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AQUINAS ON SUBSISTENT RELATION

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AQUINAS ON SUBSISTENT RELATION

In the mainstream of Latin trinitarian theology during the Middle Ages, the Divine Persons were described as subsistent relations. This conception of the Persons is commonly held to this day among Roman Catholic theologians¹. In this paper I will examine this conception, as it is presented by St. Thomas Aquinas, in the light of philosophical advances that have been made in our knowledge of the nature of relations. I will argue that these advances make it impossible to accept Aquinas's position that the Persons are subsistent relations, although they do not rule out the possibility of their being distinguished from one another by the relations that exist between them.

1. *Aquinas's theory of relations*

We can only understand what Aquinas meant by saying that the Persons are subsistent relations if we understand his views on the metaphysics of relations. Since these views are complex and liable to be unfamiliar to modern readers, it is desirable to begin an account of his conception of the Persons by setting forth his thought on relations. Aquinas's theory of relations is largely taken from Aristotle. In setting out his theory, it is not necessary for our purposes to consider whether or how he may have altered or improved on Aristotle's account. Nor is it necessary to address disputed questions about the interpretation of his theory of relations; it is only those basic features that form the core of his theory that will be needed for our discussion, since the objections that will be raised against his theory will be concerned with these basic features².

1. See e.g. W. KASPER in his *The God of Jesus Christ*, tr. Matthew J. O'CONNELL, London 1984, pp. 279-80.

2. For a more complete account of Aquinas's theory of relations, the most important work is still: A. KREMPEL, *La doctrine de la relation chez St. Thomas*, Paris 1952. M. HENNINGER's *Relations: medieval theories 1250-1325*, Oxford 1989, is also useful. L. MOONAN provides some useful discussion of Aquinas's understanding of relations

Before looking at his understanding of relations in God, we need to examine his understanding of relations in created things. Aquinas divides being into ten predicaments, nine of which are accidents and one of which is substance. These predicaments have objective reality, and are the first things to be known by our intellect (cf. *De Potentia* q. 7, a. 9). Every real thing is either a substance or an accident (cf. *De Potentia* q. 8, a. 2). Relation is one of the accidents; it is the accident that has the least being, which has led some thinkers to deny that it has real being. This denial is mistaken, Aquinas asserts; the perfection and goodness of things consists not only in their nature in themselves, but also in their order to one another. Since order is a kind of relation, and only real things can give rise to perfection and goodness, we cannot assert that no relation has real being.

Substances are subjects, are things that exist but that do not exist in anything else. The nature of an accident, on the other hand, is to inhere in a subject. Relation, however, differs from accidents such as quantity and quality in that it is not defined as inhering in a subject, but only as referring to another (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 28, a. 1; *De Potentia* q. 8, a. 2). This gives rise to an important feature of relations in created things, the feature that there is as it were two sides to them (provided they are real, something that will be gone in to below); there is the fact that, as accidents, they inhere in a subject, they have *esse in*, and the fact that, as relations, they are oriented to something else, they have *esse ad*.

Since relations are accidents, they are predicated of a subject. Every relational statement thus involves two terms; a subject of which the relation is predicated (*terminus a quo*), and the thing towards which the subject is related (*terminus ad quem*). When two things are related, then, since relations are predicated of subjects, and there are two subjects involved in the relation, there exist two relations. Abraham's being the father of Isaac thus involves two relations; the relation of paternity in Abraham, and the relation of filiation in Isaac. These relations are necessarily distinct, and are described as in opposition to one another.

and his application of this understanding to the theology of the Trinity, in «Aquinas and the Number of Divine Persons», in: *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 78/4 (2002). Moonan points out that Aquinas's view of relation is not the one held by modern philosophers, but does not attempt to determine whether this undermines Aquinas's metaphysical account of the Trinity.

There is an important distinction between the category of relation and all the other categories of being, that has already been alluded to. Things that belong to the other categories are real from their very natures — a quality, for example, is real simply as being a quality — but relations are not real things from the nature of relation (cf. *Quodlibetal Question 2*, a. 1). There is a distinction between real relations, and logical relations. This distinction is made possible by the fact that the nature (*ratio*) of a relation, unlike the nature of other accidents, is not to inhere in a subject, but to be oriented to something else: «*ratio propria relationis non accipitur secundum comparisonem ad illud in quo est, sed secundum comparisonem ad aliquid extra*»³. If inhering in things were part of the nature of relations, all relations would be real, because to inhere in a thing is to have real being. But although real relations do inhere in things, it is not their inhering in things, not their *esse in*, that *makes* them relations; it is rather their *esse ad*. The distinguishing feature of relations, their *esse ad*, does not entail real being, and hence there can be relations that do not have real being; such relations therefore do not inhere in things, but only have logical being. Aquinas says of logical relations that «...just as a real relation consists in order between thing and thing, so a logical relation is the order of thought to thought»⁴. It is the possession of *esse in* that makes a relation real.

