

## ARTICLE

**Aquinas' Theology of the God Who Is:**The Significance of *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* in the *Summa theologiae***I. Introduction**

After a period of relative neglect following the Second Vatican Council, the theology of Thomas Aquinas has undergone a revival of interest, to the point that Aquinas has now become a resource for non-Catholic theologians too. Yet while various areas of his corpus have drawn respect, his theology of God receives a high degree of criticism. His position that God is immutable and has no real relation to creation is dismissed by contemporary theology on several justifications: as contrary to the biblical God intimately concerned with his covenanted people, as epitomizing the domineering God of classical theism rejected by modern atheism for threatening the autonomy of the world, and as unable to support a genuine religious subjectivity that requires our relationship with God to be fully mutual.<sup>1</sup> Criticisms from process and feminist theologies on his characterization of God's attributes,<sup>2</sup> and from contemporary Trinitarian theology on the priority he gives the divine nature over the divine persons,<sup>3</sup> have

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Hanratty, "Divine Immutability and Impassibility Revisited," in *At the Heart of the Real*, F. O'Rourke, ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992), 137-62, at 138. Hanratty offers a concise and fair presentation of the various arguments against or modifications of divine immutability in process philosophy and theology, and the theologies of Hans Küng, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, Heribert Mühlen, Jean Galot and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

<sup>2</sup> For the arguments of process thought that God changes, cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1969); Ewert Cousins, ed., *Process Theology: Basic Writings* (New York: Newman Press, 1972); Santiago Sia, "The Doctrine of God's Immutability: Introducing the Modern Debate," *New Blackfriars* 68 (1987): 226-29; and David Pailin, "The Utterly Absolute and the Totally Related: Change in God," *New Blackfriars* 68 (1987): 243-55. For a feminist critical reading of Aquinas's classical theism, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1993). For a theological reworking of God's attributes, see Colin E. Gunton, *Act & Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The initial charge, since taken up by others, was offered by Karl Rahner in "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. K. Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 83-84, and *The Trinity*, Joseph Donceel, trans. (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 15-21 & 45-46. For a response that explains the

likewise fostered a consensus that no matter how agile and penetrating Aquinas can be on a wide range of theological problems, his basic theology of God is fundamentally misconceived.

This judgment of the inadequacy of Aquinas' theology of God has not been an entirely external criticism offered by those whose philosophical premises and theological approaches widely differ from his. Certain scholars of Aquinas, too, in their engagement with the criticisms and concerns of process thought, have sought to qualify Aquinas' teaching on divine immutability and God's relation to the world.<sup>4</sup> Although carefully correcting contemporary misunderstandings of these notions and delineating the objectionable theological implications that arise when either is denied of God,<sup>5</sup> these writers suggest that the reality and depth of God's involvement with creation can be expressed in Thomistic terms by saying that God's knowing and willing of creation makes a real difference in God. Exploiting Aquinas' own distinction between the entitive order of the divine essence itself and the intentional order of the divine knowing and willing of creation, these writers claim that in his creative, conscious intentions God's relation to the world is more than merely rational and not absolutely immutable.<sup>6</sup> While their effort to use Aquinas to advance beyond him is commendable, still their solution, in addition to being somewhat ambiguous, has been questioned for its faithfulness to Aquinas.<sup>7</sup> Their position also seems to

unity and trajectory of Aquinas' discussion of God as three persons of one essence, see Giles Emery, "Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?" *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 521-63.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony J. Kelly, "God: How Near a Relation?" *Thomist* 34 (1970), 191-229; W. Norris Clarke, "A New Look at the Immutability of God," in *God Knowable and Unknowable*, Robert J. Roth, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 43-72; William J. Hill, "Does the World Make a Difference to God?" *The Thomist* 38 (1974), 146-64. Walter Stokes sought the same end by different means, by attempting a synthesis between Thomistic and process metaphysics: "Is God Really Related to the World?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 39 (1965), 145-51. See also the brief synopsis of the debate opened up by process thought in Sia, "The Doctrine of God's Immutability," 229-32.

<sup>5</sup> According to Hill, positing a real relation of God to the world would imply: "that God is inconceivable apart from the world; that he is ontically dependent upon something other than himself; that the creative act is not free; that the creature no longer is fully contingent in existing. In short, it would subordinate God to a "whole" prior to and more ultimate than himself." (154-55)

<sup>6</sup> Clarke, 52-53; Hill, 151-52.

<sup>7</sup> How changes in God's intentional relation to the world do not involve change in God's being is not very clear in their positions, given that God's absolute simplicity excludes any real distinction between the entitive and intentional orders in God. For a

suggest agreement with contemporary critics that absolute divine immutability and a wholly one-way divine relation to the world are points of weakness in classical theism, requiring some moderation in order for the world to have the meaning and importance it ought to have for the Christian God.<sup>8</sup>

Other Thomistic scholars have replied to these criticisms and defended both Aquinas' predication of divine immutability and his denial that God's relation to the world is real. Gerald Hanratty offers a fine explanatory summary of the arguments for divine immutability and impassibility offered by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Dodds also explains the Thomistic reasons for predicating divine immutability and the ways that 'motion' may be properly said of God.<sup>10</sup> Martin J. De Nys has argued that the notion that God does not have a real relation to the world is "a substantially defensible, rationally complex, and interesting theological option" with the inner-consistency and resourcefulness to engage the concerns of contemporary theology.<sup>11</sup> I agree, and wish in this article to show this coherence and fecundity by taking a different approach than the mainly philosophical defenses offered so far. Rather than focus directly on the specifically 'problematic' issues of divine immutability and its attendant denial

critical response to the Clarke and Hill articles cited above (n. 4, see Theodore J. Kondoleon, "The Immutability of God: Some Recent Challenges," *The New Scholasticism* 58/3 (1984), 293-315. While I accept the validity of his criticisms, in my opinion they apply more to Clarke's arguments than to Hill's, as well as to Kelly's article, which Kondoleon does not engage.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, for example, claims "classic theism (and Thomism is included explicitly in this) lacks existential allure for the men of our time." (194) Supposedly because of "the existential repugnance of a statically indifferent Deity," (196) "God must be conceived of as genuinely related to the world and as really affected by our actions." (194) Clarke is another who accepts without question the current assumption that the measure of our value before God is how much we creatures 'make a difference in him' (44-45, 56-57)—i.e., whether (and to what degree) we can change him. Yet this is a dubious standard by which to measure God's love, the inverse of the biblical touchstone where the depths of God's love for us rests upon what *he* has done for *us*. The problem of imperfection inherent to this measure of 'how much we make a difference to God' is the implication that before you prayed, acted, suffered, or sinned, God had *less* regard and compassion for you. Any difference that we can make in God presumes an initial divine *indifference*.

<sup>9</sup> Hanratty, 148-62.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Dodds, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Motion of the Motionless God," *New Blackfriars* 68 (1987): 233-42. For a more extensive treatment see his book: *The Unchanging God of Love: A Study of the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on Divine Immutability in View of Certain Contemporary Criticisms of This Doctrine* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Martin J. De Nys, "God, Creatures, and Relations: Revisiting Classical Theism," *Journal of Religion* 81 (2001), 595-614, at 613-14.

of a real divine relation to the world, I intend to show in a more theological and systematic way the deep and broad implications of Aquinas' judgment that God is the act of subsistent existence itself. By tracing the trajectory of his discussion of God in the *Summa theologiae* I hope to indicate how his whole theology, especially an understanding of reality as created, rests upon this foundational claim and gives us a theological portrait of an unsurpassably active God. Because this understanding of how created things relate to God is so fundamental to his thought and so widely different from contemporary views, it is crucial that all readers be familiar with it if they are to faithfully interpret his treatment of any other theological topic within his great summary of theology.

Since the fundamental accusation against the immutable God of classical theism is that his absolute perfections prohibit him from being in a mutual relationship with the world, it is imperative to explain why Aquinas considered his conception of God's relation to the world as non-mutual to be fitting to God and faithful to the Christian doctrine of creation. Though God's relation to the world is not 'real' in the Thomistic sense of being necessary for God to be God, nonetheless it is a dynamic relation of God acting on our behalf. Indeed in contrast to process theologies, in Aquinas' theology God is active for the world with the eternal dynamism of the divine life itself, not with the mechanics of causality found in this world. Yet to be able to show all this requires grasping the richness of Aquinas' theology of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* and the way it allows for his theology of creation in which the world proceeds from, is directed by, and returns to God.

