



## Aquinas on Relations: A Topic Which Aquinas Himself Perceives as Foundational to Theology

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### Abstract

Fundamental to theology is the ordering of all things to God, yet this ordering is directly tied to the topic of relation. Thus, while the category of relation is inherited by Aquinas from ancient philosophy, it mostly shows up in Aquinas' theological treatments. This paper will look specifically at the distinction between God and creatures as understood through Aquinas' use of mixed relations. It will provide an expository treatment of Aquinas' use of mixed relation in attempt to bridge his philosophy and theology while seeking to encourage and aide others to more actively incorporate the category of relation in theological work, as Aquinas himself did.

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### Keywords

mixed relation • Thomistic theology • Creator • creature • accident

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Aquinas wrote at length about relations in God and creation. While theologically the discussion of relations may seem like a technical dissection of a peripheral philosophical topic, it was seen by the scholastics as a necessary foundation to understand certain mysteries of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Aquinas gave it its due attention in multiple theological works for good reason. Aquinas does not ever treat the category of relation under its own heading, but instead always discusses it in connection to particular theological topics, such as in his discussion of the Divine Persons, creation, and the Incarnation. If Aquinas himself believed he could not explain these core theological teachings without incorporating a discussion of relation, it would be folly to attempt to comprehend Aquinas' work without some knowledge of his understanding and use of the category of relation. For example, in the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas moves from the discussion of the divine processions, through a treatment of relations, to his teaching on the divine persons.<sup>2</sup> Gilles Emery points out

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<sup>1</sup> For an in depth analysis of the use of relation in early scholasticism see Mark Gerald Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories, 1250-1325* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> *STh* I, qq. 27-29.

that this is not accidental, but rather, in the way that Thomas treats these topics, the content of each successive question requires the discussion of the previous one.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, one will find Aquinas' line of thought in the *De Potentia* moves from the divine simplicity to the divine persons only after passing through a discussion of relation.<sup>4</sup> Thomas recognized that the topic of relations provided the groundwork necessary to build upon for several chief themes of his theology, and that, without it, there would be great risk of various theological pitfalls. One of these chief themes for Aquinas is the distinction between the divine and created order, a theology which in no small part is grounded upon Aquinas' treatment of mixed relations between Creator and creature. At the heart of this treatment is the question: what type of relations must exist between God and creatures? And why does Thomas answer that these must be mixed relations? If Aquinas' answer to this question is not properly understood, it leaves one on shaky ground to grasp the theology which he builds upon it. Therefore, this paper will endeavor to treat Aquinas' thought on relation between Creator and creature, a treatment which will be broadly divided into two parts. The first part will discuss the nature and types of relation as understood by Aquinas and inherited from Aristotle, while the second part, as a means to explicate Thomas' treatment, will address the intricacies of what he calls mixed relations, with a specific focus on the relations between God and creation.

One of the reasons why Aquinas' use of relations does not receive greater treatment within theological discussion may be that the topic can seem to be trivial given that we know and experience relations regularly in our lives, such as the relation of father and son, or the relation of double to half, or the relation of an architect to a house. If these are encountered so regularly and in familiar ways, what need is there to address them in any detail? And yet, such a familiarity has the potential to lead to a glossing over and undertreatment of the topic.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, if relations are misunderstood, rather than simply failing to be effectively treated, they could lead to disastrous theological conclusions. Allow me to point to a single example ever so briefly. In his article, "Timelessness, Creation, and God's Real Relation to the World", William Lane Craig correctly recognizes that one's understanding of relations

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Emery, 'Ad aliquid: Relation in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas', in: Matthew Lamb (ed.), *Theology Needs Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 185-186.

<sup>4</sup> *De Pot.*, qq. 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> It is true that there are many philosophical texts which treat relation in Aquinas and likewise one can find quality theology texts which treat it as well; however, it seems to this author that when Aquinas' theology is discussed, the topic of relation is too frequently left out, even when it seems to have foundational bearing, or at other times it fails to be discussed with the necessary depth that Aquinas himself seems to ascribe to it. For example, an article by David A. Walker ('Trinity and Creation in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist* 57, no. 3 (Jul 1993): 443-455) arguing for the knowability of God as triune from creation in the theology of Aquinas affirms that "the notion of creation is fundamentally a *relational* one" (448) and yet fails to make any substantial connection from this to his overall argument. Furthermore, he never addresses relation as the point of division between the persons of the Trinity, despite engaging in a Thomistic study of God's tripartiteness. This lack of treatment not only should seem surprising, but it also leaves the work impoverished of greater connections which might have been made.

between God and creation has a direct impact upon one's theology; however, because he cannot reconcile Thomas' teaching on relation with God's economic action in the world, he denies the Thomistic teaching on relation and finds himself even undercutting the divine simplicity in order to do so.<sup>6</sup> A significant theological error such as this seems to be precisely why Aquinas frequently spent time discussing the nature of relations within his treatment of broader theological topics. It seems that in his eye, the nuances and distinctions of the category of relation were necessary to fathom the theological truths upon which relation has bearing. Thus, like Aquinas, this paper too will look closely at what is meant by "relation" before treating the specific topic of mixed relations between God and creatures.

