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Williams, Aquinas, and Uncreated Grace

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Introduction

A. N. Williams attempts to refute the claim that Aquinas views grace as a created quality as opposed to an uncreated quality. Rather, Williams views Thomas' position as aligned with a view akin to that of a more Eastern theology: 'Grace is therefore not principally an entity distinct from God or an effect of God's working in us but the fact of God's indwelling, the name given to the sustenance that is God's own being, shared that we might also be divine.'[1] Moreover, she states, 'what grace is, most truly and fundamentally, is *gratia increata*, the Holy Spirit, God *ipse*.'[2] In this paper I argue that if Williams thinks Aquinas views grace as uncreated, it is unclear what she means by 'uncreated'. First, I outline Williams' reasons for thinking grace in Aquinas to be uncreated. I then explain what I call the 'problem of composition', which rules out the possibility that Williams understands 'uncreated grace' as 'God'. I consider some unsuccessful responses to this problem: first, a consideration of composition in the incarnation, and second, a solution from the work of the 20th century's Karl Rahner. I conclude that Williams' account is unclear and in need of clarification.

Williams and Uncreated Grace: Two Arguments

Williams has two lines of argument deployed to the conclusion that Thomas views grace as an uncreated quality. First, she points to the sparsity with which Aquinas uses the term *gratia creata*:

> None appear in the treatise on grace itself, despite its elaborate taxonomy—*grace freely given, habitual, actual, operating, cooperating, prevenient grace,* to name only some of the terms Thomas uses. Even the comprehensive *Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas* mentions created grace only in passing and furnishes no references to the *Summa.*[3]

[1] A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 84.
[2] Williams 89.
[3] Williams 87.

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Williams is aware that her points may suffer from 'the usual weakness of an argument from absence.'[4] However, she contends that the burden of proof lies on those who assert the position that she sees as being lacking in the text.

Secondly, Williams suggests that the importance and usefulness of the uncreated/created distinction should not be in supposing a created grace which is 'an entity distinct from God or an effect of God's working in us,' but rather as a semantic device that owes its existence to the consequences that Thomas' Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) has on his doctrine of grace.[5] Thomas' DDS states that God has no parts; he is simple. Not only does God lack the material parts of, say, a human body, but he lacks other distinctions found in humans: between essence (nature) and existence, form and matter, etc. The main point of import Williams derives from Thomas' DDS is that human beings are incredibly different from God, as 'a very deep ontological and conceptual divide appears' between them.[6] Thus Williams states:

> Thomas' concern to preserve the integrity of being leads him to describe a single thing in two quite different ways, according to the nature of that into which it is incorporated... However we describe the creature's participation in or union with God, we do not understand that divinization as violating the ontological boundary between creature and Creator. The life in which the creature shares is genuinely God's life, but we do not live that life in precisely the way God lives it.[7]

For Williams, the purpose of the uncreated/created distinction is not to suggest that there is a grace that is something other than God, but to express the *mode* in which God is present: in 'created grace', God is present to his creatures in a way that respects their creaturely limitations.[8] E. L Mascall echoes this struggle conveyed by Williams as the scholastics attempted to do semantic justice to this ontological God-man gap: they 'insisted that there can be neither, on the one hand, a degradation of God nor, on the other, a destruction of the creature's creaturehood.'[9] Nevertheless, for Williams, in the midst

[4] Williams 87.

[5] For an explanation of Thomas Doctrine of Divine Simplicity see Pasnau and Shields, *The Philosophy of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Ch. 4.

[6] Williams 40.

[7] Williams 54.

[8] Williams states: 'The difference Aquinas is pointing to, then, lies not in any essential distinction between love and goodness themselves but in the difference between their mode of existing in God and their mode of existing in us, which reduces once again to the distinction between creature and Creator.' 84.

[9] Mascall, E. L. *Via Media: an essay in theological synthesis* (London: Longmans, 1956).