In order to show the how Aquinas' conception of God's engagement with the world surpasses contemporary alternatives, one must not defend the validity of particular attributes but attend to the role his understanding of God plays in the whole of his theology—that is, the way that Aquinas considers everything to be what it is on account of God being God to it. In the *Summa theologiae* discussion finds its ordering principle in God himself (*sub ratione Dei*), so that all things are discussed in relation to God as their beginning and end.<sup>12</sup> Given this systematic grounding of all reality in the mystery of God, to fault Aquinas on his

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST], 5 vol. (Ottawa: Studii Generalis O. Pr., 1941 [Piana text of 1570 with some Leonine variants]), I, q. 1, a. 7. English translation: *Summa Theologica*, 3 vol. Trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947). In the opening prologue to the whole work Aquinas states his intention to organize theology according to the inner dynamics of the subject matter (*secundum ordine discipline*)—that is, giving primacy of discussion to what is first in reality (God) so that God may be the foundation of and ultimate context for all that follows in later questions.

understanding of God *and* continue to mine his theology for wisdom on other topics is thoroughly inconsistent with his overall intentions and liable to lead to grave misinterpretations of individual treatments.<sup>13</sup> Even a slight modification of his theology of God, such as those that have been proposed above, runs the grave risk of unmooring his understanding of creation, nature and grace from its stable foundation in the God who is simply the act of existence.

Since Aquinas intentionally organizes theological discussion in his *Summa theologiae* to reflect the order of all things in their relation to God, it is important to pay close attention not only to what Aquinas says in individual articles but to the overall manner in which he says it. Accordingly, this article, in two parts, will trace his systematic reasoning in giving the reader an expansive appreciation of Aquinas' theology of God. The first section will present the theological meaning of Aquinas' judgment that God is *ipsum esse subsistens* given in the work's opening treatise on the one God, questions 2-26. The intent here is not to focus upon any attribute or question in particular but to follow the weave of his theological argument: how all that is predicated of God, including the Creator-creation relation, depends upon God's absolute transcendence as the act of existence itself. The second section will indicate the ongoing significance of this theology for what follows later in the work, showing how this foundational theology of God remains operative in the explanation of created realities. Here the purpose is to appreciate Aquinas' theological understanding of all reality that arises because created things participate in and are fundamentally ordered to God as their principle, agent and end.

## II. The absolute simplicity and perfect fullness of *ipsum esse subsistens*

The treatise on the one God begins with question two of the *Summa theologae*, where Aquinas offers five ways for demonstrating the existence of God. Doubtless the most discussed piece of all of Aquinas' writings, still the interest has for the most part been philosophical: how the arguments work and whether they are convincing. Our concern, however, is with their *theological* significance.

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<sup>13</sup> This liability of misinterpreting sections of the *Summa theologiae* read in isolation lies in the fact that the modern reader is not likely to relate created realities to God in the manner Aquinas is careful to work out in his theology of God. Whether it is the residue of deistic scientism, the modern predilection for making the autonomy of the world absolute, or the pantheism increasingly accepted in theology today, the contemporary reader of excised passages is likely to have an understanding of created realities antithetical to the one presupposed throughout this work.

To read this second question theologically is to grasp its place within the larger context of this treatise on God, and thereby to recognize the way its conclusion becomes the principle and premise for what will be judged true of God's essence and operations. For immediately following and interlocked with question two are the questions on the simplicity and perfection of God, where Aquinas presents his fundamental characterization of God which will steer the course of the discussion in the rest of the treatise. Indeed, because this characterization depends upon what God must be as the reason for the universe's existence, here is also found the determinative principle for Aquinas' understanding of the relation creation has with its Creator.

Thus in appreciation of the systematic ordering of the questions themselves, a reading of question two in the light of the *subsequent* discussion on God's simplicity and perfection makes it clear that in the five ways Aquinas does not merely demonstrate that God exists. It is easy to assume, in the unending debate over the demonstrative merits of the five ways (a debate which tends to isolate question two from the movement inherent in the whole treatise), that all that Aquinas intends here is simply to reason to an actually existing God. Much more significantly for his theological project, Aquinas concludes to a God that is actual existence itself. The only adequate cause to explain the existence of this universe, in which the existence of each thing without exception is derived, is in an Origin that has not received its existence from anything prior.<sup>14</sup> "God as pure act, far from being an impairment to creating, is the absolute prolegomenon and, literally, *sine qua non* for creating."<sup>15</sup> To be truly adequate to the task of

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<sup>14</sup> The fundamental premise of the argument is stated twice in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3: *quod non est, non incipit esse nisi per aliquid quod est*, and *de potentia autem non potest aliquid reduci in actum, nisi per aliquod ens in actu*. This undeniable metaphysical truth to which Aquinas is here referring—namely, that every change or becoming requires a pre-existent cause already possessive of the perfection it imparts to the effect—seems to be one completely missed by process thinkers. While in any process or change the state of potency precedes the state of actuality in the effect, still the fact that the realization of every potency always depends upon an already-in-act cause implies that *act always precedes potency*. No potency realizes itself; nothing can pull itself up by its own bootstraps. Although process thought claims to reach a more rationally consistent concept of God (cf. n. 36 below), the truth is that in indiscriminately applying the process of change to God these thinkers give potency an ontological and conceptual primacy that it does not even have in this world of change.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 133. God cannot undergo any change in himself in acting for the world "both because God is pure act and because creation itself demands an immutably pure act." (ibid.)

origination the ultimate principle must be outside the category of received existence; he must be the “the sheer unreceived Act of Being.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore the theological import of question two is not so much that God must exist, but that he must also be his own existence, or else this universe would not be. In contrast to all created things that have their existence given to them, God alone is, not has, existence.

As we will now show, this conclusion that God is his own actual existence is the basis for all that Aquinas will say on the nature and operations of God. All subsequent judgments about what is or is not true of God are compelled by fidelity to this insight that God must be *ipsum esse per se subsistens* [‘the act of subsistent existence itself’] in order to be the explanatory cause this universe requires.<sup>17</sup> The way Aquinas does this is by first arguing that the God who is his own act of existence must be both absolutely simple and perfect. Aquinas then employs these two complementary truths to guide the rest of the discussion in the treatise. To appreciate his theology of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, therefore, requires first grasping how God’s simplicity and perfect fullness arise from God as the act of existence itself, and then seeing how these two truths flow into all further claims about God’s attributes, knowledge and will. The first step will involve a closer reading of Aquinas’ argument in questions 3-6. But due to the length of the rest of the treatise (qq. 7-26), accomplishing the second step within the limits of this paper will entail a more selective reading. To fit the overall theme of this article, I will focus on those passages that help show how God’s very active relation to the world is found in his simple and full act of existence.

In the pedagogically advantageous ordering he gives to the subject, Aquinas immediately follows the argument of the five ways (q. 2. a. 3) with demonstrations that God is wholly simple (q. 3) and the fullness of all perfection or goodness (qq. 4-6). His reasoning very much depends upon the necessity that the source of all things be the act of unreceived existence itself and hence beyond even the possibility of having possibilities. As the transcendent *I am*,<sup>18</sup> God is to

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<sup>16</sup> Hill, 154.

<sup>17</sup> *ST I*, q. 44, a. 1; *Deus* “*est ipsum esse subsistens omnibus modis indeterminatum.*” (*ST I*, q. 11, a. 4) Note therefore that Aquinas does not argue in the fashion of St. Anselm, deriving his theological conclusions in accordance with the *logical* axiom that God is *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*. Rather, Aquinas’ foundational principle for demonstrating the reasonableness of the faith is the *cosmological* premise or question of what this actually existing world requires for its ultimate ground and terminus.

<sup>18</sup> Like many of the patristic fathers, Aquinas explicitly refers to the revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3:14. Since this reference occurs in the *sed contra* of *ST I*, q.

be identified with *being* in the most active of senses, and anything that implies a kind of non-existence or non-actuality—including potency, composition, limitation, imperfection, and the process of becoming—must be excluded as contrary to the divine nature. Or in positive terms, God must be wholly simple and perfect in himself, and thus both transcendently other than creation (q. 4, a. 3) and yet entirely operative upon it (q. 6, a. 4).

