INCARNATION

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Introduction

According to Christian belief, Jesus Christ is a divine person who became "incarnate," i.e., who became human. A key event in the second act of the drama of creation and redemption, the incarnation could not have failed to interest Aquinas, and he discusses it in a number of places. A proper understanding of what he thought about it is thus part of any complete understanding of his work. It is, furthermore, a window into his ideas on a variety of other topics: God, human nature, language, substance, and so on. Finally, it forces us to come to grips with what is at stake in acknowledging that Aquinas was not only a philosopher but a theologian as well.

The incarnation as a properly theological problem

The claim that God became human is, or should be, a surprising one. As a matter of fact, Aquinas thinks it cannot be known by human reason operating alone. Instead, it is revealed by God through Scripture as authoritatively interpreted by the Church. As Aquinas explains, appeal to the authority of revelation establishes *that* something is the case, but it does not provide an understanding of *how* it is so.[1] The theologian's job is to accept what is revealed, an acceptance called "faith," and then to reflect on it in as satisfactory a way as possible by drawing out implications, making comparisons between revealed realities and more familiar things, and so

on. This task might even involve modifying philosophical categories and tools to make room for possibilities that show themselves only in theological contexts. There is, to be sure, a point beyond which the human intellect cannot go, at least in this life.[2] But even once that point has been reached, the quest for understanding need not be abandoned altogether: it will at least be possible to give an intelligent characterization of where our understanding falls short.

On the one hand, the attempt to make revelation the basis of theological inquiry is far from incoherent. If there is a God at all, it is to be expected that detailed information about him will be very hard for humans to acquire, but also to be expected that, if he so chooses, God can reveal himself. On the other hand, it cannot be demonstrated that revelation actually has taken place, and some readers of Aquinas will in fact reject the notion of divine revelation outright. For any reader, however, it would be a mistake to expect Aquinas to set out a theory of the incarnation (or of any properly theological topic) that in no way relies on what he takes to be revelation or that resolves all difficulties in a way that is entirely satisfying to reason apart from revelation. Aquinas would consider such attempts to be at once futile and presumptuous.

Some basic Thomistic claims about the incarnation

Christians believe that God wills the salvation of human beings from sin and that his plan to bring this about involves the second person of the Trinity's becoming human and living out a true human life, a life that leads to his atoning death, resurrection from the dead, and further salvific actions such as the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ, then, is a divine person, the second person of the Trinity and the eternal Word of the Father, who has become human. After disputes lasting generations, this understanding of Christ was formulated in A.D. 451 by the Council of Chalcedon as the teaching that Christ is one person existing in two natures, divinity and

humanity. (Since the word "hypostasis" can usually be used interchangeably with the word "person" in these debates, the union of natures resulting from the incarnation is often called the "hypostatic union.")

Now the Chalcedonian definition did not bring all discussion to an end; more debates and councils brought further refinements, and the history of these councils and their after-effects is complicated. It is safe to say, however, that essentially Chalcedonian ideas served as the context within which Aquinas and his contemporaries worked. In that context, the two most important ideas are nature and person. For present purposes let us jump straight to Aquinas's understanding of them.

The nature or essence[3] of something is what corresponds to its real definition.[4] A human being, for example, is defined as a rational animal, and that is because its nature or essence is to be just such an entity. And it is worth noting that what Aquinas means by "nature" or "essence" is something narrower than what contemporary analytic philosophers are likely to mean by "essence"; the essential attributes of a thing for Aquinas are not the same as the attributes that the thing cannot exist without. Aquinas holds that something might have attributes without which it cannot exist but which are nonetheless not essential to it—these "flow from" the essence rather than forming part of it.[5]

With regard to the concept "person," Aquinas follows Boethius, who sets out two conditions: a person must be an individual substance (hypostasis, supposit), and it must have a rational nature. To understand the first condition, consider the horse Bucephalus. Bucephalus exists independently, or "subsists": it is not part of his nature to inhere in, or belong to, anything else. By contrast, his accidents depend on him, exist in him, inhere in him, and it is part of their nature to do so.[6] So Bucephalus is an individual substance, but is he a person? He is not,

because his nature, horseness, is not a rational one. Socrates, however, also a substance, does have a rational nature, humanity, and for that reason he is not just an ordinary substance or supposit, but a person.[7]

So when Aquinas says that Christ is one person, he means that Christ is one individual rational substance. The incarnation is not a relationship between two rational substances—for example, a relationship by which the Word of God makes Jesus holy. Rather, Christ's humanity is a constituent of the one rational supposit that Christ is. And when Aquinas says that Christ has two natures, he means that there are two kinds of which we could say that Christ is a substance of that kind: if for a moment we make so bold as to speak of defining God, we could say that Christ fits the real definition of God and the real definition of a human being. Humanity is not joined to Christ in a way that results in a merging or blending of humanity and divinity—the two natures remain distinct.[8] Not that they are on a completely equal footing, to be sure: Christ had his divine nature from eternity, and only at a certain point in the world's history did he assume a human nature.

