

THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN: ON MIXED RELATIONS IN AQUINAS

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Aquinas' exposition of the relations between creator and creature has provided an important framework for illuminating aspects of the mystery of the incarnation. He maintains that while creatures are really related to God, God is not really related to creatures. This doctrine of mixed relations in Aquinas' theology describes the character of the relation between God and humanity such that, when Christ incarnates, the doctrine of immutability is preserved.

In order to provide an appropriate backdrop, the first section of this essay looks at the Aristotelian framework from which Aquinas is working. Section two examines Aquinas' doctrine of mixed relations, in which he distinguishes between real relations and relations of reason. After this, section three considers the Christological impact of such a doctrine. Finally, section four argues that in this explanation of the incarnation, Aquinas is able to preserve the doctrine of immutability. Throughout these sections, this paper highlights the role of doctrine of mixed relations as they relate to his wider theologies. In this way, the doctrine of mixed relations in Christ anchors many important doctrines, but particularly the doctrine of divine immutability.

Aristotelian Relations

What lies behind this doctrine of mixed relations, is first the different types of relations that Aquinas posits, which he inherits from Aristotle. So, to understand the doctrine of mixed relations in Aquinas, there are a few preliminary distinctions that need to be drawn.

To begin according to Aristotle, a relation is an accident. It is not some third entity which is over and above two things; or that the two things are participating in one accident such that there is a symmetrical relation *R* between *a* and *b*. Rather, there are two distinct accidental properties in *a* and in *b*.¹

From this, one can draw the principal Aristotelian distinction that Aquinas makes use of, which consists in real relations (*relationes reales*) and relations of reason (*relationes rationis*). The former is what actually serves to relate things; these are genuine relations. So, if *a* is really related to *b* then *a* is the subject of the relation *R*. In this way, *b* is really inhering in *a*. To take the example of colour similarity: if my tulips are really related to my daffodils then the tulips are the subject of the relation (of say, yellowness). Equally, if my daffodils are

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XIV 1, 1088a2–35, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 913-914

really related to my tulips, then the daffodils are the subjection of the relation (yellowness). If relation aRb is real, and relation $bR'a$ is real, then these relations must be mutual.

Relationes rationis are merely what stands in some relation to some other extreme. It does not require that, in the relation aRb , b is inhering in a .² For example the terms 'left' and 'right' in relation to the vase on my desk are not real relations, but only relations of reason.³ So then, if either R or R' is merely a relation of reason, then the relation will be non-mutual, or mixed. This, he explains, can be understood in terms of the 'known' and the 'knower'. While the knower is really related to the known, the known is not really related to the knower, only by way of reason.⁴

Creator and Creature: Relations in Creation

For Aquinas, the God-creature relation draws on this non-mutual knower/known relation in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In the same way that he holds there is a real relation on the side of the knower, so too is there is a real relation on the side of the creature. However, on the side of the creator, just as on the side of the known, there is only a relation of reason. Aquinas himself notes, "in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea".⁵

Since, God alone creates, God can be the only cause of creaturely existence which necessarily implies some relation.⁶ The question then for Aquinas, is what the nature of this relationship is. In the act of creation, there is a real difference made to the creature, for without this pure act of creativity, there would be no creature with which to have a relationship to God. Aquinas therefore affirms that there is a real dependence of creation on the principle from which it was produced. As such, a real relationship is established from creation on the side of the creature. However, despite this radical change in creaturely existence, there is nothing changed on the side of the creator, and no real relationship established in God.⁷ Herein lies the doctrine of mixed relations.

A Christological Effect

² Mark G. Henninger, "Relation as Being and Ratio: Thomas Aquinas," in *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250-1325*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 4-6

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology* 53, trans. Richard J Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 44-45

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V 15, 1021a27-b2, 769

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q13, a7, in vol. 1 trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948), 65-67

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 11, vol 11 trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, OP (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2020), 1699

⁷ SCG, II, 18

To explain how the doctrine is posited onto Christ, this paper looks to the understanding of mixed relations between creator and creature as explained in section two for comparison. So, in the same way that creation's relation to God is real, so too is Christ's humanity to his divinity. Equally, in the same way that God is not really related to creation, Christ's divinity bears a relation of reason to his humanity.⁸ As Aquinas notes, "the union of which we are speaking is not really in God, except only in our way of thinking; but in the human nature, which is a creature, it is really."⁹ Accordingly, just as the creature is dependent on the creator, Christ's human nature, as a created thing, also is contingent on the divine nature. That is to say that without the divine nature, there would be no human nature whatsoever.

On one hand, this doctrine of course emphasises the transcendence of God, affirming Christ's divine nature. Not only does it stress the completeness and perfection of God, such that when the second person incarnates there is nothing new in him. Also it emphasises the uniqueness of God as creator, and our total dependence on him as creatures. On the other hand, it stresses that, for Aquinas, it is real humanity that comes to be. Precisely because of this emphasis on the uniqueness and perfection of God, the second person is able to assume a real human nature that is really related to the divine nature.

Changing in light of relations

Aquinas' understanding of the relation between the two natures in Christ has some explanatory value for the mystery of the immutability of the incarnation. The real relation of the human nature to the divine is such that it is wholly determined by that relation; there is no human nature in Christ without the divine. Moreover, the nature of the relation of the divine person, being *relationes rationis* as opposed to *relationes reales*, means that when Christ assumes flesh there is no change that occurs in the second person. Since there is a lack of real relation of the divine person to the human nature, even though Christ assumes humanity, nothing in the person is altered. If there is no real relation, then one cannot be changed by it. God's completeness attests to the fact that it would be impossible for him to bear a real relation to a creature. However, as Aristotle notes in his knower/known relation, "the converse of this is not true".¹⁰ So while humanity is radically transformed when Christ incarnates, there is no change in him.

In this way, the doctrine of mixed relations provides good reason for affirming the doctrine of immutability, something that certainly Aquinas wants to preserve. Although Aquinas emphasises the mystery of the

⁸ Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM Cap., "Thomistic Christology," in *Does God Change: The Word's Becoming the Incarnation* (Still Rivier, MA: St Bede's Publications, 1985), 96-98

⁹ ST III Q2 A7, vol 4, 2034

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Categories* 7, 7b27-28, trans. E.M Edghill, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard Mckeeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 20-21

incarnation, this framework sheds light on the most unique relation conceivable. Not only that, but it also lays the foundation for one of the most significant doctrines for Aquinas, and the medieval period more generally, that being the doctrine of divine immutability.

Conclusion

In the exposition of the doctrine of mixed relations, Aquinas is able to shed some light on the mystery of the incarnation. Using the Aristotelian relational concepts, Aquinas elucidates, first, the creator-creature relationship as non-mutual. This reveals the way in which we as creatures relate to God as creatures completely dependent on a perfect creator. Equally, however, it reveals God's relation to us which he creates an entirely free and loving act. Second, the doctrine is able to express one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith: that Christ could be both fully God and fully human. Then, in section three and four, it is seen that by positing this creator/creature relation between God and ourselves, onto the two natures in Christ, Aquinas is able to account for and preserve the immutability in the incarnation. It is precisely because of God's lack of real relation to us that he remains immutable. So then, when Christ assumes flesh although there is no change in him, not only does our understanding of God radically change; but also, through the free and loving conciliatory act of Christ, our relation to God radically changes. Ultimately this doctrine is an essential lynchpin in Thomistic Christology, expressing Christ's relations, but also underpinning and therefore preserving some of Aquinas' most important doctrines, but specifically in this paper, the doctrine of divine immutability.

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