Real relations relate two things that must each exist, be distinct from one another, and be referable to the other (cf. *De Potentia* q. 7 a. 11). The distinction between real and logical relations is connected to the view that relations are accidents. A relation in a subject can only be a real relation when it supervenes on an accident in that subject that is not a relation. Thus Abraham's relation of paternity to Isaac results from his action of begetting Isaac. Action is an accident, that has real being. Since it has real being, the relation of paternity that it gives rise to has real being, and paternity is a real relation. But the action does not have the same being as the relation. Rather, we can distinguish between two different accidents that belonged to Abraham — the accident of action, the begetting, and the accident of relation, the paternity — which are

3. *S.th.* I, q. 28 a. 2.

4. *De Potentia*, q. 7 a. 11. Transl. as *On the Power of God* by the English Dominican Fathers, Westminster, Maryland, 1952, pp. 63-4.

real, and are not identical with one another. Real relations in created things are thus not only accidents, but accidents that depend on other accidents for their being. The accidents upon which real relations depend are described as the foundations of the relations. It is possible for a relation between two extremes to be real in one of the extremes, but not real in the other. Those relations that are real in both extremes are called mutual relations. Relations consequent upon quantity, action or passion are always real in both of the things related (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 13 a. 7), and these accidents are the foundations for all real mutual relations. When the extremes that are related are of different orders, the relation will be real in one of them but not real in the other. This is the case in the relation between knower and thing known; this relation is real in the knower, but it is not real in the thing known.

2. *Aquinas on the Persons as subsistent relations*

The idea of using relations to explain the distinction of persons in God can of course be found in St. Augustine. Aquinas follows Augustine in doing this, although his Aristotelian conception of the will and the intellect and his rather more elaborate theory of relations lead to differences between his Trinitarian theology and St. Augustine's that need not be discussed here.

Aquinas asserts (in e.g. *De Potentia* q. 8 a. 1) that the distinction between the Persons cannot be a distinction between any absolute features of God, because anything that is predicated absolutely of God denotes the one and only divine essence within which there can be no distinction. The distinction must therefore be a relative distinction. The relations in question must be real and not merely logical ones, because if the relations were only logical ones the Persons would only be logically distinct, and not really distinct; to deny that they are really distinct is the heresy of Sabellianism. As we have seen, Aquinas holds that real mutual relations arise only from action, passion and quantity. There can be no passion or quantity in the divine nature, and there can be no relations between God and created things that are real in God, so any real relation in God must arise from an action that «does not tend to anything external, but remains in the

agent itself»⁵. There are only two kinds of internal action in an agent with a nature that is divine and intellectual (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 28 a. 5); the operation of the intellect, and the operation of the will.

The operation of the intellect, in Aquinas's view, is what gives rise to the relations of paternity and filiation in the Godhead. This operation and these relations are sufficient to explain and illustrate Aquinas's doctrine on the connections between Persons, relations, and divine essence. For the purposes of describing this doctrine in general, we do not need to consider the other real divine relations of spiration and procession, which according to Aquinas arise from the operation of the will in God, and raise questions and difficulties that are peculiar to themselves.

Aquinas gives a careful description of what is involved in the operation of the intellect.

Now the one who understands may have a relation to four things in understanding; namely to the thing understood, to the intelligible species whereby his intelligence is made actual, to his act of understanding, and to his intellectual concept. This concept differs from the three others. It differs from the thing understood, for the latter is sometimes outside the intellect, whereas the intellectual concept is only in the intellect. Moreover the intellectual concept is ordered to the thing understood as its end (...). It differs from the intelligible species, because the latter which makes the intellect actual is considered as the principle of the intellect's act, since every agent acts forasmuch as it is actual; and it is made actual by a form, which is necessary as a principle of action. And it differs from the act of the intellect, because it is considered as the term of the action, and as something effected thereby⁶.

This scheme can be made more perspicuous by an illustration. Suppose I see Bessie, the cow, grazing in the field, and I think «That is a cow». Bob the cowboy, on the other side of the field, also sees Bessie, and also thinks «That is a cow». Here Bessie, who is chewing her

5. *S.th.* I, q. 27 a. 2. Transl. in A.C. PEGIS (ed.), *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, New York 1945, p. 278. Relations that arise from actions that remain within an agent should not be confused with the 'internal relations' sometimes discussed by later philosophers, which are conceived of as relations that a thing possesses essentially. There might be relations, like relations of origin, that are internal in this sense but that would not be internal to an agent. For example, some philosophers have maintained that the property of having a particular couple as parents is an essential property, so that anyone who does not have my parents could not possibly be me. This 'internal relation' is clearly not a relation arising from actions internal to an agent.

