Aquinas on the Trinity

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That God is one and three is, of course, for Aquinas a profound mystery which we could not hope to know apart from divine revelation, but we can only begin to understand what he has to say about it if we recognise that for him God is a profound mystery anyway. There are people who think that the notion of God is a relatively clear one; you know where you are when you are simply talking about God whereas when it comes to the Trinity we move into the incomprehensible where our reason breaks down. To understand Aquinas it is essential to see that for him our reason has already broken down when we talk of God at all—at least it has broken down in the sense of recognising what is beyond it. Dealing with God is trying to talk of what we cannot talk of, trying to think of what we cannot think. Which is not to say that it involves nonsense or contradiction.

This similarity is sometimes obscured for us by the fact that Aquinas thinks we can prove the existence of God by natural reason whereas such unaided natural reason could tell us nothing of the Trinity. This, however, does not, for him, make the latter a mystery where the former is not, for he thought that to prove the existence of God was not to understand God but simply to prove the existence of a mystery. His arguments for the existence of God are arguments to show that there are real questions to which we do not and cannot know the answer. He seeks to show that it is proper to ask: "Why is there anything at all instead of nothing at all?"; he seeks, that is, to show that it is not an idle question like "How thick is the equator?" or "What is the weight of Thursday week?" It is a question with an answer but one that we cannot know, and this answer all men, he says, call "God." He is never tired of repeating that we do not know what God is, we know only that God is and what he is not and everything we come to say of him, whether expressed in positive or negative statements, is based on this.

After his arguments for the existence of God, for the validity of our unanswerable question, he says,

> When we know that something is it remains to inquire in what *way* it is so that we may know *what* it is. But since concerning God we cannot know what he is but only what he is not, we cannot consider in what way God is but only in what way he is not. So first we must ask in what way

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he is not, secondly how he may be known to us and thirdly how we may speak of him.

This, at the opening of Q.3, is his programme for the next ten questions and beyond. And none of the hundreds of questions that follow in the 4 volumes of the *Summa* marks a conscious departure from this austere principle. Indeed he constantly comes back to it explicitly or implicitly.

God must be incomprehensible to us precisely because he is creator of all that is and, as Aquinas puts it, outside the order of all beings. God therefore cannot be classified as any kind of being. God cannot be compared or contrasted with other things in respect of what they are like as dogs can be compared and contrasted with cats and both of them with stones or stars. God is not an inhabitant of the universe; he is the reason why there *is* a universe at all. God is in everything holding it constantly in existence but he is not located anywhere, nor is what is God located anywhere in logical space. When you have finished classifying and counting things in the universe you cannot add: "And also there is God." When you have finished classifying and counting everything in the universe you have finished, period. There is no God in the world.

Given this extreme view of the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of God we may well ask Aquinas how he thinks we have any meaning at all for the word "God." Surely if we do not know what God is we do not know what "God" means and theology must be a whole lot of codology. To know what a daisy is and to know the meaning of the word "daisy" come to much the same thing. Aquinas replies that even amongst ordinary things we can sometimes know how to use a name without knowing anything much about the nature of the thing named. Thus the businessman may quite rationally order a computer system to deal with his office work without having the faintest idea of how a computer works. His meaning for the word "computer" is not derived precisely from knowing what a computer *is,* it is derived from the effect that it has on his business. Now Aquinas says that with God it is like this but more so. We have our meaning for the word "God," we know how to use it, not because of anything at all that we know about God, but simply from the effects of God, creatures—principally that they are instead of there being nothing. But the businessman is better off because knowing what a computer is for is a very large part of knowing what it is. Whereas God does not exist in order to make creatures. So the meaning of "God" is not the same as the meaning of "the existence of things instead of there not being anything"; we have the word "God" because the existence of things instead of there not being anything is *mysterious* to us (and,

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Aquinas argues in the five ways, *ought* to be mysterious to us).

What we say of the word "God" has also to be said of every other word we use of God; if we speak of God as good or wise it is not because we understand what it is for God to be good or wise, we are wholly in the dark about this; we use these and similar words because of certain things we know about creatures. When we do this we take words which have at least a fairly clear sense in a context of creatures and seek to use them in a different context. This, in Aquinas's terminology, is to use them analogically. Certain words, of course, simply cannot be taken out of their creaturely context because this context is *part* of their meaning. Thus we could not, even speaking analogically, say that a mighty fortress is our God, because mighty fortresses are essentially material things and God could not be a material thing. We could only say that metaphorically, not analogically.

