2025 TheoLogica
An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology
VARIA
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v9i1.67803

Aquinas' Counterfactual Incarnations

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Abstract: This article is an examination of Aquinas' account of the various ways in which the Incarnation might have occurred. Aquinas maintains that the Son of God became incarnate by assuming a specific body/soul union. Although he maintains that it was *fitting* for God to have become incarnate in this manner, he contends (i) that any one of the three divine persons could have become incarnate in this manner, (ii) that any plurality of these Persons could have assumed the same body/soul union, (iii) that any plurality of these Persons could have assumed distinct body/soul unions, and (iv) that any of the divine persons could have assumed a plurality of body/soul unions. Since these scenarios constitute increasingly radical departures from what is arguably the central teaching of the Christian faith, it is worth asking, first, whether Aquinas is rationally entitled to these modal judgments, and second, why he is advancing them so early in his Discourse on the Incarnation in the *Summa theologiae*. In this article I contend, first, that these counterfactual scenarios are possible if his actual account is possible; and second, that they shed light (i) on the manner in which the Son of God did become incarnate; (ii) on the nature and scope of God's freedom, love and power; and (iii) on Aquinas' relationship with Rahner's Rule, viz., the thesis that the economic Trinity is identical with the immanent Trinity.

Keywords: Aquinas, Incarnation, Trinity, Divine attributes

Introduction

Part III of Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* begins with a lengthy discourse on the mystery of the Incarnation. He begins with the question of whether it was *appropriate* for the Son of God to have assumed our nature. Aquinas maintains that although God could have secured our redemption in a manner that did not involve the suffering and death of his incarnate Son, this was the best way for us to appreciate both the extent

of our sinfulness and the extent of God's love, justice, and mercy. In Question Two Aquinas takes up the manner in which the Son of God assumed our nature. He contends that the Son of God became a human being by uniting to himself a properly animated human body. As we shall see, it is essential to Aquinas' position that this body/soul union is not itself a human being: he rejects the thesis that the Son of God became an instance of our nature by assuming an instance of our nature. In the third of twenty-six questions Aquinas does something quite surprising: he outlines four radically divergent ways in which the Incarnation *might* have occurred. While he affirms that only the Son of God became incarnate by assuming a human body animated by a human soul, in "Of the Mode of the Union on the Part of the Person Assuming" Aquinas maintains (i) that any of the Divine Persons could have become incarnate in this manner; (ii) that any plurality of the Divine Persons could have assumed the *same* body/soul union; (iii) that any plurality of these Persons could have assumed *distinct* body/soul unions; and (iv) that any of these Persons could have assumed a plurality of body/soul unions. These counterfactual scenarios are surprising, first, because of their content: they present us with increasingly radical departures from the theological reality which is the central focus of the historic Christian faith. They are also surprising in virtue of their immediate context: Aquinas explicates and defends these possibilities quite early in his account of this mystery in the *Summa theologiae*, which is itself offered as an introductory text for beginning students of theology. We are thus forced to confront two sets of questions: First, is Aquinas entitled to these judgments? Does he succeed in establishing that God could have assumed our nature in these various ways? Second, why is he defending these possibilities here, in the opening stages of his introductory discourse on the Incarnation? What do these scenarios tell us about who God is and what he has done for us through the Incarnation of his Son? My resolution of these queries runs as follows. In Part Two I present Aquinas' account of the manner in which the Incarnation did (and did not) occur. In Part Three I explicate his account of the various ways in which God might have assumed our nature, and I contend, in each case, that these modal judgments are adequately grounded in his account of the (actual) Incarnation in conjunction with his general account of the divine nature. In Part Four I examine his reasons for concluding that it was most fitting that only the Son should have assumed our nature. Although he could doubtless have provided additional reasons for this conclusion, I contend that the three reasons which he does provide are adequate for his purposes, since they are the sorts of considerations which reasonably influence one's behavior in a manner which leaves room for alternative courses of action. Finally, in Part Five I explain why these

counterfactual scenarios matter for Aquinas and for those who are sympathetic to his position. For starters, these scenarios exemplify an important method of philosophical and theological analysis, namely, the explication of a theory through an examination of its modal and non-modal implications. In addition to providing us a more complete understanding of his account of the Incarnation—particularly as it differs from its chief rival—these scenarios shed light upon the nature of divine freedom and the absolute metaphysical equality of the Divine Persons. They also help us to appreciate Aquinas' implicit rejection of Rahner's Rule, namely, the thesis that the *Economic* Trinity is the *Immament* Trinity.[1] Although it is hardly surprising that Aquinas is committed to the rejection of this position, from our discussion of these counterfactual scenarios it will become clear that (*pace* Rahner) Aquinas can reject it in a manner which is not theologically problematic.

1. Aquinas On How God Did (and Did Not) Become Incarnate

Before we examine Aquinas' account of the various ways in which God might have become incarnate, we must attend to his account of the manner in which God did become incarnate, and also to his account of some of the ways in which this could not have occurred. As a first step in this direction it should be noted that for Aquinas it was not inevitable that God should have assumed our nature in any manner. Since God might have refrained from creating anything, he might easily have refrained from creating an order of reality which includes human beings.[2] In addition, Aquinas maintains that God would not have assumed our nature if we hadn't fallen into sin,[3] and he does not think that it was inevitable that our first parents or their progeny should have departed from their original state of righteousness, in which "sin was avoided without struggle",[4] and in which even without grace we were "in a position to resist temptation".[5]

[1] Both expressions pertain to the manner in which God is revealed to us as both One Being and Three Persons. The Economic Trinity pertains to how the Divine Persons are revealed in the course of salvation history, and the Immanent (or Essential) Trinity pertains to how these Persons are eternally related to one another in abstraction from any of God's actions.

[2] *STh* I, q. 19, a. 3; *ScG* I, c. 81, and *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 96.

[3] *STh* III, q. 1, a. 3. It is worth noting that Aquinas does not think that the continued rectitude of our race would have placed limits upon God's power. He thus adds that "even if sin had not existed, God could have become incarnate."

[4] *STh* I, q. 94, a. 4. Here Aquinas is quoting Augustine (*De Civ. Dei,* c. 14, 10).

[5] *STh* I, q. 95, a. 4, ad 3.

Nor can we say that God was bound to assume our nature once we had fallen from our original state of rectitude. For one thing, he was not compelled to maintain the continued existence of our fallen race. Our existence is a gift which we do not deserve and which God might not have granted. Having thus maintained our existence, was he bound to seek our moral and spiritual restoration? Since for Aquinas there is no room for a real distinction between who God is, what God is, and what God wills, it is for him all but unthinkable that God—who is Love Itself—should have allowed the human race to remain forever alienated from him by our sin.[6] Even so, Aquinas does not suppose that God was bound to redeem us through the suffering and death of his incarnate Son. Although he does not suggest any concrete alternatives, he avers that "God of his infinite power could have restored human nature in many other ways".[7] While he maintains that only one who is both human and divine would be in a position to offer a condign sacrifice for the entirety of our race, as "the sovereign and common good of the whole universe" God would have been within his rights to forgive our sins in the absence of such a sacrifice.[8]

Before we take up his account of the manner in which the Son did assume our nature, let us briefly examine some of the ways in which the Incarnation could not have taken place. Aquinas recognizes three basic orders of created beings: inanimate beings, merely animate beings (plants and non-human animals), and rational beings (human beings and angels). He contends, moreover, that God could not have assumed the nature of a non-rational being: he could not have become a horse or a lion, and this for two reasons. In the first place, it would be incompatible with his divine majesty to become a member of species whose instances are not *persons* (rational beings who both act and understand). In the second place, it would have been completely futile for God to have assumed such a nature.[9] Although all created substances were made by God and for God, only rational beings are capable of knowing and loving God, only rational beings can be guilty of personal sin and subject to original sin, and so only rational beings are redeemable by God. Indeed, Aquinas maintains that only *human* beings are redeemable, since no such restoration is possible for the fallen angels.[10] And since he repeatedly insists that the Incarnation

[6] For statements to this effect see *STh* III, q. 1, a. 1; *Comp. Theol*. I, cc.199, 201.

[7] *STh* III, q. 1, a. 2. See also *STh* III, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3.

[8] *STh* III, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3.

[9] *STh* III, q. 4, a. 1.

[10] Ibid. His explanation comes in Part I of the *Summa theologiae*: angelic sins cannot be forgiven because it is impossible for angels to repent. Once they choose to act in a manner which is contrary to God's moral law their wills are permanently fixed in this rebellious state. See *STh* I, q. 100, a. 2, ad

is fundamentally grounded in God's redemptive purposes,[11] for Aquinas the Incarnation necessarily involves the assumption of *our* nature: to become incarnate is to become a human being for the purpose of securing our salvation from sin and death.

