seneca), or deconstructionist (Derrida, Schrag) point of view, I would like to present the relation between being and gift through an examination of "human originary experience." Incidentally, John Milbank's reflection on gift begins with an examination of evil (see Milbank, *Being Reconciled*).

4. Jonas, "Toward a Philosophy," 195. Jonas writes further: "In brief, a mutual feedback operates between science and technology; each requires and propels the other; and as matters now stand, they can only live together or must die together" (ibid., 195).

non-manipulable goodness in itself must be dispensed with if humanity is to progress ever onward. Since this scientific worldview deeply informs our thinking inasmuch as it has transformed thinking itself into a way of making, we cannot retrieve an adequate concept of nature and being without reexamining the grounds for our mastery over nature. This is not an easy task. On the one hand, the justification of our mastery simply through an unreflective appeal to evolution is merely another expression of our contemporary view informed by science. On the other hand, the issues raised by the scientific mastery of the world cannot be dismissed by a facile rejection of the role played by speculation and the human spirit in the constitution of singular beings. Clearly we cannot attempt to examine the nature of being as though contemporary science had nothing to offer here; that way leads to anachronisms and simply false conclusions. While the claim of modern science and philosophy needs not to be embraced acritically, it still raises a legitimate issue. In our current cultural context, reflection on the nature and unity of what is seems doomed if it halts at considering the human being as just one being among others. The human being, unlike other concrete singulars, has a unique mastery over being.

To take up and understand this mastery over nature depends on the human being's attention to his own enigmatic makeup and his centrality in the cosmos. His makeup is enigmatic because the human being is, and yet he does not come from himself; it is given to him to be. His "power" and mastery over nature emerge within this mystery of his existence having been given. His centrality in the cosmos is due to the fact that his person is a unity of body, soul, and spirit. Through his own body, which is more than a receptacle for the soul or a neutral tool for obtaining ends determined by the soul, the human being recapitulates the cosmos within himself. That the form of his body is given by the soul indicates that the human person, endowed with the capacity to desire, to reason, and to be free, unlike other creatures, is affectively aware of his own position in the cosmos. From this original place, the human being discovers himself to be limited, bodily, and yet capable of receiving the whole. This capacity for the infinite indicates that the human person not only recapitulates the world, he also transcends it. Because the human person is spiritual, his transcendence of the cosmos is a relation with the one who can ultimately account for his existence. Our encounter with nature and the world, therefore, takes place within this twofold mystery: our being given to ourselves to live the relation with the origin. Human making takes place within the human person's constitutive and prior being given to himself and is informed by a way of thinking that recognizes the gift-character of the concrete singular in wonder and permits it to be. Proceeding from the human person through the existential analysis

of originary experience holds out the possibility of an ontological discourse on the gift-form of the unity of being that can correct our contemporary perception of nature without the loss of any speculative rigor.[5]

A final twofold clarification about methodology will be helpful. To take the path of originary experience in order to approach the nature of what is, rather than anthropomorphizing ontology, enables us to grasp the gift-character and wholeness of the singular being. Furthermore, if understood correctly, originary experience protects against an objectivization of God—as if he were an object that could be encompassed by human feelings or reason—and against the tendency to relegate God to the position of a subject alongside the human being. In the face of all our attempts to confine God, the original giver, within the narrow boundaries of our transient emotions or our limited capacity to know, originary experience continues to reveal a structural disproportion between God and us. Within our experience, God naturally reveals himself as other and as calling us to respond to him. Starting from an anthropological reflection, originary experience leads us to the ontology of the concrete singular as gift and invites us to await the unexpected fulfillment of being and the human person in the Incarnate Logos who unites, without confusion or separation, the concrete singular and the divine (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 9:15).

While subsequent chapters will deal more specifically with the ontological structure of the concrete singular, its response to the original giver, and what the renewal of the gift reveals of the nature of the original giver, the present chapter attempts to illuminate the meaning of gift as revealed through our originary experience. Following the insights of Luigi Giussani, we begin with the meaning of originary experience and how it reveals the unity in difference between God, the human being, and the world; then follows an indication of the characteristics of gift that guide our reflection; and finally we will see how our originary experience invites us to perceive the historicity of the concrete singular.

1. Approaching Originary Experience

Because a word is not neutral to its historical and cultural development, it is therefore helpful to examine the main elements that constitute the full meaning of the term "experience" by looking at its etymology. The Latin root (*experior*), derived from the Greek (*peiraw*), indicates that experience

5. This approach is also proposed by Hans Urs von Balthasar and described by him as meta-anthropology. See, among others, Balthasar, *GL,* 5:653; Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*. See also Bieler, "Meta-anthropology and Christology," 129–46.

has to do with the acquisition of knowledge by trying. We become experienced by testing something repeatedly (Greek *peiraw*), as, for example, after having treated many patients, a doctor can recognize and treat a specific illness based on very few symptoms. The German word for experience, *Erfahrung*, offers another interesting aspect. Here experience is the process of learning that consists in traveling (*fahren*) around and seeking to discover the unknown by trying out different things. During this process, the traveler exposes himself to the possibility that unexpected discoveries may radically change him. To experience requires an openness to being affected by something whose origin remains beyond the control of the person.