### 1. The Nature of Relations

Aquinas undoubtedly draws upon his concept of relation from Aristotle who places it within the schema of the *Categories*.<sup>7</sup> David Svoboda writes that Aquinas "adopted the definition of relation from the *Categories* and defined it as *that whose proper being consists in being toward another*".<sup>8</sup> This definition, coupled with the fact that, by placing it in the *Categories*, Aristotle identifies relation as an accident, become two fundamental aspects upon which Aquinas builds. Aquinas notes, "in each of the nine genera of accidents there are two points for remark. One is the nature belonging to each one of them considered as an accident; which commonly applies to each of them as inherent in a subject, for the essence of an accident is to inhere. The other point of remark is the proper character of each one of these genera".<sup>9</sup> Thus the first aspect "for remark" is that both Aristotle and Aquinas determine the ontological character of relation to be one that inheres in another, which is to say, to be an accident.<sup>10</sup> The second aspect has to do with the proper character or *ratio* of the thing, the *ratio* of each category being the very thing which distinguishes that category of accidents from the others. These two aspects are important in Aquinas' treatment, and thus each should be looked at in turn. Let us treat these in reverse order, first examining the proper *ratio* of relation, and then secondly turning towards its nature to inhere in another.

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<sup>6</sup> William Lane Craig, 'Timelessness, Creation, and God's Real Relation to the World', *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 56, no. 2 (Feb 2000): 93-112. It is not the goal of this paper to explain or refute Craig's errors, he is mentioned here as a sample case to emphasize how a misunderstanding of relation in Aquinas can have serious theological consequences. For a response to Craig's text, see Matthew R. McWhorter, 'Aquinas on God's Relation to the World', *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1049 (Jan 2013): 3-19. See also Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (London: Yale University Press, 1948) for another example.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas draws additionally from the Church Fathers, Boethius, and Averroes at a minimum, and reasonably there must have been others. Here the point is simply to briefly discuss the elements which were inherited from Aristotle, which were clearly significant to Thomas thought. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 5, ch. 15; David Svoboda, 'Aquinas on Real Relation', in: *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 6, no. 1 (2016): 147-172.

<sup>8</sup> Svoboda, 150.

<sup>9</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 2, co.; *In I Sent.* d. 8, q. 4, a. 3, co.; d. 26, q. 2, a. 1 co.

<sup>10</sup> Svoboda, 150.

With regard to the categories of accidents Svoboda notes, “the differences are caused by the ‘ratio’ of each category: one differs from the other in virtue of its own proper character”.<sup>11</sup> To understand what a relation is, one must know its *ratio*, yet, to some extent, the very *ratio* of relation as an accident has already been identified in Aquinas’ definition of relation offered earlier: “that whose proper being consists in being toward another”.<sup>12</sup> This “towardness” is at the very heart of understanding the *ratio* of categorical relations. Aquinas states regularly that the proper *ratio* of a relation is its ordering towards something else.<sup>13</sup> Gilles Emery writes,

On the one hand, relation is not related to a subject as identical to this subject (substance), nor as flowing from a reality external to the subject (accidents taken from something exterior). Aquinas places relation among the accidents which affect the subject ‘intrinsically,’ as it were. On the other hand, although relation is predicated according to ‘what inheres in the subject,’ it differs from the absolute accidents, which are taken with regard to the subject itself: relation concerns the *connection or order to something else*.<sup>14</sup>

The reason why Emery compares relation to the absolute accidents here is because Aquinas himself regularly makes the comparison in order to flush out this unique element of relation which sets it apart from the other accidents. In the *De Potentia* he identifies, “relation differs from quantity and quality in that quantity and quality are accidents residing in the subject, whereas relation, as Boethius says (De Trin.), signifies something not as adhering to a subject but as passing from it to something else”.<sup>15</sup> He is slightly more detailed with his text in the *Summa*, “In the genera, apart from that of ‘relation,’ as in quantity and quality, even the true idea of the genus itself is derived from a respect to the subject; for quantity is called the measure of substance, and quality is the disposition of substance. But the true idea of relation is not taken from its respect to that in which it is, but from its respect to something outside”.<sup>16</sup> What Aquinas is stating here is that the very nature of relation in general, unlike the absolute accidents, is not limited to (nor could it really even exist in) the subject alone in which it inheres, but it must have a certain ordering toward another. Thus, while the quantity of a substance measures it in a certain way, this measurement is a self-contained reality which is not dependent upon something outside the subject for it to be. Likewise, the quality of the thing is determined by the thing without further regard to something outside the subject. But if the thing has a

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<sup>11</sup> Svoboda, 159.

<sup>12</sup> The *ratio* and definition will naturally have a certain identity for Thomas as he states that the *ratio* is “nothing else than that which the intellect understands of the signification of any name” (*In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3).

<sup>13</sup> See *STh* I, q. 28, a. 2, co; *STh* III, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2; *STh* III, q. 2, a. 8, obj. 1; *Quodl.* IX, q. 2, a. 3, co.

<sup>14</sup> Emery, 178-179.

<sup>15</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 8, co.

<sup>16</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 2, co.

relation, it must be ordered towards something else for this relation to be. One cannot be a father without there having been a child. Something cannot be “double” if there is not another thing which is half as much. To be relative is to be in relation to something else. Therefore, the ordering of one thing to another, this certain “towardness” is the proper character of relation, its *ratio*.