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of this linguistic leg-work, grace is simply 'God's self-giving to the creature,' the 'gift of which is none other than the Spirit himself.'[10]

As we have seen, Williams' strategy has been to point to the absence of textual support for the notion of *gratia creata* in Thomas, and to provide the conceptual context of DDS to suggest an interpretation of the uncreated/created distinction. However, Williams states:

> Although Thomas does not equate grace and God, he does not use the term *grace* so as to distinguish it from the divine being itself, shared with creatures. So much is the implication of Aquinas' doctrine of grace; his explicit definitions of grace fall far short of such radicality.[11]

I take Williams' point to be that she is filling in the gaps of Aquinas' thought where he is silent. Williams suggests that his thought *points to* or implies an understanding of grace as uncreated—grace as equated with 'divine being'—even though he does not explicitly state this. He discusses grace 'solely in terms of its effect on humanity,' yet these effects 'should not be taken as distinct from their origin.'[12]

Thus, for Williams, the combination of the lack of textual support for grace as created in Aquinas, and the alternative explanation offered by DDS, points to a view of grace as nothing other than God's presence in his creatures. She states that the burden of proof lies on those who assert the contrary view on grace: that it is created.

Williams on Uncreated Grace: Critique

Williams thinks that although Aquinas does not explicitly equate grace with God (divine being / Holy Spirit / etc.), this is the direction his thought tends towards. In what follows I argue that it is unclear what Williams means by suggesting Aquinas views grace as uncreated, given the constraints of Thomas' thought.

Aquinas thinks grace is an accidental quality. Grace is 'above human nature': human beings can be human beings without the bestowal of grace, thus grace is not part of their nature. As I have stated, in reading Williams one might think she suggests that, for Aquinas, grace is simply the uncreated God. However, if this were the case, her position would entail the view that God becomes accidentally present in a person as a quality (called 'grace'). This view is ruled out by Thomas' wider thought, and I label these restraints the 'problem of composition'. In his dealings with DDS in 1a q3, Aquinas asks whether God can enter into the composition of other things (article 8), and he answers negatively. He states, 'it is not

[10] Williams 62.
[11] Williams 84.
[12] Williams 84.

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possible that God enter into the composition of anything, either as a formal or a material principle.' If a person is composed of substance and accidents, then any accident in a person is part of a composition of a human person.

This seems to rule out the possibility of God being joined to a person as an accidental quality. It might be objected that, in the incarnation, we find God entering into a composition with a human nature in the person of Christ, which runs contrary to Aquinas' view just stated. The doctrine of the incarnation states that Christ is one person with two natures: Divine and human. It would seem that if we take the person of Christ to be a composite of Divine and human natures, God *does* form a composite with another thing: namely, a human nature. Thus, God is a *part* of Christ, which seems to be denied by Aquinas' DDS.

Aquinas responds to this challenge by stating that the person of Christ may be viewed in two ways. First, 'as it is in itself, and thus it is altogether simple, even as the Nature of the Word.'[13] I take this to mean that Christ in himself is the second person of the Trinity, and is thus 'altogether simple' given DDS. Secondly, Aquinas states that the person of Christ may be viewed as follows:

> In the aspect of person or hypostasis to which it belongs to subsist in a nature; and thus the Person of Christ subsists in two natures. Hence though there is one subsisting being in him, yet there are different aspects of subsistence, and hence he is said to be a composite person, insomuch as one being subsists in two.[14]

Whilst Christ is a composite person, he is not 'so called on account of parts, but by reason of number, even as that in which two things concur may be said to be composed of them.' The thought here seems to be that whilst there are two natures in the person of Christ, these do not count as parts. If God were to become part of a fully literal composition it would require that there be some sort of potency in God which is realized in the thing composed. Such potency in God is denied by DDS. However, whilst strict composition is not possible, nevertheless there may be an *analogous* sense in which God is a composite in Christ: some of the entailments of composition are present, others are not.

An assessment of the plausibility of this idea of composition would involve further investigation into Aquinas' doctrine of the Incarnation. However, for my purposes, we can ignore the question of plausibility. The relevant question is whether Aquinas' acceptance of analogous

[13] All references to Aquinas' work are to the online edition of the translation by the Father of the English Dominican Order (available here: http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html). In this case, ST III q2 a4.

