

1-1-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Hauser, Christopher (2022) "Aquinas on Persons, Psychological Subjects, and the Coherence of the Incarnation," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.1.6

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss1/6>

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# AQUINAS ON PERSONS, PSYCHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS, AND THE COHERENCE OF THE INCARNATION

Christopher Hauser

The coherence objection to the doctrine of the Incarnation maintains that it is impossible for one individual to have both the attributes of God and the attributes of a human being. This article examines Thomas Aquinas's answer to this objection. I challenge the dominant, mereological interpretation of Aquinas's position and, in light of this challenge, develop and defend a new alternative interpretation of Aquinas's response to this important objection to Christian doctrine.

## 1. Introduction

Is it possible for an individual to be both God and a human being? According to the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, such a state of affairs is not only possible, but in fact actual. This doctrine asserts that the Divine Word, one of the three persons of the Trinity, contingently assumed a human nature and thus became a human being, even while retaining his essential divine nature and thus remaining God. In the words of the Council of Chalcedon (451AD),

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, [was] made known in two natures which are unconfused, unchanged, undivided, unseparated, with the difference of the natures being in no way removed on account of the union but rather what is proper (*idiotēs/proprietas*) to each nature is preserved and comes together in one person (*prosopon/persona*) and one hypostasis, not parted or divided in two persons, but [in] one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

In short, the Word Incarnate, Christ, is claimed to be one person, one hypostasis, who has two natures, one divine and one human. Consequently, Christ is said to have both the attributes proper to a human being and the attributes proper to God.

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<sup>1</sup>My translation, based on the Greek and Latin texts in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 86.



This last claim in particular has given rise to a much-discussed challenge to the coherence of the doctrine. Following Richard Cross, I call this “the coherence objection.”<sup>2</sup> The objection claims that it is impossible for one individual to have both the attributes proper to a human being and the attributes proper to God, for at least some of the attributes proper to God are (it is claimed) incompatible with at least some of the attributes proper to a human being. For example, one might charge that it is a necessary attribute of God to be omnipotent, a necessary attribute of a human being to be limited in power, and impossible for one individual to be both omnipotent and limited in power. A similar charge of incoherence can be leveled against the claims that Christ is both immutable and mutable, impassible and passible, eternal and temporal, and so on.

This article’s aim is to explicate Thomas Aquinas’s response to the coherence objection and, in doing so, shed light on his conception of personhood. Aquinas’s discussion of the coherence objection has received much attention from contemporary philosophers of religion and historians of medieval philosophy. A leading interpretation—the “mereological interpretation”—has emerged in this literature, defended by scholars such as Richard Cross, Eleonore Stump, and Alfred Freddoso.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in contemporary discussion of the coherence objection, the “mereological response” is standardly associated with Aquinas.<sup>4</sup> In fact, with just one recent exception, nobody has offered a serious exegetical challenge to this interpretation of Aquinas.<sup>5</sup>

The recent exception is Michael Gorman. In his 2017 book, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, Gorman devotes a chapter to arguing against this interpretation of Aquinas. But though he questions whether there is sufficient textual evidence for attributing a mereological view to Aquinas, Gorman claims not to have a “knock-down argument

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<sup>2</sup>See Cross, “The Incarnation.”

<sup>3</sup>See Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 195–198; Stump, “Aquinas’ Metaphysics of the Incarnation”; Stump, *Aquinas*, ch.14; and (with some differences) Freddoso, “Logic, Ontology, and Ockham’s Christology,” 304–308. Similar interpretations of Aquinas can be found in Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 130–133; Bäck, “Aquinas on the Incarnation,” 135–141; Bäck, “Scotus on the Consistency of the Incarnation and the Trinity,” 85–86; and Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, 254–259. Bäck finds in Aquinas two possible strategies for answering the coherence objection, only one of which (what Bäck calls the “specificative analysis”) is a variant of the mereological interpretation; the second strategy (what Bäck calls the “reduplicative analysis”) is, as Bäck recognizes, a non-starter. Whereas Stump and Freddoso seem to think the mereological view they attribute to Aquinas constitutes a successful response to the coherence objection, Adams, Bäck, Cross, and Hughes offer more negative verdicts. In his “*Libellus pro sapiente*,” Klima also appears to endorse a variant of the mereological interpretation. In what follows, I focus on the Stump–Cross variant of the mereological interpretation, as this is (in my view) the clearest variant.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Flint, “A Death He Freely Accepted,” 4; Flint, “Should Concretists Part with Mereological Models of the Incarnation?,” 71–72; and Hasker, “A Compositional Incarnation.”

<sup>5</sup>Weinandy (in “Aquinas: God IS Man: The Marvel of the Incarnation,” 88n63) claims that the mereological interpretation of Aquinas (which he associates with Stump) is wrong, but he provides no exegetical argument to support this contention.

against the mereological interpretation” and that “there is no such argument.”<sup>6</sup> Gorman’s own view is that Aquinas’s “remarks [in response to the coherence objection] are so brief and undeveloped that a certain kind of agnosticism is in order” and that the best one can do is “think through what kind of view would make sense on the basis of what he says.”<sup>7</sup> Gorman goes on to develop a non-mereological “Thomistic” response to the coherence objection which he thinks is “consonant with his [i.e., Aquinas’] way of thinking” though not something Gorman would claim is *Aquinas’s* view, given the lack of strong textual evidence for it.<sup>8</sup>

This article provides what Gorman says cannot be provided: a knock-down exegetical argument against the mereological interpretation and a new alternative interpretation which has strong textual support.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I first summarize Aquinas’s general strategy for addressing the coherence objection, highlighting the need for a deeper analysis of the general move he makes in response to the objection (§2). Next, I clarify the details and textual motivation for the mereological interpretation, which purports to provide such a deeper analysis (§3). I then show that the mereological interpretation conflicts with Aquinas’s general thesis that “actions belong to suppositis” (*actiones sunt suppositorum*) and application of this thesis to the case of the Incarnation (§4). After a brief aside in which I address a potential concern involving Aquinas’s claims about human souls (§5), I go on to offer an alternative, non-mereological interpretation of Aquinas’s response to the coherence objection (§§6–7).

Though the discussion of this article concerns the correct interpretation of Aquinas’s answer to the coherence objection, at stake is a point of broader significance for the study of the history of the concept of a person and for contemporary discussions of the Incarnation. I conclude by highlighting this point of broader significance (§8).

## 2. Aquinas’s General Approach to the Coherence Objection

Aquinas’s general approach to the coherence objection is rooted in the patristic tradition. According to that tradition, divine predicates are predicated of Christ “in respect to his divine nature” (*secundum divinam naturam, secundum divinitatem*) and human predicates are predicated of Christ “in respect to his human nature” (*secundum humanam naturam, secundum humanitatem*).<sup>10</sup> Aquinas appeals to this traditional idea when he considers

<sup>6</sup>Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 135.

<sup>7</sup>Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 127.

<sup>8</sup>Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 153.

<sup>9</sup>I do not directly address the textual merits of the “Thomistic” approach which Gorman develops as an alternative to the mereological interpretation. Nonetheless, the textual arguments which I offer to support my own alternative to the mereological interpretation provide reason to accept my alternative interpretation over Gorman’s.

<sup>10</sup>For example, the Council of Chalcedon says that Christ is “begotten before the ages from the Father in respect to his divinity (*secundum deitatem*), but in the last days, the same, on account of us and our salvation, [born from] the Virgin Mary, God-bearer, in respect to his

a version of the coherence objection in *ST* III.16.4, which he presents as follows:

It is impossible for opposites to be predicated of the same thing. But the things which are characteristic of [one who has] a human nature are contraries to the things which are proper to God. For God is uncreated, immutable, and eternal, whereas it pertains to human nature to be created, temporal, and mutable. Therefore, it is not possible that the things which are characteristic of [one who has] a human nature are said of God.<sup>11</sup>

In response to this objection, Aquinas invokes the aforementioned patristic idea: the divine predicates said of Christ should be understood as being said of him “in respect to his divine nature” and the human predicates said of Christ should be understood as being said of him “in respect to his human nature.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, for example, rather than saying that Christ is omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, impassible, etc., it would be more precise to say that Christ is omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, impassible, etc. in respect to his divine nature. Likewise, rather than saying that Christ is limited in knowledge, limited in power, mutable, passible, etc., it would be more precise to say that Christ is limited in knowledge, limited in power, mutable, passible, etc. in respect to his human nature.

