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Esse, Procession, Creation: Reinterpreting Aquinas

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Two Approaches to Speculative Inquiry

It is fashionable to re-validate medieval thinking for the contemporary world by assuming that while medieval theological speculation is no longer of much interest, other than as a kind of archaeology of the medieval mind, there is quite a lot of philosophically interesting material to be recovered from the debris of medieval speculation, more particularly in the field of logic and cognate interests.[1] This view succeeds in missing a great deal of what is of significance in the field of speculative metaphysics. For example the significance of the distinction between *esse subsistens* or subsistent existing and *esse commune* or existing in general tends to be overlooked. Yet it is vital to the kind of synthesis of philosophical and theological speculation with which many of the medieval thinkers were preoccupied. It links them back via the Islamic and Jewish thinkers to figures such as Augustine and even to Philo who endeavoured to reconcile religious faith with the philosophical tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle. What follows is an essay in drawing out the implications of Aquinas's philosophico-theological synthesis with regard to a contemporary revaluation of the notion of creative order.[2]

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[1] An example of this may be found in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzman, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1982), in striking contrast to the earlier volume in the series, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Arthur Hilary Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). For a similar assessment of the latter, see J. A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996), 11–14.

[2] This project is part of a larger study in speculative metaphysics of which the co-author is Professor James Bradley of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The notion of subsistent existing is what is required for an account of existing beings to be complete and in that sense self-explanatory–in other words an account which includes within itself all the conditions that are necessary for its realisation. It is closely akin to what Spinoza, for example, understood by "substance" or Hegel by "absolute Idea." However, in both Spinoza and Hegel, the theological mode of thinking has been resolved into the philosophical and, so to speak, transcended. For Aquinas and his contemporaries such a resolution would have involved the abandonment of the primacy of faith and revelation. Philosophical inquiry was a necessary adjunct in the overall theological project of *fides quaerens intellectum,* faith seeking an understanding of itself. Yet it was in this context that absolutely key concepts such as that of subsistent relations were in fact elaborated. No doubt this is why later Protestant theology would accuse the schoolmen of theological rationalism. But in the medieval period, thinkers like Berengarius, Anselm and Abelard had strenuously attempted to uncover the inherent intelligibility of what was held by Christian faith, even while holding that the substance of these truths might be beyond unaided human reason to discover. The de facto outcome of this endeavour was an elaborate but brilliant intermeshing of material derived from Greek philosophy with the requirements of the essential Christian doctrines. In what follows we shall hope to see how this works in the doctrines of Trinity and Creation, to produce a synthesis which goes far beyond what Hegel was inclined to write off as merely "representational thinking."

In what follows, St. Thomas Aquinas will be taken as exemplary. Although other important syntheses of philosophical and theological speculation are to be found in the period, notably thinkers of the Franciscan tradition, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and Ockham particularly, Aquinas is perhaps particularly notable for the systematic nature of his attempt to explore the philosophical elaboration of concepts essential to an explication of the metaphysical dimensions of Christian thought. It has to be noted at once that Aquinas continued to maintain that the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an understanding of the nature of God which was in principle beyond the power of human reason, unaided by divine revelation to discover. The same would hold true also of important aspects of the doctrine of Creation, even though the essential notion of the ontological dependence of all finite beings on an infinite being could be reached by way of argumentation from the most general characteristics of the beings of which we have knowledge by way of sense

perception.[3] Nevertheless, in the elaboration of a theological understanding of these revealed doctrines, Aquinas clearly draws upon a vast array of material derived ultimately from philosophical sources–most particularly from Aristotle and the neo-Platonists. Although officially the "handmaid of theology" the genuinely philosophical nature of the elaboration of the concepts of *esse*, of immanence, of subsistent relations, of transcendental attributes, of analogical predication and of real, virtual and logical distinctions is very clear. It could be argued that de facto what we have here is a consciously theological ingression into a tradition of thought in which the distinction of theology and philosophy is not only often unclear, but is of itself much less important than might have seemed at the time. This is particularly true in light of the developments to which it gives rise in later philosophical theories.

The present essay raises the question of reading back the implications of the trinitarian theology into Aquinas's strong theory of existence or *esse* in such a way as to amplify its contribution to speculative philosophy. It therefore involves a transgression of the formal boundaries of metaphysics and theology as these were recognised in the world of medieval speculation, yet in a manner that can surely be counted as a valid "retrieval" of what is at least implicit there.[4]

Esse subsistens and *esse commune*

It is well known that the most fundamental or primordial conception of Aquinas's metaphysics is the notion of *esse* or of "being," understood in a verbal or active

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[3] The second question of the first part *Summa Theologica* [*ST*] is implicitly a vindication of philosophical thought as legitimately exploited in the elaboration of a theological synthesis. See my article: "The Argument from Contingency Then and Now," in *God and Argument*, ed. William Sweet, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 1999).

[4] There is a good deal of current interest in Aquinas's Trinitarian theology, but not, so far as I know any such reading back as is attempted here. This is not to say that Trinitarian enrichment of metaphysics has not occurred elsewhere, notably in the philosophies of Hegel, Schelling, Peirce and even Heidegger. For a good revaluation of the Trinitarian theology of Aquinas, see Gilles Emery, O. P., *Trinity in Aquinas* (Naples: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2006), which also has a considerable bibliography. See also Norman Kretzmann, "Trinity and Transcendentals," in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, eds., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 79–109; David Burrell: "Creation and 'Actualism': The Dialectical Dimension of Philosophical Theology," in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology,* vol. 4 (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

sense.[5] *Esse* grounds all possibility of anything being something; it is the most primitive notion of what we have termed speculative metaphysics. Anything else is in some way or another a particular determination of being understood in this sense. Form and essence are determinations or limitations not of an entity but of an activity, the activity of *esse*–unless of course we have already understood "entity" in an active sense. If there were something for which there is required no principle of determination or limitation, it would be a subsistent *esse.* The arguments that Aquinas rehearses in question 2 of the *Summa Theologica* are designed to show that if beings exist which are not of this subsistent kind, that can only be by way of an intrinsic dependence on that which does subsist, or contains within itself all the conditions of its own existence. We are not particularly concerned here with the validity of such arguments–this question has been the source of endless discussion in philosophical theology–but rather with the notion of subsistent existence as a feature of this particular metaphysical landscape. The connection with speculative theology is established by the recognition that a "being" of this kind is what all human beings understand as God.[6] But so far as unaided reason is concerned there is little more of a positive nature that we can say, though a great deal can be said by way of negation. Where all other beings, known to us through experience are finite, contingent, caused and limited, this reality is infinite, necessary, uncaused. Consequently the name most appropriate to it is "The one who is." In our present condition we can attain to no real grasp of his essence other than that "he possesses *esse* itself as an infinite and indeterminate [in the sense of unlimited] sea of substance."[7] We should note of course that the medieval thinkers's notion of this subsistent existence is by no means the same as Hegel's notion of the indeterminate but empty concept of being. It is indeterminate precisely because it is sheer existence or *esse*, unlimited by any particular essential form. But the story does not end with this powerfully agnostic view, and this for two reasons.

First, a number of important attributions can be affirmed of God precisely as the source and origin of all finite being. All the positive characteristics or

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[5] I have retained the Latin form of *esse* for the simple reason that there is no precise English equivalent. The sense of *esse* is of activity rather than being, unless one uses something like "being in the active sense," which is clumsy. "Existence" tends to be understood as "mere existence" which of course would be fatal to any understanding of what we are talking about.

[6] I place the word 'being' in quotes because the question whether we can refer to this as a being is already unclear, since the notion of 'a being' normally requires further determination.

[7] *ST* 1a, q. 13, a. 11.

"perfections" of finite beings must be attributed to God as their source. This attribution has a necessarily negative side, in that such characteristics are realised in God in a manner consonant with perfect simplicity and therefore not as they are realised in the beings of which we have direct experience; and at the same time they are attributed to him in an *eminent* way, that is as the source of such characteristics by way of causation and participation. In this way are attributed to God such things as infinite power, truth, goodness, life, knowledge and will.

Second–and here the transition to a properly theological inquiry is evident–as a consequence of divine revelation, this slate of attributions is significantly enriched and explored through the recognition that the nature of the divine life is disclosed through the revelatory activity of God in human history. The belief that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, are the culminating events in the divine Word becoming flesh and the sending of the Holy Spirit give rise to the specification of divine life as essentially triune and relational in nature. Suddenly, the bare attributions of the earlier approach take on a detail and specificity in which the notion of *esse subsistens* burgeons into a complex of processions and relations though which the structure of divine life is spelled out in the doctrine of the Trinity, and this in turn gives rise to the doctrine of divine creation of the world.