6. *De Potentia* q. 8 a. 1 (transl. cit., pp. 70-1).

culd, is the thing understood. Bob and I, in thinking «That is a cow», are both understanding something about Bessie; and we are in fact both understanding the same thing, because the content of what we are thinking about Bessie is the same. In this case, the single intelligible species, which we are both entertaining in our thought that Bessie is a cow, is the form of cowhood. There are not two different intelligible species in my thought and Bob's thought; if there were, we would not be thinking the same thing about Bessie. (If there were different intelligible species in our thoughts, then if one of us was thinking that Bessie was a cow, the other one could not also be thinking that Bessie was a cow; he would have to be thinking that Bessie was something else — an elk, say, or a buffalo.)

However, there is obviously also a sense in which Bob and I are having two different thoughts. My thought is occurring in my mind, and Bob's thought is occurring in his; if I stop thinking «That is a cow», and begin thinking about something else, that does not mean that Bob also stops thinking «That is a cow». Since my thought and Bob's thought are different, it follows that we can distinguish between the form of cowhood as existing in my thought and the form of cowhood as existing in Bob's thought. This is a distinction between what Aquinas would call my intellectual concept of cowhood, and Bob's intellectual concept of cowhood.

Aquinas makes use of this distinction in the following way. He remarks that the intellect can understand other things, and it can understand itself. It is the latter sort of understanding that occurs in the operation of the intellect in God. God's intellectual concept, or word, is produced by the act of his intellect. This production differs from the production that happens when created intellects think of themselves. Since God is simple and is pure act, his act of intelligence is his very essence. God is thus co-essential with — has the same essence as — his intellectual concept. Since this concept is co-essential with God, is a likeness of God (being a thought of himself), and proceeds from God, its procession can be called a generation and a begetting (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 27 a. 2). The Word that is begotten is the Son, and the one who begets is the Father. The relation between the Father and the Son is a real one on both sides. A relation is real on one side but not the other, Aquinas says, when the cause of the relation exists on one side and not the other; and «...the Word

is produced as co-essential with God himself; wherefore God is related to his word in respect of something in God and not only with respect to something on the part of the Word»⁷. Moreover, the intellect is a real thing, and is really related to the concept that proceeds from it intellectually (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 28 a. 1 ad 4).

Since the relation between God and his Word is real on both sides, and since, Aquinas holds, when two things are related there are two different and opposed relations between them, the relation between God and his Word involves two different, opposed relations; the relation of paternity, and the relation of filiation. A consideration of paternity and filiation in God permits us to set forth two crucial aspects of Aquinas's understanding of the divine relations. These are his view that the relations are identical with the divine essence, and his view that the Persons are identical with their relations.

In God, as in creatures, there are two sides to real relations. There is their having real being, and there is their being relations — their being oriented to another. In creatures, the being of real relations is accidental being, is *esse in*. But the being of relations in God cannot be accidental being, since there are no accidents in God. There is no other being in God aside from the divine essence, and thus whatever has being in God is the divine essence. The being of the relations in God, their *esse*, is the being of the divine essence, and these relations are identical with the divine essence (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 28 a. 2, *De Potentia* q. 8 a. 2). The 'two-sidedness' of the divine relations is thus different from that of created relations. The divine relations have an *esse ad*, a 'towardness', just as created relations do. This towardness is not enough to make them real relations. Like created relations, the divine relations need some other kind of being to make them real. Unlike created relations, however, the kind of being that makes the divine relations real is not accidental being. It is rather substantial being, the *esse* of God himself. The divine being thus 'underlies', or rather *is*, three different relations.

As the relation which exists in creatures involves not only a regard to another, but also something absolute, so the same applies to God; yet not in the same way. What is contained in the creature, above and beyond what is contained in the meaning of relation, is something else besides that relation; whereas in God there is no distinction, but both are one and the same reality...⁸.

7. *Ibid.* ad 3 (transl. cit., p. 72).

8. *S.th.* I, q. 28 a. 2 ad 2 (transl. cit., p. 285).

As well as being identical with the divine essence, the relations, in Aquinas's view, are identical with the Persons, and constitute the Persons. The Persons, Aquinas argues, are hypostases — that is, are individual things, that cannot be predicated of several. The divine essence is common to the Persons and is predicated of several (although it is not divided amongst them), so it cannot distinguish or constitute the Persons; only what is individual and incommunicable in God can do so. What is individual and incommunicable in God is origin and relation, which differ logically although they do not differ really. But origin cannot distinguish the Persons, because things can only be distinguished by what is intrinsic to them, and the origin of things is not intrinsic to them. Relation must therefore be what constitutes the Persons (cf. *De Potentia* q. 8 a. 3, *S.th.* I, q. 40 a. 2). The identity of Persons and relations follows from the fact that in God abstract and concrete are one and the same. The relations of the Persons, which are their personal properties, must therefore be the same as the Persons (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 40 a. 1). Although each Person is identical with the divine essence, it does not follow, in Aquinas's view, that the Persons are identical with one another. The Persons are really identical with the divine essence, but not logically identical with it, and identity is only transitive, in Aquinas's view, when it is both a real and a logical identity (*idem re et ratione*) (cf. *S.th.* I, q. 28 a. 3). Things are logically, as well as really, identical when they are really identical and have the same definition. The identity of the Persons with their relations, on the one hand, and with the divine essence, on the other, is the key to Aquinas's trinitarian theology. Because the Persons are identical with their relations, and these relations are opposite relations which are necessarily different from one another, the Persons are necessarily different from one another. Identity of Person and relation thus secures the distinction of Persons for Aquinas. Because the Persons are identical with the divine essence, which is subsistent, they subsist and are divine.