Whatever is not simple can be divided so that each of its parts is not identical with any other or with the whole. Since the real distinctiveness of each part is assured only by a negation of it *not being* any other, this “is not” of the part is antithetical of the absolute “is” that God must be for the universe to truly exist. Division also introduces potentiality in the subject, not just the possibility of corruption but also the necessity that each part receive qualification from and thus stand in potency to the other’s distinctiveness (q. 3, aa. 1 & 2). Composition is thus contrary to the one whose essence is to be existence itself. Although all created things, no matter how simple, are ‘composed’ of an essence with the act of existence (since *what* they are cannot be identified with *that* they are), God in contrast is beyond even this most basic and universal composition. If God cannot be divided between his essence and his existence, he cannot be divided at all (q. 3, aa. 4 & 7). Theologically, his simplicity is important because it requires us to affirm that anything true about God is true of him wholly and absolutely, not partially or conditionally. Indeed, the many ways that God is great can be encapsulated in the simply truth that God *is*, so that no addendum over and above his essence need be admitted.

The divine simplicity of pure existence is infinitely rich in perfection. Now what is most simple in our experience is a geometric point—indivisible yes, but of very little substance. The simplicity of God, however, is of a richness of depth and breadth beyond our comprehension. For the *is* of God that excludes any imperfection also encompasses all perfections, “for a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, because the universe comes from God, all the good found in it must in a greater manner pre-exist in the Creator for him to be rightly regarded as its point of origin (q. 4, a. 2). Consequently, the judgment that God is utter simplicity must be complemented

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2, a. 3, on the basis of the argument offered here one could say that the entirety of Aquinas’ theology of God explicates the meaning of the biblical name *Yahweh*, by far the predominant designation of God in the Old Testament.

<sup>19</sup> *ST* I, q. 4, a. 1; also q. 4, a. 2: “Since therefore God is subsisting being itself, nothing of the perfection of being can be wanting to Him. Now all created perfections are included in the perfection of being; for things are perfect, precisely so far as they have being after some fashion.”

by the judgment that God is the fullness of perfection, containing within himself, without loss of that simplicity, the exemplary type of every sort of created good. As created being exists because God is pure act, so created goodness exists because God is absolute perfection. Of course, divine 'perfection' is not an attained state, the terminus of a process, as it is in all created things that are perfected.<sup>20</sup> With this negation, the term *perfection* is justifiably applied to God because everything that is perfect is, as such, in act. "The first active principle must necessarily be most actual, and therefore most perfect." (q. 4, a. 1)

As the perfect one, however, God is not just the *source* of goodness in creation. He is also the *end* of creation, the absolute goodness that gives all change and activity in creation a direction and final intelligibility. For Aquinas, just as this changing universe requires an absolutely transcendent Beginning, so too does it require an absolutely transcendent End. Creation includes a two-fold relation to God: a) only because God is its source is the universe not nothing; b) only because God is its end is the universe not nonsense. Without *telos* order is impossible; without resultant good change is meaningless.<sup>21</sup> Each end of action is a good sought only because its very desirability derives from its participation in the goodness of God.<sup>22</sup> Only because God is simple and absolute perfection is he supreme goodness itself, in relation to which all other ends derive their character

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<sup>20</sup> In this sense the ordinary meaning of the word is misleading: *perfection*, from the Latin *perfectus*, past participle of *perficere*—to finish, to bring to completion; *per*, through + *ficere*, combining form of *facere*, to make, do (*Random House Webster's College Dictionary*, New York: Random House, 1992). Perhaps this is the reason why Paul S. Fiddes mistakenly describes Aquinas as saying that God "has no potentialities that he does not eternally actualize," and that "there are no unrealized potentials in God." (*The Creative Suffering of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 50) God's pure act is not perfectly realized potentiality, but the absolute absence of potentiality.

<sup>21</sup> *ST I*, q. 45, a. 1, ad 2: *Mutationes accipiunt speciem et dignitatem...a termino ad quem*. "Changes receive species and dignity...from the term to which [they tend]." Aquinas is convinced no change would occur at all without the specification of action given by the end: "Besides, if an agent did not incline toward some definite effect, all results would be a matter of indifference for him. Now, he who looks upon a manifold number of things with indifference no more succeeds in doing one of them than another. Hence, from an agent contingently indifferent to alternatives no effect follows, unless he is determined to one effect by something. So, it would be impossible for him to act. Therefore every agent tends toward some determinate effect, and this is called his end." (*Summa contra gentiles* [hereafter, *SCG*] Bk. III, chap. 2)

<sup>22</sup> *ST I*, q. 6, a. 4. Furthermore, no such consistent direction of action which we see in the patterns of nature is possible unless the good God has established for creatures what they could not establish for themselves: their own proper end (*SCG* Bk. I, chap. 44; *ST I*, q. 19, a. 4; cf. the fifth way of q. 2, a. 3).

as good.<sup>23</sup> As we shall later see, the direction God gives to creation as the End of all ends, the Goodness of all good, is an important element in his theology of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*.

Now it is in the question on divine goodness that Aquinas first states that God has only a logical but not a real relation to creation.<sup>24</sup> From what has already been said it is clear that a real and necessary relation exists *from* creation to God.<sup>25</sup> Aquinas is denying the reverse—that God is *necessarily* related to creation—yet this does *not* mean that there is no divine relation to the world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Aquinas summarizes the relation of creation to God's goodness in this way: "Everything is therefore called good from the divine goodness, as from the first, exemplary, effective and final principle of all goodness." (*ST I*, q. 6, a. 4)

<sup>24</sup> *ST I*, q. 6, a. 2, ad 1: "Now a relation of God to creatures is not a reality in God, but in the creature, for it is in God in our idea only." Aquinas clarifies the point more thoroughly in *ST I*, q. 13, a. 7: "Sometimes a relation in one extreme may be a reality, while in the other extreme it is an idea only. And this happens whenever two extremes are not of one order." An example of this kind of relation whose terms are of different orders is the relation between things in nature and the same things as sensible and intelligible. The relation of things sensed and understood to the actual existing things is real, but the relation of actual things to their sensible and intellectual counterparts is only a relation of reason, since a particular tree exists regardless of whether it is ever sensed or understood. This same kind of disparity of orders is found in the relation between God and creation. "Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God himself, whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but only a relation of idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to him." (*ibid.*; cf. *ST I*, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3; q. 45, a. 3, ad 1) For an elucidation of this distinction and its significance, as well as a clarification of an ambiguity in an example Aquinas uses to demonstrate it, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1985), 88-96. See also David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 84-87.

<sup>25</sup> It deserves elucidation that by 'relation' Aquinas means a specific predication of reference posited of a singular reality, not what today we call a "relationship" which joins two participants in a common bond. Whereas in modern parlance one relationship exists between two terms, in this Aristotelian usage a distinct relation is predicated for each term, resulting in two relations or predications which may or may not be equivalent. The Creator-creation pairing is such a case of non-equivalent relations; the relation of creation to God is real or necessary (*relatio realis*) for its very existence, but the relation of God to creation is only in idea (*relatio rationis*)—i.e., necessary not for divine existence but necessary for a truthful predication that God is Creator. Thus, saying that God has no 'relation' to creation cannot be equivalent to saying that God has no 'relationship' with it.

<sup>26</sup> De Nys (599-600) points out that Aquinas' denial of a real relation occurs in the midst of his affirming and explaining the theological propriety of predicating relative

Granted that this non-necessary universe does indeed exist, not only must it be in relation to God, but also God must be active towards it, extending, as it were, his *act* of existence and goodness to it.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Weinandy labels this non-necessary, more than merely logical relation of God toward the world an ‘actual relation,’ in order to express that God is actually, if not necessarily, related to the world because the world is really related to him.<sup>28</sup> *Actual* is an especially fitting term because the reality of God’s relation to the world is found not in the necessity of God’s nature but in the *act* of all that God is freely willing and doing for creation.

Having given the substance of what Aquinas means in insisting God is absolutely simple and perfect, it is now vital to indicate how these claims work as a ‘double hermeneutic’ to shape the rest of his theology of God. Both of these primary theological judgments work together and complement one another, so that divine simplicity is not understood as insubstantial or vacuous, nor the fullness of divine perfection (goodness) understood as implying multiplicity or composition. Applied to our ideas about God, the first is principally exclusionary and refining, the second predominantly expansive and enriching. For proper theological language involves acts of judgment about what God is and is not based upon the relation creatures have to God, a relation which entails the negating truth that God is transcendentally unlike creatures, and the affirming one that all the good in creatures must be found more eminently in God. Predications

terms of God, for “God is related to creatures in so far as creatures are related to him.” (*ST* I, q. 13, 7, ad 5: *cum ea ratione referatur Deus ad creaturam que creatura refer[a]tur ad ipsum*) We speak truly when we call God “Creator” or “Lord,” because the world has a real relation to God, and this only because God is truly in the act of eternally knowing and freely willing the world. A lack of a real (necessary) divine relation to the world is therefore not a denial of God’s engagement with the world; it is rather an affirmation of it, one that is made in respect of the freedom of the creative act of One who absolutely transcends the world.