Aquinas goes on to suggest that, once it is specified that the relevant divine predicates are predicated of Christ only in respect to his divine nature and the relevant human predicates are predicated of Christ only in respect to his human nature, the alleged incoherence in attributing both divine and human attributes to Christ can be resolved:

It is impossible that opposites are predicated of the same thing in respect to the same thing. However, nothing prohibits that they be predicated [of the same thing] in respect to different things. And in this latter way opposites are predicated of Christ: not in respect to the same thing but in respect to different things.<sup>13</sup>

The idea is that, for any pair of opposed F and G ascribed to Christ, so long as the nature in respect to which Christ is F differs from the nature in

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humanity (*secundum humanitatem*)” (my translation, based the text in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 86). Here Chalcedon tacitly addresses the seeming inconsistency in one person’s being both “begotten before the ages” and “born in the last days” by noting that Christ was begotten before the ages *in respect to his divinity* and born in the last days *in respect to his humanity*. Consider likewise the Athanasian Creed’s statement that Christ is “equal to the Father in respect to his divinity but less than the Father in respect to his humanity” (for the full text, see Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 19).

<sup>11</sup>*ST* III.16.4.obj1. All references to Aquinas’s works are to the Latin editions available at <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/>. English translations are my own. I abbreviate references to Aquinas’s texts as follows: *Summa Theologiae* = *ST*; *Summa Contra Gentiles* = *SCG*; *Compendium Theologiae* = *CT*; *Quaestio Disputata De Unione Verbi Incarnati* = *De Unione*; *Quaestio Disputata De Spiritualibus Creaturis* = *QDSC*; *Quaestiones De Quolibet* = *QQ*; and *Scriptum Super Sententiis* = *In Sent*.

<sup>12</sup>See *ST* III.16.4.c.

<sup>13</sup>*ST* III.16.4.ad1.

respect to which Christ is G, there is no incoherence. Thus, for example, allegedly there is no incoherence in Christ's being immutable in respect to his divine nature and yet mutable in respect to his human nature. What would be incoherent, Aquinas claims, would be for a thing to be both mutable and immutable in respect to the same nature.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting that this maneuver will only address the alleged incoherence in Christ's having both the attributes proper to God and the attributes proper to a human being if one accepts that what is proper to being God is to be immutable, eternal, impassible, etc. *in respect to one's divine nature* and that what is proper to being a human being is to be mutable, temporal, passible, etc. *in respect to one's human nature*. Aquinas makes clear that this is in fact his view in a related passage in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where he writes that "natural properties (*naturales proprietates*) are predicated of each thing in respect to its nature (*secundum eius naturam*)."<sup>15</sup>

Now for this response to the coherence objection to be satisfactory, further work is needed to clarify the meaning of the predications in question. For all Aquinas has said here, it is not yet clear what he thinks it is for something to be immutable in respect to its divine nature and yet mutable in respect to its human nature, omniscient in respect to its divine nature and yet non-omniscient in respect to its human nature, and so on. Given this lack of clarity, it is also not yet clear why it is not incoherent for something to be both immutable in respect to one nature and yet mutable in respect to another nature, omniscient in respect to one nature and yet non-omniscient in respect to another nature, and so on.

Unfortunately, Aquinas does not offer the requisite further clarification in *ST III.16.4* (or in any of the parallel passages mentioned in n.14). Gorman claims that Aquinas *never* offers the requisite clarification.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, proponents of the mereological interpretation and I, though differing in our interpretations, claim that elsewhere Aquinas does provide the resources needed to understand these *secundum quid* predications and why, given this understanding, there is no incoherence in Christ's being mutable in respect to his human nature and yet immutable in respect to his divine nature, passible in respect to his human nature and yet impassible in respect to his divine nature, and so on.

### 3. The Mereological Interpretation

Proponents of the mereological interpretation claim that Aquinas thinks Christ is a whole of which his divine and human natures are constituents, or at least that the relationship between Christ and his natures is like that between a whole and its parts in that, just as a whole can have certain properties in virtue of having a part with those properties, Christ

<sup>14</sup>See SCG IV.39, *De Unione* 2.ad1, and *De Unione* 3.ad13 for the same idea. See also *De Unione* 2.ad5 and ad18.

<sup>15</sup>SCG IV.39.2.

<sup>16</sup>See Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 144.

can have certain properties in virtue of having a nature which has those properties.<sup>17</sup> Here they invoke the idea that, as Eleonore Stump puts it, “there is a distinction between a property a whole has in its own right and a property it has in virtue of having a constituent that has that property in its own right.”<sup>18</sup> An apple, for example, is an apple in its own right (i.e., not in virtue of having a part which is an apple) but red derivatively, in virtue of having skin which is red. According to the mereological interpretation, Aquinas invokes this distinction to answer the coherence objection: Christ’s human attributes belong to his human nature in its own right and to Christ only derivatively, i.e., in virtue of his having a human nature which has those attributes in its own right, and Christ’s divine attributes belong to his divine nature in its own right and to Christ only derivatively, i.e., in virtue of his having a divine nature which has those attributes in its own right. Though this interpretation is often referred to as “mereological” insofar as it treats Christ’s human and divine natures as (analogous to) parts or constituents of Christ, it might be more perspicuously called “the inheritance interpretation,” insofar as the crucial idea is that Christ’s human and divine attributes are *inherited* from natures which respectively have those attributes in their own right.<sup>19</sup>

It is this idea, proponents of the mereological interpretation claim, which Aquinas has in mind when he suggests that we can avoid incoherence if we clarify that the divine predicates said of Christ are said of him “in respect to his divine nature” and that the human predicates said of Christ are said of him “in respect to his human nature.” More carefully, according to the mereological interpretation, such predications should be understood as follows:

THE MEREOLOGICAL ANALYSIS: for any F and nature *n*, Christ is F in respect to *n* (*secundum n*) iff Christ is derivatively F in virtue of having a nature *n* which is F in its own right.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Though Aquinas says that Christ’s relationship to his human nature can be treated as *like* that of a whole to its part, he insists that Christ’s human nature is not properly speaking a part of Christ (see *In Sent.* III.11.1.3; *In Sent.* III.6.2.3.ad4; *ST* III.2.4.ad2; and *De Unione* 2.c; see also *CT* I.2.11, *CT* I.2.12, and *SCG* IV.41.10). Cross worries that this is a serious problem for Aquinas (see his *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 197–198). Stump attempts to address this worry in “Aquinas’ Metaphysics of the Incarnation,” 215–217, and *Aquinas*, 414–415.

<sup>18</sup>*Aquinas*, 412.

<sup>19</sup>See Stump, “Aquinas’ Metaphysics of the Incarnation,” 212–217; Stump, *Aquinas*, 412–413; and Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 196–197. Freddoso (in “Logic, Ontology, and Ockham’s Christology,” 304–308) offers a variant on this interpretation. Unlike the Stump–Cross interpretation discussed in the main text, Freddoso’s interpretation holds that Christ *has his divine attributes non-derivatively*. However, like the Stump–Cross interpretation, Freddoso’s interpretation holds that Christ *has his human attributes derivatively* in virtue of having a nature, viz., his human nature, which has them in its own right. It is this latter claim which is the target of the objection discussed in §4, and thus Freddoso’s variant of the mereological interpretation is also challenged by that objection.

<sup>20</sup>Adams, Bäck, and Cross call this a “specificative analysis” of the *secundum quid* specification and contrast it with an alternative analysis which they call the “reduplicative analysis”

Just as there is no incoherence in an apple's being both derivatively red in virtue of having a part (viz. its skin) which is red and derivatively not red in virtue of having a part (viz., its flesh) which is not red, likewise (it is claimed) there is no incoherence in Christ's being both derivatively limited in power in virtue of having a human nature which is limited in power and also derivatively unlimited in power in virtue of having a divine nature which is unlimited in power, derivatively mutable in virtue of having a human nature which is mutable and yet also derivatively immutable in virtue of having a divine nature which is immutable, etc.

That is the view, but what reason is there to attribute it to Aquinas? Proponents of the mereological interpretation claim to find strong evidence that this is Aquinas's view in Aquinas's response to the question of whether Christ can be said to be a creature.<sup>21</sup> Consider, for example, the discussion in *ST* III.16.8.c:

Now we should not have names in common with heretics, lest we seem to approve of their error. But the Arian heretics said that Christ is a creature and less than the Father, not only by reason of his human nature but also by reason of his divine person. Thus, it ought not to be said absolutely (*absolute*) that Christ is a creature, or less than the Father, but with specification (*cum determinatione*) [of the respect in which he is a creature], namely, in respect to his human nature (*secundum humanam naturam*). But concerning those things which cannot be [mistakenly] thought to belong to the divine person in respect to himself (*secundum seipsam*), these *can* be said unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*) of Christ by reason of his human nature (*ratione humanae naturae*): thus we say unqualifiedly that Christ suffered, died, and was buried. Likewise, in corporeal and human things, if a doubt can arise as to whether something belongs to a whole or a part [of the whole], if it is in the part we do not attribute it to the whole unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*), that is, without specification (*idest sine determinatione*). For we do not say that the Ethiopian is white, but that he is white in respect to his teeth (*secundum dentem*). However, we say without specification (*absque determinatione*) that he is curly because this [i.e., curliness] cannot belong to him except in respect to his hair (*secundum capillos*).