It would be a mistake to understand this theological enrichment as rationally unfounded speculation. Here the philosophical tradition of Plato, Aristotle and the neo-Platonists provide the means by which this doctrine is elaborated. The Good "beyond being" and the indefinite dyad of Plato, the notion of God as thought thinking itself, imparting to the cosmos a finality of attraction, and the emanations of divine mind and divine soul in Plotinus are all deployed in a new and impressive synthesis in a metaphysical understanding of the chief Christian doctrines.[8]

All of this remains to be explored in more detail in the understanding of the Trinitarian relations and the emanation–creation of the world of finite beings from them. The point for the moment however is to draw attention to a fundamental difference in what might be called the two planes of existence, that of *esse subsistens* and the existence common to all finite beings, what is termed *esse commune.* Some care is needed in the understanding of this distinction. The medieval thinkers insist that *esse* is not a genus of which there are specifically

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[8] It is at this point that the characteristically jejune dilemmas surrounding the notions of divine omniscience and omnipotence which characterise a good deal of what goes by way of "philosophy of religion" are found to be lacking a more robust account of the medieval idea of God.

different kinds, because genus always relates to an essence or nature of some kind, however generalised. *Esse*, or being in the active sense is that primitive activity which is the placing of things in existence, not the kind of beings that they are. The way in which *esse* or existence is affirmed of God is different from the way in which it is affirmed of anything else. God's existence is entirely unconditioned, independent and self-sufficient. The existence of everything else is conditioned and derived. This latter kind of existence is what is meant by the general term *esse commune* and is the proper subject matter of metaphysics.

The reason for emphasising this apparently abstruse distinction is to establish in advance the limit of the carry-over of the essential characteristics of divine life into the beings that are derived from it by way of creation–emanation. It would be convenient, to say the least, if, having discovered the essential relationality of divine being, we could extend this characteristic to all derived or dependent being. But although for the medievals God is entirely immanent in the created world, his being is not confused with it. There is not even a hint of pantheism in the medieval doctrine of divine immanence. Having said this of course we will be anxious to see whether this theologically vouchsafed theory of relational being has any significant resonance or carryover in the understanding of dependent or finite being.

Triunity, Order and Intelligibility

The most general theme of the present study in speculative metaphysics is an inquiry into the nature of the activity of actualization, which we have seen as deriving from a consideration of what we will call "strong" theories of existence.[9] It is clear that the metaphysical view that is at work in Aquinas's theology is a strong theory of existence. *Esse* or existence precedes every further determination by way of genus and difference. It is true that a metaphysics of being in the active sense, a metaphysics of actualization, can be extracted from Aquinas's theological writing and was indeed explored by him at length in his more purely philosophical works. But ultimately the metaphysics of existence looks for its completion to the relation of what is termed *esse commune* to that kind of *esse* which is ultimate in the order of explanation, the *esse subsistens* in which all finite beings participate and therefore on which they depend in the order of

[9] On "strong" and "weak" theories of existence, see James Bradley, "Transformations in Speculative Philosophy 1914-1945" in *Cambridge History of Philosophy 1870-1945*, ed. Tom Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 436-446.

explanation. But it is also the view of Aquinas that *esse subsistens*, although argued to by *philosophical* reasoning, depends for its fullest explication on the theological inquiry into the nature of divine being. This is to be found in the theological elaboration of divine life as essentially relational. It is this analysis of divine life as a matter of relational order which completes the requirement that a strong theory of existence be ultimate in order of explanation and in that sense self-explanatory. How and to what extent this view can be extended to found a view of all kinds of being whether infinite or finite is the object of what follows.

Before continuing, it may be useful to note a matter which is central to the metaphysics of Aquinas and was to become a source of some disagreement on the part of his most outstanding successor, and to some extent critic, John Duns Scotus. If, as Aquinas believes, the movement of thought from finite *esse commune* to its ultimate source in *esse subsistens* entails a qualitative, perhaps better, "intensive" difference, then some account must be given as to how the transition is made intelligibly so as to avoid a kind of metaphysical aphasia and agnosticism. This is a particularly crucial question for Aquinas since he insists that all human understanding of things takes its rise from, and is inherently limited by, what we might now term the empirical sources of knowledge–*nihil in intellectu nisis prius in sensu* (nothing in the mind which does not take its rise from sense perception). The key concept that Aquinas uses in this context is that of analogical predication. The theory of analogy [of being] erects a conceptual structure between what we can predicate of finite beings, ultimately grounded in human experience and what is predicated of God, whether on the ground of metaphysical argument (as in the "five ways" and their elaboration[10]) or on the ground of divine revelation (as in the theological elaboration of the divine nature in the subsequent questions of *The Summa Theologica*, part I.). According to this view, metaphysical reasoning is competent to establish a link of causality and participation between finite and unconditioned being. God is understood as the universal cause of each and every feature of finite beings and all positive characteristics of finite beings are in some sense 'participations' in divine perfection. On the ground of this link, both the essential similarity and the essential difference between *esse commune* and *esse subsistens* is affirmed at one

[10] On the incompleteness of the five ways taken without consideration of subsequent questions on the unity and simplicity of the divine being, see the pioneer work of Edward Sillem, *Ways of Thinking About God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1961). For a fuller list of references see John F. Wippel's *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 380, note 1.

and the same time. It is on this analogical bridge that Aquinas is able to found various attributions derived from our most general understanding of the nature of the beings of our experience. Duns Scotus on the other hand, who does not rely so heavily on the notion of *esse* for his metaphysical theory of being, argues that if we are not to be caught up ultimately in equivocation, we have to recognise that being is a univocal concept and additionally that one of its transcendental attributes is a disjunctive requirement that it be either infinite or finite.[11]

The relative weight of metaphysical and more properly theological reasoning, at least as far as Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* is concerned, is to a considerable extent concealed by the admirable continuity of the overall development of that work. Establishing that God is one, infinite, living and possessed of intellect and will is within the reach of metaphysical reasoning–these attributes can be understood as the negatively qualified attributes of *ipsum esse existens* which is the proper definition of God.[12] In addition they serve as the bridge to the domain of theologically founded reasoning, although the transition, at least in *The Summa Theologica* is scarcely noticeable. It occurs most obviously at the point at which Aquinas puts the question: whether in God there is any procession?[13] In Aquinas's view, the foundations of Trinitarian doctrine stem from divine revelation, without which this aspect of divine life could not be known. Nevertheless, the theological elaboration of these fundamental articles of faith picks up and deploys in new ways philosophical notions derived from Plato, Aristotle, middle-Platonists like Philo, and particularly from Plotinus and the other neo-Platonists.[14]

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[11] We need not enter at this point the technicalities involved in the difference between the two systems as a result of which being is for Scotus a concept, whereas for Aquinas it is rather a notion that is the product of a judgement and therefore, for him, not strictly a concept. The disagreement relates to Scotus not allowing a real distinction between *esse* and nature or essence.

[12] See *ST* 1a, q. 13, a. 11.

[13] The transition is concealed to a considerable extent because theological sources have already been deployed in Aquinas's discussion of the attributes of God, particularly of the notion of divine providence, but also in the discussion of God as possessing intellect and will. But it has to be remembered that right from the beginning, this *Summa* is primarily a theological work, designed for the teaching of theology, not metaphysics as Aquinas makes abundantly clear in the very first, and often neglected Question 1. Interpreting the *ST* correctly depends on taking what Aquinas has to say there about theological science with full seriousness. Aquinas develops these matters more fully in his *Commentary on Boethius's* de Trinitate 1, q. 1 and 2.

[14] The inter-weaving of more properly philosophical with religious and theological thought in the ancient and medieval world is very much more complex than is sometimes thought. A very great deal of patristic theology already draws heavily on philosophical sources and the syntheses of the

If the concept or notion of *esse subsistens* has seemed to reach a somewhat agnostic conclusion as "having being itself as a kind of infinite and indeterminate sea of substance,"[15] what follows from this point is a highly detailed account of the nature of subsistent being. What is surprising and often unappreciated is the way in which Aquinas combines the affirmation that in God essence and existence are one and the same with an account of this existence in terms of processional relations. What is of particular importance is that the divine essence is not the foundation of relations which are conceived as subsequent to it, but is identified with these relations.

