Divine Persons and Notional Acts in the Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract
This article presents a reconstruction of an important but neglected element of the trinitarian theology of Thomas Aquinas: namely, his teaching on the notional acts, the intratrinitarian acts attributed to the Divine Persons, and how they relate to individual Divine Persons. In the process, this article shows that, for Aquinas, and for medieval theologians more generally, although we can distinguish between the Divine Persons and their respective intratrinitarian acts according to our human mode of understanding, each Divine Person is, in reality (literally, in the *res*, or in the thing), nothing other than a single eternal act. This article also explains how thinking of the Divine Persons as divine acts offers significant resources for contemporary theology and corrects against certain perceived weaknesses of Aquinas's trinitarian theology and relation-centered accounts of the Trinity more generally.

According to Thomas Aquinas, Divine Persons are constituted by relations.[1] The Father is constituted by paternity (his relation to the Son), the Son by filiation (his relation to the Father), and the Holy Spirit by procession (his relation

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1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 40, a. 2, a. 4 (hereafter cited as *ST*). For the Latin tradition, this approach to the Divine Persons is especially indebted to Augustine.

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to the Father and the Son). As a result, we can say that "paternity is the Father himself, and filiation is the Son, and procession is the Holy Spirit."[2]

The practice of identifying Divine Persons with divine relations so closely, and in this way, especially as epitomized by Thomas Aquinas, has received many criticisms. Among Eastern theologians especially, there are deep concerns about the very idea of identifying Divine Persons so closely with relations. The Aristotelian category of relation has long been applied to trinitarian Persons in the East.[3] Nevertheless, the East has never given the category of relation as much prominence as the West, and Eastern theologians often criticize Western theologians for what they regard as an exaggerated and problematic emphasis on trinitarian relations.[4]

One objection faults Aquinas—and relation-centered accounts of the Trinity more generally—for defining the personal identities of Father and Son exclusively in terms of each other, without any mention of the Holy Spirit. Emmanuel Durand, for example, a theologian who otherwise takes much inspiration from Aquinas's trinitarian theology, objects that "it is not fitting to maintain that the hypostasis of the Father is 'constituted' by his relation to the Son alone."[5] Within the trinitarian mystery, he explains, Persons are not constituted two by two; to the contrary, "in his proper hypostatic existence, the Father is conjointly determined by his relation to the Son and by his relation to the Spirit."[6]

Likewise, though without any specific reference to Aquinas, Sarah Coakley and Katherine Sonderegger caution against dyadic formulations of the identities of Father and Son that implicitly subordinate and marginalize the Holy Spirit.[7] For Coakley, these dyadic formulations obscure the truth about the Holy Spirit and complicate efforts to arrive at an ecumenical agreement about the Spirit's procession. Even to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the West does, Coakley argues, "is to presume that a privileged dyad of Father and Son is already established,

    For Augustine on Persons and relations and the creative appropriation of his theology by Thomas Aquinas, see Bruce Marshall, "Aquinas the Augustinian? On the Uses of Augustine in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology," in *Aquinas the Augustinian*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 41–61 at 54–60.

2. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 1, ad. 1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3. See, for example, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 29.16.

4. See, for example, Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1976), 57; Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, trans. Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barringer, vol. 1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1994), 262; John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Continuum, 2006), 137n73, 145n92, 150–51.

5. Emmanuel Durand, *Le Père, Alpha et Oméga de la vie trinitaire* (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 273.

6. Durand, *Le Père, Alpha et Oméga*, 273.

7. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "on the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101, 327–34; Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Processions and Persons* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), 525–26, 561.

and the Spirit then somehow has to be fitted in thereafter."[8] For similar reasons, Thomas Weinandy criticizes traditional accounts of the Holy Spirit, both Eastern and Western, for portraying the Holy Spirit as entirely passive within the Trinity and for failing to assign him any active role, which Weinandy argues is unbefitting to the Holy Spirit's status as a Person.[9]

These criticisms call for a careful but appreciative response. On the one hand, there are compelling reasons to hold that the Divine Persons are identical with their personal relations. If God is simple, as early Christian theologians universally maintained, and as medieval and modern church councils have taught, then each Divine Person must also be simple.[10] It follows that any property attributed to a Divine Person must be identical with that Person. The Father cannot merely possess the property of paternity; since there is no composition in him, he himself must be that property. Moreover, properly understood, the relations of paternity and filiation imply reference to the Holy Spirit. As Gilles Emery has argued, "the Holy Spirit is not absent from the relation of paternity and filiation that 'constitute' the Father and the Son," because "the procession of the Holy Spirit is inscribed in the mutual relation of the Father and the Son."[11]

On the other hand, overemphasis on the Aristotelian category of relation can diminish our appreciation for other aspects of the trinitarian mystery. Conceptually, the category of relation is static. It picks out for our attention how something relates to something else. It does not pick out for our attention how that relation came about. Yet the Divine Persons do not just relate to each other. They also actively communicate or receive their deity. They can therefore also be understood through the category of act. With too much emphasis on the category of relation, and too little attention to the dynamic origin of the Son and the Spirit in their respective processions and to the Father's status as the ultimate source of those processions and "the font and origin of all divinity,"[12] the Divine Persons can come to seem inert and lifeless. Moreover, while neither the Eastern nor Western

8. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 330.
9. See Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 6–15, esp. 7–9. Coakley shares Weindandy's concerns and likewise aims to portray the Holy Spirit with an active role within the Trinity. See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, esp. 100–144, 235–36, 287–88, 308–34.
10. For a historical survey of Christian teaching on divine simplicity from the early church to the present, see Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) and the July 2019 issue of *Modern Theology*. See also Lateran IV (1215), can. 1, and Vatican I (1870), *Dei Filius*, ch. 1, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 43rd ed., Latin–English, ed. Peter Hünermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), nos. 800, 3001 (hereafter cited as *DH*).
11. Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine of the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 116. See also Robert M. Doran, *The Trinity in History: A Theology of the Divine Missions*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 85–86.
12. Eleventh Council of Toledo (675), in *DH*, no. 525.

traditions can be fairly accused of impugning the divine coequality of the Holy Spirit or denying him an active role within the Trinity, there are tendencies within both traditions that can lead to a diminished appreciation of the Holy Spirit, and more could be done to counter them. The theology of Thomas Aquinas, for example, whether fairly or not, can easily be taken to imply that the Father and the Son are established in their identities without any reference to the Holy Spirit.

With these concerns in mind, this article will present a reconstruction of an important but neglected element of the trinitarian theology of Thomas Aquinas: namely, his teaching on the notional acts, the intratrinitarian acts attributed to the Divine Persons, and how they relate to individual Divine Persons.[13] First, it will provide a summary of medieval trinitarian terminology as interpreted by Aquinas and show that, in agreement with many readings of Aquinas but against others, he counts four notional acts within the Trinity, not two. Then it will explain how, for Aquinas, and for medieval theologians more generally, although we can distinguish between the Divine Persons and their respective intratrinitarian acts according to our human mode of understanding, each Divine Person is, in reality (literally, in the *res*, or in the thing), nothing other than a single divine act.[14] Finally, this article will argue that thinking of the Divine

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13. Despite being integral to his theology of the Trinity, the notional acts are rarely discussed in the secondary literature on Thomas Aquinas. For lengthy exceptions, see Paul Vanier, *Théologie trinitaire chez saint Thomas d'Aquin: Évolution du concept d'action notionnelle* (Montreal: Institut d'études médiévales, 1953); Emmanuel Perrier, *La fécundité en Dieu: La puissance notionnelle dans la Trinité selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009), esp. 173–203; Deryck C. Barson, "A Divine Person in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2019), esp. 29–35, 240–59. For briefer exceptions, see Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *Paths to the Triune God: An Encounter between Aquinas and Recent Theologies* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 218–24; Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74–77. For Aquinas's most significant treatments of the notional acts, see *Commentary on 1 Sentences*, d. 5, q. 3, ad. 3; d. 10, a. 5, ad. 3; d. 11, q. 1, a. 3; d. 32, q. 1, a. 1–2 (hereafter, for Aquinas and other medieval authors, commentaries on book 1 of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* cited as *1 Sent.*); Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 2, a. 6; Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, 1.59–65 (hereafter cited as *CT*); and Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 36, a. 1; q. 37, a. 2; q. 40–41. The most important of these are those found in the *Compendium Theologiae* and the *Summa Theologiae*. For the Latin text of passages quoted in this article, see *1 Sent.* (Parma: Petrus Fiaccadorus, 1856); *De Potentia* (Taurini: Marietti, 1953); *CT* (Taurini: Marietti, 1954); and *ST* 1 (Rome: Leonine, 1888), as available at http://www.corpusthomisticum.org.