Before making further attempts at the meaning of experience, a word about its content is in order. When we talk about "originary" experience we indicate that fundamental dimension of our human existence that becomes actual in every discrete experience. "Originary," besides its chronological connotation of beginning in time, points to a sourcing and guiding by means of ordering. Originary experience does not, then, refer to the events of infancy. It points rather to the actual living out of existence considered as a whole and, as this experience brings to light what is specifically human, its relation with the underlying mystery that makes all of being intelligible. The "content" of the originary experience is the whole of life as engaged in every circumstance with the ultimate meaning.

Pondering all these elements together, we see that experience refers to the entire human person: historical bodiliness, freedom, affection, desires, reason, being with others. More radically, it means that what is at stake is the person as such and his destiny. Our common experience teaches us that we truly see only when we put ourselves at risk. This risking is not embraced out of a love of danger but in the desire to discover what one does not yet fully know, namely, who one is and what being is. In fact, since what is sought in whatever one seeks is the meaning of oneself and all that is, it is clearly all of the human person that is risked. Traveling to a foreign land (*Erfahrung*), one hopes to grow, to know oneself by "recognizing the divine that is within us," as Plato said.[6] That there is risk and the possibility of changing indicates also that the content of what one experiences remains larger than what one can comprehend. Experience is not coextensive with life. That there will always be more to discover is indeed an indication of life's greatness; and this ever-more is a sign of the presence of the infinite mystery.

6. In this regard, the knowledge acquired through "experience" can be approximated to the classic understanding of wisdom (*sapientia*): the knowledge of oneself that requires acknowledging that one "does not know" and that one's own self is comprehensible only with the relation to the divinity (Plato, *Apology* 23b; Plato, *Alcibiades* 132c–135b).

To discover something new through experience suggests further that "originary experience"—man's engagement of all of himself with all of reality and its center, God—has a twofold dimension. It implies a receiving and a capacity to create. In order to discover, one needs to be actively searching. Distracted, ideological, or bored spirits are not available to find anything. At the same time, the traveler discovers because what he seeks comes to him first. The priority of the receptive over the creative, rather than a diminishment of man's greatness, indicates his true stature. The traveler begins to walk because, in a certain sense, he has already been given what he has yet to find. The initiative to look for the meaning of one's own enigma is a response to the invitation of the land where one hopes to find the sense of existence. In fact, after having gained some experience, one realizes both that he has been put on the path and that existence itself is always this already-being-on-the-path. For this reason, although one is involved in the discovery, the *logos* of what is seen is not imposed externally by the traveler. The content of experience is greater than the experience itself; rather than being produced or predetermined, this content is also welcomed.

The unity of the receptive and creative dimensions of experience, on the one hand, and the engagement of one's entire self with a reality that remains always greater than what one can experience, on the other, brings us to a deeper layer of experience. To experience means to encounter the truth in which one becomes aware of the totality of reality. More precisely, a person becomes aware of himself in his relation to the world and to the ultimate guarantor of reality's and his own goodness. Yet, since the priority of receiving is to be retained with respect to the creative aspect of experience, this dawning awareness grows, not as the fruit of conquest or the intake of a given *datum*, but out of the lived acknowledgment of oneself and the world as given. Experience, then, is not the stockpiling of information but rather the relation of all of oneself with the divine; it is lived awareness of the whole as an inexhaustible given.[7]

2. Terminological Clarifications

To understand better what "originary experience" means and how it grants access to the unity of being as gift, a brief presentation of the cultural development of the semantics of the term will be helpful. As we shall see, because

7. For further development of this, see the famous work of Jean Mouroux, *L'expérience chrétienne: Introduction a une théologie* (Paris: Editiones Montaignes, 1952). English translation: *Christian Experience*, 24. See also Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 346–50.

what is at stake in every experience is our relationship with the whole, the history of the concept of experience tends to overemphasize one or another particular aspect. Yet the neglect of other aspects results in confusion and hinders the growth in truth that is the desire of wisdom. Early Greek philosophy does not seem to attribute much importance to what one acquires through experience. For example, Aristotle considers experience to be that degree of knowledge between the simple sensible perception of finite beings and the proper sciences. "Experience knows the particular, whereas science (art) knows the universals."[8] Experience is an acquired skill, the synthesis of memories that prepares theoretical and practical knowledge.[9] This sense of experience, according to which *nihil in intellectu nisi in sensu*, was adopted by Aquinas, although he also speaks of a knowledge by connaturality in which, through experience, one is attuned to the whole of being as, for example, the chaste knows what chastity is by experience and not by what he may have studied of this evangelical counsel.[10] It is true that experience also has, at its first level, the connotation of searching for the truth and the acquisition of forms through sense knowledge. Nevertheless, the meaning of this search is more fully elucidated within the context outlined above.

Through the Middle Ages, "learning by trying" was still seen as part of a path that both presupposed and yielded recognition of an ultimate origin, a final cause. Physics, metaphysics, and theology formed a differentiated unity. The origin was seen as the ever-present, initiating, and guiding *telos* of one's own inquiries. It was God who was sought in whatever one was learning. This, of course, did not mean that theology trumped science. Although, as many have shown, the perception of God guided scientific inquiry, the latter had its own integrity and methodology. This does not intend to say that the sciences were conceived independently from God, but that they represented a further exploration into the mystery of the whole. Independently of how it was used and accounted for, experience had to do with one's own organic encounter with truth. It took into account both the whole person and the way in which knowing took place.

8. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 981a15–16. For Aristotle, experience does not offer knowledge of the reasons for things; it is only science that studies the universals that can grant this knowledge: "Men of experience know that the thing is so, but do not know why; while [those who possess scientific knowledge] know the why and the cause of the facts" (ibid., 981a28–30).

9. Ibid., 980b25–981b9.

10. *ST*, II–II, q. 45, a. 2, c; *ST*, I–II, q. 26, a. 2; *ST*, I–II, q. 29, a. 1. This connotation of experience as the acquisition of knowledge is also found in more recent authors such as Bernard Lonergan, for whom experience has four different senses that must be properly distinguished: biological, aesthetic, intellectual, dramatic. Besides these, he also speaks of religious experience (Lonergan, *Insight*, 182–91).

Modernity's progressive rejection of fourfold causality, however, gradually began to account for beings as if God did not exist.[11] Detached from their ultimate ground, concrete singulars became tools at the disposal of our technological endeavors and hence mirrors to serve the solipsistic perception of human existence. This epistemological strategy, as is well known, was the fruit of modernity's attempt to ground reasonableness (and hence truth) in reason alone, that is, in the identification of the act of thinking with its content.[12] This identification, with its undergirding separation of reason from experience, so it was hoped, was to yield absolute certainty. Modernity gradually separated the different elements that constitute human experience.

The Cartesian claim to ground truth in thought, without the presumed necessary reference to something other than the human mind (ultimately God), not only inaugurated the so-called transcendental turn to the subject and the methodical experience of empirical reality; it also introduced a separation between reason and its object that still haunts much of today's thought. The Cartesian claim, however, revealed itself as unable to reconcile the pursued immediacy of the subject to itself with the inescapably mediated character of human subjectivity. While idealism claimed to overcome this separation between reason and its object, and to retrieve via dialectics (Hegel) the role of mediation for a truth that attempts to account for difference within itself (thus eliminating both the Enlightenment's claim of immediacy without presuppositions, and the positivistic reading of being), it did not succeed in preserving the integrity of difference throughout the theoretical or practical process of the constitution of the absolute. Knowledge gained through experience aimed ever more decisively at the acquisition of power and at the manipulation of nature for the sake of a perennial progress. Phenomenology's pursuit of the originary experience that precedes the opposition of subject and object comes to a halt (at least in Heidegger) because its reading of metaphysics as onto-theology finishes by hypostasizing the appearing of being in an event of reciprocal belonging that represents the end of being and of *Da-sein*.[13]

11. Grotius, *De iure belli*, prolegomena 11.

12. Of course, this concept of reason and truth is only one aspect characterizing "modernity." Robert Spaemann, for example, indicates the following as the primary aspects: understanding freedom as emancipation; the myth of necessary and endless progress; progressive mastery of nature; objectivism; homogenization of experience; hypothesizing reality; naturalistic universalism (Spaemann, "Ende der Modernität?," 232–60).

13. Gadamer's attempt to continue the phenomenological reflection through hermeneutics still accentuates the separation between ontology and history. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

The modern perception of experience also affected the understanding of religious experience, that is to say, of man's relation with God. Christian dogmas, for example, rather than the expression of the truth revealed through the person of Jesus Christ, are perceived as historical, relative truths. Although at first one could claim the need in faith to obey these truths, once they lose their intrinsic, universal value, any remaining moral force quickly disappears under the dominance of relativism. Religious experience, as seen in the different forms of Protestantism, is relegated to emotions whose validity is determined by their intensity since historical mediation is no longer acceptable. Schleiermacher's emblematic account of religion in terms of a feeling of absolute dependence falls back into the attempt to eliminate conceptual and historical mediation and seeks to ground the perception of truth in an ineffable, incommunicable, interior experience that yields no volitional or cognitive content.[14] In this regard experience is revelatory of a knowledge that is unable to transcend the subjective sphere of the person and so be communicated.

The philosophical and theological understanding of experience is both prompted by and responsible for the contemporary scientific concept of experience. As Robert Spaemann argues, for modern science, the acquisition of knowledge through experience is equivalent to "planned, homogenized experience, i.e., experiment."[15] The aspect of receiving in experience is interpreted as sheer passivity or simply set aside. Nowadays, to experience something is tantamount to verifying a hypothesis through an experiment that remains under the control of the scientist. An experience is a controlled experiment. To learn by trying has come to mean to experiment with things or, more crucially, with oneself—as biotechnology enables us to do in unprecedented ways. The encounter with truth offered by the scientific understanding of experience no longer leaves room for discovery as the unexpected fruit of a patient search that demands putting oneself at the disposal of what is given to be known. To understand experience as undergoing an event, circumstance, etc., which is deprived of intrinsic meaning, is yet another expression of this reduction of experience to experiment. It is left up to the human person to construct meaning by imposing a relative sense on a given event.

That experience seems to be trapped either by sheer subjectivism or by a technocratic interpretation of knowing is a revealing witness to the fact that when one sets aside God as the ultimate giver and *telos* of all that is, one is left with the illusion of a mastery over reality that can only fragment the

14. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*; Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 3–128.

15. Spaemann, "Ende der Modernität?," 240.

human person out of existence, as the tragic events of the twentieth century and the servitude of man at the hands of the technical manipulation of his own life illustrate. Experience requires the whole of the human person as always already engaged with all of reality and with the common center of both, God.