We must now confront the central question of this mystery: how did God assume our nature and so become a human being? As a first step in this direction, we must recognize that God is a Trinity of Persons, and that of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, only the Son assumed our nature. Our next question is equally pressing: what exactly did the Son of God assume? What does he mean by "human nature" in this context? Aquinas insists that God did not assume our nature in the Platonic sense of this term: he did not assume the abstract essence of our humanity. Rather, he assumed our nature *in atomo*, i.e., in a concrete individual, namely, a human body animated by a human soul.[12] In particular, he assumed this body/soul union from the first moment of its existence. What precisely does this assumption involve? Aquinas contends that the Son of God assumed this body/soul union by uniting it to himself, i.e., to his *person*. He takes the nature of this union to be *ineffable*, which is to say that we are in little or no position to understand this relation, much less to describe it.[13] But we can at least describe some of its effects: as a result of his union with this animated body, the Son of God is now both fully human and fully divine. For Aquinas this last point is non-negotiable: the one person of Christ now instantiates two distinct natures, namely, his original, divine nature and his assumed, human nature. As an instance of both natures, he is not half-human and half-divine, but fully human and fully divine. As a fully divine being, the incarnate Christ is eternal, uncreated, and unlimited with regard to his knowledge and power. As a human being, he is temporal, created, and distinctly limited with regard to his knowledge and power. How can one person have both sets of properties? How can one person be both temporal and eternal, both created and uncreated, and both limited and unlimited with regard to his knowledge and power? In response to these concerns Aquinas employs what has come to be known as the *reduplicative strategy*, one which seeks to avoid the charge of contradiction by adding distinct, qualifying phrases to these pairs of ascriptions. Aquinas thus writes that "it is impossible for

4; and *STh* I, q. 64, a. 2. Since angels are purely spiritual beings, the assumption of such an angelic nature would not (strictly speaking) have been an *incarnation*, but Aquinas would surely not be content to rest his case upon semantic considerations.

[11] See *STh* III, q. 1, aa. 3-5; *Comp. Theol.* I, cc. 200, 204.

[12] See *STh* III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3; and *STh* III, q. 2, a. 5, ad 2.

[13] See *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 211, and *De unione*, a. 1.

contraries to be predicated of the same in the same respects, but nothing prevents their being predicated of the same in different aspects. And thus contraries are predicated of Christ, not in the same, but in different natures."[14] Although it would be obviously contradictory to say that Christ is both F and not-F in the same sense at the same time, it is not contradictory to say that he is F in one sense and not-F in another. Since properties do not apply to God and creatures in the same sense (their focal meaning is determined by their application to creatures, and these meanings are extended to God by way of analogy), we can consistently affirm that Christ is both created and uncreated, since he is uncreated with regard to his divine nature, and created with regard to his human nature.[15]

For an adequate understanding of Aquinas' account of the Incarnation we must confront one more question: what is the ontological status of the animated body which the Son of God has united to himself? In particular, is this body/soul union itself a human being? Did the Son of God become an instance of our nature by assuming an instance of our nature, as the so-called *assumptus-homo* theory affirms? Although he appears to have been open to this possibility in some of his early writings,[16] Aquinas' mature Christology is resolutely opposed to this position.[17] While he would grant that every human being *possesses* a human body which is animated by a human soul, he would not allow that every animated human body is a human being, since this is not true of the body/soul union which was assumed by the Son of God. For if this soul/body union had been a human being, then it would have been an individual substance of a rational nature, and hence a *person*.[18] So if the Son of God had become a human being by assuming a human being, the Incarnation would have involved two persons rather than one. That is, it would have involved both (i) the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, and (ii) the person which is constituted by this created body/soul union. In short, he thinks that the *assumptus-*

[14] *STh* III, q. 16, a. 4, ad 1. See also *ScG* IV, c. 2.

[15] For affirmations of this strategy which are consistent with Aquinas' official, "one substance" account of the Incarnation, see O'Collins (2002, 6-8); Stump (2002, 211-217); and Gorman (2014, 86-100).

[16] Here I am thinking, in particular, of his Commentary on Lombard's *Sentences,* written c. 1252-56 (see *Sent*. III, d. 6, a. 1), and Quodlibet IX, written c. 1256-59 (see *Quodl.* IX, q. 2, a. 1).

[17] See *STh* III, q. 2, a. 3; *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3; *ScG* IV, c. 38; and *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210.

[18] Here Aquinas is relying upon Boethius' conception of a person as an "individual substance of a rational nature." See *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium,* 3.4-5.

homo theory cannot be correct, since it is inconsistent with the one person/two nature formula which has been *de fide* since the Council of Chalcedon in 451.[19]

It is helpful to understand Aquinas' account of the Incarnation as arising out of his rejection of the *assumptus-homo* theory. This response begins by affirming that the Son of God is a *suppositum*, i.e., a complete individual substance which exemplifies a specific nature. A human being is also a *suppositum*, though one of a quite different kind, which exists in a different order of reality. Since the Son of God is a *suppositum*, the body/soul union which he assumed cannot also be a *suppositum* because it has existed *in him* from the first moment of its existence. Because this body/soul union exists in a substantial reality of a higher metaphysical order, it cannot be a *suppositum* because it does not exist as a discrete substantial reality. Since every human being is a *suppositum*, this body/soul union is not a human being, though Aquinas would likely concede that it is the only such union which does not fall under these categories. He thus rejects the thesis that the Son of God became an instance of our nature by assuming an instance of our nature. In its place, Aquinas affirms what has come to be known as the *subsistence* theory of the Incarnation. On this account, the Son of God became a human being by assuming what belongs to us essentially as instances of this nature, namely, a human body animated by a human soul. In virtue of this assumption the Son of God *subsists* in this nature, which is to say that he exists as a substantial reality in and through this animated human body, so that its parts and properties are properly *his* parts and properties. This means, in turn, that by touching the hand of Christ one will have touched the eternal Son of God. Even so, Aquinas does not think the Son is related to his assumed nature in the same manner as his original nature. Although he speaks of the Son of God as subsisting in both natures, he maintains that the Son is his divine nature, but not his human nature. That is, Aquinas contends both (i) that the Son is *identical* with his divine nature, and (ii) that the Son is *not* identical with the body/soul union which is his assumed nature.[20] While it is no part of Aquinas' account that the Son of God either does or could cease being human, he maintains that the Son might never have become human: he might never have assumed our nature. Now that he has done so,

[19] Elswhere I argue (Conn 2015) that Aquinas is mistaken in this regard. That is, I contend that it is possible to affirm the *assumptus-homo* theory in a manner which is consistent with the Chalcedonian formula. Although I go on to argue that such an account exhibits some theological advantages over Aquinas' subsistence theory, as a Catholic Christian I cannot suppose that Aquinas' account is ill-conceived or defective in any substantive manner.

[20] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7, ad 3.

however, Aquinas contends that the Son is a human being in exactly the same sense in which you and I are human.[21]

With this account of Aquinas' position in place, we are in a position to examine his account of the various ways in which the Incarnation *might* have occurred. As we shall see, Aquinas suggests that God could have assumed our nature in four quite surprising ways: (i) any one of the three Divine Persons could have become human by assuming a human body/soul union; (ii) any plurality of the Divine Persons could have assumed the same body/soul union; (iii) any plurality of the Divine Persons could have assumed distinct body/soul unions; and (iv) any of the Divine Persons could have assumed a plurality of body/soul unions. Since these counterfactual scenarios constitute increasingly radical departures from the central teaching of the Christian faith, they are likely to strike the faithful as more than a little bizarre and disturbing. And so we must ask, first, whether Aquinas is *entitled* to these counterfactual judgments: does he offer credible reasons for thinking that God could have assumed our nature in these additional ways? And we must ask, second, why he takes these possibilities to matter: what do they tell us about who God is and about what he has done for us in Christ? We will address the first question in Part Three, and the second question in Parts Four and Five.

2. Aquinas On How God Might Have Become Incarnate

Let us now turn to Aquinas' accounts of the various ways in which the Incarnation might have taken place. In "Of the Mode of Union on the Part of the Person Assuming" Aquinas outlines four sets of counterfactual scenarios, scenarios in which at least one Divine Person assumes at least one individual human nature consisting of an animated human body.[22] As we shall see, Aquinas contends that God could have orchestrated some rather astonishing variations on this theme. In presenting us with these counterfactual scenarios Aquinas is asking us to contemplate radically divergent ways in which God might have become human. As thought-experiments, however, they are still highly controlled: they are all presented within the bounds of classical theism and Latin Trinitarianism. Before we can proceed, we must take stock of some salient aspects of these doctrines. We believe that there is exactly one God, and that God is both an absolute unity and a Trinity of Persons. How are these Persons related to the One God? Since God is an absolute unity we cannot say that these Persons are distinct parts of the Divine

[21] See *STh* III, q. 2, a. 5; *Comp. Theol*. I, c. 211; and *De unione*, a. 2, ad. 5.