14. Medieval theologians routinely distinguish between the way we think or talk about things and the things themselves. Thomas Aquinas does so as well. To indicate when he is speaking about how we talk about things, he specifies "according to mode of signification" (*secundum modum significandi*); to indicate he is speaking about how we think about things, he specifies "according to mode of understanding" (*secundum modum intelligendi*); and to indicate that he is talking about the things themselves, he specifies "in reality" (*re*, in the thing). The last expression is difficult to translate; "in reality" is a standard English translation.

Persons as divine acts offers significant resources for contemporary theology and corrects against certain perceived weaknesses of Aquinas's trinitarian theology and relation-centered accounts of the Trinity more generally.

Medieval Trinitarian Terminology as Interpreted by Thomas Aquinas

Probably the single greatest obstacle to the contemporary retrieval of medieval trinitarian theology is its highly technical terminology. It is filled with metaphysical and philosophical presuppositions foreign to most people today and is difficult even for professional theologians to access. Complicating matters further is the fact that the same terms can be used with subtle, but significant, differences in meaning. Accordingly, there is considerable confusion and disagreement in the secondary literature on Thomas Aquinas about what he means by the term *notional act*. In particular, there is great disagreement about whether he recognizes four notional acts or only two—a question of considerable importance for his understanding of the notional acts. Yet this confusion and disagreement is rarely noted or even addressed. Consequently, before turning to the question of how Aquinas relates the Divine Persons to their notional acts, which is the principal interest of this article, it is necessary to provide an overview of his interpretation of medieval trinitarian terminology, and also to clarify how many notional acts he thinks there are.

Following patristic custom, medieval theologians attribute relations to the Divine Persons. Three relations are proper to a single Person only: the relation of *paternity*, proper to the Father and directed to the Son; the relation of *filiation*, proper to the Son and directed to the Father; and the relation of *procession*, proper to the Spirit and directed to Father and Son. These three relations are sometimes called *personal relations*. Then there is a fourth relation: the relation of *common spiration*, also known as *active spiration*, which belongs to both the Father and the Son and is directed to the Holy Spirit. These relations do not subsist between Persons. In the typical modern understanding of a relationship, a relationship is a common reality shared by two or more people. Trinitarian relations, however, are different. They are Aristotelian relations. They are properties. For example, the Father has the relation of paternity, which means that he relates to the Son as Father. The Father's relation of paternity is not common to Father and Son, nor is it a tertium quid "between" Father and Son. It is proper to the Father, and only to the Father, even though it is directed to the Son. Aquinas embraces this tradition and assigns the four relations to the three Divine Persons accordingly.[15]

In addition to the four relations, Aquinas also lists five notions. Sometime in the twelfth century, theologians began to speak of notions.[16] Notions are ideas by which

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15. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 28, a. 4; q. 33, a. 4.
16. The concept of notion traces back to Augustine and *De Trinitate* 5.7. Its medieval appropriation was greatly promoted by Peter Lombardo, who makes use of the term *notiones* at critical points in his discussion of the Trinity. See Peter Lombard, *1 Sent.*, d. 7, c. 2; d. 26, c. 2; d. 27, c. 2–3; d. 28, c. 1, cc. 5–6; d. 29, cc. 3–4; d. 31, c. 1–2; d. 33, c.2. (These conclusions about the emergence of the term *notiones* are based in part on searches conducted on Brepolis [www.brepolis.net], Brepolis's online database of Latin texts. Brepolis

the Divine Persons are known.[17] Notions include relations, but they also include the property of unbegottenness (innascibility) proper to the Father. For some time, it was debated how many notions there were, and, in the process, what exactly a notion consisted of. The view that became standard—which is also Aquinas's view—is that there are five notions: the four relations plus the property of unbegottenness.[18] This settled enumeration implicitly clarified the meaning of notion. It also more firmly established the technical terms of *paternity*, *filiation*, *procession*, *common spiration*, and *unbegottenness* in medieval trinitarian theology.

In addition to the five notions, medieval theologians also speak of four intratrinitarian activities, which correspond to the relations like verbs to nouns.[19] To the Father is assigned *generation*, also known as *active generation*; to the Son, *nativity*, also known as *passive generation*; to the Spirit, *procession*, also known as *passive spiration*; to Father and Son together, *spiration*, also known as *active* or *common spiration*.[20] The term *generation* denotes the Father's generating of the Son; the term *nativity* denotes the Son's coming forth from the Father; the term *procession* denotes the Spirit's coming forth from Father and Son; the term *spiration* denotes the Father's and Son's spirating of the Holy Spirit. (Very confusingly, the terms *spiration* and *procession* are the same terms used for the relations of common spiration and procession.) By the time of Aquinas, these terms had become standard for talking about the intratrinitarian activities attributed to the Divine Persons.

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includes an extensive selection of edited medieval texts, so these conclusions are well founded, but they are only tentative and provisional, since numerous relevant medieval texts have not been edited or published, especially those by less famous authors.) Fiona Robb has come to a similar and complementary conclusion. She holds that the medieval classification of nouns referring to God as either essential, personal, or notional "probably goes back to Anselm of Laon via his two most famous and influential pupils, Peter Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers." See Fiona Robb, "Intellectual Tradition and Misunderstanding: The Development of Academic Theology on the Trinity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries" (PhD diss., University College, London, 1993), 34.

17. See, for example, Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 32, a. 2, ad. 2.
18. See, for example, Albert, *1 Sent.*, d. 13G, a. 10; 28B, a. 1; d. 29D, a. 8–9; Alexander of Hales, *1 Sent.*, d. 27, n. 3, p. 3; d. 27, n. 8, p. b; d. 28, n. 5–6; d. 29, n. 4, p. a; d. 33, n. 4; Bonaventure, *Breviloqium*, 1.3; Aquinas, *ST* 1, a. 32, a. 3.
19. The phrase *intratrinitarian activity* is not a medieval expression; it is used here in a purely descriptive fashion, as a metaphysically neutral placeholder, to designate the various ways that the Divine Persons communicate or receive their deity. It is not meant to prejudge the question of whether or not every intratrinitarian activity is also, metaphysically, an act in the Aristotelian sense.
20. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 4. See also Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 3; Aquinas, *CT*, 1.59, 1.63–65. Regarding the meaning of the term *nativity*, Aquinas explains that *nativity* is "the special name of the Son's procession" in *De Potentia*, q. 10, a. 2, ad. 16. Regarding the Spirit's personal relation, Aquinas explains that the Spirit's relation has no proper name and so is called *procession* or *passive spiration*, terms that apply in the first place to the Spirit's origin or procession and only indirectly to his relation. See Aquinas, *1 Sent.* d. 18, q. 1, a. 4; *De Potentia*, q. 10, a. 2, ad. 16; *CT*, 1.59; *ST* 1, q. 28, a. 4.

