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THE CONCEPT OF *RELATION* IN THE THOMISTIC PERCEPTION OF A *PERSON*

In the thought of Thomas Aquinas, theology and philosophy unite in a whole while maintaining their own entity, in what Étienne Gilson has called “Christian philosophy,” which was founded by the Fathers of the Church by incorporating for the first time Greek philosophy in the corpus of Christian thought.¹ Thomistic philosophy, a product of the joining of Hellenism and Christianity and the reconciliation of theology and philosophy, faith and reason, contemplates man both in the context of a logical construction and as a person in the context of a set of experiences.

Thomas Aquinas, an heir to both Greco-Roman and Christian traditions, returns to the ancient ontology of Greek philosophy in order to face his era’s greatest challenge, that is, the incorporation of Aristotelian nature with its own ontological composition into the Universe created by God, according to Christian faith. The connection of the metaphysics of being with Aristotle’s philosophy of nature allows for the composition of “anthropology” *per se*, in whose context is placed the concept of a person as it emerges from the following two funda-

¹ Étienne Gilson, *L’Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998), 212.

mental issues: the metaphysical approach to a person ontologically connected with “nature,” and the concept of a person as “relation.”

The Relation between Person and Nature

The realization of nature’s particular structure and the study of the nature and causes of things in the context of the Thomistic interpretation of the world has led to an acknowledgement of the nature of things not only as essence, but also as an activity *per se*, that is, a second causality participating in the hierarchical order of the universe and immanent in beings.

The acknowledgement of the nature of things as a second causality is founded on the acceptance of the possibility of all beings but God, and their ontological submission to the primary cause. This finds its metaphysical expression in the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence in every being but God.²

Thomistic ontology focuses on the reality of being as a synthesis of essence and existence, and achieves the ontological foundation of a person by distinguishing it from the concept of essence or nature.

The contemplation of the person as substance vis-à-vis the concept of essence or nature, which originates from the Patristic tradition,³ setting the concept of a person in the field of individuality, combined with Aristotelian hylomorphism, leads to the unity of the human synthesis, consisting of soul and body.

Human nature is based on the synthesis of soul and body, the soul being ontologically united with the body. A person as individual substance (*substantia*) is a hypostasis, in whose context rational nature

² Ernest L. Fortin, “St Thomas Aquinas,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss, Joseph Cropsey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 223–250. See also ST, I, q. 3, a. 4 and SCG, I, 22.

³ Eleni Procopiou, *The Person as a Subject of Law in the Work of Thomas Aquinas* [in Greek] (Athens: Herodotos Publ., 2013), 158 ff.

takes place, making it supreme. “The synthesis of this matter and this form is a hypostasis, or person.”⁴

Thomas Aquinas’ conviction of the idea of natural order and the interpolation of nature between man and God has resulted in an ontological upgrading of the material world and the acknowledgement of man as a natural being, that is, the acknowledgement of his partly autonomous existence—a significant fact for the whole of modern thought—without denying the metaphysical foundation of a standard human essence.

A person as an individual component of this soul and this body safeguards the individual existence of this particular synthesis,⁵ whose ingredients are individuality and unity, since the human being is a whole founded on man’s psychosomatic unity. A person as an ontological subject is an autonomous whole existing *per se* and for himself, an individual with a personal soul, mind and body, a singular subject of human nature not “directed by others,” but being “a master of his acts.”⁶

A person’s ontological autonomy forms the foundation of his practical moral freedom. Therefore, a person as a metaphysical reality is founded on the contemplation of a person as a self-existing being and a performer of personal acts.

Thus, the concept of a person, a theological concept originating from the dogmatic elaboration of the theology of Trinity and Christ, is complemented by a philosophical (metaphysical) viewing. In this context, there emerges the concept of the Christian person which is not identical with Plato’s or Aristotle’s “man.” The metaphysical dimension of a person is Thomism’s great contribution which forms the foun-

⁴ ST, I, q. 29, a. 2 ad 3.

⁵ Aquinas’ view on the individuality of the soul confronted Averroism.

⁶ ST, I, q. 29, a. 1, resp.: “persons . . . distinguish themselves from other substances because they are ‘masters of their own acts’. They do not simply endure energy, like other substances, but act on their own. Therefore, acts belong to persons.”

dition of Western thought and takes shape—not against nature but—based on the ontological unity of the common nature of all men.

