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Relations Without Forms: Some Consequences of Aquinas's Metaphysics of Relations

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Abstract

This article presents a new interpretation and critique of some aspects of Aquinas's metaphysics of relations, with special reference to a theological problem—the relation of God to creatures—that catalyzed Aquinas's and much medieval thought on the ontology of relations. I will show that Aquinas's ontologically reductive theory of categorical real relations should equip him to identify certain relations as real relations, which he actually identifies as relations of reason, most notably the relation of God to creatures.

Keywords

Aquinas, Relations, Creation, God

Aquinas presents his metaphysics of relations primarily in discussions of two theological problems: the relations of the persons of the Trinity to each other and to the Divine Essence, and relations of creatures to God and of God to creatures.¹ The former led Aquinas to formulate an account of real but non-inhering relations (since divine persons, simple as they are, cannot be the subjects of accidents), and the latter led him to posit relations of reason that are true of but nevertheless do not posit anything in God. But Aquinas's discussion of relations in these theological contexts are clearly not intended to

¹ References of Aquinas are taken from *Opera Omnia*, ed. Robert Busa, S.J. Milan: Editoria Elettronica Editel, 1992. Revised edition on the internet, by Enrique Alarcón, <http://www.corpusthomaticum.org/iopera.html>, 2005. I would like to thank Marilyn McCord Adams, JT Paasch, Scott Williams, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

be applicable to theological cases only. Building on the work of Henninger, I develop an account of Aquinas's views about real relations as they obtain in created substances, what Henninger calls categorial real relations (CRRs).² I show that Aquinas has an ontologically reductionistic account of CRRs in just the sense that Aquinas thinks that the *esse* of a real relation is identical to the *esse* of the foundation of the relation. Then I strike new ground, arguing that Aquinas's account of CRRs yields two surprising conclusions which Aquinas elsewhere explicitly rejects. I argue that some relations, namely relations between a knower and the thing known, and the relation between God and creation, all satisfy Aquinas's criteria for real relations, and therefore should have been identified as such. In these respects I will also part ways with Henninger, who strongly defends Aquinas's view on creation relations and knower-known relations as consistent with Aquinas's broader thought on the ontology of relations. Arguing that Aquinas *could have said* something he *in fact did not say* is, I am well aware, a risky endeavor. The justification for the project lies, not in the attempt to fix Aquinas such that, *mutatis mutandis*, he comes out *right*, but rather in the exploration of the implications of Aquinas's reductive ontology of relations.

I. The Aristotelian Approach

As Aquinas understood Aristotle, the ten categories exhaustively divide the modes of extramental being. Of these, the category substance was held to be ontologically prior to the other nine categories of accidents, inasmuch as the existence of accidents is dependent on the substances that they modify. Relation is one of these nine accidental categories.³ In his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas argues that relations exist in things and not just in the soul by noting that relation is one of the categories. He says, "Nothing that exists only in the soul is determined to any genus."⁴ Aquinas assumed that the ten logical categories reflected and were dependent for their truth on ten modes of being. To

² Mark Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250-1325* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), "Thomas Aquinas on the Ontological Status of Relations." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25:4 (1987), pp. 491-515, and *Some Late Medieval Views of the Category of Relation* (Unpublished dissertation, UCLA, 1984).

³ For helpful discussion of medieval views of relations, see, in addition to Henninger's *Relations*, Jeffrey Brower, "Medieval Theories of Relations," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relations-medieval/>.

⁴ *In I Sent.*, d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.

paraphrase Wippel, he assumed that the order of language accurately reflected the order of being.⁵

From the claim that relation is one of the ten categories of being and one of the nine accidental categories, understanding the categories of being to demarcate modes of extramental being, it follows that

[P1] CRRs exist extramentally.

And from [P1] along with the fact that CRRs are intrinsic accidents, it follows that

[P2] CRRs posit something real in subjects.

Latinizing Aristotle's Greek, *pros ti*, a common term for "relation" in medieval scholasticism was *ad aliquid*, or "to something." In Aristotle's definition, a relation is something the being of which is to be toward another.⁶ A metaphor commonly used revolves around the idea of "pointing to" or "looking toward." Thus Aquinas identifies a component of relations that is a *respectus ad alterum*.⁷

[P3] For any CRR whose subject is *a*, there is some "respect toward" a term, *b*, by virtue of which *a* is related to *b*.

But equally important to the truth of relational statements, is the subject's being a certain way, namely, being related to its *relatum* in the way indicated by the relational statement. The predicate "whiter than *x*" demands a subject, *y*, of which it is said, and the truth of "*y* is whiter than *x*" demands that *y* be whiter than *x*. This feature of *y* was called that upon which a relation (say, being whiter than) is founded, or put simply, the *foundation* of a relation:⁸

[P4] For any CRR, R, the subject, *a*, or something inhering in *a*, is the foundation of R,

⁵ John Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas's Derivation of the Aristotelian Categories (Predicaments)," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987),

⁶ Aristotle, *Categories* 8a 31; Aquinas, *In I Sent.* d.33, q.1, a.1, ad 1.

⁷ *In I Sent.*, d.26, q.2, a.1, ad 3.

⁸ *In I Sent.*, d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.

What is denoted by the description, “foundation of a relation,” can be considered separately from its being the foundation of a relation. Thus, the whiteness of *y*, which is the foundation of its relation to *x*, is simply an absolute accident in the category of quality. In addition to absolute accidents, substantial forms and supposita can also serve as the foundations of real relations, since, e.g., those absolute items in virtue of which Socrates is co-specific with Plato are the substantial forms of Socrates and of Plato. And, as we will see in the treatment of creation relations, the whole created supposit is the foundation of the creation relation to God.