3. A Distinct Understanding

While an empirical conception of experience emphasizes only the receptive side of experience, and the idealist and scientistic views hold up experience as the manifestation of the constructive capacity of the spirit, experience in the sense we are unfolding here is beyond the Enlightened separation of the receptive from the creative aspects.[16] When dealing with experience we need to realize first that we are talking about a living whole, that is, the concrete historical existence of someone who is engaged, with all of his being, with the antecedent and ever-greater mystery as the mystery freely gives himself to be discovered in the human path towards wisdom. Second, contemporary entanglements with the term "experience," as outlined in the previous section, emerge from a misconstrued anthropology that grants man's central role in the cosmos while ignoring the fact that this dignity has been given to him. In other words, it is an anthropology that claims to have transfigured itself into a theology. Whereas prior to Christianity man could understand himself either as part of the cosmos and doomed to disappear with it, or as possessor of a tragic nobility that was always aware of the temptation of hubris, with the Judeo-Christian tradition the dignity and centrality of man emerges through the covenant and creation in Christ. After this revelation occurs in history, it is not possible to return to earlier anthropologies and cosmologies. Man either conceives himself as given to himself and, bearing the image of the divine, as invited to live a dramatic relation with God, or he replaces God.[17] In the latter case, desire, reason, freedom, will, bodiliness, history, the world, and God are seen as disconnected fragments that the human person is free to reassemble at will. The problem is that one cannot define the meaning of all these fragments beforehand. The meaning has to be discovered as they play themselves out in experience. Detached from experience, Giussani contends, one comes up with a concept of reason as

16. Mouroux, *Christian Experience*, 9–15.

17. "O man!" Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "realize what you are! Consider your royal dignity! The heavens have not been made in God's image as you have, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor anything to be seen in creation. . . . Behold, of all that exists there is nothing that can contain your greatness" (cited in de Lubac, *Drama*, 20).

the measure of being. Thinking, reduced to measuring, becomes a species of willing.

Originary experience regards man's capacity to grasp the meaning of something, its "objective link to everything else," and the awareness of this link.[18] Giussani's absolutely innovative concept of religious, elementary experience—or originary experience as we have translated it here—allows us to ponder the enigma of the human person as given to himself in order to acknowledge the totality of the gift of being.[19] For Giussani, originary experience is neither one way of knowing among others, nor a practical implementation of a theoretical ideology, nor a neutral instrument with which to gather information whose value and meaning are then assessed through heuristic, extrinsic criteria. Rather, "experience is reality's emerging into man's awareness; it is the becoming transparent of reality to man's gaze."[20] The fact that reality "emerges" into man's awareness shows that what is at stake in originary experience is the unity of the numerous factors already indicated: the reality that precedes the traveler and gives itself to be known, the traveler who seeks to discover the meaning of things and of himself, the distinction without separation of the two as they are held together by their link, their union with the ultimate mystery. What becomes transparent to man's gaze is the character of the concrete singular as a sign, that is, as a reality given to itself, which, carrying the memory of the giver, brings the beholder to their common origin.

Giussani offers this precious synthetic definition: "elementary [or originary] experience tends to indicate totally the original impetus with which

18. "Experience demands an I, an object, a relationship between the I and the object; but this is not enough: [these three elements are to be perceived] within an ideal horizon that colors in different ways the relation that God establishes between me and the thing. This is the mortal sin from Descartes onwards: to speak of reason forgetting that from which one extracts the concept of reason: experience. Doing this one fabricates, pre-fabricates the concept of reason and with it judges the concept of experience. In this way one confuses everything" (Giussani, "*Tu*," 84; *ROE*, 98–102, at 99). This chapter of *ROE* was originally published as Luigi Giussani, *L'esperienza*. For an approximation of Giussani's concept of experience, cf. Scola, "Esperienza cristiana," 199–213; Scola, "Esperienza, libertà e rischio," 71–89; Sani, "L'educazione," 5–27, at 21–23; Konrad, *Tendere*.

19. For Giussani, *esperienza originale* (here translated as originary experience), *esperienza elementare* (elementary experience), and *esperienza religiosa* or *senso religioso* (religious sense) are synonymous terms. Although familiar with the solitary work of Jean Mouroux on experience and well-versed in North American Protestant theology, Giussani contends that his understanding of experience is "totally original" (Giussani, "Seminario," 134). For a comprehensive bibliography from 1951–1997, see Giussani, *Porta la speranza*, 205–60. For a historical development, see Montini and Giussani, *Sul senso religioso*.

20. Giussani, *USD*, 107.

the human being reaches out to reality, seeking to become one with it. He does this by fulfilling a project that dictates to reality itself the ideal image that stimulates it from within."[21] Originary experience speaks therefore of our dynamic encounter with reality in all its complexity: on the one hand reality emerges before man and dictates "an ideal image" that the concrete singular carries within itself, that is, its own *logos* and its unique relation with God and the world. The "ideal image," in this regard, is an echo of "the Word of Another."[22] Man's original encounter with truth is always already offered to him by the objective and historical self-presentation of being, whose full disclosure requires the entire person. This is why, on the other hand, and simultaneous with the self-presentation of the concrete singular, the human being "reaches out" with an "original impetus" and "seeks to become one with reality."