More should be said about Christ's humanity. Aquinas thinks that Christ could have had every possible human perfection, and his list of these is a generous one: in principle, Christ could have known everything a human can know, could have been free of all temptation and all passions, could have been free of every bodily ailment, and so on. Being perfectly human, in short, is not inconsistent with being human. In fact, however, Aquinas attributes only some of these perfections to Christ, depending on whether possessing them or not possessing them furthers his salvific mission.[9]

Christ's human knowledge was as extensive as human knowledge could be: he had the beatific vision, full infused knowledge, and full acquired knowledge.[10] Of his possession of the

beatific vision, Aquinas notes that this enabled Christ to be, in virtue of his humanity, the source of truth for other humans.[11] He also had a human will and the ability to perform authentically human actions.[12]

At the same time, Aquinas is clear that Christ did have imperfections or defects both of body and of soul. Bodily defects are usually imposed, as a penalty for sin; this does not apply to Christ, of course. He accepted such defects willingly, as part of his salvific mission. In particular, Aquinas says that Christ took on bodily defects for three reasons: to be able to atone for our sins by taking our punishment upon himself, to make his human nature more believable, and to be able to provide us with an example of patience in the face of suffering.[13] In addition to these defects of body, Christ took on defects of soul; for example, he was liable to physical pain and sorrow. Aquinas is careful to note that the way in which Christ suffered from such defects was different from the way in which we suffer from them: in our case, defects of soul often interfere with the exercise of reason and lead to sin, but in Christ's case they did not.[14]

Aquinas intends what he says about Christ's human defects, and what he says about Christ's human perfections, to be consistent with the central claim that Christ has a human soul and a human body, with human mental and physical powers that allow him to perform true human acts. Mark 10.13-16 portrays Christ as embracing young children. His decision to embrace them was on Aquinas's understanding a real human decision; the arms with which he embraced them were real human arms, animated by a real human soul and folded around the children in a real human greeting. Christ really was (and is) a man, a human being.

But who—that is, *which person*—is Christ? Or to put the question in linguistic terms, which person does the expression "Christ" stand for? It stands for the very same person that expressions like "the Word" or "the Son of God" or "the second person of the Trinity" stand for,

and also for the very same person that "Jesus" stands for.[15] The human being at issue is not a different person from the second person of the Trinity but rather the very same person. Christ is one divine-and-human person whose humanity retains its own powers while serving as an instrument of the divinity. Thus for Aquinas it is the one Christ who, in one act, both touches a leper by virtue of his human power and heals him by virtue of his divine power.[16]

In line with a long tradition, Aquinas would say that a good test of whether one has correct views in Christology is whether one accepts the "communication of idioms," i.e., the sharing of properties. One must be willing to say not only that the Word of God created the stars but also that Jesus created the stars; likewise, one must be willing to say not only that Jesus suffered on the cross but also that the Word of God suffered on the cross. "The Word" and "Jesus" are two names for one person who both created and suffered. At the same time, one must know when and how to qualify such claims when necessary, lest misunderstandings arise; the Word suffers on the cross not in virtue of his divinity, but rather in virtue of his humanity.[17]

A difficult issue

So far I have simply laid out some of the many claims that Aquinas makes about the incarnation, without much attempt to indicate where difficulties arise or how Aquinas might address them. In the remainder of this article, I will focus by way of example on one difficult topic. The goal, besides exploring more of Aquinas's views, will be to provide an example of how Thomas uses and adapts philosophical ideas in carrying out his Christological investigations.

Let us begin by briefly stepping back from Christ's humanity and talking instead about Socrates'. Socrates' human nature is a principle in virtue of which he exists in a certain way, as an entity of a certain sort—namely, as a human being.[18] But it is not only for being an entity of a

certain sort that he is dependent on having a human nature—he is also dependent on having a human nature for the simple fact that he exists at all, as an individual substance or supposit of any sort.[19] In other words, he depends on his human nature not only for being such-and-such a sort of thing but also for what Aquinas would call his "simple" or "absolute" existence. Without his humanity, Socrates would not only fail to be human, he would fail to be anything at all—he would simply not exist.[20] Let us say henceforth that Socrates' human nature is not only a "humanizing" nature but also a "supposit-supporting" nature.

Now is what is true of Socrates' human nature true of every instance of human nature? If we were to say "yes," implying that Christ's human nature too is not only humanizing but also supposit-supporting, then we would run into problems. Given that there is only one supposit in Christ and that this supposit is the second person of the Trinity, we would be committed to saying that Christ's human nature is supposit-supporting for a divine supposit, i.e., that a divine supposit depends for its absolute existence on being human. Obviously Aquinas is not going to take this route.