[22] *STh* III, q. 3, aa. 1-8.

Substance. Rather, on the principle that "that which subsists in the divine nature is the divine nature itself,"[23] Aquinas contends that each of these Persons is the whole of the Divine Substance, which is itself identical with the Divine Essence.[24] This means, in turn, that there is one sense in which the Father and the Son are numerically distinct (they are distinct *persons*), and there is another sense in which the Father and the Son are numerically identical (they are the same *being* or *substance*). As numerically distinct persons, we believe that something has *always* been true of each which has never been true of the others. Thus, for example, we believe that the Father alone is he who begets the Son, that the Son alone is he who is eternally begotten of the Father, and that the Holy Spirit alone is he who proceeds from the Father and the Son. In this way we can make sense of the proposition that something new and astonishing has come to be true of the Son: he has become a human being by assuming a human body and soul. In Question Three of his discourse on the Incarnation Aquinas' goal is to establish that it was not inevitable that God should have become incarnate in just this manner: he could have assumed our nature in several different ways. Although he concludes "Of the Mode of Union on the Part of the Person Assuming" by arguing that it was most fitting that only the Son should have assumed our nature, in Article Five he argues that any of the three Divine Persons could have assumed our nature; in Article Six he argues that any plurality of the Divine Persons could have simultaneously assumed the same individual human nature; and in Article Seven he argues, first, that the Divine Persons could have assumed distinct individual human natures, and second, that each could have assumed a plurality of individual natures. Let us consider these scenarios in turn.

First counterfactual scenario. Since we believe that only the Son assumed our nature, we must concede that it was possible for just *one* of the three Divine Persons to become incarnate. In Article Five of this discussion Aquinas' goal is to establish that *any* of the Divine Persons could have become human. Since each of these Persons has an equal share of the divine nature, what is possible for the Son must also be possible for the Father and the Holy Spirit. Aquinas thus writes that "whatever the Son can do, so can the Father and the Holy Ghost, otherwise the power of the three Persons would not be one. But the Son was able to become incarnate. Therefore the Father and the Holy Ghost were able to become incarnate."[25]

[23] *STh* I, q. 29, a. 4.

[24] See *STh* I, q. 28, a. 2; *STh* I, q. 29, a. 4; *STh* I, q. 39, a. 5, ad. 4; and *STh* I, q. 39, a. 6, ad 2.

[25] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 5.

In the ensuing paragraph Aquinas reiterates the above argument in a manner which employs a technical distinction between the *act* and the *term* of an assumption. The term of an assumption is the one *to whom* an individual human nature comes to be united, and the act is the principle by which this union is achieved. Aquinas insists that in every case, the *term* of an assumption is a Divine Person, and the *act* is a manifestation of the Divine Power. Each of the Three Persons is an equally viable candidate for this union, since they are equal in power and dignity. Although Aquinas will go on to argue that it was most fitting that only the Son should have assumed our nature, his goal at present is to establish that the properties which distinguish the three Persons from one another do not necessitate this result. Indeed he contends that in virtue of their equality as Divine Persons, the Divine power is *indifferent* with regard to which of these Persons is to be singled out as the term of an assumption, and hence that "the Divine power could have united human nature to the Person of the Father or of the Holy Ghost, as It united it to the Person of the Son. And hence we must say that the Father or the Holy Ghost could have assumed flesh even as the Son."[26]

It is worth noting that Aquinas' contention that the Father or the Holy Spirit might have become incarnate instead of the Son is not without precedent: Peter Lombard's account of this mystery in the *Sentences* also begins with an affirmation of this possibility.[27] In his usual fashion, Aquinas considers and responds to three objections to this position; two of these objections were among Lombard's reasons for thinking that it was most fitting that only the Son should have assumed our nature. The first of these objections maintains that it would have been inappropriate for someone other than the Son to have assumed our nature and so become the Son of Man. Such an action would have fomented error and confusion, as some would have said that there are two natural Sons when there is only one, and others would have been inclined to falsely identify the natural Son with the adopted Son.[28] Aquinas is not moved by these considerations. Although he does not say so here, it would surely be a mistake to suppose that God's power is circumscribed by our epistemic limitations. More to the point, he does not think that the Father's becoming incarnate would make it impossible for us to distinguish him from the Son. If the

[26] Ibid.

[27] See Peter Lombard, *Sent.* III, d. 1, c. 1. In this context Lombard also affirms what will be presented here as Aquinas' *third* counterfactual scenario, in which two or more of the divine persons assume distinct individual natures.

[28] Anselm advances this objection in *On the Incarnation of the Word* I.10, and in *Why God became Man* II.9.

Father had been the one to assume our nature, then the messianic title "Son of Man" would have referred to the Father instead of the Son. In this event we could no longer say that one of the Divine Persons has both an eternal birth and a temporal birth, since the eternal birth will always belong to the Son, while the temporal birth would now belong to the Father. Even so, the Father and the Son would still be individuated by their unique personal properties; we would need to add, in this case, that something new and astonishing has come to be true of the Father instead of the Son.

Although Aquinas takes it for granted that these counterfactual incarnations would have been likewise geared towards our redemption, he does not suppose that the *redemptive overtures* of the Father or the Holy Spirit would have taken precisely the same form as the Son's. Thus Aquinas:

> Even as by the Incarnation of the Son we receive adoptive sonship in the likeness of His natural sonship, so likewise, had the Father become incarnate, we should have received adoptive sonship from Him, as from the principle of the natural sonship, and from the Holy Ghost as from the common bond of Father and Son.[29]

As things stand now, it is the Son who has secured for us the grace of adoptive sonship, and he has done so in a manner which is befitting his position as a *natural* son: the efficacy of his redemptive mission is thus grounded in his loving submission and obedience to the Father. If the Father had become incarnate instead of the Son, the ensuing course of events would not have been efficacious in just this way: the incarnate Father would have secured our redemption in a manner which appropriate for one who, as the *principle* of natural sonship, is one to whom filial love and obedience are due.[30] Along the same lines, if the Holy Spirit had become incarnate, his redemptive mission would have been informed by a different set of virtues, not those of a Natural Father or Son, but rather those which arise from the love which the Father and the Son have for one another.

Although Aquinas believes that the grace of adoptive sonship might have come to us through the Incarnation of the Father or the Holy Spirit instead of the Son, he understands that there are weighty reasons for supposing that this could not have been true of the Father. For, the objection proceeds, "the Son is said to be sent and to be begotten by the temporal nativity, inasmuch as He became incarnate. But it

[29] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 5, ad 3.

[30] For an account of Aquinas' understanding the relationship between the Son's economic obedience and his eternal generation, see Swain and Allen (2013, 121-126).

does not belong to the Father to be sent, for He is innascible, as was said above."[31] The force of this objection, I take it, is that the Father cannot become redemptively incarnate because he cannot be *sent*, since (unlike the Son and the Holy Spirit) he is *innascible*: he is not one who proceeds from another. In other words, the Father cannot become redemptively incarnate because this would involve his being *sent* into the world, and being sent implies a relation of obedience and submission to the sender which cannot be ascribed to the Father.[32] Here is the whole of Aquinas' response to this objection:

> It belongs to the Father to be innascible as to eternal birth, and the temporal birth would not destroy this. But the Son of God is said to be sent in regard to the Incarnation, inasmuch as he is from another, without which the Incarnation would not be sufficient for the nature of the mission.[33]

Aquinas contends that the Father's innascibility did not preclude him from assuming our nature in place of the Son, since he possesses this property in virtue of his eternal relation to the Son and the Holy Spirit, and his assumption of our nature would have had no effect upon these eternal relations. If the Father had assumed our nature, then as we now say of the Son, he would have become human without ceasing to be who and what he has been from all eternity, and so he would have become human without ceasing to the one divine person who does not proceed from another. While I see no basis for rejecting these implications, I think it must be said that this response does not squarely confront the central point of the above objection, which is attempting to forge a connection both (i) between being *redemptively incarnate* and being *sent*, and (ii) between being *sent* and being *from another*. From the second clause of his response, moreover, it is pretty clear that Aquinas affirms the latter implication, namely, that only one who from another can be sent, and so be endowed with a mission. Since he is evidently committed to the thesis that Father cannot be sent, Aquinas owes us an account as to how it is possible for the Father to become redemptively *incarnate* in a manner which does not involve

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[31] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 5, ad 3. For discussions of the Father's innascibility, See STh I, q. 32, a. 3, and q. 43, a. 4. This objection echoes Lombard's second reason for supposing that it was most fitting that the Son should become incarnate. See *Sent.* III, d. 1, c. 1, 4.

