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AQUINAS, THE INCARNATION AND THE RELATIVE
IDENTITY THESIS: A MODEST DEFENSE OF THE
ASSUMPTUS-HOMO THEORY

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THE MYSTERY OF the Incarnation tells us that, in the course of human history, the Word of God assumed our nature without ceasing to be who and what he has been from all eternity, the only begotten Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Thomas Aquinas was far from alone in insisting that our understanding of how this took place be properly grounded in our understanding of why it took place. The Son of God assumed our nature so that he might suffer and die on our behalf, that we might be saved from the curse of sin and death and restored to God's friendship and the path towards our highest good: the beatific vision of God. Since only one who is human is in a position to suffer and die on our behalf, and since no mere human is in a position to offer such a condign sacrifice—one that satisfies the demands of God's justice with regard to the whole of our race—it has long been an article of faith that the Incarnation involves one person who is both fully human and fully divine.¹ For Aquinas, this means

¹ For examples of this line of reasoning in Aquinas, see *STh* III, q. 1, a. 2; *ScG* IV, c. 54; and *Comp. Theol.* I, cc. 198-200. Quotations from the *Summa theologiae* are from the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). Quotations from the *Summa contra gentiles* are from the translation by Charles J. O'Neil (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). Quotations from the *Compendium of Theology* are from the translation by Richard Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In the course of this paper I shall also be drawing upon Ralph McInerney's translation of Aquinas's *Scriptum super libros*

understanding the Incarnation in a way that avoids the heresies of Monophysitism and Nestorianism.² The former heresy fails to uphold the perduring reality of both natures, since it depicts them as blended into a single, *theandric* nature, according to which Christ is neither “perfect man” nor “perfect God.” The latter upholds the reality of these natures at the expense of Christ’s personal unity, since on this view the incarnate Christ involves two, numerically distinct persons, one of whom is human (Jesus of Nazareth) and one of whom is divine (the Eternal Word).

Following Peter Lombard, Aquinas’s positive treatment of the Incarnation arises out of a debate between three accounts of this mystery which endeavor to avoid these theological hazards, accounts which have come to be known as the *assumptus-homo theory*, the *subsistence theory*, and the *habitus theory*.³ While all three accounts profess allegiance to the one-person/two-natures formula of the Incarnation, they differ markedly as to how these natures are related to one another and to the one person of Christ. As its name suggests, the *assumptus-homo* theory maintains that the Son of God assumed our nature by assuming a complete human being. Having thus united himself to this human being, the one person of Christ exists in relation to two beings or substances, namely, his original, divine substance (whom he has been from eternity), and an assumed, human substance (whom he has become).

The subsistence theory categorically rejects this dualism of substances. On this account, the Son of God did not become an instance of our nature by assuming an instance of our nature. Rather, he became an instance of our nature by assuming those features which are essential to our nature, namely, a human

Sententiarum, J. L. A. West’s translation of *De unione*, and West’s translation of *Quodlibet* IX, q. 2, aa. 1-2. While not readily available in translation, all three texts are available online at dhspriority.org/Thomas.

² *STh* III, q. 2, a. 6.

³ In what follows I am primarily concerned with Aquinas’s understanding of these positions. For Lombard’s account, see Peter Lombard, *Sent.* III, d. 6 (Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, book 3, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. Giulio Silano [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008], 24-37).

body animated by a human soul. While the realization of such a soul/body union generally constitutes an individual substance (a discrete human being), this one does not, since this soul/body union has been united to the person of the Word from the first moment of its conception. On this account, the features that are essential to our humanity are owned by the person of the Word, so there is only one substantial being here rather than two. This being now subsists (i.e., exists in a substantial manner) both in his (original) divine nature and in his (assumed) human nature.

The *habitus* theory likewise rejects the dualistic commitments of the *assumptus-homo* theory. With the subsistence theory, this account maintains that the Eternal Word has taken on those features which are essential to our humanity, namely, a human body and soul. The *habitus* theory parts ways with the subsistence theory in two crucial respects. The first difference pertains to how the Word is thought to have assumed these features. On this account, the Word has adopted these features in a contingent and accidental manner: he wears them after the manner of a cloak (*habitus*). While these features might be thought of as a created extension of himself, they cannot in any sense be identified with him, since—strictly speaking—they do not literally become *his* features. Thus to touch the hand of his assumed body would not be to touch *him*, but rather to touch a body that is intimately (though accidentally) related to him. The second difference pertains to how his assumed body and soul are related to one another. On the plausible assumption that every soul/body union constitutes a distinct human being (and hence a discrete substance), this account maintains that the Word assumed these features separately: they are accidentally united to him without being united to one another. On this account, the Son of God takes on both realities after the manner of a garment, and he wears them, as it were, as separates.

Although Aquinas categorically rejects both the *assumptus-homo* theory and the *habitus* theory, it is not hard to see why he is comparatively dismissive of the latter: on this account the Son of God does not literally become a human being, he merely appears to us in human vesture. We do not come to possess, as parts, the articles of clothing which we don; nor do we become

personally modified by their properties. In addition, on this account the Son of God would lack a feature that is essential to our humanity, namely, that of possessing a human body which is animated by a human soul. Indeed, on this account the assumed body would not even *be* a human body, since a body is human only if it is properly informed by a human soul.⁴

In this article I shall thus focus my attention on the first two positions outlined above. Part I presents Aquinas's account of the *assumptus-homo* theory; part II presents his primary reasons for rejecting this position; and part III presents his account of the subsistence theory, particularly as it arises out of this rejection. In part IV I take issue with Aquinas's case against the *assumptus-homo* theory. I argue, first, that this theory is implicitly grounded in a relativized conception of identity (according to which it is possible for an object *a* and an object *b* to be the same *F* but different *G*s), and that Aquinas is in no position to reject this theory on these grounds since his account of the Holy Trinity is likewise informed by a relativized conception of identity. I subsequently argue that the *assumptus-homo* theory is immune from Aquinas's objections once it is properly informed by its implicit logic of relative identity. Finally, I argue that this approach provides us with a simpler and more intuitive means of understanding this mystery, and also with a more complete and effective strategy for responding to the charge that it is logically impossible. I thus conclude that if this account of the Incarnation is ultimately compatible with established Church doctrine, there are good reasons for preferring it to the one which Aquinas defends.

I. AQUINAS'S ACCOUNT OF THE ASSUMPTUS-HOMO THEORY

The subsistence theory and the *assumptus-homo* theory share three fundamental commitments. Both accounts maintain (i) that the one person of Christ is both fully human and fully divine; (ii) that one is human only if one is endowed with a

⁴ For Aquinas's rejection of the *habitus* theory, see *Quodl.* IX, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1; *STh* III, q. 2, a. 6; *ScG* IV, c. 37; *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 209; and *De unione*, a. 1.

human body which is properly informed by a human soul; and hence (iii) that the Son of God assumed our nature by uniting himself to a specific soul/body union. These accounts disagree most fundamentally about the ontological status of this union, with the central issue being whether it constitutes a complete human being.

Although brief references to the *assumptus-homo* theory are scattered throughout Aquinas's discussion of the Incarnation in the *Summa theologiae*, there are relatively few extended discussions of this position.⁵ In the most protracted of these discussions, Aquinas describes "the first opinion set down by the Master" as one of three accounts of the Incarnation which endeavor to understand this mystery in a manner that avoids the heresies of Monophysitism and Nestorianism.⁶ Speaking of this account, in particular, Aquinas writes:

Some conceded one person in Christ, but maintained two hypostases, or two supposita, saying that a man, composed of body and soul, was from the beginning of his conception assumed by the Word of God.⁷

On the assumption that every soul/body union constitutes a complete human being, this account maintains that the Word became human by assuming a human being from the first moment of its conception. In Aquinas's terminology, this human being would constitute a second *hypostasis* or *suppositum*. From the surrounding discussions it is clear that Aquinas is using these terms more or less interchangeably to denote a discrete, substantial reality. *Hypostasis* is the Greek equivalent of *substance*, and it is here being used to denote what Aristotle would have referred to as a *primary* substance, namely, a being of which things are said and which is not said of anything else in turn. Along the same lines, a *suppositum* is a complete, individual

⁵ In *STh* III, see q. 2, aa. 3 and 6; q. 4, a. 3; and q. 16, aa. 1 and 2.