Here Aquinas gives two examples in which a whole is said to be F (e.g., white, curly) in a certain respect in virtue of having a part which is F: the (black-skinned) Ethiopian is said to be white in respect to his teeth in virtue of having a part, viz., his teeth, which is white in its own right; likewise, the curly-haired person is said to be curly in respect to her hair

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(Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 130–133; Bäck, “Scotus on the Consistency of the Incarnation and the Trinity,” 85–86; and Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 195–196).

<sup>21</sup>Cross (in *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 195–196) refers to *ST* III.16.8. Stump (in *Aquinas*, 487n96) refers to SCG IV.48. Freddoso (in “Logic, Ontology, and Ockham's Christology,” 304–308) and Bäck (in “Aquinas on the Incarnation,” 135–136 and “Scotus on the Consistency of the Incarnation and the Trinity,” 86) refer to *ST* III.16.8 and *In Sent.* III.11.3. See likewise Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 130–133, and Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, 257–259.



in virtue of having a part, viz., her hair, which is curly in its own right. In these examples, the *secundum quid* specification serves to specify a constituent  $n$  of  $x$  which is  $F$  in its own right and by virtue of having which  $x$  can be said to be  $F$  in a derivative way, viz.,  $F$  in respect to  $n$  (*secundum n*). Generalizing from these examples, proponents of the mereological interpretation claim that, for any  $F$ , Aquinas's talk of Christ's being  $F$  "in respect to his human nature" or "in respect to his divine nature" should be understood in a similar way.

However, nothing in this passage mandates this generalization.<sup>22</sup> Aquinas's concern here is to show why in some contexts, to avoid confusion, one should not say merely that " $x$  is  $F$ " but instead specify in what respect (*secundum quid*) one means to affirm that  $x$  is  $F$ . Aquinas illustrates this with two examples in which this is done by specifying a part of  $x$  which is  $F$  in its own right, in virtue of having which  $x$  (the whole) is  $F$  in a qualified sense, viz.,  $F$  in respect to that part. However, the fact that Aquinas uses mereological examples to illustrate the idea of specifying the respect in which a predicate applies to something doesn't imply that he thinks that this is the only way of specifying a respect in which a predicate applies to something. In particular, it doesn't provide strong support for the claim that, for any  $F$ , when Aquinas says that Christ is " $F$  in respect to his human nature" or " $F$  in respect to his divine nature," the *secundum quid* specification should be understood in this mereological way.

In fact, as I show below, both in Christological contexts and in contexts which bear directly on the relevant Christological predications, Aquinas employs *secundum quid* specifications in non-mereological ways.<sup>23</sup> To pave the way for this, I begin by showing that Aquinas's general thesis that only suppositis act/operate (*actiones sunt suppositorum*) is inconsistent with a mereological analysis of some of the relevant Christological predications.

#### 4. A Problem for the Mereological Interpretation: Actions, Suppositis, and Persons

The mereological view (i.e., the view attributed to Aquinas by the mereological interpretation) depends on the thesis that Christ's human properties are properties which Christ has in virtue of having a human nature which has those properties in its own right. When applied to cases in which the property is an action/operation or a capacity to act/operate in some way, this thesis has the striking implication that Christ's human nature is itself a thing which can or does so act/operate in its own right.<sup>24</sup> Consider, for example, Christ's experience of suffering on the

<sup>22</sup>The same is true of the parallel passages in Aquinas's other works (see n.21).

<sup>23</sup>For a different argument against using the aforementioned texts to support the mereological interpretation, see Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 127–143.

<sup>24</sup>I note that Stump, Cross, and Freddoso explicitly suggest that Aquinas applies his mereological analysis to Christ's operations (Stump, *Aquinas*, 415–416; Cross, *The Metaphysics of*

Cross: this experience is a human operation of Christ, something which Christ can do (or undergo) only because he has a human nature. Experiencing suffering on the Cross, moreover, is a property which appears to be incompatible with a property of divinity, viz., impassibility. Applied to this case of putatively incompatible attributes, the mereological view implies that Christ derivatively experiences suffering on the Cross in virtue of having a constituent (viz., his human nature) which experiences suffering on the Cross in its own right. Hence, the mereological view implies that Christ's human nature is a thing which can (and in fact does) experience suffering. The same result follows for all of Christ's human operations (e.g., his human thinking, his human willing, his human pitying, his human sorrowing, etc.). If Christ has all of his human properties derivatively, in virtue of having a human nature which has those properties, as the mereological view claims, then Christ's human nature is a thing which can (and in fact does) think, will, pity, sorrow, experience pain, etc.

What makes this result so striking is that Christian orthodoxy and Aquinas insist that Christ's human nature is not a person. In the words of Chalcedon quoted in §1, the human and divine natures of Christ "come together in one person (*prosopon/persona*) and one hypostasis, not parted or divided in two persons." Now the mereological view is meant to be consistent with this central doctrinal claim. But it follows from the conjunction of this claim and the mereological view that Christ's human nature is (i) a thing which can (and in fact does) in its own right think, will, pity, sorrow, experience hunger, and, in general, perform all the operations characteristic of a human being and yet (ii) is not a person. Why is this significant? Well, it means that proponents of the mereological view must reject the idea that being a subject of sufficiently rich mental states (i.e., a thing which thinks, wills, pities, sorrows, etc. in the way that a human being thinks, wills, pities, sorrows, etc.) is sufficient for being a person. Put differently, they must reject the idea that anything which is psychologically just like a person is a person.

In other, non-historical work for this journal, I have argued that this provides a strong reason to reject any mereological solution to the coherence objection.<sup>25</sup> What I wish to examine here, however, is not the philosophical question of whether it is true that anything which is psychologically just like a person is a person but rather the *historical* question whether this is something that *Aquinas* thinks is true. If the mereological interpretation is correct, then Aquinas must deny that being an individual which thinks, wills, and engages in other distinctively "rational" operations (the activities which Aquinas in SCG III.113.6 calls "personal acts" (*actus personales*)) is sufficient for being a person.

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*the Incarnation*, 154, 197, and 220; and Freddoso, "Logic, Ontology, and Ockham's Christology," 304–305).

<sup>25</sup>See Hauser, "On Being Human and Divine."

Several prominent scholars have maintained that medieval and patristic authors in general, including Aquinas, *do* deny this. Richard Cross and Timothy Pawl, for example, argue that, in general, patristic and scholastic authors held that it is possible for something to be an individual which thinks, wills, loves, and, in general, engages in the activities characteristic of persons *and yet is not person*.<sup>26</sup> To support this, Cross maintains that Scotus and earlier scholastics, including Aquinas, “are happy to ascribe human activity to the assumed nature [of Christ]. They all assume that we can speak of the human nature doing things,” such as thinking, willing, and whatever other operations are characteristic of human beings, even while insisting that it is not a person.<sup>27</sup> Cross and Pawl also argue that such a view is implied by certain authoritative patristic texts, such as the *Tome of Leo* (a letter read and approved at the Council of Chalcedon), which appear to ascribe human actions to Christ’s human nature even while denying that it is a person.<sup>28</sup>

Cross and Pawl’s claims concern a whole range of medieval and patristic authors, not just Aquinas. I will not attempt to settle here whether they are right about other thinkers but only whether they are right about Aquinas. My claim is that they are wrong about Aquinas. A crucial, oft-invoked principle in Aquinas’s philosophical system is the principle that “actions belong to suppositis” (*actiones sunt suppositorum*).<sup>29</sup> More precisely, Aquinas holds that

- (1) For any nature, only a hypostasis/supposit can perform the actions/operations which pertain to that nature.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>See Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 226–229 and 319–323; Cross, “Nature and Personality in the Incarnation,” 250–1, where Cross associates this view with “any orthodox Christology”; and Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology*, 33, where Pawl applies this general claim about patristic and scholastic authors to Aquinas in particular. (It is worth clarifying here that Pawl makes these claims in the context of a broader historical discussion and not a discussion in which he is trying to support a particular interpretation of Aquinas’s response to the coherence objection).

<sup>27</sup>Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 220.

<sup>28</sup>See Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 23 and 183–184; Cross, *Communicatio Idiomatum*, 14; and Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology*, 214–215 and 228–229. For a detailed account of why Leo’s letter and related conciliar texts should not be interpreted in this way, see Hauser, “On Being Human and Divine,” §4. Cross (in *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 155 and 221) adds that Leo’s letter is quoted by both Aquinas (in *ST* III.19.1) and Henry of Ghent to support the claim that Christ’s human nature acts/operates. Later in the main text above, I address how Aquinas’s discussion in *ST* III.19.1 should be understood.