The "impetus," which is always a response to the emergence of reality, brings something new into existence. It does so by fulfilling a project that was first elicited by the ideal image hidden within the reality itself. This ideal image is given back to the reality itself now unfolded anew in a unity that includes both the reality and the person in their relation with their common giving origin. Fulfilling the project entails bringing about something new because the becoming transparent of the concrete singular in man's consciousness is the fulfillment of the former in the latter and a more intense radiance of the latter with the light of the singular being. That the human person "seeks to become one" with what gives itself to be known reveals that the ontological unity with what gives itself to be discovered and embraced requires an ordering towards the origin of both the person and the concrete singular.

For Giussani, therefore, every original human experience is either a religious one or it is not an experience in the first place: ultimately, experience is the living affirmation of God as that "unitary meaning which nature's objective and organic structure calls the human conscience to recognize."[23] Experience, therefore, has to do with the dynamic unity of the encounter between reality and all of man, whose *telos* (and fulfillment) is the affirma-

21. Giussani, *RS*, 9.

22. Giussani, *ROE*, 99.

23. Ibid. Giussani therefore is not proposing either a naïve realism or a critical idealism as an understanding of man's access to truth. His concept of experience has little to do with Rahner's, for whom man's experience of God and of himself is passive, transcendental, non-thematic, and non-reflexive. For Giussani experience does not have to do with "conditions of possibility" but with actual understanding in which history never comes at a second moment, nor is it seen as history of God. See Rahner, "Experience of Self," 122–32.

tion of God. Let us first look at how originary experience allows us to perceive finite beings as gift and then at the involvement of the human person.

4. The Inexorable Presence of the Sign

One can never stress enough that experience implies "an encounter with an objective fact that is independent from the experience that the person has."[24] Finite beings send man into a state of ongoing wonder, presenting themselves attractively (beauty), carrying their own *logos* (truth), and introducing him to the perception of and response to the good. Finite beings therefore are not sheer data, material that is infinitely open to manipulation by the subject. "Being," Giussani writes, is "not some abstract entity"; it is "a presence that I do not myself make, that I find. A presence that imposes itself on me."[25] Being is given to the person; it is a gift. Thus for Giussani, in some similarity with Balthasar, originary experience represents the perception of the concrete analogy of being through its transcendental determinations and not through an abstract reflection on being.

In an attempt to overcome the positivistic understanding of finite being (and reality as a whole) mentioned earlier, Giussani does not speak of the concrete singular in terms of an object lying before a knowing subject, but rather of "presence." With this term, he wishes to illustrate the interiority of finite beings and their relation with the knowing person (primarily man, but ultimately God). Let us look at what this term, "presence," entails.

"Presence" indicates, first of all, that something is present to someone. That is, as "present," it is another, irreducible to the one before whom it presents itself. What is present comes from some other who is distinct from both what is present and the beholder. For being to be "present" means further that it addresses the one to whom it comes. The coming into being of concrete singulars aims at man's welcoming of the irreducible, inexhaustible alterity of the singular gift. Taking traditional metaphysics as a starting point would have meant stopping at the acknowledgment of the creatureliness of a finite being. We would miss the fact that concrete singulars, in being themselves, are also present to someone, that is, they are themselves inasmuch as they address someone. This reference to another, which is proper to being-gift, grounds the subsequent ethical reflection.

Another aspect of "presence" has to do with belonging. To be present to someone is to be given to someone, and in a certain sense to belong to that person. Finite being, we could say, operates the claim of the beautiful

24. Giussani, *RE*, 130.

25. Giussani, *RS*, 101.

on the one who is called. The otherness of the concrete singular represents a gift because the claim of its beauty is to let its own light illumine and shine in the beholder so that this one can come to see and desire the source. To belong to another does not have a univocal meaning and depends on a free giving to the beholder. Yet, even at its most basic level, to speak of belonging indicates that gift, being as presence, is not a self-enclosed reality; it is always already with other beings. It contains the memory of the origin, and it exists within a communion of beings.

Being as "presence" arrives at its full meaning in man when his awareness reaches its fullest form, when it offers, that is, recognizes, the divine mystery as the ultimate consistency of all that exists.[26] This characterization of being as presence is a way of expressing a unity of that which is present and the one to whom it is present. This unity is not a static, topographical face-off. It is a free belonging to each other that preserves their difference because the one to whom singular being is given acknowledges the origin and *telos* common to both.

Giussani clarifies further that the condition for perceiving the gift-character of being and its irreducible alterity is the passionate, insistent, and complete observation of reality and of oneself in action. This observation has to be "complete" in order to make room for all the factors of reality, without censoring for any ideology or dividing what is separate only in thought. It has to be "passionate" because freedom and reason are co-originary. There is no such thing as a simple rationalistic observation of the nature of beings. The one who does not love does not discover.[27] Finally it has to be "insistent" because the temptation to ideology is always lurking.

The other part of the condition is that one's engagement be with the whole of reality and its center. Without engaging the whole, instead of knowledge one would end up, once again, in an ideological account of oneself and of being—an account that attempts to fit the whole to the particular of one's choice. Grasping the unity of being as gift is an arduous exercise that requires paying attention to oneself in action. We could even say that experience and action are two sides of the same coin. Action, which is not simply "production" or "making," is the concrete, dramatic dialogue in history between God and man, a dialogue in which circumstances are as much

26. For an account of the ontological movement of beings, see Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 3.8–9 (PG 3:704D–705B).