II. Aquinas on CRRs

Many medieval thinkers would have agreed on the account of relations given thus far. It was in their theories of the nature of the distinction between the foundation and the being-toward of relations that medieval thinkers disagreed, or in the nature of the distinction between the foundation and the relation itself. Aquinas’s position is that a CRR is identical in *esse* with its foundation, but distinct in *ratio*. Furthermore, the being-toward of a relation is to be understood primarily in causal terms, that is, a substantial or qualitative form has an active or passive potency to relate its subject to a term. For example, Aquinas understands Socrates’ humanity to be that by virtue of which Socrates is a member of his species, as well as that by virtue of which he has the relation of co-specificity to Plato.

Aquinas’s most sustained treatment of relations comes in the first book of his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.⁹ Here Aquinas distin-

⁹ Henninger does not and (with the exception of this note) I will not discuss Aquinas’s distinction between relations or relatives *secundum dici* and *secundum esse*. This distinction concerns the ways in which relations or relatives may be described, whether or not the relations in question are real or of reason. For example, in *QDP* q.7, a.10, ad.11, Aquinas says that the relations *right* and *left* are relations *secundum esse*, because the terms “right” and “left” signify “the relations themselves.” *Knowledge* and *sensation*, however, are relations *secundum dici*, because the terms “knowledge” and “sensation” signify qualities (of the soul), from which relations arise. The terminology of the distinction is confusing, since there can be a relation *secundum esse* which is also a relation of reason, and there can be a relation *secundum dici* which is a real relation. I will not focus on this distinction, concerned as it is with the grammar of language about relations, rather than with the metaphysics of relations. For further reading, see *ST.1*, q.13, a.7, ad.1; *In I Sent.* d.3, q.5, a.1, exp.; *In I Sent.* d.7, q.1, a.2, corp.; and *In I Sent.* d.30, q.1, a.2, corp.

guishes several times between the *esse* and *ratio* of relations.¹⁰ The *esse* and *ratio* are sometimes said to be two modes of being of a relation,¹¹ and sometimes said to be two ways of considering a relation.¹² Put very briefly, the *esse* of a real relation is its extramental being in some subject, whereas the *ratio* of a real relation is the intensional content of a real relation, or an account of the nature of a real relation. As a quality, the mode of existence of wisdom is accidental inherence in a subject; indeed, naturally all absolute accidents in the category quality exist in and modify their subjects. The *ratio* of a quality is just what is intelligible about the essence or nature of a quality considered as such. So the *ratio* of a quality is, Aquinas says, a nature posited (as inhering in a subject) in the category of quality.

But matters are different with the *esse* and *ratio* of a relation. The claim is that, while relation posits something inhering in a subject according to *esse*, it does not do so by *ratio*.¹³

According to *ratio*—that is, what is intelligible about the essence or nature of a relation considered as such—a relation is what is referred to another, and involves no inherence in a subject:

[P5] According to the *ratio* of relation, a relation does not inhere in a subject,

[P6] Only the “respect toward” a term is included in the *ratio* of a relation.

One might object to this characterization by pointing out that a relation does not just refer to another, but refers *something* to another—it takes more than one *relatum* to make a relation. And, therefore, if the “respect toward a term” of a relation is to be included in the *ratio* of a relation, the subject ought also to be. Nevertheless, if inherence in a subject were part of the *ratio* of relation, then nothing could be a relation that did not inhere in a subject. There are apparent counterexamples, however, such as relations of reason and the non-composite persons of the Trinity.¹⁴ On the basis of these counterexamples, Aquinas concludes that accidental inherence in a subject is not part of the

¹⁰ *In I Sent.* d.20, q.1, a.1, corp.; d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.; d.30, q.1, a.3, corp.; d.33, q.1, art.1, corp.

¹¹ *In I Sent.* d.20, q.1, a.1, corp.; d.33, q.1, a.1, corp.

¹² *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.

¹³ *In I Sent.* d.20, q.1, a.1, corp.

¹⁴ Henninger, *Relations*, p.16; *In I Sent.*, d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.

ratio of relations. When relations do inhere, they do so because they have some *absolute* foundation that inheres.¹⁵

This distinction between the *esse* and *ratio* of relation is an important part of Aquinas's theology and metaphysics for at least three reasons. It enables him to argue not only (i) that not every relation is real, but also (ii) that the category of relation is in some sense irreducible to other categories even if (as Aquinas concludes) the *esse* of a CRR is identical to the *esse* of its foundation, and also (iii) that when a relation is real, it need not be inherent (once it is admitted that the foundation may be something other than an accidental form).

Now, if a relation as such is just a *respectus ad alterum*, then the absolute foundation of a relation is distinct in some way from the *respectus*. We may express this as,

[P7] A CRR is identical in *esse* with but distinct in *ratio* from its foundation.

If the foundation of a relation changes, there is not only a change in the relation, but there is also a change in the subject. The foundation of a relation is the subject or some accident of the subject. Therefore, if a substance gains or loses one or more of its accidents, the substance itself undergoes accidental change, since the substance both supports the existence of and is characterized by its accidents. But Aquinas denies that when the *respectus ad alterum* ceases when the term is removed (i.e., changes in the relevant way), this change in the term causes an accidental change in the subject.¹⁶ This entails that a subject can lose a relation without undergoing change. But in this case the relation couldn't be a really inhering accident of the subject that is distinct from its foundation.

As we have seen, Aquinas identifies two ways in which a real relation can be destroyed: either through a change in the foundation of the subject of the relation or through a change in the term. If there is a change in the term, the *respectus ad alterum* of the relation ceases, and "then the relation is withheld, without change made in it [the subject]."¹⁷ In other words, the ceasing of R in *a* does not constitute a change in *a*. And if R's ceasing constitutes no change in *a*, then R was not an accident of *a* with *esse* really distinct from its foundation. Therefore Aquinas does not think that the foundation of a

¹⁵ *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1, ad 3.

¹⁶ *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1, ad 3.

¹⁷ *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1, ad.3. Also, *In V Phys.* lect.3, n.8.