<sup>29</sup>See *ST* II-II.58.2.c; *ST* I.29.1.c; *ST* I.39.5.ad1; and *ST* I.40.1.ad3. In some texts, Aquinas says that “actions belong to singulars” (*actus sunt singularium*) (*In Sent.* III.18.1.1.ad2; *ST* I.57.2.c) or that “actions belong to individuals” (*actus sunt individuorum*) (*In Sent.* II.32.1.2.c; *In Sent.* IV.4.2.1.3.ad2). One might think that the claim that actions belong to singulars or individuals doesn’t rule out the possibility that Christ’s human nature acts since Christ’s human nature is a concrete particular, a soul-body composite (see *ST* III.2.3.ad2). However, as I show in the main text, Aquinas doesn’t take this route.

<sup>30</sup>In theological contexts, Aquinas uses the Greek term “hypostasis” interchangeably with the Latin term “suppositum.”

Crucially, Aquinas does not abandon, revise, or invoke an exception to this principle when discussing the case of the Incarnation. On the contrary, he explicitly invokes it in his theorizing about the Incarnation to elucidate the claim that, in Christ, two natures, one divine and one human, come together in one person.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for example, in *ST III.2.3.c* Aquinas writes,

a hypostasis alone is that to which the operations and properties of a nature, as well as whatever pertains to the account of the nature in the concrete, are attributed. For we say that this human being reasons and is risible and is a rational animal. Indeed, for this reason this human being is said to be a supposit, namely, because he is subject to (*supponitur*) those things which pertain to a human being, receiving the predication of them.

Here, in the context of explaining the conciliar claim that Christ is one hypostasis/supposit with two natures, Aquinas maintains that the operations which pertain to a nature can be attributed only to a hypostasis/supposit of that nature.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, when explaining why individual human beings are not their individual human souls, Aquinas puts it thus: “whatever performs the operations of a certain [kind of] thing is that [kind of] thing.”<sup>33</sup> If something can perform the operations which pertain to a given kind of nature, then it is a supposit of that nature. In particular, if something can perform the operations which pertain to a rational nature (e.g., if it can think, will, love, etc.), then it is a supposit of a rational nature, i.e., a person (since, on Aquinas’s view, a person just is a supposit of a rational nature).<sup>34</sup>

Now, in conformity with Chalcedon, Aquinas holds that

(2) Christ’s human nature is neither a person nor a hypostasis/supposit.<sup>35</sup>

It follows from (1) and (2) that

(3) For any operation/action which pertains to human nature, it is not the case that Christ’s human nature can perform that operation/action. (From 1–2)<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>In addition to the passages subsequently discussed in the main text, see *ST III.7.13.c*; *De Unione* 1.ad16; *ST III.19.1.ad3*; *ST III.19.1.ad4*; and *ST III.40.1.ad3*.

<sup>32</sup>In the quoted passage, Aquinas claims that not just the operations but “whatever pertains to the account of the nature in the concrete” belong to a hypostasis alone (e.g., the hypostasis alone, not its nature, is a human being, an animal, etc.). Here I focus on the fact that Aquinas thinks that operations belong to hypostases/supposits alone.

<sup>33</sup>*ST I.75.4.c*.

<sup>34</sup>Boethius defines a person as “an individual substance of rational nature.” Aquinas accepts this but clarifies that, by “an individual substance,” he means a supposit/hypostasis. This clarification is important because in some contexts Aquinas uses the term “individual substance” in a broad way which includes both supposits and non-supposits such as integral parts, like a particular hand or foot, and individual human souls. See *ST I.29.1.ad5* with *ST I.75.4.ad2*.

<sup>35</sup>See, e.g., *ST III.2.3* (esp. ad2); *SCG IV.38*; *De Unione* 2; and *CT I.210–211*.

<sup>36</sup>Corey Barnes (in “Aristotle in the *Summa Theologiae*’s Christology,” 193–194) makes a similar point about Aquinas’s application of the *actiones sunt suppositorum* principle to the

That Aquinas accepts (3) shows that he must reject a mereological response to the alleged incoherence of attributing both human and divine operations to Christ. Consider, for example, the claim that Christ is impassible in respect to his divine nature and yet also capable of experiencing pain in respect to his human nature. Christ's human nature is not a supposit and hence, on Aquinas's view, cannot experience pain, for experiencing pain is an operation and hence something only a supposit can do. Hence, Aquinas must reject the mereological analysis of the claim that "Christ is capable of experiencing pain in respect to his human nature," for that analysis entails that Christ's human nature is capable of experiencing pain. More generally, for any human action/operation  $\phi$ , Aquinas must reject the mereological analysis of the claim that "Christ  $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) in respect to his human nature," for such an analysis entails that Christ's human nature  $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) in its own right, which is inconsistent with (3).

At this point, one might object that Aquinas doesn't really think that only supposit act/operate since he often speaks of things which are not supposit acting/operating. In particular, Aquinas sometimes speaks of Christ's human nature acting/operating and frequently speaks of Christ's human soul acting/operating, even though he maintains that neither is a supposit.<sup>37</sup> For example, in *ST* III.19.1.c Aquinas writes,

Just as the human nature in Christ has the proper form and power through which he operates, so too does the divine. Hence, the human nature has a proper operation distinct from the divine operation, and vice versa... And this is what Pope Leo says in his letter to Flavian [i.e., the *Tome of Leo*], 'Each form,' viz., the divine nature and the human nature in Christ, 'with the communion of the other, does what is proper to it, that is, the Word does what is of the Word and the flesh carries out that which is of the flesh.'

Richard Cross claims that "Aquinas makes an important claim here—that the human nature [of Christ] operates (does things)," a claim which I noted above is one which Cross argues was standard among medieval and patristic authors.<sup>38</sup> This leaves us with a puzzle: if Aquinas really thinks that only supposit act/operate, why does he attribute actions/operations to things which he insists are not supposit, including Christ's human nature and human soul?

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Incarnation. However, Barnes does not relate this point to the coherence objection and hence does not identify the challenge it poses to the mereological interpretation of Aquinas's response to that objection.

<sup>37</sup>See, e.g., *ST* III.7.1.ad3; *ST* III.10.3.c; *ST* III.13.4.c; and *ST* III.15.4.c. Aquinas's philosophical discussion of the human soul is permeated by talk of the soul acting/operating and even talk of powers of the soul acting/operating, despite his denying that the soul (or its powers) are supposit. See, e.g., *ST* I.84.1.c and *ST* I.86.1.c. Hughes (in *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, 258–259) appeals to texts such as these to support his assertion that Aquinas thinks statements like "Christ is fearful" are true because Christ has a human nature (or constituent thereof, viz., a human soul) which is fearful.

<sup>38</sup>Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 154; see also 220–221.

A resolution to this puzzle is provided by what Aquinas says in *ST* III.20.1.ad2. Discussing the sense in which Christ can be said to both serve (because human) and yet rule (because divine), Aquinas writes,

Now to act is not attributed to a nature as an agent (*agens*) but to a person, since, according to the Philosopher, 'actions belong to suppositis and to singulars.' Nevertheless, action is attributed to a nature as to that in respect to which (*secundum quam*) a person or hypostasis acts. Hence, although a nature is not properly said to rule or serve, nevertheless every hypostasis or person may be properly said (*proprie dici*) to be ruling or serving in respect to this or that nature.

Here Aquinas contrasts two ways in which an action can be attributed to something, viz., (1) as to an agent of that action or (2) as to "that in respect to which" (*secundum quam*) the action is performed. He proceeds to insist that a nature "in respect to which" a person or supposit performs a certain action is not "properly said" (*proprie dici*) to perform that action (e.g., "a nature is not properly said to rule or serve"). When it is said, for example, that "to rule belongs to such and such nature," what is meant is that such and such nature is something "in respect to which" (*secundum quam*) an agent can rule; such a way of speaking should not be taken to imply that the nature itself is an agent of the action, i.e., a thing which rules. Indeed, in another text, *ST* II-II.58.2c, Aquinas says that actions are properly attributed only to suppositis and goes on to say that a form, power, or part in respect to which a supposit acts/operates can be said to so act/operate only in a "metaphorical" (*metaphorice*) sense, as when one says things like "sight sees" or "this eye sees, but not that one."

In short, though Aquinas allows that actions can be attributed to the nature of a supposit as to that "in respect to which" the supposit acts, the agent, i.e., the thing which performs the actions in question, is the supposit, not the nature. Hence, in the case of Christ, the supposit alone, i.e., Christ, and not his human nature, performs his human actions. *A fortiori* and contrary to the mereological view, Christ does not perform his human actions in virtue of having a human nature which in its own right performs those actions.