Aquinas makes this point forcefully on more than one occasion. A good example is the following: "It is clear then that the real relation existing in God is in reality identical with his essence and differs only conceptually, in so far as relation implies reference to its counterpart, which is not implied in the concept of essence. It is clear therefore that in God the actuality (*esse*) of relation and the actuality (*esse*) of essence are not different but one and the same."[16] This absolutely clear and unequivocal statement of Aquinas is often missed, leading to profound misunderstandings of Aquinas's doctrine of God. It is around this key recognition that the present essay turns.

The (logically) first procession which constitutes divine life is, for Aquinas, by way of intellect and is named as the generation of the Word, which is a perfect reflection or image of divine life reflected into itself, a relation for which the analogy in the created world is what Aquinas conceives as the "mental word" or the self-conscious recognition of an act of knowing. This procession is the philosophical account of what is referred to theologically as the Begetting of the Son by the Father. This procession leads to a completion in a further procession by way of will or love and is the presence to itself of divine life as the beloved in the lover and this procession is the philosophical account of what is known theologically as the sending of the Holy Spirit. These two processions exhaust the notion of divine activity. A procession is understood as the movement of something to something else and is therefore essentially relational in character rather than substantial, these relations being not only real but subsistent.

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theologians of the high Middle Ages is not absolutely new, but new in relation to the immediately antecedent practices of early medieval theology, limited largely to textual commentary and interpretation.

[15] Aquinas quoting John of Damascus at *ST* 1a, q. 13, a. 11.

[16] The Latin text is: "*Et sic manifestum est quod relatio realiter existens in Deo, est idem essentiae secundum rem … Patet ergo quod in Deo non est aliud esse relationis et essentiae, sed unum et idem*." *ST* 1a, q. 28, a. 2.

Consequently the terms of these relations are described as persons or hypostases, a term derived from Plotinus but already current in Patristic theology, to account for the three foci of divine activity. Unlike the use of person to refer to finite rational beings, the term does not in this case imply individuality, for in God it is the divine nature which is individual, so that there is only one divine nature which is identical with the threefold activity of the hypostases.

The divine "persons" are therefore constituted by their relational activity and are nothing separate from that activity. Being Father is eternally to be begetting and is nothing apart from nor prior to this. Being Son is being eternally begotten and similarly is nothing apart from this; the same point follows for the Holy Spirit. This complex of relations is not a composition, for God is absolutely simple and undivided. It is described as a *perichoresis* or a "dancing around." The naming of God as "Lord of the dance" is therefore wittingly or unwittingly perfectly apposite. The activity is also described as *circumincession.*

In describing God and divine activity, new ground is endlessly being broken, because, perhaps for the first time ever, a 'being' is understood in wholly relational terms.[17] That is, a 'being' here is understood as nothing other than its relations. Aquinas and other medieval writers make a distinction between what they term "essential" and "personal" attributes and they elaborate a highly developed semantic system in which the essential and personal attributes are kept clearly distinct. Nevertheless there is never any idea of a divine essence which is even logically prior to the relational properties: the essence is relational and the relations constitute the essence. Clearly, this is something other than the conceiving of finite subjects as constituted by their relations, for in God the relatedness is not to anything outside himself, not even to the world which he creates … God is what he is simply in virtue of his eternal, perichoretic, relational activity. This divine reality is described as complete, perfect, infinite and wholly self-sufficient. He is, to use the terminology of the Book of Revelation, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

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[17] We have already voiced our questioning as to whether God can literally be spoken of as 'a being' and the medievals often speak of God more technically as *ipsum esse subsistens*, in which "being" is used in the verbal rather than the entitative sense. Perhaps the most universally prevalent source of anthropomorphism in almost any discourse about God, whether everyday or technical, is the failure to recognise that God is not an entity in the familiar sense. For Aquinas every finite being is a limited realisation of active existence, whereas God is active existence unbounded by such a limiting essence. Alternatively God is described as that Being whose essence is identical with unbounded existence.

Triadic Order and Creation

Nevertheless from the human standpoint God is seen as subject, particularly in relation to creation. Theology is immediately reminded that its ascent (as far as reasoning is concerned) to the being of God was precisely from a world of contingency and finitude which had come to be seen as requiring an ontological foundation in that which is unconditioned. Indeed the fundamental faith in God is faith in God precisely as "maker of heaven and earth." The matter of relating this unity of perfect and complete activity to a world of finitude requires a new understanding of this relation of ontological dependence and it would be difficult to say that medieval theology ever found a way of effecting this transition by means of deduction or implication. Ontological dependence can be proved by rational demonstration: creation, at least in the sense understood by Christian theology, cannot. For the medievals, only God can create. Yet, whether creating is part of his nature is another question. God does not need to create and in this sense, therefore, creating does not seem to be part of his nature. Yet creation can only come about if God wills it. Further, creation can hardly be viewed as a kind of optional extra, only accidentally linked to the divine nature. There can be no division between possibility and actuality in God, because divine nature seems to exclude the notion of possibility–God is by definition wholly actual. For Aquinas, the ontological relation of the finite world to God as its source is a relation which is real in created beings, yet is not a real relation in God.[18] How this can be, if God freely creates the world and does not create by necessity, is a matter of some difficulty. But it seems to go something like this: It is of the nature of the Good to communicate itself and this is true not only of the supreme Good but of what Aquinas here terms "natural" beings, which seek to realise not only their own end or good and, so far as they can, communicate what they have to others.[19] By analogy, God in his enjoyment of his own perfection also delights in

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[18] Eg., *ST* 1a, q. 13, a. 7; q. 45, a. 3. This curious view that in some sense God is not affected by creation derives from the power of the neo-Platonic tradition in Scholastic thinking, although its ultimate roots are in Plato's conception of the Good and Aristotle's idea of God as moving the world only by attraction. It seems that not until William of Ockham is it recognised that this is a severe limitation on the transitivity of freely willed creation. See note 36 below.

[19] This essential, perhaps defining characteristic of the Good, already recognised in Plato (see *Timaeus* 29e) is certainly one of the most poignant witnesses to the goodness of creation. As Christopher Stead notes, by the time of its incorporation in the Hermetic Literature the expression is extended to the notion not only of communication but of self-disclosure. See Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 159 .

communicating this good to other beings by way of participation. He loves them, however, not as ends in themselves but in relation to his own good.[20]

Here, as at many other points in this difficult reconciliation of the philosophical tradition with the requirements of specifically Christian faith in divine revelation, the strain is felt in maintaining the absolute completeness of a God who reflects the characteristics of the impassible Good, of the One "beyond being," while at the same time maintaining the sheer givenness of the world of nature and the world of human beings. To put the dilemma in its starkest form, what scripture affirms is not "that God so loved himself" but that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son" (Jn 3,16) No doubt, in a system of theology structured by the neo-Platonic triad of abiding, procession and return it is possible to reconcile an apparently self-contained complete perfection with its emanative diffusion in the created world, but whether in the end this does not run into contradiction, once God's freedom and love are engaged in the activity of creation is by no means so clear. In some contemporary theology a good deal of criticism has been directed to the medieval synthesis, at least as exemplified in Aquinas, for predetermining our understanding of Trinity and creation by setting up a Greek philosophical view of God prior to exploring the requirements of a theology based on history of salvation.[21] It might be said that Aquinas inherited from his neo-Platonic predecessors the problem of making the transition from the complete self-sufficiency of God, conceived of as the One, to a world characterised by finitude, contingency and becoming. In one sense this problem becomes greater and the strain perhaps more evident, once the procession of the hypostases has been made internal to the divine unity.[22] For the moment we may perhaps put this question of internal strain on hold, while we move on to consider the way in which Aquinas conceives of this "diffusion of the Good" in creation.

Trinity and Creation: Sending and Giving

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[20] For a discussion of this see *ST* 1a, q. 19, a. 2.

[21] See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999 [1970]) and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1991), especially chapter 5. That Aquinas quite consciously preferred the neo-Platonic scheme for theology is clear from *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 7.

[22] It will be remembered that in Plotinus, the inadmissibility in the One of any kind of composition precludes an emanation even of divine mind within itself. The emanation of the divine mind is already a *tolma* or "daring venture"; that of the soul is another. In Aquinas's theology, the processions of Word and Spirit are to be reconciled within the perfect unity and simplicity of the one divine nature.