⁶ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 6. The second account is the subsistence theory, and the third is the *habitus* theory. In this passage Aquinas goes on to observe that none of these accounts is properly styled as an *opinion*, since the second is required as a matter of faith while the others are implicitly heretical.

⁷ *Ibid.*

substance which is endowed with a specific nature. Aquinas thus writes that a *suppositum* of a given nature “is the individual subsisting in this nature.”⁸ In other words, a *suppositum* is the persisting, substantial reality which owns or exemplifies its nature. He goes on to observe that in some cases there is no room for a real distinction between a *suppositum* and its nature. In particular, he writes that

if there is a thing in which there is nothing outside the species of its nature (as in God), the suppositum and the nature are not really distinct in it, but only in our way of thinking, inasmuch as it is called a *nature* as it is an essence, and a *suppositum* as it is subsisting.⁹

For Aquinas, the divine reality is both a nature and a *suppositum*; when we characterize this reality as a *suppositum*, however, our emphasis is on it as a complete, substantial being.

In the first extended discussion of this position in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas takes up the question of “whether the union of the Word Incarnate took place in the suppositum or hypostasis.”¹⁰ Since the *assumptus-homo* theory takes the Incarnation to involve the union of two *supposita*, Aquinas presents this theory as rejecting his account of the hypostatic union, one which maintains that the union of natures “took place in the suppositum or hypostasis.”¹¹ His logic here is unexceptionable. One who takes the union of natures to involve a plurality of *supposita* must deny that this union exists in the one *suppositum* which Aquinas takes to be present, namely, the *suppositum* which he has just identified as the person of the Word.¹² In the course of discussing objections to his account of the hypostatic union, Aquinas cites passages from Augustine, Pope Leo, and Boethius, passages that challenge his account by appearing to affirm the presence of a second *suppositum* in Christ. The

⁸ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, obj. 1.

¹² *STh* III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3.

passages from Augustine and Leo both occur in the first objection, which runs as follows:

It would seem that the union of the Word Incarnate did not take place in the suppositum or hypostasis. For Augustine says (*Enchir. xxxv, xxxviii*): *Both the Divine and human substance are one Son of God; —but they are one thing (aliud) by reason of the Word and another thing (aliud) by reason of the man.* And Pope Leo says in his letter to Flavian (*Ep. xxviii*): *One of these is glorious with miracles, the other succumbs under injuries. But one (aliud) and the other (aliud) differ in suppositum.* Therefore the union of the Word Incarnate did not take place in the suppositum.¹³

The first clause attributed to Augustine (from *Enchiridion* 38) explicitly mentions a duality of substances existing in Christ, with the added claim that the divine and human substances “are one Son of God.” The second clause (from *Enchiridion* 35) supports this position in a manner which is echoed by the passage from the Tome of St. Leo. Here Aquinas is drawing attention to the use in these texts of the relative pronoun *other (alius)*. In particular, he is noting that the use of the neuter (impersonal) form of this pronoun (*aliud*) appears to affirm a second being or substance, in distinction from the masculine (and hence *personal*) form (*alius*), which would indicate the existence of a second *person*.¹⁴

It is worth noting that in citing these passages from Augustine’s *Enchiridion* Aquinas is following Lombard, who likewise offers these passages in support of the *assumptus-homo* theory. Moreover, apart from one passage from Hilary’s *De Trinitate*

¹³ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1. Relevant passages from the letter from Pope Leo to Flavian—frequently called the Tome of St. Leo—can be found in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7th edition, ed. J. Neuner, S.J., and J. Dupuis, S.J. (New York: Alba House, 2001), 226 (passage 612). This text will hereafter be identified as *ND*. Passages in *ND* will be cross-referenced with parallel passages in H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (hereafter, *DS*). References to passages in *ND* will hereafter be cited in the following manner: *ND* 612/*DS* 294.

¹⁴ Aquinas himself employs this distinction at *STh* I, q. 31, a. 2 in connection with the mystery of the Holy Trinity, where he argues that the Father and the Son are other in the personal sense (*alius*), but not in the impersonal, generic sense (*aliud*). In both cases *alius/aliud* is used to indicate distinct *supposita*, but only *alius* is used to indicate distinct *supposita* who are also distinct persons.

(10.57), Lombard's textual support for this theory is drawn entirely from Augustine. In addition to lengthier passages from *Enchiridion* 35 and 38, Lombard includes another from *Enchiridion* 36, two from *On the Trinity* (13.17 and 13.19), one from his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (78.3), and two from *On the Predestination of the Saints* (15.30 and 15.31).¹⁵ While these passages do not provide us with sufficient grounds for concluding that Augustine is indeed committed to this account of the Incarnation (especially since the passages which Lombard cites in support of the other two accounts are also drawn largely from Augustine), we can at least say that he provides us with many passages that are friendly to this position. This fact was not lost upon Aquinas, who for obvious reasons was keen to disassociate Augustine from this position. Thus, for example, in response to Augustine's contention (in *De agone christiano* 11) that "the Son of God assumed a man, and in him bore things human,"¹⁶ Aquinas insists that passages like these "are not to be taken too literally, but are to be loyally explained, whenever they are used by holy doctors; so as to say that a man was assumed inasmuch as his nature was assumed."¹⁷

We may now turn to the passage from Boethius which appears to affirm a second, human substance in Christ. As before, Aquinas presents the following passage in the course of discussing objections to his "one substance" account of the hypostatic union:

Further, hypostasis is nothing more than a *particular substance*, as Boethius says (*De Duab. Nat.*). But it is plain that in Christ there is another particular substance beyond the hypostasis of the Word, viz. the body and the soul and the resultant of these. Therefore there is another hypostasis in Him besides the hypostasis of the Word.¹⁸

This passage begins with the truistic observation that an hypostasis is a particular substance. The sequel is anything but

¹⁵ Lombard, *Sent.* III, dist. 6, c. 2 (Silano, trans. 25f.).

¹⁶ This passage is quoted in *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3, obj. 1.

¹⁷ *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1.

¹⁸ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 2.

truistic: it affirms a second substance existing in relation to the Word, namely, the human being which is constituted by his assumed body and soul. It is worth noting that the part of this objection which is explicitly attributed to Boethius stems from his definition of a person as an “individual substance of a rational nature” in *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium* (parenthetically cited under the title *De persona et duabus naturis*).¹⁹ Since Aquinas’s refutation of the *assumptus-homo* theory leans heavily upon this definition, it might seem odd that he is attributing this account to Boethius. The existence of a second substance does not follow from Boethius’s definition of *person*, much less from the truistic observation that an hypostasis is a particular substance. Even so, this attribution is fully justified, since in *Contra Eutychem* VII Boethius contends that the *assumptus-homo* theory is required as a matter of Catholic doctrine. In particular, he argues that the two-substance account of the Incarnation is the “middle way” between the heresies of Nestorius and Eutyches, and hence that it is the only way of affirming that in Christ “there are two natures but one person as the Catholic Faith believes.”²⁰

Aquinas is not merely content to show that an *assumptus-homo* theorist must reject his account of the hypostatic union. He also forcefully objects to this theory’s alternate conception of this union, one which involves the union of two substances (one divine and one human) in the one person of Christ. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas observes that advocates of Lombard’s first opinion maintain both (i) “that there is but one person in Christ,” and (ii) “that there is one hypostasis of God and another of man, and hence that the union took place in the person and not in the hypostasis.”²¹ In other words, this account maintains that the divine and human substances are united in and to the one person of Christ.

¹⁹ Boethius, *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium* 3.4-5 (Boethius, *The Theological Tractates*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74 [Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973], 85).

²⁰ Boethius, *Contra Eutychem* 7.83-84 (Loeb ed., 121).

²¹ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3.