[32] For a recent example of this line of reasoning, see O'Collins (2008, 21f). O'Collins goes on to argue that there are even more compelling reasons for supposing that the Holy Spirit could not have assumed our nature. O' Collins thus concurs with Rahner's contention that only the Son could have assumed our nature. See Rahner (1982, 214f, 223f).

[33] STh III, q. 3, a. 5, ad 3.

(in the strict sense) a redemptive *mission*. Although he does not address this possibility here, it is not difficult to piece together his response to this concern.

In "The Mission of the Divine Persons" Aquinas confirms that a divine person can be sent only if he proceeds from another:

> The very idea of mission means procession from another, and in God it means procession according to origin, as above expounded. Hence, as the Father is not from another, in no way is it fitting for Him to be sent; but this can only belong to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, to Whom it belongs to be from another.[34]

For Aquinas it is analytic that only one who is *from another* can be sent and hence have a mission. He thus cites with approval Augustine's contention at *De Trinitate* II.3 that "the Father alone is never described as being sent."[35] Although propriety of speech even prevents us from speaking of the Father as sending *himself* on a redemptive mission, these linguistic considerations do not prevent the Father from freely acting on our behalf. Aquinas thus writes that "in the sense of *giving* as a free bestowal of something, the Father gives Himself, as freely bestowing Himself to be enjoyed by the creature."[36] In affirming that the Father might have assumed our nature in place of the Son, Aquinas was surely thinking along just these lines: to have become incarnate for our redemption would have been a most generous act of self-giving. Moreover, should the Father have assumed our nature instead of the Son, this act of supreme condescension could not have failed to be redemptive. In "Of The Efficiency of Christ's Passion" Aquinas writes that "from the beginning of his conception Christ merited our eternal salvation."[37] If the Father instead had freely chosen to become incarnate, the sacrificial nature of this act would surely have been no less meritorious. Although it was also expedient—in virtue of our own moral and epistemic limitations—that the Son should suffer on our behalf, nothing prevents us from saying that the incarnate Father could also have suffered for us in bodily form. As we have already seen, however, the incarnate Father's suffering

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[34] *STh* I, q. 43, a. 4. By emphasizing that the procession involved here is a procession of *origin*, Aquinas is highlighting the fact that the persons who are related in this manner are absolute equals: there is no sense in which the one who sends is superior to the one who is sent. He affirms their metaphysical equality at *STh* I, q. 43, a. 1, ad 1, and argues for it at *STh* I, q. 42, aa. 4 and 6.

[35] *STh* I, q. 43, a. 4, ad 2. Augustine thus writes at *De Trinitate* IV.20, n. 32 that "if God the Father had willed to appear visibly through the subject creature, yet it would be most absurd to say that He was sent either by his Son, whom he begot, or by the Holy Spirit, who proceeds through him."

[36] *STh* I, a. 43, a. 4, ad 1.

[37] *STh* III, q. 48, a. 1, ad 2. See also *STh* III, q. 34, a. 3.

would not have been efficacious in the same way as the Son's. For the efficacy of Christ's suffering is grounded in his loving obedience to this Father,[38] and though he only suffered as a man, this act of filial love and obedience is an expression both of his human will and of his divine will. For obvious reasons, the suffering of the incarnate Father could not have unfolded in just this way. Even so, the incarnate Father could have offered himself as a sacrifice to the Holy Trinity on our behalf, since charity rather than obedience is the essential motive for such an act.[39] It is thus not hard to see why Aquinas supposes that the Father could have been redemptively incarnate in a manner which is consistent with his paternal dignity.

As strange as these counterfactual possibilities might seem to the faithful, the scenarios to follow are likely to seem far stranger. For it is one thing to say that the Father or the Holy Spirit might have become incarnate in place of the Son, and quite another to say that all three of the Divine Persons might have become incarnate, and Aquinas means to affirm this possibility as well. Indeed he contends that this could have taken place in two completely different ways: the three Divine Persons might have assumed the *same* individual human nature, or they might each have assumed numerically distinct natures. Aquinas defends the first of these possibilities in Article Six of this discussion, and the second in Article Seven. Let us consider them in turn.

Second counterfactual scenario. Aquinas contends that the Son of God became a human being by assuming a properly animated human body. It is essential to his position that this body/soul union is not itself a substance (*suppositum*) and hence not a human being. Having assumed this body/soul union, the Son of God exists as a substantial being in and through this created reality. Although Aquinas speaks of the Son as subsisting in both of his natures, it should be clear that he is not related to these natures in the same way: he is identical with his divine nature, but not with his assumed nature. The created nature which he has assumed is quite literally a physical extension of his existence. Although he is not identical with this body/soul union, it cannot be said that he merely *owns* it, since its parts and properties are also his parts and properties. After establishing that any of the Divine Persons could have assumed our nature, Aquinas contends that any plurality of these Persons could have simultaneously assumed the *same* individual nature. He is suggesting, in other words, that the soul/body union which was assumed by the Son of God might have been simultaneously assumed by the Father and the Holy Spirit. Since this union is realized by the Divine Power, and each of the Persons, by himself, could have

[38] *STh* III, q. 47, a. 2.

[39] *STh* III, q. 48, a. 3, ad 1.

assumed this individual human nature, Aquinas maintains that nothing prevents "several of the Divine Persons" from simultaneously assuming the same individual human nature. He thus cites with approval Augustine's insistence that with regard to this mystery "the whole reason of the deed is the power of the doer,"[40] and he takes this to imply that our judgments concerning what is or is not possible should be determined by "the quality of the Divine Person assuming, and not according to the quality of the human nature assumed."[41] From this one should not suppose that Aquinas takes the ontological status of the assumed body/soul union to be irrelevant to the possibility in question. Indeed quite the opposite is true: he means to establish that it is possible for a plurality of persons to assume the same body/soul union *if* and *only if* this reality is an individual human *nature* rather than an individual human *being*. Let us consider these claims in turn, starting with the first half of this biconditional.

Aquinas contends that any plurality of the Divine Persons could have assumed the same body/soul union, thus conceived as an individual human nature which is not itself a substance and hence not a human being. If each of the Persons had assumed the same individual nature, then each of them would have become a human being: each of them would be fully human and fully divine. Since there would be three divine persons here, and each of these persons would now be a human being, how many human beings would be involved in this tri-personal Incarnation? His answer runs as follows:

> In the hypothesis that three Persons assume one human nature, it would be true to say that the three Persons were one man, because of the one human nature. For just as it is now true to say that the three Persons are one God on account of the one Divine Nature, so it would be true to say that they are one man on account of the one human nature.[42]

If the three Divine Persons had assumed the same human nature, then the Persons who subsist in one Divine Nature would also subsist in one human nature. And so just as we now say that the three Divine Persons are the same God, if the three Divine Persons had come to subsist in the same human nature, they would also be the same

[40] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 6. The quotation is from Augustine's letter to Volusianum (letter 137, c. 2, section 8). In this context Augustine is drawing attention to the fact that the scope of God's power vastly exceeds the scope of our understanding, and hence that we should not shrink from affirming the many wonders associated with the mystery of the Incarnation.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Ibid*., ad 1.

human being. And from this it follows that exactly one human being would be involved in this tri-personal assumption. Since nothing prevents the three Persons from being the one and the same God, they might also have been one and the same man. As Richard Cross nicely puts it, "Aquinas does not believe that there is an identity problem here, since the claim that the three persons were one human being is exactly parallel to the claim that the three persons are one God—a claim that he does not believe to raise any insuperable identity problems"(Cross 2002, 233). As things stand now, we believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *three* in one sense (they are three persons) and *one* in another (they are one and the same God). If the three Divine Persons had assumed the same human nature, they would be one in an additional sense: they would be the same human being. Even so, Aquinas is adamant that this would not undermine their distinctness as persons. Although the parts and properties of this body/soul union would now belong to each of these Persons individually, they would continue to be individuated, as persons, by the unique relations which each bears to the other two. He thus concludes that "it could not be argued that because the three Persons were one man they were one simply."[43]

We are now in a position to consider the second half of the above biconditional, namely, Aquinas' contention that a plurality of Divine Persons can assume the same body/soul union *only if* this union is not a human being. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the body/soul union which the Son assumed was in fact a complete human being. That is, let us suppose—with the *assumptus homo* theory—that the Son of God became a human being by assuming a human being. Although Aquinas takes this account to be erroneous, he does not take it to be contradictory, on the grounds that it is impossible for one *suppositum* (the assumed human being) to exist in another (the Son of God).[44] For he understands that a "two substance" account of this mystery would be committed to a different understanding of the hypostatic union. That is, one who takes the Incarnation to involve the union of a human being to the Son of God must say that "the human being is the Son of God, and the Son of God is the human being".[45] Aquinas thus recognizes that if the Incarnation involves a relation between two *substances* (rather than a relation between a substance and a nature), then these substances would be identical in some manner. At the same time,

[43] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 6, ad 1.