So it seems necessary to answer "no," i.e., to say that there can be a human nature that is humanizing but not supposit-supporting. And in fact this is just what Aquinas holds:

> On the basis of his human nature, the Son of God does not exist absolutely . . . but only as a human being.[21]

The person or supposit of the Son of God is not supported by Christ's human nature. His humanity is a principle in virtue of which he is human as well as divine, but not a principle in virtue of which he exists as opposed to not existing at all. Indeed, there is no supposit or person that depends for its absolute existence on Christ's humanity.

It might sound wrong to say that Christ's humanity does not account for the absolute existence of any supposit or person. Saying so seems to imply that his human nature is somehow

lacking in metaphysical dignity. Worse, it might seem to imply a sheer impossibility, namely, that something could be a human nature and yet not be that on which the absolute existence of a person depends.[22]

Concerning the dignity of Christ's human nature, Aquinas says that "it is more dignified for something to exist in something else that is of greater dignity than for it to exist through itself."[23] To forgo a lower role (being responsible for the existence of a supposit) for the sake of a higher one (being a constituent of a divine-human supposit) is no loss—in fact, it is gain.

Concerning the second and deeper worry, i.e., the worry about whether it is even possible for there to be a human nature that is humanizing but not supposit-supporting, Aquinas clearly thinks that it is possible, so long as the nature exists in some pre-existing supposit (it couldn't exist in no supposit at all). His idea seems to be that it is not a necessary condition of something's being a human nature that it *actually* be a principle upon which a supposit depends for its absolute existence—what is necessary is only that it be the sort of reality to which it is natural to have a supposit thus dependent upon it. This is still true of Christ's human nature, even though it is not supposit-supporting in actual fact.

The same point can be made from the complementary perspective, that of the supposit rather than that of the nature. Everything that possesses a human nature must have absolute existence as a supposit, i.e., every human being must be a supposit. But from this it does not follow that everything that possesses a human nature must have absolute existence as a supposit *in virtue of possessing that nature.* It might, as in Christ's case, have it in virtue of possessing some other nature. Before the Son became human, he was already subsistent, already a supposit, and therefore becoming subsistent was not possible for him. Christ's human nature was given no opportunity to be supposit-supporting; from the very first it existed only as a constituent of a

supposit that was, so to speak, already supported. But of course that does not mean that Christ's human nature does nothing—before the incarnation, the Son was not human, and Christ's human nature serves for him precisely as a humanizing principle, a principle in virtue of which he is not only divine but human as well. Although in the incarnation the Son does not come to be a supposit or person, he does come to be human, to be corporeal and animate in a fully and properly human way.

To say that there can be a human nature that is humanizing but not supposit-supporting is certainly to deviate from the usual way of thinking. Such a deviation might be looked upon as a valuable insight, or it might be looked upon as a desperate *ad hoc* maneuver. Whether one thinks of it as desperate or not depends, in large part, on whether one thinks it rational to adopt Aquinas's faith-based point of view in the first place. As for its being *ad hoc*, however, there is a sense in which Aquinas would gladly agree: he is explicit about the fact that the incarnation is a unique case, and so in a sense an *ad hoc* solution is just what one should expect.[24] As noted at the outset, theology in Aquinas's understanding must not only employ philosophical notions but modify them when necessary.[25]

NOTES

[1] QQ 4, q.9, a.3, response.

[2] See for example ST 1a, q.12, aa.12-13.

[3] For "essence" and other synonyms of "nature," see for example DEE c.1.

[4] See for example In Sent 3, d.5, q.1, a.2; SCG 4, c.35; QDP q.9, a.1, response; QDU a.1; ST 3a, q.2, a.1.

[5] For helpful remarks on some of Aquinas's views here, see Matthew J. Kelly (1976),

"'Subject,' 'Substance,' and 'Accident' in St. Thomas," *The New Scholasticism* 50, 232-36. For a partial attempt to recapture the same sort of approach in a contemporary framework, see Michael Gorman (2005), "The Essential and the Accidental," *Ratio* 18, 276-89.

[6] That last claim would need to be qualified in light of Aquinas's understanding of transubstantiation, but such concerns lie beyond the scope of this paper.

[7] See In Sent 3, d.5, q.1, a.3; In Sent 3, d.6, q.1, a.1, qa.1, response; QDP q.9, aa.1-2; QDU aa.1-2; ST 1a, q.29, aa.1-2; ST 3a, q.2, aa.2-3. Lafont has laid stress on the fact that for Aquinas the divine persons are subsisting relations (e.g., ST 1a, q.28, a.2), and he thinks that the Boethian notion of person as rational substance is not always adequate for Christological purposes. The particular problems that Lafont is concerned with are not at issue here, however, so the point will not be pursued further. See Ghislain Lafont (1969), *Peut-on connaître Dieu en Jésus Christ?* (Paris: Cerf), 107-157. For further complications, see John Wippel (2000), *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press), 228-37.