And although the divine relations constitute the hypostases and thus make them subsistent, they do so inasmuch as they are the divine essence: because a relation as such neither has nor can give subsistence, for this belongs to a substance alone. On the other hand the relations as such distinguish, for it is as such that they are mutually opposed (*De Potentia* q. 8 a. 3)⁹.

9. *De Potentia* q. 8 a. 3 (transl. cit., p. 88). The account of Aquinas's trinitarian theology that I have given in this paper has benefited from the expert instruction of the late Fr. Jean-Marie Tillard O.P.

3. *Objections to Aquinas's position on divine relations and the Persons*

This account of the trinity of persons and unity of divinity in God makes ingenious use of broadly Aristotelian theories of relation and identity. If this theory is a true one, the description of the Trinity that makes use of it succeeds in giving a coherent account of how the three Persons can be distinct from one another and yet be one God. The problem for Aquinas's trinitarian theology is that the logical and metaphysical positions it assumes are not correct ones. The difficulties with the logical and metaphysical presuppositions of Aquinas's account of the Trinity lie in two areas; in his conception of identity, and in his conception of relations¹⁰.

The relevance of different conceptions of identity to Trinitarian theology has been much discussed by contemporary philosophical theologians, but the question of the implications of different understandings of relation for accounts of the Trinity has received little consideration. I want to focus on the question of relation rather than continue the debate over identity, but the close connections between these two issues make it desirable to give some consideration to the question of identity. Aquinas is concerned in his account of the Trinity to reject the idea that identity must always be transitive; for if he allowed that identity is always transitive, he would have to conclude that since the Persons are all identical with divine essence, they are identical with each other. He does this, as we have seen, by distinguishing between real and logical identity, and claiming that identity is only transitive if it is both real and logical. From the point of view of modern understandings of identity, however, it is not possible to admit either that there is more than one kind of identity, or that identity statements need not be transitive.

Modern logicians propose two competing accounts of identity; the absolute conception of identity, and the relative conception of identity. The relative conception of identity makes these claims:

- (1.) We cannot say that things are simply identical, without any further qualification. Instead, statements of identity are always relative to some description. Peter Geach asserts: «When one says

10. In distinguishing between these two areas I do not mean to take a position on the question of whether or not identity is a relation.

'x is identical with y', this I hold, is an incomplete expression; it is short for 'x is the same A as y'¹¹. Stated more formally, this position holds that for x to be identical with y is for x to be the same F as y, where x and y stand for individuals, and F stands for some sortal. Sortals are characterised by Peter Strawson in this way: «A sortal universal supplies a principle for distinguishing and counting individuals which it collects. It presupposes no antecedent principle, or method, of individuating the particulars it collects»¹². Examples of sortal predications given by Strawson are «Fido is a dog», «is an animal»; examples of predications that are not sortals are «Socrates is wise», «Socrates fights».

- (2.) It is possible for x to be the same F as y, but for x to not be the same G as y, where F and G stand for different sortals. This possibility is what makes the relative theory of identity importantly different from an absolute conception of identity. A standard example of such an alleged possibility is one given by Leonard Linsky¹³. Suppose the obelisk known as Cleopatra's Needle, which was brought to London and set up as a landmark in 1877, had been gradually eroded by pollution, and that its stone had been replaced by concrete in the course of repairing it, until there was no stone left. We could then say that the present-day Cleopatra's Needle is the same landmark as the landmark set up in 1877, but not that it is the same stone as the stone set up in 1877.

11. P. GEACH, «Identity», in: *Logic Matters*, Oxford 1972, p. 238. Peter Geach proposes and defends the relative identity thesis in his *Reference and Generality: An Examination of Some Medieval and Modern Theories*, Ithaca 1962; «Identity», in: *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967), pp. 3-12 (reprinted in his *Logic Matters*); «Identity — A Reply», in: *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1968), pp. 556-559 (also reprinted in *Logic Matters*); «Ontological Relativity and Relative Identity», in M.K. MUNITZ (ed.), *Logic and Ontology*, New York 1973, pp. 287-302. Useful discussion of Geach's thesis is found in J. PERRY, «The Same F», in: *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970); E.M. ZEMACH, «In Defense of Relative Identity», in: *Philosophical Studies* 26 (1974); N. GRIFFIN, *Relative Identity*, Oxford 1977; J. PERRY, «Relative Identity and Number», in: *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1978); H.W. NOONAN, *Objects and Identity*, The Hague 1980; D. WIGGINS, *Sameness and Substance*, Cambridge 1980 (revised as *Sameness and Substance Renewed*, 2001); W.P. ALSTON & J. BENNETT, «Identity and Cardinality: Geach and Frege», in: *The Philosophical Review* 93 (1984).