27. Giussani, *RS*, 3–33. The circularity between freedom and reason can also be found in, e.g., Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate*: "Intelligence and love are not in separate compartments: *love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love*" (no. 30; AAS 101 [2009], 665).

the stage on which the action takes place as the content of this drama.[28] The perception of being as gift is never the necessary or automatic outcome of a logical process but requires the engagement of the human person. The gift must be received in order to be seen. When the human being is engaged thus, it is possible for him to discover the positivity of what he encounters and of himself in three aspects: the fact that beings are given (are present to him); that finite beings are not simply opaque objects but signs with which the human being is united; and that he, along with the concrete singular, is constantly generated by the source.

The perception of being as gift disclosed by man's original relation with the other and revealed in experience opens a further dimension of intelligibility. That being is gift indicates that gift is also a *logos*, "a word, an invitation," that speaks of another. In fact, "the gift whose meaning is not also given is not really a gift."[29] Gift, in other words, carries its own intelligibility. This means not only that reality's own light enables man to see it as gift but also that this gift is the word of another, a mystery always present and ever greater that speaks to man. It is important to realize, first, that to say that the gift has its own *logos* not only means that truth and goodness are coexistent in the singular as it is given to itself and to another. It also means that originary experience, to discover the meaning of any given being or circumstance, must listen carefully to the *logos* that speaks within and through the gift. Man must not impose an aleatory meaning on his own experience. Just as life is larger than our experience of it, so the *logos* that speaks in the gift cannot be enclosed in a human concept. The fact that originary experience bears its own meaning does not imply that one will understand or grasp that meaning. The inseparability of gift from its own *logos* indicates that the mystery pronounces himself to man in infinitely different ways without repetition. Every finite being-gift is a whole, an integral singular being, a word infinitely other than the mystery and yet a word that communicates this mysterious other on which it constitutively depends.

Giussani speaks of *sign* as the dual unity of gift and *logos* discovered through originary experience: "The sign is a reality whose meaning is another reality, something I am able to experience, which acquires its meaning by leading to another reality."[30] Finite being is a sign, a word-gift that brings man to the transcendent ground of both reality and the human being.

28. Maurice Blondel's work is in fact one of the main sources of Catholic reflection on experience. See his *L'action (1893)*.

29. Giussani, *JTE*, 71. Translation modified. The text continues: "And we would not be able to recognize that life and the cosmos are gift if we did not await the revelation of its meaning."

30. Giusanni, *RS*, 111.

While some of his christological writings treat "sign" and "sacrament" as synonymous, Giussani does not use the term "symbol" to refer to the dual unity of gift and *logos* that characterizes finite beings.[31] "Symbol" does not indicate the intrinsic link between gift and *logos* as clearly as "sign" seems to do. "Symbol" can be easily understood as a reality whose meaning is culturally determined and hence imposed on human experience. In this sense, "symbols" would be historically conditioned and so would have no claim to universality or ontological depth. This understanding of symbol easily leads to conclusions such as those of M. Lawler, for whom "experience and not ontology makes reality."[32] For Giussani, instead, the sign is "a word that shakes up because it is through the sign that the presence of the transcendent *touches* the flesh."[33] Whereas the culturally determined understanding of symbol leads to endless interpretations, for Giussani, experience is "bumping into a sign, an objective reality that moves the person towards his *telos*, towards his destiny."[34] The sign, therefore, indicates the concrete way in which the mystery gives himself to the human being, so that, through the flesh, once it is received, the sign moves the human being to recognize and assent to the source that generates everything.

It is in the experience of the encounter with the inexorable presence of finite beings that one discovers oneself as given to oneself. Giussani says that "there was a time when the person did not exist: hence what constitutes the person is a given (*datum*), the person is the product of another."[35] Our birth, more than a biological beginning whose only meaning is chronological, reveals something very important about finite human being: not originating with oneself is the sign that one has been given to oneself. The existence of freedom, limited though real, and of self-awareness prevents us from reducing the human being to his historical and biological antecedents. The human being is an incarnate spirit that transcends nature. "One cannot deny," Giussani insists, "that the greatest and most profound evidence is that I do

31. Giussani, "Ogni cosa." See also Giussani, *TT*, 11–35; Giussani, "Mistero e segno coincidono." For his understanding of sacrament, see Giusanni, *WTC*, 179–200.

32. Lawler, *What Is*, 48. Karl Rahner does have an interesting theology of symbol, which nonetheless remains problematic because it does not integrate his Trinitarian ontology with Christology. See Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," 221–52; Rahner, *Church and the Sacraments*.

33. Giussani, *RVU*, 114.

34. Giussani, *AVS*, 351.

35. Giussani, *ROE*, 98. That man depends, that he is "the product of another," is "the original condition that is repeated at all levels of the person's development. The cause of my growth does not coincide with me but is other than me" (ibid.).

not make myself, I am not making myself. I do not give myself being, I do not give me the reality that I am; I am 'given.'"[36]

To welcome the evidence of one's own constitutive givenness reveals the unity binding the self together with its mysterious and permanent source: God, the ultimate source at the origin of both the sign and the human being. Since the origin revealed in the sign is the one from which one's own self and every sign is ultimately continuously begotten, the mystery may be called "father." Unlike a human father, however, the mystery is "Father at every moment. He is begetting me *now*."[37]