[14] ST III q2 a4.

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composition in the incarnation might allow for an understanding of God's presence in persons as an accidental quality. It seems unlikely that Williams would seek to understand the presence of God in a human person in the same way as God is present in Christ, for such a suggestion would face numerous theological problems. However, one option is to appeal to the *analogous* composition in the incarnation, and suggest that God's presence in persons also involves analogous composition, but of a *different kind* from the incarnation. This is suggested by Karl Rahner—20th century German, Catholic theologian—who is viewed by many in the secondary literature as a Thomist, and to whom we now turn.[15]

Karl Rahner and the Appeal to Analogy

Rahner attempts to establish a way in which God may be present in a person, alongside what seems to be an intention to avoid the problem of composition alluded to above. In his *Foundations of Christian Faith,* Rahner states that God's 'self-communication' does not involve God *saying something* about himself, but rather that this term signifies that 'God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man.'[16] The act of accepting God's self-communication involves accepting something which remains 'really divine,' and which is not reduced to something created. The question for a Thomist is: how does God 'make himself the innermost constitutive element of man' yet avoid the problem of composition?

Karen Kilby states that for Rahner, in a sense, God *does* become the accidental form of a person.[17] However, God does this in a way that avoids the problem of composition.[18] Rahner writes that God's self-communication must be understood as "*analogous to* a causality in which the 'cause' becomes an intrinsic, constitutive principle of the effect itself," which involves a 'relationship of formal causality as distinguished from efficient causality.'[19] He writes:

[15] Rahner's philosophy dissertation *Geist in Welt* is an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' epistemology influenced by the transcendental Thomism of Joseph Marechal and the existentialism of Martin Heidegger.

[16] Rahner, K. *Foundations of Christian Faith: an Introduction to the Idea of Christiantiy* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978). 119.

[17] Notice how this parallels Aquinas, idea the grace is an accidental quality of a person. Rahner does not use the language of God uniting himself as 'accidental form' of a person, rather this is Kilby's interpretation of Rahner, partly based on Rahner's proposal that God 'makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man.'

[18] Kilby, K. *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004). Ch. 4.

[19] *Foundations* 121. Italics mine.

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> We are also familiar with formal causality: a particular existent, a principle of being is a constitutive element in another subject by the fact that it communicates itself to this subject, and does not just cause something different from itself which is then an intrinsic, constitutive principle in that which experiences this efficient causality . . . In what we call grace and the immediate vision of God, God is really an intrinsic, constitutive principle of man as existing in the situation of salvation and fulfillment. As distinguished from the intrinsic, essentially constitutive causes which are found elsewhere in our experience, this intrinsic, formal causality is to be understood in such a way that the intrinsic, constitutive cause *retains in itself its essence absolutely intact and in absolute freedom* . . . The possibility of this self-communication is an absolute prerogative of God, since only the absolute being of God can . . . at the same time communicate himself in his own reality *without losing himself in this communication.*[20]

Kilby calls this divine self-communication a '*quasi*-formal cause,' in which there is only 'an analogous relationship between the kind of thing the divine self-communication is and known instances of formal causality.' For in this one case alone 'the cause remains intact, free over against the thing caused, unentangled in the being of which it nevertheless becomes the (accidental) form.'[21]

In assessing Rahner, the question to be asked is: if Aquinas appeals to analogous composition in his account of the incarnation, might a Thomistic account also appeal to analogous composition (and analogous causality) in understanding God's presence in humans persons? In answering this we must consider the idea that God as formal cause could become present in a person as an accidental form whilst remaining free and unentangled from her. What does it mean to be free and unentangled in this context? Neither Rahner nor Kilby elaborate on this. The emphasis on freedom may, I think, be explained by considering one of Aquinas' reasons for thinking that God cannot form a composite with something else.[22] For Aquinas, God is the first efficient cause, and thus 'to act belongs to him primarily and essentially.' Aquinas states:

> But that which enters into composition with anything else does not act primarily and essentially, but rather the composite so acts; for the hand does not act, but the man by his hand; and fire warms by its heat. Hence God cannot be part of a compound.[23]

The worry here is clear: if God forms a composite with something else he no longer acts primarily—'freely'—but the composite acts. Thus, to form a composite would involve God forfeiting some of his

[20] *Foundations* 121. Italics mine.
[21] Kilby 56.
[22] ST 1a q3 a8.
[23] ST 1a q3 a8.