12. P. F. STRAWSON, *Individuals*, London 1959, p. 168.

13. In his review in *Mind* 73 (1964) of Geach's *Reference and Generality*.

The absolute conception of identity denies both these claims. It holds that statements of identity are complete on their own, without reference to any sortal or other description under which the items that are asserted to be identical must fall, and that such statements are subject to Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. This Law states that if any two objects x and y are identical, then whatever is true of x must be true of y , and vice versa. In consequence, the absolute conception of identity denies that x and y can be the same F but not the same G ; because, if it is true of x that it is G , and x and y are identical, it must therefore be true of y that it is G . (Examples like those of Cleopatra's Needle are dealt with by distinguishing the 'is' of composition from the 'is' of identity. The 'is' of composition refers to the stuff that material things are made up of. However, material things need not be identical with the stuff they are made up of; humans, for example, remain identical over time, although the matter that makes up their bodies is continually changing. The 'is' in «Cleopatra's Needle is not the same stone» is then understood as an 'is' of composition, rather than an 'is' of identity.)

The relative theory of identity was in fact first suggested by Geach in the course of discussing Aquinas's trinitarian theology. There he remarked that «Now different Persons' being the same God is not manifestly impossible; for, in general, x and y may be the same F although different things are true of x and y »¹⁴. This assertion corresponds to the second feature of relative identity described above. Geach's proposal of a relative conception of identity was an ingenious idea, that may have been inspired by Aquinas's notion of logical identity, but that did not in fact correspond to what Aquinas thought. For one thing, relative identity is supposed to be the *only* sort of identity that exists. It does not allow for the possibility of two different sorts of identity, one real and one logical. For another thing, relative identity is transitive. If x is the same F as y , and y is the same F as z , then, on the relative conception, x must be the same F as z . In cases

14. P. GEACH, «Aquinas», in: ANSCOMBE & GEACH (edd.), *Three Philosophers*, Oxford 1961, p. 118. This mention of relative identity predates Geach's other discussions of the subject. Geach's views on identity and Trinity have been taken up by other Christian philosophers, most notably by A. P. MARTINICH, «Identity and Trinity», in: *Journal of Religion* 58 (1978), and P. VAN INWAGEN, «And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God», in: T.V. MORRIS (ed.), *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, Notre Dame 1988.

like the Cleopatra's Needle one given above, we do not, on the relative identity view, have a case of non-transitive identity, but rather two different sorts of relative identity predicated of the obelisk, of which one sort happens to obtain and the other sort does not. When Geach and others resort to relative identity in order to claim that the Persons are the same God but not the same Persons, they are thus advancing a position that is quite different from that of Aquinas. They are not using 'same' in the sense that Aquinas does, because their understanding of identity is different from his.

The relative conception of identity is thus incompatible with Aquinas's position. The same is true of the absolute conception of identity. This conception, as can be seen from the description of it given above, also rules out the existence of more than one sort of identity, and requires that identity statements be transitive. In my opinion the scholarly debate over the nature of identity comes down decisively in favour of the absolute conception of identity¹⁵. David Wiggins asks the fundamental question in this debate; «How, if *a* is *b*, can there be something true of *the object a* which was untrue of *the object b*? *They are the same object*»¹⁶. Attempts to answer this question by relative identity theorists all seem to me to fail. It is possible that a theologian might take a defiant stand, and ask why the fact that modern logicians all reject Aquinas's understanding of identity should lead us to think that this understanding is wrong. The strength of the case for absolute identity is part of the response that can be given to this stand; this case does not leave room for Aquinas's view. Another part of the response to this stand will emerge from the discussion of Aquinas's understanding of relation. This understanding, as we will see, is closely linked to his understanding of identity, and as a result the problems with his understanding of relation undermine his account of identity.

Although the implications of different conceptions of identity for trinitarian theology have, as we have seen, been explored in some detail by philosophical theologians, the implications of different conceptions of relation for accounts of the Trinity have been neglected.

15. For the case against relative identity, see WIGGINS (2001), PERRY (1978), and ALSTON & BENNETT (1984).

16. WIGGINS (2001), p. 27.

The nature of relations is however of fundamental importance for trinitarian theologies of Aquinas's sort. This is because contemporary philosophers have adopted a basic metaphysical division that is fundamentally different from that of Aristotle and Aquinas. They have divided the attributes that it is possible for things to have into two categories, the category of property (or monadic property) and the category of relation. By 'property' they do not mean an attribute that inheres in something, but rather an attribute — like being green, or being a dog — that belongs to single objects. Substance and accident (with 'accident' understood as an attribute that inheres in a single substance) are all properties in this sense; hence relations cannot be accidents. Relations do not attach to a single subject at all, except in the case of relations between a thing and itself¹⁷. Since relations do not attach to a single subject, there is no such thing as opposition of relations in Aquinas's sense. Since opposition of relations is what distinguishes the Persons in Aquinas's trinitarian theology, this understanding of relations implies that the basis for the distinction of Persons that Aquinas offers does not exist, and hence that his theology fails to explain how they are distinguished from one another.