Consequently, the crowning moment of Christian metaphysics is the one in which the concept of a person is complemented by the Aristotelian concept of nature. Aquinas' view follows the Greek tradition as well as the Patristic tradition of the approach of taking human nature as a universality, a part of which is individuality, the hypostasis or person.

The abstract idea of human nature accompanies a person's historical existence and Aquinas, despite his admiration for the person as the unique product of a particular historical existence, looks consistently towards human nature as a metaphysical concept.

By the metaphysical synthesis of the concepts of person and nature in the field of ontology, Thomas Aquinas managed to combine the impersonal metaphysics of ancient Greeks (primarily that of Aristotle) with Christian personalism. Thus, in the thought of Aquinas the ontological concept of a person as expressed in Christian theology, that is, in the image of divine substances, remains attached to the metaphysical reality of human nature.

The world, however, does not consist solely of persons but is primarily a world of natures, that is, purposes, destined for a teleological prospect, so much so that the idea of a complete transcendence of the human person appears weak. Therefore, it is impossible to contemplate the human person without simultaneously contemplating the human species.

In this context, the metaphysical contemplation of a person is based on the distinction between person and nature and their coexistence. It is not based on the identification of person with nature⁷ that leads to the identification of human substance with essence, that is, the

⁷ This identification originates from the acceptance of the unprecedented uniqueness of the person in the nominalist philosophy, which rejected the ontological reality of universal concepts and turned to individual things, thus undermining the foundations of ontology itself.

disappearance of universal nature which results in ontology being reduced to the metaphysics of individual substance and in the absolute acceptance of a person by the abolition of the concept of essence and the sole acceptance of the individual. This would amount to a nominalist position, the very opposite of ancient Greek and medieval ontology.

In the thought of Thomas Aquinas, a person at a supernatural level is not detached from mankind, while, as a historical person, he or she is not detached from society. The concept of person becomes metaphysical by reduction from the natural order. Therefore, natural sociability lies at the foundation of a person's supernatural fulfillment.

In this way Thomas Aquinas achieves a synthesis between man as such, as human nature or mankind, with man as a person vis-à-vis others.⁸ By means of an ontological approach, he extends the concept of person to all men, making them equal in the field of ontology and attributing an all-human value (*dignitas*) to human nature and to every individual person, being responsible for its own acts.

The Concept of “Relation”

The synthesis of person and nature is completed through the contemplation of person as “relation,” and is therefore closely associated with the Trinitarian principle of “homoousion.” Thomistic theology has fully adopted the doctrine of homoousion of the Greek Fathers, in whose context hypostasis (person) is connected with the common essence, or nature.

Thomas Aquinas' concept of a person as a self-existent relation consists of the contemplation of person as society or relation, and is fundamental in the history of theological thought. In the Trinitarian doctrine, divine persons are identical with their substantial relations.⁹ There is no ontological precedence of substance or person: divine sub-

⁸ ST, II-II, q. 64, a. 1, ad 3.

⁹ ST, I, q. 29, a. 4, resp. and ad 1 and 3. “Persona significat relationem prout est subsistens in natura divina” (ST, I, q. 39, a. 1, resp.).

stance exists in full in each of the divine substances, so that they may join in the common essence and that the otherness and the personal existence of divine persons may be safeguarded. These persons are distinguished by their relations, meaning that persons are the actual substantial relations of fatherhood, “sonhood” and precedence.

A substantial relation does not presuppose a distinction between persons. Rather, it carries it along, and it is naturally simultaneous with the person.¹⁰ Thus, there is no ontological precedence of person vis-à-vis substantial relation. Through these relations persons relate with each other, because these relations are identical with the persons themselves. However, these relations are not based on occurrence; they are essence itself, relations or substances within the divine nature; relations substantiating persons in a way that each divine person signifies a substantiated relation, that is, “the Greek Fathers’ way of existing.”¹¹

When it comes to God, the concept of individual substance includes relation; not as a simple relation, but a relation indicated by the way of *substantia*, that is, hypostasis.¹² The three substances hold individually the whole of one substance, being independent of each other as persons but fully united because of their common essence; existing as self-existing relations, that is, as persons defined by their relations, which are characterized by an ontological reality.