<sup>27</sup> *ST* I, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1: “Creation signified actively means the divine action, which is God’s essence, with a relation to the creature.” Aquinas holds that given that there is a creation—a necessary supposition contingent upon divine freedom—we can truly say that God’s essence is identical to the divine power that acts to effect creation. (cf. *ST* I, q. 25, a. 1c. & ad 3) “Power is predicated of God not as something really distinct from his knowledge and will, but as differing from them logically; inasmuch as power implies a notion of principle putting into execution what the will commands, and what knowledge directs, which three things in God are identified.” (*ST* I, q. 25, a. 1, ad 4) Therefore, although there is in God no real—i.e., necessary—relation to creation, nevertheless the divine action by which there is a creation is nothing less than the divine essence itself in execution. God is the Act by which creation is.

<sup>28</sup> Weinandy (1985), 94-95.

of abstract names fall under the hermeneutic of divine simplicity, while predications of God's supereminence fall under the hermeneutic of divine perfection.<sup>29</sup> All these theological affirmations are analogical because the world depends upon the *ipsum esse subsistens*, since analogy "requires...that God be in act and that the creature exist in real dependence upon the divine *actus essendi*."<sup>30</sup>

In every subsequent judgment Aquinas makes about God's essence in questions 7-11, and about God's operations in questions 14-26, the notions of divine simplicity and perfection respectively purify and exalt all that is judged true of God according to the theological exigency that he is subsistent existence itself. On that basis, none of these subsequent predications of God in terms of what he is (not) or how he acts introduce composition or imperfection in God. This means first of all that the various divine attributes or operations distinguished by us in God are never an added property which qualifies the divine essence; rather, each is nothing other than identical to the divine essence itself. Given that God is *esse*, the proper verb for theological predication is not 'has' but the verb that designates the act of subsisting: God *is* his own eternity, God *is* his own knowing, etc.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, whatever is rightly said about God's

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<sup>29</sup> "We know God from creatures as their principle, and also by way of excellence and remotion." (*ST I*, q. 13, a. 1) "As God is simple and subsisting, we attribute to him abstract names to signify his simplicity, and concrete names to signify his substance and perfection, although both these kinds of names fail to express his mode of being, forasmuch as our intellect does not know him in this life as he is." (*ST I*, q. 13, a. 1, ad 2) "Thus whatever is said of God and creatures is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently." (*ST I*, q. 13, a. 5)

<sup>30</sup> William J. Hill, 'On "Knowing the Unknowable God"' [review of *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* by David Burrell], *The Thomist*, 51 (1987): 699-709, at 706. Affirming that in God essence and existence are absolutely identical distinguishes God from the world, enabling the theologian "to safeguard God's unknowability and at the same time, paradoxically, to indicate how he may be known." (*ibid.*, 704)

<sup>31</sup> *ST I*, q. 10, a. 2: "Not only is God eternal, but he is his eternity; whereas, no other being is its own duration, as no other is its own being. Now God is his own uniform being; and hence as he is his own essence, so he is his own eternity." *ST I*, q. 14, a. 4: "It must be said that the act of God's intellect is his substance. For if his act of understanding were other than his substance, then something else, as the Philosopher says [*Metaphysics*, Bk XII], would be the act and perfection of the divine substance, to which the divine substance would be related, as potentiality is to act, which is altogether impossible; because the act of understanding is the perfection and act of the one understanding. ... Now in God there is no form which is something other than his existence, as shown above [q. 3]. Hence as his essence itself is also his intelligible species, it necessarily follows that his act of understanding must be his essence and his existence."

essence or operations must be affirmed or else God would be less than perfect, yet affirmed only in a way where no limitation, characteristic of created reality, is introduced into the theology of God.

In order to complete this examination of Aquinas' theology of God and its systematic inner coherence, let us now attend to some instances which suitably demonstrate how the rest of the treatise, under the rubrics of divine simplicity and perfection, express that God is the act of subsistent existence itself. From the remaining questions on the divine essence (*ST I*, qq. 7-11) we will focus not on God's immutability (q. 9), but on the question that immediately precedes it and therefore gives it some context: question 8 on divine omnipresence. From the questions on the divine operations (qq. 14-26), discussion will center on God's knowing and willing of creation, crucial for appreciating Aquinas' take on the divine-world relation and how his conception differs from what is put forth today.

After Aquinas explains that God is infinite only in that manner conformable with his simplicity and perfection,<sup>32</sup> his next theological interest is to discuss God's active omnipresence in the universe (q. 7, prologue; q. 8). This eighth question, together with significant portions of question 6 and questions 14-25 that concern the extension of the divine operations into the world, are *prima facie* evidence that even in his effort to treat "God in himself" Aquinas's theological portrait is far removed from its contemporary caricature of a God with little regard for the world. As the infinite act of existence, God is the active presence underlying and permeating creation. Yet his presence throughout the universe is not like some ether distended through space, for then his presence would be divisible into parts. Since divine simplicity excludes division, God is present "primarily" in every aspect of creation with the entirety of his being (q. 8, a. 4). Indeed, his presence is not one of spatial occupation, but of universal activity: *Deus est in omnibus rebus, non quidem sicut pars essentiae, vel sicut accidens, sed sicut agens adest ei in quod agit*,<sup>33</sup> *per contactum virtutis*.<sup>34</sup> By his essential *esse*

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<sup>32</sup> "Since therefore the divine being is not a being received in anything, but he is his own subsistent being, as was shown above [q. 3, a. 4], it is clear that God himself is infinite and perfect." (*ST I*, q. 7, a. 1) God is absolutely, essentially infinite (a. 2), without limitations of any sort. His infinity is not a greatness of the kind found in creation—i.e., that of an unending extension in size or number (aa. 3 & 4). His greatness is infinite actual existence, not an unlimited potency (as in process thought). In sum, divine infinity is another way of naming God's simple and absolute perfection, a greatness wholly without demarcation, augmentation, succession or number.

<sup>33</sup> *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1: "God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works."

God is present to all things as the unceasing cause of their being, and therefore his universal presence must be absolute, since that to which God's agency is not extending is simply not existing.<sup>35</sup>

Worth highlighting about God's universal activity is Aquinas' transcendent sense of its manner of operation. As question eight denies that God is actively present in spatial terms, so the next two questions, on divine immutability and eternity, forbid conceiving divine action as involving change or time. God is the constant, changeless agent operative in the world, and while the created effects of his agency vary over time and space (and are thus historical and existentially experienced as changing and diverse), his agency is simple and perfect. Being infinite, God does not even move to extend his power, which is already perfectly extended to all its effects (q. 9, a. 1). Likewise, God is universally operative in every moment, yet not successively, as that is another form of division incompatible with his simplicity (q. 10, aa. 1 & 4). Thus Aquinas teaches us to subordinate the conditions and categories of space and time to God's *esse*, for they are the effects of his creative action, not the conditions under which he must operate. In contrast to process thought, Aquinas sees universal change in the world not as an indication of a changing God, but of an immutable God who is operative universally.<sup>36</sup> The wonderful implication of all this is the central biblical truth that *as God is, so does God act for us*. No change between

<sup>34</sup> *ST I*, q. 8, a. 2, ad 1: "by contact of power."

<sup>35</sup> *ST I*, q. 8, a. 3: "Therefore, God is in all things by his power, inasmuch as all things are subject to his power; he is by his presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to his eyes; he is in all things by his essence, inasmuch as he is present to all as the cause of their being." (cf. q. 8, a. 4) Note, therefore, that creation's contact with God's agency is not just at its beginning, but continues as long as it exists.