Underlying this contemporary view of relations is a view of propositions that is fundamentally different from that of Aquinas. Aquinas's understanding of the ten predicaments in general, and of relation in particular, is bound up with his conception of propositions. Following Aristotle, he saw all propositions as containing two terms, a subject term and a predicate term. With propositions of this form, the only statements that it is possible to make are statements that assign attributes to subjects. If we accept that all propositions have this form, we must accept that all true statements will be statements of this sort. This conception of propositions will have implications for ontology. The view that being is divided into substance and accident conforms to, and is perhaps necessitated by, this conception of propositions. The view that relation is predicated of a single subject is certainly necessitated by this conception of

17. Contemporary philosophers will allow that there can be relations between a thing and itself, that are real and are not, as Aquinas would have it, merely logical (good examples of such real relations would be self-love and self-hatred, which are real and commonly observable examples of relations between a thing and itself).

propositions, because it is impossible for propositions of the form laid down in this conception to describe a single relation as being predicated of more than one subject.

Modern philosophical thought has accepted a quite different understanding of propositions, an understanding that does not have the same implications for the nature of relations, and that enables us to think about relations in a different and better way. The modern understanding of propositions is taken from Gottlob Frege, the mathematician who developed modern logic. Frege's basic insight, which made possible his discovery of the fundamental principles of modern logic, was a conception of propositions that is based on the notion of a function.

Consider this example of a function:

$$x^2 + 2y + 3.$$

If we insert numbers in the places of the variables x and y , stipulating that $x = 4$ and $y = 2$, we will have provided arguments for this function. These particular arguments, the numbers 4 and 2, will, for this function, give the value of 23. Frege understood concepts to be a particular kind of function; a kind that takes objects as arguments, and that has truth or falsity as values. Take, for example, the concept of «being a man», or the concept of «being older than». These concepts, like the function $x^2 + 2y + 3$, are by their nature what Frege calls unsatisfied — they have holes in them, so to speak, that can be filled. These holes can be represented by a more perspicuous notation, that represents the concept of «being a man» as

x is a man

and the concept of «being older than» as

x is older than y .

If we fill the hole (represented by the variable x) in the concept « x is a man» by the object «Socrates», we get a proposition;

Socrates is a man

that has the value 'true'. If we fill it by the object Bucephalus, we get the different proposition

Bucephalus is a man

which has the value 'false'. Concepts can have one gap in them, or many — there is no upper limit to how many, just as there is no limit to how many variables there can be in an equation. (In Frege's view, there may be limits to the number of spaces for objects that can exist in concepts that we can grasp, but that is a fact about our intellectual capacities, not about concepts in themselves — just as the limits of what we can understand about mathematics have no bearing on mathematical truths themselves.)

There has been much debate over the ontological features of Frege's theory — over his assertion that concepts not only resemble, but really are, functions, over his view that the values of truth and falsity are existing things, and much else. But the basic idea that concepts and propositions are at least analogous in their structure to functions has been accepted, and forms the indispensable basis of modern predicate logic. It has made possible the enormous advance in power and subtlety of analysis that modern logic has brought about — an advance that is literally infinite in one respect, since Aristotelian syllogism offered a finite number of valid argument forms, whereas modern logic can establish an infinite number of them. The Aristotelian view of propositions as containing only two terms is no longer accepted¹⁸.

This conception of propositions has great importance for our understanding of the metaphysics of relations. It no longer requires us to hold that propositions have only two terms; it allows us to accept that there are relations that have more than two terms. It does not require us to understand relations as being predicated of a single subject. On the Aristotelian view, a proposition like «Socrates is taller than Theatetus» must be understood as predicating an attribute — the attribute of being taller than Theatetus — of a single subject, Socrates. On the Fregean view, this proposition can certainly be understood as predicating of Socrates the attribute of being taller than Theatetus, but it does not have to be understood as predicating an attribute of Socrates only. Instead of saying that the proposition contains a single

18. Efforts have been made by logicians like F. SOMMERS, *The Logic of Natural Language*, Oxford 1982, to develop a two-term logic that is as powerful as Fregean predicate logic, but logical systems like this one are not the same as the one used by Aquinas, and do not carry the same ontological implications.

subject of which an attribute is predicated, the Fregean view holds that the proposition contains two objects — Socrates and Theatetus — and makes an assertion about both of them.