Turning now to the other aspect of relation requires examining the nature of relation as something which inheres in another. When considering relation as an accident, one must be careful not to perceive this form of inherence as identical to other accidents which inhere in a subject. Much like relation differs from the absolute accidents in proper character, it also differs from them in inherence. Drawing from Aquinas’ commentaries on Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, Emery discusses that according to Aquinas there are two modes by which a predicate is said to inhere in a subject. “First, when that which is predicated inheres ‘per se and absolutely’ in the subject”. And this can be said of the accidents quantity and quality. “Secondly, when that which is predicated relates to something which inheres in the subject ‘not absolutely but in connection to something else’ (*non absolute, sed in respectu ad aliud,* ‘per respectum ad alterum’), we are in the presence of the predicament ‘ad aliquid’ which Aquinas also calls ‘predicament of relation’ (*praedicamentum relationis*)”.<sup>17</sup> It should be immediately obvious that this difference in inherence flows directly from the *ratio* of the category of relation. Because relation is that which is ordered towards another, its accidental existence is not contained in a single subject absolutely but inheres in a relational way. To demonstrate this predicament of relation Svoboda offers the following example:

When we predicate an absolute predicate of a subject (i.e., a predicate that signifies an absolute accident together with its subject), e.g. we predicate of Socrates that he is wise, we in fact say that there is wisdom in him or that he has wisdom. On the other hand, when we predicate a relational predicate, e.g. that Socrates likes Alkibiades, we do not say that there is a relation or a relational nature in him, we merely state that Socrates relates to his beloved pupil in some way.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, though this relation is an accident which inheres within Socrates (its subject), it does not predicate anything of Socrates “per se and absolutely”, but only through an ordering of Socrates towards Alkibiades. “One can thus consider relation under two aspects: (1) inasmuch as it is an accident, it inheres in a subject (accidental *esse* of the relation); (2) but ‘as relation,’ that is to say, in its proper formal *ratio*, the

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<sup>17</sup> Emery, 178, see Aquinas, *In V Meta.* lect. 9; *In III Phys.* lect. 5; *STh I*, q. 28, a. 1, co.; *In I Sent.* d. 8, q. 4, a. 3, co.; d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, co.; d. 30, q. 1, a. 1, co; *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 8, co.

<sup>18</sup> Svoboda, 162, footnote 45.

relation does not regard the subject which bears the relation, but it concerns only the connection (*respectus*) to something else".<sup>19</sup>

### A) Conditions of a Relation

This means that there are multiple necessary conditions which must exist for there to be a relation. There must be a *subject* of the relation. This is the substance in which the accident of relation inheres, and which is the thing which is ordered towards another. Then there is the other. That toward which the relation is ordered is the *term* of the relation. Thirdly there must be a *foundation*, which is a type of cause of the relation in the subject. This foundation is the basis for the relation but differs from the relation itself.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas identifies repeatedly that the foundation for real relations can be two-fold, either quantity, or action and passion.<sup>21</sup> A foundation has the capacity to be the source of a relation yet does not alone establish one. If there are six persons eating supper, the quantity six has the capacity to be the foundation of a relation. If there are also six slices of pie for dessert, then the relation of equality between the persons and the pie comes to be. However, if the dog suddenly snatches a slice of pie and consumes it, the relation of equality ceases to be even though the foundation (six persons) does not change.<sup>22</sup>

There are those who have disagreed about this division. Scotus did not believe that a relation was always distinct from its foundation. He claimed that the relation of dependence which creatures have towards God was identical with its foundation,<sup>23</sup> yet this would not only deny the distinction between relations and their foundations, but it would cause relation to cease to be an accident, and place it in the very essence of the creature. The creature's relation to God is concomitant with it being created, but it is not identifiable with the creature itself. The creature is entirely dependent upon the Creator for both its essence and existence, but the creaturely relation to God is neither of these. The *esse* of things does not *per se* constitute relation towards God. "In being constituted as beings, existents, things are creatures and hence related to God but their constitution *in* being is not that relationship. Were it otherwise, being would not be being but would be 'being-towards.' Existence... would be reduced to the

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<sup>19</sup> Emery, 181. See also Clifford Kossel, 'Principles of St. Thomas's Distinction between the *Esse* and Ratio of Relation', in *The Modern Schoolman* 24 (Nov 1946): 19-36 and (Jan 1947): 93-107; Edward A. Pace, 'The Concept of Order in the Philosophy of St. Thomas', in: *The New Scholasticism* 2, iss. 1 (Jan 1928): 62ff.

<sup>20</sup> See Norbert D. Ginsburg, 'Metaphysical Relations and St. Thomas Aquinas', in: *The New Scholasticism* 15, iss. 3 (July 1941): 253.

<sup>21</sup> *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 9, co.; *In III Phys.* lect. 1; *In V Meta.* lect. 17.

<sup>22</sup> *In V Phys.* 3; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 14, ch. 1. For further discussion see Mark Gerald Henninger, 'Aquinas on the Ontological Status of Relations', in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (Oct 1987): 501ff.

<sup>23</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* II, dist. 1, qq. 4-5, n. 260-261.

predicamental order, to the accident of relation".<sup>24</sup> Likewise, what the essence of a thing is, is not "dependence upon God", but to be the certain type of thing it is. The fact that the creature is a creature is not *due* to its dependence upon God, even if it is dependent as a natural consequence of its creaturehood. Emery clarifies this interplay, "although the relation to God is not an essential property of creatures, it is [also] not a mere accident. Rather, it is a *proper* accident (*proprium accidens*) of creatures, that is, an accident that necessarily belongs to created beings—a determination that is not part of the essence of a being but that necessarily 'follows from those things that do belong to the *ratio*' of a created being".<sup>25</sup> To be a created thing results in a creaturely dependence, a relation which is a proper accident. As a proper accident Aquinas will speak of relation as something "concreated" (*quid concreatum*), that is, something which comes to be through the act of creation, but is not itself a subsistent being.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, even in the case of creation the foundation of the relation is not identical with the relation itself but is distinct.