[44] Aquinas thus writes at *STh* III, q. 4, a. 3 that "it cannot properly be said that the Son assumed a man, granted (as it must be, in fact) that in Christ there is by one suppositum and one hypostasis. But according to such as hold that there are two hypostases or two supposita in Christ, it may fittingly and properly be said that the Son of God assumed a man."

[45] *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210.

there would have to remain a sense in which these substances are *not* identical, since otherwise they would be one substance rather than two. From this it follows that the identity-relation which holds between the Word and this man would have to be one which holds relative to some descriptions but not relative to others. Here is his description of this two substance account in the *Summa contra gentiles:*

> On account of this unity, the Word of God, as they say, is predicated of that man and that man is the Word of God. This sense results: "The Word of God is man" and this is: "The person of the Word of God is the person of the man," and conversely.[46]

Advocates of the *assumptus-homo* theory maintain that the Son of God became a human being by assuming a human being. On this account, then, the Incarnation involves a relation between these two beings, and this passage indicates that Aquinas takes this relation to be one of *personal identity*: on this account these beings (the human being and the Word) would be the same person. Lest anyone should reject this suggestion as grossly anachronistic, it is worth pointing out that the account of identity which is evidently implicit in the *assumptus-homo* theory is also implicit in the Latin conception of the Holy Trinity: whereas the Incarnation (on this account) presents us with a plurality of *beings* who are the same *person*, the Holy Trinity presents us with a plurality of *persons* who are the same *being.* This, in turn, helps to explain why Aquinas was open to the *assumptus-homo* theory in some of his early writings: an advocate of this account can plausibly claim fidelity to the Chalcedonian formula of one person and two natures.

Why does Aquinas maintain that it is impossible for more than one of the Divine Persons to assume the same body/soul union if this union constitutes a complete human being? Immediately following his endorsement of Augustine's contention that God's power vastly exceeds the scope of our understanding, Aquinas concludes the body of Article Six in the following manner:

> Therefore it is not impossible that two or three Divine persons should assume one human nature, but it would be impossible for them to assume the same hypostasis or person. Thus Anselm says in the book *De Concep. Virg. (Cur Deus Homo ii.9),* that *several Persons cannot assume one and the same man to unity of Person*.[47]

[46] *ScG* IV, c. 38. For a parallel claim, see *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 210.

[47] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 6.

Here Aquinas reiterates his contention that two more Divine Persons could assume the same body/soul union if this reality is an individual human *nature*, and he subsequently avers that this would not be possible if the assumed body/soul union constitutes an individual human *substance* (*hypostasis*). In lieu of a substantive argument for this position, Aquinas appeals to Anselm's contention in *Why God Became Man* that "several persons cannot assume one and the same man to unity of Person."[48] Aquinas concurs with Anselm's contention that it is impossible for more than one of the Divine Persons to assume the same body/soul union if the *assumptus-homo* theory is true, and hence that this union is a complete human being. Given his understanding of this position, it is not hard to see how he reaches this conclusion. Let 'IHN_1' stand for the individual human nature which was assumed by the Son, and let us suppose, with the *assumptus-homo* theory, that IHN_1 is a human being. Now let us consider the suitably qualified identity-statements to which we would be committed on this account. First, as a matter of basic Trinitarian theology, we would be committed to the following thesis:

1. The Father is not the same person as the Son.

If IHN_1 is a human being, and the Son became a human being by assuming IHN_1, then we must also affirm that IHN_1 and the Son are both (i) distinct beings, and (ii) the same person. And this would commit us to the following:

2. The Son is the same person as IHN_1.

Now let us suppose that the Father has also assumed IHN_1. This would likewise commit us to the following:

3. The Father is the same person as IHN_1.

Since there could hardly be an identity relation which is not symmetrical, (3) further commits us to the following:

4. IHN_1 is the same person as the Father.

[48] Anselm, *Why God Become Man* II, c. 9.

And since this relation of identity must also be transitive (when the same sortal concepts are involved), (2) and (4) imply that

5. The Son is the same person as the Father.

We believe that the Father and the Son are numerically distinct persons. If IHN_1 is a human being, it would be impossible for both the Father and the Son to assume this reality, since this would imply that IHN_1 is both (i) the same person as the Son, and (ii) the same person as the Father. This, in turn, has the absurd implication that the Father is the same person as the Son.

There is something initially puzzling about Aquinas' appeal to Anselm's contention that "several persons cannot assume one and the same man to unity of Person." Whereas Aquinas offers this passage in support of his position, Cross (2002, 232f) suggests that it contains the standard objection to Aquinas' position. Cross suggests, in particular, that this passage from *Cur deus homo* encapsulates the standard objection to the thesis that more than one of the divine persons could have assumed the same body/soul union. Here is Cross' translation of this passage, rendered with an additional clause:

> Many persons cannot assume one and the same man into unity of person; therefore it is necessary that this [assumption] be brought about in one person.[49]

Is Anselm affirming Aquinas' position here or is he objecting to it? The presence of the second clause makes it pretty clear that Anselm would reject Aquinas' second counterfactual scenario: he thinks that at most one of the Divine Persons can become incarnate. How then can Aquinas be offering the first clause in support of his position? Is he misreading or misrepresenting Anselm's account in a manner which is favorable to his own position? I contend that Aquinas is guilty of no such error. Indeed, I contend that Aquinas has a clear and accurate grasp of Anselm's position, and that their positions align in just the way that Aquinas has suggested. To understand why, we must examine Anselm's argument for the above conclusion. Whereas Cross turns to Bonaventure for an explanation of Anselm's position, Anselm himself directs us to his argument for this position in *On the Incarnation of the Word.* The argument to which he is referring runs as follows:

[49] Ibid., 233. The Latin text (Anselm 1947, 105) runs as follows: *Plures enim personae nequeunt unum eundemque hominem assumere in unitatem personae. Quare in una tantum persona hoc fieri necesse est.*

> God did not assume a human being in such a way that the divine and human natures are one and the same, but in such a way that the divine and human person is one and the same. And this can only be in one divine person. For we cannot understand that different persons are one and the same person with one and the same human being. For if a human being is a person with several individual persons, the several persons that differ from one another are necessarily one and the same person, and this is impossible. Therefore, it is impossible that when God became flesh respecting any one person, God also becomes flesh respecting another person.[50]

In this passage, Anselm contends that it is impossible for two or more Divine Persons to assume the same human being. His argument for this conclusion closely follows the one which I have attributed to Aquinas. According to this argument, if the Father and the Son had assumed the same human being, this would imply that the Father and the Son are both the same *person* as this human being, which would have the absurd consequence that the Father is the same person as the Son. So it is not possible for two or more divine persons to assume the same human being. The contours of this argument indicate, first, that Aquinas and Anselm have the same understanding of what the *assumptus-homo* theory involves (its basic commitments and implications), and second, that Aquinas is fully justified in citing Anselm's position in support of his own: Anselm's position confirms Aquinas' contention that it is impossible for more than one Divine Person to assume the same body/soul union if the *assumptus-homo* theory is true. It is also worth noting that Anselm and Aquinas do not agree as to whether it *is* possible for two or more divine persons to assume the same body/soul union: Aquinas thinks this is possible, and Anselm does not. The above passage also helps us to identify the source of this disagreement: Anselm is evidently an *assumptus-homo* theorist. Not only does he repeatedly describe this mystery as involving the assumption of a human being, on the grounds that that it would be impossible for more than one Person to assume the same body/soul union if this union constitutes a human being, Anselm concludes that it is impossible for two or more divine persons to assume the same body/soul union. This, in turn, helps us to understand why Aquinas only mentions the point on which he and Anselm agree: he is clearly not interested in advertising the fact that Anselm is committed to an account of this mystery which he takes to be erroneous and contrary to the faith.

Before we take up the counterfactual scenarios which Aquinas presents in Article Seven, let us briefly take stock of the ground we have covered thus far. In Article

[50] Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* I, c. 9.