Although paternal, the mystery remains mystery. Any attempt to define the face of the mystery inevitably becomes ideology.[38] This will remain the case even when, in Christ, the mystery lets himself be seen. "God is father, but he is father like no other is father. The revealed term carries the mystery further within you, closer to your flesh and bones, and you really feel it in a familiar way, as a son or daughter."[39] Human experience does give us an intimation of what the Incarnation of the Logos reveals, apart from which we could never fathom this: the mystery is Father like no other father. Because of the dialogical aspect of the mystery's self-manifestation (through the sign that is both gift and *logos*), Giussani also designates the mystery with the second personal pronoun. Both reality itself and, as we shall see, man's own dynamism attest to the existence of the mystery, that "Thou" who speaks to man. Once again, although to speak in terms of dialogue presupposes ascribing personhood to the divine mystery, this "Thou" remains "inexhaustible, evident, and not 'demonstrable'"—that is, beyond man's comprehension.[40]

To sum up, we can say that originary experience allows us to discover both finite being and oneself as gift at whose respective centers is the divine mystery. Since the nature of being is gift and the divine mystery addresses himself to the human person, the truth of this claim about originary experience cannot be seen if it is detached from the engagement of freedom. When Giussani says that originary "experience" enables us to perceive the *evident* nature of the sign's dual unity of being-gift and *logos* he does not have in mind a certainty that does not require freedom. "Evidence" does not mean logical (univocal) or empirical evidence. It is thus neither the result of physical observation nor a necessary deduction from certain premises. Rather,

36. Giussani, *RS*, 105; Giussani, *GTSM*, 77ff.
37. Giussani, *RS*, 106.
38. Ibid., 95–97, 132–40.
39. Ibid., 145.
40. Ibid., 161.

"evidence" indicates the peculiar ontological and epistemological nature of truth, according to which truth presents itself offering the meaning for which man is searching and calling for the decision of man's freedom. The relation with truth is always a dramatic event. The self-presentation of truth offers meaning and invites man to receive it. While truth's self-presentation is unequivocal, being's meaning as gift cannot be seen until it is embraced. Reason and freedom are co-originary. "Evidence," therefore, means "to become aware of an inexorable presence." To perceive the evidence is to "open my eyes to this reality which imposes itself upon me, which does not depend upon me, but upon which I depend; it is the great conditioning of my existence—if you like, the given."[41]

5. The Experience of Being Given

We have mentioned that originary experience indicates the engagement of all of oneself with all of reality and its center, God. Man's engagement with the whole, or his lived awareness, acknowledges that both the human person and other concrete singulars have been made, are given to themselves and to each other. The encounter with the gifted irreducibility of the other can be accounted for in many different ways. Yet, rather than imagining what we have described so far as a solitary individual contemplating a beautiful starry night, or a sudden realization in the midst of life—but in a sense also apart from it—that one is not one's own, it is more helpful to realize that the gift character of being involves first and foremost the personal encounter and the common life that takes place within the family. To be sure, acknowledging being's utter positivity also happens in many other circumstances. Still, since both knowing and loving have the form of a personal encounter, a look at the nature of familial relations will enable us to give a more complete account of the main characteristics of gift.[42] I will thus sketch out the existence of the human person from its beginning to its end with an eye toward indicating the main features of gift.

Giussani referred constantly to the event of one's own birth to indicate the gift-character of finite being.[43] For him, the crucial cultural problem

41. Ibid., 101. "Man depends, not only in an aspect of his life, but in everything: whoever observes his own experience can discover the evidence of a total dependence on Another who has made us, is making us, and continuously preserves us in being" (Giussani, "Paternità," 1–4, at 1). See also Giussani, *GTSM*, 77.

42. For the personal nature of human knowing, see Nédoncelle, *Personne humaine*; Nédoncelle, *La réciprocité*; Nédoncelle, *Vers une philosophie*.

43. "Try to imagine a baby who has just come to life in the womb of its mother, just conceived. To make an unimaginable paradox, if that small fetus knew that all that he

today is the retrieval of the meaning of birth. "Every evil," he said in an interview, "originates with the lie according to which man theoretically and practically attempts to define himself, forgetting, erasing from his memory his own birth."[44] Birth expresses primordially the gift of being. We have already alluded to the fourfold mystery of birth as that which more than anything else puts us in the way of seeing being's nature as gift. We can now return to this mystery to see that it first indicates an exuberance of the gift. The child is the fruit of a loving union of a man and a woman. Birth, in this regard, is a radically non-democratic event: the child has no say in his own birth and the parents cannot force his personal existence into being. Certainly, scientific progress can facilitate the manipulation of the begetting of a child, but science can never overcome the fact that it always operates with preexistent material that it did not and cannot create.[45]

The existence of gift requires a giver, who gives without claiming a return; a receiver—which in our case also coincides with the gift itself; and a dynamic, loving relation between them. This relation constitutes in different degrees a dwelling place. The child is loved into existence and comes as a gift within a home. It is rather difficult today to understand what a home is. Technology has left us homeless and has forced us to think unilaterally of "place" in terms of time and hence as empty space. A dwelling place is now seen as a stopping point in the path of time, and time is no longer viewed as the confirmation of the gift that grants indwelling and unity. Pushing the human being to do more and better, to try different things, and to master nature, the technological mindset and the tools it creates project the human being ahead in the future, preventing him from living the present and from being some-where. Tragically, since the future is not yet and the past is no longer, by preventing his dwelling in the present, the technological mindset places the human being no-where. Because he is no-where, technology

is, everything, each tiny drop of blood, each cell from its newly begun structure, everything in him, comes from the body of his mother . . . if this small fetus could be aware, he would feel everything flowing from the organism of his mother. . . . Think of the kind of total dependence—total in the absolute sense of the term—his self-awareness must be" (Giussani, *PLW*, 3:25). This example is also used to clarify the nature of morality.