Let us examine this via another approach. Recall that a foundation is the causal source of a relation, either under the aspect of quantity, or action and passion. This means one must make a certain division here. As Svoboda reminds his reader, "a cause, which Aquinas construes as the principle of the being of an effect, is really distinct from what it causes".<sup>27</sup> This is why, quantity has the *capacity* to form a relation (equal, double, half, etc.), but does not do so necessarily. It can be the foundation of a relation, but something simply having the accident of quantity is not identical with it having the accident of relation. This division is no less true for foundations of action and passion. One can point to the generative power within man as the foundation for the relation of fatherhood. However, this is not the same as the relation itself. "A man subsequently becomes a father because he has exercised that power in engendering a son; the power to generate a son is not the relation of fatherhood: otherwise celibates would be fathers; nor is the act of generating the relation of fatherhood: otherwise one man would be ten fathers if he had ten children".<sup>28</sup> Obviously neither such option is what is meant by fatherhood, and thus the relation of fatherhood can (and must) be distinguished from its foundation: the power and act of generation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, 'Creation as a Relation in St. Thomas Aquinas', *The Modern Schoolman* 56, no. 2 (Jan 1979): 127.

<sup>25</sup> Emery, 200.

<sup>26</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 3, ad 2.

<sup>27</sup> Svoboda, 169, see *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 8, co.

<sup>28</sup> Wilhelmsen, 118.

<sup>29</sup> Wilhelmsen identifies here (118) the potency of generation, not the act of generation as the foundation of fatherhood. However, later he seems to include the act as part of the foundation (see also 122). The latter seems to be the more prevalent consideration for foundation (c.f. Svoboda 150 and Earl Muller, S.J., 'Real Relations and the Divine: Issues in Thomas's Understanding of God's Relation to the World', in: *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 675). What is important is if identifying the causal *act* as the foundation, rather than the *potency* of that act, that it not be construed to imply a one-to-one correlation that wherever there is a foundation there is *de facto* a relation. This is not the case. As noted above, quantity is the foundation for the relation of equality, but obviously the existence of quantity does not automatically bring about the relation

In fact, not only is a foundation distinct from its relation, but that it has a relational aspect is in a certain respect secondary to it. Svoboda demonstrates this with an example of the relation of likeness which flows from the accident of quality. He notes that the quality of redness which can be found in an apple is the foundation for the likeness between that red apple and other red things (while simultaneously the redness of the apple is the foundation for dissimilarity between it and apples which are yellow). Yet this foundation is not solely, or even primarily, for the purpose of relation, but it is firstly an accident which “determines its subject absolutely” (under the aspect of quality) and only by the consequence of this, also “determines it relatively” in relation to something else (likeness). “Redness therefore primarily makes an apple red and secondarily similar, or dissimilar to other colored things”.<sup>30</sup> This is why relations are reliant upon foundations for their existence, but the relation cannot be the foundation itself.

### *B) Types of Relations*

These three elements then, the subject, term, and foundation are the necessary conditions for a relation. However, the question of what type of relation they might bring about is a further question still. Aquinas divides relations into either those relations which exist in reality, or those which are in concept only. That is, there are relations which Aquinas calls real, and there are what he terms relations of reason, also sometimes called logical, conceptual, or rational relations. Aquinas identifies these two types of relations in his *Summa Theologiae*: “Relation in its own proper meaning signifies only what refers to another. Such regard to another exists sometimes in the nature of things, as in those things which by their own very nature are ordered to each other, and have a mutual inclination; and such relations are necessarily real relations”.<sup>31</sup> Then, having identified the first type of relation, Aquinas proceeds to define the second, “Sometimes, however, this regard to another, signified by relation, is to be found only in the apprehension of reason comparing one thing to another, and this is a logical relation only”.<sup>32</sup> This division is of paramount importance for Aquinas’ use of relation because he wants to identify that there can be a “toward something” that actually exists in the things themselves (a real relation), or that the “toward something” can be in the mind alone and not something which actually inheres in the subject (a relation of reason).

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of equality. Therefore, in certain contexts it may not be unwise to speak conservatively and say that the potency of generation is the foundation of fatherhood rather than ascribing it to the act of generation, though certainly a relation of fatherhood only comes about when the power is brought to act. In either case however, the point at hand remains the same, the foundation remains distinct from the relation itself.

<sup>30</sup> Svoboda, 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 1, co.

<sup>32</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 1, co.



Such a division is possible specifically because of the nature of relations and how they differ from the absolute accidents. "In relations alone is found something which is only in the apprehension and not in reality. This is not found in any other genus; forasmuch as other genera, as quantity and quality, in their strict and proper meaning, signify something inherent in a subject. But relation in its own proper meaning signifies only what refers to another".<sup>33</sup> Therefore, because relation fundamentally inheres in the subject, not absolutely, but relationally, which is to say in connection to something else, such a connection has the capacity to either be an accident really in the subject, or secondarily it can be something which exists in the mind alone, applying a connection of one thing to another, even though this connection is not actually inherent in the subject.