Five Aquinas argues that any of the Divine Persons could have assumed our nature, thus conceived as a body/soul union which is an individual human nature and not a human being. In short, he is attempting to establish that the Father or the Holy Spirit might have become human instead of the Son. In Article Six he argues that *all* of the Divine Persons could have assumed our nature. In particular, he contends that they could have assumed the same body/soul union. If the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had assumed the same body/soul union, then not only would each of them have become a human being, they would have become the *same* human being. As things stand now, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three in one sense (they are three persons) and one in another sense (they are one God). In his second counterfactual scenario Aquinas establishes that they might also have been one in an additional sense: they might also have been one human being. At this point it should come as no surprise that Aquinas thinks that God could have assumed our nature in still other ways.

Third Counterfactual Scenario. In Article Seven Aquinas presents two additional scenarios in practically the same breath. Here is the whole of his "sed contra" statement for this article, in which he defends an affirmative answer the question of "Whether One Divine Person can assume two human natures":

> Whatever the Father can do, that also the Son can do. But after the Incarnation the Father can still assume a human nature distinct from that which the Son has assumed; for in nothing is the power of the Father lessened by the Incarnation of the Son. Therefore it seems that after the Incarnation the Son can assume another human nature distinct from the one He has assumed.[51]

Here Aquinas is suggesting, first, that each of the Divine Persons could have assumed unique body/soul unions, and second, that each of these Persons could have assumed a plurality of such unions. The second possibility is based upon the first, which is itself grounded in the conviction that the Divine Persons have an equal share of the Divine power. Since the Father can do anything the Son can do, the Son's decision to assume an individual human nature does not preclude the Father from doing likewise. In Article Six Aquinas contends that the Father could have assumed the same individual nature as the Son; he is now arguing that the Father and the Son could have assumed distinct individual natures, i.e., distinct body/soul unions. Although he does not say so here, he is obviously committed to the more general thesis that each of the three Divine Persons could have assumed numerically distinct

[51] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7.

body/soul unions, and that these assumptions could have occurred at the same time or at distinct times in any temporal order.

It should be noted that there is no further discussion of this counterfactual scenario in the *Summa theologiae*. Aquinas does not offer an additional justification of this account; nor does he consider and respond to objections which might be proffered against it. His primary interest in presenting this scenario is evidently to pave the way for the one to follow, which he does discuss at length and which (unlike the current scenario) has received a good deal of recent attention. Even so, nothing prevents us from examining the implications of this scenario, particularly as it relates to those which precede it. In his second counterfactual scenario Aquinas maintains that any plurality of the Divine Persons could have assumed the same individual nature. By assuming the same body/soul union, the Father and the Son would have become the same human being. That is, each of them would have become *a* human being, since each would now be endowed with a human body animated by a human soul. Although they are numerically distinct *supposita*, if they had assumed the same body and soul, Aquinas insists that they would be the *same* human being. They are one God because they subsist in the same Divine Nature, and they would have been one human being because they would have subsisted in the same human nature. In his third counterfactual scenario, on the other hand, the three Divine Persons assume unique body/soul unions. How many human beings would be involved in such a case? Would there be one human being present here, or three? Since the three Divine Persons are distinct *supposita*, if each of these persons had assumed a distinct body/soul union, there would be three human beings present here rather than one. As things stand now, there is one sense in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three (they are three persons) and another sense in which they are one (they are one God). In this counterfactual scenario, there would be an additional sense in which they are three: they would be three human beings. If it is possible for them to be three persons in spite of the fact that they are one God, then it must also be possible for them to be three human beings. Aquinas' argument strategy for the second counterfactual scenario can thus be pressed into service here as well.

Are there credible grounds for rejecting this counterfactual scenario? Clearly those who insist—with Anselm, Rahner and O'Collins—that only the Son could have assumed our nature will balk at the suggestion that the Father and the Holy Spirit might have assumed individual human natures of their own. If one is willing to concede that any of the Divine Persons could have become incarnate, however, then I think one must also concede the possibility of the present scenario. While we

would likely prefer that God reveal himself to us by becoming one instance of our nature rather than three, we should not suppose that God's power is limited by our preferences for practical efficiency or theoretical simplicity. I thus conclude that if Aquinas is justified in positing his first counterfactual scenario, then he is likewise justified in positing this one. Let us therefore turn to the scenario which he hoists upon its shoulders.

Fourth counterfactual scenario. As we have seen, Aquinas contends that if it is possible for the Father and the Son to assume distinct individual natures, then "it seems that after Incarnation the Son can assume another human nature distinct from the one He has assumed."[52] That is, since it is possible for the Father or the Son to assume distinct individual natures, it must also be possible for the Son to subsequently assume a *second* individual nature. And of course he does not suppose that this is true only of the Son. He is therefore suggesting that each of the Three Persons could have assumed a plurality of individual human natures.

In the ensuing paragraph Aquinas provides a second argument in support of this counterfactual scenario. As with many of his preceding arguments, this one is grounded in considerations of Divine Power. He thus writes that "what has power for one thing, and no more, has a power limited to one. Now the power of a Divine Person is infinite, nor can it be limited by any created thing. Hence it may not be said that a Divine Person so assumed one human nature as to be unable to assume another."[53] Since each Person is endowed with infinite power, each Person has the power to assume one individual human nature. And since what can be done *once* by means of such power can also be done *twice,* Aquinas maintains that each Divine Person is capable of assuming a second human nature. Aquinas does not suppose that divine omnipotence extends to tasks which are logically impossible: it does not take away from the greatness of God's power that he cannot actualize states of affairs which are inherently contradictory.[54] He is therefore assuming that what can be done *once* by means of such power can also be done *twice,* provided that the state of affairs realized by the second action is consistent with what is realized by the first. Although God is capable of creating one human being, and then another, he cannot create the *first* human being more than once. So the question at hand is whether the Son's assumption of one human nature is logically compatible with his assumption of a second. Aquinas insists that these tasks are indeed compatible, since otherwise "it would seem to follow from this that the Personality of the Divine Nature was so

[52] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7.

[53] *Ibid*.

[54] *STh* I, q. 25, a. 3.

comprehended by the one human nature as to be unable to assume another to its Personality."[55] Since it is impossible for the Creator to be comprehended by a creature, Aquinas concludes that the assumption of the first created nature leaves room for the assumption of a second.

Is it genuinely possible for one of the Divine Persons to assume more than one body/soul union? Although epistemic modesty may preclude us from certainty in such matters, we can at least determine whether this supposition yields any obvious absurdities. Let us, therefore, suppose that the Son has assumed an individual human nature which we shall designate as IHN_1. By uniting IHN_1 to himself, he who is identical with his divine nature will now possess a second, created nature. As the substantial owner and bearer of this created nature, its parts and properties are *his* parts and properties. And so by assuming IHN_1, the Son is now a human being in the same sense and for the same reason that you and I are human: he has a human body which is animated by a human soul. Let further suppose, in accordance with this counterfactual scenario, that the Son assumes a *second* individual nature, which we shall designate as IHN_2. Since IHN_1 would remain distinct from IHN_2—Aquinas maintains that they are individuated by their matter—the Son would now be the owner and bearer of two human natures rather than one. Even so, Aquinas maintains that since the Son is the one and only substantial reality which owns and bears these natures, he would still be *one* human being. Aquinas maintains, in other words, that by assuming a second individual nature the Son would not have become a second human being. Because he is the same *suppositum* that he was before, he is the same human being he was before. Aquinas thus writes that "if the Divine Person were to assume two human natures, He would be called, on account of the unity of the *suppositum*, one man having two human natures."[56] It is fair to say that he would be less *recognizably* human in this state: he would be less like us now than he was before, since he would now possess *two* animated human bodies rather than one. But we could not say that he is less human, *simpliciter*. I say this, first, because "human being" is not a degree concept: one is either an instance of this concept or one is not. In addition, having become a human being with the assumption of IHN_1, he continues to be endowed with those features which one might reasonably take to be both necessary and sufficient for our humanity: he is still endowed with an animated human body. Although this scenario is likely to strike the faithful as theologically odd and unattractive, since I do not find it to be absurd, I am willing

[55] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7.

[56] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7, ad 2.

to concede that it is logically and metaphysically possible for God to actualize this state of affairs.

