Kenneth Schmitz on Creation *Ex Nihilo* and the Metaphysics of Gift: 
A Reflection on the Occasion of His Becoming *Emeritus* Professor of Philosophy

My first contact with Professor Kenneth Schmitz was via telephone about 40 years ago, in 1971 or 72, when I was still a graduate student in California. The journal *Communio* had just been launched in Europe by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, and Henri de Lubac among others, and Fr. Joseph Fessio, then studying with de Lubac, had asked me to make contact with some philosophers and theologians in the United States, to help begin an American edition of the journal. Seeking a philosopher, I contacted James Collins, the eminent Catholic historian of philosophy from St. Louis University, for his advice. I explained to him the project of *Communio*, and he immediately recommended Professor Schmitz, then of the University of Toronto. Thus began our conversations and friendship and eventual work together that have continued over the years, with both of us finally working physically in the same place when we each moved to the Institute in 1992.

I may be permitted before beginning my formal remarks to recall only one story, involving a particular meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America that he and I both attended at the University of South Carolina in the mid-eighties. There are two things you need to know about metaphysicians, though they may already be obvious to you. The first is that, when gathered together, they tend to become intensely absorbed with—no doubt because they are often so starved for—metaphysical discussion. And second, that—it may be said without too much exaggeration—, they tend by and large to be socially inept.
Professor Schmitz and I were involved in conversation at the opening session of the Society when someone announced that it was time for dinner and that everyone should go to the elevator in the next room to be taken to the top floor of the building, where there was a restaurant overlooking the campus. As Ken and I and the other metaphysicians entered the elevator, each of us looked downward as the conversations began to trail off into an awkward quiet. Some dozen persons entered the very large elevator, and the doors closed. Then: no movement, only silence. Everyone waited. Still no movement and more uneasy silence. Finally, there came from the back corner of the elevator a slightly timid and uncertain voice: “Did anyone push the button?”

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It is appropriate on this special occasion to say a word about the mission of the John Paul II Institute, and about Professor Schmitz’s philosophical work in light of this mission.

I.

Pope John Paul II himself indicates the key to his pontificate when he begins his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, with the statement that “the Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history.” We enter into the full substance of what is intended by the statement, however, only insofar as we understand that witness to its truth involves an entire way of life at the heart of which lies a distinct vision of reality—of the reality of all things but of man in particular—in relation to God in
Jesus Christ. Blessed John Paul characteristically insisted that a God-centered way of life, on the one hand, and recognition of the dignity of the human being, on the other, stand and fall together. In the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, 36, one of the main documents that occupied his attention at the Council: “when God is forgotten, the creature itself is obscured, rendered unintelligible.” Or, put positively, in light of *Gaudium et Spes*, 22: it is in light of the mystery of the trinitarian love of God manifest in Jesus Christ that man’s highest destiny or calling (*vocatio*) becomes clear. John Paul II’s profound sense of the intrinsic link between the forgetfulness of God and the denial of man’s true dignity was of course forged in the work camps and death camps of 20th century Nazism and Communism. But he also saw the link concretely expressed in the West’s bracketing of God’s reality from the stuff—the form and content—of everyday public life in the culture.

I believe we may say, in a word, that, according to John Paul II, human civilization lives or dies finally by the depth or superficiality (*super-facies*) of its idea of God. That is why he said (in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p.229, referring to André Malraux) that “the twenty-first century would be the century of religion or it would not be at all.”

II.

Regarding the place of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, within this central vision of the late pope, then: evidently, Blessed John Paul founded the Institute because he saw that marriage and family play an essential role in realizing the indissoluble link between the reality of God and the dignity of the human
person. For John Paul II, however, the family does not play this role only as one institution, however indispensable, alongside many others. On the contrary, marriage and family in a certain sense can be said to disclose the nodal point of the *humanum* as such in its creatureliness.

How this is so can perhaps be understood best in terms of the pope’s notion of man’s originary experience as developed especially in his well-known catecheses on Genesis, creation, and the spousal union of man and woman. Entitled *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, these discourses conceive man’s original experience in terms at once of solitude and unity. “Original solitude” refers to man’s fundamental structure as made for God. Man is originally solitary, in other words, not because he is alone *tout court*, but because in his singular constitution as a creature he is related to the Creator before he is related to anything else—“before” here in the sense of an ontological rather than temporal priority. That is, it is *in the very act of creating man in his original solitude with and for God* that God simultaneously affirms that it is not good for man to be alone, or to be without community with another human being who is different but of the same kind.