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freedom. In light of this, I take it that when Rahner says that God becomes 'an intrinsic, constitutive principle of man' without losing his freedom he means that God *does not* forfeit his freedom to the composite formed, rather he somehow retains it.

What about Kilby's emphasis on God remaining 'unentangled' with the person? Kilby's words are 'unentangled in the being of which it nevertheless is the (accidental) form.' I take this talk of entanglement to be of an *existential* nature. The thought seems to be that for Rahner, when God unites himself to a person as accidental form he does so without becoming *dependent* on the person for his existence. That is, God's existence remains unentangled from the existence of the person with whom he unites himself as accidental form.

At this point it is useful briefly to consider Aquinas' distinction between substance and accident. In the *Categories* Aristotle distinguishes between ten categories of being: substance, quality, quantity, relation, where, when, position, having, doing, and being acted on.[24] Aquinas seeks to preserve part of Aristotle's project by distinguishing between the being of substances and the being of all the other nine categories, *accidental being*. There are substances, and there are ways in which substances are, namely, accidents. Accidents are said to be beings in a derivative sense: they exist only insofar as they exist in a substance, and their being depends on the being of that substance. It is the substance that most truly exists, inasmuch as only substances have being in their own right, intrinsically.[25]

We have seen Rahner attempt to avoid sacrificing God's freedom and existential independence by appealing to an *analogous* form of causality. The question is, if Aquinas allows for analogous composition in the Incarnation, might he also allow for it in Rahner's case of God-in-normal-persons? A reason to doubt Aquinas' approval of Rahner is that for Aquinas, the incarnation involves God being joined to a human nature as a substance, rather than as an accident to a substance. This has consequences for the questions of existential entanglement and freedom.

First, on the question of existential entanglement, we can see from the distinction between substance and accident that for Thomas, accidental forms are *thoroughly entangled* in the being they are forms of. The shape of the statue is dependent upon the statue for its existence. The redness of the apple is dependent upon the apple for its existence. By definition, an accident depends upon a substance for its existence. Whereas in the incarnation, where God is present as a

[24] See Aristotle, translated by Ross, W. D. *The Works of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928). Ch. 6.

[25] See Pasnau and Shields, *The Philosophy of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Ch. 3.

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substance, an analogous account of composition does not seem ruled out *in principle*, as it seems to be in Rahner's case.

On the question of God retaining freedom as part of a composite, it is much more conceivable for that freedom to be had by a substance-in-a-composite, rather than an accident-in-a-composite. For in the incarnation, according to Aquinas, Christ exercises his freedom through his human nature, in a similar way to how I exercise my freedom through my hand.[26] The same cannot be said for an accident in a composite. Thus, it seems that whilst an analogous account of composition in the case of the incarnation—where God is present as a substance in a composite—is acceptable on Thomistic terms, an analogous account of composition (and formal causality)—where God is present in a person as an accidental form—runs into immediate difficulties.

Williams: an Attempt at Clarification

I have explained the problem of composition which rules out the possibility of God joining himself to a person as an accidental quality called grace. Furthermore, I have shown how Rahner's appeal to an analogous form of composition (and causality) is also deeply problematic from a Thomistic perspective. In light of these considerations, we may assume that Williams does not in fact equate God and the accidental quality of grace. We must then enquire as to what her understanding of uncreated grace amounts to.