CRR and the relation itself are really distinct.¹⁸ This conclusion is corroborated by the *corpus* of the same article, in which Aquinas says that the *esse* of the relation is founded on something in a thing, for example, the relation of equality is founded on quantity. When there is a real relation, the only *esse* is the *esse* of the foundation.¹⁹

Aquinas recognized that, if the relation R of *a* to *b* depends on *b*'s being in a certain way, then if R is *something* in addition to its foundation, then the relevant kind of change in *b* will produce an accidental change in *a*, namely, the ceasing of R. Consider two white things, *a* and *b*. Following Aristotle Aquinas argues that *b*'s becoming gray, which causes R' and R to cease, is not a change in *a*. Nevertheless, some account of change must be given, since in the gain or loss of a relation something new can be said of the subject. Accordingly Aristotle and Aquinas after him call relational changes, changes *per accidens*, characterized in the following way:

[P8] A subject, *a*, changes *per accidens* when both (a) something can be newly affirmed or denied of *a*, and (b) *a* neither acquired nor lost any substantial, quantitative, or qualitative form.

Since Aquinas thinks that acquiring or losing a relation is a change *per accidens*, we can say,

[P9] The acquisition or loss of a CRR, R, in a subject, *a*, is a change *per accidens* in *a*.²⁰

Aquinas defends this account of the change involved in the acquisition and loss of real relations in a non-commentary work, *QDP*. In q.7, a.8, Aquinas repeats the distinction between *per se* and *per accidens* change, and claims that the acquisition or loss of a relation is merely change *per accidens* of a subject.²¹

¹⁸ Holding a contrary position, Robert W. Schmidt, in *The Domain of Logic According to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p. 139, argues that a relation must be really distinct from its foundations for the following reasons: a) Aquinas would not have placed relation among the categories of being if he did not think they had really distinct *esse*; and b) Aquinas calls relation the weakest of beings (*QDP* q.8, a.1, ad 4; q.9, a.7, corp.), and wouldn't have done so if the *esse* of a relation were the same as its foundation. However, as I argue below, Aquinas's position is that relation is an irreducible category of being owing to its distinct *ratio*.

¹⁹ *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.

²⁰ *In V Phys.* lect.3, n.7.

²¹ *QDP*, q.7, a.8, ad5.

Unlike absolute accidents such as quality or quantity, which remain in a subject by inherence, a relation signifies transition (*in transitu*) from a subject to a term, and does not make a composition with its subject.²² Here, *in transitu* is used instead of, but to similar effect as, *respectus* and its variants. It conveys the idea of having an aspect or bearing toward something else, but with the idea of movement instead of looking. The relevant sense of composition in this text would seem to be a joining together of matter and form(s), or substance and accidental form(s), as opposed to a mixture of elements (earth, water, air, fire) or substances (e.g., wine and water). The foundation of a relation does make composition with its subject, since the foundation is form, but the *respectus ad alterum* of a relation does not make a composition with its subject. If a relation is not the sort of thing that makes a composition with its subject, then it is neither matter nor form (nor an element nor another substance). Therefore,

[PI0] The “respect toward another” of a CRR does not make a composition with its subject.

It is safe to conclude, then, that Aquinas does not think that there are really distinct relative forms, and that he does think that the *esse* of a CRR is identical with the *esse* of its foundation. Mark Henninger does not explicitly deny, as I have denied, that Aquinas thinks there are relative forms, but his account is consistent with mine in that he nowhere affirms that Aquinas thinks this. However, Henninger does explicitly say that, for Aquinas, real relations make composition with their subjects,²³ referencing *ST Ia*, q.28, a.2 and *In I Sent.*, d.33, q.1, a.1, in support of this position. Nevertheless, Henninger is also careful to distinguish that a real relation only makes a composition with its subject in virtue of its absolute foundation, and that the *respectus ad alterum* of a real relation is no entity in addition to its foundation.²⁴ Moreover, the texts he cites in support of his claim are both consistent with the claim that it is the foundation alone and not the foundation together with the *respectus ad alterum* that makes a composition with its subject. Therefore, on the reducibility of the *esse* of a CRR to its foundation, and in the rejection of distinct relative forms, I take my and Henninger’s accounts to be in agreement.

²² *QDP*, q.7, a.8, corp.

²³ Henninger, *Relations*, p. 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

If there are no relative forms, such that the gain or loss of a relation is not a change *per se* in the subject of the relation, what is it about *relata* in reality, in virtue of which they are related? Aquinas holds that each absolute feature of a subject is able to become the actualized foundation of a real relation. Aquinas therefore understands each absolute feature to have a potency to be the foundation of a relation. By virtue of those absolute forms by virtue of which one thing can become related to another, a subject has many virtual or indeterminate relations “rooted in” these absolute forms, and these virtual relations are determined when a correlative comes into being.²⁵ Aquinas explicitly identifies the roots of categorical real mutual relations as the foundations of the relations, and identifies the *esse* of the relation as the root.²⁶ Responding to the problem of how it can be that *a* is not changed when *b* changes and becomes really related to *a*, then, Aquinas reduces the *esse* of the CRR to the *esse* of the foundation (the root), and then ascribes to the root the aspect of virtually including a relation to all potential *relata*, where a potential *relatum* is anything that can change in some relevant way (e.g., can become white). When something changes in the relevant way, the potency of a foundation is actualized. The change in a foundation when it begins actually to relate the subject to a term, and the change in a foundation when it ceases actually to relate the subject to a term, are examples of *per accidens* change. Aquinas elsewhere calls the foundations of relations *causes* of relations—remove the cause of a relation, remove the relation.²⁷ (Note that this characterizations of the foundations applies to all CRRs, and not only causal real relations. Elsewhere, Aquinas distinguishes between real relations based on quantity, and real relations based on activity and passivity, and says that all mutual CRRs fall under one of these types or the other.²⁸ But in either type of real relation, the foundation of the CRR is an actualized power to be related. Just as fire has the active power to heat by virtue of its hot nature, and does not have that power by virtue of an extra accident inhering in fire, so a brown horse has the power to be similar with respect to color to all other brown things. The first example is a relation based on causality, and the second is a relation based on quantity.) Therefore

²⁵ *In V Phys*, lect.3, n.8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *QDP* q.7, a.8, ad 5.