Aquinas's treatment of the Trinitarian life, of the divine persons, processions and relations, along with all the difficulties of constructing a grammar and a logic appropriate to the expression of these matters, concludes with a first intimation of parallelism between the internal Trinitarian life and its deployment in the created world. In the final discussion of Trinitarian relations (question 43), two new concepts are introduced which characterise the relations of origin with respect to the temporal world. Concepts arising from a non-temporal consideration of the divine relations, thought of as having a term, are generation and spiration (the word used to refer to the procession of the Holy Spirit), but along with these, two other terms with a temporal reference are introduced: those of "sending" and "giving."[23]These terms refer in the first instance, beyond the doctrine of creation in general, to the new ways in which the Trinitarian relations are reflected in rational beings. They are aspects of the divine immanence in the created world. The concepts of "sending" and "giving" are introduced at this point, not primarily in order to give an account of how God creates, but rather in anticipation of the doctrine of grace and the participation in the divine life which is accorded to human beings. It seems that the full scope of the immanence of divine life in the created world is, for Aquinas, only possible where a true image of the Trinity is found, namely in beings possessed of intellect and will. Nevertheless, the immanence of God in the world has been announced as, so to speak, the end-point of creation. In whatever manner the perfection or complete self-sufficiency of the divine nature is to be properly understood, the movement towards divine presence in the world of creation is here being clearly signalled.[24]

The question of divine immanence in the created world is, from the point of view of this study, one of fundamental importance. If any argument is to be made that created reality is in some sense an extension of the self-realising activity of the divine life and that it is driven in its on-going actualisation in a manner structurally at least analogous with that life, we shall have to give an account of how and to what extent the essentially relational nature of God is reflected in his creation. In other words, what we shall be looking for is evidence of creative immanence in the structure of finite being. Put in another way, we shall be asking about the analogical resemblance between *esse subsistens* and *esse commune*, or the being which is common to everything in the world of our experience.

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[23] See *ST* 1a, q. 43, a. 2.

[24] Readers of Heidegger will notice here an interesting resonance with his treatment of the relations of origin in the late essay *Time and Being*.

Divine existence and finite existence are, at least for Aquinas, conceptually related not by identity but by analogy. From Anselm to Aquinas, the need to get at the difference in meaning between "exist" with reference to God and with reference to created beings has been seen as a key to non-anthropomorphic expressions about the nature of God. But, having thus safeguarded the transcendence of the divine, is it possible nonetheless to give an account of how finite being is derived from subsistent or infinite being in a way which allows a pertinent continuity of meaning in the language of existence and actualization of a kind that excludes mere equivocation?

It might be argued here that Aquinas's highly metaphysical account of creation is singularly lacking in the sense of the immediacy of creation and divine immanence such as we find it in the biblical doctrine of creation. From the "In the beginning" of Genesis to the "In the beginning" of John, God is everywhere present and active in the created world. Yet this kind of immediate immanence never denies but rather underlines the "holiness" of God, and holiness is (at least up to a point) a religious expression for the more philosophical term of transcendence. What we are looking for is not the "otherness" of divine existence, but rather for the continuity in spite of difference between actualization in the divine and actualization in finite being. In other words, we are looking for the positive ground for the analogy, rather than the undoubted source of difference.

There are a number of elements in Aquinas's account of creation which underline the notion of continuity between divine self-actualization and the actualization or existence of the world of finite being. The first, and not the least important is the immediacy with which the treatment of creation succeeds the treatment of the relational life of the Trinity. (This is one of those instances in which the logical sequence of the overall synthesis of the *Summa Theologica* is integral to the understanding of the detail of the argument) It can hardly be without significance that just as the relational nature of God was introduced by the word "procession," the transition to the doctrine of creation is headed: "Concerning the procession of created beings from God and of the first cause of all beings." This underlining of the notion of creation as procession is immediately taken up again in the preamble to the first of these questions: "After the consideration of the divine Persons [not "of the divine nature"] it remains to give consideration to the procession of created beings from God"[25] It is true that it will often be said that "operations of the Trinity *ad extra* are of a single principle"–it is not any particular divine person who creates, but "God" creates.

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[25] *ST* 1a, q. 44.

But that single principle has by now been shown to be not accidentally triune, but essentially so. God's singularity has been shown to be essentially relational in a threefold way. It would be a mistake to understand it as a kind of "closed shop" in which the unity of God takes precedence over his threefoldness, or of the essentially relational nature of that unity. The origin of the finite world is to be found in a Trinitarian God whose essence is his own relational existence. It is precisely as Trinity that God creates.[26]

The second point which underscores the continuity between subsistent and finite being is the conscious use of the term "emanation" as a way of referring to creative process. It is not unusual for creation to be understood primarily in terms of causality; and since causality is nowadays most often thought about in terms of efficient or effective causality on the basis of physical interaction, it is often assumed that the doctrine of creation is to be understood as super-effective efficient causality. The notion of cause here employed by Aquinas is very much wider. Most importantly it includes the notion of "participation." It might be said that the somewhat schematic treatment of divine causality by Aquinas in question 44 is mainly designed to underline the notion that God is not merely the moving cause of the created world, but that he is the total or universal cause of finite beings, not just as this or that being or kind of being, but precisely as actual or existent. It is designed to underscore the theory of participation or derived being, the point of which is the rather Platonic notion that the intelligibility of all instances of existing or actualization is a derived intelligibility, reflecting that which is the principle or source. What is not Platonic in this view is that we are no longer dealing with Platonic forms nor even with divine ideas in the traditional sense but the with divine nature in so far as it is participated by beings of every kind.[27] Whatever we may be required to say about the essential difference between *esse subsistens* and *esse commune*, it remains true that *esse commune* participates in and therefore reflects the divine being.

The third point which draws attention to the continuity is the retention by Aquinas of the notion of emanation. The notion of emanation is usually associated with the work of Plotinus and the other later neo-Platonist philosophers. Even in Plotinus the word is no more than an analogy, the purpose of which is to maintain, at one and the same time, the derivation of all subsequent beings from the One, while at the same time maintaining the un-alteration in the One as a result of this process or procession. It is not surprising then that it is

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[26] See note 30 below.
[27] *ST* 1a, q. 44, a. 3.

retained by Aquinas since the entire theological endeavour is structured on the triad, *monē, proodos, epistrophē,* "abiding, procession, return." The essential character of creation for Aquinas calls for the deployment of both notions, causality and emanation: the first in order, among other things, to maintain (perhaps against the neo-Platonists) divine freedom in creation and the autonomous reality of finite beings; the second, in order to emphasise the notion of participation. What we have here is not a contradiction but an indication of the need for more than one analogy, ostensibly excluding one another, in a way similar to the complementarity of wave and corpuscular theories of light in physics. The idea of "universal cause" (the subject of question 44 taken as a whole), that every aspect of the being of finite reality is derived being perhaps explains the need for the complementary analogy of emanation.[28]It is not only the coming to be or production of finite being which is explained by the causal relation, but also its formal characteristics and its inherent finality or teleological character are understood as participations in, and therefore reflections of, the divine nature.

The fourth point of continuity brings the matter most directly to light. Under the general heading: "Concerning the manner of the emanation of things from their first principle," Aquinas raises two directly Trinitarian questions: "Whether creation is common to the entire Trinity or is rather proper to a particular Person," and following this, "Whether there is a trace (*vestigium*) of the Trinity in created things."[29] To the first question, Aquinas answers that although the principle of creation is the divine essence, and, in that sense, is not proper to any one person of the Trinity, nevertheless God creates through his own essentially relational essence, by intellect and will, which is the same as to say that creation engages not just a single principle, but that single principle precisely in its Trinitarian structure, and concludes that it is the procession of persons in the Trinity which is the principle of creation because the processions are the embodiment of the essential attributes of knowledge and will.[30] The Plotinian

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[28] It is important to note that Aquinas does not use the term "emanation" in discussing the processions and relations within the Trinitarian life. The processions of Word and Spirit are in no way emanations (understood in the neo-Platonic sense), since this would distance them from the unoriginated Father). However, Aquinas does say that what he calls intellective emanation is the proper analogy for the divine procession of the Word. See *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4, chap. 11, sec. 8.

[29] *ST* 1a, q. 45, a. 6 and 7.

[30] Aquinas does on a number of occasions directly link the "process" of creation with its origin in the Trinitarian processions. See, for example, the prologues to the *Commentary on the Sentences*

sequence of emanations, having been made internal to, and constitutive of, divine being, now becomes a unified principle of creative emanation.