This understanding of relations is clearly superior to Aquinas's one. It does not make the implausible assertions that no relation can have more than two terms, and that all real relations exist in (if they are created) or are identical with (if they are divine) the things that they relate. It is easy to give instances of relations that are undoubtedly real and that undoubtedly have more than two terms. A good example is the relation of betweenness. If a point A is between points B and C on a line, it is related to those points by the relation of betweenness, and this relation obviously has more than two terms.

As well as getting rid of opposition of relation, adding relation as an extra metaphysical category different from that of substance or accident removes the motivation for saying that relations must be 'in' the things that they relate. Even if we were to want to preserve the idea that relations are in the things they relate, however, it should be noted that this idea will not provide us with a reason for accepting the opposition of relation; because it will not give us any reason for thinking that a single relation cannot be 'in' more than one thing. This fact can be obscured by the connections between the relations that exist between things and the monadic properties of the things related. Many relations require the existence of monadic properties in their terms. An example is the relation of «being more intelligent than». Things can only stand in this relation when they are intelligent, and being intelligent is not a relation. When things stand in this relation, there will be a monadic property in each of them — the property of having intelligence. The relation will supervene on these properties, and the properties will be different from one another. But the difference between the properties cannot provide a foundation for opposition of relation, because what is different here are the monadic properties, *not* the relation; there is a *single* relation between the two things, a relation which the different monadic properties give rise to.

There are some features of relations themselves (as opposed to their connections with monadic properties) that might be thought to correspond to the idea of opposition of relation that is found in Aquinas, but that in fact do not. The logic of relations distinguishes between relations that are symmetrical, and those that are not. A relation R

between a and b is symmetrical when a 's standing in R to b implies that b stands in R to a , and vice versa. Thus the relation of being a spouse is symmetrical; if a is b 's spouse, b must be a 's spouse, and vice versa. This logic also contains the idea of the converse of a relation; when R is the relation of teacher to pupil, for example, its converse will be the relation of pupil to teacher.

These facts can seem to lend support to Aquinas's views, because when a relation is not symmetrical, it is not identical with its converse. The relation of a 's being the spouse of b , being symmetrical, is identical with the relation of b 's being the spouse of a ; but the relation of c 's being the teacher of d , since it is not symmetrical, is not identical with the relation of d 's being the pupil of c . The importance of this for Aquinas's views are that it implies that whenever a relation that is not symmetrical exists between two things, another, different relation that is its converse must also exist between these things; and the relations that Aquinas postulates in God, like paternity and filiation, are not symmetrical ones.

This sounds rather like Aquinas's understanding of opposing relations. But there is a crucial difference between this understanding and Aquinas's; opposing relations, in Aquinas's view, are different because each relation belongs to one of the terms and not to the other. But neither a non-symmetrical relation between two things nor its converse belong to one of the terms of the relation more than to another. The non-identity of non-symmetrical relations and their converses thus provides no support for the idea of opposing relations.

There is thus no such thing as the opposition of relation. The implications of this fact for Aquinas's trinitarian theology are plain. It means that it is not possible for the Persons to be constituted by, and identical with, their relations. Because a relation between two things is only one relation, not (as Aquinas would have it) two relations that are necessarily different, if the things in such a relation are identical with the relation they are in, they will be identical with one another; each would be that one relation. Think of a relation as being like a rope that attaches two things together. If each of the things were identical with the rope, each would *be* the rope, and there would be no difference between them; they would not be two, but only one, thing. The non-existence of opposition of relation means that relations between things are like ropes that join them. Far from explaining

the distinction between the Persons, the identity of Persons and relations would actually make any distinction between them impossible¹⁹. (It is worth pointing out that this problem could not be avoided by adopting the relative theory of identity.)

The case against Aquinas's view of relation is, as mentioned above, of importance for his conception of identity. This is because his understanding of relation is presupposed by his distinction between real and logical identity. This distinction, as we have seen, is used to answer the objection that since identity is transitive, the claim that the Persons are identical with the divine nature entails that they are identical with each other. He states the objection that identity must be transitive as follows:

It seems that the relations which are in God are not distinct in reality from each other. Because all things identical with one and the same thing are identical with one another. But every relation in God is identical in reality with the divine nature. Therefore divine relations are not distinct from each other in reality²⁰.

He replies to this objection as follows;

According to Aristotle [*Physics* III, 4.202b10], this argument, that all things identical with one and the same thing are identical with one another, holds good wherever there is identity both in reality and meaning (*in his quae sunt idem re et ratione*), as when the same thing is called a 'tunic' and a 'garment', but not where there is a difference of meaning. Hence in the same passage he says that although changing and change as well as being changed are the same thing, nevertheless it does not follow that changing and being changed are identical; for changing implies the relationship of causing change in another, whereas being changed implies the relationship of being changed by

19. A further difficulty with Aquinas's view on the identity of Persons and relations arises from his position on the *filioque*. He asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and describes this procession as giving rise to the relation of active spiration in the Father and the Son. Active spiration, in his view, is a single relation, not two different relations. But if the Father and the Son both stand in the relation, and are both identical with their relations, it follows that the Father is identical with the Son. Aquinas cannot escape this conclusion by saying that the Father is really but not logically identical with the Son. For one thing, he maintains that the Persons are not just logically, but also really, distinct. For another, the conclusion that follows from assuming the *filioque* and the identity of Persons with relations is not just a logical identity of Father and Son, but also a real identity, since these assumptions imply that Father and Son are the same relation and thus the same Person.