A more detailed account of this position may be found in parallel passages in the *Compendium theologiae* and the *Summa contra gentiles*. In the former, having just catalogued the heretical implications of the *habitus* theory, Aquinas writes:

And others, wishing to avoid the aforementioned inappropriate things, held that the soul in Christ was united to the body, and that such a union constituted a human being that they say that the Son of God assumed into the unity of his person. And by reason of this assumption, they say that the human being is the Son of God, and that the Son of God is the human being. And because they say that the aforementioned assumption had the unity of the person as its terminus, they profess one person of God and the human being in Christ.²²

In this passage Aquinas provides us with a substantially richer and clearer account of the *assumptus-homo* theory. This account begins with the thesis (i) that the Son of God assumed a properly animated human body (i.e., one united to a human soul). On the implicit grounds (ii) that every soul/body union constitutes a complete human being, this account further maintains (iii) that the Son of God assumed a human being by uniting this human being to himself. Since it is granted by all (iv) that the Son of God is himself a complete substantial reality, this account is committed to the thesis (v) that the Incarnation involves a plurality of substances (one human and one divine).²³ This, in turn, raises the question of how these substances are related to one another. How, in other words, is the Son of God related to the son of Mary? According to Aquinas, this account maintains that because the Son of God united the son of Mary

²² *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210 (Regan, trans., 159).

²³ Although he takes the *assumptus-homo* theorist to affirm the existence of a second substance in Christ, and hence to suppose that there are *two* substances here rather than one (one human and one divine), Aquinas takes it for granted that “substance” would not apply to both realities in the same sense. Rather, as in all other cases in which common nouns are applied both to God and to creatures, Aquinas takes the *assumptus-homo* theorist to maintain (i) that “substance” applies to the assumed human being in something like its ordinary sense, and (ii) that “substance” is being extended to God by way of analogy. Although this human being would not be a *suppositum* in Aquinas’s sense, it is easy to see why one might take it to be fully substantial, since it is capable of independent existence, and (unlike a soul) it has a complete specific nature.

to himself, we can now affirm (vi) that the Son of God *is* the son of Mary. Since the ‘is’ here is the ‘is’ of identity, and identity is symmetrical relation, we can indeed say (vii) that the Son of God is the son of Mary and that the son of Mary is the Son of God. Finally, because this human being was assumed “into the unity of his person,” we can insist (viii) that one and the same person is both the Son of God and the son of Mary. This proposition, in turn, is sufficient for the thesis that the one person of Christ is both fully human and fully divine. It is thus not hard to see why Aquinas takes this account seriously: although it is implicitly heretical, the *assumptus-homo* theory offers a serious and at least initially plausible expression of the Chalcedonian formula.

The *assumptus-homo* theory’s claim to Chalcedonian orthodoxy depends crucially upon propositions which I shall henceforth refer to as the *unity thesis* (iii), the *plurality thesis* (v), the *identity thesis* (vii), and the *one-person thesis* (viii). The plurality thesis affirms the presence of a second *suppositum* existing in relation to the Son of God, namely, the human being which is composed of Christ’s body and soul. The unity thesis affirms that the Son of God united this human being to himself. The identity thesis makes the highly paradoxical claim that as a result of this union, this human being is the Son of God and the Son of God is this human being. And the one-person thesis affirms that this human being and the Son of God are one person rather than two.

How are we to understand the identity thesis, especially since it is affirmed in conjunction with the plurality thesis? And how is the identity thesis related to the one-person thesis? A preliminary answer to both of these questions may be found in a parallel passage in the *Summa contra gentiles*. Having presented versions of the unity and plurality theses, Aquinas goes on to affirm a more nuanced form of the identity thesis:

On account of this unity, the Word of God, as they say, is predicated of that man and that man is the Word of God. This sense results: “The Word of God

is man” and that is: “The person of the Word of God is the person of the man,” and conversely.²⁴

This account maintains that the divine and human substances come together in the person of Christ in such a manner that he is both the one and the other. Indeed on this account we can even say that the one *is* the other, since we can specify a sense in which the divine substance (here identified as the Word of God) and this human being are one and the same. Since “the person of the Word” is also “the person of the man,” we can say that the Word and this man are the same person.²⁵ This, in turn, clarifies the relationship between the identity thesis and the one-person thesis: if these substances are the *same* person, then there is one person here rather than two.

II. AQUINAS’S OBJECTIONS TO THE *ASSUMPTUS-HOMO* THEORY

While the *assumptus-homo* theory and the subsistence theory both maintain that Christ became human by assuming a human body and soul, the former theory contends, on the assumption that every soul/body union is a complete human being, that this union is itself a complete human being, and hence that there exists a second substance in relation to the one person of Christ. At least at first glance, this might appear to be a fairly trivial point. What harm is there in supposing this soul/body union to be a complete human being? For Aquinas, the harm would be incalculable, since this seemingly innocuous supposition has deeply heretical implications. As we shall see in what follows, he contends, first, that this account is committed to the Nestorian heresy of affirming a separate person for each of the two natures in Christ; second, that it is incompatible with the communication of idioms, which prevents us from attributing human features to the divine Son of God and divine features to

²⁴ ScG IV, c. 38 (O’Neil, trans., 186).

²⁵ In part IV I argue that this account of the *assumptus-homo* theory is committed to a relativized conception of identity. Since Aquinas’s objections to this theory are not informed by this commitment, for now I shall leave the specific nature of this identity relation undefined.

the human son of Mary; and third, that it is committed to the Adoptionist heresy, since the assumed human being would perforce be a second, adopted Son of God.

A) *First Objection*

Most fundamentally, Aquinas contends that by affirming a second (human) substance in Christ, the *assumptus-homo* theorist is logically committed to the Nestorian heresy, since we cannot affirm the existence a second substance in Christ without tacitly affirming the existence of a second person in Christ. Thus, for example, in the *Compendium theologiae* Aquinas writes:

But this position, although it seems nominally to retreat from the error of Nestorius, slips into the same error with him if one should scrutinize it more deeply. For a person is clearly nothing but an individual substance of a rational nature, and human nature is a rational nature. And so, because this position posits in Christ a hypostasis or temporal and created existing subject of a rational nature, it also posits a temporal and created person in Christ. For this is what the terms *existing subject* or *hypostasis* mean, namely, individual substance. Therefore, when they posit in Christ two existing subjects or hypostases, if they understand what they say, they necessarily have to posit two persons.²⁶

This objection rests squarely on Boethius's conception of a person as an individual substance of a rational nature.²⁷ Although there are substances that are not persons (e.g., this cat or that tree), every substance endowed with a capacity for knowledge and volition is a person. In short, every *rational* being is a *personal* being, namely, a primary substance which is also a person. Since human beings are rational beings by nature, every human being is a person, every human being is a *someone* rather than a *something*. And if every human being is a person, we cannot affirm the existence of a second, human substance in Christ without affirming the existence of a second *person* in

²⁶ *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210 (Regan, trans., 159). For parallel versions of this objection see *ScG* IV, c. 2 (O'Neil, trans., 186); and *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3.

²⁷ Boethius, *Contra Eutychem* 3.4-5 (Loeb ed., 85).

Christ. It thus follows that the *assumptus-homo* theory does not avoid the errors of Nestorianism and hence that an advocate of this position cannot consistently affirm both (i) that there is one person of Christ and (ii) that Christ assumed our nature by assuming a complete human being. It is worth adding that in support of this contention, Aquinas appeals to the following passage from the Second Council at Constantinople (553):

If anyone seeks to introduce into the mystery of the Incarnation two subsistences or two persons, let him be anathema. For by the incarnation of one of the Holy Trinity, God the Word, the Holy Trinity received no augment of person or subsistence.²⁸

Not only does Aquinas take the council Fathers to be condemning any account of this mystery that represents Christ as assuming a second (human) substance, in his introduction of this passage he explains why they reject this position: this account commits one to saying that someone *other* than the Word “was born of a Virgin, suffered, was crucified, was buried.”²⁹

An advocate of the *assumptus-homo* theory will surely endeavor to avoid this implication of a second person in Christ, and he might do this, Aquinas suggests, by insisting upon a real distinction between (a) this human being and (b) the person of this human being. This, in turn, will make it possible for one to affirm that the person of the human being is the person of the Word of God. Here is Aquinas’s response to this line of reasoning:

Again, even if the hypostasis of that man could not be called a person, the hypostasis of the Word of God is nonetheless the same as His Person. If, therefore, the hypostasis of the Word of God is not that of the man, neither will the Person of the Word of God be the person of the man. This will falsify their own assertion that the person of that man is the Person of the Word of God.³⁰

²⁸ Quoted at *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3. This passage is from the fifth of fourteen anathemas pronounced against the “Three Chapters.” See also *ND* 620.5/*DS* 426.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *ScG* IV, c. 38 (O’Neil, trans., 186f.).