What then determines if a relation is real or merely conceptual? For a relation to be real, three conditions must be satisfied.<sup>34</sup> First, in a real relation the subject and the term must be real; if either of these elements is not real, that is either or both exist in idea only, then the relation would be a relation of reason.<sup>35</sup> A man who is not a father, could be *in concept* related to his future children by the relation of fatherhood, but this is not an accident that has come to be in the man in reality. Instead the relation exists only in the mind, which, conceiving that if the man was to have children, he would in fact be their father, applies such a relation to him. Thus, it should be clear that the relation of fatherhood which he has to his future children is merely a relation of reason, existing only in the mind as long as there are no actual children to whom he is ordered towards as father.<sup>36</sup> This leads to the second condition necessary for a relation to be real: there must be a real foundation which causes the relation to be in the subject. Because while the ordering of one thing to another depends upon the "towardness" of one to the other, the reality of the relation *in the subject* "depends on the substance *and* on the foundation (*fundamentum*), that is to say, on that which *causes* this relation in the subject... [and so] the existence (*esse*) of the real relation is grounded in an *accident* which is presupposed (as a prerequisite) to this relation, and which causes this relation in the subject".<sup>37</sup> Without the causation of a foundation, the relation cannot exist in the subject, but at most would exist only in the mind. Thirdly, the subject and the term must be really distinct from one another. If they are not distinct, but one, then the "towardness" which orders one thing to another, can only be in the mind. For in such a case the mind conceives of the thing doubly and orders it so as to relate the thing to itself, even though in reality the thing is one and therefore is unable to be ordered without reference to something outside of itself.<sup>38</sup> These three

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<sup>33</sup> *STh I*, q. 28, a. 1, co.

<sup>34</sup> There is also a fourth condition necessary for *mutually* real relations between two things, which will be identified later.

<sup>35</sup> Muller, 675.

<sup>36</sup> *In I Sent.* d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, co.

<sup>37</sup> Emery, 185.

<sup>38</sup> *STh I*, q. 13, a. 7, co.; *In I Sent.* d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, co.; *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 11 ad 3.

conditions are always necessary for a real relation to exist. Therefore, as an example, father and son have mutually real relations of fatherhood and sonship. Both extremes exist (first condition), and they are distinguishable from one another (third condition). The foundation also is real and is the cause by which the relations of fatherhood and sonship come to be in the father and son respectively (second condition). And therefore, in each there is a real relation in which each is ordered to the other as father and son. However, while the relations of father and son are relatively straightforward, not all relations are so easily defined. The relations of Creator and created is one such pairing.

## **2. Mixed Relations**

### *A) Difficulties with Symmetrical Relations*

Thomas identifies that there are indeed certain relations between God and the creature, “Now we must needs admit a relation between a principle and the things which proceed from it; and not only a relation of origin inasmuch as a result springs from its source, but also a relation of distinction, seeing that an effect must needs be distinct from its cause, for nothing is its own cause”.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, there must be a set of relations between God, creator and cause of creation, and the creature, term of that creation. Given that these relations exist, it becomes a question of what type of relations they are, most specifically whether real or logical.

Now as is most often the case, pairs of relations are symmetrical, either both being real (as in the case of fatherhood and sonship) or both logical (as with a man’s theoretical future fatherhood and the corresponding future sonship/daughterhood), but in the case of God and creation this will not work. Symmetrically logical relations between God and the creature would mean that at least one of the three required conditions for a relation to be real would fail to be. However, in each case this would immediately create problems within theology. Clearly, we would not be able to deny the actual reality of God or creation itself, but since both the subject and term are real, then one must affirm the first condition necessary for a real relation. For the second condition to fail, it would mean that the foundation would have to exist only in the mind. But, how can we say there is no real connection between the created and the Creator? The creature in its very nature is related to, and dependent on, God as creator and cause. No one would say that the connection of effect to cause exists only in the mind and not in reality. If the creature did not have a real relation to God due to a lack of foundation, it would force one to deny the very act of creation as a causal foundation. Since this is not the case, only a failure of the third condition could be grounds for a logical relation. However, the third condition, that the subject and term are distinct, must be affirmed unless one is willing to accept pantheism, which clearly

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<sup>39</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 8, co.

Aquinas was not; therefore, it appears clear that all three conditions are fulfilled and the relations between God and creatures cannot be mutual relations of reason.

However, when we examine the possibility of the relations between God and creation being purely real, it appears equally (if not more) problematic. If a real relation is a real “toward something” as said earlier, then a real relation from God to creatures would mean that God is ordered towards creatures. Such an ordering would be opposed to the infinite distinction between God and the creature; in some way a real relation would need to imply comparability between subject and term. Furthermore, since God created *ex nihilo*, and a relation with nothing would be non-existent, the relation between God and the creature would be added to God at the act of creation, where it did not exist previously.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, this change would not be an accidental change, but a substantial change in God, because as Thomas reminds us, there are no accidents in God: “Now whatever has an accidental existence in creatures, when considered as transferred to God, has a substantial existence; for there is no accident in God; since all in him is his essence. So, in so far as relation has an accidental existence in creatures, relation really existing in God has the existence of the divine essence in no way distinct therefrom”.<sup>41</sup> As such, the addition of this relation in God at creation would impart mutability in the Divine Essence which is opposed to the very nature of God *qua* God. Lastly, if such a relation really existed, thus being part of the nature of God, it would necessarily be part of the definition of God. This however would result in God being defined by the creature. That is, it would place a necessity for the creature in the very nature of God; God would fail to be fully himself without being referable to creation. This is theologically nonsensical. It either denies the infinite perfection of God prior to his creative act, or undercuts the eternal nature of God, only admitting that he comes to *be God* at the moment in which he creates, and that God *qua* God did not exist prior to such an act. Yet this cannot be. Though God may have created the platypus, his very essence is not defined by this creation, and he would be no less God prior to creating, or if he had never created, the platypus or any other given member of creation. Therefore, it seems that one also cannot affirm mutually real relations between God and creation.