44. Testori, *Il senso*, 38.

45. A rather lucid example of this opposing view was written by Gregory Stock: "IVF still accounts for fewer than 1 percent of live births in the United States. Improvements, however, may transform the procedure enough to integrate it into routine procreation. With a little marketing by IVF clinics, traditional reproduction may begin to seem antiquated, if not downright irresponsible. One day, people may view sex as essentially recreational, and conception as something best done in the laboratory" (Stock, *Redesigning Humans*, 55). See also Ratzinger, "Man between Reproduction and Creation."

cannot but consider the human person as an individual, that is, a holder of rights who determines himself through his action—now understood as making. Yet, in this way, technological thinking quantifies the subject. It abandons man to laws and policies that accentuate his homelessness. Because of this quantification of the person, even at home, social life turns out to be a sequence of individual encounters that not only leave the person radically isolated but, more intensely, force the relationship with others into an exercise of power and instinct. The home into which a child is born is the place that love generates by allowing people to participate and dwell in it. In this sense, the home, with the shared life it entails, is not only where one is born but also the place that continuously helps the person rediscover his own constitutive childlikeness. The home is the continual, living reminder of one's own having been begotten, of the gift-ness of life, and of the task of existing. The gift is never a monad: it exists only within a communion.

As a fruit, the child always arrives as a surprise. Although he cannot come into being without the parents, he is another spirit, who is irreducible both to his parents and to the biological laws. The child is a gift because he is given to himself. Yet the origin remains present in the child as other. The child belongs to this origin, yet is truly given to himself and can enjoy his very being (as the child's joyful play reveals). The gift is not simply the correct array of gift, giver, and receiver. The giver remains present in the gift (the child), but as other than the gift. This is true both somatically and, more importantly, spiritually. Let us look at this more closely.

The parents' embrace of the child—expressed both by the physical embrace and by the existence of the home and life together—represents the certainty that allows the child to grow, precisely because each parent images (differently) the ultimate paternal origin from which the child comes. The father is the sign of God's absolute otherness, and as father, he is always oriented towards the begotten child and the child's destiny. The human father therefore is rightly seen as the reminder of one's own origin *and* as he who accompanies one on one's own path and leads one to fulfillment. Fatherhood is as much about origin as it is about *telos* and accompanying the child in moving toward his *telos*. The mother is the sign of God's gratuity. The gift does not count the cost of how much it gives. It gives all of itself without regard for what is left for itself because it knows that it is itself only when it gives itself completely and embraces what it receives in giving itself. Paternity and maternity, although different expressions of the same love, are not interchangeable roles. As Balthasar says, "In love and in fidelity the woman has an easier time of it. . . . The woman is not called to represent anything that she herself is not, while the man has to represent the very source of life,

which he can never be."[46] Fatherhood and motherhood, however, image the totality of God's love only *together*. The father can be father (and so represent the origin and its fecund, accompanying authority) only in responding to the wife's incarnation of love's gratuity. The mother can be mother (the icon of divine gratitude and creaturely reception of divine love) only as a response to the husband's representing the origin. In this way, as the educative task illustrates, the mother helps the child to face life with the certainty of being loved (hence complementing the task of the father), and, as the father responds to the gratuitous love that the wife incarnates, he helps the child to face existence, to grow free in becoming personally responsible for his own destiny. This asymmetrical reciprocity that is fruitful in a third person expresses the nature of gift at the anthropological level.

Experiencing the fatherhood and motherhood of his parents is essential to the child's discovery of the positive sense of dependence on God and of the positivity of existence, for it is through his parents that the child can discover the utter positivity of God's fatherhood. Thus, without fatherhood and motherhood, dependence (and hence sonship) would be slavery, finitude an unbearable limit, and life's positive destiny dissolution in the One. The home is the place in which one can discover the truth of the freedom of the gift: autonomy (*autexousia*) and indebtedness.

The education to the truth of the gift that the father and the mother are to give begins by accepting the child as other. The gift is not a gift until it is received. This is the case first of all for the parents: they are to accept the child as a gift to them from another. The reception of the child requires them to affirm joyfully their own finitude, that is, their not being the ultimate origin of the child. If the parents were to present themselves as the only origin, the child would perceive himself to be just a reiteration of that human origin, and the gift of his very self would lose its freedom and novelty. If the parents were to distance themselves completely from the ultimate origin and deny that they are a sign of the divine giver, the gift, as F. Ulrich writes, "would be absolutized; it would be consumed in the things that are and coincide with them."[47] To receive the child as a gift entails the constant acknowledgment that the child is given to them and that they are a true origin precisely because the gratuitous and ongoing gift of their substance is a real sign of the divine love. The child thus needs to be set free if he is to discover being's gift-ness.[48]

46. Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, 221.

47. Ulrich, *Mensch als Anfang*, 140.

48. We refer to the child in the singular, but we include within this reference the relation among siblings. The multiplicity of children is, in fact, an important sign of the fecundity proper to love (beyond its quantitative value), because every child is an