Anglican theologian Brian Hebblethwaite vigorously rejects this assessment. While he allows that each of the Divine Persons could have assumed a unique body/soul union, he contends that it is logically impossible for one of the divine persons to assume two body/soul unions. Indeed he takes Aquinas' affirmation of this scenario to be a "serious aberration in a great theologian," one which ultimately reveals the existence of "certain highly questionable elements in classical Christology" (2001 323-334). In addition to being self-contradictory, Hebblethwaite contends that Aquinas' position is informed by a woefully inadequate conception of our nature. Both criticisms are nicely articulated in the following passage:

> I myself have already stressed that there is no personal relation between the divine Son and the man Jesus. Jesus *is* God the Son incarnate. All the same, one cannot treat the human nature in a purely adjectival way, as a theoretically multipliable garment. Granted that there is only one ultimate metaphysical subject, namely God the Son, a personality, a subject, and a life actually constitutes the human form of the divine life. One could even say that the human person is the divine person incarnate, though not, of course, an independent human person related to the divine person. Sadly, it is this generic, adjectival, talk of human nature being assumed that permits Thomas to envisage the possibility of multiple incarnations. Even he does not take seriously enough the fact that a series of divine incarnations would have to be the same person, human as well as divine. And there lies incoherence—an incoherence brought out only too clearly by the eschatological implications of simultaneous existence of a number of risen humans each alleged to be the incarnate Son of God. (2001, 326)

Hebblethwaite's objections are centered around two issues: (i) the ontological status of the assumed human nature, and (ii) the relation of this nature to the Divine Person who has assumed it. Having assumed the individual nature which we associate with Jesus of Nazareth, Aquinas maintains that the Son of God could have subsequently assumed a *second* individual nature. According to Hebblethwaite, Aquinas can affirm this possibility only if he takes an individual human nature to be a sort of *theoretically multipliable garment*: it is possible for the Son of God to become incarnate in more than one individual human nature only if such a nature is not the sort of thing which one *is*, but rather the sort of thing which one *wears*. He further argues that this commits Aquinas to a revisionist understanding of Christ's humanity, one which he variously characterizes as *generic*, *impersonal* and *adjectival*. Hebblethwaite

is suggesting, in other words, that Aquinas' account of human nature does not even begin to do justice to Jesus' lived experience as a fully concrete, flesh-and-blood human being. Worse still, he maintains that even with this adjectival conception of human nature in place, Aquinas' position is logically impossible, since it implies that it is possible for the Son of God to become numerically identical with two or more individuals. For Hebblethwaite, the body/soul union which the Son assumed quite simply *is* Jesus of Nazareth, and in virtue of this assumption the Son of God is Jesus of Nazareth. It is possible for the Son of God to assume a second body/soul union only if it is possible for him to become identical with a second human being, and on the standard, absolute conception of identity this is not possible. Hebblethwaite thus concludes that "the very idea [of multiple incarnations] makes no sense," since "one individual subject cannot, without contradiction, be thought capable of becoming a series of individuals, or a fortiori, a coexistence community of individuals" (2001, 333).

Hebblethwaite contends that Aquinas' affirmation of this counterfactual scenario is beset with two fatal difficulties. In addition to being informed by an artificial conception of human nature, this position is logically contradictory, since it implies that it is possible for one individual to become identical with several individuals. Since Aquinas' affirmation of this scenario is an extension of his general account of the Incarnation, these objections, if sound, would threaten his account of this mystery. Although the problems which Hebblethwaite has identified here are clearly to be avoided at all costs, Aquinas' position is not vulnerable to these objections. To see why, let us once again suppose that the Son of God has successively assumed two individual human natures, IHN_1 and IHN_2. This scenario does not commit Aquinas to the absurd thesis that the Son of God is numerically identical with IHN_1 and IHN_2. Although he does maintain that the Son of God is identical with his divine nature, he categorically denies that the Son is identical with his assumed, human nature. In this very context he explains that "the Son of God is his Godhead, but is not his manhood".[57] Although Hebblethwaite is himself in no position to affirm the possibility of multiple incarnations, he has not raised a problem of identity for Aquinas' position.

How about his other concern, namely, that Aquinas' account involves a revisionist conception of our nature? I contend that this objection also misses the mark. Since we have no idea what it would be like to be both divine and human, we are in no position to ascertain whether Aquinas' account of this mystery does justice

[57] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7, ad 3.

to the felt character of his existence as a divine being who is also a human being. But we can say this: there is nothing *abstract* or *adjectival* about the human nature which the Son of God has assumed. For Aquinas, the body/soul union which the Son of God has assumed is every bit as concrete as ours. Although this animated body is not a substance (*suppositum*) by Aquinas' standards, it is not less *real* than the body/soul unions which do constitute genuine (primary) substances. Finally, while it is true that this body/soul union is not a second *person*, it would be misleading to call it *impersonal*, since it likewise constitutes a created center of consciousness, understanding and volition with characteristically human limitations of power and scope. Although Aquinas relies upon the garment analogy as a way of specifying the relationship which the Son of God has to this individual nature—namely, that he subsists in one nature in a manner which allows for him to subsist in two or more—he makes it clear that this analogy "does not fit at all points."[58] As we have seen, for example, in virtue of his assumption of this body/soul union, its parts and properties are his parts and properties, and this is not true of his clothing. I therefore submit that Aquinas' affirmation of this counterfactual scenario is immune from both of Hebblethwaite's objections,[59] and given what I take to be the absence of conspicuous absurdities here, I reaffirm its prima facie possibility.

In what remains of this article we must address two sets of questions. First, why does Aquinas think it was most fitting that only the Son of God became incarnate? And why did he become incarnate through the assumption of *one* body/soul union? Second, if it was most fitting that only the Son assumed our nature, why does it matter that the Incarnation could have occurred in these other ways? What do these counterfactual possibilities tell us about who and what God is, and what do they tell us about what God has done for us in Christ? Let us consider these questions in turn.

3. Why It Is Most Fitting that Only the Son Became Incarnate

In the final article of this discussion Aquinas contends that it was most fitting that only the Son should have assumed our nature, since it was more fitting for the Son to become incarnate than it was for the Father or the Holy Spirit. In a manner which appears to disregard all but the first of his counterfactual scenarios, his arguments for this conclusion presuppose that it was most fitting, first, that only *one* of the three Divine Persons should become incarnate, and second, that this person should

[58] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 7, ad 2.

[59] For additional responses to Hebblethwaite's attempted refutation of this possibility, see Kevern (2002, 342-347); Crisp, (2009, 155-175); Pawl (2016, 117-130); and LePoidevin (2011, 228-241).

become incarnate through the assumption of *one* individual human nature. Although he does not defend these conclusions in Question Three, he does address them in the sequel. He affirms the first on the principle that "what can be done by one must not be done by many." [60] He thus concludes that "it was most fitting that by one man all the rest should be saved."[61] Although this principle would also support the conclusion that it was most fitting for this event to involve the assumption of *one* body/soul union—since one was clearly sufficient for his redemptive purposes—Aquinas provides a different rationale for this proposition. Because it was most fitting that only one *suppositum* should become incarnate, he contends that it is also most fitting that this *suppositum* should assume *one* individual human nature, "so that on both sides unity might be found".[62] Whereas the first proposition is grounded in considerations of simplicity and efficiency, this one is grounded in considerations of symmetry: it is most fitting that the one divine nature be equally matched by one assumed nature. Aquinas thus advances both propositions on broadly aesthetic grounds, and this helps to explain why he takes this result to be merely *fitting*: these are precisely the sorts of considerations which we take to be significant without being logically conclusive. With these reasons in place, let us return to his arguments in the final article of Question Three.

In Article Eight Aquinas concludes this discussion with three reasons for thinking that it was most fitting that only the Son should have become incarnate. He thinks this was most fitting, first, because we bear a particular affinity to the Word of God. Indeed Aquinas identifies *two* levels of affinity here: one which holds between the Word and all creatures, and one which pertains especially to human beings. The first affinity is grounded in an analogy between a craftsman and the Creator. Aquinas begins by observing that a skilled craftsman does not fashion an artifact in a purely arbitrary manner: his work is invariably guided by a plan, one which ultimately fits his conception—his *logos*—of how this object should be. And so we can say that the *logos* of the craftsman "is an exemplar likeness of whatever is made by him."[63] Aquinas maintains that the same is true of God the Father, who creates all things in a manner which is patterned after *his* Logos, the Son of God. All creatures thus bear a special affinity to the Word of God, who is "the exemplar likeness of all

[60] *STh* III, q. 4, a. 5, ad 3.
[61] Ibid.
[62] *STh* III, q. 4, a. 5.
[63] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 8.

creatures."[64] And in virtue of this affinity it is most fitting that he should have been the one to assume our nature. Thus Aquinas:

> The Word of God, Who is His eternal concept, is the exemplar likeness of all creatures. And therefore as creatures are established in their proper species, though movably, by the participation of this likeness, so by the non-participated and personal union of the Word with a creature, it was fitting that the creature should be restored in order to its eternal and unchangeable perfection; for the craftsman by the intelligible form of his art, whereby he fashioned his handiwork, restores it when it has fallen into ruin.[65]