To the question as to whether there is a trace or vestige of the Trinity in created beings, Aquinas replies with a distinction between "trace" and "image." It is only in beings with intellect and will that the stronger reflected likeness ("image") is found: in such beings there is a similar (analogous) movement of knowledge leading to a "conceived word" and a "processive love." A less complete likeness or "trace" is also found in every finite being.. This consists in three things: its independent being, its form or species and its order or relatedness to other things. In this context, Aquinas recalls various other analogous triads in Augustine:

It is something	It has a form	It has a certain order
Number	Weight	Measure
Manner	Appearance	Order
It exists	It is discerned	It conforms

Although all of this may seem to be of rather antiquarian interest, it does underscore the conviction in both Augustine and Aquinas, that triadic order is not something to be found only in the revealed doctrine of the Trinity. The essentially triadic character of order is retained in every finite being, in itself and in its relations with other beings. The stronger feature of resemblance or "image" is found in all spiritual or intellectual beings and is the basis for the richer analogy between intellectual beings and Trinitarian life.

There is a further significant carry-over from uncreated to created being which does not come out so sharply in the texts of the *Summa Theologica* with which we have been primarily concerned. Not only is triadic order carried over in the movement from uncreated to created being, but so also is the processive movement itself. This is an important corrective to the common understanding of

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of Peter Lombard: "Just as a branch river has its source in the main river, so the procession in time of created beings is derived from the procession of persons … consequently the first precession is the cause and reason for every subsequent procession." See also *ST* 1a, q. 45, a. 6: "The divine persons are causal in relation to the creation of things in accordance with the order of their procession." For a fuller account see Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 408–415.

medieval views of the world of finite beings as a collection of particular substances or entities linked simply by external rather than intrinsic relations to each other. Although the "physics" underlying the view may be, to the modern mind, extremely naive, the movement of triadic order is nevertheless clearly expressed. In a very interesting passage of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas sketches a theory of universal emanation, or transitive activity, in the created world. Emanation is seen as the way in which the being of any particular thing is related beyond itself to the being of other things. It fills out what was sketched in the *Summa Theologica* as the essentially triadic order of finite beings. In this *Summa Contra Gentilles* passage, Aquinas is laying the foundations for an apologetic explanation of Christian belief in the notion of divine generation (of Son from Father) and begins with the least form of emanation–that which is found in inanimate material beings, in which emanation is limited to the effect such beings have on others in virtue of their form or structure. Although the example Aquinas uses is that of fire, it is also presumably true of sticks and stones. In inanimate beings, the movement of emanation is entirely blind. But with living or organic life there is already a tendency towards reproduction. But organic reproduction leads to an externalization of what is reproduced. With sensitive beings, emanation results also in an inward, reflexive movement yet with reference to what is external to it–as in minimally conscious sensation. The argument which proceeds through human and then angelic intellectual life aims at showing ever increasing immanence of the emanative process to itself or self-consciousness with a view to finding an argument of convenience to support Christian belief in the wholly immanent triadic order of the divine personal life. This transitivity between subsistent being and finite being once again requires recourse to the principle of *bonum est diffusivum sui.* Further to this, when discussing the notion that *bonum est diffusivum sui* in answer to the question "Why creation?" Aquinas will build an argument which has as its foundation the tendency of every being to communicate itself.

What we might conclude from all of this is that one element of the analogical similarity holding between subsistent or infinite being, on the one hand, and finite or participated being, on the other, is that the notion of existence, *esse* or active being, is its essential transitivity: immanent order is the foundation of, and ultimately identical with, transitive order.

Why is there Creation?

Up to this point we have been primarily concerned with questions of the triadic conception of the divine nature and of the ways in which this is continued in and reflected by the world of finite being which is conceived as free causal emanation, or procession, from and participation in subsistent being. The question cannot be avoided, however, why there should be a world of finite being at all. If the divine, perichoretic life is complete and perfect in itself–and Aquinas never thinks otherwise–and if this divine life is sovereignly free, why should God create at all? The medieval answer to this question requires that we make a distinction between God's nature considered in itself, on the one hand, and in relation to anything other than himself on the other. The divine processions are neither free nor necessary. For the generation of the Word to be free would require that we think of the Father as a subject in his own right. But if the Father is defined purely in terms of his relative being, as he must be, he does not have that independence of being a subject in isolation from his relative nature. In other words, the divine processions are not free. Being Father is not anything prior to begetting the Word–he just is that. On the other hand they are not necessary either, for there can be no constraint without a subject to be constrained. So the answer is that in respect to his own being God is neither free nor necessitated, because the divine processions and the relations that arise from them are constitutive of the divine nature. (The sense in which God is thought of as a "necessary being" is not what is in question here.) Knowledge and love are simply God's nature and about that we can say no more. However, if one of the possibilities of that nature is to create that which is other than himself, God must be understood to be sovereignly and unlimitedly free with respect to that possibility. We might go on to ask the question: if God is free to create or not create, if creating is not a necessity of his nature, what could it be that would move him to create rather than to not create? Again, the medieval answer is clear: God cannot be moved to act by something other than or outside himself. Hence it must be something in his own nature which is the motive force of creation.

When Plato's demiurge decided to create, it was out of his goodness. But his goodness was confronted by the chaotic elements and so he willed that they should become as good as possible and this would be by way of being formed into a living being with soul and intelligence.[31] But in the Christian view of creation, at least as the medievals understood it, there are no preexistent elements, chaotic

[31] See Plato, *Timaeus* 30.

or otherwise. Creation is *ex nihilo*–in no way a response to a situation.[32] God cannot create for his own satisfaction, since he is, so to speak, perfectly satisfied in his own self-completeness or perfection. The principle appealed to is that if we look more closely at the nature of the Good we find that it is "self-diffusive"–*bonum est diffusivum sui.* If God is superabundant and infinite good, and if it is of the nature of the Good that it, so to speak, overflows, then Good emanating from its source is necessary and we could then say that creation follows of necessity from the divine nature. But if, as Aquinas and all the other Christian teachers maintain, God loves only himself of necessity, and that he does indeed possess sovereign freedom with regard to anything other than himself, then it seems necessary to say that, if God wills creation, he does so in relation to his own goodness, not as its completion (because it is already complete and lacking nothing) but because it is good to manifest and share it.

This seems to be very close to what Aquinas holds. If, he argues, it is of the nature of natural beings to communicate their own goodness to others in so far as they can and their own perfection allows, so much more so must it be true of God that he sees it as good to communicate his own goodness to others. But he goes on to qualify this by saying that this communication is not an end in itself but somehow is subsumed under his own good.[33] The goodness of self-communication is understood as a good intrinsic to the divine nature. It is perhaps at this point that we witness the strains imposed on the doctrine of creation by the requirement that the divine nature be viewed not only as perfect and infinite but with the perfection and infinity of that which is complete in itself. In the last analysis, it seems that the medievals always draw back from the recognition that bountiful creation might be as much part of the divine nature as are the immanent, perichoretic relations of the divine life. In spite of the evangelical renewal which

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[32] The primary scriptural basis for the *ex nihilo* doctrine is the opening verse of the *Book of Genesis*. However, it is now recognised that it might be read: "In the beginning, when God created heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void." See, for example, the New English Bible rendering. God's creative activity is then identified with his word addressing this chaotic situation. This would be much closer to the account in the *Timaeus* of Plato. If this reading were accepted the first expression of creation *ex nihilo* would not come until 2 *Maccabees*, 7: 28. Such a reading might well call for a radically different doctrine of creation than that accepted by Aquinas and his contemporaries and so would go beyond anything that might be understood as an interpretation of his thought.