That much is clear. What is not clear, however, is how medieval theologians classified generation, nativity, procession, and spiration. They all agreed that paternity, filiation, procession, and common spiration were relations. And they all agreed that paternity, filiation, procession, common spiration, and unbegottenness were notions. But what were generation, nativity, procession, and spiration? Among medieval theologians, there is no single category for all four that claims widespread consensus, at least in terms of explicit endorsement. In fact, at least until Thomas Aquinas, medieval theologians rarely even hint at one. They do, however, agree about some things. They agree that nativity and procession can be classified as origins: the way by which the Son and the Spirit receive their respective identities. They agree that nativity and procession can also be classified as processions: the way that the Son and the Spirit come forth from their respective principles (with the Son's principle being the Father, and the Spirit's principle being the Father and the Son together).[21]

Medieval theologians also agree on another point. Beginning in the thirteenth century, after the terminology of notions had been well established, some theologians also speak about notional acts.[22] Notional acts are acts associated with the notions, and therefore individual Divine Persons. Beyond that, the category of notional act is not well defined. Among those theologians who use the term *notional act*, there is little consensus about its meaning and proper usage. Nevertheless, they agree on one important point: generation and spiration can be classified as notional acts.

But apart from these points of agreement, medieval theologians give mixed indications. Should the categories of origin and procession be taken to include generation and spiration (in addition to nativity and procession)? And should the category of notional act be taken to include nativity and procession (in addition to generation and spiration)? The answer is not immediately apparent. For example, medieval theologians often speak of origins in a generic way that clearly includes nativity and procession, but may or may not include generation and spiration. For the most part, medieval theologians do not attempt to clarify which intratrinitarian activities fall under the categories of origin or notional act. They simply talk about them in the course of addressing some topic in trinitarian theology. They rarely discuss how they should be classified.

On a few occasions, Thomas Aquinas makes an effort to explain his understanding of how these four intratrinitarian activities relate to each other and other trinitarian categories. In question 40 of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, in the course of explaining why the Divine Persons are constituted by relations not origins, he states that origins can be understood from either an active perspective or a passive perspective.[23]

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21. The triple use of the term *procession* to refer to either the relation of procession, the Spirit's proceeding, or generic trinitarian proceeding is one of the most confusing aspects of medieval trinitarian terminology.

22. On searches conducted on Brepolis (www.brepolis.net), Albert is the earliest theologian to use the term *notional act*.

23. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 4. See also *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2. Aquinas also speaks of "active origin" in *CT*, 1.59. Aquinas stands out from his contemporaries for how clearly he affirms that origins can be considered from an active as well as a passive perspective, but he is not unique in this regard. In *1 Sent.* d. 26, a. 1, q. 3, Bonaventure implies that the Father's generation of the Son is an origin, suggesting that Bonaventure, too, counts active generation as an origin.

Taken actively, the category of origin encompasses generation and spiration. Taken passively, the category of origin encompasses nativity and procession. Elsewhere, in the *Compendium Theologiae*, he states that *common spiration* and *procession*, as well as *generation* and *nativity*, all signify origin.[24] Based on these passages, it is clear that, for Aquinas, each of these four intratrinitarian activities can be classified under the category of origin.

What Aquinas says about origins seems to apply to processions as well. On multiple occasions, Aquinas speaks of "origins or processions" in a way that implicitly equates origins with processions.[25] It is easy to understand why Aquinas equates origins and processions. If origins are the way by which Divine Persons receive their identity, and processions are the way that Divine Persons come forth from their respective principles, then of course it makes sense to equate origins with processions. The terms *origin* and *procession* each signify the same reality. The concept of origin puts the emphasis on how Divine Persons receive their identity, while the concept of procession puts the emphasis on how those same Divine Persons come forth from their principles, but both *origin* and *procession* signify the same reality. And if *origin* and *procession* signify the same reality, it follows that, for Aquinas, processions can also be understood from either an active or a passive perspective, just like origins.[26] In fact, in one place in his *Sentences* commentary, he uses the expression *passive procession*.[27] His use of this term implies that there is also such a thing as active procession. And if there is such a thing as active procession, then clearly procession can be understood either actively (from the perspective of the Father and the Son) or passively (from the perspective of the Spirit). Elsewhere he confirms this implication by stating that the terms *spiration* and *procession* each pertain to the "processions or origins."[28] For Aquinas, then, the category of procession, like the category of origin, has a double aspect, in that it can be understood either actively or passively. The category of procession does not apply merely to the Son and the Spirit coming forth from their respective principles; it also applies to the Father generating the Son, and to the Father and the Son together spirating the Spirit.

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24. Aquinas, *CT*, 1.59. He also indicates that *generation* and *nativity* both signify origin in *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 3, and that *spiration* and *procession* both signify origin in *ST* 1, q. 28, a. 4.
25. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.24; *ST* 1, q. 27, prologue; 1, q. 28, a. 4; 1, q. 35, a. 1; *Commentary on John*, 16.4; John Baptist Ku, *God the Father in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 35n3. The *Summa Fratris Alexandri* and Bonaventure also equate origins with emanations. See *Summa Fratris Alexandri* 1, p. 1, in. 2, tr. 1, q. 1, t. 2, c. 5; Bonaventure, *1 Sent.*, d. 26, a. 1, q. 3.
26. Bernard Lonergan describes processions in this way, though without explicitly stating that it is Aquinas's own understanding of processions. See Bernard Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, trans. Michael G. Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 235–37.
27. Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 14, q. 1, a. 2, arg. 4. Albert also speaks of passive procession in Albert, *1 Sent.*, d. 15A, a. 5. Even more significantly, in *1 Sent.*, d. 26C, a. 13, Albert speaks of "processions active and passive" in the context of explaining how the relations of paternity and filiation relate to each other.
28. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 28, a. 4.

Like the categories of origin and procession, the category of notional act has a double aspect, too, both active and passive. Most of the time, Aquinas applies the category of notional act in an active sense, either to the Father generating the Son, or to the Father and the Son together spirating the Spirit. Yet he also implicitly classifies nativity and procession as notional acts. In one passage, Aquinas describes the Son's receiving of the divine essence from the Father as a notional act,[29] and in another he implies that generation and nativity are each equally notional acts.[30] Likewise, in a couple of other passages, he refers to the Spirit's procession as a notional act.[31] He also says that the Holy Spirit "proceeds as a subsisting operation,"[32] a phrase that implies that the Spirit's proceeding is a kind of act. Individually and together, these passing comments all suggest that, for Aquinas, it is not merely generation and spiration that can rightly be classified as notional acts but also nativity and procession.

There is another reason to think that, for Aquinas, the category of notional act includes nativity and procession and not just generation and spiration. In his commentary on the *Sentences*, he explains that there are not two operations in the Father's generation and the Son's nativity, but only one. "By one and the same operation," he writes, "the Father generates and the Son is born; but this operation is in the Father and the Son differently according to their respective relations."[33] For Aquinas, generation and nativity are not two distinct operations; they are the same operation from two different perspectives. By implication, the same must be true of spiration and procession. And if spiration and procession are one and the same operation from different perspectives, then they must each also be acts—or more precisely, notional acts.

Aquinas makes a clarification about the Son's generation that bolsters this conclusion. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he explains that when we speak of the Son being generated, we must understand any implied passivity in a "grammatical" sense only, according to the way we talk about the Son's generation, and not in the sense of moving from potency to act.[34] Since God is pure act, there can be no metaphysical passivity in the Son's nativity or the Spirit's procession. Only one conclusion is possible: that both nativity (passive generation) and procession (passive spiration) are acts, too.[35]

29. Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 5, q. 3 a. 1 ad. 3.