With Joseph Ratzinger, then, as he expresses this in his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, we may say that man’s original imaging of God consists first in man’s capacity for worship, and consequently but simultaneously in his inner ordination to another human being, hence in his socialness that begins in a spousal relation. This original structure of
aloneness and unity lies hidden at the heart of every human experience. Every human being in his originality as a creature bears the dual implication of order from and toward God as well as toward and in unity with other human beings. Here, then, lies the root anthropological meaning of the human person as a *communio personarum*—the concept that is central for John Paul II’s vision of marriage and family as well as for his reading of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and of the Church’s missionary opening to the world.

Needless to say, the foregoing points need to be amplified in light what may be termed the trinitarian Christ-centeredness basic to the life and work of Blessed John Paul. This will suffice, however, as I turn now to the work of the man being granted this afternoon the title of Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Institute.

III.

Professor Kenneth Schmitz’s metaphysics of gift, set forth in sustained fashion especially in his well-known book, *The Gift: Creation*, indicates what seems to me a capstone of his own life work as well as what indeed is arguably the central metaphysical notion undergirding the theological anthropology of the Institute as just indicated. Now Professor Schmitz’s philosophical work is far too rich and spreads over far too many themes to be captured adequately in a summary statement—and he will understand that it is much easier to comment on a person’s thought in his absence than it is in his presence. My intention is not to offer a synthesis but only to direct attention to arguments of his
work that are fundamental for the task given over to the Institute by John Paul II.

We will highlight especially three points. First, pondering the notion of gift in light of creation *ex nihilo*, Professor Schmitz establishes the grounds for a God-centered idea of the creature all the while he simultaneously secures the full integrity and dignity of the creature. Second, he enunciates the metaphysical roots of creaturely community, of an originally given community of all creatures with each other, by virtue of their common relation to the Creator God. Third, interpreting creative causality through the category of gift, Schmitz restores “a metaphysical interiority to nature, as well as to the natural in man” (*The Gift*, 89). These three aspects of Schmitz’s provide what seems to me the ontological infrastructure that is presupposed in John Paul II’s notions of original solitude and original unity, and that alone enables us to exhibit the reasonableness of these notions. Let me now comment briefly on each of the three aspects.

(1) Creation *ex nihilo* means that the creaturely being as such, as a whole, is given to himself and is so far in-dependent. But it also means that the creature owes everything to God, and is thus absolutely dependent. But how, then, do we resolve the apparent paradox indicated here? Doesn’t this paradox suggest a humiliation of the creature—“if God initiates the context and sets the conditions for [everything man does]” (68). Indeed, this is why, according to Schmitz, one might say, recalling the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, that a desire for the death of God seems to be “rooted in the very condition of being a creature” (68)—only with this death, in other words, could the creature thus be
said to be into genuine autonomy.

Schmitz argues that this objection can be met only if we re-think the meaning of creaturely integrity and creative power from “within the context of creation *ex nihilo* itself” (73). He then states:

The dependence of the creature is absolute because it is dependence upon [the] very generosity that in its turn is the original condition of the creature’s very being. If the creature were humiliated by this, then its very being would be in a totally deprived and absolutely abject state; so that the creature would be *nihil*, rather than *ex nihilo* (73-4).

For Schmitz, then, in a word, God’s act of creation cannot be the source of humiliation and so far indignity of the creature since it is by virtue of that very act that the creature *is* on its own, is in-dependent, at all!

We arrive thus at the burden of the professor’s argument: I am from within the depths of my autonomy as a singular being God-centered. I am originally self-centered only as, at an even more fundamental ontological level, God-centered. (We can recall here the view of Augustine–affirmed in his own way by Aquinas: God is more interior to me than I am to myself: *interior intimo meo*.)

We can indeed make the point stronger: my original *self*-affirmation as a creature cannot but imply affirmation of my inmost reality *as given* to myself, and thus in some sense as gift from another. The generosity of the creative Giver takes original form in the
creature as the re sponsive giving properly called gratitude. Creation ex nihilo, in a word, implies that autonomy and gratitude in the creature can never be dissociated from each other—or can be dissociated only at the expense of distorting the integrity of the creature, thus rendering the creature unintelligible in his proper nature and dignity.

(2) But this first point remains in an important sense incomplete. In creating, the creator in his creative generosity does not merely create individuals singly, but creates their world as well. “The creature is in fact a member of the ultimate plurality, the created universe” (74). This membership of the individual creature in the world, however, must be rightly understood. Schmitz accordingly clarifies

the world is not some thing apart from its creatures: it does not have its own act of being. Still, it does have its own mode of being. The world is not an individual. Nor is it a mere collection, a network of relations resting upon non-worlded and private individuals. Nor is it the System of which they are mere members. Rather, the world is that which is built into its creatures, and they into it. For they are built-up in and for and with regard to the world within which they have their being (The Gift, 111-112).