[33] *ST* 1, q. 19, a. 2. Aquinas here notes that the same question arises concerning his knowledge of things other than himself, namely created beings in regard to which the principle *scientia Dei causa rerum* (the knowledge of God is the cause of things) applies.

was part and parcel of the medieval renewal of theology, the identification of God with boundless agapeic love seems to be held back precisely by a kind of withholding which Plato had argued could not be attributed to the "maker and father of the universe." The drive towards voluntarism in the developments of Scholastic speculation subsequent to Aquinas will eventually allow for a new emphasis on the communication of freedom both in and to creation. This will result eventually in an entirely new conception of the notion of derived order as freely self-constructing, rather than as an imposed, pre-conceived order. This road, however, is an extremely long and tortuous one and the scope of this study will allow us only to witness the first steps which we identify, to a degree, with the withering of the notion of form along with a strong move towards voluntarism, as it occurs particularly in the Franciscan school of thinkers, notably Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

Norman Kretzmann has pointed out that Bonaventure had already taken steps in this direction by way of placing heavier emphasis on the "productive" aspect of the principle that the Good naturally diffuses itself.[34] Less concerned with the Aristotelian conception of Good as final cause to the exclusion of productive causality, Bonaventure sees the self-diffusiveness of God in creation as following (freely) from the self-diffusiveness which is the goodness of the divine nature itself, whose goodness is expressed already in the Trinitarian communicative processions. Aquinas apparently rejected such an account of the Trinitarian relations on the ground that it would imply that in some sense the Father already possesses a goodness which he communicates by way of generation and spiration, thus detracting from the exclusively relational nature of the divine essence. For Aquinas the perfection or goodness of the divine being is not communicated from one divine person to another but is rather the perfection of that self-communication in its fully relational nature. It is not our purpose here to be waylaid by the small print of Trinitarian theory and for our purpose it is enough to signal the stronger trend towards voluntarism in the Franciscan school, while at the same time noting the more thoroughly relational conception of the triune divine nature in Aquinas. We will look more closely at the medieval conceptions of the Good in our treatment of the transcendentals.

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[34] Norman Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create Anything at All?" in Scott MacDonald, ed., *Being and Goodness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), chapter 8.

Creation and "Divine Ideas"

For Aquinas, the most fundamental source of the world of finite being remains the infinite divine *esse,* but now conceived not simply as undifferentiated activity, but, by way of revelation, conceived as a perichoretic triunity. Creation is in the first and most fundamental sense a communication of that being. The Platonic identification of intelligibility with form maintained an important and significant place in medieval thinking about the intelligibility of the created world. It is true that for the most part the rediscovery of Aristotle's more metaphysical writings had led to an acceptance of his critique of the Platonic teaching and to a recognition that form exists primarily in particular beings. Nevertheless the Platonic theory of a world of pure intelligible forms as the exemplars imitated by the beings of the world of change and becoming was carried over by way of Philo and of Plotinus into the medieval synthesis. In the doctrine of Trinitarian life, the divine Word which proceeds by way of intellect is not simply the expression and reflection of divine being but at the same time includes all the ways in which that being can be participated by finite beings both as an ordered cosmos and as the exemplar of all particular finite beings. Allied to the divine will to create such a cosmos, the Word is seen as essentially creative and the source of the intelligible nature of the world and all that inhabits it. As we saw, the Trinitarian "trace" in finite beings consists of their being, their form and their order. Every finite being is in the first place a particular determination of the activity of existence. This determination or limitation is its essence or essential nature. This is true of every kind of finite being, including the purely immaterial or "spiritual" beings, such as angels. In the case of physical beings this essential nature is a composite of form and matter, which further limits it or determines it to be this particular, individual being. The notorious debates in the medieval schools on the nature of universals is intimately related to the question of the precise nature of this composition of matter and form in particular physical beings. Three parallel discussions can be discerned in the evolution of medieval thinking on these matters: the discussion of divine ideas in creation, the discussion about essence and individuation and the discussion about the ontological status of universals. We might say that they are respectively the theological, the ontological and the logical aspects of essentially the same question. The nature of what are called "divine ideas"as the exemplars of created beings belongs primarily to the ontological discussion. The teasing out of these strands is a matter of both delicacy and complexity and what needs to be said here is simply that from Philo onwards the divine exemplars of created things are in the mind of God and tend

to be identified with the divine Word, who is not only the likeness of the unseen God (Col 1, 15–16; Jn 1, 3), but as these texts suggested, is the exemplar of the whole of the created world.[35] The forms, from being the eternally intelligible realities of which the world of becoming is an imperfect imitation, have now become the creative expressions of the divine will freely creating the world and all that is in it. One might say that the divine ideas are no longer what God contemplates but are rather the expressions of divine creative will.

In this progression of the great Scholastic masters the notion of "order" in the world of finite reality, and along with it, the concept of active existence have undergone a considerable and portentous change. The later thinkers agree with Aquinas on the general notion that divine creative activity leaves a trace in all natural beings and a stronger likeness or "image" in intellectual beings. Their way of explaining all this is of course different to some extent on account of systematic differences. Such traces signal the presence of creative power without really reflecting the Trinitarian nature of the creator, except by way of appropriation: exemplarity appropriated to the Word, production to the Father and goodness, or being-ordered-to-an-end, to the Holy Spirit. The notion of exemplarity is conditioned by the differing emphasis on the role of divine ideas in creation. This difference underlines the more important movement in the direction of voluntarism to this extent that an increasing emphasis is placed on creation as an expression of divine will. An indication that the hold of neo-Platonic emanation has indeed been broken along with the notion of order based on form is William of Ockham's bold assertion that creation in God is a real relation.[36] A great deal of significance follows from this for the created order is now freed from necessity and becomes a contingent order. For the moment, the sovereignly independent will of God is what determines the nature of that order. How that order is to be understood independently of this relation to divine power, the range of contingency and freedom and the place of empirical enquiry in its understanding, will become one of the preoccupations of the early modern period

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[35] The literature on these matters is immense, but a very useful study of the doctrine in historical context can be found in Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), chapter 5, especially 77–100.

[36] See William of Ockham, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* 6, q. 28: "Is the action of creation a relation of reason?" To the present writers, this abandonment of the tenaciously held idea that there can be no real relation of God to the created world is a move whose significance has rarely been noted. In an important sense, it changes everything. Ockham first rejects the notion that the relation of God to creation is no more than "a relation of reason."

and will carry over into the questions about the order of nature which are so central to Kant, Hegel and Schelling.

Being and its Transcendental Attributes

The essential link that we have tried to establish between the infinite being of the Creator and the created order can now be seen to consist in three elements: origin, structure and finality.[37] To these correspond what have come to be known as the transcendental or convertible attributes of being itself. This notion of being as actualization, as the medievals, following Aristotle, insisted, is not a genus of which there are specific varieties, because it is logically prior to any such specification or determination. Yet, far from saying that being is the most empty and indeterminate of notions, the medievals insisted that wherever there is existence of any kind at all, there are at least three essential characteristics or attributes (Scotus calls them *passiones*). These attributes are variously listed and numbered (the differences occurring, largely, for contextual reasons). The simplest version is in direct correspondence with the three elements just listed and consists in *ens, verum* and *bonum*, "being," "the true" and "the good." Sometimes the first, *ens* is further explicated as *res, unum* and *aliquid* or "reality," "unity" and "difference."[38] The members of this first triad are considered to be absolute attributes and the others, "true" and "good" are conceived as relational, in that true implies a relation to mind and good a relation to will. On occasion, a further attribute, also relational in nature is added, which is *pulchrum*, or "the beautiful" which implies a relation both to mind and to will. Aquinas, for example, defines the beautiful as *id quod visum placet* (that which when seen [or perceived] delights).[39] It relates to mind as the object of perception and to the will as the object of delight.

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[37] This threefold trace or vestige can be found in many places. It is clearly distinguished from the closer likeness of image. It reflects divine causality in relation to efficient, formal and final causes. A clear example would be Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense* 1, dist. 3, q. 5, 1. Although there are differences in the "fine print," Scotus here agrees with Aquinas and makes the same moves of recognising that it is God as a single principle who originates created being by exemplarity, power and finality. These three aspects are in turn appropriated to Word, Father and Holy Spirit respectively.

[38] Notice once more the parallel with the threefold trace in a very clear exposition of the theory of transcendental attributes of being given by Aquinas in *de Veritate,* q. 1, a. 1.

[39] *ST* I q. 5 art. 4 ad. 1 and *ST* I-IIce q. 27 art. 1 ad. 3.