Thus when we say that God is maker or cause of the world we are using "maker" and "cause" outside their familiar contexts in senses which we do not understand.

So it should be clear that for Aquinas the existence of God at all is as mysterious as you can get. The Trinity for him is no less and no more mysterious. To say that there is Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are God is for him no more mysterious than to say there is God at all. In neither case do we know what we are saying, but in neither case are we talking nonsense by contradicting ourselves. This latter is, of course, the next point to consider.

Aquinas holds that although we do not know what it is for God to be maker of the world it is not nonsense to say this of God in the way that it would be *nonsense* to say literally that God is a mighty fortress or a cup of tea. It is frequently the case that we find we have to apply several predicates to God and because we do not understand them in this context we cannot see *how* they can be compatible with each other; but this is very different from saying that they are *in*compatible. It is one thing not to know how something makes sense and quite another to know that it does *not* make sense. Aquinas's task is to show that while we do not see how there can be Father, Son and Spirit who are all one God, we can show that it is not nonsense.

The thought may (at least at first) appear to be simpler if we look at the mystery of the incarnation. Here Aquinas holds that we do not understand how anyone could be simultaneously divine and human in the way that, for example, we *can* understand how someone could be simultaneously Russian and human. But he holds that we *can* understand that for someone to be both divine and human does *not* involve a contradiction in the sense that for something to be both a square and a

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circle *would* involve a contradiction.

Now, similarly, he holds that we cannot understand how God could be both Father, Son and Spirit as well as utterly one and simple, but we do understand that this does not involve the kind of contradiction that would be involved in saying, say, that God is three Fathers as well as being one Father, or three Gods as well as being one God.

What we have to do in this case is to see how we are compelled to say each of the things but not to try to imagine them being simultaneously true or even try to *conceive* of them being simultaneously true; we should not expect to form a concept of the triune God, or indeed of God at all, we must rest content with establishing that we are not breaking any rules of logic, in other words that we are not being intellectually dishonest.

There is nothing especially odd or irrational about this. It only seems shocking to those who expect the study of God to be easy and obvious, a less demanding discipline than, say, the study of nuclear physics. In physics we are quite accustomed to the idea that there are two ways of talking about the ultimate constituents of matter, both of them necessary and both of them internally coherent, and yet we do not know how to reconcile them: one in terms of waves and the other in terms of particles. It is not a question of choosing between them; we have to accept them both. We do not, however, need to conceive of how anything could be both wave and particle; we simply accept that, at least for the moment, we have these two languages and that the use of them does not involve a contradiction although we cannot see *how* it avoids contradiction.

It is true that most physicists would look forward to some future theoretical development in which we will devise a single language for expressing these matters but they do not see themselves as talking nonsense in the meantime. This too is rather similar to Aquinas's position, for he too looks forward to a theoretical development by which we will come to see, to understand, how God is both one and three, but this he thinks can only come by sharing God's own self-understanding in the beatific vision. But meanwhile we are not talking nonsense.

To take another parallel: the square root of a number is that which when multiplied by itself yields that number. Since any number whether positive or negative when multiplied by itself yields a positive number, what could be made of a notion like the square root of a negative number, the square root of minus 2 for example? There is plainly no way in which we could conceive of the square root of minus 2 but this does not faze mathematicians; they are content to use it in a rule-governed way and find it a very useful device.

Aquinas, then, is faced with a situation similar to the physicist's. We have on the grounds of revelation to say two quite different kinds of

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things about God, that God is altogether one and that there are three who are God. We cannot *see* how they can both be true but that need not faze us; what we have to do is to show that there are no good grounds for saying that they are incompatible. We have to show in fact that the conditions which would make them incompatible in other cases do not and cannot apply to God—remember that all we know of God is what he is not, what he cannot be if he is to be God, the reason why there is anything instead of nothing.