Further support for this conclusion is provided by the analogies Aquinas uses to illustrate the relationship of Christ's natures to the operations which pertain to those natures. Aquinas likens this relationship to the relationship of forms (e.g., the heat or lightness of fire), capacities (e.g., sense or intellect) and organs (e.g., eyes or ears) to the operations which pertain to these forms, capacities, and organs.<sup>39</sup> Now, as Aquinas makes clear in *ST* I.75.2.ad2 and *ST* II-II.58.2.c, the forms, capacities, and organs in question do not perform the acts in question. Properly speaking, a person's senses do not sense, intellect doesn't think, and eyes do not see; rather, the

<sup>39</sup>See especially *De Unione* 5.c and *CT* I.212. See also *CT* I.211; *SCG* IV.41.11; *ST* III.2.6.ad4; *ST* III.19.1.c; *ST* III.19.1.ad2; *De Unione* 1.c; and *De Unione* 5, ads.5, 8, and 13.

person senses by exercising her senses, thinks by exercising her intellect, and sees by using her eyes. Likewise, on Aquinas's view, it is not the heat of the fire (a form) which heats but the fire which heats, exercising the capacity to heat which it has in virtue of being hot. Given the aforementioned analogies, we should likewise conclude that Christ's human nature does not act/operate but rather Christ, the supposit, acts by exercising his human nature or, more precisely, the capacities which come with his having a human nature.

Further support for this conclusion is provided by the fact that Aquinas clarifies that a supposit's nature is a *principle* (*principium*) of its operations and contrasts the nature's role as a *principle* by which the supposit operates with the supposit's role as the *agent* which so operates. Thus, for example, when discussing Christ's twofold operation in *De Unione* 5.c, Aquinas writes,

the unity and plurality of an action can be considered on the part of the principle by which an agent operates (*ex parte principia quo agens operatur*). And in this way an action is said to be one or several in respect to species, just as vision and hearing are operations differing in species. For an action proceeds from an agent in respect to the nature of the power by which the agent acts (*secundum rationem virtutis qua agit*).

Aquinas goes on to suggest that Christ has two kinds of operations because there are two principles by which he acts, viz., his divine nature and his human nature. In *De Unione* 5.ad14, Aquinas adds, "Christ is one agent [because he is one supposit], but there are two [kinds of] actions in him [on account of his two natures]." Similarly, in his *Compendium Theologiae*, Aquinas claims,

Since operations belong to supposits, it has seemed to some that, just as there is but one supposit in Christ, so likewise there is only one [kind of] operation in him. But they did not consider this rightly: many [kinds of] operations are discerned in any individual if there are many principles of operation in it. Thus, in a human being the operation of thinking differs [in kind] from the operation of sense perception because of the difference between sense and intellect. Likewise, in fire the operation of heating differs [in kind] from the operation of soaring upward because of the difference between heat and lightness. Nature is related to operation as its principle. Therefore, it is not true that there is in Christ only one [kind of] operation because he is one supposit. Rather, there are in Christ two [kinds of] operation because of his two natures.<sup>40</sup>

Just as fire engages in two kinds of actions, viz., heating and soaring upward, by virtue of two distinct forms or principles, viz., its heat and its lightness, likewise Christ engages in two kinds of actions, viz., human actions and divine actions, by virtue of two distinct principles, viz., his human nature and his divine nature. Together, these texts provide clear

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<sup>40</sup>CT I.212. See also QQ 9.2.2.ad2.

evidence that Aquinas holds that what acts/operates is a supposit and that a supposit's nature is not something which acts/operates but instead is a *principle by which* the supposit acts/operates.

In short, on Aquinas's view, Christ's human nature does not itself perform human actions/operations. But, in direct conflict with this, the mereological view implies that Christ's human nature is a thing which performs human actions/operations (e.g., experiences suffering on the Cross) in its own right. Hence, either the mereological view is not Aquinas's view or Aquinas is inconsistent. While it is possible that Aquinas is inconsistent, charity demands that we consider whether there is an alternative, non-mereological interpretation of Aquinas's answer to the coherence objection consistent with his claims that only supposits act/operate, that Christ's human nature is not a supposit, and that Christ's human nature is not an agent of his human actions/operations but rather a principle by which the supposit to which it belongs, viz. Christ, so acts/operates.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Though similar in some respects, the argument I have offered differs in a significant way from Michael Gorman's exegetical argument against the mereological interpretation. In particular, I do not claim, as Gorman does, that Aquinas thinks "we should not, except perhaps in a few exceptional cases, attribute features to natures" (*Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 135–136). Instead, I only claim that there are *some* important attributes (in particular, actions/operations) which Aquinas thinks can be (properly) attributed only to supposits and hence cannot be (properly) attributed to Christ's human nature (since it is not a supposit). Though Aquinas holds that Christ's human nature is not a supposit, he maintains that it is a concrete particular, an individual "substance" in one sense of the term; indeed, he likens its ontological status to that of an integral part of supposit (e.g., a particular hand or foot), which he thinks is a concrete particular but not a supposit (see *ST* III.2.3.ad2). Just as there is no obstacle in general to features being (properly) predicated of a hand (e.g., a hand has a certain color and a certain shape) or hair (e.g., we have seen that Aquinas thinks that a person can be said to be "curly" in virtue of having hair that is curly), I see no obstacle to Aquinas's thinking that some features can be (properly) predicated of Christ's human nature or that Christ's human nature can serve as a "proper subject" for some properties. Indeed, Gorman concedes that there are such properties (though he calls them "exceptional"): for example, Aquinas holds that Christ's human nature has the property of being created and the property of being assumed (see *ST* III.13.4.ad3 and *ST* III.13.4.ad3). What distinguishes these "exceptional" cases from non-exceptional cases? Gorman doesn't say. Unlike Gorman's argument, my argument doesn't rest on this dubious distinction; all I rely on is the claim, clearly made in the texts quoted above, that natures do not perform the actions/operations which pertain to them.

For a similar reason, I would not call Aquinas's Christology a "single-subject Christology" (as Corey Barnes does in "Aristotle in the *Summa Theologiae's* Christology," 193). On Aquinas's view, Christ's human nature, and even constituents thereof, are subjects of at least some properties; they just aren't things which think, will, sense, or perform any other human operation (properly speaking). Indeed, on my interpretation of Aquinas, it is plausible to think that *some* of Christ's human properties (not his actions/operations) belong to Christ derivatively, in virtue of his having a human nature (or a constituent thereof) which has that property, in the way that the mereological interpretation proposes holds for *all* of Christ's human properties. For example, it is consistent with my interpretation of Aquinas that Christ has whatever weight that he has derivatively, in virtue of having a human body (a constituent of his human nature) which has that weight in its own right.



In §§6–7 below, I develop such an alternative, non-mereological interpretation.<sup>42</sup>

### 5. An Alleged Counterexample: The Case of the Human Soul

Before moving on to discuss my alternative interpretation, I want to pause to address a prominent case where Aquinas appears to attribute human actions/operations to non-supposits. This is the case of the human soul. Two pieces of evidence are relevant here. First, though Aquinas explicitly claims that human souls are not supposits or persons, he often talks *as if* human souls perform human actions/operations, e.g., think, will, experience pleasure and pain, etc.<sup>43</sup> Second, in the course of explicating his well-known thesis that human souls can exist separately from the bodies they inform, Aquinas claims that, unlike the sensory powers of a human being, the human powers of intellect and will are “in the soul as their subject (*subiecta*).”<sup>44</sup> One might take this claim to imply that Aquinas holds that human souls are things which can think and will. More generally, one might claim that these two pieces of evidence show that Aquinas, despite repeatedly affirming and never renouncing the *actions sunt suppositorum* principle, nonetheless allows that certain non-supposits (*viz.*, human souls) can engage in certain actions/operations, including those which pertain to a rational nature.

This, if true, would falsify my claim that Aquinas holds that only persons (i.e. supposits of a rational nature) can engage in the acts proper to a rational nature. But, as I now make clear, there are in fact good grounds for denying that the aforementioned two pieces of evidence really show that Aquinas believes that human souls can, properly speaking, think, will, or perform any other human act/operation.

Concerning the first piece of evidence discussed above, it is crucial to note that though there are many passages in which Aquinas attributes human operations to souls, speaking as if human souls were things which think, will, etc., there are also passages in which Aquinas clarifies that this is not a precise way of speaking and that what in fact performs the actions/operations in question, properly speaking, are the supposits (i.e., the persons) to which these souls belong.

To see this, let us first recall a point made in the previous section: though Aquinas occasionally attributes human actions/operations to Christ’s

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<sup>42</sup>It is worth clarifying that though I have argued against the mereological interpretation’s claim that Aquinas thinks Christ performs his human operations derivatively, in virtue of having a human nature which performs those operations in its own right, I have *not* argued against the mereological interpretation’s related but distinct claim that Aquinas thinks of Christ’s relation to his human nature as analogous to that of a whole to one of its parts. For more on this, see the references in note 17 above.

<sup>43</sup>For the claim that human souls are not supposits or persons, see *ST* I.29.1.ad5 and *ST* I.75.4.ad2. For Aquinas talking as if human souls think, will, experience pleasure and pain, etc., see, e.g., *ST* I.84, *ST* I.87, and *ST* I-II.31.5.c.