These issues, however, only remain issues if one posits symmetrical relations between Creator and created, either wholly real, or wholly logical. Therefore, the solution which Aquinas offers is that of asymmetrical relations. Aquinas was astute enough to realize that if neither mutually symmetrical pairing could be correct, a third option must be available. Thus he identifies that “when something proceeds from a

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<sup>40</sup> One might make the observation that while it is true that a non-existent thing cannot be the term of a real relation, it could be the term of a relation of reason (such as with the earlier example of the man who is logically related to his future children). Thus, the claim could be made that while a real relation could not be in God in relation to creatures prior to creation, there could be a logical relation. However, this ultimately would not change the point which is being made, for if the relation of God to creatures was to change from a logical to a real relation at the moment of creation, because the relation would necessarily be part of the Divine Substance, it would still result in a mutable God, which cannot be.

<sup>41</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 2, co.

principle of the same nature, then both the one proceeding and the source of procession, agree in the same order; and then they have real relations to each other".<sup>42</sup> However, "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".<sup>43</sup> Therefore, what we have is an asymmetrical set of relations – that which Aquinas will call mixed relations – where the relation from one side is an accident really inhering in one extreme, while the corresponding relation with regards to the other extreme exists only in the mind. Saint Thomas likens this to the relation between knowledge and the thing known.<sup>44</sup> Knowledge has a real relation to the thing, but the thing itself only has a relation of reason in respect to the knowledge. Thus, if I comprehend in my intellect the knowledge of a specific chair, that knowledge is really related to the chair. Both the knowledge and the chair exist, and they are distinct from one another. Furthermore, my capacity for knowing which has been applied to this particular chair is a real foundation which causes my knowledge to have a real relation of dependence with regards to the chair. (I could hardly comprehend that specific chair if it did not exist.) But, the chair itself does not have a corresponding order under the relation of dependence toward my knowledge of it; neither the existence of the chair is dependent upon my knowledge of it, nor would my knowledge or lack of knowledge about the chair have any effect on it.

The lack of a real relation of the chair to my knowledge of it is explained under a two-fold reasoning. Firstly, there is no corresponding foundation which causes in the chair an ordering towards my knowledge of it, which thus results in the failure to fulfill one of the requirements for a real relation. But secondly, we find that here Aquinas adds an additional requirement: agreement within "the same order" between things. This is not an absolute requirement, but one necessary for *mutually* real relations. And since knowledge and the thing known "'are not of the same order,' inasmuch as the thing known, which exists in the order of natural being (*esse naturale*), is found outside the order of sensible being and intelligible being as such (*extra ordinem esse sensibilis et intelligibilis*) ... our intellect attributes to the thing known a relation of reason which necessarily corresponds to the real relation that science maintains with this thing known".<sup>45</sup> Thus, when one considers the chair, and my knowledge of it, making a logical comparison by which the chair is considered in relation to my knowledge of it, this is a relation in conception only, and not an accident which inheres in the chair itself, even though there is a corresponding real accident of relation inhering in my intellect with regards to the chair. Therefore, such relations between two things not of the same order are always mixed asymmetrical relations, real with regard to one extreme, but only logical with regard to the other.

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<sup>42</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 1, co.

<sup>43</sup> *STh* I, q. 13, a. 7, co.

<sup>44</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 3, co.

<sup>45</sup> Emery, 190; *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 10 co.; *STh* I q. 13, a. 7, co.

### *B) Relation of Creatures to God*

Because mixed pairs of relations are comprised of both a real and a logical relation, depending upon which extreme is considered the subject, and which the term, one must examine such relations from each side. To understand the relations between God and creature we will first begin by examining the relation in the creature and then subsequently consider the reverse relation. As identified earlier, it seems that the creature must be really related to God as coming from God. Thomas makes this explicit in the *De Potentia*, “Things that are ordered to something must be really related to it, and this relation must be some real thing in them. Now all creatures are ordered to God both as to their beginning and as to their end”.<sup>46</sup> Thus in coming from God in its origin and being directed towards God in its final end, the creature must have a real relation to the Creator. As such, the creature is related to its cause, namely God, in a similar way to that in which a house would be related to the architect or a cake to its baker.

It can also be shown that the creature is really related to God through the order of dependence. Saint Thomas identifies it this way: “in all those things that are referred the one to the other, the one depending on the other but not conversely, there is a real relation in the one that is dependent, and in the other there is a logical relation, as in the case of knowledge and the thing known”.<sup>47</sup> This dependence goes beyond the initial act of creation. The creature also needs God’s divine power and will to remain continually present for it to remain in existence. In this continual dependence, the creature “is referred to the Creator: and depends on the Creator who does not depend on it. Wherefore the relation whereby the creature is referred to the Creator must be a real relation, while in God it is only a logical relation”.<sup>48</sup> Thus in affirming a real relation in creatures with respect to God, one is able to retain the affirmation of the three necessary conditions for a real relation: God and creation exist, they are really distinct, and there is a real causal dependence within the creature which is the foundation of the relation.

### *C) Relation of God to Creatures*

Now it may well seem that since the creature has a real relation to God, in some way this should impart a real relation in God with respect to the creature, but this is simply not the case. If it is recalled that a real relation consists in the “toward something” of one thing to another, then it should be clear that a real relation is mutual if, and only if, in those things related, there is a mutual “towardness” in each thing with regards to the other. Such is always the case in relations of quantity, thus “for the same reason that a quantitative thing A is really related to the quantitative thing B, B is really

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<sup>46</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 9, co.

<sup>47</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 3, co.