²⁸ *In V Met.* l.17, n.3; *QDP* q.7, a.10, corp.

[P11] The *respectus* of a CRR, R, is the actualization of a power of a foundation to make its subject, *a*, really (categorically) related to a term, *b*, when *b* exists in the relevant way.

One might object that [P11] actually undermines the claims [P9] and [P10], for one might hold that the actualization of a power always introduces a new form into extramental reality. Then, *contra* [P10], a CRR would make a composition with its subject, and *contra* [P9], the acquisition or loss of a CRR would be a change *per se* in its subject. Here we might think of matter's potentiality to become any substance: this power is actualized only when there begins to be a new substance. Or consider a log's potentiality to become hot, which is actualized only when the form of heat is introduced into it. But these and similar examples do not exhaust the legitimate senses of the actualization of a power. Consider a boy's potentiality to become a man: a boy is a boy and a man is a man in virtue of the same form. Or consider fire's potentiality to heat. If God conserves fire in existence without any surrounding bodies, the fire is hot but it does not heat. Introduce surrounding bodies and the fire begins to heat. The presence of surrounding bodies actualizes fire's potentiality to heat, but nothing new is added to the fire when it begins to heat. [P9], [P10], and [P11] therefore form a consistent triad.

Another possible objection looms. Aquinas thinks that the ten Aristotelian categories are at least in some sense irreducible to one another; the categories categorize all the flavors of extramental being.²⁹ If a CRR is identical in *esse* with its absolute foundation, however, how is it an irreducible category of being? The procedure here is to determine what sort of distinction obtains between a real relation and its foundation, and then to determine whether this distinction is "distinct enough" to maintain the irreducibility of the relative category. First, the *rationes* of relation and the absolute natures that can serve as the foundations of relation are distinct and exclusive. The *ratio* of something absolute includes being or being in a subject, while the *ratio* of relation includes having or being a respect toward another. Furthermore, the existence conditions of an absolute thing are not the same as the existence conditions of a relative thing, since a relative thing, although it is an Aristotelian accident and therefore belongs to a subject, nevertheless requires for its existence a term's being in a certain way. A real relation is therefore distinct in *ratio* from its foundation, and has distinct existence conditions from its foundation.

²⁹ *In I Sent.*, d.26, q.2, a.1, corp.

In other work, Aquinas used the distinction that obtains between exclusive *rationes* to profound philosophical and theological effect. Henninger notes the famous *DEE* distinction between essence and existence, which starts from the observation that the *ratio* of an essence such as humanity does not include existence.³⁰ And with respect to the sticky issue of divine simplicity, Aquinas argued that the variety of perfections ascribed to God have exclusive *rationes* and are therefore not diverse merely in the act of thinking, but are properties of the thing itself.³¹ Aquinas holds that something that is one can truthfully be described under a variety of *rationes*, where none of these include or follow from others. The distinction applies to creatures as well. The *rationes* of foundation and relation are exclusive—one neither includes nor follows from the other—but a CRR and its foundation are just one thing. Unlike God, who necessarily has all of His attributes, it is contingent whether or not an absolute accident is the foundation of a real relation (it is contingent on the existence of a term). But when it is the foundation of a real relation, it is one *esse* with at least two *rationes*. It is in this sense—and only in this sense—that relations are distinct from and irreducible to beings of some other category. In short,

[PI1] The *respectus* of a CRR, R, is the actualization of a power of a foundation to make its subject, *a*, really (categorically) related to a term, *b*, when *b* exists in the relevant way,

must be consistent with

[P1] CRRs exist extramentally,

[P2] CRRs posit something real in a subject,

[P4] For any CRR, R, the subject, *a*, or something inhering in *a*, is the foundation of R,

and,

[P3] For any CRR whose subject is *a*, there is some “respect toward” a term, *b*, by virtue of which *a* is related to *b*.

³⁰) Henninger, *Relations*, p. 30.

³¹) *In I Sent.* d.2, q.1, a.2, corp.

CRRs exist extramentally inasmuch as the power to be related and the actualization thereof are attributes or properties of the foundations of relations, and these foundations themselves are certain absolute features of subjects. In other words, CRRs exist extramentally inasmuch as foundations exist extramentally. CRRs inhere in subjects for the same reasons. These statements are sufficient to maintain the consistency of [P1], [P2], and [P4] with [P11]. As for [P3], we have seen that, although the *respectus* is not an inherent form really distinct from the foundation, yet the conditions of its existence are different from the existence conditions of the foundation. For the *ratio* of relation to be correctly applied to *a*, the foundations, F and F', of both *a* and the term, *b*, of the relation, must exist in a certain way. Thus, although the relation, R, inheres only in *a*, and depends for its *esse* on the F of *a* in the sense that it is identical in *esse* with F, yet it also depends for its *esse* on the F' of *b*, in the sense that without F', F would not be actualized or determined with respect to its power to relate *a* to *b*. In terms of [P3] and [P11], the *respectus* is identical with the actualized or determined power of F when *a* is related to *b* by virtue of F and F'. If [P1]-[P4] and [P11] are consistent, then, the actualized or determined power of F when *a* is related to *b* by virtue of F and F' must be distinct from F. That is, the distinction involved in,

[P7] A CRR is identical in *esse* with but distinct in *ratio* from its foundation.

must be “distinct enough” to constitute relation as a category of being. And, as we concluded earlier, a foundation is (for Aquinas) distinct from its *respectus* by a distinction between *rationes* that obtains in some sense in the thing, and not merely in the intellect. Aquinas's theory is therefore consistent with the placement of relation as a distinct category of being.