<sup>36</sup> Process theology considers itself to be philosophically rigorous in its willingness to say God is subject to the same exact conditions that apply to our reality: "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse." (Whitehead, 1969, 405) As David Pailin explains, process metaphysics seeks "to determine the 'unconditionally necessary or eternal truths about existence' which therefore apply *a priori* to all possible (and hence all actual) modes of existence. If, then, to be real is necessarily to be constituted by a temporally-oriented process, this must be true of the divine reality." (246) Two points can be made in rebuttal, one philosophical and one theological. 1) This axiom that universal features of our reality apply equally to God cannot be consistently applied—e.g., dissolution or death occurs to everything that changes in our reality, yet process theologians exclude God from the possibility, let alone the eventual actuality, of non-existence. 2) This axiom cannot be reconciled with the Christian teaching that God is the Creator of all things, for any feature of our world that is seen as necessarily applying to God's being (like space and time) cannot then be the work of his hand, but instead become a condition of that making.

primordial and consequent states is found in God; no intermediary exists between the absolute God and the conditional world.<sup>37</sup>

In the second half of this opening treatise on the one God, concerning the divine operations (*ST I*, qq. 14-26), Aquinas expands the understanding of divine activity beyond the terms of general causality and into the more proper terms of the personal operations of one who is both intelligent and free. Of course, the hermeneutics of divine simplicity and fullness of perfection continue to apply; God can be said to be understanding and willing because these operations involve no composition (potentiality) or imperfection.<sup>38</sup> In the case of God, since he exists simply and perfectly, he understands and wills simply and perfectly. Indeed, in God alone to exist is to understand and to will. To express it in a more appropriate active tense: as God exists, so he understands, so he wills—necessarily, supremely, always, etc. No operations other than these two are comparable in simplicity and perfection as the act of existing itself.

It is because God is the act of existence itself that God perfectly knows himself with supreme comprehension and wills his own goodness with the awesome fullness of love. Regarding divine knowing, Aquinas' argument rests

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<sup>37</sup> It seems to me that the weakness of the Thomistic response to process thought that emphasizes the distinction between the entitive order of God's being and the intentional order of God's knowing and willing of the world is that it tends to assume, and perhaps even promote, this idea that if God is truly immanent and active in the world there must be a difference between God in himself and God for us. Yet even as it is theologically proper to acknowledge the reality of change and diversity in what God accomplishes for us in history, this does not mean that one must apply to God the changes and conditions of how things occur to the way God operates. Since time and space do not measure God, but he determines them, his reality and agency must not be understood according to their exigencies, but in accordance with his own.

<sup>38</sup> See the objections and responses to *ST I*, q. 14, aa. 1-5 & q. 19, aa. 1 & 2 which deny any potency, composition, external movement or imperfection to these divine operations; cf. also q. 14, a. 8 & q. 19, a. 4 which exclude a cause outside of God for these acts. Aquinas also insists that these operations are immanent so that, for simplicity's sake, their perfection lies in the act themselves, not in any external resultant term (q. 14, prologue). Similarly, note Aquinas' insistence that the act of understanding involves no inherent dualism of the mind knowing and object known: *intelligibile in actu est intellectus in actu* (*ST I*, q. 14, a. 2). Throughout his discussion of the divine operations it is crucial to realize that though Aquinas will liken these internal operations to *movements* (anticipating the discussion of the Trinitarian processions), yet they are not movements involving change over space or time (*ST I*, q. 14, a. 2, ad 2). They are dynamic in that activity is occurring, but said activity is without beginning, sequence or end. For a discussion of how Aquinas felt free enough to predicate 'movement' of the immutable God, see Dodds, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Motion of the Motionless God," 238-41.

on the truth that both the mind's power to know (strength of intellect) and the knowability of the object (depth of intelligibility) are directly proportional to their degree of immateriality or actuality (*ST I*, q. 14, a. 1). Being unsurpassable in act, the *ipsum esse subsistens* is thus simultaneously the pure power to comprehend and the pure intelligibility of what is comprehensible: God is perfect acuity of perfect lucidity.<sup>39</sup> Similar reasoning is used to characterize divine willing. Just as reality is the measure of a thing's truth and knowability, so also is being the measure of a thing's goodness and desirability.<sup>40</sup> Since there cannot be anything more full of being, truth or goodness than the God whose essence is subsistent existence, the divine will cannot love anything more than the reality of God, the perfect good perfectly known. And since the act of God excludes process, God's willing cannot be a desiring of a good yet to be acquired, but the loving of goodness already and always possessed as an ever *is* (*ST I*, q. 19, a. 1, ad 2). God's willing of his own goodness is God's restful act of delight in being God.

As a theologian of the Creator, Aquinas is equally concerned with explaining God's knowledge and willing of creation. His key insight is to root God's understanding and willing of the world within his act of understanding and willing himself.<sup>41</sup> Once again it is divine simplicity and perfection that frame Aquinas' theological conception of how God knows and wills the world. Both premises require that the world not be considered as another object adding to God's great wisdom or the willing of his own supremely resplendent goodness. If the world could be said to inform God's awareness and teach him what he otherwise would not already know, his knowledge would be composite and imperfect. Likewise, if the world could offer to God a desirable good not initially and more eminently found in God's own goodness, then the simplicity of the divine will would be divided between two loves and the goodness of God would be imperfect for being supplemented by something beyond him. God truly knows and wills (loves) the world, but does so in the act of knowing and willing

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<sup>39</sup> *ST I*, q. 14, aa. 2-4; *in Deo intellectus, et id quod intelligitur, et species intelligibilis, et ipsum intelligere, sunt omnino unum et idem.* (a. 4)

<sup>40</sup> The faculty of the will is concomitant with understanding since, as intellectual appetite or desire, 'to will' is to love the good as known (*ST I*, q. 19, a. 1). The interpenetration of the faculties of knowing and willing reflects the convertibility or direct proportionality of being, truth and goodness—i.e., what exists, is true and good, and conversely so (cf. *ST I*, q. 5, aa. 1-3; q. 16, a. 3; q. 79, a. 11, ad 2).

<sup>41</sup> *ST I*, q. 14, aa. 5 & 6; q. 19, aa. 2 & 5. "So as God understands things apart from himself by understanding his own essence, so he wills things apart from himself by willing his own goodness." (q. 19, a. 2, ad 2)

himself, for his essence contains all the intelligibility and goodness found by likeness in creation.<sup>42</sup> Denying that God's knowing and willing is in any way caused by the world not only maintains the necessity that God be the pure act which the universe requires as its ultimate cause, it enfolds God's creative knowing and willing of us into the supremely blissful act of God being God.

Aquinas realizes that divine knowledge and will cannot depend even in part upon a world that in its entirety depends upon God knowing and willing it into existence. Divine knowledge is not derived from the universe, but rather, like the artist, extends outward to produce it.<sup>43</sup> Because the object of his self-understanding is the fullness of perfection, in knowing himself God knows all there is to be known. For included in his knowing himself perfectly is God's knowing of himself as cause, and thus his knowing of all that he can effect. "His knowledge extends as far as his causality extends," which, because the proper effect of his essence is being, means that God properly knows all things that exist in any way, whether actually or possibly, down to the least minutiae.<sup>44</sup> Thus in his self-understanding God not only knows all that he actually creates, he knows

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<sup>42</sup> *ST I*, q. 14, a. 6: "As therefore the essence of God contains in itself all the perfection contained in the essence of any other being, and far more, God can know in Himself all of them with proper knowledge. For the nature proper to each thing consists in some degree of participation in the divine perfection. Now God could not be said to know Himself perfectly unless He knew all the ways in which His own perfection can be shared by others. Neither could He know the very nature of being perfectly, unless He knew all modes of being. Hence it is manifest that God knows all things with proper knowledge, in their distinction from each other." *ST I*, q. 19, a. 2: "Thus, he wills both himself to be, and other things to be; but himself as the end, and other things as ordained to that end; inasmuch as it befits the divine goodness that other things should be partakers therein." *ST I*, q. 19, a. 2, ad 2: "Hence, although God wills things apart from Himself only for the sake of the end, which is His own goodness, it does not follow that anything else moves His will, except His goodness. So, as He understands things apart from Himself by understanding His own essence, so He wills things apart from Himself by willing His own goodness."

<sup>43</sup> Charles Hartshorne has accused Aquinas of being inconsistent to the rules of analogous theological predication on this point, arguing that since analogy requires some likeness of our reality to the nature of God, then God's knowledge must in some way be dependent upon the world if our knowledge is going to reflect it in any way (*Man's Vision of God, and the Logic of Theism* [Hamden, NY: Archon Books, 1964], 235-36). Yet he seems to have reduced human knowledge to its acquisition, ignoring its retention and application. The created analogy Aquinas gives for divine knowing is not human learning, but the creative application of human knowledge in artistic production—e.g., the house built in accordance with the architect's originate idea for it (*ST I*, q. 14, a. 8).