One of the basic principles which Aquinas employs in considering the Trinity is the Augustinian principle that everything that is in God is God. This is again something we cannot understand, we cannot see how it could be true but we are forced to assert that it is true. It follows, in Aquinas's view, from the fact that there can be no passive potentiality in God. This means that there is nothing in God which might not have been in him, there is never anything which he might be but is not or that he is but might not have been.

This in its turn follows from the fact that God cannot be changed by anything. If God were the patient or subject or victim of some other agent he could not be the source of the existence, the reality of everything that is. Rather, there would be something (this other agent) who would be a source of something in God. If God were not the source of the existence of all that is he would not be what we use the word "God" for. Now Aquinas holds, surely reasonably, that it makes no sense to speak of what does not exist as acting or doing anything or bringing anything about. Hence what is merely potential—what might exist but does not—cannot act to bring itself about nor can it bring anything else about. What is potential can only be brought into existence by something that is actual. We must not confuse potentiality in this sense with power, an active capacity to do something; we mean simply what might be but isn't. Thus if there were any potentiality in God in this passive sense, he would need to be acted on by some other agent and thus, as we have seen, would not be God. God is thus, in Aquinas's phrase, *actus purus*, sheer actuality. He does not become, he just is. He cannot become because then there would be something he might be but is not. It is for these reasons that Aquinas says that God is totally unchanging and timeless.

Because of this, Aquinas argues that there can be no "accidents" in God. Let me explain that. It is accidental to me that I am giving this lecture. This means that I would still be me if I were not giving it. Similarly it is accidental to me that I am wearing these clothes and that I am 6 feet high. I am still me in bed and I was the same me when I was 4 feet high. What is accidental is opposed to what is essential. Thus it is not accidental but essential to me that I am an animal or that I am a human

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being. If I ceased to be an animal I would cease to exist, I would turn into something else—a corpse. By what is essential to a thing we mean what it takes for it to exist. What it takes for me to be is my being human, what it takes for Fido to be is being a dog, but both Fido and I have many other things about us which are not essential in this sense, many things which we could lose or gain without ceasing to be. This is what "accidents" means.

Now it is clear that if giving this lecture is accidental to me I might not have been giving it—I mean I would still have been me if I had gone down with flu or simply been too scared. To have accidental features then is to be potential in some respect. Fido is eating a bone but he might not have been, he is not barking but he might be. To have accidental features as distinct from essential ones is to have some potentiality. Hence a being, God, with no potentiality can have no accidents. Every feature of God must be of his essence, essential to him.

Now please notice that all this argument is based not on any knowledge or understanding that we have of God; it is simply what we are compelled to say if we are to use the word "God" correctly, i.e. to mean whatever unknown mystery is the source of the being of all that is. Whatever would answer the question: "Why is there anything rather than nothing at all?", whatever "God" refers to, it could not be anything with potentiality and hence it could not be anything with accidental features.

This means that whatever is in God *is* God. My giving this lecture is not my being me, it is accidental to me, whereas my being human is my being me. Now with God *everything* he is is just his being God.

So if we say that God is wise or omnipotent we cannot be referring to two different features that God *happens* to have over and above being God. The wisdom of God just is his being God; so are his omnipotence and his goodness and whatever else we attribute to him. Now of course we cannot understand what it would be like for something to be its own wisdom. The wisdom we understand is always an accidental feature of persons, and so is power or goodness. When we use such words of God we must be using them analogically, outside the context of their first use, and we do not understand what we mean by them. We have no concept of the wisdom of God; for that matter we have no concept of God.

So every feature we attribute to God just is God, it is the divine essence or nature. But now we come to a complication because not everything we *say* of God attributes in this sense a feature to him. I mean not every sentence beginning "God is... " or "God has ..." is intended to attribute some real feature to him. This is because some of the things we say about God are relational. Let me explain that.

Suppose that next week I shall become a great-uncle. At the moment

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it is, we shall say, not true that I am a great-uncle; next week it will become true. Are we then to say that a potentiality in me to become a great-uncle has been fulfilled? Not so, because my becoming a great-uncle involves no change in me at all; it is entirely a matter of a change in my niece Kate and what is in her womb. So although a sentence like "Herbert is becoming a great-uncle" sounds just like "Herbert is becoming wise" or "Herbert is becoming a Dominican", we should not be misled by the grammar into thinking we are talking about a change in what is named by the subject term. The fact that there really is a new thing to say of me does not have to mean to say there is a new reality in me. Relational expressions are quite often like this. For example: "You are on my left but you used to be on my right" doesn't have to imply any change in you; I may simply have turned round. You have not fulfilled any potentiality in yourself to become on my left. There would be only a *verbal* change—something new to *say* about you. Similarly "you are farther away" or "you have become richer than I" may or may not be true because of changes in you; they may be, for you, merely verbal changes.

