

## *REVIEW*

### THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN: ON MIXED RELATIONS IN AQUINAS

“The Divine and the Human” is an essay that sets out to explain how Thomas Aquinas preserves the immutability of God despite the complicated reality of the incarnation. To do so, Aristotle’s categories of ‘real’ relations and ‘relations of reason’ are deployed to explain how the two natures of Christ relate to each other. The author of this essay explains the argument in four sections. The first section is a description of Aristotelian thought. Here, the author explains that a mutual, ‘real’ relation exists between two objects when they mutually inhere within each other. However, a relation should be called mixed or a ‘relation of reason’ when only one of the two objects inheres within the other (i.e. what is known inheres in the knower, but not vice-versa). The second section picks up from the explanation of a ‘relation of reason’ and applies it to God’s act of creation. Therefore, it can be said that, in God’s act of creation, man ‘really’ relates to God because the impetus of man’s existence is in God’s action (i.e., man’s existence depends on God) However, God only relates to man in a ‘relation of reason’ because He does not depend on mankind for his existence or definition. The third section of this essay moves into the effect that this construal of ‘relating’ has upon Christology. By applying a ‘relation of reason’ to the person of Christ, Aquinas explains how the humanity of Christ has a ‘real,’ dependent relationship upon the divinity of Christ which relates to his humanity solely by ‘reason’ (meaning Christ’s divinity doesn’t depend upon his humanity). In the fourth and final section, the author explains why this is an important clarification for the person of Christ: it preserves God’s immutability even in the act of incarnating. Though Christ put on flesh and bore creation (which implies a moment of change) this construal of the relationship between his two natures locates all existential change within Christ’s humanity, thereby keeping his divinity immutable.

“The Divine and the Human” is a strong essay written in clear language, with a great structure, good pacing, and a concise objective and execution. One of the strongest parts of its argument is the attempt to show how a single concept (philosophical relations) travels through three stages before arriving at a specific Christological conclusion. By tracing the thought from Aristotle, to Aquinas, to Christ, and finally to immutability, the reader is brought along on a journey of theological development. This encourages agreement with the essay's conclusion and provides a sense of completeness and closure.

That being said, this review proposes several points of critique that may help strengthen the essay. First of all, the section titled “Aristotelian Relations” feels slightly rushed, and seems to suffer from a lack of words. Though the term ‘accident’ is common in Aristotelian thought, a definition of it would be helpful for the clarity of this section. Furthermore, after explaining that a ‘relation’ is neither an actual entity nor a type of bridge between two objects, this section proceeds to describe how an object can be “the subject of the relation.”<sup>1</sup> This seems to set up ‘the relation’ as an entity in itself which undermines the previous statement. On the other hand, the author may have meant ‘subject’ in the grammatical sense which, if that is the case, it is not explained and creates confusion. This section would either benefit from more explanation of the philosophical definitions involved, or it should rely primarily on tangible examples to get the point across. Secondly, the brevity of the essay is a major strength in the sense that it quickly and succinctly explains a complex theological idea in a few pages. However, it becomes a weakness when the essay presents no engagement with adverse arguments or further implications of the doctrine of mixed relations. For example, what are the Christological implications of this relational division between the two natures of Christ? If Christ’s humanity relies entirely upon his divinity, how can this be called a true union? If Christ’s divinity does not relate to his humanity in a way that can be informed and affected by it, does Christ’s divinity experience life in the same manner as his humanity? Does his divinity experience suffering and temptation in the same sense? Follow this line of thought forward to the crucifixion. Does Christ’s divinity die? Or only his humanity? What about the resurrection? Death and resurrection would be correctly called ‘change,’ so does Jesus (in both his natures) die and resurrect? Or does the defense of immutability prevent such an idea? These are the questions that stem from such a Christological explanation, and some type of engagement with them by this essay would have been beneficial (though to do so with such a limited word count would be quite difficult). These rhetorical questions that stem from Aquinas’ foray into the mystery of the incarnation show that it may indeed prove to be more harmful to posit something so definite about the convergence of transcendent otherness and immanent mankind.

In conclusion, “The Divine and the Human” offers a summary of Aquinas’ employment of Aristotelian categories in order to describe the relations of Christ’s divinity and humanity. Aquinas

---

<sup>1</sup> “The Divine and the Human,” 2.

does so to preserve the immutability of God so that one is not forced to admit that God ‘changes’ when he incarnates. This paper does a great job describing Aquinas’ thought in a broad sense, yet it offers little in the realms of the further implications of this Christology, discussion of why immutability must be preserved, or how this at once sheds light on the mystery of the incarnation, yet still “emphasizes the mystery of it.”<sup>2</sup> To round out this review, a turn to the words of St. Gregory of Nazianzus may prove comforting when approaching the incarnational mystery:

No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence. As for a discovery some time in the future, let those who have a mind to it research and speculate. The discovery will take place, so my reason tells me, when this God-like, divine thing, I mean our mind and reason, mingles with its kin, when the copy returns to the pattern it now longs after. This seems to me to be the meaning of the great dictum that we shall, in time to come, “know even as we are known.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> “The Divine and the Human,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus. *Oration 28.17*. In *On God and Christ*. Crestwood NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002, 50.