Thus, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their relations, since there is no synthesis of form and matter in God, nor a synthesis of essence and occurrence. Therefore, each divine attribute is divine nature itself.

This Thomistic approach to a person as society or relation is equal to the contemplation of a person as universality; in fact, it is based on it. Through it there arises the issue of the difference between

¹⁰ ST, I, q. 40, a. 2, ad 4.

¹¹ Emile Bailleux, “Le personnalisme de Saint Thomas en Théologie trinitaire,” *Revue Thomiste* 61 (1961): 25–42.

¹² ST, I, q. 29, a. 4, resp. Also, John of Damascus, Ἐκδοσις ακριβῆς τῆς Ορθοδόξου πίστεως [*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*], III, 21.

divine and human persons, as the society of persons, and the identification of persons with their relations concerns the way of existence of divine persons, consisting of “correlation with the other,” with the other being “naturally simultaneous,”¹³ meaning that a self-existing relation, being a component of the person, incorporates a correlated “other,” who is naturally simultaneous with substance. The person-substance acquires its ontological content being in relation; a relation that exists in itself.

The society of divine persons, however, cannot be transferred to the human society of persons. Human persons do not indicate substantial relations, because their relations are simple. The model of the absolute connection of the person with “relationality” may not, according to Aquinas, be applied to human persons because their relations do not have an ontological context, “they do not signify a person but a person’s relation.”¹⁴ On this point also Thomas Aquinas follows the doctrine of the “homoousion” of the Greek Fathers, primarily John of Damascus.¹⁵

Human persons are separate, not within each other. Therefore, although Aquinas acknowledges the analogy between the immaterial and the material world (*analogia entis*), he deems relations applications of a person, not its ingredient, as with divine persons.

Conveyance of the theological concept of a person to a human person may only occur by means of the assumption of a supernatural role by a fellow being as third party.¹⁶ However, this does not mean that

¹³ ST, I, q. 40, a. 2, resp. and ad 4.

¹⁴ ST, I, q. 33, a. 2, ad 1.

¹⁵ John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, I, 8: “In the case of all created things, the distinction of the subsistences is observed in actual fact . . . [they] are both separated in space and differ in time . . . and all differentiating properties . . . they do not dwell in one another . . . but in the case of the holy Trinity . . . the community and unity are observed in fact . . . each one of them is related as closely to the other as to itself . . . it is by thought that the difference is perceived.”

¹⁶ Philippe Vallin, *Le prochain comme tierce personne chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2000), 274.

a human person, as a specific individual, is subject to substantial relations that constitute his existence as substance, because a human person “is” only by analogy to divine persons.

Man *per se* carries with him the ontological absolute of human nature, along with its value, which is higher than that of any other nature. Man exists as a person in relation to “things” and “others,” as primarily expressed in the field of knowledge,¹⁷ within which the close association of soul and being is the outcome of the correlation of subject and object, of a person and the world. “To know,” says Aquinas, “signifies primarily an experienced relation of the knowing subject with the object of knowledge,”¹⁸ since through an object a subject becomes aware of itself.

Apart from the field of knowledge, however, man exists in relation to things and others. Such an existence is the product of relations between men; not “substantial” ones but objects of moral-juridical regulations.

The Thomistic contemplation views the issues of individuality and personal identity as a life’s course, with the teleological arrangement of life as a whole. However, this personal identity is not just the total sum of a life’s episodes and events, or relations with others, because “a relation includes beings in relation. It is something else that adds up to the participants.”¹⁹

The procedure of the completion of a man’s perfection relies primarily on his relations with God and his fellow being, that is, activities by which a human person advances to his completion. The human face, however, precedes and distinguishes itself from its activity, since

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas’ epistemological principle consists of an agreement between the order of knowledge and the order of being; that is, an agreement of the intellect with “things” (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*), so that knowledge may be an expression of this agreement between knowledge and the being. Cfr. Michel Villey, *Réflexions sur la philosophie et le droit. Les Carnets* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 477.

¹⁸ ST, I, q. 34, a. 1, ad 2–3. The awareness that one perceives something that can be perceived includes one’s awareness of oneself (*De Veritate*, 10, 8).