III. Consequence One: Known-Knower Relations

I would like to transition now to consider two of Aquinas's views in relation to CRRs as I and Henninger have characterized them—the relations between a known and a knower and the relations between God and creatures. Aquinas thinks that this pair of *relata* are non-mutually really related; that is, he thinks that while a knower and a creature have CRRs to a known and to God, respectively, he thinks that the relation of a known and of God to a knower and a creature are, respectively, relations of reason. I consider first knower-

known relations, and move on to God-creature relations, arguing that in each case Aquinas *could have* argued that these are real relations. My aim here is not to argue that Aquinas was *inconsistent*; instead, I argue that he did not bring own theory of relations to bear on all relevant fields.

Why doesn't Aquinas think that a known has a CRR to its knower? One reason for denying CRRs in the known is the concern that the known be in no way determined by being known. If knowledge did determine the known, then the intellect would construct reality instead of discover it. However, Aquinas notes several important differences between the category of relation and the absolute accidental categories of quantity and quality that should assuage this concern. The *ratio* of relation does not include inherence in a subject; something can be relative even when it does not have an ontologically irreducible relative accident. Furthermore, even when a CRR is posited in a subject, it is only distinct in reason *ex parte rei* from some absolute thing on which it is founded. The motivation for this relegated status of the *esse* of CRRs, we saw, was to preserve Aristotle's and his intuition that the acquisition or loss of a relation does not constitute the acquisition or loss of form—a change in relation is only *per accidens* and follows on some other, *per se*, change. But if the gain or loss of a CRR only changes its subject *per accidens*, where this is understood as change without the gain or loss of form, then there is nothing amiss in positing CRRs in the known. Assume for the sake of argument that knowns do have CRRs to their knowers. If my knowledge changes, say, through amnesia, and I know much less of the known than I did before, then the foundation of my real relation to the known has changed (a *per se* change in me), and therefore the real relations in me and the known have changed (*per accidens* change in both *relata*). If we seek a foundation in the known on which a CRR can be founded, it is anything about the known that is intelligible, and these things are real and in or of the thing. If *a* and *b* are white and are therefore mutually related in color similarity, and if *aRb* and *bR'a* are true statements, we can say that what makes these statements true is the respective colors of *a* and *b* (the foundations), as well as (therefore) the applicability of the *ratio* of relation to each. In treating these relations as CRRs, Aquinas would go on to say that the *ratio* of relation pertains to the respective foundations of *a* and *b*, is an intelligible component of the respective foundations of *a* and *b*, and is irreducible to the *ratio* of whiteness. In treating the relations of known and knower, on the other hand, Aquinas would deny that the *ratio* of relation pertains to a foundation in the known and is therefore not a CRR. But, since Aquinas thinks that the acquisition or loss of any CRR is a change *per accidens* in a subject ([P9]) and thinks that a

CRR does not imply composition with the subject ([P10]) and is an accident of the subject only inasmuch as it is founded on something absolute in the subject,³² why the reluctance to identify the relation in the known as a CRR?

Mark Henninger argues that Aquinas's primary reason for denying that the known has a CRR to the knower is instead based on a distinction between the physical and intelligible orders. Aquinas expresses this idea in *QDP*, q.7, a.10, corp., saying,

And there are some things to which some are ordered to others but not vice versa, because they are totally extrinsic to that genus of action or power which arises from such an order. It is clear that knowledge is referred to the thing known, because the knower by an intelligible act has an order to the thing known which is outside the soul. But the thing itself that is outside the soul is totally untouched by such an act, since the act of the intellect does not pass into exterior matter by changing it; so that the thing which is outside the soul is totally outside the genus of intelligible things.³³

According to Henninger, the “intentional” and “natural” orders are “incommensurable, not ‘of the same type’, [...] Hence [...] there is no real co-relation in the known to the knower.”³⁴ I am less moved by the distinction of orders than is Henninger, although I admit that it plays an important—if not central—role in Aquinas's understanding of non-mutual relations. But simply being of different orders does not deliver any compelling reason for being unable to be mutually really related. If we seek the reason why different orders are taken to be incommensurable with respect to mutual CRRs, the answer seems to be that such orders have at best one-way causality, and not two-way. For example, in the above text, the knower is related to the known, whose form is diffused through the medium and into the organ of the knower, but the known is not related to the knower, because “the act of intellect does not pass into exterior matter by changing it.” Therefore, the distinction of orders (here, the natural and intentional orders) is relevant to the present problem *only insofar as* a thing of one order acts on a thing of the other, and not *vice versa*. If this is correct, then the pith of Henninger's incommensurable orders objection to mutual CRRs between the knower and the known, is exactly what was expressed in the first objection, above, namely, that the knower would in some way act on or determine the known. My

³² *QDP* q.7, a.9, ad 7.

³³ *QDP* q.7, a.10, corp. Trans. English Dominican Fathers (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), p. 59, slightly modified. Also, *ST* Ia, q.13, a.7, corp.

³⁴ Henninger, *Relations*, p. 36.

response to this objection is given above. I conclude, then, that Aquinas could have accommodated mutual CRRs between the knower and the known in his ontology.

IV. Consequence Two: God-Creature Relations

Here I mount a criticism of Aquinas's reasons for denying real relations to creation in God. I hinge my treatment of God-creature relations on three claims made by Aquinas: 1) the act of creation is reducible to relations between God and creatures; 2) the relation in creatures is a real relation; and 3) the relation in God is a relation of reason. After expounding Aquinas's arguments for (1), I will argue that (2) is most coherent if the real relation in question is understood according to the theory of CRRs outlined above. Finally, I will argue that (3) should not follow from Aquinas's own reasoning on the natures of relations and of God, and argue that it is more consistent with his theory of relations in general to argue that God is related to creatures through what I will call analogical real relations.