Now consider the profoundly mysterious truth that God sustains Pinochet in existence. This was not true of God in, say, 1900 because in those far off happy times Pinochet did not exist and so God could not have been sustaining him in in existence. So God began to sustain him. He *became* the sustainer of Pinochet. But, Aquinas says, this does not entail any change in God any more than becoming a great-uncle entails any change in me. Thus becoming the sustainer of Pinochet is not a real happening to God, in our sense, although it becomes true of him. It is true of him not because of some new reality in him but because of some reality in Pinochet—that he began to be alive. Of course that he is alive is due to a reality in God: His profoundly mysterious eternal will that he should come to exist at a certain date. But this eternal will is not something that comes about at a date so this does not imply any real change in God.

So when Pinochet was conceived there was something going on in him, but on God's side the change is merely verbal; we have a new thing to say about God, it is not a new thing about God that we are saying.

So there is a great deal of logical difference between saying that God is wise and saying that God is the *sustainer of* Pinochet or in general saying that he is creator. In the first case we attribute a real feature to God, wisdom, which (because there can be no accidents in God) must therefore be identical with being God. In the second case the reality is in the creature, there is merely a verbal change in God—a change in what has to be said of him. For this reason we are rescued from the appalling fate of suggesting that being creator and sustainer of Pinochet is essential to God, that he would not be God had he not created him.

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So being creator of the world is not part of what it is to be God. God did not become God when in, say, B.C. 4005 he created the world. Indeed he did not change at all. Although saying he *became* creator sounds like attributing an accident to God it is not in fact attributing any new feature to him at all; we say it in order to say something new about the world. (Strictly speaking of course even the world itself did not *change* when it was created because until it was created it wasn't there to change. But that is another question.) We should remember, of course, that when we say God does not change, we do not mean God stays the same all the time. God is not "all the time". God is eternal. To attribute stasis to God is as mistaken as to attribute change to him.

The main point is this: that what we say of God because of his creative relationship to creatures does not attribute any new reality to God and thus does not speak of God's essence.

The principle that whatever is in God is God, then, does not apply to such relational predicates as being creator or being sustainer of Pinochet. It *does* apply to non-relational predicates like "is wise" and "is good" and "is merciful." God's wisdom, goodness and mercy are all identical with his essence and there is no real distinction in God between his goodness and his wisdom. On the other hand there *is* a real distinction between God sustaining Pinochet and God sustaining me but it is not a real distinction in God but a very fundamental one between myself and Pinochet.

It is indeed a great mystery that the wisdom of God is God, and the power of God is God, and the goodness of God is God, and all three are the same God—we cannot understand how this can be, but it is not like the mystery of the Trinity because we cheerfully admit that (in some way we do not understand) all three are in fact identical, there is no distinction between the goodness and the power and the wisdom of God.

In the case of the Trinity, however, we want to say that the Father is God and the Son is God and the Spirit is God and all three are the same God but nevertheless they are *not* identical. There is distinction between Father, Son and Spirit.

What we have got to so far is that when we are speaking of *what is real in God* we are speaking of what is God's essence and all our predicates refer to one and the same identical essence of divinity, not to a number of accidents; our different predicates do not mark real distinctions in God. When, however, we are speaking of God's *relationship to creatures*, our different predicates *do* mark real distinctions but not in *God* because they entail no reality in God.

Aquinas's next move is to speak not of God's activity with regard to creatures, his creative act, but of God's activity within himself. And here we have to notice a difference between transitive and intransitive verbs.