30. "Notional acts and the relations of persons differ according to mode of signification, but in reality they are entirely the same; hence the Master says, in Book 1, distinction 27 of the *Sentences*, that *generation* and *nativity* are different names for paternity and filiation." See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 1, ad. 2.

31. Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 32, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 3; 1, q. 36, a. 1.

32. Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 32, q. 1, a. 2, ad. 4. This passage was drawn to my attention by an unpublished manuscript by John Baptist Ku.

33. Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 20, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 1; Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 75.

34. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 1, ad. 3. See also 1, q. 41, a. 6, ad. 1.

35. As John Baptist Ku writes, "'To be spirated' (or 'to proceed') is an *action* that involves no passivity whatsoever. The term '*passive* spiration,' a common expression among Aquinas' contemporaries, signifies simply that the Holy Spirit receives the divine nature of the Father and the Son; and this 'receiving' is an act!" See Ku, *God the Father*, 31. Likewise, in his presentation of trinitarian doctrine, which draws extensively on the trinitarian theology

For a variety of reasons, then, we have good grounds to conclude that, for Aquinas, the categories of origin, procession, and notional act designate the same realities in God. Yet this conclusion stands in some tension with the way Aquinas usually talks. Most of the time when he speaks about origins and processions, Aquinas seems to have in mind the coming forth of a Person from his principle, and, therefore, either nativity or procession.[36] Likewise, when Aquinas speaks about notional acts, he usually seems to have in mind the acts proper to the principle of a procession, namely generation and spiration.[37] And when it comes to the question of how many notional acts there are, he gives mixed signals. Sometimes he seems to classify generation, nativity, spiration, and procession as four distinct notional acts. On other occasions, he speaks as though there are only two origins, processions, or notional acts. In the *Summa Theologiae*, for example, he states that there are only two actions in God, namely the action of the intellect and the action of the will, and that, as a result, there are only two processions, namely the procession of the Word and the procession of love.[38]

The tension between Aquinas's definitions of key terms and his actual use of them reflects larger tensions in medieval theology. Medieval theologians, like theologians today, never sat down to agree to any conventions about how they would speak about the Trinity. They just spoke about the Trinity with the vocabularies that they had inherited, and in conversation with each other, they gradually refined those vocabularies and settled on ways of speaking that allowed them to communicate, however imperfectly. The result was a functional, but not entirely consistent, terminology. Despite Aquinas's evident interest in formulating systematic definitions and developing grammatical rules for using terms consistently, he is constrained by his inherited vocabulary. There is only so much order he can inject into linguistic conventions that arose organically, and not by design.

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of Thomas Aquinas, Gilles Emery writes, "To proceed is an act." Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine of the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 150. For texts where Aquinas seems to classify the Spirit's procession as a notional act, see *1 Sent.*, d. 32, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 3; *ST* 1, q. 36, a. 1.

36. See, for example, Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 27, a. 1–5. This question on "procession" and its five articles are mainly concerned with the Son coming forth from the Father and the Spirit coming forth from the Father and Son—not the Father generating the Son or the Father and Son spirating the Spirit.

37. For example, in the *Summa Theologiae*, for most of Question 41 on the notional acts (except for *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 1, ad. 1–3 and *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 6, ad. 1), Aquinas talks as though notional acts are proper to the principle of a procession only. He also speaks this way about notional acts in *CT*, 1.63–65.

38. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 27, a. 5 (see also 1, q. 28, a. 4, ad. 2). Now, in this passage, Aquinas does not explicitly relate these two actions and processions to the category of notional acts. He also uses the word *actiones*, not *actus*, and Aquinas always speaks of *actus notionales*, never of *actiones notionales*. Nevertheless, what he says here can easily be taken to imply that there are two and only two notional acts, which stands in some tension with what he says elsewhere.

Aquinas's lack of consistency explains the confusion and disagreement in the secondary literature about his theology of notional acts. In the secondary literature, scholars generally agree that, for Aquinas, *processions*, *origins*, and *notional acts* all somehow signify the emanation of the Son and the Holy Spirit from their respective principles. But they differ about whether these expressions signify the same realities in God. Some hold that *notional act* means the same thing as *procession*.[39] Others hold that these two terms denote two separate categories, with notional acts relating to processions like action to passion.[40] Interpreters also disagree about the number of notional acts. Some speak of two notional acts.[41] Others count four: generation (active generation) and nativity (passive generation), and then spiration (active spiration) and procession (passive spiration).[42] Still others speak of two notional acts: generation and spiration, but then specify that each notional act has a double aspect, such that generation and spiration can be considered from either an active perspective or a passive perspective.[43]

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39. As suggested by John Baptist Ku, citing Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 32, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 3, in *God the Father*, 35n3. Citing Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 4, Ku also suggests that the terms *origin* and *notional action* refer to the same thing. In a similar vein, Emmanuel Durand suggests that, for Aquinas, the terms *origin*, *act*, *emanation*, and *procession* are all interchangeable. See Emmanuel Durand, "La Père en sa relation constitutive au Fils selon saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue thomiste* 107 (2007): 47–72 at 51.

40. As suggested by Barson, "A Divine Person," 30–31.

41. Hyacinthe-François Dondaine in S. Thomas d'Aquin, *Somme théologique: La Trinité, ol. 2: 1a, Questions 33–43*, ed. Hyacinthe-François Dondaine (Paris: Société Saint Jean l'Évangeliste, 1945), 357–58; Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Trinity and God the Creator: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, Ia, Q. 27–119*, trans. Frederic C. Eckhoff (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1952), 77, 283–94; Barson, "A Divine Person," 30. Garrigou-Lagrange calls the two notional acts *active generation* and *active spiration*.

42. Lonergan is perhaps the most prominent interpreter of Aquinas who speaks of four notional acts. He does not explicitly state that Aquinas holds for four notional acts; however, given that he bases his trinitarian theology on Aquinas, he seems to at least see this view to be compatible with his teaching. See Lonergan, *The Triune God*, 385. Karl Rahner cites Lonergan and follows him in *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 78. According to an article by R. L. Stewart, which is supposedly about the topic of notional acts in general but seems mainly concerned with the proper interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, theologians differ about whether there are two or four notional acts, but the majority of theologians hold for four. See his "Acts, Notional," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 86. Likewise, although they do not explicitly claim that there are four notional acts, Anselm Min and John Baptist Ku each describe passive generation and/or passive spiration as notional acts distinct from active generation and/or active spiration. See Min, *Paths to the Triune God*, 219; Ku, *God the Father*, 47–48.

43. A. Michel, "Notions (dans la Trinité)," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol 11.1, ed. Émile Amann (Paris: Librarie Letouzey et Ané, 1931), 802–5 at 804. This understanding of the notional acts is not presented explicitly as the teaching of Thomas Aquinas; however, in context, it is strongly implied that it accurately describes his teaching. Moreover, despite identifying the notional acts with active generation and active spiration (as noted above), Garrigou-Lagrange in another place speaks of a notional act "taken actively"—implying that a notional act can also be taken passively. See Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Trinity*, 283.