20. *S.th.* I, q. 28, a. 3 (transl. C. VELECKY O.P., in: *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars ed., vol. 6, London 1965, p. 33).

another. Likewise, while both fatherhood and sonship are in reality the same thing as the divine nature (*idem secundum rem cum essentia divina*), nevertheless their proper meanings imply opposite relationships. That is why a distinction is drawn between them²¹.

This argument for the distinction between real and logical identity depends on Aquinas's understanding of relations, because on the modern understanding of relations it does not hold up. For the modern understanding, it will not be true that changing, change and being changed are the same thing. Instead, we will be able to distinguish three things in a change. One thing is the relation of changing, and the other two things are the objects that occupy the places of changer and changed in this relation. Because these things are different on the modern view, there will be no need to postulate that they are identical in any way at all. The difference between changer, change, and changed will lie in their being different things, not in their being in some way the same thing while also falling under different descriptions. Dispensing with Aquinas's understanding of relation thus also leads us to dispense with his notion of a distinction between real and logical identity.

What about Aquinas's argument that the absence of any difference between abstract and concrete in the divine nature means that the Persons must be identical with their relations? Aquinas's description of the divine simplicity does indeed imply that there is no difference between abstract and concrete in God, so that God is the divine essence. But even if we accept Aquinas's views on divine simplicity, the conclusion about the hypostases that he draws from it does not follow. From the very nature of the hypostases it follows that they have properties — hypostatic properties — that are not identical with the divine essence. Thus, the fact that God is the same as the divine essence, because of the divine simplicity, need not imply that the features of the hypostases are simple in the same way and thus that the Persons are identical with their hypostatic properties, which are the properties that distinguish them as hypostases from one another. Indeed, we know that this cannot be so. If the simplicity of the divine essence, the essence that the Persons share, meant that the Persons were identical with all the features that they possess, it would be the case that the Persons were identical with both the divine essence and

21. *S.th.* I, q. 28, a. 3 ad 1 (transl. VELECKY, p. 35).

their hypostatic properties. That would mean that the hypostatic properties would be identical with the divine essence, of which there is only one, and thus that there was only one Person²².

The non-existence of opposition of relation does not make shipwreck of Aquinas's entire trinitarian theology. It need not falsify his contention that the Persons are distinguished by their relations, since we need not suppose that things are distinguished by their relations through opposition of relation; they can be distinguished from each other simply by being different terms of a relation. The psychological analogy of the Trinity that Aquinas takes from Augustine holds that the Persons are distinguished by their relations, since thinking and being thought, loving and being loved, are what distinguish the Persons, and are relations of a kind. But it does mean that the metaphysical underpinnings of a trinitarian theology of an Augustinian or Thomist sort need to be rethought from their foundations²³.

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22. Aquinas would not accept this argument for the Persons' not being identical with their properties, because, as we have pointed out, he would claim that the fact that the Persons are only really identical, and not logically identical, with the essence means that the identity of the Persons with the essence does not entail the identity of the Persons with each other. However, as mentioned above, his distinction between real and logical identity is not a tenable one, so a defence of this kind cannot rebut this argument.

23. In «Aquinas on divine simplicity», in: *The Monist* (1997), I have attempted to sketch out an alternative metaphysical foundation for a psychological account of the Trinity. The view that the Persons of the Trinity are subsistent relations has often been presented as a teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The grounds given for this assumption are the teachings of the council of Rheims in 1148, and the Council of Florence. In its Decree for the Jacobites 'Cantate Domino', the Council states: «Hae tres personae sunt unus Deus, et non tres dii: quia trium est una substantia, una essentia, una nature, una divinitas, una immensitas, una aeternitas, omniaque sunt unum, ubi non obviat relationis oppositio» (edd. DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 33rd ed., Rome 1965, no. 1330, p. 337.) However, this statement, which was not in any case solemnly defined by the Council, does not actually assert that the Persons are subsistent relations. The case of the council of Rheims is more complicated. The creed given in Mansi as having been taught by this council does indeed state that the persons are subsistent relations. However, the researches of Nicholas Haring have shown that this creed, which is given by Geoffrey of Auxerre in the *Libellus contra Gisleberti Pictavensi episcopi* as having been produced by the council, was not actually taught by the council at all; see N. HARING, «The Case of Gilbert of Porrée, Bishop of Poitiers», in: *Medieval Studies* 23 (1961); and «Notes on the Council and Consistory of Rheims», in: *Medieval Studies* 24 (1962). From a Roman Catholic point of view, the assertion that the Persons are subsistent relations is thus no more than a theologoumenon.