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Aquinas points out that not all our acts are actions upon something else, acts which make a difference to something else. Carving and writing and teaching are all acts whose reality consists in what happens to some subject, and so is creating. Carving can only be going on if some stuff is being carved, writing can only be going on if some words are being written; but what about the act of, say, growing. You can of course grow in a transitive sense as when a gardener grows begonias, but growing in the intransitive sense is not an activity that does something to some thing else, nor is boiling or collapsing. To use Aquinas's phrase, it remains within the agent. Still more clearly the act of understanding is not an act which does anything or makes any difference to anything else. It is a kind of growing or development of the mind itself, not an operation on what is understood or on anything else. Of course there are philosophers who, partly for this reason, think it a mistake to talk of understanding as an act but we cannot pause here to argue with them. For Aquinas, at any rate, it was an act performed by the agent but not passing outside the agent to alter or influence or change anything else. Aquinas occasionally calls such actions "immanent" acts as opposed to "transient" ones.

Now can we speak of *God's* act of understanding? It would take much too long to give an account of Aquinas's general theory of understanding. You will just have to take it from me that for him both understanding and being intelligible have to do with not being *material.* To understand a nature is just to possess that nature immaterially. To possess the nature of a dog materially is to *be* a dog; to possess the nature of a dog immaterially (to have it in mind) is to *understand* a dog, to know what a dog is, or what the word "dog" means.

For Aquinas, you might say, the *norm* for being is that it should be intelligent, understanding, *immaterial* being; the exceptional ones are those whose being is curbed and restricted by matter; matter not thought of as some special kind of stuff but as the limitedness and potentiality of things. For Aquinas *we* can understand because we are just about able to transcend our materiality. While almost all our vital operations are operations of the body, circumscribed by matter, in the act of understanding we have an act which, although it is heavily involved with bodily activity and cannot ordinarily take place without concomitant bodily working, is not of itself an act of the body, a bodily process. Beings which are not material at all, quite unlimited by matter, angels for example, would understand much better than we do, without the tedious need for bodily experience, for what he calls the sense power of the *imaginatio* or *phantasmata* and for the use of material symbols and words.

For Aquinas, then, it follows simply from the fact that God cannot be material that he cannot be non-intellectual, he cannot fail to be

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understanding. This is part of our negative knowledge of God, our knowledge of what God is not.

We should, however, be quite clear that in saying that we know that God is not impersonal, not lacking in understanding and knowledge, we are laying no claim to knowing what it means for God to understand. Aquinas will go on to speak of God having an understanding of himself or forming a concept of himself but it is clear that we have so far no warrant for saying this. There is no reason to suppose that God's act of understanding is so much like ours. But on the other hand we have equally no warrant for saying that it isn't. I mean we *do* have warrant for saying that God does not *hear* or *see* anything just as he does not chop down trees, for all these are operations of a material body; the idea of God forming a concept of himself is not excluded in *that* way. It is simply that other things being equal we would have no reason to assert it. Aquinas, however, thinks other things are not equal for he interprets the Logos theology of John as suggesting just this.

When we understand a nature—say, what an apple is—we form a concept of what an apple is and this concept is the meaning we have for the word "apple." (When I speak of understanding the nature of an apple I do not mean some profound grasp of the essence of apples; I just mean the situation of someone who knows what apples are as distinct from someone who has never come across them or heard of them.) The concept is not precisely *what* we understand; what we understand is *what apples are*, *the nature of apples*, but the concept is what we have in mind in understanding this nature. It is the meaning for us of apples, the meaning expressed in the word "apple." So when you learn, say, what peevishness is, you do so by forming a concept which is the meaning of the word "peevish" or "peevishness." It is not exactly that you learn the word itself for you may not know that useful word and you may express the meaning you understand by some complicated circumlocution, and again a Frenchman who comes to the same understanding of what peevishness is will form the same concept which for him will be the meaning of the word "maussaderie." The concept, then, is what is conceived in the mind in the act of understanding and because it is the meaning of a word it was called by the medievals the *verbum mentis*, the word of the mind. This does not commit them to any doctrine that we can have concepts before we have any words in which we express them; indeed Aquinas clearly thought we could not, but it is plain that many different words or signs may express the same concept: that is what we mean when we say that this word or phrase means the same as that one.