<sup>44</sup>See *ST* I.77.5.

human nature, in the texts where Aquinas pauses to clarify the meaning of such attributions, he makes it clear that they should not be taken to imply that Christ's human nature itself is an agent of those actions/operations. Consider again, for example, the passage quoted above from *ST* III.20.1.ad2, where Aquinas clarifies that "to act is not attributed to a nature as an agent (*agens*) but to a person, since, according to the Philosopher, 'actions belong to suppositis and to singulars'." More generally, in *ST* II-II.58.2.c Aquinas clarifies that though people (including Aquinas) may talk as if *parts, forms, or powers* were themselves agents of the actions/operations which pertain to them, this is an improper way of speaking since, properly speaking, it is *the supposit*, not the part, form, or power, which acts by virtue of/by means of (*per*) the part, form, or power. As he puts it,

actions belong to suppositis and wholes and not, properly speaking, to parts or forms or powers, for it is not proper to say (*non enim proprie dicitur*) that a hand strikes but that a human being strikes with his hand (*homo per manum*), nor that heat [i.e., a form] heats but that fire heats by virtue of its heat (*ignis per calorem*) . . . But metaphorically (*secundum similitudinem*) the different principles of action in one and the same human being (for example, reason and the irascible and concupiscible appetites) are taken [i.e., talked about] as if they were different agents (*accipiuntur. . . quasi diversa agentia*).<sup>45</sup>

Human souls are parts of human persons by virtue of which these persons do various things, including, e.g., think and will, and so human souls thus fall within the range of the general claim made here. Hence, the general claim made here indicates that though Aquinas may occasionally or even frequently attribute acts of thinking or willing to a person's soul, such attributions should not be understood to imply that he believes that the soul thinks or wills, properly speaking; what thinks or wills, properly speaking, is not the soul but the supposit or person to which that soul belongs.

In fact, this is exactly what Aquinas says in several texts in which he explicitly discusses the sense in which human souls can be said to think. Consider in particular the following passages:

It can be said that the composite itself (that is, the human being) thinks (*intelligit*), inasmuch as the soul, which is the formal part of a human being, has this proper operation, just as the operation of any part is attributed to the whole. For, a human being sees by means of his eye, walks by means of his foot, and, likewise, thinks by means of his soul (*et similiter intelligit per animam*).<sup>46</sup>

One can say that the soul thinks (*intelligit*), just as [one can say] that the eye sees, but it is more proper (*magis proprie*) to say that a human being thinks by means of his soul (*intelligit per animam*).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>*ST* II-II.58.2.c.

<sup>46</sup>*QDSC* 2.ad2.

<sup>47</sup>*ST* I.75.2.ad2.

In the first passage, Aquinas indicates that his view is that the soul can be said to think in the same way that a person's other parts (e.g., eyes, feet, etc.) can be said to perform the operations that the person performs by means of them. But, as Aquinas makes clear in the passage from *ST* II-II.58.2.c quoted in the previous paragraph, the parts by means of which or with which (*quo, per*) a supposit does something are not themselves properly said to do that thing, e.g., "it is not proper to say that a hand strikes but that a human being strikes with his hand." Hence, the analogies in question imply that a person's soul does not think properly speaking: just as a person's eye does not see properly speaking, likewise a person's soul does not think properly speaking. In fact, Aquinas makes this very point in the second of the above quoted passages: though people (including Aquinas) may talk of the soul thinking, such talk should be understood in the way that we understand talk of an eye seeing. In particular, though we may occasionally talk loosely of eyes seeing (e.g., "his right eye sees well, but not his left"), what sees, properly speaking, is the person, not his eyes. Likewise, though Aquinas may talk loosely of "the manner in which the soul thinks when united to a body. . .[and] the manner in which it thinks when separated from a body" (*ST* I.84.proemium), what thinks, properly speaking, is a human person, not her soul.<sup>48</sup> Considered in light of these

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<sup>48</sup>Brian Carl ("Action, Supposit, and Subject," 557) claims that in this text, *ST* I.75.2.ad2, Aquinas is drawing a threefold distinction between (1) non-subsistent forms (e.g., heat), which cannot be properly said to act at all; (2) subsistent parts of suppositis (e.g., an eye or a human soul), which can be said act in a more proper sense than non-subsistent forms but in a less proper sense than suppositis can be said to act; and (3) suppositis (e.g., a human person), which can most properly be said to act. Even if this threefold distinction is granted, this much is clear: Aquinas claims that the sense in which human souls can be said to think (or, more generally, act/operate) is the same, less-than-fully-proper sense in which bodily organs can be said to perform the actions/operations (e.g., see, hear, smell, etc.) which their suppositis (*viz.*, human persons) perform by means of (*per*) them. Now it is evident that bodily organs do not see, hear, smell, feel, etc., strictly speaking: there are not multiple things (my eyes and me) which are aware of the colors before me, multiple things (my ears and me) which are aware of the sounds around me, or multiple things (my hands and me) which are aware of smoothness of the rock in my hands. Hence, from Aquinas claim that our souls can be said to think in same, less-than-fully-proper sense in which our eyes, ears, nose etc. can be said to see, hear, smell, etc., it is safe to conclude that he does not believe our souls think, strictly speaking.

This is consistent with Carl's observation that Aquinas distinguishes the less-than-fully-proper sense in which a non-subsistent form (e.g., heat) can be said to act/operate from the less-than-fully-proper sense in which subsistent parts (e.g., eyes, ears, human souls) can be said to perform the acts/operations which are performed by means of (*per*) them. Thus, for example, while neither non-subsistent forms nor subsistent parts properly speaking perform the actions/operations in question, in the case of subsistent parts and not in the case of non-subsistent forms the performance of the action/operation in question essentially involves a certain change or process that occurs in the subsistent part (e.g. a person's action of seeing, on Aquinas's view, essentially involves a certain change which occurs in one's eyes; by contrast, fire's action of heating does not involve any change or process which occurs in the fire's heat (the accidental form by virtue of which the fire so acts)). This difference is enough to explain why Aquinas implies in *ST* I.75.2.ad2 that subsistent parts can more

clarificatory remarks, the fact that Aquinas sometimes talks as if human souls think, experience pain, etc. provides no reason to believe that, contrary to his explicit explanation of how such talk should be understood, he really does think human souls think, experience pain, etc.<sup>49</sup>

What about Aquinas's claim that the human powers of intellect and will, unlike all human sensory powers, are in human souls as their subjects (*subiecta*)? Again, there are strong reasons to think that this claim should not be understood to imply that Aquinas thinks the human souls can think or will, properly speaking. First, there are the texts just cited, in which Aquinas affirms that what properly speaking thinks is the human person or supposit, not her soul. Second, Aquinas's claim that our powers of intellect and will are "in" our souls as subjects ought to be interpreted in light of his parallel claim that our sensory powers are "in" their corresponding sensory organs "as their subjects." For example, in *QDSC* 4.ad3, Aquinas writes,

those powers whose operations do not belong to the soul alone but to the composite are in an organ as their subject (*sunt in organo sicut in subiecto*)... alone in the soul as their subject are those powers whose operations are not carried out by means of a bodily organ (*non per organum corporis exequitur*).

We have just seen that Aquinas explicitly maintains that the organs by means of which human supposits see, hear, smell, etc. do not themselves see, hear, smell, etc., properly speaking. Given this, Aquinas's claim here that the powers of sight, hearing, smell, etc. are "in" bodily organs "as their subjects" should not be understood to imply that he believes that these bodily organs see, hear, smell, etc., properly speaking. Likewise then, Aquinas's claim that the powers of intellect and will are "in" the soul as their subject should not be understood to imply that Aquinas believes that the soul can think or will, properly speaking.<sup>50</sup> Finally, it is worth

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properly be said to act than non-subsistent forms can be said to act even while also saying elsewhere (e.g., in *ST* II-II.58.2.c) that neither subsistent parts nor non-subsistent forms properly speaking perform the acts which supposits perform by virtue of or by means of them.

<sup>49</sup>Alain de Libera makes a similar point about Aquinas's talk of the soul acting/operating in "When Did the Modern Subject Emerge?," 211.