[8] ST 3a, q.2, aa.1-3; see also SCG 4, c.41; QDU, aa.1-2.

[9] A good discussion of Aquinas on Christ's human nature from just this perspective can be found in Marilyn McCord Adams (1999), *What Sort of Human Nature? Medieval Philosophy and the Systematics of Christology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press), 49-68.

[10] For an overview of Christ's human knowledge, see ST 3a, q.9. For details on Christ's possession of the beatific vision, see ST 3a, q.10; for details on his infused knowledge, see ST 3a, q.11; for details on his acquired knowledge, see ST 3a, q.12.

[11] See ST 3a, q.9, a.2.

[12] See ST 3a, qq.18-19.

[13] ST 3a, q.14, a.1; for more on Christ's bodily defects, see the whole of ST 3a, q.14.

[14] ST 3a, q.15, a.4; for more on Christ's sinlessness, see ST 3a, q.15, aa.1-2; for physical pain, see ST 3a, q.15, a.5; for sorrow, see ST 3a, q.15, a.6.

[15] For a sustained reflection on some of the linguistic issues concerning the incarnation, and on the metaphysical issues that lie behind them, see Henk J. M. Schoot (1993), *Christ the 'Name' of God: Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ* (Leuven: Peeters).

[16] ST 3a, q.19, a.1, ad5; see also ST 3a, q.18, a.1, ad2.

[17] See ST 3a, q.16.

[18] See for example DEE c.1.

[19] See for example QDU a.4.

[20] Here it is worth comparing Socrates's humanity with one of his accidental forms: in virtue of his whiteness, Socrates is the sort of thing that is white, but he doesn't depend on his whiteness for his absolute existence (cf. QDU a.4).

[21] "Non enim ex natura humana habet Filius Dei quod sit simpliciter…sed solum quod sit homo" (ST 3a, q.3, a.1, ad3), my translation. See also In Sent 3, d.6, q.1, a.1, qa.4, ad1. QDU a.1, ad15, as it appears in the Marietti edition, seems to undermine or even contradict the idea that Christ is humanized by his human nature, but the text of that edition is flawed there: see Michael Gorman (2000), "Christ as Composite According to Aquinas," *Traditio* 55, 143-57, p.150n12. For a few more relevant passages, not all of them easy to interpret, see In Sent 3, d.10, q.1, a.2, qa.1, ad1-2; In Sent 3, d.10, q.1, a.2, qa.2, ad1; In Sent 3, d.12, q.1, a.1, ad2; ST 3a, q.2, a.2, ad2; ST 3a, q.2, a.3, ad3; ST 3a, q.16, a.6, ad1; ST 3a, q.16, a.12, response, ad1.

[22] Here it is worth mentioning a distinct but related problem. According to Aquinas's canonical way of speaking, a human nature is but one principle of a human being, and human beings are not identical to their natures. From this perspective it makes sense to consider the possibility that Christ's human nature is unique inasmuch as it fails to *support* a human supposit, but it does not make sense to consider the possibility that Christ's human nature is unique inasmuch as it fails to *be* a human supposit—such is true of every human nature. But there is another way of using the expression "human nature," also found in Aquinas, in accordance with which it might indeed make sense to say that ordinary human natures are human persons but that Christ's human nature, uniquely, is not. If we did say that, then we would face the analogous difficulty of explaining how it could be true at all, and how it could be true without Christ's human nature being inadequate in some way. For discussion, see for example Othmar Schweizer (1957), *Person und Hypostatische Union bei Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg [Schweiz], Universitätsverlag); Michael Gorman (2000), "Uses of the Person-Nature Distinction in Thomas's Christology," *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 67, 58-79; Richard Cross (2002), *The Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 246-56; Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 409-410. Although I

do not think that Aquinas's views on this problem have yet received a fully adequate interpretation, I do think it safe to say that the right path is the one laid out by Schweizer and Stump.

[23] "Dignius autem est alicui quod existat in aliquo se digniori, quam quod existat per se" (ST 3a, q.2, a.2, ad2), my translation.

[24] For example, in QDU a.3, response, Aquinas notes that in the case of the Trinity there is one nature with three supposits, and in the case of the incarnation two natures with only one supposit, but that in every other case, the correspondence between natures and supposits is one-to-one. See also ST 3a, q.2, a.6, ad1, where Aquinas quotes John Damascene to the effect that the incarnation is not wholly like anything else.

[25] I would like to thank Anne-Marie Gorman and Thomas Weinandy for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.