Having considered the conflicting evidence, we can easily account for this diversity of opinions among interpreters of Aquinas. Does he hold for two notional acts or four? Are processions, origins, and notional acts all the same thing, or do the terms *procession*, *origin*, and *notional act* refer to different realities in God? Aquinas is not entirely consistent. As a result, a variety of answers to these questions can claim good textual support. But on balance, if we pay particular attention to how he defines terms and the architectonic structure of his trinitarian metaphysics, we have good grounds to conclude that, for Aquinas, generation, nativity, spiration, and procession can each be classified as notional acts (whether that implies four notional acts, or two notional acts that can be considered from either an active or passive perspective), and that most of what he says about processions and origins applies to notional acts, and vice versa.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and Their Notional Acts

It is well known that, according to Thomas Aquinas, the Divine Persons are subsisting relations: that is, relations that subsist in and of themselves and not as accidents of some other substance.[44] What is not as well known is that, for Aquinas, the Divine Persons are also, in reality, their respective notional acts. The way we talk and think about the Divine Persons differs from the way we talk and think about their respective notional acts, but they are ultimately one and the same thing. Divine Persons and their respective notional acts differ "according to mode of signification" (*secundum modum significandi*) or "according to mode of understanding" (*secundum modum intelligendi*), but in reality (in the *res*, in the thing), they are the same. The Father *is* generation, the Son *is* nativity, and the Spirit *is* procession.

Speaking of the Father, Aquinas explains, "Just as God's act of understanding is God himself understanding, so the Father's act of begetting is the begetting Father himself, although the modes of signifying are different."[45] The same applies to the other Divine Persons. Just as the Father is an act, the Son and the Spirit are acts, too. The Son is the act of proceeding from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the act of proceeding from the Father and the Son.[46] The reason for this identity between Person and action is, ultimately, divine simplicity. If there were a real distinction between Person

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44. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 4.
45. Aquinas, *CT*, 1.65, trans. (modified) Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: Herder, 1947), 61.
46. Aquinas does not put it this way explicitly. He never says, "the Son is the act of proceeding from the Father." Moreover, except by implication in *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 1 ad. 2, he does not call nativity a notional act. Nevertheless, especially in light of what he says about the Father generating and the Son being generated by one and the same operation in Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 20 q. 1 a. 1 ad. 1, we are well justified in concluding that, for Aquinas, "the Son is the act of proceeding from the Father." Likewise, Aquinas never says, "the Spirit is the act of proceeding from the Father and the Son." Still, this inference is well justified, especially on account of the two passages where he seems to call the Spirit's procession a notional act. See Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 32, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 3; Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 36, a. 1.

and action in God, then action would be an accident, and divine simplicity rules out there being any accident in God.[47]

For similar reasons, Aquinas holds that, in reality, notional acts are identical with the corresponding relations. "Notional acts and the relations of Persons differ according to mode of signification, but in reality, they are entirely the same."[48] Notional acts differ from relations according to understanding and mode of signification, but they are the same in the sense that matters most: in actual, objective reality. Elsewhere, using the terminology of origins rather than notional acts, he makes a similar point. He explains that relations and origins are the same in reality, but relations signify "by way of form" while origins signify "by way of act."[49] The identity of relations and notional acts follows naturally from thinking of the Divine Persons as Aristotelian relations. For within the Trinity, relations imply processions, or more precisely, the Aristotelian categories of action and passion; with creatures, relations can be explained otherwise, but within God, only procession can explain relation.[50] The relation of paternity, for example, implies generation. The Father's relation to the Son as Father implies that the Father generates the Son. And due to the divine simplicity, anything attributed to a Divine Person must be identical with anything else attributed to that Person. So generation must be identical with paternity, and vice versa.

Compared to his contemporaries Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure (though not Albert) and many of his successors (notable exceptions including Henry of Ghent, John Duns Scotus, Dionysius the Carthusian), Aquinas stands out for how frequently he talks about notional acts.[51] This fact suggests that, compared to his contemporaries, he found the metaphysical category of act particularly useful when it comes to understanding the Divine Persons. Nevertheless, in asserting the ultimate identity of Persons, relations, and origins, Aquinas is not being innovative. He is asserting something held universally by his contemporaries.[52] The difference is that he also frequently invokes the category of notional act, which was just beginning to appear as a rough synonym for the category

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47. "But in God, action is not distinguished from agent except according to reason, because otherwise action would be an accident in God." See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 4,1 a. 4, ad. 3. On the incompatibility of accidents with divine simplicity, see Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 3, a. 6.

48. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 1, ad. 2.

49. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2.

50. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 28, a. 4. See also Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 53–55.

51. In the works available on Brepolis, Alexander of Hales does not use the term *actus notionalis* at all; Bonaventure uses it only once in *1 Sent.*, d. 10, dubia 3. By contrast, Thomas Aquinas uses it fifty-five times; Albert, twenty-four times; Henry of Ghent, twenty-seven times; John Duns Scotus, twenty times; Walter Chatton, three times; William of Ockham, five times; and Dionysius the Carthusian, thirty-two times. Dionysius and Henry of Ghent also each use the term *actio notionalis* a handful of times, and Scotus once.

52. In an article surveying medieval trinitarian metaphysics, Marilyn McCord Adams describes Aquinas as voicing "the consensus that origins are really the same as the relations." See Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Metaphysics of the Trinity in Some Fourteenth Century Franciscans," *Franciscan Studies* 66 (2008): 101–68 at 158, https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.0.0013.

of origin, and thus extends the identity of Persons, relation, and origins to include notional acts as well. Bonaventure, for example, makes similar claims as Aquinas about the identity of Persons and origins. In the context of explaining how personal properties distinguish the Divine Persons from each other, Bonaventure explains that "in Divine Persons, 'to originate,' 'to be,' and 'to refer to another' are all the same," but we can distinguish between them according to our mode of understanding.[53] Later, he applies this principle to God the Father. He maintains that paternity and generation "are the same property in reality (*secundum rem*)," but this same property can signified in different ways.[54] On these points, there is no substantive difference between Bonaventure and Aquinas. They agree that the Father and the act of generating differ according to mode of signification; they also agree that, in reality (in the *res*), the Father and the act of generating are one and the same.

Beyond these points of agreement, however, Aquinas takes a position that differentiates him from Bonaventure.[55] He holds that the Divine Persons are "constituted" not by origins or notional acts but by relations.[56] More specifically, they are constituted by personal relations (that is, paternity, filiation, or procession).[57] What he means by this

53. Bonaventure, *1 Sent., Opera Omnia*, vol. 1 (Quaracchi, 1882), d. 26, a. 1, q. 3.

54. Bonaventure, *1 Sent.*, d. 27, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1.

55. The extent to which Aquinas diverges from Bonaventure is not clear. Bonaventure gives mixed indications about whether he thinks that relations or origins should have conceptual priority. He is widely held to favor origins, but the point is contested. What is beyond dispute, however, is that Bonaventure does not take an unequivocal position in favor of the priority of relations. Given how emphatically Aquinas prioritizes relations over origins, the sheer fact that Bonaventure does not stake out a clear position in favor of relations is already in itself a significant point of divergence. On the interpretation of Bonaventure about the relative priority of relations and origins, see Zachary Hayes, "Introduction," in *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1979), 11–103 at 38; Russell L. Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions at the Medieval University: The Use of Philosophical Psychology in Trinitarian Theology among the Franciscans and Dominicans, 1250–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 74–80, esp. 76n59; Ku, *God the Father*, 172–78. What is striking is that, unlike Aquinas, Bonaventure is not interested in the question of what "constitutes" the Divine Persons; that terminology seems to be foreign to the way he speaks about the distinction of Persons within the Trinity. It may be that interpreters are divided because the questions that Aquinas and later theologians are trying to answer are foreign to Bonaventure's mindset.

56. On the distinction and constitution of Divine Persons, see especially Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2 a. 2; *CT*, 1.60–65; *De Potentia* q. 8, a. 3; *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2, a. 4. For sympathetic expositions of Aquinas's position on this question, see Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 120–27; Ku, *God the Father*, 172–83. For a comparative discussion of constitution in medieval theologians such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, Alexander of Hales, and Scotus, see the editors' note in Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia*, 1:459. For a contemporary Thomist account, see Lonergan, *The Triune God*, 365.