<sup>50</sup>What then *does* Aquinas mean in saying that the powers of intellect and will are "in the soul as their subject" whereas the sensory powers are "in" their corresponding sense organs "as their subjects"? The argument given in the main text doesn't depend on a specific answer to this. That being said, an answer can be given based on the following text:

Now, although there belongs to the soul a certain proper operation which the body does not share, namely thinking (*intelligere*), there are nonetheless certain operations common to it and the body, such as fear, anger, sense perception, and the like, for these occur by reason of some change (*transmutationem*) in some specific part of the body, from which it is clear that these operations belong to the soul and body together. (*SCG* II.57.6)

I would suggest that Aquinas's idea is that our sensory powers can be said to be "in" various parts (or organs) of our bodies insofar the exercise of such powers essentially involves (and hence is mediated by) a change in these corresponding organs, whereas our intellectual

adding that this interpretation is not just exegetically well-supported but intuitively much more plausible than the alternative interpretation, for the alternative interpretation (on which Aquinas believes that our souls think) saddles him either with the deeply counterintuitive view that that within each human person there is more than one thinker (*viz.*, the person and her soul) or with the nonsensical view that we ourselves (human persons) don't in fact think but only have souls which do.<sup>51</sup>

Some readers may wonder how this discussion fits into the controversy surrounding Aquinas's views on the post-mortem survival of human souls. Aquinas holds that, after a human person's death and the separation of her soul from her body, something can and does think, will, and engage in whatever other operations don't essentially depend on the soul's informing a body. In fact, when discussing the afterlife, Aquinas speaks not only of disembodied acts of thinking and willing but also post-mortem experiences of rewards (in Heaven), trials (in Purgatory), and punishment (in Hell) as well as post-mortem acts of intercessory prayer. But what is this disembodied something which thinks, wills, experiences, and prays after the person's death? Proponents of what is often-called the "Corruptionist interpretation" maintain that Aquinas holds that human persons are essentially embodied and hence cannot survive the separation of their souls from their bodies; when human persons die, their souls survive, but they themselves, the persons, cease to exist (until their eventual bodily resurrection). For this reason, Corruptionists maintain that Aquinas's belief is that *one's separated soul* is what thinks, wills, experiences, and prays during the interim period between one's death and one's bodily resurrection. By contrast, proponents of the "Survivalist interpretation" claim that, though Aquinas thinks our bodies are part of our natures as human beings, we human persons can nonetheless exist without being embodied and hence survive the separation of our souls from our bodies. On this interpretation, what thinks, wills, experiences, and prays during the interim period is the same human person who thinks, will, experiences, etc. prior to death; at death, that person simply becomes disembodied, *i.e.*, a supposit with a soul but no body informed by that soul.<sup>52</sup>

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powers can be said to be "in" the soul insofar as the exercise of those powers does *not* essentially involve (and hence is not mediated by) any such change in a corresponding part (or organ) of the body. This aligns with Aquinas's reasoning in texts like *ST* I.77.5 and *CT* I.89, where Aquinas explains that the powers of intellect and will are "in the soul as their subject" because the operations of these powers can be "carried out without a corporeal organ." If in saying that these powers are "in the soul as their subject" Aquinas meant that the soul itself thinks and wills, then this inference would be a *non sequitur*: the alleged fact that an operation (*e.g.*, thinking) can be carried out without a corporeal organ, provides on its own no reason to think that that operation, which we know we ourselves perform and intuitively believe nothing else performs, is performed by one's soul.

<sup>51</sup>For further discussion of this point, see Hauser, "Persons, Souls and Life After Death."

<sup>52</sup>For pro-Corruptionist arguments, see Toner, "Personhood and Death in St. Thomas Aquinas;" Toner, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Death and the Separated Soul;" Nevitt, "Aquinas on the Death of Christ"; and Nevitt, "Survivalism vs. Corruptionism." For pro-Survivalist

What is relevant to this article is the fact that proponents of the Corruptionist interpretation are committed to thinking that Aquinas, despite affirming and never qualifying or rejecting the *actiones sunt suppositorum* principle, nonetheless countenances separated souls which think, will, etc. and yet are not suppositis. Because the literature here is vast and comprises numerous exegetical arguments on both sides, I cannot take up a serious discussion of this issue here. Instead, I simply note that I believe that a fair appraisal of all the evidence favors the Survivalist interpretation.<sup>53</sup> Of course, those who disagree with me about this will see the case of the separated soul as a counterexample to my claim that Aquinas holds that only persons, i.e., suppositis of a rational nature, can think, will, and, in general, engage in the operations proper to a rational nature. Given this, it is worth emphasizing that I have shown (in §4 above) that there is direct evidence that Aquinas applies the *actiones sunt suppositorum* principle to the case of the Incarnation, maintaining that only the incarnate supposit/person, Christ, and not his human nature, thinks, wills, senses and, in general, performs his human operations. I also showed that there is also strong evidence that Aquinas holds that Christ's human nature is related to his human operations as a principle of those operations rather than as an agent of those operations. The upshot of this is that, even if one should believe that the Corruptionist interpretation is the correct interpretation of Aquinas's position on separated souls, this would neither undermine the previous section's argument against the mereological interpretation of Aquinas's position on the Incarnation nor undermine the arguments developed hereafter (in §§6–7) on behalf of an alternative interpretation of Aquinas's response to the coherence objection.

#### 6. A Non-Mereological Account of Christ's Human and Divine Operations

I observed in §2 that Aquinas's general answer to the coherence objection is to invoke the patristic idea that though "it is impossible that opposites are predicated of the same thing in respect to the same thing. . . nothing prohibits that they be predicated [of the same thing] in respect to different things."<sup>54</sup> But though Aquinas thinks that every putative case of Christological incoherence can be addressed by distinguishing the nature "in respect to which" (*secundum quid*) divine things are predicated of Christ from the nature "in respect to which" human things are predicated of Christ, there is no reason to suppose that Aquinas thinks each *secundum quid* specification ought to be understood in the same way regardless of

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arguments, see Stump, "Resurrection and the Separated Soul" and Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, ch.13. References to other authors engaged in this exegetical dispute can be found in these works.

<sup>53</sup>Brower's defense of the Survivalist position, which includes responses to several pro-Corruptionist arguments, is especially persuasive. See Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, ch.13.

<sup>54</sup>ST III.16.4.ad1.

the predicate being specified. To see this, consider, for example, the following non-Christological assertions:

- (1) The house is well-designed in some respects, but not others: the kitchen is great, but the bathrooms need a lot of work.
- (2) Sam is both skilled and unskilled: he is skilled at cooking, but not at golf.

In (1), the speaker specifies the respects in which the house is well-designed and not well-designed by specifying which parts of the house are well-designed and which are not. By contrast, in (2) the speaker doesn't specify the respects in which Sam is both skilled and unskilled by specifying parts of Sam which are skilled and parts of Sam which are unskilled; instead, she does so by specifying activities at which Sam is skilled and activities at which Sam is unskilled. In general, the respects in which a predication can be qualified vary from predicate to predicate.

Given this, rather than assume that Aquinas thinks every Christological predication involving a *secundum quid* specification should be understood in the same way (e.g., in the mereological way), we should instead take each predication case by case and consider how the modifier "in respect to his human (or divine) nature" is functioning in that particular case. In this section, I discuss Aquinas's account of Christ's divine and human operations and the way in which the *secundum quid* modifier functions in predications involving Christ's operations, e.g., predications like "Christ is omnipotent in respect to his divine nature and yet limited in power in respect to his human nature," "Christ comprehends the divine essence in respect to his divine nature and yet does not comprehend the divine essence in respect to his human nature," and so on.

We have seen that Aquinas thinks that natures are related to actions/operations as principles of those actions/operations, not as agents of those actions/operations. Given this, when Aquinas speaks of a supposit like Christ operating "in respect to *n*" (*secundum n*), the "*secundum n*" should be understood as specifying a *principle by which* the supposit so operates (and not, as the mereological interpretation maintains, *a part which so operates in its own right*). In other words,

- (A1) For any supposit *x*, operation  $\phi$ , and nature *n*, *x*  $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) in respect to *n* (*secundum n*) iff *n* is a principle by which *x*  $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ).

Thus, for example, Christ suffers (or can suffer) in respect to his human nature iff Christ's human nature is a principle by which Christ suffers (or can suffer).

But what is it for something to be a principle by which (*per quod, quo*) a supposit operates (or can operate)? Aquinas discusses three cases of such principles. First, Aquinas calls a *capacity* which something exercises when it acts/operates in a certain way "a principle" of its so acting/operating. For example, Aquinas maintains that a person's sensory powers (e.g., sight, hearing, etc.) are principles of her acts of sensation (her acts of seeing, hearing, etc.); similarly, a person's intellect (or capacity for thinking) is a

principle of her acts of thinking.<sup>55</sup> Second, Aquinas also refers to things' forms as "principles" of their operations. For example, Aquinas calls fire's heat (a certain accidental form) a principle of its action of heating and fire's lightness (another accidental form) a principle of its moving upwards. Finally, as I observed in §4, Aquinas also refers to the *natures* of suppositas as "principles" of their operations. These three different cases of principles can be unified in the following way: some  $y$  is a principle by which  $x$  can  $\phi$  iff  $x$  can  $\phi$  by exercising  $y$  (if  $y$  is a capacity) or by exercising the capacities which  $x$  has in virtue of having  $y$  (if  $y$  is a form or nature). Hence, we can make (A1) more precise by replacing it with (A2):

(A2) For any supposit  $x$ , operation  $\phi$ , and nature  $n$ ,  $x$   $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) in respect to  $n$  (*secundum n*) iff  $x$   $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) by exercising the capacities which  $x$  has in virtue of having  $n$ .