Now let us return to the understanding of God. God's understanding of me or of any of his creatures is not something other than his creating

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and sustaining of them. God, you may say, knows what he is doing and what he is doing is keeping these things in their being and everything about them. God's knowledge of me, then, like his creating of me is a relational predicate true of God because of a reality in me. Just as I will be a great-uncle because of the reality in my niece. God knows me not by having a concept of me distinct from a concept he has of you, he knows me by knowing himself and thus knowing himself as creator of me and you. Thus that God knows me and also knows you does not imply that there are two different concepts, two different realities in God, any more than when I become a great-uncle three times over there will be three different realities in me.

But what, asks Aquinas, about God's understanding of himself. Here we could speak of God forming a concept of himself. The concept, remember, is not *what* is understood but *how* something is understood, what is produced, brought forth, conceived, in the understanding of something. *What* God understands is himself identical with himself but *in* understanding he conceives the concept, the *verbum mentis*, and this because eternally *produced, brought forth* by him is not him.

Let us remind ourselves again that there is no "must" about it. Aquinas is not trying to deduce the Trinity from God's intellectuality. We do not understand God's understanding, and apart from the revelation about God's Word we should not be talking about God forming a concept.

Notice the importance of the switch from looking at God's activity that *passes outside him* to creatures, to looking at his *immanent* activity of self-understanding. In the former case there is no reality in God on which the relationship of being created or being understood is based; it is a reality in the creature and a merely verbal thing in God, a change in what is to be said of him. In the latter case, however, there is a reality, a concept, in God himself. A reality distinct from God in God.

But what about the Augustinian principle mentioned earlier: "everything that is real in God is God"? We cannot see the concept in God (as we can see our own concepts) as an accident distinct from the essence. In us our concept is a reality distinct from us in us. It is an accident. Our concepts come and go, and we remain what we are; this cannot be true of God. If God has formed a concept it is not an accident of God, it is God. This is quite beyond our understanding, we are merely forced to it by our reasoning. We are not, of course, forced by our reasoning to say that God forms a concept of himself, but we are forced to say that *if* he does so it cannot be merely accidental, it must be God.

The act of creating brings about a relationship between God and his creature. They are *distinct* but *related* to each other as creator and creature. But the basis of this relation is real only in the creature, just as

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the basis of the relationship of being a great-uncle is real only on one side. The act of God's self-understanding which involves the bringing forth of a concept, a *verbum mentis*, also brings about a relationship between God and the concept. They are *distinct* but *related* to each other as conceiver and what is conceived, meaner and meaning. But the basis of this relationship, unlike the relationship of creation, is real at *both* ends. The mind and the *verbum* it produces are really distinct as the opposite ends of a relationship. And whatever is real in God is God.

St Thomas shifts, as does St John himself from Logos language (*In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God*) to the language of Father and Son. He argues that these come to the same thing: there are two essential requirements for the act of generation—first that A should have been *brought forth* by B and secondly that it should have the same nature as B. I did not generate you because although you have the same nature as I have, I did not bring you forth. On the other hand, I did not generate my nail clippings or my thoughts, although I brought them forth, because they are not themselves human beings. I would generate only my children which are both brought forth and of the same nature. The *verbum mentis* of God, however, is *both* brought forth by him, conceived by him, and *also* is of the same nature, for, being real in God, it is God. Thus the language of generation, of Son and Father, is here applicable.

It does not in any case seem fortuitous that the language of mental activity parallels that of sexual generation. The word "concept" itself belongs primarily to the context of generation.

So for Aquinas, as indeed for the Catholic faith, Father and Son do not differ in any way (*homo-ousion*). In each case what they are is God and they are nothing except that they are God. The Father has no features or properties which the Son has not. The only thing that distinguishes them is that they are at opposite ends of a relationship. The Father *generates* the Son, the Son is *generated by* the Father. Being the Father just is standing in that relationship to the Son; being the Son just is standing in that relationship to the Father. The Father *is a relation*. It is not that he has a relation. Just as in creatures wisdom is always an accident, the wisdom of some subject, so in creatures "a relation to..." is always an accident supervening on some already existing subject.

But, of course, as we have seen, nothing supervenes on God. In him there are no accidents. Whatever really is in God is the essence of God. So the Father does not *have* a relationship of Fatherhood to the Son; he is that relationship subsisting as God. And the Son *is* the relation of being generated by the Father subsisting as God.

Need I say that the notion of a subsisting relation is mysterious to us,

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we do not know what it would mean or what it would be like, but (to repeat) we do not know what subsisting wisdom would mean or what God would mean or what God would be like.