57. According to Aquinas, the relation of common spiration does not constitute any Divine Person. It is common to both Father and Son, and it does not constitute either of them; instead, it inheres in their already constituted Persons. See Aquinas, *CT*, 1.60.

claim is not entirely clear because Aquinas is not entirely clear about what it means to constitute a Divine Person in the first place.[58] Nor does he explain how constituting differs from distinguishing.[59] To constitute a Divine Person is to make him who he is; beyond that it is difficult to say more. But it is clear that, for Aquinas, relations have a conceptual priority over origins. Even though relations and origins denote the same thing in God, they differ in mode of signification. And according to Aquinas, the mode of signification proper to relations is suited to the Divine Persons in a way that the mode of signification proper to origins is not. Consequently, relations can be said to constitute the Divine Persons, but origins cannot. In taking this position, Aquinas is following his teacher, Albert, who held that the Father's generation of the Son presupposes a distinct Person; therefore paternity precedes generation.[60] His position on this point will be vigorously defended by many theologians, especially Dominicans, and strenuously criticized by others, especially Franciscans.[61]

In light of the controversy that follows him, which hardens as the years pass, it is notable that Aquinas's position on the constitution of Divine Persons evolves over the course of his life. In his earlier writings, he emphasizes the priority of relation emphatically. He argues that the Persons are distinguished only by relation, and he does so without mentioning mode of signification or mode of understanding.[62] Later, his position softens, and he makes qualifications.[63] Quite possibly in response to Bonaventure, he concedes that, according to the order of understanding, origin does precede relation

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58. Aquinas gives his longest and clearest explanation of what it means to constitute a Divine Person in his *CT*: "Although several notions or properties may pertain to a single Person, only one of them constitutes the Person. For a Divine Person is constituted by the properties, not in the sense that He is constituted by several of them, but in the sense that the relative, subsisting property itself is a Person. If several properties were understood as subsisting in themselves apart, they would be several persons, and not one person. Hence we must understand that, of the several properties or notions belonging to a single Person, the one that precedes according to the order of nature constitutes the Person; the others are understood as inhering in the Person already constituted." See Aquinas, *CT*, 1.60, trans. (modified) Vollert, 56.

59. In *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2, Aquinas indicates that, even though constituting implies distinguishing, distinguishing does not always imply constituting. Yet he does not explain why. How exactly constituting differs from distinguishing is a significant problem of interpretation.

60. Albert's views are evident in his discussion of the personal distinction of the Father. See Albert, *1 Sent.*, d. 27, a. 2; Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 125–27.

61. On thirteenth- and fourteenth-century criticism of Aquinas on this point, see Adams, "Metaphysics of the Trinity"; Russell L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and *Intellectual Traditions*; John T. Slotemaker, *Trinitarian Theology in Medieval and Reformation Thought* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 79–112.

62. Aquinas, *1 Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 2.

63. Scholars have noted a shift in how he approaches the relative priority of relations and origins in his later writings. See Robert L. Richard, *The Problem of an Apologetical Perspective in the Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1963), 109–10; Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions*, 74n53.

in the case of the Son.[64] More significantly, he acknowledges that Persons are distinguished by origins as well as relations. He says that both relations and origins distinguish the Persons, but that "it is better to say that the Persons or hypostases are distinguished by relations than by origins" because the *ratio* of origin "signifies the way to a subsisting Person, and not yet as constituting it."[65] Despite these concessions, however, he remains true to his original intuition about the priority of relations over origins. He never wavers in his position that it is relations, and not origins, that "constitute" the Divine Persons.[66]

In explaining his position, Aquinas offers two main arguments. First, he acknowledges that relations and origins are ultimately the same in God, but he points out that relations signify "by way of form" while origins signify "by way of act."[67] Accordingly, relations express something intrinsic to the Persons, whereas origins express something extrinsic: namely, the way from something or the way to something. For example, the Son's nativity "signifies the way to a subsisting Person, and not yet as constituting it."[68] Consequently, relations are suited to signifying the Divine Persons in a way that origins are not. Second, Aquinas notes that "an action presupposes an acting Person."[69] Even though Persons and notional acts are the same in reality, they are not the same according to our mode of understanding. Therefore, according to our mode of understanding, notional acts presuppose Persons.[70]

Aquinas's position is puzzling. The idea that relation and origin could differ according to mode of signification, but in reality be the same, is not the puzzling part. It is widely held, for example, that God's goodness and God's wisdom differ in the way we think and talk about God, but in God himself, due to divine simplicity, God's goodness and God's wisdom are actually one and the same thing. But Aquinas goes beyond asserting that relation and origin differ according to mode of signification but in reality are the same. He also says that the Divine Persons are constituted exclusively by relation. It is difficult to fathom how this claim could be true. If relations and origins are

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64. See Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 3, ad. 7; *CT*, 1.64; *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 4, ad. 3; Bonaventure, *1 Sent.*, d. 27, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2. On the likely possibility that Aquinas is responding to Bonaventure, see Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought*, 33; *Intellectual Traditions*, 74n53; Ku, *God the Father*, 175–76.

65. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2. Two lines after conceding that both relations and origins distinguish the Persons, Aquinas states that origin "is not distinctive and constitutive of the hypostasis." This apparent contradiction is puzzling. Perhaps it is a slip, and Aquinas meant to say, "origin is distinctive but not constitutive of the hypostasis." More likely, Aquinas intends to make a category distinction between merely "distinguishing" and "distinguishing and constituting." In support of this latter possibility, we can note that Thomas often pairs the terms *distinguish* and *constitute* in later writings, as though both terms, when used together, convey a distinct meaning (see Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 3).

66. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2, a. 4; see also Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 10, a. 3.

67. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2.

68. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 2.

69. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 4; see also Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 10, a. 3.

70. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 40, a. 4; Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 10, a. 3.

the same in reality, then it follows that origins constitute the Divine Persons—make them what they are—just as much as relations. To deny this would be like saying that God's goodness, but not his wisdom, makes God who he is, which makes no sense. If God's goodness and God's wisdom are the same in reality, they must both equally make God who he is.

William of Ockham raises a similar objection. In his commentary on the *Sentences*, Ockham accurately summarizes Aquinas's position and then responds to it.[71] In his response, he rejects the idea that modes of signification are relevant to the question of whether origins or relations constitute Divine Persons. "We cannot say," Ockham writes, "that origin does not constitute, and relation does constitute, on the grounds that they differ according to modes of signification."[72] Since origins and relations are the same in reality, if relations constitute Persons, then origins constitute Persons and vice versa. Modes of signification have no bearing on the matter because modes of signification are proper to signs, not things.[73] And since Ockham agrees that relations and origins are the same in reality, he naturally concludes, against Aquinas, that origins, as well as relations, distinguish and constitute the Divine Persons.

It is difficult to see how Aquinas's position could overcome Ockham's objection. His claim that relations constitute Divine Persons, but origins do not, is not logically coherent.[74] The root problem seems to be Aquinas's understanding of signification. According to E. J. Ashworth, the theory of language that Aquinas shares with his contemporaries "tends to take words as units, endowed both with their signification and their *modi significandi* before they enter sentences and independently of speaker intention on any given occasion."[75] This approach to signification works well in a great variety of contexts, just as Newtonian mechanics works well with speeds not approaching the speed of light. Nevertheless, intention is intrinsic to words,[76] and while Aquinas is

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71. William of Ockham, *Ordinatio* 1, *Opera Theologica*, vol. 4 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1979), d. 26, q. 2; Adams, "Metaphysics of the Trinity," 159–65; Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions*, 623–24.