Aquinas's account of the act of creation is construed along Aristotelian lines. Creation is a production that is distinguished from the production of particular beings by particular beings, since unlike natural productions, production *totius entis* has no substrate. In general, if x is produced, it is produced out of something that itself is not- x . *Logically* analogous, if there is a production *totius entis*—of the whole of being—then not-being is that “out of which” it is produced. Creation is therefore *ex nihilo*.³⁵

Aquinas argues that God has the power to produce without a substrate by distinguishing between beings that are limited in act, and a being that is pure act.³⁶ A finite being is act limited by form. In composite beings, form is limited by matter. These metaphysical limitations prescribe the range of a substance's causal power—*omne agens agit, secundum quod est actu*.³⁷ But since God is subsistent *esse*, the range of God's causal power is being itself. As fire has power to make things hot, God has power to make things exist.

³⁵ Aquinas argues for creation *ex nihilo* in several texts and in diverse ways, most of which do not concern me in the present inquiry. Cf. *QDP* q.3, a.3; *SCG* II, cap.16; *ST* Ia, q.45, a.1. Interestingly, in *In I Sent.* d.5, q.2, a.2, corp., Aquinas argues that the Son is generated *ex nihilo* and explains that when it is asserted that something is *ex nihilo* all that is asserted is *non esse ex aliquo*.

³⁶ *QDP* q.3, a.1, corp.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

In natural production there is a distinction between the activity of production and the relation that the effect has to its cause; the activity precedes the effect, but the relation is in some sense posterior to the effect. Since God does not act on a pre-existing substrate, the act of creation involves no process of becoming, or, as Aquinas says, its being and its being made are simultaneous.³⁸ In creation, therefore, the activity of production and the relation which obtains once the effect has been produced are simultaneous. Aquinas therefore characterizes the act of creation itself as a relation of a creature to the principle of its being.³⁹

To clarify the conclusion that the act of creation is a relation of the creature to the creator, it is necessary to make two distinctions. First, the act of creation is distinct from what is created. Subsistent beings are created, and the relations of dependence on God are “concreated” with them and are not altogether identical with them.⁴⁰ The second distinction is between the act of creation taken “actively” and taken “passively”. Active creation signifies the act of God as such, “understood with” (*cointellecta*) a certain uncreated relation to creatures. Passive creation signifies a real relation “in the mode of change.”⁴¹ It is “in the mode of change,” because Aquinas has analyzed the act of creation on the model of natural production, and a relation of the product to the producer is what remains when a production has reached its term (the product). The relation is real because the production is real and, to this extent, is like natural productions, which produce *per accidens* a relation of the product to its cause.

On the surface it is strange that God’s creative action should be identified in the creature as something in the relative category, since relations, like all accidents, are understood as posterior to their subjects. But, of course, the creative action must be prior to the creature. The creation relation is therefore different from other accidents in that it is necessary to a substance’s existence. As we have seen, Aquinas tries to capture this necessity by claiming that this special relation is “concreated” with the subject.⁴² Utilizing the current interpretation of CRRs, I will argue that Aquinas nicely navigates this dialectical tension, avoiding two absurdities—on the one hand, claiming that the creation relation is prior to its subject, rendering its accidental status unintelligi-

³⁸) *ST* Ia, q.45, a.3, ad 2; *QDP* q.3, a.1, ad 11.

³⁹) *QDP* q.3, a.3, corp.; *ST* Ia, q.45, a.3, corp.; *SCG* II, cap.18, n. 2.

⁴⁰) *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad 7; see also *QDP* q.3, a.3, corp.

⁴¹) *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad 2; see also *SCG* II, cap.17.

⁴²) *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad 7.

ble; and on the other hand, claiming that the creation relation is posterior to its subject, rendering unintelligible the account of produced being.

It is important to recall at this point some of the features of CRRs. A CRR is identical in *esse* with but distinct in reason *ex parte rei* from its foundation. In this respect, the category of the relative is irreducible to any absolute category. The foundation of a CRR can be an inhering (absolute) accident, the substantial form, or the supposit itself. Aquinas describes potential foundations of CRRs as having *powers* to be related *in radice*, which are activated necessarily when a subject changes in a relevant (relation producing) way.

Bearing these features in mind, we can turn to several texts in which Aquinas explicates the creaturely relation to God. In *QDP* Aquinas says that this relation does not follow from the principles of the subject's being.⁴³ This is to note that being dependent for its existence on God is not included in the absolute *ratio* of any essence; it is simply a necessary condition of existence for anything other than the divine essence. The creation relation is a non-definitional yet necessary property of every substance.⁴⁴

In *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad2, Aquinas responds to the objection that if the creation relation is something real in the creature, then it too is created and must therefore have a real relation to God; and if this new real relation is created then it too has a creation relation, and so on *ad infinitum*. Aquinas responds that the relation, taken strictly, is not created but *concreated*, and is not properly speaking a being (a supposit), but something *inhering*.⁴⁵ In the third response he adds that, since a relation is an accident, according to its *esse* it inheres in a subject (the created supposit) and is posterior to its subject.⁴⁶ But according to the *ratio* of the relation—the divine action taken passively—the relation is in some way prior to the subject.⁴⁷

In *ST* Ia., q.45, a.3, Aquinas argues that, “creation posits something in creatures according to relation only,”⁴⁸ for reasons given above. Passive creation is

⁴³ *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad 3.

⁴⁴ In calling the creation relation a non-definitional yet necessary accident of the creature, I do not mean to imply, of course, that the creation relation should be thought of as a *proprium* of the creature, as risibility is a *proprium* of humanity. Risibility is a non-definitional yet necessary accident in the sense that it follows from the essence. But a creation relation does not follow from the essence of a creature; otherwise, every essence would be created, and there is no reason to suppose that Aquinas thinks that every possible essence must be created.

⁴⁵ *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad 2.