We see then that the only distinction in God is that of being at opposite ends of a relationship due to an act or "process" within the Godhead. Nothing that is said non-relationally about God makes any distinction between Father and Son, and nothing that is said even relationally about God in virtue of his dealings with creatures refers to any real distinction in God at all. God turns to creatures, *as his creatures*, the single unified face of the one God, the unchanging, the eternal, the single source of all that is. It is only with God's own interior life, his own self-understanding, that there is a basis for distinction. And of course that interior life is of vast interest to us because we are called on to share it. God does not look upon us human creatures simply as creatures; he has invited us by our unity in Christ to share in Christ's divine life within the Trinity, to share in his Sonship. And this of course brings us, perhaps a little belatedly, to the Holy Spirit, for it is by receiving the Spirit through faith in baptism that we share in the interior life of the Godhead.

The main principles for Aquinas's treatment of the Spirit are already laid down in his discussion of the Father and the Son. This indeed is one of the major difficulties with his treatment. He is, however, quite conscious and explicit about what he is doing. He says that it is necessary to consider the Holy Spirit on the same lines as we consider the Son. His reason for this is that the only possible distinction in the Godhead is the distinction of two opposite ends of a relationship and the only possible basis for relationship in the Godhead is the relation of origin to what is originated, a relation set up by some *procession* such as the conception of the Word, the generation of the Son.

So the Holy Spirit too must be distinct in its relation to its origin and its origin, says St Thomas, lies in that other immanent operation of the intellectual being, the operation of the will, the operation of love.

This, however, is where the difficulties begin. It is not too difficult to see how in understanding himself the Father forms a concept of himself which being real in God is itself God; it is much less easy to see how anything is formed in the operation of the will. This is especially so if we remember Aquinas's own often repeated doctrine that while truth is in the mind, goodness is in things. The act of understanding is a taking into the mind of the form or nature of things and this is the formation of a concept; but the act of loving is a going out towards the thing, a being attracted to it or an enjoyment of it. It is not at all clear what it is that is originated in this act of the will. Remember that the Holy Spirit is not what is loved, any more than the concept or word or Son is what is known; what is

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known and loved is the divine nature itself it is a question of self-knowledge and self-love; the Word is what is formed in this self-knowledge and the Holy Spirit is what is formed in this self-love.

Well, says Aquinas, we ought not to think of the Holy Spirit as a likeness of what is loved in the way that the concept is a likeness (in this case a perfect likeness) of what is known; rather it is tendency towards a nisus or impulsion towards even a kind of excitement—an enjoyment. This, Aquinas thinks, is formed in the act of loving. This is the term of the act of what he calls "spiratio," breathing forth. It becomes, then, difficult to speak of the Holy Spirit as a "thing" that is formed, and I remember Victor White always used to regard this as one of the great strengths and glories of Aquinas's teaching on the Trinity. With the Holy Spirit, at least, we are in no danger of seeing God as a "person" in the modern sense. Here, God is a movement, an impulse, a love, a delight. "This is my beloved *Son* in whom I am *well pleased*". This is the whole of the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is essential to Aquinas's doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from *both* the Father and the Son, and not merely from the Father. The reason for this is that the only distinction admissible in the Trinity is that of being at opposite ends of a relation based on a procession of origination. If the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son there is no such relation between them and therefore no distinction between Son and Holy Spirit.

Thus in Aquinas's account there are two *processions* in God, one of the intellect, God's knowing himself which is generation, and one of the will, God's enjoying himself which is spiration. Each of these gives rise to a relationship with two (opposite) ends, the origin and the originated. There are thus four of these *relations*. This does not, however, result in four distinct persons, for in order to be distinct a person must be at the opposite end of a relation from *both* other persons. The Father is opposed to the Son by generating and to the Spirit by spiration. The Son is in relation to the Father by being generated and to the Spirit by spiration. The Spirit is in relation to both the Father and the Son by being spirated, or "processio" (in a new sense).