<sup>44</sup> *ST I*, q. 14, a. 11; cf. q. 14, a. 5 and q. 25, a. 3

all that his boundless power could create (*ST I*, q. 14, aa. 9 & 12). To know *esse* essentially is to know whatever *is*, in all the senses and tenses "is" is used.

The operation of God's willing of creation reflects the same dynamism: what is properly willed is God's own goodness, yet in that most sublime act all that God wills other than himself is willed as well. "His goodness is the reason of his willing all other things." (q. 19, a. 4, ad 3) He freely wills the world in the natural necessity of delightfully willing his own goodness. Thus in parallel to how God's knowledge causes, and is not caused by, created things, God's will is the cause of the good found in created things, rather than created goods motivating the divine will to want them (q. 19, a. 5). His willing of creation in the willing of his own goodness ensures that creation is a free, gratuitous, and ordered act of God—*free* because God necessarily wills only his own goodness (q. 19, aa. 3 & 4); *gratuitous* because God, infinitely satisfied with his own goodness, seeks or needs nothing from creation (q. 20, a. 2); and *ordered* because God wills creation on account of, and as a manifestation of, his own goodness (q. 22, aa. 1 & 2). In this way Aquinas conceives of the bountiful love of God for the world not as a love that is attracted by created good, but as the love that causes the good which makes created things lovable.<sup>45</sup> It is pure gift-love, not acquisitional love.<sup>46</sup>

This theological conception of God's relation to this world is simply the working out of the implications of faith's claim that the world is God's creation, made from nothing by his power, in accordance with his wisdom, on account of his goodness. The divine-world relation is not mutual, precisely because such mutuality or reciprocity would mean that God is not really Creator. For example, if God were to come to know what will happen in the world only from the actual outcomes of contingent events, then the world could not spring forth from the Creator's knowledge and will. Part of it at least would proceed from his ignorance, and as a consequence the whole of it could not be grounded in his love. Or to say that God is affected by the world, and receives some good from the world that he otherwise did not eternally possess, is to radically change the reason for the world from the pure gratuity of the Creator to a utilitarian need on

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<sup>45</sup> *ST I*, q. 19, a. 2: "To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. Hence, since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists. Yet not as we love. Because since our will is not the cause of the goodness of things, but is moved by it as by its object, our love, whereby we will good to anything, is not the cause of its goodness; but conversely its goodness, whether real or imaginary, calls forth our love...."

<sup>46</sup> *ST I*, q. 44, a. 4: "But it does not belong to the first agent, who is agent only, to act for the acquisition of some end; he intends only to communicate his perfection, which is his goodness."

the part of God for some good (in process thought: divine actualization) he cannot possess otherwise. It also removes the end of creation out of God himself (where humanity comes to share and rest in unchanging divine life) into a never-ending process of incremental aggrandizement of the God-world reality. The act of creation cannot involve or lead to a mutual relation between God and the world without contradicting the very nature of such an act as one of absolute origination *and* ultimate culmination. Happily, given that it is only a God who is pure *act* of existence, understanding, loving, perfection that *can* create, the Creator-creature relation is truly dynamic even though it is not mutual.

To grasp how this relation is also dynamic on the side of creation—without making passive the God who is pure *act*—we must now see how this theology of God grounds and shapes Aquinas' understanding of all that proceeds out from and returns back to God.

### III. *Ipsum esse subsistens* – Foundation of the *Summa theologiae*

What impact does this theology of God have on the rest of the *Summa theologiae*, as the inquiry moves on from discussing God himself to things in their relation to God? Let me offer first a few general remarks that suggest its influence in various ways, before specifically elucidating one important point where this theology of God explicitly grounds the explanation Aquinas offers—that of the relation of creation to God in the third section of the *Prima pars*.

First of all, the theological characterization of God that Aquinas presents in the opening treatise is clearly determinative for how the whole *Summa theologiae* unfolds. We have noted that Aquinas orders all the subject matter in the *Summa theologiae* according to reality's relation to God as its beginning and end. This ordering of creation to God (and the corresponding arrangement of the theology) is possible only if God is *ipsum esse subsistens*. Only as absolutely simplicity and the fullness of perfection can God be the singular, ultimate origin of creation and the sole exemplar of the grand diversity within it. His simple-perfect essence is the simultaneous one and many the ancients realized the world required, without any of the further, necessary emanations postulated in neo-Platonism.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Because Aquinas identifies oneness, existence, goodness, understanding and willing in God as the divine essence itself, his theology can transcend the thought of Plotinus, whose supreme, the One, had to be conceived as above being, understanding and goodness because the latter were held to involve some dualism. Cf. *The Essential Plotinus: Representative Treatises from The Enneads*, trans. by Elmer O'Brien (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1975; facsimile reprint of The New American Library edition, 1964).

Likewise, at creation's other pole, it is due to his radical simplicity and perfection that God can be the end of all things, the one transcendent vanishing point to which the multiple and various trajectories inherent in all things converge. According to Aquinas, order is required when a diverse many proceed from one source,<sup>48</sup> and order is possible for the many and different only if all have a common, *transcendent* end.<sup>49</sup> The theology of God expounded in the opening treatise intends to show how God meets both conditions for the order of the world. With such a theology of God as origin and end, it makes eminent sense to structure one's theological exposition in the pattern of an *exitus et reditus*.

Besides being responsible for the structure of the whole theological presentation, this theology of God bears a general influence upon particular points of discussion within each part of the *Summa theologiae*. In the *Prima pars*, this theology of the one God is proper preparation for the treatise on the Trinity, for only such a radical simplicity that is never simplistic or monadic can adequately exclude a tritheistic understanding of the Trinity. Also, the application of the hermeneutic of simplicity/perfection to the operations of God is a necessary prelude to the discussion of the processions in the Trinity, which are likened to these two conscious operations.<sup>50</sup> In the *Prima secundae*, the discussion of grace presupposes an understanding of how God is the Act behind all created movements and perfections.<sup>51</sup> Grace can be seen as the perfection of

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<sup>48</sup> *ST* I, q. 42, a. 3: *ordo semper dicitur per comparationem ad aliquod principium*. "Order always has reference to some principle." Cf. *ST* I, q. 36, a. 2; II-II, q. 26, a. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *De potentia Dei*, 7, 9; *SCG* Bk. III, 64. For Aquinas, the order of the universe is twofold—the intrinsic order of its many parts to one another and to the whole, and the order of the whole to God (*ST* I, q. 103, a. 2, ad 3).

<sup>50</sup> Unless the operations of understanding and willing are immanent, simple (not requiring introduction of composite elements), and perfect in themselves (its good consisting in the very act itself), they could not be fitting analogies for the Trinitarian processions. Furthermore, Aquinas' theological reach to identify God with his acts of understanding and willing leads him to identify each Person of the Trinity with his personal processional act: the Father *is* the act of begetting, the Son *is* the act of being begotten, and the Holy Spirit *is* the act of love spirated.

<sup>51</sup> *ST*, I-II, q. 109, a. 1: "...all movements, both corporeal and spiritual, are reduced to the simple First Mover, Who is God. And hence no matter how perfect a corporeal or spiritual nature is supposed to be, it cannot proceed to its act unless it be moved by God; but this motion is according to the plan of His providence, and not by necessity of nature.... Now not only is every motion from God as from the First Mover, but all formal perfection is from Him as from the First Act. And thus the act of the intellect or of any created being whatsoever depends upon God in two ways: first,

nature, not the violation of human freedom, only with a theological understanding of created reality as dependent upon and directed by God who is pure act. In the *Tertia pars*, implicit behind Aquinas' understanding of the salvific agency of Christ is a comparison to the universal agency of God. As God is First, Exemplary, and Final Cause of creation, so Christ is the principle, form and goal of salvation.<sup>52</sup> Like the simplicity and perfection of the one God, there is an emphasis upon the indivisible unity and the fullness of perfection found in Christ. In both cases Aquinas knows that a principle must be both one and perfect if it is to be the true and universal agent of a work of such grand scale, be it creation or redemption. Finally, it is not a stretch to claim that the focus of Aquinas' sacramental theology upon the effective *operation* of these signs of grace arises from his initial concern to treat God as *act*.