⁴⁶ *QDP* q.3, a.3, ad 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ST* Ia, q.45, a.3, corp.

the real relation in creatures to the principle of their being. Thus, although the subsistent creature is signified as the term of the act of creation, with the creative act preceding the product, the subsistent is really the subject of the creation relation, “and is prior to it in being, as the subject of an accident.”⁴⁹ In explicating this confusing move, Aquinas makes a strong statement that will serve to point us toward a more satisfying account of the creation relation: “creation taken passively is *in* the creature, and *is* the creature,” since the creation relation is identical in *esse* with the created supposit.⁵⁰

Creation relations are in one sense similar to causal relations like father and son in that the foundations of such relations are not an inhering form, but the supposit itself. If *a* and *b* are both white, then *a* is similar to *b* with respect to whiteness. But if *a* is the father of *b*, then *b* is the son of *a*, full stop. This is because the foundation of the relation of sonship to *a* is the subsisting individual, *b* itself. The creation relation is a similar case. The created supposit itself is the foundation of a relation of dependence on God.

But *being a foundation of* implies *being prior to*. A natural objection then is that a created thing cannot be the foundation of the creation relation, since this would entail that the created thing is prior to its being created. Nor can the relation be prior to the creature, since this would make something in an accidental category prior to and a condition for the existence of a substance. In general relations cannot be prior to substances, but in the case of creation relations the substance cannot be prior to the relation. But on the current interpretation of Aquinas’s theory of relations, the quandary is resolvable. Aquinas treats the passive creation relation as a CRR, and these are identical in *esse* with their foundations but distinct from them in reason *ex parte rei*. Therefore, passive creation and the created supposit are one in *esse* but have distinct *rationes*. Understood as the supposit of a given essence, only the definition of the essence is included; understood as a created supposit, the *ratio* of being dependent on God is included. I admit that in the passages that deal explicitly with the creation relation, this reductive interpretation is not the most natural reading. But, in light of other passages, in which Aquinas is more directly concerned with the nature of relations in general,⁵¹ the texts on the creation relation gain intelligibility not otherwise available. The objection that there is a vicious circle of priority on Aquinas’s account is resolved once

⁴⁹) *ST*.Ia, q.45, a.3, ad 3.

⁵⁰) *ST* Ia, q.45, a.3, ad 2.

⁵¹) See especially, *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1; q.1, a.1, ad 3; *In V Phys.* lect.3; *In V Met.*, lect.17; *QDP* q.7, aa.8,9.

the identity of supposit and relation is asserted, since the reason for holding the priority of the supposit over the relation—that it is the subject of inherence of the relation—is moot.

Aquinas consistently and emphatically denies that God has a real relation to creatures.⁵² The only real relations he attributes to divinity are the interpersonal relations of the Trinity.⁵³ Three features of godhead are supposed to make real relative accidental predication repugnant: simplicity, immutability, and aseity. However God is related to creation, one must be able to say on Thomistic terms that God is simple, immutable, and completely independent from anything other than Godself. If relations introduce an inhering accident, if they introduce *per se* change, or if they make God dependent on creation, then He is not really related. In the context of denying relations of God, Aquinas thought that real relations would introduce all three.

Aquinas frequently precedes his conclusion that God is not really related to creatures by arguing from analogy: just as the known is not really related to the knower, so too God is not really related to the creature. But he has at least two ways of using the knower-known analogy. The weaker and less interesting is stated in *QDP* q.3, a.3, corp.: in related things, 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.⁵⁴ This argument is clearly false, since parity of reason should make all dependence relations non-mutual, but then (for example), all relations of active (efficient) causation would be relations of reason. Moreover, Aquinas explicitly identifies active efficient causal relations as CRRs in *QDP* q.7, a.10, ad1 and ad2.

The second, given in *QDP* q.7, a.10, corp., is not as clearly false. Suppose a relation were a really distinct inhering accident. Aquinas is concerned that if the object known is really related to the knower, then in knowing its object the knower somehow changes it—in short, the intellect partially determines or shapes reality. Analogously, Aquinas is at pains to maintain God's immutability, and therefore denies that in creating, the existence of the creature introduces a new accident in divinity.

If one assumes that when *a* causes a change in *b* and becomes really related to *b* as its active cause, that *a* changes, then God can't be really related to

⁵² For example, *QDP* q.3, a.3, corp.; q.7, a.10, corp.; q.7, a.11, corp.; *QDV* q.3, a.2, ad 8; q.4, a.5, corp.; *SCG* II, c.12, n.3; *ST* Ia., q.45, a.3, ad 1; *In I Sent.*, d.26, q.2, a.3, ad 1; d.30, a.1, ad.1, ad 2.

⁵³ *QDV* q.4, a.5, corp.

⁵⁴ *QDP* q.3, a.3, corp.; see also *QDV* q.4, a.5, corp.

creatures, at the risk of compromising divine immutability. But Aquinas does not think that acquiring a new CRR is a change *per se*. Recall Aquinas's distinction between *per se* and *per accidens* change with respect to relations, made in *In V Physics*, l.3, n.8. On the basis of this text and *QDP* q.7, a.8, corp., I concluded that

[P8] A subject, *a*, changes *per accidens* when both (a) something can be newly affirmed or denied of *a*, and (b) *a* neither acquired nor lost any substantial, quantitative, or qualitative form,

and

[P9] The acquisition or loss of a CRR, *R*, in a subject, *a*, is a change *per accidens* in *a*.