¹⁹ Villey, *Réflexions sur la philosophie et le droit*, 477.

the latter is an application of the face and does not belong to its essence. Although the human face can only achieve its completion by many activities, it does not identify with them. A human person is conceived in his or her progressive development in the time span of both their personal history and human history in general. However, the meta-physical approach to a person's identity does not occur through a person's relations or activities, because in Christian teleology a man's soul is free, being destined for a cause higher than that of the earthly state.²⁰ This, after all, is the contribution of Christianity.

This contemplation of Thomas Aquinas on the free side of the person constitutes the idea of the transcendence of the human person as regards any social order.²¹ It relates, however, to the spiritual, supernatural sphere, not the physical side of the person's existence in society. In the context of his or her social relations, an individual-natural person comprises his or her "roles" and relations by which he or she is placed in a society and the service of the common good.²² On the other hand, a person in his or her supernatural accomplishment is independent of these roles since man *per se*, human nature as an ontological category, is beyond and above social roles and relations or a person's acts, since a person heads towards an "end," the end of human nature. This contemplation identifies neither with the absolute autonomy of the person as existence, that is, the metaphysics of individual substance, nor with its definition via its relations with other persons and universal nature.

Thus, according to Thomas Aquinas, the ontological density of the essence of person, which enriches the individual existence through essence or nature, can be rendered neither by the historical approach to a person as proposed by MacIntyre—who identifies a person with his or

²⁰ ST, II-II, q. 104, a. 5, resp.

²¹ Procopiou, *The Person as a Subject of Law in the Work of Thomas Aquinas*, 354.

²² A person is indeed part of a tradition in the context of a community, not a separate individual (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 138 and 199).

her relations and social roles²³—conceiving it as a narrative identity of a life lacking any transcendental foundation, nor by the secularization of the theological concept of a person, by which the latter is moved as a relational category from the field of metaphysics to that of morality.

Persistence in the “relational” dimension of the person leads, in the final analysis, to a denial of the individual personal soul and individuality for the benefit of the “other,” to the identification of person with relation which, however, does not bear the ontological contents of a person but simply the moral ones, and is a form of return to Averroism which lies in the antipodes of Thomistic metaphysics of a person.

The metaphysical concept of the human person may only be perceived in relation to the order of blissfulness, the final end of human existence, which bears the contents of a moral approach in a person’s relational dimension. In the Thomistic interpretation of a person, the human person is not just the final product of a procedure of historical change, a transformation of one’s “self” and his relations,²⁴ as the postmodern era believes, since it is neither detached from the world and social life, that is, an isolated self, nor does it identify fully with its social existence. Moving between two lives and two perfections, the perfection of birth and that of nature, it connects history and metaphysics.

Thus, in modern personalism the identification of a person with its relations, or the contemplation of a person as a “relational” category is equivalent with an identification of the person with its “roles” or qualities, and the contemplation of human personality as a unity of narration, or through its historical unfolding.²⁵ In other words, it is not

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 160.

²⁴ *Id.*, 33.

²⁵ *Id.*, 26 and 206. As Eleonore Stump notes, the experience of a second person as interpersonal relation is characteristically presented in the biblical narrative. See Eleonore Stump, “Second Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 57:4 (2001): 745–771.

compatible with the metaphysical-ontological foundation of the person as understood by Thomas Aquinas, which goes beyond history.

Man as a natural person, a subject of history, is strongly dependent on his relations with others, while also a carrier of both “relations of love” founded primarily on the teachings of Christian life,²⁶ and “relations of justice,” concerning primarily social life, since justice views goodness as a “duty towards the community or God.”²⁷ A person, as part of a community and in relation to it, is a carrier of relations of justice, since “the truth of justice does not concern the truth of life, which is a personal truth; it is the rule which opinions on fellow beings follow.”²⁸

Such relations are regulated by the virtue of justice, whose reason for existence is “the relation with the person of the other” (*ad alterum*). Thus, in the context of justice, the paramount moral virtue, as it is a “relation with another,” there arises the precise and practical character of the person as well as the concept of “relation” in the field of relations of justice, as adopted by Aquinas from the Aristotelian philosophy of law.

Justice, according to Aquinas and following Aristotle, is a social virtue concerning a social group; it specifically serves natural and social order seeking a “just relation,” that is, a “relation of equality” concerning things.