Even if we are able to drive a wedge between this human being and the person of this human being, we cannot do the same for the Word and the person of the Word, since they are identical. And since the divine substance (the Word) and this supposed human being are clearly not identical (they could hardly be less alike), neither can we say that the person of the Word is the person of this human being, since this would commit one to saying (since identity is a transitive relation) that this created and contingently existing person is the divine substance, which is clearly absurd.

B) *Second Objection*

Aquinas also contends that the *assumptus-homo* theory is incompatible with the *communicatio idiomatum*: it prevents us from attributing properties of the son of Mary to the Son of God and conversely. In the *Compendium theologiae* the following objection comes immediately after the first objection quoted above:

Second, any things that differ as existing subjects are so disposed that things proper to one cannot belong to the other. Therefore, if the Son of God and the human son are not the same existing subject, then it will follow that things belonging to the human son cannot be attributed to the Son of God, and vice versa. Therefore, we will be unable to say that God was crucified or born of the Virgin, and this belongs to the Nestorian impiety.³¹

Since the Councils of Ephesus (432) and Chalcedon (451), the affirmation of Mary as the mother of God has served as a litmus test for Christological orthodoxy, not so much for what it says about Mary as for what it says about Christ, namely, that he who was born of the Blessed Virgin is both fully human and fully divine.³² Here Aquinas is again pointing out that *assumptus-homo* theorists are in the same position as the

³¹ *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210 (Regan, trans., 159). For parallel versions of this objection, see *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3; and *ScG* IV, c. 8 (O'Neil, trans., 187f.).

³² For relevant passages from the Council of Ephesus, see *ND 605/DS 251*. For passages from the Council of Chalcedon, see *ND 614/DS 301*.

Nestorians: they cannot consistently affirm that Mary is the mother of God. Since they insist upon a real distinction between the Son of God and the assumed human being, and since only the latter was born of the Blessed Virgin, they cannot say that Mary is the mother of God; they can only affirm the more modest claim that she is the mother of the (assumed) human being. In other words, advocates of this position must share in the Nestorian impiety of denying that Mary is the *theotokos* (God-bearer), and of insisting that she is merely the *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer).

It is worth noting that Aquinas takes this objection to be similarly confirmed by the holy fathers. In this instance he appeals to the following passage from Council of Ephesus (431):

If anyone ascribes to two persons or subsistences such words as are in the evangelical and apostolic Scriptures, or have been said of Christ by the saints, or by Himself of Himself, and, moreover, applies some of them to the man, takes as distinct from the Word of God, and some of them (as if they could be used of God alone) only to the Word of God the Father, let him be anathema.³³

Since the council Fathers evidently condemn any account of this mystery which takes the Incarnation to involve two substantial realities rather than one, Aquinas can hardly be faulted for taking the *assumptus-homo* theory to fall under this condemnation. Nor is it hard to discern their grounds for this contention: any such revisionist account of this mystery would prevent us from speaking about Christ in a manner that is faithful to Scripture and tradition.

Once again, Aquinas is aware that *assumptus-homo* theorists will endeavor to avoid these heretical implications. Because they take the divine and human beings at issue here to be united in the one person of Christ, they will insist that they can affirm Aquinas's propositional examples of the *communicatio idiomatum*. In the *Summa contra gentiles*, for example, Aquinas anticipates the following response to this objection:

³³ Canon 4 of this council, quoted at *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3. See ND 606.4/DS 255.

In this account whatever is predicated of the Word of God is, they say, able to be predicated of that man; and, conversely, although with a kind of reduplication, so that, when it is said “God has suffered,” the sense is “A man who is God by unity of person has suffered,” and “A man created the stars” means “He who is man.”³⁴

Since *assumptus-homo* theorists maintain that the Word of God and this human being are the same person, they will insist that they can speak of each being as having characteristics that are proper to the other. As Aquinas points out, this strategy is based on a logical device known as *reduplication*, that is, the practice of adding qualifying phrases to statements of predication, phrases that specify the respect in which a given quality is predicated of the subject. By means of this logical device, advocates of this theory endeavor to affirm such statements as the above. Thus, for example, they are wont to say (of Christ) that this man created the stars because they believe that he who is this man is the very one who (as God) created the stars. They likewise affirm that God was crucified because they believe that he who is God is the very one who (as man) was crucified. And so they can affirm that Mary is the mother of God because she is the mother of one (as man) who also happens to be God.

Since Aquinas himself defends the reduplicative strategy as a means of resolving paradoxical statements about Christ (e.g., that he is both equal to the Father and less than the Father),³⁵ he does not take issue with the viability of this strategy per se. He simply does not think that *assumptus-homo* theorists are in a position to employ this strategy. In the *Compendium theologiae* he writes that

one may wish to say that we attribute things belonging to the human being to the Son of God, and the converse, because of the unity of the person, although the human being and the Son of God are different existing subjects. But this is altogether impossible. For it is clear that the eternal existing subject of the Son of God is nothing but his very person.³⁶

³⁴ *ScG* IV, c. 38 (O’Neil, trans., 186).

³⁵ *STh* III, q. 16, a. 4.

³⁶ *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210 (Regan, trans., 159).

The *assumptus-homo* theorist's use of this strategy is predicated on the thesis that the divine and human substances are one and the same person. Only then can one say, for example, that he who (as man) was born of Mary is the very one who (as God) created the stars. For reasons which we have already considered, Aquinas contends that *assumptus-homo* theorists cannot consistently affirm the presence of one person in Christ. In the above passage, for example, he argues that since the Son of God is identical with the person of the Son of God, this human being is the same person as the Son of God only if this human being is the Son of God, and this is clearly impossible. In the *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas undermines this use of the reduplicative strategy by appealing to Boethius's concept of 'person'. Since human beings are rational substances and all rational substances are persons, the human being that is alleged to exist in Christ would necessarily constitute a second, created person.³⁷ This, in turn, precludes *assumptus-homo* theorists from employing the reduplicative strategy.

C) *Third Objection*

In the *Compendium theologiae*, Aquinas presents a third and final objection to the *assumptus-homo* theory, namely, that this theory is committed to a Nestorian version of the adoptionist heresy. Here is the whole of this objection:

Third, if we should predicate the name *God* of a temporal existing subject, this will be fresh and new. But everything that we freshly and newly call God is only God because it has become God, and what has become God is God by adoption, and not by nature. Therefore, it will follow that the human being was God only by adoption, not truly and by nature, and this also belongs to the error of Nestorius.³⁸

The *assumptus-homo* theory maintains that the Word of God assumed our nature by assuming a complete human being. If one who is God became human by assuming a human being,

³⁷ ScG IV, c. 38 (O'Neil, trans., 186).

³⁸ *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210 (Regan, trans., 160).

then there exists a human being who has become God. What has *become* God cannot be God by nature: it can only be God by adoption, that is, by a free act of the divine will. And so it appears that this human being is merely an *adopted* Son of God. This is problematic, I take it, because it implies that there are two Sons of God rather than one: there is one who is the Son of God by nature and one who is the Son of God by adoption. On this account, then, we cannot say (with Aquinas) that there is one person who underwent two births (one eternal, one temporal).³⁹ Nor can we say that there is one substantial reality who is both (a) eternally begotten of the Father and (b) born of the Virgin Mary. In support of this contention, Aquinas again appeals to the Council of Ephesus, which approved the following passage from “Felix, pope and martyr”:

We believe in God our Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary: that He is God’s everlasting Son and Word, and not a man assumed by God so that there is another [*alter*] besides him. Nor did God’s Son assume a man that there be another [*alter*] beside Him; but the perfect existing God was made at the same time perfect man, made flesh of the Virgin.⁴⁰

Since the *assumptus-homo* theory insists upon a real distinction between the divine Son of God and the human son of Mary, advocates of this theory cannot consistently affirm that one and the same being is both perfect God and perfect man. Nor can they say that the Son of God himself literally *became* a man. For if the Son of God had *assumed* a man, this man would necessarily constitute *another person (alter)* existing alongside the Son of God.