Now let us turn to the treatise on creation, where Aquinas develops an understanding of creation in relation to God who is pure act. Here he again speaks of the relation of the world to its Creator, this time with a focus upon the created term, which is defined as the mirror opposite of the One who is *ipsum esse subsistens*. Aquinas grasps the nature of our reality theologically—that is, as fundamentally related to God its origin, exemplar, principal cause of its advancement, and final end. The truth of creation's relatedness to God is the foundational premise impacting every theological discussion of created realities which follow in the rest of the *Summa theologiae*.<sup>53</sup> Since this work follows the dynamic movement of creation from God to God by the Act that God is, understanding this relation is crucial for appreciating the profound understanding Aquinas has of God's engagement with creation. Consequently, we will look first at how Aquinas defines creation as a relation to God, and then draw out some of its theological and cosmological implications.

At the very beginning of the treatise on creation (*ST I*, q. 44, a. 1), Aquinas explicitly reminds the reader of the foundational point of his theology: God is *ipsum esse per se subsistens*. What grounds his theology of God will ground his theological understanding of the world. In marked contrast to God's subsistent existence, created reality is *participant esse*, or *esse per participationem*. When a

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inasmuch as it is from Him that it has the form whereby it acts; secondly, inasmuch as it is moved by Him to act.”

<sup>52</sup> Note Aquinas' use of first, efficient, exemplary and final causality in discussing Christ as the agent of our salvation, and his use of *participation* in explaining our share in his headship and work, in *ST III*, q. 3, a. 8; q. 8, aa. 1 & 5; q. 24, aa. 3 & 4; q. 48; q. 56, aa. 1 & 2; q. 57, a. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. by J. Murray and D. O'Connor (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 47-50.

thing possesses some characteristic that it does not have on account of its own essence, it must receive it by an act of participation in another being that does have it as proper to its own essence. Participation occurs by the patient sharing in what the agent is essentially. Aquinas likens the relation of the world having its existence from God to a hot iron bar having its heat from the fire of the forge—in both relations the dependent receives only by partaking in what essentially belongs to the diffusive agent alone. Just as the iron bar grows cold again when removed from the fire, so too would removing creation from contact with God's power mean the loss of what it partakes in—the very act of existing.<sup>54</sup> Since only that which is as simple and as perfect as God can be the essence of self-subsisting existence, the world exists only by continually receiving its actuality from God.

A relation of the participating subject to the diffusive agent is absolutely necessary for that which exists by participation. This relation cannot be limited merely to an initial act of origination, since participation requires an ongoing immersion in the essential agent's act. Hence Aquinas defines creation as a *relation: creatio in creatura non sit nisi relatio quaedam ad Creatorem, ut ad principium sui esse*.<sup>55</sup> As the foundational truth, this notion of relation indicates that *to exist* in our case is to necessarily and radically depend upon God: “it must be said that every being in any way existing is from God.” (q. 44, a. 1) This relation is fundamental and inalienable, always presupposed for all created reality, from the universe as a whole to the smallest particle in it. One can say that in a way similar to the truth that God is, and does not have, existence, so the universe is, and does not have, a relation to God.

In this understanding of the relation of the world to God, whose contrasting terms are *ipsum esse subsistens* and *esse per participationem*, the latter stands as pure recipient to the unceasing activity of former. The relation is not mutual, not a reciprocal exchange, for it involves the recipient taking on a share of what the agent already is. In such relations, it is also necessary that the participated reality be proper to the very essence of the diffusive agent, otherwise it simply could not be the agent of such an effect. Only the God who is the essence of existence can be the Creator diffusing existence. As fire heats by

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<sup>54</sup> *ST I*, q. 44, a. 1. Aquinas also uses the following analogy: “Now every creature may be compared to God, as the air is to the sun which enlightens it. For as the sun possesses light by its nature, and as the air is enlightened by sharing the sun's nature; so God alone is Being in virtue of His own Essence, since His Essence is His existence; whereas every creature has being by participation, so that its essence is not its existence.” (*ST I*, q. 104, a. 1)

<sup>55</sup> *ST I*, q. 45, a. 3: “creation in the creature is only a certain relation to the Creator as to the principle of its being.”

being naturally hot, so God creates by being what God naturally is, the essential act of existence. Since participation is a sharing in what is proper to the agent's essence, the act of diffusing is not an addendum to the agent's being, a supplemental role over and above what it is essentially. As fire does not change (neither becoming nor doing something else) when the iron begins to share in its heat, so too does God's creative act mean no change in what he naturally is when creation begins to partake in his existence. Thus the act of creating, since it is simply the act of existence extended to the created, does not involve an additional or supraessential activity on God's part. It is the participating recipient, not the diffusive agent, which is altogether different because of the relation.

As a consequence, one can see how the act of creating does not add anything to God's simplicity and perfection. He is not something else or something more by creating, since the act of creating involves nothing over and above his very act of being God. In contrast to many theologians who write about the God-world relation today, Aquinas does not posit change or augmentation to the Creator on account of his bringing the world into existence. And yet, there is in his position the same truth which contemporary theologians of a mutable God have great concern to affirm—namely that the act of creating is essential to God being God.<sup>56</sup> Creating is not an accidental divine act, neither lightly entered into nor superficially performed. And yet only Aquinas can uphold the freedom of God vis-à-vis creation without making the act accidental or whimsical. God creates by his own essence (which he is necessarily), yet he creates freely, not by necessity. This is the profoundest sense of love—to act with one's whole being, not because one must, but because one graciously commits one's whole self to doing so.

In addition to the theological implications of the relation of *esse per participationem* to *ipsum esse subsistens*, there are further cosmological inferences to make. Because the relation that creation is to God is absolute and necessary, it neither changes nor lessens over time. It is as true of creation's current and future states as it is was of its initiation. Aquinas does not say that creation in the creature is a relation as to the principle of its *becoming* or *beginning*, but "relation as to the principle of its *being*."<sup>57</sup> In line with this point, existence by participative relation to the Creator is as true of created effect as the created cause. That is to

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<sup>56</sup> By "essential" I mean 'by the very same essential act that God is God', not 'necessarily.' For a contemporary insistence on this point, see Fiddes, 71-75.

<sup>57</sup> *ST I*, q. 45, a. 3; cf. *ST I*, q. 104, a. 1 for Aquinas' explanation of the difference between the causing of the becoming of an effect and the causing of its being.

say, a thing's dependence upon a natural cause for its *becoming* does not mean it depends any less upon God's essential existence for its *being*. Indeed, the dependence of all things in this world upon prior causes for their existence is the universal indicator that all created things are composites of essence and an act of existence, and therefore in intimate need to participate in the fire of God's essential existence. While the form of an effect comes from the secondary, natural cause, the actual existence can only come from the First Agent who is the act of existence essentially.<sup>58</sup> All this is only to say that natural causation (as well as the scientific explanation natural causation makes possible) does not in any way supplant the causation of God the first cause. Instead of increasing the distance between created effects and the first cause, secondary causality only confirms the absolute bond between any created thing of participated existence and the God who is essential existence itself.

More than just the sustaining cause of all created existence, the God who contains all perfections as *ipsum esse subsistens* is also the exemplary cause of all created form, and the final cause of all things (*ST* I, q. 44, aa. 3 & 4). Here Aquinas repeats the themes first brought to light in the discussion of God's perfection/goodness (*ST* I, qq. 4-6) and ideas (q. 15), only this time it is to demonstrate not that God is truth and goodness itself but that creatures have their intelligibility and teleological goodness by participation in God's essence. In addition to the act of existence, the intelligibility (form) and goodness (end) of creatures depend upon God's essential act.<sup>59</sup> With his own essence as the 'template' for every pattern of intelligibility found in created things, God creates

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. *ST* I, q. 104, 1: "Every effect depends on its cause, so far as it is its cause. But we must observe that an agent may be the cause of the *becoming* of its effect, but not directly of its *being*.... Now it is clear that of two things in the same species one cannot directly cause the other's form as such, since it would then be the cause of its own form, which is essentially the same as the form of the other; but it can be the cause of this form for as much as it is in matter—in other words, it may be the cause that *this matter* receive *this form*. And this is to be the cause of *becoming*, as when man beget man, and fire cause fire." And ad 1: "*Being* naturally results from the form of a creature, given the influence of divine action." Note that because created causes are insufficient on their own to cause the existence of their effects, the theological option of deism—a God whose activity is restricted to merely an act of world origination—is fundamentally impossible for a world containing change. This is a case when the metaphysics rightly understood prevents a false theological conclusion drawn from the scientific understanding of nature.