In this passage Aquinas explains why it is appropriate for the order of salvation to mirror the order of creation: for an individual to be restored is for it to be healed in a manner which reflects its original "design plan". It is thus fitting that the created order be restored by the one through whom it was created, namely, God's eternal *Logos*. Aquinas reiterates this contention in his third reply by characterizing our restoration as a *second* creation. Since the first creation of all things "was made by the power of God the Father through the Word," it is fitting that the second creation be effected "through the Word, by the power of God the Father."[66]

Aquinas contends that as rational beings we enjoy an additional likeness to the Son of God. He thus writes that the Word of God "has a particular agreement with human nature, since the Word is a concept of the eternal Wisdom, from Whom all man's wisdom is derived."[67] Since the Word is the preeminent expression of God's wisdom, and our nature as rational beings is patterned after this wisdom, it is most fitting that we be perfected in wisdom by the one who is the exemplar of our rational natures. And so Aquinas concludes that "for the consummate perfection of man it was fitting that the very Word of God should be personally united to human nature."[68]

Aquinas' remaining arguments for supposing that only the Son should have assumed our nature are also grounded in soteriological considerations, and in both cases he means to establish that the Son of God was uniquely suited for the redemptive purposes of this event. The first of these appeals to the Apostle Paul's observation, reflected in both Hebrew and Roman law, that only a *son* can serve as

[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 8, ad 2.
[67] *STh* III, q. 3, a. 8.
[68] Ibid.

an heir (Rom. 7:17). Since the goal of the Incarnation is ultimately to restore us to "our heavenly inheritance" as the adoptive sons of God, it was most fitting "that by Him Who is the natural Son, men should share this likeness of sonship by adoption". That is, it is most fitting that we—male and female alike—be restored as the adoptive sons of God by the one who is God's natural Son. It has not hard to imagine why he should think so. As God's adopted sons and daughters, our love for God is best patterned after his love for the Father, since our love, like his, is largely expressed through the loving and obedient submission to him who is the Source of all that we are and have.

Aquinas' final reason for supposing that it was most fitting that only the Son should become incarnate is tied to his understanding of the historical fall of man through the sin of Adam. Thus Aquinas:

> For the first man sinned by seeking knowledge, as is plain from the words of the serpent, promising to man the knowledge of good and evil. Hence it was fitting that by the Word of true knowledge man might be led back to God, having wandered from God through an inordinate thirst for knowledge.[69]

Here Aquinas is affirming, first, that our fallen condition is ultimately grounded in Adam's act of disobedience, and second, that this act was motivated by the desire for a kind of knowledge which Adam ought to have repudiated. On the principle that the remedy for our fallen condition ought to be suited to the ultimate cause of its inception, it is fitting that our restoration be secured through an act of obedience by God's Son, who is the "Word of true knowledge".

Although Aquinas could surely have provided additional reasons for thinking that it was most fitting that only the Son should have assumed our nature, I find these reasons to be more than adequate for his purposes, since each provides a reason for the Son's Incarnation which are significant without being conclusive. Let us therefore turn to the theological significance of these counterfactual scenarios.

4. The Theological Significance of Aquinas' Counterfactual Incarnations

If it was most fitting that the Son alone assumed our nature, why does it matter that the Incarnation could have taken place in the other ways he has specified? Since the *Summa* is no place for idle, theological speculation, we cannot help but wonder what he is hoping to accomplish in this discussion. It is quite possible that his primary

[69] Ibid.

objective is disciplinary rather than doctrinal: he might take this discussion to be important primarily because it is an application of a central method of philosophical and theological analysis, namely, that of testing and explicating a theoretical position in terms of its implications. This would surely be an adequate reason for including this discussion in what is ostensibly a textbook for beginning students of theology. And while this exercise would be worthwhile for its own sake, it also brings us to a more complete understanding of his official "subsistence" theory of the Incarnation, particularly as it relates to its primary competitor, the *assumptus-homo* theory. So even if Aquinas' objective here is largely methodological, the application of this method is fruitful in other ways besides.

In what remains of this article I would like to briefly mention four additional ways in which these scenarios shed light upon the nature and purposes of God. First, this account is an illustration of the general principle that what God does, he does freely and without compulsion. Having freely chosen to become redemptively incarnate, God was not compelled to become incarnate in the Person of the Son, and having chosen to become thus incarnate, the Son was free to assume our nature in any number of ways.

Second, these statements about what God could have done tell us something important about who God is: they provide insight into the nature of the three Divine Persons who are—both individually and collectively—the one God. In particular, Aquinas affirms these counterfactual scenarios as an expression of their equal power and dignity as divine persons. Since the Son's love for the Father is expressed largely through filial submission and obedience, there is no avoiding the appearance of inequality here. Since Aquinas is convinced that any degree of actual inequality would compromise the Son's perfect divinity,[70] he is understandably keen to expose this error.

Third, by affirming these counterfactual scenarios Aquinas is implicitly rejecting the thesis which has come to be known as *Rahner's Rule*, that is, the thesis that the *immanent* Trinity is the *economic* Trinity, where the 'is' here is one of strict, numerical identity.[71] The phrase "immanent Trinity" refers to the eternal relations which hold between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: the Father's unique relation to the Son, the Son's unique relation to the Father, and the Spirit's unique relation to the Father and the Son. The phrase "economic Trinity" refers to the specific manner in which each of these Persons has acted in salvation history. By affirming (*inter alia*) that the Father or the Holy Spirit could have become redemptively incarnate instead

[70] See *STh* I, q. 42, aa. 4, 6.

[71] See Rahner (1970, 21-24).

of the Son, Aquinas is affirming that the relational properties which individuate these Persons do not determine the roles which each must play in salvation history, and this obviously commits him to the denial of Rahner's Rule.

Since Rahner's account of the Holy Trinity is consciously formulated as a rejection of Latin Trinitarianism, it is hardly surprising that Aquinas is implicitly committed to the denial of Rahner's Rule. Even so, it is still worth noting that Aquinas is in a position to deny Rahner's Rule in a manner which is not theologically problematic. In addition to arguing that only the Son could have assumed our nature, Rahner contends that the widespread affirmation of the alternative thesis—that any of the Divine Persons could have assumed our nature—would "create havoc with theology" (Rahner 1970, 30). Thus Rahner:

> There would no longer be any connection between "mission" and the intra-trinitarian life. Our sonship in grace would in fact have absolutely nothing to do with the Son's sonship, since it might equally well be brought about without any modification by another incarnate person. That which God is for us would tell us nothing about that which he is in himself, as triune. (Rahner 1970, 30)

From our discussion of Aquinas' counterfactual scenarios it should now be clear that his position is not subject to any of these unfortunate consequences. For starters, it cannot be said that he lacks a robust and fully trinitarian theology of mission. As we have seen, his account of the divine relations in "The Mission of the Divine Persons" includes a clear and direct connection between "mission" and the intra-trinitarian life. He contends that only one who is *from another* can have a mission, and hence that the Father cannot be sent into the world either by himself or by another. Even so, Aquinas does not believe that this precludes the Father from becoming redemptively incarnate, since he would still have been free to give of himself in this manner. Nor would it follow from this possibility that "our sonship in grace would in fact have absolutely nothing to do with the Son's sonship". Although Aquinas contends that our redemption might have been realized through the Incarnation of the Father or the Holy Spirit, he does not suppose that these redemptive overtures would have been realized in precisely the same manner. Thus, for example, he maintains that the efficacy of the Father's sacrifice would not have been grounded in his obedient submission to the will of another. Although it was not inevitable that our redemption came by way of the Son's Incarnation, on Aquinas' account we can be especially grateful that it did. Since the efficacy of his sacrifice was a function of his loving and obedient devotion to the Father's will, the Son has secured the grace of adoptive sonship in a manner which best exemplifies the manner of life to which

we are called as God's children. Finally, Aquinas would not allow that what God has done for us in Christ tells us nothing about what God is like in himself. Since he contends that any of the Divine Persons could have secured our redemption through the assumption of our nature, he must deny Rahner's Rule: he must deny that the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity. It should be clear, however, that in spite of this denial Aquinas can consistently maintain that the particular manner in which God has revealed himself to us in Christ tells us a great deal about what God is like in and of himself. It is one thing to suppose that God's redemptive overtures are not identical with the immanent Trinity, and quite another to suppose that these overtures shed no light on the immanent Trinity, and there is absolutely no reason to suppose that Aquinas is committed to the latter claim.

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Published Online First: April 13, 2025