The logical peculiarity of the transcendental attributes is sometimes described as their "convertibility" and phrases such as *ens et verum convertuntur* (being and the true are convertible) or *ens et bonum convertuntur* (being and the good are convertible) are frequently found.[40] What this means essentially is that these attributes conceptually enrich the notion of being while at the same time not determining or limiting the notion, but rather explicating it As Aquinas says, "some predicates may be said to add to being, inasmuch as they express a mode of being not expressed by the term being."[41] Although the convertibility of the transcendentals is itself a matter relating to the logical properties of these terms, this logical property is founded on the transcendentals as ontological properties or attributes and as such they serve to explicate the full content of *esse* or being in the active sense. Although the formal notion of true includes relation to a mind and that of good a relation to will, these relations have their foundations in the being of things, and so it is both the case that truth and goodness are real properties of every being as such and at the same time that they imply a reference to mind and will. On the strength of this, Aquinas is able to endorse two apparently conflicting definitions of truth, one of which identifies truth with the real, the other which underscores relation to a mind.[42] It is true that Aquinas does conclude that the "formal" notion of truth is to be found in the reference to a mind. If, *per impossibile*, no mind, not even the divine mind existed, Aquinas concludes that there would be no such thing as truth. Nowadays, the notion of ontological truth, that truth is a property of active being, has become strange and unfamiliar. We are inclined to think of truth as a property of true statements, or of true propositions. For Aquinas and the other medieval thinkers, truth is transcendentally convertible with being because being is the foundation and source of intelligibility. Truth as a property of minds or of propositions, of true statements or of true beliefs is understood as derivative from this primary sense of the inherent intelligibility of things which is co-extensive with being.

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[40] The precise meaning of "conversion" and "convertibility" have been quite widely discussed. Peter Geach has suggested the etymology of "turning together" in the manner of wheels linked by cogs. Another possible etymology would derive "conversion" from the Latin *conversari*, meaning "to keep company with" which certainly grasps the intent of the term. But in the end the meaning is probably the technical, logical property of convertibility of propositions such that it is true that it is both true that "if A then B"and "if B then A." See Peter Geach, "Relativity and Relative Identity" in *Logic and Ontology*, ed. Milton K. Munitz (New York: New York University Press, 1973), 288.

[41] *De Veritate* q. 1 art. 1. The treatment here is primarily concerned with the ontological foundation of the concept of truth. Elsewhere Aquinas makes similar points about the convertibility of being and the good, e.g., *ST* 1, q. 5, a. 1–3.

[42] See the same text in *de Ver.* q. 1, a. 1, and q. 21, a. 1.

Perhaps even stranger to the contemporary mind is the identification of active being with "the Good." In contemporary thinking, good in its proper sense is an evaluative term, both in a very broad sense but also in the narrower context of ethical or moral value. What we have to think of in the medieval context is not the good in an evaluative nor in an ethical sense, but in the sense of perfection, realization or actualization. The modern understanding of evolutionary actualization has, as one of its dogmas, the exclusion of teleology–actualization is reduced to "happening" explained solely in terms of antecedent conditions. To that extent, one sense of the question why things happen has simply become null. The medieval thinkers were, however, the inheritors of the tradition in which Plato's "Good beyond being," Aristotle's revision of this as "that at which all things aim" and Plotinus's Good as the object of universal desire, constituted the ultimate explanatory principle of all things. Although they subscribed to the full range of Aristotelian causal categories, they also accorded a pre-eminence to the concept of "final" cause as the ultimate answer to the question "why?" Actualization and perfection in the sense of complete realization were one and the same, though differing "formally" or conceptually. What the concept of perfection or the Good adds to the notion of actualization is what we might now term the dynamic nature of active existence, which is not simply occurrence, but movement in the direction of completion or fulfilment.

The Franciscan school of thinkers were even inclined to put the Good ahead of Being (the Platonic influence) as that which is most ultimate in the order of explanation.[43] Aquinas's position on this , following Avicenna and citing Aristotle, is clearly that active being is logically the more primitive notion in so far as intelligibility is concerned, even though from the standpoint of causal explanation, the Good is primary and has been called the *causa causarum*.[44] If the activity of actualization (*esse*) is the most primordial or ultimate notion to which the speculative thinker can reach, the further question as to why such actualization occurs calls for an inherent explanatory power which is reflexive. The answer has to be found, at least as far as the medievals saw it, in what they termed the Good. The difference to which we have alluded between the Dominican and the Franciscan schools of thought comes in the end to the question

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[43] For an informative account of two contesting strands in medieval thought on this question see André Hayen, *La Communication de l'Être d'après S Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1957), 81–89.

[44] See *ST* 1a, q. 5, a. 2 where Aquinas distinguishes the "order of predication" from the order of causal explanation.

whether the Good is to be accounted for by reference to actualization or whether actualization is ultimately accounted for by the nature of the Good. Either way it is necessary to inquire a little further into what these thinkers understood by transcendental Goodness.

Two apparently conflicting accounts could be given of the nature of the Good. The first, derived from Plato by way of neo-Platonic thought, particularly from pseudo-Dionyisius, is the notion of the ultimately self-diffusive *bonum est diffusivum sui*. This begins from the notion that there is something that we could refer to as subsistent goodness. Plato's "Good beyond being" is interpreted in such a way that being is derived from the Good. The second is drawn from Aristotle, for whom the "Good is that at which all things aim." In the medieval theories of creation, the former would underline the Good as the source of creation through its own super-abundance; the latter underlines the Good as the *telos* inherent in the activity of actualization. *Energeia*, which is the term from which "act" and "actualization" are derived, is always movement towards some kind of fulfilment. The difference has in each case to be reconciled, but it might be said that at least at first sight, the neo-Platonic principle of *bonum est diffusivum sui* might seem to be the more easily reconciled with the requirements of the Christian theology of creation and the notion of divine generosity. It is sometimes argued that there is an unresolved tension in Aquinas between these notions of the Good at least as far as the doctrine of creation is concerned.[45] This may well be true, but is mitigated to some extent by Aquinas's insistence on the notion of universal causality as a consequence of which God is understood to be both the productive and the final cause of created beings.[46] In other words, God as subsistent Good is at once both source and end of finite being–both Alpha and Omega.

The way in which Aquinas understands this transcendentality of Being, Truth and Goodness, is qualified by his distinction between *esse subsistens* and *esse commune.* Just as being in these two senses is related by analogy, so too the transcendental attributes are so linked. The triadic relational structure of *esse subsistens* is not simply carried over into the world of finite, created beings, whose most general characteristic is *esse commune*, but is realised there in an essentially participated fashion. Convertibility (in its ontological foundation) reflects but is not identical with the perichoretic relation of the divine persons but

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[45] See, for example, the essay of Norman Kretzmann cited in note 34 above
[46] *ST* 1, q. 44; q. 45, a. 1.

it would appear that for Aquinas there is an analogical continuity between them.[47] Duns Scotus has insisted, against Aquinas, that being is a univocal notion,[48] but is then forced to maintain the claims of divine transcendence by building into his theory of transcendental attributes or *passiones entis* a preliminary qualification by way of a series of *disjunctive* transcendentals: every being is either infinite or finite, necessary or contingent, actual or potential. Either way, created or finite being reflects divine being and so is both true and good by participation. In the divine, viewed concretely and personally, truth is appropriated to the divine Word, which is the expression of divine being and goodness is appropriated to the Holy Spirit, for which the proper names are "love" and "gift." Appropriation, in this context, is a term which is largely unfamiliar to present day readers–at least in the sense in which it is used in medieval thought. It is really a device by means of which the medieval thinkers sought to reconcile what were termed personal or relational attributes with those that were thought of as attributes of the divine nature or essence in its unity. So, the transcendental attributes of being are realised both in the transcendent nature of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* and in finite beings under the heading of *esse commune.* God is therefore subsistent Truth and Goodness and these are properties consequent upon his nature. But as we have seen, this nature is nothing other than the Trinitarian relations in their perichoretic inter-relationship. The difficulties involved in giving coherent and logical expression to all this is recognised, for example when Aquinas discusses "whether essential names *in abstracto* can be used to "refer to" (*supponere pro*) a divine person.[49] The difficulties arise precisely from the logical peculiarity of a single subject, God, whose essence involves the real distinction of three divine persons. Appropriation is the ascription of properties which in reality belong to the essential nature of God (properties pertaining equally to the divine persons) to particular persons on the basis of a similarity between these common properties and the particular nature of the distinct processions and relations. So, being truth and goodness are common properties of the divine nature, yet there is a certain

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[47] I have not found any passage in Aquinas that makes this link explicit, but it is difficult to reject such an implication. There are however indications that the implication is pointed to in some places where the connection between the procession of the divine persons is related directly to the procession of creation. On this see Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy*, 408ff. In Aquinas see *In Quattuor libros Sententiarum,* prologue to book 1 and *ST* 1, q. 33, a. 3 ad 1.

[48] On Scotus's reasons for maintaining that being is a univocal concept, see Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy* vol. 3 (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1950), 500ff.