72. William of Ockham, *Ordinatio* 1, d. 26, q. 2.

73. Adams, "Metaphysics of the Trinity," 159–60; Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions*, 624.

74. This criticism and the suggestions that follow are meant as a sketch, not a fully developed argument; they touch on major issues that have been the subject of controversy since the thirteenth century and cannot be adequately defended here.

75. E. J. Ashworth, "Signification and Modes of Signifying in Thirteenth-Century Logic: A Preface to Aquinas on Analogy," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1991): 39–67 at 67, https://doi.org/10.5840/medievalpt199116.

76. For my defense of this point—which is by no means universally acknowledged, in part because intention is frequently identified with purpose or ultimate objective rather than something broader and more readily accessible—see Nicholas E. Lombardo, "A Voice Like the Sound of Many Waters: Inspiration, Authorial Intention, and Theological Exegesis," *Nova et Vetera* 19 (2021): 825–69 at 827–31, https://stpaulcenter.com/07-nv-19-3-lombardo/. See also Ben F. Meyer, "The Primacy of the Intended Sense of Texts," in *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Alison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989), 17–55 at esp. 19–20; John C. Farrell, *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

sensitive to authorial intention when it comes to interpreting texts,[77] his inherited theory of signification does not give adequate attention to speaker intention. Consequently, the theory is liable to break down in contexts where subtle shifts in intention change the meaning of words. That seems to be what is happening here. Aquinas seems to take the terms *relation* and *origin* to have a fixed mode of signification that transcends context or speaker intention. He also seems to treat their corresponding concepts as though they consist of mental representations. The problem is that words do not signify meaning apart from context and speaker intention. Moreover, mental concepts are not mini-models of external realities, but rather the medium through which we know the world, or in this case God.[78] In his claim that relations, but not origins, constitute the Divine Persons, Aquinas confuses the order of signification with the order of reality. He fails to see that, by maintaining that relations and origins are the same in reality, he has committed himself to the view that origins, as well as relations, constitute the Divine Persons.

Putting aside these criticisms, we might well want to ask, Why does Aquinas fight so forcefully for the conceptual priority of relations over origins, when he concedes that, in reality, relations and origins are the same? Why does he care? A large part of the answer traces back to Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. In book 1, distinction 27, Peter Lombard asks whether the Father is the Father because he begets or instead begets because he is the Father. Due to the influence of the *Sentences*, and the fact that theologians everywhere were required to teach from it and comment on it, this question was forced on theologians. Even when they made distinctions, as they usually did, the very process of answering the question encouraged them to think in binary terms and, as result, to argue for the conceptual priority of either relations or origins. Battle lines were quickly drawn, and it became one of the great controversies of medieval trinitarian theology.[79] With theologians long divided on this question by the time he started

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77. See, for example, Timothy Bellamah, "Qui Primo Per Verba Intenditur: Notes on Thomas's Understanding of Authorial Intention and the Literal Sense," in *Dominicans and the Challenge of Thomism*, ed. Michał Paluch and Piotr Lichacz (Warsaw: Instytut Thomistyczny Warszawa, 2012), 261–77.

78. See Robert Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," *Review of Metaphysics* 40 (1987): 451–63. Despite his appreciation for many aspects of his theory of human knowing, Sokowlowski sees problematic tendencies in Aquinas to reify concepts in just this way: "Aquinas's insistence that the thing we directly know is the thing itself and not an idea of the thing is reassuring, but the constant use of the term *similitudes* for intelligible species, concepts, judgments, and even arguments does seem to 'substantialize' them to an uncomfortable degree. As Bernardo Carlos Bazán says, with this doctrine 'Thomas inaugurates a kind of thought through intermediaries whose problems are enormous.' Descartes and Locke seem just around the corner." See Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 298; Bernardo Carlos Bazán, "*Intellectum Speculativum*: Averroes, Thomas Aquinas, and Siger of Brabant on the Intelligible Object," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 423–46 at 436, https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2008.0773.

79. Russell Friedman identifies this controversy about God the Father as one of the five most significant flashpoints in medieval trinitarian theology. See Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought*, 171–73.

teaching, it would have been natural for Aquinas to assume that he had to take sides and very difficult for him to recognize that Lombard's question was poorly framed and theologically misleading. It would also have been natural for Aquinas to favor relations over origins, as that was the position of his mentor, Albert. But whatever his precise reasons for emphasizing the conceptual priority of relations, it is striking that, as he grew older, Aquinas made more and more concessions to those who prioritized origins over relations—raising the possibility that, if he had lived longer, he may have made even more.

Explaining the Poor Reception of Aquinas's Theology of Notional Acts

Probably for most theologians today, even for those with more than a passing acquaintance with the theology of Thomas Aquinas, it would likely come as a surprise to hear that, for Aquinas, the Divine Persons are, in reality, identical with their respective notional acts. Or that in taking this position, he was not proposing anything novel but simply echoing a commonplace of medieval theology about Persons and origins being identical with each other. And yet, the facts speak for themselves.

The idea that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are, in reality, identical with their respective notional acts has no small significance—either in itself or in its implications. Why has this critical element of Aquinas's trinitarian theology been so poorly recognized? How could it have been missed? There are many reasons. There is, first of all, the problem of his inherited terminology and his limited success in repurposing it to suit his theological ends. In conventional connotation and his own usage, notional acts were strongly associated with active generation and active spiration. Despite holding that nativity and procession can also be classified as notional acts, Aquinas never states his position clearly and unambiguously; their status as notional acts has to be inferred from passing comments and the internal logic of his system. Moreover, despite clarifying that, when we speak of the Son being generated, any implied passivity must be understood in a "grammatical" sense only,[80] and thus tacitly qualifying the meaning of conventional terms like *passive generation* and *passive spiration*, Aquinas still continues to use this conventional terminology. By doing so, Aquinas obscures his commitment to the view that nativity and procession are, metaphysically, acts.[81]

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80. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 1, ad. 3. See also *ST* 1, q. 41, a. 6, ad. 1.
81. For proof of just how misleading this terminology can be, consider how Stăniloae criticizes Catholic terminology (and implicitly Thomas Aquinas, insofar as he regards him as the prime representative of the Catholic tradition and its shortcomings) for describing the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession as passive—apparently without realizing that Aquinas fully agreed that the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession must be understood as acts and that he too saw problems with taking conventional expressions at face value: "[Both the Father and the Son] live this act [of generation] eternally as subjects, but they live it in common or within an intersubjectivity which does not confuse them, for each lives the act from the position that is his own. For this reason the Catholic terminology of *generatio activa* and *generatio passiva*—the former attributed to the Father, the latter to

Having said that, the most decisive reasons for the poor reception of his theology of the notional acts do not lie in his terminology. They stem from his confusing distinctions about modes of signification and his commitment to false controversies about relations and origins, which muddy the waters and weaken the force of his metaphysical claims about the identity of Persons and acts. The sheer amount of attention that he gives to these issues, combined with the logical incoherence of his position and the subtle nature of his errors, distract greatly from what is most interesting and most significant about his theology of the notional acts—namely, his thoughtful elaboration of the view that the Divine Persons are, in reality, the same as their respective notional acts.

Things only got worse after his death. Due to the way that the Dominican tradition quickly united around him (something without parallel in the Franciscan tradition), and due to the tendency of the Franciscan tradition to define itself against the Dominican tradition, and vice versa, his problematic distinctions became perpetually frozen in theological discourse.[82] As his followers defended his distinctions, often with less suppleness and nuance than he did, his critics dug in their heels and became more extreme in their criticisms. To this day, the controversy about whether relations or origins constitute the Divine Persons has never been resolved, nor has there been any wide recognition that the controversy is a false one. Instead, it has mostly been forgotten. Like many forgotten controversies, however, it has not ceased to be influential—in this case, by obscuring what all medieval theologians believed in common and by burying deep in the tradition a false dichotomy between relations and origins. The hidden influence of this unresolved controversy has made it all the more difficult to appreciate the full significance of Aquinas's view—shared by every one of his contemporaries—that, in reality, Divine Persons, relations, and origins are all the same.