<sup>48</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 3, co.

related to A".<sup>49</sup> For example, 'more' always has a corresponding relation of 'less' while that which is equal, always results in a relationship of equivalence for both extremes. However, such correspondence of real relations is not always the case in relations of active or passive power where "there is not always order of movement on both sides".<sup>50</sup> Now Aquinas is quite explicit that the relation between God and the creature is not one of quantity, for an infinite being cannot be compared to a finite being by a proportion of definite excess,<sup>51</sup> but rather one of action and passion.

In relations of action and passion, the question is one of mutual order. Thomas teaches that that which is caused "must always have an order to the agent or mover, seeing that the effect is always perfected by its cause and dependent thereon: so that it is ordered to it as the cause of its perfection".<sup>52</sup> However, he goes on to say that in the other extreme, the acting agent sometimes has an order towards its respective effects, but at other times the ordering exists only from the effect to the cause and not vice versa because the cause is "wholly foreign to that genus of actions or power from which that order arises".<sup>53</sup> So, in the case of natural agents, the agent "moves and acts by an intermediary movement or action that is between the mover and the thing moved: between the agent and the patient: wherefore in this intermediary, at least agent and patient, mover and thing moved must come together. Wherefore the agent as such is not outside the genus of the patient as such", but each share of the same order and "consequently each has a real relation to the other".<sup>54</sup> However, in the case of relation between Creator and creature, Aquinas reminds us, "God does not work by an intermediary action to be regarded as issuing from God and terminating in the creature: but his action is his substance and is wholly outside the genus of created being whereby the creature is related to him".<sup>55</sup> And because the creative act, which is nothing other than the divine essence, is outside the genus of the created being, it is not of the same order as creation and must result in mixed relations. This set of relations is one that is only real on the part of the creature and not reciprocally real in God, and thus, need not imply any comparability between God as subject and creation as term.

An astute observer might wonder that if the knowledge of a thing is really related to the thing known, and if God knows all his creatures, would not God have a real relation through his intellect to the creature? This would indeed be the case for all beings other than God. "In those things in which there is a difference between the intellect and its object, and the will and its object, there can be a real relation, both of science to its object, and of the willer to the object willed".<sup>56</sup> Notice in these cases that

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<sup>49</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, co.

<sup>50</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, co.

<sup>51</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, ad 9.

<sup>52</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, co.

<sup>53</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, co.

<sup>54</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, ad 1.

<sup>55</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 10, co.

<sup>56</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 4, ad 1.

both the subject and term would exist as distinct from each other. "In God, however, the intellect and its object are one and the same; because by understanding himself, God understands all other things; and the same applies to his will and the object that he wills. Hence it follows that in God these kinds of relations are not real; as neither is the relation of a thing to itself".<sup>57</sup> So God has no real relation to the creature even in his knowledge of the creature.

There could remain the claim that the relations between God and the creature are mutually real relations because creation is somehow a necessary act of God. However, such propositions are directly opposed to the nature of God. God as pure act is in no way essentially dependent upon creation. One cannot say that creation fulfills some need in God's nature to create for he is infinitely blessed with or without creation. Nor could it be said that there is anything in the creature that makes God bring it about. There can be no mutual dependence between God and creatures at any level. Saint Thomas says this clearly, "[God] does not produce the creature by necessity of his nature, but by his intellect and will.... Therefore, there is no real relation in God to the creature; whereas in creatures there is a real relation to God; because creatures are contained under the divine order, and their very nature entails dependence on God".<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, there can be no change posited in God because of his act of creation. In his act of creation, God does not become something he previously was not. The change that happens at creation is a change that is only posited in the creature, not in God. In this case God can be likened to a column around which a man moves. The column may start on the man's right, but then when the man moves to the other side, the column is then on the man's left. But, no change has transpired in the column itself. It is the man that has changed; the column was unchanging even amidst the change of relation.<sup>59</sup> Thomas speaks of this sense of the God-creature relation directly:

When these relations begin to be ascribed to God on account of some change wrought in creatures, it is evident that the cause of their being attributed to him is on the part of the creature, and that they are predicated of God accidentally. But as Augustine says this does not imply an accident in God, but refers to something outside him and compared to him accidentally: for God's existence does not depend on creatures as neither does the builder's existence depend on the house: wherefore just as it is accidental to the builder that the house exists, so is it accidental to God that the creature exists. For we say that anything without which a thing can exist is accidental to it.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 4, ad 1.

<sup>58</sup> *STh* I, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>59</sup> *STh* I, q. 13, a. 7, co.; see Aristotle, *Physics*, bk. 5, ch. 2.

<sup>60</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 8, ad 6.

Indeed, there is no need in God to create; there is no change in God at creation nor is he moved by creation; there is no increase in the perfection in God upon creating, and there is no advantage obtained by God in the act of creation.

*D) Clarifications Concerning Relations of Reason*

While it is not the goal of this paper to argue the veracity of Aquinas' use of relation against those who believe it to be in error, before concluding this discussion it does seem that it would be of value to speak briefly on the nature of logical relations and some potential errors which might lead to problematic understandings. It seems that the tendency regarding logical relations is to take them as worthless and of no merit, most specifically because their counterparts are identified as "real". For, if one type of relation is "real", must not the other type of relation somehow fail in "realness"? And what would failing in "realness" mean? Not existing? Being a false relation? A relation applied without basis? Yet this is not in fact how Aquinas speaks about logical relations.