[49] *ST* 1, q. 39, a. 5.

fittingness in ascribing being to the Father, truth to the Word and goodness to the Holy Spirit.[50]

The resulting semantic problems are considerable. The answer involves the medieval theory of distinctions. The transcendental attributes are held by Aquinas to be formally, but not really distinct. This means in the simplest terms that what is expressed by each is not reducible in meaning, but is reducible in reference. Being does not just mean the same as thing, true or good, even though whatever is a being is also true and good in the senses we have been discussing. This is what is meant by their convertibility. But when these terms are appropriated to the particular divine persons they are being ascribed to persons who are really distinct.[51] We might therefore decribe appropriation as a peculiar form of metonymy, of such a kind that the divine Word may be referred to as truth and the Holy Spirit as goodness or love, even though strictly speaking these attributes refer to the divine nature considered in its unity.

Summary and Assessment

What I have tried to do in this essay has been to show that the strong theory of existence operating in the thought of some of Aquinas reveals a number of important elements in theories of being as active existence which will surface again at various points in the subsequent history. Many points of detail have been either skimmed over or even ommitted in the process in the interests of highlighting features which often become obscured in more detailed accounts of the various medieval systems. What has emerged, most notably in the doctrine of the Trinity, is an understanding of existence as activity rather than as essence, or perhaps better, as an understanding of the mutual interrelationship of essence and existence. The divine essence has been seen to be not accidentally, but essentialy a matter of subistent, relational activity, triadic in form and perichoretic in its internal reflexivity. We have also seen that all finite and contingent existence is derived from this by way of creation understood as a freely willed participation in this infinite source of being and that as such finite being reflects and mirrors

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[50] On the appropriation of the transcendentals in medieval thought, see Chapter 9 in Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy*. For Aquinas's definition of appropriation see *De Veritate* q. 7, a. 3: "What is in fact a common property has a greater similarity to what is proper to one person than it is to what is proper to another."

[51] For the details of Aquinas's argument on this particular point see *de Ver.,* q. 1, a. 1, ad. 5. The outcome is that both in the case of the divine being and in that of created being, the transcendentals are not really distinct but only conceptually.

the characteristics of its source and origin. Creation has been found to be not only causation (and this in an ampliative sense of "universal cause") but also "procession" and "emanation." Although for the medievals this reflection is at its most complete in rational beings endowed with mind and will, it is nevertheless genuinely carried over into the ontological structure of all finite beings.[52] Although all being 'outside' of the originating Trinitarian source is limited by its finite nature or essence and is therefore essentially dependent being, nevertheless it has a comparable structure of origin, form and finality (characteristic of the Trinitarian relations) in such a way that it exhibits the transcendental attributes of being, truth and goodness. We have seen that in finite beings, existence has been limited and determined by essence or nature and that this conception of essence is bound up with the notion of substantial and accidental forms. What is sometime overlooked, resulting in a static notion of essence, is that the medievals were operating with the Aristotelian conception of form understood as a principle of activity. The Platonic notion of form underwent a profound metamorphosis in Aristotle to become a dynamic principle of self-realisation. In Aquinas, this activity of form is not cancelled but rather subsumed into the primacy of active existence or *esse*. Traditionally much greater emphasis has been placed on the notion of form as a principle of identity, as the foundation of the quiddity or nature of a thing than upon form as a principle of active self-realisation.[53] This has resulted in an undervaluation of the continuity between the Trinitarian processions and the creation of the finite world.

There has been a good deal of misunderstanding of the medieval distinction of essence and existence, such that existence was understood as an entirely characterless act, the sole point of which is to activate any particular essence, conceived as simply a possible nature, with the resulting union giving a real being. It may well be true that the medieval writers sometimes express themselves in this way. No doubt many of the problems and confusions surrounding the question of real versus formal distinction between essence and

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[52] It has to be remembered that the medieval syntheses were concerned with creation more from the standpoint of a theology of human redemption than from any kind of cosmogonic interest for its own sake. This accounts for the greater interest in the Trinitarian image reflected in human nature than in the trace of triadic order pervading the entire created world.

[53] Among those who have seen this shortcoming in common understanding of Aristotelian form is Martin Heidegger. See his important study: "On the Essence and Concept of Φυσις in Aristotle's *Physics*, B, 1," reproduced in M. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also George A. Blair, *Energeia and Entelecheia: "Act" in Aristotle* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1992), especially 38–40.

existence are related to the inherent difficulty of constructing an adequate vocabulary to express the notion of metaphysical principles of being.[54] However, if we take seriously the notion that finite essences or natures are in reality instances of incomplete participations of existence, or that essence is simply a particular way in which existence is realised in the contingent world of finite beings, the matter becomes clearer. Essence is a particular determination of the activity of esse. It has no reality other than as a determination of active existence. The gradual but real withering of the notion of form that we have noted in the progression from Aquinas through Scotus to Ockham witnesses to the recognition that essence and existence are related in such a way that essence without existence is no more than the notion of a possible being. There is nothing in the finite essence which is not derived from the single source of infinite divine existence, and all the characteristics which it exhibits are determinations of that existence. Consequently there are no elements in finite beings which have any other provenance than the creative will of their divine origin. This is the real import of *creatio ex nihilo* and of the universal-causal-emanation of the world of finite beings from God.

It has to be recognised that in medieval theories, the fundamental importance of the distinction between subsistent and common existence tended to produce not a unified metaphysics, but a two-tiered system in which the principles of the one were not immediately continuous with those of the other. Although the perichoretic relationality of the divine persons is reflected in and resonated in finite beings, to degrees varying along the scale of beings from physical or material beings to intellectual or spiritual ones, it cannot be said that cosmic process can be cashed out in precisely the same terms; it is always a matter of analogical similarity rather than of simple continuity. The divine transcendence is often characterised as an "infinite distance" between God and the created world. Combined with the notion that the divine perichoresis is complete and perfect in itself, the never solved problem is how to relate the divine and created worlds.

Nevertheless, the question could not be shirked and, as we have seen, the answers most commonly given focussed on the nature of the Good as of its nature self-diffusive. Although the logical expression is sometimes rather contorted in order to preserve the 'infinite distance,' it is allowed that a fundamental

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[54] In the present writer's estimation, one of the clearer treatments of this matter is to be found in Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, 332–335, 461–463, 510ff– the respective discussions of the distinction of essence and existence in the context of Aquinas, Giles of Rome and Scotus.

characterisation of such self-diffusive goodness is love, which is recognised as the completion of the divine perichoresis, hence also its initiation. What this really shows for the medievals is that God does not have to create, but that if he freely wills to do so, he is still acting 'in character,' so to speak. But there is a good deal to be said for the view that the medievals generally were so impressed and, perhaps, overawed by the richness of the philosophical heritage of the Greek world that they failed to give full consideration to the extent of God's love for the world, achieving its highest expression in the Incarnation of the divine Word. The overwhelming concern to guard the rights of divine transcendence could be said to lead to a systematic undervaluation of divine immanence. In theology this has almost always remained a matter of high contention, to the extent that even in the time of Hegel, the charge of pantheism was frequently levelled at attempts to give full value to the essential interconnection of infinite and finite in the matter of active existence.

If it has to be conceded in the end that Aquinas never achieved a truly unified speculative metaphysics, this has to be accounted for in terms of deficiencies at a number of levels, both theological and what might be called technical-philosophical. But our concern, in concluding this paper is to underline the important positive contributions that Aquinas made to the advancement of such a project. The definition of being as the activity of self-actualization, the recognition of a triadic order of origin, structure and finality, the elaboration of a theory of subsistent relations and the interconnective process of causal-emanation: all these contribute to the possibility of a unified theory of speculative metaphysics and will reappear in various forms and guises in the on-going history of such endeavours. The movement towards voluntarism, the recognition of the univocal nature of being, the abandonment of the more static conceptions of form and the recognition of a real relation between God and the world of finite, contingent being, all these developments signalled a direction towards an increasingly sophisticated speculative metaphysics.

In concluding, it can be noted that the failure to adequately implicate God in the finite world of contingent being had as a result the gradual relegation of the doctrine of God to a mere requirement of the understanding of that world in early modern philosophy and various forms of deism in which the vital relation of the triune divine nature with the created world faded into a systemic requirement of a more mundane metaphysic. As Heidegger might have said: what remains unthought in medieval thinking did indeed lapse into a "forgetfulness of being." The purpose here has been to open it up to fresh thought and reflection.