Augustine’s reference to that work of God’s “wherein He worketh hitherto” (according to the quotation from Scripture that would provide a basis for the concept of providence) evokes a statement Christ makes in relation to his own work: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (John 5:17). The statement raises a number of questions, starting with the one concerning the relation between the Father and the Son’s respective works. The theological uses of the metaphor of the instrument need to be understood by reference to this question.

That theologians would appeal to something like a rhetoric of instrumentality, with the metaphor of the instrument at its center, should come as no surprise, and not only in light of the metaphor’s obvious relation to the problem of work, precisely what is at stake in Christ’s statement. The Son himself, as it turns out, is implicitly conceived, starting with the first reflections on the Incarnation, in instrumental terms. We can see this if we return, briefly, to the doctrine of exinanitio, which I discussed towards the end of Part One, while analyzing the Exercises’ treatment of the divinity’s concealment in the Passion. As I pointed out, when the Exercises state that the divinity goes into “hiding,” they are alluding to the consummation, as it were, of the evacuation of divine attributes that, echoing the terms of the famous hymn from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, begins when God is “found in human form” (schémati heuréthis hos anthropos). Death radicalizes this evacuation, making it seem as though the divinity had definitively and irrevocably retreated. In order to convey the implications of this retreat, the Pauline hymn resorts to a crucial juxtaposition: what is in “very nature a God,” we read, takes on “the very nature of a servant.” Closer to the Greek original, we can say that what is in “the form of God” (morphé theou) takes on “the form of a slave” (morphén doulos).

The possibility of conceiving of Christ in instrumental terms rests on this reference to the doulos. To see this, we must go beyond a purely typological analysis, according to which the hymn would contain an echo of Isaiah’s suffering ‘servant’ (ebed) (Isaiah 53:1–12). Closer to the Greek philosophical milieu with which Paul was engaging, the term doulos can instead be said to introduce an ‘economic’ preoccupation, in the sense
that this word had for Aristotle: Christ’s redemptive work is the decisive moment in the ‘administration’ (nomos) of God’s ‘household’ (oikos), precisely because as a slave he is the premier instrument of such administration. It suffices in this context to recall what Aristotle has to say in the Politics, where he writes that those who devote themselves to the art of managing the household “must have their own proper instruments for the accomplishment of their work.” The household, according to a favorite analogy of Aristotle’s, is like a ship: it comprises a set of instruments, which can be either inanimate—such as the rudder—or animate—such as the look-out man. When it comes to the household, Aristotle suggests, “the servant is a kind of instrument.” He is, however, an animate instrument, and thus unlike the other instruments among which he is found. Such instruments are unable to accomplish their work by themselves, and hence dependent for their deployment on the slave, who is for this very reason “himself an instrument which takes precedence over all other instruments.”

The fate of the economic preoccupation that insinuates itself through the doulos—the fate, that is, of the concern with God’s administrative praxis—lies beyond the scope of this discussion. Instrumentality,

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1 Aristotle, Politics, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 1253b. The other instruments, Aristotle writes, are unlike “the statues of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus, which, says the poet, ‘of their own accord entered the assembly of the Gods.’” The shuttle or the lyre are not able to operate, Aristotle writes, “without a hand to guide them.” If this were not so, “chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves.” Aristotle’s distinction between the slave and the other instruments in a household’s property is then followed by another distinction between “instruments of production” and “instruments of action.” What is used without producing anything is an instrument of action, Aristotle writes, while what is used in order to produce something is an instrument of production. A bed, for example, is simply used. No other thing comes into being as a result of its use. A shuttle, however, can be used to weave a garment. According to Aristotle, the slave is an instrument of action, since although he uses instruments of production, he does not produce anything directly. Cf. Ibid., 1254.

2 On this preoccupation, see Giorgio Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, 17–52. The word oikonomia, Agamben explains, appears for the first time in the writings of the Greek fathers in the context of their attempt to counter accusations that God’s oneness was compromised by the doctrine of the Incarnation. The meaning assigned to it was no different from the one that it had acquired in the philosophical milieu in which it originated: oikonomia, Agamben writes, was meant to designate the “management” of a household consisting of a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit. Proponents of a divine economy intended the concept to make it possible to approach God’s redemptive praxis, and what he did, independently of what he was: this praxis was formulated in terms of a plurality of persons that could be simply set aside where his being, and the oneness that was constitutive of that being, was at stake. In speaking of God’s oikonomia, then, the Greek fathers thought they had found a way of neutralizing accusations that they had introduced a “polytheistic” principle into theology.