D) Conclusion

In the most general terms, Aquinas takes the *assumptus-homo* theory to be fundamentally confused. Since every human being is an individual substance of a rational nature, the Son of God could not have assumed a human being without assuming a

³⁹ See *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 212.

⁴⁰ Quoted at *ScG* IV, c. 38. Aquinas also appeals to this passage at *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3.

second person. Had the proponents of this theory properly reflected on what it means to be a person, they would never have been tempted to say that the Son of God assumed our nature by assuming a human being.⁴¹ This theory is also deeply heretical. Since it leads directly to the Nestorian heresy, it stands condemned by the proliferation of authoritative confessions and councils which were forcefully directed against this heresy. Moreover, many of these condemnations appear to be more-or-less explicitly directed against the *assumptus-homo* theory itself or any account of this mystery that affirms a plurality of substances in Christ. And so it would seem that the *assumptus-homo* theory is not a tenable option for one who endeavors to keep the Catholic faith “whole and entire.” In what remains of this article, I will take issue with this contention. In part III I outline Aquinas’s preferred account of this mystery, and in part IV I argue, first, that his objections against the *assumptus-homo* theory are unsuccessful, and second, that there are credible reasons for preferring this theory to the one Aquinas defends.

III. AQUINAS AND THE SUBSISTENCE THEORY

There is a clear sense in which Aquinas’s positive account of the Incarnation arises out of his denial of the *assumptus-homo* theory.⁴² Although he agrees that the Word assumed our nature by assuming a human body which is properly informed by a human soul, this union of soul and body cannot be a human being. For if it were a human being, then it would be a second substance existing in Christ, and since human beings are rational by nature, and all rational substances are persons, if this soul/body union were a human being then it would constitute a second *person* in Christ. But if—as Aquinas agrees—every other soul/body union constitutes a human being, why doesn’t this one? And if it isn’t a human being, then what is it?

⁴¹ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3. See also *De unione*, a. 2.

⁴² In what follows I shall restrict my attention to Aquinas’s official, “one *esse*” account of this mystery.

Aquinas repeatedly insists that the Son of God did not become human by assuming our nature in the Platonic sense: he did not unite to himself the abstract essence of our humanity. Rather, he assumed our nature *in atomo*, that is, in a concrete individual.⁴³ In particular, he assumed our nature by assuming a human body which is animated by a human soul. Although he denies that this individual is a human being, he is bound to concede that it is very like a human being. This ensouled body is not merely a countable reality in the same way that a hand or a foot is, since unlike a hand or a foot (or a soul), it has a complete specific nature. This helps to explain why Aquinas refers to Christ's human nature as a "particular substance,"⁴⁴ and as "a kind of individual in the genus of substance."⁴⁵ Indeed he even goes so far as to concede that this ensouled body is an individual in the genus substance, which is endowed with a rational nature, and not without reason, since it is endowed with a created intellect and will. So why isn't it a person? His answer:

We must bear in mind that not every individual in the genus of substance, even in rational nature is a person, but that alone which exists by itself, and not that which exists in some more perfect thing. Hence the hand of Socrates, although it is a kind of individual, is not a person, because it does not exist by itself, but in something more perfect, viz. in the whole. And hence, too, this is signified by a *person* being defined as *an individual substance*, for the hand is not a complete substance, but part of a substance. Therefore, although this human nature is a kind of individual in the genus substance, it has not its own personality, because it does not exist separately, but in something more perfect, viz. in the Person of the Word.⁴⁶

Even if every other union of body and soul is a person, this one is not because it exists in a substantial reality of a higher metaphysical order, namely, the person of the Word. Since something is a person only if it is a complete subsisting reality (a *suppositum*), because this union of soul and body is not complete subsisting reality, it is not a person. This body and

⁴³ See *STh* III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3; and *STh* III, q. 2, a. 5, ad 2.

⁴⁴ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2.

⁴⁵ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

soul do not constitute a complete subsisting reality because “in Christ they are united together, so as to be united to something higher, which subsists in the nature composed of them.”⁴⁷ Although Aquinas concedes that the individual which is constituted by this soul/body union would be a *suppositum* if it were to exist separately from the Word,⁴⁸ in its current and actual mode of existence, it is not a complete subsisting reality because the Son of God is a complete subsisting reality and this ensouled body exists *in him*. And because this ensouled body is not a *suppositum*, it is not a man (human being) for the same reason that it is not a person: properly speaking, “man,” “human being,” and “person” alike refer to individual *supposita*. In these terms, then, it is logically impossible that the Son should have assumed a *suppositum*. And since something is a man only if it is a *suppositum*, it is likewise impossible that he should have assumed a man. Aquinas thus writes that “since we cannot say that a *suppositum* was assumed, we cannot say that a man was assumed.”⁴⁹ He subsequently observes that “the Son of God is not the man whom he assumed, but the man whose nature he assumed.”⁵⁰ By assuming our nature *in atomo*, the Son of God has *himself* become an instance of our nature. So Aquinas insists that he is “called a man univocally with other men, as being of the same species.”⁵¹

To fully appreciate Aquinas’s position as an alternative to the *assumptus-homo* theory, we ought to say a bit more about how the Son of God is related to his two natures. To begin with, how is he related to his assumed, human nature? Aquinas contends that this union of body and soul was “assumed to the Divine Person or hypostasis.”⁵² In particular, the Word assumed this union of body and soul by uniting it to himself. He thus writes that “what is composed of them is united to the already

⁴⁷ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 5, ad 1.

⁴⁸ See *Quodl.* IX, q. 2, a. 2; and *De unione*, a. 2, ad 10 and 17.

⁴⁹ *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3, ad 2.

⁵⁰ *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3, ad 3.

⁵¹ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 5. See also *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 211; and *De unione*, a. 2, ad 4.

⁵² *STh* III, q. 3, a. 6.

existing hypostasis or Person.”⁵³ Although he occasionally characterizes this union in negative terms, namely, by observing that the Word and this soul/body composite are neither accidentally nor essentially united, Aquinas does not think that we are in a position to further characterize this union in positive terms. In the *Compendium theologiae*, he describes it as incomprehensible and ineffable,⁵⁴ and in *De unione* he adds that it is a “singular union” for which there is no satisfactory analogue in the world of creatures.⁵⁵ He thus quotes with approval Augustine’s affirmation of this mystery’s singularly impenetrable nature:

If a reason is sought, it is not wonderful; if an example is demanded, it is not unique. We must grant that something is possible for God, which we confess that we cannot investigate; for in such things the entire reason for the thing made is the power of the maker.⁵⁶

Since the scope of God’s power vastly outstrips the breadth of our understanding, it is no idle obscurantism that prompts Augustine and Aquinas to suppose that the Word has united this body and soul to himself in a manner that we cannot begin to fathom.

Although we are not in a position to understand the positive nature of this union, Aquinas does think that we can specify some of its consequences. In the *Compendium theologiae*, for example, he observes that as a result of this union, “the soul and body are drawn into the person of the divine person, so that the person of the Son of God is also the person, hypostasis, and existing subject of the human son.”⁵⁷ In other words, as a result of this union, we are presented with one person—one individual substance of a rational nature—who now subsists in two natures.

Although the Son of God is now said to *have* two natures and to *subsist* in two natures, he is not related to these natures

⁵³ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 5, ad 1.

⁵⁴ *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 211.