On the one hand, then: worldly community does not exist except in and through the individual entities in which alone it is actual, and hence in and through what are categorial relations among individual entities. On the other hand: individual entities do not actually exist except as originally-already in the mode of community with one
another, that is, by virtue of the transcendental relationality built into the being of each of them by the creator in the act of creation. My mode of being as an individual, in a word, is to be-in-the-world, and thus to be social.

All of this makes explicit what is implied by the fact that the individual creature’s original order of relation to God, and, in a secondary but simultaneous and intrinsic way, also to the entire creaturely world, is always already initiated in each creature before, or indeed as, it is enacted or constructed by the creature. This is why Schmitz rejects what he terms “reciprocation by interaction”—we might also say, for example, reciprocation via contractual acts—as a proper way of understanding “the first response of [the community that is established via creation ex nihilo]” (125).

(3) The foregoing two points, however, leave us still to show “how it is possible [for the creature] to receive everything and yet to maintain an intrinsic dignity and integrity”—which was the question raised in the first place by creation ex nihilo. And thus our third point, already implied in the first two. This “how” is bound up with recovery of generosity, in terms of what Schmitz calls metaphysical interiority. He develops what he means by this in The Gift with reference especially to the human soul or spirit, and thus human knowledge and love. It is through analysis of human understanding and love, in other words, that we can be brought to see that “gift [is] the mode appropriate to creative causality” (87). It is generosity that expresses “the power that brings creatures and their world ex nihilo into being” (87).
Here, then, is the third point: according to Professor Schmitz, causal power in its most fundamental meaning is to be identified with the generous interiority characteristic of love. Nonetheless, in identifying causal power finally with love, or the category of gift, Schmitz does not mean thereby “to place an anthropological or ‘merely subjective’ restriction upon causative power,” but to open out “the category of causality [itself] to richer and more definitive forms and potencies” (88). “We are justified in taking this turn,” he says, “on the general grounds that what holds really and truly at the level of human life is as apt for the analysis of the ultimate nature of reality as is the methodologically restricted concept of power-as-physical-force operative in the objective consideration of physical nature” (88). Schmitz’s interpretation of creative causality through the category of gift, then, entails reconfiguring the meaning of formal, final, efficient, and material causality as prevalently conceived in the modern period.

I should note here that Schmitz, while framing his argument regarding metaphysical interiority in terms of traditional metaphysics, makes clear elsewhere that, though his analysis differs from the more phenomenological analyses of Wojtyla, the two approaches, rightly understood, complement each other.1 With this clarification, we can thus rightly say that Schmitz’s argument provides grounds for John Paul II’s sense of metaphysics as meta-anthropology, as developed in his pontificate.

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To conclude, then: we find in Schmitz’s understanding of gift the ontological
infrastructure of the ideas that serve as central presuppositions for John Paul II in his founding of the Institute: of man’s “original solitude” and “original unity” and hence original meaning as a communio personarum, and also of the metaphysical generosity and interiority whereby the creature retains his integrity within a community ultimately initiated by and dependent upon God. It is this ontology of gift that enables us to exhibit the reasonable warrant for John Paul II’s message to our age: that the Creator God and the human creature, so to speak, live and die—ultimately have intelligibility—only together. The legitima autonomia of the creature affirmed by the Second Vatican Council is a matter of self-centeredness only as a matter simultaneously of God- and other-centeredness.

I believe that it is especially—though certainly not only—with respect to the three claims enunciated above that we see why Professor Schmitz’s metaphysics of gift will always remain fundamental for the education carried on at the Institute, in fidelity to the spirit and word of Blessed John Paul II.

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Endnote

1. In his study of Wojtyla’s philosophical anthropology, Schmitz says: “it is precisely because the traditional metaphysics of being is pre-modern that it need not reject the light thrown upon human interiority by Wojtyla’s phenomenological analysis. It is just because traditional metaphysics does not absorb being into experience that its sense of ontological interiority is compatible with and open to the modern experience realistically considered . . . [B]ecause the traditional metaphysics of being has not suffered the divorce of subjectivity and objectivity in their modern and mutually exclusive senses, such a metaphysics can provide a more adequate base for a modified modern sense of interiority, . . . Hence, just because traditional metaphysics
does not empty non-conscious things of their appropriate interiority and depth, it can find the
grounds for an interiority shared in common by conscious and non-conscious beings. Traditional
metaphysics of being can then identify the distinctive mode of human interiority in terms of
intellectuality and freedom, leaving to a realist phenomenology the description of the
experienced inner drama of responsible liberty (Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama:*
*The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II*, pp. 142-43).