Recall that Williams thinks the purpose of the created/uncreated distinction in Aquinas is to allude to the *mode* in which grace is present in the creature, and present in God. She initially uses this language in discussion of Aquinas on the beatitudes (1a q26 a3), a passage that 'reveals a pattern we will see again in the doctrine of grace.' Here Aquinas makes a distinction between 'the way a thing is said to exist in God and the way that same thing may exist in a creature receiving it as God's gift.'[27] She writes:

> Thomas' concern to preserve the integrity of being leads him to describe a single thing in two quite different ways, according to the nature of that into which it is incorporated. The same beatitude—and it is crucial to grasp that Aquinas does not, by intention or in fact, posit two beatitudes—may be viewed as uncreated in God but created when it becomes part of the creature. Because there exist nonetheless not two beatitudes but one, the creature's beatitude is not some lesser form of what exists in God, but the creature's own experience, as creature and within the limitations of creaturely existence, of the divine. It is

[26] ST III q2.
[27] Williams 54.

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> precisely the basic principle of deification that operates here: however we describe the creature's participation in or union with God, we do not understand that divinization as violating the ontological boundary between creature and Creator. The life in which the creature shares is genuinely God's life, but we do not live that life in precisely the way God lives it.[28]

Williams is clear that the term 'created beatitude, like its counterpart, created grace,' may be misunderstood if removed from the context of DDS. She holds that Aquinas must divide 'into distinct contexts what is in reality one,' and thus 'the created-uncreated distinction refers to the ontological divide between God and humanity rather than designating fundamental divisions of grace or beatitude.'[29]

Aside from Williams' comments on created beatitude, the other key passage for understanding this 'mode talk' is her note on created grace.[30] Williams considers Thomas on the grace of Christ and the question of whether this grace is infinite. She thinks this passage is the prime reference to created grace in Aquinas, thus her dealings with it may be seen as an attempt to deal with an objection to her position. She states that Aquinas answers the question of the infinite nature of grace from three perspectives. First, the grace of the hypostatic union is infinite, as the Person of God is infinite. The second grace—habitual grace—is considered from two angles: 'as a being and in its specific nature of grace.' The latter, 'taking the grace of Christ purely qua grace,' is infinite. But with regard to the former—'considered not in its nature but as a being'—this is not infinite, for 'grace conforms to the nature of its subject.'[31]

Williams then expands on what Aquinas' passage on the grace of Christ might mean. She states that the assumption of Aquinas' notion of created grace is that grace is an *anhypostatic,* as it 'assumes the limitations of its subject when enhypostasized.' If grace did not assume the limitations of its subject, it would do one of two things: either it would 'impose its nature on the other . . . which would constitute not union but annihilation,' or it would 'change the nature of that hypostasis in the most fundamental way possible, so that what was once created (would) somehow become uncreated.' According to Williams, both of these options cannot be on the table for Aquinas: the first, because God does not seek to annihilate persons in bestowing grace upon them; the second, because of Aquinas' DDS and

[28] Williams 54.

[29] Williams 55.

[30] I use 'mode talk' as a label for Williams' view (explained above) that the purpose of the uncreated/created distinction is not to suggest that there is a grace that is something other than God, but to express the *mode* in which God is present: in 'created grace', God is present to His creatures in a way that respects their creaturely limitations.

[31] Williams 89.

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the need to preserve the Divine/human ontological gap. Thus, the purpose of the use of the term 'created grace' is to make clear that in bestowing grace God does not annihilate the person's nature, nor does he withdraw her creaturely status, rather he joins himself to her in a way that preserves her creaturely nature.

In light of these considerations we may ask: does Williams' 'mode talk' throw light on her understanding of uncreated grace? As described, the purpose of the mode talk is to emphasise that in bestowing grace God does not destroy our nature nor does he remove the creature/Creator gap. The problem here is that Williams does not give an account of how this works. If she were to provide an account, would it be an account in which God unites himself as a quality of a person without destroying their nature and removing the creature/Creator gap? Or would it be an account that suggests God *creates* something separate from himself—called grace—to bestow on human persons? The textual evidence in Williams suggests she would not support the latter option, yet the constraints of Thomas' thought give us reason to think she would not support the former either.

Williams has suggested that, given the two arguments put forward for her position, the 'burden of proof' is on those who hold grace in Thomas to be created. However, I suggest that given the absence of an account of uncreated grace from Williams—how it can be 'uncreated' whilst not involving God's presence in a person as an accidental quality—the burden of proof is back on her, as a clearer account is required.

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