Therefore, a person as natural person is a member of a city and a carrier of relations of justice, and as such is subject to the common good. A person, as protagonist of cosmic order, is born with law, that is, relations of justice, and is connected with “things” through which persons enter a status of individual roles that safeguard individual benefit. In other words, in the context of justice persons are again juxta-

²⁶ ST, I, q. 108, a. 3, resp., and ST, II–II, q. 184, a. 3, ad 3: “[I]n Christian life there is a perfection of love . . .”

²⁷ ST, II–II, q. 79, a. 1, resp.

²⁸ ST, II–II, q. 109, a. 3, ad 3.

posed with “things,” the world of “having,” because, as Thomas Aquinas states, “through actions . . . and external things men can communicate with each other . . . because through them a man is validated vis-à-vis another (man).”²⁹

Man’s close connection with nature, a person’s with “things” and the “nature of things,” takes place primarily in the context of relations of justice, which are relations between persons, a product of the correlation of things.

Factum relationis as a primary “relational” event is founded above all in the relation of the person with things and others, and occurs in the field of justice, which has a “public aspect,” as it concerns the community. In this context, relations between persons occur in the sphere of an objective framework of relations, not the sphere of a “consensus between subjects.”³⁰

Thus, in Thomistic contemplation of the human person, the supernatural world of persons, in its theological and metaphysical sense, coexists with the world of persons as protagonists of cosmic order and legal relations. A person’s inclusion in the framework of legal relations and its ontological liberation in the supernatural field have opened up the way for the social acknowledgement of the human person, which has since been placed within the community, in the heart of social relations.

Thomas Aquinas’ metaphysical contemplation of a person, founded on the concept of relation as complemented by its contemplation in the field of human knowledge and its moral-juridical approach in the field of social and legal relations, raises primarily the issue of unity and individuality of the human being as precondition for the protection of human individuality from a confusion with nature, species or

²⁹ ST, II–II, q. 58, a. 8, resp.

³⁰ Consensus between subjects, as perceived by Arendt, that is, a common sense within a community (*sensus communis*) cannot replace “relations of justice” on which the life of a community is primarily founded. See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 70–71.

God,³¹ as Gilson has rightly noted. As far as human existence is concerned, what is non convertible is not the “relational event,” but the person *per se*, with his or her unbreakable unity as a psychosomatic entity of the human person, vis-à-vis which “others” and their actions are seen as having occurred objectively, so that personal as well as social relations may be combined with personal commitments. This allows for the concept of a person to be perceived without conversion to anything else, that is, in a non convertible manner.³²

Indeed, in social life we perceive ourselves as persons, because we act and interact on each other according to a common human nature. However, the concept of a person cannot be replaced by the concept of a team: by “us” or the contemplation of persons as members of a group, on the basis of their roles in a joint activity.

The ontological foundation of a person as relational category dismisses metaphysical individualism. It needs, however, to confront the issues of modern personalism with its origins in Kant’s philosophy, veering between two extremes: 1) an exaltation of subjectivity far from any demand for transcendence, once again in the service of an individualistic perception of life, and 2) a transcendence-denial of individuality and a replacement of individualism by a “communal personalism” that cancels any sense of individual autonomy.³³

³¹ Saint Thomas, *Textes sur la morale*, French transl. and comments by Étienne Gilson (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998), 12.

³² Strawson raises the issue of the “primitiveness of the concept of a person.” See Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), 102.

³³ Emmanuel Mounier, *Le personnalisme* (Paris: PUF, 2007), 34: La personne “n’existe que vers autrui, elle ne se connaît que par autrui, elle ne se trouve qu’en autrui. L’expérience primitive de la personne est l’expérience de la seconde personne.”

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SUMMARY

The article aims to show that the connection of the metaphysics of being with Aristotle's philosophy of nature allows for the composition of anthropology *per se* which involves the concept of a person as it emerges from the two fundamental issues: the metaphysical approach to a person ontologically connected with nature, and the concept of a person as relation. The article concludes with the claim that, in Thomistic anthropology, the supernatural world of persons coexists with the natural world of persons who are subject to cosmic order and legal relations. Thus, a person's inclusion in the framework of legal relations and its ontological liberation in the supernatural field open up the way for the social acknowledgement of the human person.

KEYWORDS: relation, person, Thomism, nature, anthropology, metaphysics, God, society.