Contemporary Applications

Once we strip away his confusing distinctions about modes of signification, Aquinas's understanding of the notional acts opens up great possibilities for a better reception of his own theology and also for trinitarian theology more generally.

First, the idea that Divine Persons and their respective notional acts are one and the same supplies a very useful metaphysical category for thinking and talking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In contemporary trinitarian theology, only a handful of metaphysical categories are ordinarily applied to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: person,

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the Son—is foreign to Orthodox theology. The Son is not passive in his generation from the Father, although he is not the subject who begets but the subject who takes his birth. Neither does the term 'procession' in reference to the Holy Spirit mark any passivity on the part of the Holy Spirit such as would make him an object of the Father." See Stăniloae, *Experience of God*, 261.

82. The history of this debate is well documented in Friedman's *Medieval Trinitarian Thought* and *Intellectual Traditions*.

hypostasis, and relation. These are the only categories widely used to describe who and what they are. But the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and medieval theology more generally, give us good reasons to add a fourth: act. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not merely Persons, hypostases, and relations. They are eternal acts, too.[83]

Human language falls infinitely short of divine realities, and no human word, no human category, can ever do them justice. We therefore need a range of words to speak about the Trinity. Words communicate insight into divine realities only through metaphor and analogy, and the more metaphors and analogies at our disposal, the more we can play them off against each other to triangulate our meaning and better convey the truth about God. The category of act draws our attention to the dynamism and eternal liveliness of each Divine Person in a way that the categories of person, hypostasis, and relation do not. It puts the eternal activity of the Divine Persons front and center. It draws attention to the connection between persons and processions.[84] It also clarifies that the Son's generation is an eternal generation, without beginning or end, and that the Spirit's eternal procession likewise has no beginning or end.

In this way, the metaphysical category of act is a very useful complement to the metaphysical category of relation. With too much emphasis on relation, the Trinity becomes static and lifeless; with too much emphasis on act, the Trinity becomes unstable and seemingly in a process of temporal becoming, which runs against divine eternity and diminishes the coequal dignity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. By balancing out the emphasis on relations that has long characterized the Western tradition, attention to the category of act makes the Western tradition more accessible to Eastern

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83. Among contemporary theologians, Thomas Weinandy is perhaps the most prominent advocate for thinking of the Divine Persons as acts. In the context of reflecting on the role of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, Weinandy has developed at length the implications of thinking of the Divine Persons as "co-inhering acts" for trinitarian ontology. See Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 53–85, esp. 78–80. See also Thomas G. Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 465–73. His work, which has been widely read and well received, demonstrates the fruitfulness of thinking of the trinitarian Persons as eternal acts. For other advocates of thinking of Divine Persons as divine acts, see James E. Dolezal, "Trinity, Simplicity and the Status of God's Personal Relations," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014): 79–98 at 91–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12016; Nicholas E. Lombardo, "The Return of the Holy Spirit to the Father: A Puzzle for Trinitarian Theology," *Louvain Studies* 44 (2021): 114–30, https://doi.org/10.2143/ls.44.2.3289492; and Lombardo, "Where Does the Holy Spirit Proceed *To*?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (forthcoming). Arguably, Stăniloae can be cited as well: "The Spirit is eternally in the movement of proceeding from the Father, just as the Son exists eternally in the movement of taking birth from the Father." See Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, 261.

84. Katherine Sonderegger wrote her recent book on the Trinity with a similar objective in mind. In the preface she explains, "My aim, at any rate, is to re-moor the concept of *person* to that of *processions*, such that the Persons can be seen as the Holy Life of God, taken as a whole." See Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:xxii.

theologians who do not share this emphasis and who tend to emphasize the distinct origins of the Divine Persons: the Father as without origin, the Son as generated, and the Spirit as proceeding.[85] It does all of these things without abandoning traditional Western theologies or terminologies. Affirming that the Father is an eternal act, for example, does not contradict the idea that he is also the relation of paternity. It simply supplies a complementary vantage point from which to contemplate who the Father is.

Second, thinking of the Holy Spirit as identical with his own act of proceeding counters portrayals—or implicit portrayals—of the Holy Spirit as entirely passive within the Trinity. Although he receives his deity, he does not receive it in a passive way. He is the act of proceeding; there is no metaphysical passivity in him. Granted, not everyone objects to passive portrayals of the Holy Spirit. Walter Kasper, for example, calls him "pure reception, pure gift," and in contrast to the Father and the Son who are givers, he describes the Holy Spirit as "pure recipient."[86] But for those who regard such passive portrayals as problematic, or at least incomplete, thinking of the Holy Spirit as the act of proceeding provides a welcome alternative and one that can claim the theological authority of Thomas Aquinas.

Third, thinking of Divine Persons as acts can help correct against dyadic formulations that define the identities of Father and Son exclusively in terms of each other. While it is true that, properly understood, the relations of paternity and filiation imply the Holy Spirit, proper understanding is not easy to come by. Trinitarian theology is difficult, and Aristotelian ways of thinking about relation are foreign to contemporary modes of thought. It requires significant philosophical background to grasp what Aquinas means when he says that the Father is constituted by paternity. Thinking of the Divine Persons as acts comes more easily to us. And just as we intuitively recognize that the same action can have multiple effects in the human realm, we can readily imagine how a single, eternal act might have multiple effects. By the single, eternal act proper to himself, the Father does not merely generate the Son; with the Son, he also spirates the Spirit. His action has two effects. And since the Father is identical with his own proper act, he is accordingly constituted as Father not merely by his generating of the Son, but also by his spirating the Spirit. We speak of his generating and spirating as though they are two different acts, but actually, they are two different effects of the same eternal act. The same applies to the Son. By the single, eternal act proper to himself, the Son actively receives his deity from the Father and, with the Father, spirates the Spirit. We speak of the Son's nativity and spirating as though they are two different acts, but in reality, they are two different effects of the same eternal act. Robert Doran makes a similar point: "*for the Father to beget the Son and for the Son to be begotten of the Father is for the two together to breathe the Holy Spirit*. The entire system of exchanges in God is an eternal blaze of love."[87] Granted, thinking of the Divine Persons as acts does not eliminate the lure of dyadic formulations. Dyadic

85. This approach to the Trinity has deep roots in the theology of Gregory of Nazianzus. See his *Orations* 31.8.

86. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 2012), 290.

87. Doran, *Trinity in History*, 2:86 (emphasis in original).

formulations will always be tempting. In our human experience, we have strong human analogues for the Father and the Son but not for the Holy Spirit. As a result, it is easy to fall into thinking that we can grasp the identities of Father and Son without reference to the Holy Spirit. Thinking of the Divine Persons as acts provides an important resource for countering dyadic formulations. It opens up avenues for explaining how the Holy Spirit is, in fact, integral to the personal identities of both the Father and the Son.

Conclusion

Thomas Aquinas gave more attention to the category of notional act than any of his predecessors. In a sophisticated way, he integrated what was then a relatively new category with the more established terminology of origins and processions. Unfortunately, the ambiguities of his inherited terminology obscured many of his systematic achievements. Confusing distinctions and false controversies made things worse. As a result, his account of the notional acts has been poorly received, and its full implications have not yet been widely recognized. A better appreciation for this aspect of his thought would correct against perceived weaknesses of relation-centered accounts of the Trinity and open up new possibilities for contemporary trinitarian theology.

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