⁵⁵ *De unione*, a. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 211.

in the same manner, since he is identical with his divine nature, but not with his human nature. Aquinas thus writes that “the Son of God is his Godhead, but not his manhood.”⁵⁸ On this account, then, the Son of God *subsists* in his human nature without *being* this nature. Although this doesn’t tell us as much as we might want to know, it still tells us a good deal. It tells us that he exists in a substantial manner which now includes this nature, which is to say that the characteristics that accrue to this ensouled body also accrue to *him*. This tells us, in turn, that his relationship to this nature is not strongly analogous to one’s relation to a garment or an instrument,⁵⁹ since this ensouled body is quite literally a physical extension of his existence: to touch Jesus’ hand is to touch the Son of God. At the same time, we should note that though these bodily parts are now his, and more generally, that by having this nature he has all of its parts, Aquinas does not think that Christ is the mereological sum of this ensouled body and his divine nature. In this case he would not be fully human and fully divine, but merely part human and part divine.⁶⁰ Even so, Aquinas is willing to concede that there is a sense in which Christ is partly composed of his human nature. In particular, he thinks that the one person of Christ (who in himself is “altogether simple”) is now composite because he now subsists in two natures.⁶¹ In other words, the incarnate Christ is a composite being because he is no longer an absolutely simple being, since he is now endowed with a nature and with characteristically human parts and properties which are distinct from one another and from himself.

It is not hard to see why Aquinas embraces the subsistence theory: of the three accounts outlined by Lombard that claim to avoid the hazards of Monophysitism and Nestorianism, this is evidently the only one that enables us to uphold Christ’s

⁵⁸ *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7, ad 3. See also *De unione*, a. 2, ad 2.

⁵⁹ Aquinas does concede that Christ’s human nature is like a garment or an instrument in some respects. He affirms the first analogy at *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7, ad 3; he affirms the second at *STh* III, q. 2, a. 6, ad 4.

⁶⁰ In support of this contention see *STh* III, q. 2, a. 1; and *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 211.

⁶¹ *STh* III, q. 2, a. 4. For a detailed analysis and defense of this thesis, see J. L. A. West, “Aquinas on the Metaphysics of *Esse* in Christ,” *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 231-50.

humanity and divinity in a manner that does not undermine his personal unity.⁶² In the following section I hope to show that this is not the case.

IV. A MODEST DEFENSE OF THE *ASSUMPTUS-HOMO* THEORY

Although Aquinas has presented a formidable case against the *assumptus-homo* theory, I contend that all three of the above objections miss the mark. In particular, I contend that this theory is implicitly grounded in a relativized conception of identity, and that once it is cast in these terms it is immune from these objections. I argue, in addition, that Aquinas is in no position to object to the *assumptus-homo* theory on these grounds, because his account of the Holy Trinity is likewise committed to a relativized conception of identity. Finally, though I am convinced that Aquinas's account of the Incarnation remains a tenable understanding of this mystery,

⁶² It should be emphasized that this is Aquinas's official, mature position with regard to the *assumptus-homo* theory. Apart from an isolated (and quite late) affirmation of a secondary *esse* in Christ in *De unione*, a. 4 (1272), Aquinas remained both firmly committed to the subsistence theory and resolutely opposed to the *habitus* theory. In some of his early writings, however, he is significantly less critical of the *assumptus-homo* theory. Thus, for example, in the *Sentences* commentary (1252-56), he concedes that an advocate of this position can consistently affirm that Christ is one person existing in relation to two *supposita* (the divine *suppositum* and the assumed human being which is constituted by union of his assumed body and soul). In particular, he suggests that an advocate of this position can maintain that the assumed *suppositum* does not constitute a second *someone*, since it is "joined to another thing of a higher dignity" (III *Sent.*, d. 6, q. 2, a. 1). That is, by invoking a strategy that is integral to his own position, Aquinas suggests that one might consistently maintain that "Christ is someone, namely the one assuming, and something, namely, the thing assumed; and that he is two in the neuter, but not in the masculine," and hence (in *ibid.*, ad 1) that *Christus est aliud et aliud*, that he is both one Christ and two substances. Along the same lines, in *Quodlibet* IX (1256-59), though he insists that the *habitus* theory is implicitly heretical, Aquinas refrains from making the same claim with regard the *assumptus-homo* theory. Instead, he recommends the subsistence theory on the grounds that it is "the common opinion of recent writers and is truer and safer than the others [i.e., opinions] by far" (*Quodl.* IX, q. 2, a. 1). For dates of authorship I am relying upon Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

there are at least two reasons for preferring the *assumptus-homo* theory, which I will outline.

Although the relation of identity is generally taken to be a two-way relation that holds, absolutely and without qualification, between an object and an object, for several decades a minority of philosophers have been articulating and defending a conception of this relation which is neither dyadic nor absolute. This account maintains, first, that identity is best conceived as a *triadic* relation which holds between an object and an object relative to a sortal count noun. On this relativized conception of identity, we cannot meaningfully say that (or ask whether) an object *a* is an object *b*: we must say that *a* is the same F as *b*, where 'F' is the sortal count noun which specifies the third, conceptual aspect of this relation. In addition to insisting that well-formed statements of identity include this conceptual element, this account also maintains that it is possible for an object and an object to be identical on some specifications but not on others. In other words, on this account of identity it is possible for *a* and *b* to be the same F but different Gs.

Before we proceed I would like to draw attention to three formal aspects of this relation. First, as we should expect from an equivalence relation, relative identity is both symmetrical and transitive in the following manner: If *a* is the same F as *b*, then *b* is the same F as *a*. And if *a* is the same F as *b*, and *b* is the same F as *c*, then *a* is the same F as *c*. Finally, it should be noted that this relation does not obey Leibniz's Law. If *a* and *b* are the same F but different Gs, this difference will inevitably mean that one of these Gs will have at least one property which the other lacks. While there is no shortage of philosophers who reject relative identity on just these grounds,⁶³ the formal

⁶³ Thus John Perry, "The Same F," *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 181-200; Leslie Stevenson, "Relative Identity and Leibniz's Law," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1972): 155-58; David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 37-42; Timothy Bartel, "The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 135-37; Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 156-61; and Colin McGinn, *Logical Properties: Identity, Existence, Predication, Necessity, Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 4f.

consistency of first-order logic with relative identity has been demonstrated on multiple occasions.⁶⁴ Just as there are consistent geometries that do not include Euclid's parallel-line postulate, there are consistent first-order logics that do not include Leibniz's principle of indiscernibility.

Although the formal logic of relative identity has only recently been worked out in detail, it is not unusual for philosophers to find nascent instances of this logic embedded in theories and doctrines that long predate these developments. Indeed the most common application of relative identity pertains to the Latin formulation of the Holy Trinity, and not without reason, since this doctrine states that there are three persons of the Holy Trinity and that each of these persons, by himself, is identical with the divine reality.⁶⁵ This doctrine thus affirms that the Father and the Son are numerically distinct in one sense (they are distinct persons) and numerically identical in another (they are the same being), and this can only be true on a

⁶⁴ For a formal proof of its consistency, see Pawal Garbacz, "Logics of Relative Identity," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 43 (2002): 27-50. As we shall see (below, n. 71) Peter van Inwagen provides an informal demonstration of the consistency of relative identity both in its application to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and also in its application to the doctrine of the Incarnation.

⁶⁵ This account of identity was first applied to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity by Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe in *Three Philosophers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1961), 118-20. In this passage Geach and Anscombe take Aquinas to affirm both (a) the thesis that identity-statements must be made relative to a sortal kind term, and (b) that it is possible for an object *x* and an object *y* to be identical on some sortals and distinct on others. For subsequent applications of relative identity to the doctrine of the Trinity, see A. P. Martinich, "Identity and Trinity," *Journal of Religion* 58 (1978): 169-81; idem, "God, Emperor, and Relative Identity," *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979): 180-91; Peter van Inwagen, "And Yet They Are Not Three Gods but One God," in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 260-80; idem, "Three Persons in One Being," in *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 82-97; and James Cain, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Logic of Relative Identity," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 141-52. For applications of relative identity to the mystery of the Incarnation, see Peter van Inwagen, "Not by Confusion of Substance, but by Unity of Person," in *God, Knowledge and Mystery*, 260-79; Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, *Anselm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 136; and Christopher Conn, "Relative Identity, Singular Reference and the Incarnation: A Response to LePoidevin," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012): 61-82.

relativized conception of identity.