Aquinas speaks of relations of reason developing out of one of two modalities. The first is one where the mind "discovers" a relation and attributes it logically, such as when "the mind sometimes conceives two things as having, existence, whereas one or neither of them is a being: as when it considers two futures, or one present and one future, and considers one in relation to the other by placing one before the other; wherefore such relations are purely logical since they arise from the mode of understanding".<sup>61</sup> We have looked at this type of logical relation with regards to how the mind poses a relation between a man and his future children. The second type of modality is the type which Aquinas attributes to mixed relations where the relation arises in the mind due to its mode of knowing. In these cases, the mind "sometimes considers something in relation to another inasmuch as it is the term of the relationship of another thing to it, and yet itself is not related to the other".<sup>62</sup> Thus, because A is really related to B, the mind logically orders B back to A, even if no such ordering really exists as an accident within B itself. My knowledge of a chair is ordered towards the chair as the origin of knowledge, yet the chair is not ordered conversely. This, however, does not prevent my mind from imputing a certain corresponding relation from the chair to my knowledge of it.

Note what Aquinas does not say. He does not say that such an application of relation by the mind is baseless or false. In fact, the basis for the relation is quite explicit. In the first modality the basis is the mind's ability to understand relations in possible things, and in the second it is founded on the mind's understanding of relations that already exist. Aquinas' affirmation of the ability of the mind to ascribe logical relations allows for situations such as when my mind applies a certain ordering

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<sup>61</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 11, co.

<sup>62</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 11, co.



from the chair to my knowledge of it, even though no such ordering exists in the chair itself. Such an affirmation by Aquinas is not a meaningless one. When a friend offers directions to his home based on a certain uniquely describable landmark, one's ability to recognize such a landmark requires precisely the ability of the mind to make a relation between the landmark itself, and the friend's descriptive knowledge of it, even though the landmark itself has no "real relation" to the friend's knowledge. Therefore, while Aquinas identifies that logical relations such as these do not exist in the things themselves, it also does not mean that such relations are *falsely* ascribed to the two things<sup>63</sup> (if they were, landmarks could never be rightly identified), simply that the ordering posited between the things is in the mind alone and not inherent to the thing itself.

Logical relations are not non-relations,<sup>64</sup> they are relations of a certain modality. They have meaning and can tell us about that to which they pertain. They are not non-existence, yet their existence is in the mind, not as an accident within the thing itself. Such a state of being, while of a lesser order, is not non-being, but intelligible being. If a man intends to propose marriage to a woman, to do so, he must be able to consider the woman as having the potency to be his future wife, and as such, he must consider her under the aspect of wife in the future, applying *within his mind* the relation of marriage between himself and her *even though the relation does not yet exist in the couple themselves*. If such logical relations had non-being, rather than intellectual being, then men could not logically know such relations in the mind prior to them existing in the persons themselves. But this would mean no man could conceive of marriage with someone to whom he is not already married, and thus no man would ever propose or marry at all.

Rather than making relations of reason a "throw away", Aquinas recognizes that they are an important philosophical foundation that help man to understand the nature of things. This is a much different concept concerning logical relations than is found after Aquinas in the development of nominalism, which desired to back away from real relations, and uses relations of reason to separate our understanding of things from the things themselves. Emery recounts this problematic approach as found in Ockham:

For William of Ockham in the fourteenth century, the predicament of relation will be composed exclusively of names, that is to say, of relative *words*, and not of things existing outside the mind (all that exists is the singular thing in its irreducibility). Ockham will expel the existence of relations from the reality of things; he will maintain the existence of real extramental relation only "where faith obliges" (the doctrine of the Trinity), thereby creating a rupture between the philosophical approach and the theological approach.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> ScG II, q. 13, a. 5, co.

<sup>64</sup> Henninger, 'Aquinas on Relations', 498.

<sup>65</sup> Emery, 188.

Through this, Ockham and nominalism not only clearly differ from Aquinas who explicitly affirms the real grounding of relations of reason, they also try to avoid real relations which exist in things themselves, something which Aquinas directly affirms.<sup>66</sup> Such a deviation, and the problems which follow from it become only a further reminder of the importance of understanding Aquinas' teaching on relation, so that one does not vitiate Aquinas' philosophy from his theology as Ockham did to his own.

For Aquinas, logical relations, and thus also the logical side of mixed relations, ultimately have to do with our mode of understanding, rather than the attribution of some relation inhering in the very thing itself. Therefore, Aquinas writes with regards to the logical relation of Creator to creature, "such relations are not said of God in the same way as other things predicated of him. For all other things, such as wisdom and will, express his essence; the aforesaid relations by no means do so really, but only as regards our way of understanding".<sup>67</sup> However, by stating that they regard our mode of understanding, Thomas, teaches that such relations, rather than being devoid of meaning, are part of the building blocks which are imperative to the theological study by which man seeks to know God.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is certainly possible to read Thomas' theology with no understanding of his use of relations. It may even be possible to draw correct conclusions from what is read. However, if Aquinas' theology is about coming to know divine things, and real relations concern that which is in the thing itself, and relations of reason concern our ability to understand such things, then certainly one must conclude that a reading of Aquinas without an understanding of relation is at the very least an impoverished reading. Aquinas draws on relation explicitly in his discussions of Trinity, hypostatic union, and creation, while his understanding of relation further informs his epistemology, undergirding such things as his use of analogy. If these all build on relation, and relation itself allows us to understand how one thing is in respect to another, then it seems that it behooves those who want to study Aquinas' theology to spend some time with his philosophical foundations, not the least of which is relation.

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<sup>66</sup> *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 9, co.

<sup>67</sup> *ScG II*, q. 13, a. 5, co.