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Relationality in and to the Divine

The question I raised last week centered around God creating relations and lack being a relation, which seemed to imply that God creates evil since evil is a lack of being. Put more formally: God is the creator of relations, lack is a kind of relation and evil is a lack of being therefor God is the creator of evil. Clearly Aquinas would deny that God, who is pure being and benevolence, could possibly be the author of evil. In what sense is God the creator of relations and in what sense is lack and evil? Only by carefully examining the terms will the solution come to surface. But, before coming to a resolution, it is necessary to deepen the problem a bit by reframing it into a question of God's perfection and substance. Since God's intellect and its object are numerically identical (ST I.14.2c) and God's intellect is his substance (ST I.14.4c). It seems that if God's perfect comprehension of the genre of relations contains the perfect comprehension of the species of lack—and since God's intellect is his substance, the perfection of lack must be in God. But, God lacks in nothing, so, clearly, something is amiss in my¹ (or Aquinas') reasoning. Identity and relations are the core concepts which I will examine here to see if Aquinas has already presented a resolution to this question.

1. My general temperament is one of both epistemic humility and self-doubt, I am seeking to cultivate the former and trust in God's sufficient grace to cure the later. Unfortunately I have a hard time telling them apart in most cases. Either way, I tend to think that any defect of reasoning comes from my own misunderstanding of Aquinas rather than believing myself to be a theologian on par with St. Thomas. That is not to say that I may find problems in St. Thomas's thought, but my default position is one of humility.

Question 28 of the Summa addresses specifically the divine relations and, as one might expect, begins with an analysis of relationships. And, for Aquinas, identity is a special kind of relationship. Unlike quantity or quality, relations are never inherent in the subject, “but relation in its own proper meaning signifies only what refers to another” (ST I.28.1c). There are two kinds of relations: logical relationships that only exist in the mind; and real relationships require two terms and exist in actuality that exist in the same order. A thing cannot be really related to itself, however it can be logically related to itself—numeric identity is a logical, not real relationship (ST I.28.1ro2). On the other hand, two numerically distinct things—Professor Marshall and myself, for example—can be the same in the sense that we both belong to the genre of animals and the species of man; we both have the same relationship to our species. Likewise, I am the same as my cat in the sense that we both are of the genre of animals, but that is the extent of our sameness.

This question of sameness is important to understand the relations within the trinity. Is, for example, the first person of the trinity really, or only logically, related to the second? Boëthius says that “Relation in the Trinity [...] is the relation of the same to the same” (ST I.28.1.o2). To say that this is to be understood as the sameness of numeric identity is to be committed to modalism (the Sabellian heresy). Aquinas reads Boëthius’s claim to the sameness of the Father to the Son and the Holy Spirit as one of sharing in the same substance not of

numeric identity. Since the divine processions are all of the same order (ST I.27 AA 2, 4), the relations in God are real, not merely logical relations.

But, God does not relate to creatures as the persons of the trinity relate to each-other. As said above, real relations can only occur within the same order, but God is outside the order of creation. The order of creation is contained in the divine order. So, it is possible for creatures to have a real relation to God. But God does not have a real relation to any creature (ST I.28.1ro3). God's relation to the world is logical, not real. But, the worry raised in this paper is not about God's relation to the world, but that lack may be in God.

Aquinas' solution is that, "every relation is based either on quantity, as double or half; or on action and passion, as the doer and the deed. [...] Now there is no quantity in God, for He is great without quantity [...] it follows that a real relation in God can be based only on action" (ST I.28.4.c). Since lack is a relation of quantity and God is great without quantity, lack is not a real relation in God, but only a logical relation held in the mind of God. Logical relations do actually exist as understood by God. But their existence in God's understanding does not mean that they exist really in God. "Ideal relations exist as understood by God. Hence it does not follow from their plurality that there are many relations in God; but that God knows these many relations" (ST I.28.4ro3).

It seems that this does not really address my worry since, "in God [...] the intellect and its object are one in the same; because by understanding Himself, God understands all other

things” (ST I.28.4r01). God understands ideal relations and God understands all things through understanding himself. So, ideal relations must be in God and lack is a kind of ideal relation. God understands the ideal relation of lack through understanding himself. It seems to follow that lack, at least in some sense, is in God.

In looking at the proper nature of relation, as opposed the accidental nature (ST I.28.2c) Aquinas reiterates that relations are not intrinsic but require two terms. If a relation were intrinsic to something, it would be accidental to that thing. In God there are no accidents, “since all in Him is His essence” (Ibid.). In what sense, then, are relations (both real and logical) in the divine essence? The relation is in God not as applying to the divine essence, “but in so far as relation implies respect to something else, no respect to the essence is signified, but rather to its opposite term” (Ibid.). That is, the logical relation of lack exists in God’s essence as a concept opposed to its opposite term—actuality, being, abundance. God thusly understands the logical relation of lack as distinct from act. Since the divine essence comprehends lack perfectly, God’s essence retains is perfection even though, in this sense, it includes lack— inclusion of lack in this way is part of God’s perfection: “It does not follow, if a relative term or any other name applied to God signifies something imperfect, that the divine essence is in any way imperfect; for the divine essence comprehends within itself the perfection of every genus” (ST I.28.2r03). Lacking understanding of lack would be a lack in God and an imperfection; God’s

perfection requires that God understand the logical relation of lack but this does not imply that lack is really in God. This, I think, adequately addresses my initial worry.

In discussing the real distinction of the persons of the trinity, the question of what the real relations are. Thomas defines the real relations within God as paternity, filiation, spiration and procession. Filiation is a specific kind of procession, but there is no proper term for how the spirit proceeds from the Father (and, one would think, the Son). Both the Son and the Spirit proceed from the father, but the converse is not true. In real, as opposed to logical, relations there is a mutuality and difference in the related things—a human father is also a son, but the relationship of father to son is not the same of son to father. That is, a single man may be both father and son, but is father with respect to his own children and is son with respect to his father. This same kind of relation holds within the Trinity except that the Father does not have a father but is self-subsisting. The Son, likewise, is also self-subsisting but in filial relation to the Father. The Father spirates the spirit, but the spirit proceeds from the father. Since all three persons of the trinity are of the same order, these relations are real. The logical relationship of lack, however, is of a different order and therefore does not have distinctive existence within the Godhead, in this sense there is no lack in the trinity even though the perfection of the concept of lack is in the understanding of God. So, it is fitting and proper to say that God is the creator of relations as well as quantity, substance, quality and so on, and that God has relations properly in his understanding without them being in the essence even

though Gods essence is his understanding himself. This distinction applies to logical relations and does not deny the real relations of the trinity.