<sup>59</sup> "But every creature has its own proper species, according to which it participates in some degree in likeness to the divine essence." (*ST* I, q. 15, a. 2) "Now it is manifest that in the whole created universe there is not a good which is not such by participation." (*ST* I, q. 103, a. 2)

a great diversity of kinds of beings so that the universe as a whole can best suggest the depth and breadth of God's own simple perfection.<sup>60</sup> This wide-scale diversity of forms given by God to beautify the universe in turn opens up, through the dynamism of natural causality, to the pursuit of greater perfections or further ends. As stated previously, the Good that God is essentially is the cause of the goodness or desirability of the result pursued in created operations, so that Aquinas can dare to say that every creature seeks God simply in acting to attain that which it naturally desires as the fulfillment of its form.<sup>61</sup> Thus, through the initial perfection of a thing (its form), and all the subsequent perfections it acquires (supplemental goodness), a creature relates to God as its exemplar and end. There is no being, no intelligibility, no good in the universe that is not from, by and for (unto) God as participated.

There is still one further aspect of creation's relation to God, one which above all else shows the active engagement of God with his creation. As pure Act, God is the universal agent of all action in creation (*ST I*, q. 104, a. 5). By God's act all creatures are moved to operate because he is the Cause of all causality; his Godness is the 'Event' underlying all events in the world. In contrast to a current tendency to think that potential agents can be self-actualizing, Aquinas holds that every single potency, including the potency to act, requires an agent in act to bring it to realization. Because all created causes are agents that come to act, they can reach the state of actually causing only by being brought there by another already in act. Only the one who is *ipsum esse subsistens* is always in act, and thus God alone is universal cause ultimately bringing all potential agents to their act. Within creation, operation—i.e., the state of actually causing—is a participated reality, requiring a sharing in the One who is always in act. *Et ideo quantumcumque natura aliqua corporalis vel spiritualis ponatur perfecta, non potest in suum actum procedere nisi moveatur a Deo.*<sup>62</sup> God

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<sup>60</sup> *ST I*, q. 47, a. 1; cf. *ST I*, q. 22, a. 4.

<sup>61</sup> *ST I*, q. 6, a. 1, ad 2: "All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many similitudes of the divine being." *ST I*, q. 44, a. 4, ad 3: "All things desire God as their end, when they desire some good thing, whether this desire be intellectual, sensible, or natural (i.e. without knowledge), because nothing is good and desirable except forasmuch as it participates in the likeness to God." Cf. *ST I*, q. 103, a. 2.

<sup>62</sup> *ST I-II*, q. 109, a. 1: "Hence, no matter how perfect a corporeal or spiritual nature is supposed to be, it cannot proceed to its act unless it is moved by God."

moves every creature to act in accordance with its own nature. In our case, he moves us to know and to will.<sup>63</sup>

To fully explain how God as pure Act causes the integral acts of creatures is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>64</sup> A warning can be given, though, about the danger of trying to conceive it imaginatively as some kind of divine 'push' or 'charge' energizing all created causes. In fact, the universal causality of God as the pure Act actualizing creation is not just a matter of effective or efficient causality, for it presupposes and involves all the distinct dimensions of the creature's participative relation to God discussed above: God as the sustaining cause of all created existence, the exemplary cause of all created forms, the final cause of all ends pursued. Furthermore, that God's causality is universal does not mean that it is exclusive—crowding out the genuinely effective action of the natural cause. Since in the act of creating God intends to diffuse his goodness by a broad and rich participation, God acts to make creatures true causes of their effects because the highest form of imitation of the One who acts for the good of others is to make them to be a cause of another's good. Aquinas' affirmation of the universal reach of God's causation is not to the detriment of created causality, but to uphold its integrity by relating it to its ultimate cause.

Thus God gives to the world not only its existence, order, goodness and beauty, but even gives all causes their acts by which they fulfill their potential and contribute to the world's completion. Nothing in the world is or acts apart

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<sup>63</sup> What is true in terms of Aquinas' cosmology is also true of his anthropology: God acts so that the human person can act, intelligently and freely. God is the first, exemplary and final cause of all our acts of understanding the true (*ST I*, q. 79, aa. 2-4; q. 105, a. 3) and willing the good (*ST I*, q. 83, a. 1; q. 105, a. 4). Both operations are participations in the divine operations of understanding and willing that God is. This double active participation is perfected through grace (faith and charity) and glory (beatific vision), until men and women share most profoundly in the mysterious life of God.

<sup>64</sup> For a more detailed explanation on divine universal agency, see Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, eds. [*Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 1] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), I-4: "St Thomas's Theory of Operation," pp. 66-93. Also requiring further explanation that cannot be supplied here is how the universal agency of God in no way implies divine causality of evil (cf. *ST I*, q. 49). Aquinas attributes to God causal responsibility only of what exists, is true, and is good. Evil, as a privation of proper good and a violation of the order of the universe to God, is not itself a thing or act which as such requires divine exemplarity or agency. Evil is rather the corruption of a thing or the disorder of an act. As the privation of being, it does not have any cause *per se*, let alone the *per se* cause of existence itself (cf. *ST I*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2; q. 19, a. 9).

from God, the fundamental *a priori* of creation. God is the ultimate 'condition for the very possibility of' all things in the universe, precisely because he is *ipsum esse subsistens*. While contemporary theologians have underscored the absolute transcendence of Aquinas' theology God, they have overlooked the radical immanence of this God. But when understood correctly, the 'metaphysically pure' attributes of divine simplicity and perfection (as well as immutability, infinity and the like) are as crucial for affirming the intimate, active presence of God in creation as they are for affirming God's transcendent otherness over the world. Rightly understood, these attributes do not imply a God too remote to care for or act in the world, but rather that divine concern and action—which are proper to him because he is perfect act—occur in a transcendent manner incomparable to any agency found in the world. Since God transcends space and time, his transcendence cannot be an infinite distance from creation; since he transcends change, the dynamism of his agency is not arrested in a static immobility for being altogether immutable.

Here is where the notion of participation proves so valuable, for by employing it Aquinas can convey the radically active presence of God in creation without conceiving it in a manner that collapses divine agency into the categories and confines of natural causation or processes. Creation is placed within God's dynamics, related to God as God is, rather than God made to fit the categories of the world. Even as participation expresses the immersion of creation in God's act, it also allows for the proper 'distance' of transcendence between God and the world—not in terms of special remoteness but in terms of non-identity or reciprocity. Participation requires that each term of the relation be of an entirely different "order": the participating in relation to the essential. Creation, because every perfection it possesses is by a thoroughgoing sharing, cannot be equivalent in any way to God, who is what he is by his own essence. Participation keeps the order of created reality distinct from the order of divine being, yet simultaneously expresses the dependent, inseparable, immersed relation of creation to God, as well as the active, transcendentally immanent agency of God on behalf of the world. At the same time the notion provides a theological explanation of divine action in the world that in no way interferes with or compromises the natural causality which science endeavors to explain without reference to supernatural causes. The integrity of natural causality is preserved, even as it is theologically understood to depend upon God's universal action, not his non-interference or inactivity. The world is suffused with the active presence of God, and yet not by that presence prevented from being itself and acting according to its own integrity.

#### IV. Conclusion

It is a hallmark of his theology that Aquinas understands created things with a genuine respect of and attentiveness to their own proper natural integrity. Yet he also operates with a theological perspective that understands created reality as a multifaceted real relation to God, the originating and sustaining principle of its existence, the type of its intelligibility, the cause of its causal action, and the ultimate goal of its perfection. This relation is one of created participation in the divine essence of subsistent existence, which implies that God is intimately involved in creation, and creation actively immersed in the divine. To appreciate the profundity of this theological cosmology one must understand and appreciate Aquinas' theology of God. Admittedly this means grappling with some subtle and demanding philosophical thinking that loses the immediacy of the biblical God by abandoning the stage of salvation history. And at first blush his use of Aristotelian metaphysics can seem to conclude to a self-satisfied god remotely indifferent to the world. Yet his theology of the one God is actually faithful to the biblical revelation of God as *Yahweh*, since it rests entirely upon the judgment that God must be *ipsum esse subsistens* if this conditional world is to exist at all. Working out the implications of the doctrine of creation, Aquinas uses metaphysics to depict God in active relation to the world without reducing God's mystery to that relation, nor reducing the dynamics of that relation to those found in the world. After all, space and time are God's creation, not his categories. God is fully divine without the world, and yet is his own eternal act on behalf of the world. In this way, God's ineffably exalted transcendence, and his profoundly attentive and active immanence, are identical in him as one simple and perfect *act*. God *is*, and God is the diffusive 'Fire' at the heart of all created things: the living Fire of the world's birth, the powerful Fire driving its advance, and the glorious Fire of its ultimate destiny.

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