For these reasons, if a real relation is newly attributed to God when *c* is created and becomes really related to God, then there is not *per se* change, but only *per accidens* change. But Aquinas introduced this distinction precisely to deny that when *a* changes and *a* and *b* are newly co-related, *b* also changes; *b* only changes *per accidens*. Likewise, it does not seem repugnant to divinity to claim that when *c* is created, *c* and God are co-related. God's active creation relation is no more and no less a change than his creative activity itself.⁵⁵

If one assumes that a relation is a kind of accidental form that is really distinct from its foundation, then God can't be really related to creatures, at the risk of compromising divine simplicity. But Aquinas does not think that a CRR is really distinct from its foundation. The nature of the distinction of a CRR from its foundation is closely connected to the conclusion that the acquisition or loss of a relation is merely a *per accidens* change. If the change that occurs in *a* when it gains a new relation to *b* is meant to be understood in non-hylomorphic terms (*per accidens* and not *per se* change) then Aquinas is not picturing a relative accident as a distinct form inhering in its subject. Indeed, Aquinas says that the *esse* of a CRR is founded on something absolute in the subject.⁵⁶ From this, and from Aquinas's insistence that the acquisition or loss of a relation is only change *per accidens*, I concluded that, for Aquinas,

⁵⁵ Whether or not Aquinas's understanding of God's creative activity is itself consistent with all he would like to say about divine immutability is a separate issue. See *ST* Ia, q.9, a.1.

⁵⁶ *In I Sent.* d.26, q.2, a.1, corp., ad3.

[P7] A CRR is identical in *esse* with but distinct in reason *ex parte rei* from its foundation.

Aquinas admits that God's simplicity can accommodate distinctions of reason *ex parte rei*.⁵⁷ Of course, the divine attributes are identical with the divine essence, and theologians in Aquinas's strain would never admit that a real relation to creatures would be among these identical-yet-distinct-in-reason features of godhead. Accordingly, the claim that there is nothing repugnant in attributing a real relation to God that is founded on and identical in *esse* with God, but distinct in reason *ex parte rei*, awaits trial.

If one assumes that real relations to creatures are in God, but remembers that whatever is in God is in God essentially, then God is essentially related to creatures. This view makes the existence of the creature an essential condition of God's being. As such, God could only be really related to creatures at the risk of compromising divine aseity. So if it is possible to argue on Thomistic grounds that God has a real relation to creatures, it must be possible to characterize this real relation without making it one among many divine attributes which are identical in *esse* with but distinct in reason *ex parte rei* from each other. The active creation relation will be contingent, while God's attributes such as wisdom will be necessary.

If God is really related to creatures, then clearly the kind of real relation he bears is the active cause of the created effect. For Aquinas, creation taken actively is the divine action itself. It is a feature of Aquinas's theory of real relations that the *esse* of the relation is its foundation—in this case the divine essence—but that the foundation considered with its respect toward another has a *ratio* different from that which it has when considered as absolute being. The reality of the relation is the foundation itself expressing its power to be so related. On this clarified view, the divine action itself—identical with the divine essence—is the foundation of the real relation to creatures that begins at God's creative act. This change is neither substantial nor accidental in hylomorphic terms, but can be described as a *per accidens* change, where this is understood as the new applicability of a *ratio* (of being related to creation) to God. I have called these new relations "real" as opposed to "categorical real," because God is outside all categories. Nevertheless, the whole project of Aquinas's natural theology requires there to be important similarities between natural causation and divine, such that Aquinas relies heavily on the categories of activity and passivity to explicate his doctrine of creation.

⁵⁷ *In I Sent.* d.2, q.1, a.2, corp.

Mark Henninger argues that Aquinas's primary reason for denying that God has real relations to creatures has to do more with the transcendence of God than with any of the attributes I have considered here.⁵⁸ Henninger cites *QDP* q.7, a.10, corp., in which Aquinas stipulates that for any two things to be mutually related by real relations, the foundations of the relations must be of the same genus. God, being outside all categories of being, shares no genera with creatures. Therefore, God has no real relations to creatures. We can respond to this position in two ways. First, recall from the discussion of knower-known relations in section III that I claim and argue that what motivates the claim that beings of disparate orders cannot be mutually related by real relations is that beings of the really related order are effected or determined by beings from the other order, and not vice versa. As I argued in section III, so here: since a real relation does not introduce a new form, since it does not make composition, and since a subject's acquisition or loss of a real relation is not a *per se* change in its subject, the incommensurable orders objection is moot.

Second, Aquinas's analogical understanding of being requires that, even though God is outside all genera, God is yet similar enough to created being such that homonymous predicates affirmed of creatures and of God can function as a middle term in syllogistic reasoning about the existence of God.⁵⁹ God's agency in creation is to be understood analogically, not univocally. Aquinas understands univocal agency to be that whereby an effect has the same specific nature as its cause, as when a man generates a man, or heat makes things hot.⁶⁰ God's nature, *ipsum esse*, is not communicated in creation (because God is simple and infinite),⁶¹ but what is created is something *similar* to divine essence in an imperfect way, such as wisdom, which exists in rational creatures accidentally and deficiently but in God substantially and perfectly. Applying this similarity-with-difference to the real relations that, I have argued, can be affirmed of God on Thomistic grounds, we must characterize these relations primarily in negative terms, that is, as *not* implying composition in God and *not* implying God's dependence on creation. But they do not fail to be "real" relations in any salient sense that we have discovered in this study. On my view, then, Aquinas has the philosophical resources to affirm real relations in God toward creatures—*analogical real relations*.

⁵⁸ Henninger, *Relations*, pp. 31-39.

⁵⁹ *In I Sent.* d.8, q.1, a.2, corp.; *ST* Ia, q.13, a.5, corp.

⁶⁰ *In I Sent.* d.8, q.1, a.2, corp.

⁶¹ *ST* Ia, q.11, a.3, corp.

Here I have been concerned to show that the interpretation of Aquinas's theory of CRRs offered here adds coherence to Aquinas's account of the creation relation in creatures, but that Aquinas himself did not apply the theory to a traditional problem of classical theism in a way that he could have. Aquinas's theorizing makes room for affirming real relations of God, and in general allows us to speak of a divine *quasi*-mutability (*per accidens* change) that doesn't compromise the *desiderata* of Aquinas's doctrine of God. God's active creation relation is no more and no less a change than his creative activity itself.



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