Since Aquinas is himself a defender of Latin Trinitarianism, it is worth asking whether his account of the Holy Trinity is likewise committed to a relativized conception of identity. I contend that it is. Although God is an absolutely simple being, the divine nature exhibits three subsistent relations, namely, the relations of paternity, filiation, and procession. These relations “distinguish and constitute” three *hypostases*, where each hypostasis is an eternally persisting, quasi-substantial reality. I say “quasi-substantial” for while each of these hypostases is an individual subject of properties and relations, they are not paradigmatic Aristotelian substances. Since these hypostases exist in one another and also in the divine essence, they do not exist as separate individuals in the ordinary sense. Even so, Aquinas does not hesitate to speak of them as substances and even as *first* substances.⁶⁶ It should thus not be surprising that he refers to each of the subsistent relations as a *suppositum*, with the implication that each is a complete substantial reality which falls under the genus substance and which exemplifies a specific nature.⁶⁷ Finally, since they are *supposita* of a (supremely) rational nature, Aquinas concludes that each of these subsistent relations is a distinct person.⁶⁸

If the Holy Trinity involves three persons, and each is a complete substantial reality, and each of these persons is fully divine, how is there not a plurality of divine beings? Since he is committed to the doctrine of divine simplicity, Aquinas cannot say that each of these persons constitutes a part of the divine reality. Rather, on the principle that “that which subsists in the divine nature is the divine nature itself,”⁶⁹ he contends that each of these persons is the whole of this reality, and hence that each of these persons is identical with the divine essence.⁷⁰ He consequently rejects the principle that “whatever things are

⁶⁶ *STh* I, q. 28, a. 3.

⁶⁷ *STh* I, q. 29, a. 2.

⁶⁸ *STh* I, q. 30, a. 1, ad 1.

⁶⁹ *STh* I, q. 29, a. 4.

⁷⁰ See *STh* I, q. 28, a. 2; *STh* I, q. 29, a. 4; *STh* I, q. 39, a. 5, ad 4; and *STh* I, q. 39, a. 6, ad 2.

identical with the same thing are identical with each other,”⁷¹ and insists that there is one sense in which these subsistent relations are identical (they are same divine essence, which is itself the divine reality) and another sense in which they are distinct (they are distinct relations subsisting in this reality). Thus, for example, speaking of the subsistent relations which are the Father and the Son, he writes that “although paternity, just as filiation, is really the same as the divine essence; nevertheless, these two in their own proper idea and definitions import opposite respects. Hence they are distinguished from one another.”⁷² Aquinas’s account of the Holy Trinity depends upon a relativized conception of identity, that is, one that rejects the principle of indiscernibility and that holds between an individual (the Father) and an individual (the Son) in one sense (they are the same being) but does not hold in another (they are distinct persons).

For quite similar reasons, I maintain that the *assumptus-homo* theory—the account which Aquinas presents and subsequently rejects as heretical—is likewise grounded in a relativized conception of identity. To see why, let us briefly return to two of the theses which he attributes to this account, namely, the *plurality thesis*, which affirms that the Son of God and the son of Mary are numerically distinct substances, and the *identity thesis*, which affirms (in its most complete and nuanced form) that the Son of God is the same person as the son of Mary. In a manner that strongly mirrors his official account of the Holy Trinity, Aquinas’s account of the *assumptus-homo* theory presents us with one sense in which the Son of God and the son of Mary are identical (they are the same person) and with another sense in which are not identical (they are distinct beings or substances). Although it would clearly be premature to insist upon the truth of this account, we can at least say that it could only be true on a relativized conception of identity, for then and only then could one say that the Son of God and the son of Mary are the same person but different substances. From

⁷¹ *STh* I, q. 28, a. 3, ad 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

the vantage point of an absolute conception of identity, one who thinks that *a* is identical with *b* might well insist upon specifying the primary sense in which *a* is identical with *b* (e.g., that *a* is the same F as *b*), but one could not consistently go on to affirm a sense in which *a* is *not* identical with *b* (e.g., that *a* is not the same G as *b*). Since “*a* is the same F as *b*” would on this account be reducible to “*a* is an F, and *b* is an F, and *a* is identical with *b*,” while “*a* is not the same G as *b*” would be reducible to “*a* is a G, and *b* is a G, and *a* is not identical with *b*,” the statement “*a* and *b* are the same F but different G’s” would have the contradictory implication that *a* both is and is not identical with *b*.

While there are many philosophers who would reject any theory or doctrine which is committed to a relativized conception of identity, Aquinas is in no such position, since his account of the Holy Trinity is informed by just such a relativized conception of identity. I do not contend that Aquinas was aware of this implication. On the contrary, I suspect that he was not and, indeed, that he did not have a clear sense of these competing accounts of identity. I say this, in part, because his objections to the *assumptus-homo* theory, as powerful as they are, have no bearing upon an account of this theory that is informed by a relativized conception of identity, as may be seen in a reconsideration of his objections.

In what is surely his most basic and fundamental objection, Aquinas contends that one cannot say that the Son of God became human by assuming a human being without implicitly affirming the existence of a second person in Christ. Since a human being is an individual substance of a rational nature, and since every such substance is a person, the second substance attributed to Christ would necessarily constitute a second person in Christ. Aquinas further takes this to indicate that advocates of this theory are simply confused about what it means to be a person. But is it plausible to suppose that Boethius is thus confused about his own concept of personhood? Once the *assumptus-homo* theory is properly informed by a relativized conception of identity, there is no basis for such a charge. With this account of identity in place, one can grant

that the assumed human being is a person without having to affirm the existence of a *second* person in Christ, since one can say that this human being is the same person as the Son of God. If these beings are the *same person*, then there is one person here rather than two.

In addition, it is now plain that Aquinas's appeal to the transitivity of identity does not present a problem for the *assumptus-homo* theory. An advocate of this account would indeed affirm both (i) that the son of Mary is the same person as the Word and (ii) that the Word is the divine essence. While (i) is an instance of *personal* identity, (ii) is an instance of *ontic* identity: in affirming (ii) one is affirming that the Word is *the same being as* the divine essence. Since (i) and (ii) involve different sortal concepts, one who affirms the conjunction of (i) and (ii) is not committed to the (absurd) thesis that the son of Mary is *the same being as* the divine essence, much less to the thesis that the son of Mary is absolutely identical with the divine essence.

Next to be considered is Aquinas's contention that *assumptus-homo* theorists cannot consistently affirm such propositions as "Mary is the mother of God" or "a man created the stars." They cannot affirm these propositions, Aquinas maintains, because their affirmation of two substances in Christ precludes them from affirming the communication of idioms. In particular, they cannot affirm such statements by means of the reduplicative strategy, since the success of this strategy is contingent upon there being exactly one person who has both natures. It should now be clear, however, that *assumptus-homo* theorists are in a position to say just this, namely, that there is one person who is both fully divine and fully human. On this account, Christ is fully divine because he is personally identical with the divine substance, and he is fully human because he is personally identical with the assumed human being. This account maintains that Christ has always been personally identical with the first being, and by uniting himself to an ensouled human body he has *become* personally identical with the human being which is constituted by this union. Moreover, if he is personally identical with both of these substances, then

their properties would accrue to him and vice versa. On this view one can affirm that Mary is the mother of God, since she is the mother of one (as a human being) who also happens to be God (since he who is the human being is also the Son of God).

Aquinas's third objection is that the *assumptus-homo* theorist is committed to the Adoptionist heresy. Since this account maintains that Christ is personally identical with the son of Mary and also with the eternally begotten Son of God, an advocate of this account can maintain, with Aquinas, that the one person of Christ has "two generations and two births." It may also be recalled that this objection rests upon the premise that if God has become a human being, then some human being has become God. It should now be clear that advocates of this theory will not concede, without qualification, that some human being has become God. Rather, they will insist that there is one sense in which this is true and another sense in which it is false. That is, they will affirm that a human being has indeed become *personally* identical with God, but they will deny that a human being has become *ontically* identical with God. It is clear, moreover, that Aquinas's objection only works if the *assumptus-homo* theory includes this latter claim, for only then would one be logically compelled to say that there are two Sons of God, one of whom is a Son of God by nature and one of whom is a Son of God by adoption. I thus conclude that none of Aquinas's objections applies to this theory once it is properly informed by a relativized conception of identity.