This does not commit Aquinas to the "filioque" in the sense in which it is found objectionable by the Eastern churches. The root of their complaint, as I understand it, is that the *filioque* seems to take away from the Father as unique source or principle of the Godhead. However, the Greek Orthodox theologians who in 1875 came to an agreement with the Old Catholics[1], expressed their faith by saying, "We do call the Holy Spirit the Spirit of the Son and so it is proper to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son." But that last clause is an exact quotation from Aquinas:

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> Quia igitur Filius habet a Patre quod ab eo procedat Spiritus Sanctus, potest dici quod Pater *per* Filium spirat Spiritum Sanctum; vel quod Spiritus Sanctus procedat a Patre *per* Filium, quod idem est.
>
> Because the Son owes it to the Father that the Holy Spirit should proceed from him, it can be said that the Father through the Son breathes forth the Holy Spirit, or that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, which is to say the same thing.

I think it will be clear that Aquinas's doctrine gives us no warrant for saying that there are three persons in God; for "person" in English undoubtedly means an individual subject, a distinct centre of consciousness. Now the consciousness of the Son is the consciousness of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, it is simply God's consciousness. There are not three knowledges or three lovings in God. The Word simply is the way in which God is self-conscious, knows what he is, as the Spirit simply is the delight God takes in what he is when he is knowing it. If we say there are three persons in God, in the ordinary sense of person, we are tritheists. (In this matter I have a lot of sympathy with Professor Wiles).

For Aquinas the key to the Trinity is not the notion of person but of relation, and in fact in my account of his teaching I have not found it necessary to use the word "person" at all. Aquinas quotes with ostensible approval Boethius's definition of a person as "an individual substance of rational nature". But, as speedily emerges, the "persons" of the Trinity are not individuals, not substances, not rational and do not *have* natures. What Aquinas labours to show is that in this unique case "person" can mean relation. This he does out of characteristic *pietas* towards the traditional language of the church. But of course even in Aquinas's time *persona* did *not* mean relation and most emphatically in our time "person" does not. For our culture the "person" is almost the opposite of the relational; it is the isolated bastion of individuality set over against the collective. Even if we criticise this individualism, even if we try to put the human being back into a social context as a part of various communities, the notion of person does not become relational enough to use in an account of the Trinity. Aquinas could have made better use of the original sense of *prosopon* or *persona* as the player's mask or megaphone and his doctrine of the Trinity might be more easily grasped if we spoke of three *roles* in the strict sense of three roles in a theatrical cast—though we have to forget that in the theatre there are people *with* the roles. We should have to think just of the roles as such and notice how they each have meaning only in relation to and distinction from each other. We could speak of the role of parenthood, the role of childhood and the role of love or delight. This is not to speak of

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the Trinity as a matter simply of three aspects of God, three ways in which God appears *to us*, as Sabellius is alleged to have taught, for essential to this whole teaching is that God turns only one aspect to us, "*opera ad extra sunt indivisa*"; it is in his immanent activity of self-understanding and self-love, delight, that the roles are generated.

These roles, firmly established in the life of the Godhead, are then reflected (I prefer the word "projected"—as on a cinema screen) in our history in the external missions of the Son and the Spirit by which we are taken up into that life of the Godhead. In this way the obedience of Jesus is the projection of his eternal sonship and the outpouring of the Spirit is the projection of his eternal procession from the Father through the Son. It is because of these missions in time that the life of the Trinity becomes available to us: I mean both in the sense that we know of it, believe in it, and in the sense that we belong to it. These are of course the same thing. It is because we share in the Holy Spirit through faith and charity and the other infused virtues that we are able to speak of the Trinity at all. It is not therefore adequate to speak of God's redemptive act as an *opus ad extra.* It is precisely the act by which we cease to be *extra* to God and come within his own life.

1 James Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, p. 186.

Coercion in Augustine and Disney

William T. Cavanaugh

"He's way into the merchandising. It makes me crazy because you can't escape it."[1] This is the way the mother of a four-year-old described herself faced with 1997's blitzkrieg of product tie-ins associated with Disney's movie *Hercules*. The same syndicated newspaper article from which the above quote is taken introduces a selection of this merchandise (which includes such must-haves as glow-in-the-dark Hercules shorts and an official Hercules silver coin) with the following: "OK, maybe you can't afford to shower your offspring with all 7,000 official 'Hercules' tie-in products. But here's a sample of the superhero merchandise that your kid's best friend soon will be bringing to show and tell. Not that you should feel guilty, of course..."

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