What about the conciliar statements which are evidently directed against this position? As someone who means to keep the Catholic faith whole and entire, I am ready to disavow any account of this mystery which runs afoul of such statements. But since these passages are directed against the Nestorian heresy, and by extension, against any account which carries the same implications as this heresy, it is not obvious that these passages apply to a proper understanding of the *assumptus-homo* theory, that is, one that preserves its implicit logic of relative identity. The whole point of these condemnations is evidently to preserve our understanding of Christ's personal unity. If the logic of relative identity is sufficient to preserve our

understanding of God's absolute unity in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, then surely it is also sufficient to preserve our understanding of Christ's personal unity in the mystery of the Incarnation, especially since the latter instance of unity is not absolute, since Christ is presently endowed with distinct natures and properties. That is, although there are three divine persons existing in God, we can affirm that God is an undivided unity because we can say that each of these persons is *ontically* identical with God. Along the same lines, although we affirm that Christ assumed our nature by assuming a human being, and hence that he currently exists in relation to two beings (one divine and one human), we can nonetheless insist that there is one person of Christ, because we maintain that each of these beings is *personally* identical with Christ.⁷³

Since none of Aquinas's substantive objections to the *assumptus-homo* theory applies to an account of this theory that is properly informed by its implicit logic of relative identity, his case against this theory is not successful. His subsistence theory remains a tenable understanding of this mystery; however, I would like briefly to suggest two reasons for preferring the alternative account. In the first place, while nothing prevents one from restricting relative identity to the mystery of the Trinity, applying it to both mysteries in the way we have done here is surprisingly fruitful. On this unified approach, each mystery involves two instances of relative counting, namely, one for counting *persons* and another for counting *beings*. In addition, these mysteries involve distinct but complementary instances of unity-in-diversity: the mystery of the Holy Trinity presents us with a plurality of *persons* who are the same *being*, while the mystery of the Incarnation presents us with a plurality of *beings* which are the same *person*. While this sort of fruitfulness and explanatory power is certainly not a conclusive

⁷³ My present goal is to show that the *assumptus-homo* theory is not committed to the Nestorian heresy. Although I am not interesting in rescuing Nestorianism from the charge of heresy, it is conceivable that relative identity would have helped Nestorius himself to establish (as he argued in *The Bazaar of Heraclides*) that his affirmation of a second *ousios* in Christ does not commit him to a second person in Christ.

reason for embracing the *assumptus-homo* theory, it is nonetheless far from trivial.

This theory enjoys a second advantage which I take to be far more compelling. The *assumptus-homo* theory is in a significantly better position than the subsistence theory to respond to the obvious logical objections that are made against the mystery of the Incarnation. Given our understanding of what it means to be God, and also what it means to be human, it is hard to see how the Son of God could have both sets of properties at the same time. This would mean, among other things, that he is both temporal and eternal, created and un-created, corporeal and incorporeal. It is thus easy to see why one might take such a doctrine to be completely incredible. It is one thing to accept a doctrine as a mystery of faith even though we cannot see how it is true, and quite another to accept one that we can see to be false. It is no stretch to insist that we can see it—thus construed—as false, as surely as we can see that there could not be an animal that is both a squid and a squirrel.

The Church Fathers were keenly aware of the deeply paradoxical nature of this mystery. To cite just one example, consider the following passage from the Tome of St. Leo:

And so, the Son of God, descending from His heavenly throne, yet not leaving the glory of the Father, enters into this lowly world. [He comes] in a new order, generated by a new birth. In a new order, because, invisible in his nature, He became visible in ours; surpassing comprehension, He has wished to be comprehended; remaining prior to time, he began to exist in time. The Lord of all things hid His immeasurable majesty to take on the form of a servant. The impassible God has not disdained to be a man subject to suffering nor the immortal to submit to the law of death.⁷⁴

In this passage Leo attributes at least six pairs of seemingly incompatible properties to the incarnate Christ: (i) absent from and present with the Father, (ii) visible and invisible, (iii) comprehensible and incomprehensible, (iv) temporal and eternal, (v) vulnerable to harm and impassible, and (vi) mortal and immortal. How is it that the bishops at Chalcedon embraced this

⁷⁴ ND 612/DS 294.

confession by shouting, in one voice, that “Peter has spoken through the mouth of Leo”? Why did they not respond instead with dismay and disbelief? There is at least one key ingredient here that militates against such a response: these competing pairs of properties are attributed to Christ in connection with distinct natures. Although it would be absurd to say, for example, that Christ is both visible and invisible in the same sense at the same time, it is not obviously absurd to say that he is invisible with regard to his divine nature and visible with regard to our nature.

In defense of this strategy, Aquinas thus observes that

it is impossible for contraries to be predicated of the same [subject] in the same respects, but nothing prevents their being predicated of the same [subject] in different aspects. And thus contraries are predicated of Christ, not in the same, but in different natures.⁷⁵

As a final and complete defense against the above objection, this application of the reduplicative strategy is not terribly compelling. The objector is surely aware that these properties are said of Christ with regard to distinct natures, and hence, for example, that he is not being said to be both created and uncreated in the same sense at the same time. Even so, on the subsistence theory we are still being told that one *suppositum* is both created (*secundum humanitatem*) and uncreated (*secundum divinitatem*). And so the objector is bound to ask: how is it possible for one and the same being to be created in one sense and uncreated in *any* sense? Although a proponent of this account will surely continue to affirm the truth of this proposition (and hence its possibility), I cannot see that any progress has been made towards justifying this claim. Moreover, insisting that this is possible because Christ is both human and divine only raises the further question of how it is possible for one substance to have both of these natures at the same time.

On the *assumptus-homo* theory, we are not forced to say that one and the same being is both created in one sense and

⁷⁵ *STh* III, q. 16, a. 4, ad 1.

uncreated in another. According to this theory we are presented with two distinct beings: the divine being, which has the full array of divine properties, and the human being, which likewise has the full array of essential human properties. Since Christ is personally identical with both of these beings, we can affirm that *he* has both sets of properties, and hence that he is both created and uncreated, temporal and eternal, corporeal and incorporeal, and so on. That is, we can say that he is created *secundum humanitatem* because he is personally identical with a created human being, and that he is uncreated *secundum divinitatem* because he is personally identical with the divine essence, which is itself eternal and uncreated. Although we do not understand how it is possible for Christ to be personally identical with a plurality of beings (much less with beings that exist at such different orders of reality), within a logic of relative identity we can at least show that this supposition is not self-contradictory. Here I am thinking of Peter van Inwagen's parallel applications of relative identity to the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity, and of his subsequent demonstration of their formal consistency.⁷⁶

I conclude that the *assumptus-homo* theory, with its implicit logic of relative identity, provides us with a comparatively simple, intuitive, theologically fruitful, and orthodox way of understanding the mystery of the Incarnation, as well as a more credible and complete means of defending this mystery from the charge of logical impossibility. If this account of the Incarnation proves to be genuinely compatible with established Church doctrine concerning the one person and two natures of Christ,

⁷⁶ After translating the fundamental tenets of both doctrines into the logic of relative identity, van Inwagen demonstrates the formal consistency of these statements by constructing (in each case) a model that consists of statements which share the same form as these statements and which are all true (on this model). For his application of this method to the mystery of the Trinity, see "And Yet They are Not Three Gods," 249ff. For his application of this method to the mystery of the Incarnation, see "Not by Confusion of Substance," 223-25.

then there are good reasons for preferring it to the one Aquinas defends.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ I would like to thank Patrick Toner and Michael Gorman for convincing me of the need to come to terms with Aquinas's account of the Incarnation, and also for helping me to appreciate the force of his objections against the account I am defending. I would also like to thank Fr. David Carter, Fr. Timothy Bellamah, and two anonymous referees for their exceptionally helpful comments upon an earlier draft of this paper. I am solely responsible for any errors that remain.