A correlative analysis should be given for the claim that a supposit does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  in respect to a nature  $n$  (*secundum n*):

(A3) For any supposit  $x$ , operation  $\phi$ , and nature  $n$ ,  $x$  does not  $\phi$  (or cannot  $\phi$ ) in respect to  $n$  (*secundum n*) iff it is not the case that  $x$   $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) by exercising the capacities which  $x$  has in virtue of having  $n$ .

Given this analysis of the relevant predications, we can now understand Aquinas's way of resolving alleged cases of incoherence involving Christ's operations. According to (A2) and (A3), for any operation  $\phi$ , the claim that "Christ  $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) in respect to one nature  $n$  and yet does not  $\phi$  (or cannot  $\phi$ ) in respect to another nature  $n^*$ " should be understood to mean that Christ  $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having  $n$  but does not  $\phi$  (or cannot  $\phi$ ) by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having  $n^*$ . For example, for it to be the case that *Christ suffers in respect to his human nature and yet cannot suffer in respect to his divine nature* is for it to be the case that *Christ suffers by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having a human nature and yet cannot suffer by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having a divine nature*. Likewise, for it to be the case that *Christ is omnipotent, i.e., can produce any possible effect, in respect to his divine nature and yet also limited in power, i.e., cannot produce any possible effect, in respect to his human nature* is for it to be the case that *Christ can produce any possible effect by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having a divine nature and yet cannot produce any possible effect by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having a human nature*.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup>CT I.212.

<sup>56</sup>This analysis is fully consistent with Aquinas's "concretism," that is, his claim that Christ assumes a particular human nature, distinct from the human natures of other human beings, composed of a particular human body and a particular subsistent soul (see, e.g., ST III.2.5, ST III.4.4, ST III.4.5, SCG IV.39, and SCG IV.44). Moreover, this analysis is also fully consistent with the idea that many or all of Christ's human operations essentially involve certain processes or changes which take place in Christ's assumed concrete human nature (or the parts thereof). For example, just as an ordinary human person's seeing (i.e., exercising



Are such states of affairs coherent? It would seem so. Just as there is no incoherence in Socrates being such that he cannot see by exercising his power of hearing but can see by exercising his power of sight, likewise there is no incoherence in Christ's being such that he cannot suffer the pain of crucifixion by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having a divine nature and yet can suffer the pain of crucifixion by exercising capacities which he has in virtue of having a human nature.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, just as there is nothing impossible about a state of affairs in which a blind person can perceive a shape by touch which she cannot perceive by sight, likewise there's nothing impossible in it being the case that Christ can comprehend the divine essence by exercising his divine intellect (his divine capacity to understand) and yet cannot comprehend the divine essence by exercising his human intellect (his human capacity to understand).<sup>58</sup>

As these examples illustrate, the fact that something does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  by exercising one capacity does not entail that it does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  by exercising another capacity. And so, if a thing has two natures, the fact that it does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  by exercising the capacities which it has in virtue of having one nature does not imply that it does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  by exercising the capacities it has in virtue of having its other nature. In other words, given the analysis in (A2) and (A3), an  $x$ 's being such that  $x$  does not  $\phi$  (or cannot  $\phi$ ) in respect to its nature  $n$  does not entail  $x$  has no other nature  $n^*$  such that  $x$   $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) in respect to  $n^*$ . Nor does it entail that  $x$  does not  $\phi$  (or cannot  $\phi$ ).<sup>59</sup> For this reason, there is no incoherence in its being both the case that (i)  $x$  does not  $\phi$  (or cannot  $\phi$ ) in respect to some  $n$  and that (ii)  $x$  does  $\phi$  (or can  $\phi$ ) in respect to some  $n^*$ , provided that  $n \neq n^*$ . What would be incoherent, given the analyses of (A2) and (A3), would be an individual who both  $\phi$ s and does not  $\phi$  (or both can  $\phi$  and cannot  $\phi$ ) in respect to the same  $n$ . This fits with Aquinas's general claim that "[though]

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her human capacity to see, which she has in virtue of having her human nature) essentially involves her eyes or visual organ undergoing a certain change (see n.50 above), likewise Christ's seeing (i.e., exercising the power to see that he has in virtue of having a human nature) also essentially involves Christ's eyes (parts of his concrete human nature) undergoing a certain change. In general, Aquinas's claim that Christ (the incarnate supposit or person) alone, and not his human nature, performs his human operations is fully consistent with his view that many or all of these human operations essentially involve certain processes or changes that take place in Christ's concrete human nature (or, more accurately, in various parts of that concrete human nature).

<sup>57</sup>For Aquinas's use of an analogy along these very lines, see *De Unione* 5.c.

<sup>58</sup>See *ST* III.10.1.

<sup>59</sup>In other words, given the analysis in (A3), the *secundum quid ad simpliciter* inference from  $x$  does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  *secundum*  $n$  to  $x$  does not (or cannot)  $\phi$  is invalid: if something does not (or cannot) do some action by one principle, it doesn't follow that it does not (or cannot) do it; after all, there might be some other principle by which it does (or can do) it. On the other hand, given the analysis in (A2), the *secundum quid ad simpliciter* inference from  $x$   $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) *secundum*  $n$  to  $x$   $\phi$ s (or can  $\phi$ ) is valid: if something does (or can do) something by one principle, then it does (or can do) it.

it is impossible that opposites are predicated of the same thing in respect to the same thing. . . nothing prohibits that they be predicated [of the same thing] in respect to different things."<sup>60</sup>

Some readers may worry that this response to the coherence objection works only given an unduly weak account of the attributes proper to God and to a human being. Consider, for example, the case of Christ's passibility and impassibility: on the proposed account, Christ is "impassible" only in the sense that he cannot suffer by exercising a capacity which he has in virtue of having a divine nature. One might object that it is proper to God to be impassible in a stronger sense: anything that is God, one might claim, can in no way suffer, whether by exercising a human capacity or by exercising a divine capacity. Similarly, consider the case of Christ's omnipotence and limited power: on the proposed account, Christ is "limited in power" only in the sense that he cannot bring about any effect by exercising the capacities which he has in virtue of having a human nature. Again, one might object that it is proper to a human being to be "limited in power" in a stronger sense: anything that is a human being, one might claim, must be incapable of bringing about certain effects.

Since my aim is to explicate Aquinas's view, not fully defend it, I will not attempt to fully address this concern here. Still, I think Aquinas is in a good position to answer these objections. As Aquinas sees it, impassibility is attributable to God because God has a divine nature which is pure actuality and hence provides him with no passive potency, i.e., no capacity to be acted upon.<sup>61</sup> But it doesn't follow from the fact that it is essential to being God to have a divine nature which provides no capacity to be acted upon that it is impossible for anything which is God to be acted upon (and, in particular, to be acted upon in a way which causes or constitutes an experience of suffering). Instead, it only follows that anything which is *merely* God, i.e., has only a divine nature, cannot be acted upon (as long as it is *merely* God). Similar, on Aquinas's view, a human being is limited in power only because the capacities which it has in virtue of having a human nature are limited (e.g., one cannot create *ex nihilo* by exercising any power had in virtue of having a human nature). It follows that anything which is *merely* human, i.e., has only a human nature, is not omnipotent (as long as it is *merely* human). But it doesn't follow that anything which is human is not omnipotent.<sup>62</sup> Similar responses could be given to worries about other cases, e.g., omniscience and limited knowledge.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>ST III.16.4.ad1.

<sup>61</sup>See, e.g., SCG I.16.

<sup>62</sup>A similar distinction between what is essential to being human and what is essential to being *merely* human is defended in Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, 65–67.

<sup>63</sup>One reader has questioned whether the view proposed here differs significantly from the "Thomistic" solution to the coherence problem Gorman develops as an alternative to the mereological interpretation of Aquinas (see Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, 152ff). Both Gorman's "Thomistic" solution and the view I ascribe to Aquinas involve accepting a distinction between what follows from something's being *merely* God (or

7. *A Non-Mereological Account of Christ's Immutability, Mutability, Temporality, and Eternality*

In this section, I move on to discuss alleged cases of Christological incoherence which do not involve Christ's operations. In particular, I'll focus on two central such cases, namely, the case of Christ's immutability and mutability and the case of Christ's temporality and eternity. Again, when offering his general answer to the coherence objection, Aquinas does not specify what he means when he says that the relevant divine attributes (viz., immutability and eternity) are predicated of Christ *in respect to his divine nature* while the relevant human attributes (viz., mutability and temporality) are predicated of Christ *in respect to his human nature*. Still, as in the case of Christ's operations, there are other texts which shed light on how Aquinas thinks such *secundum quid* modifiers can function to specify predications of mutability, immutability, temporality, and eternity. In particular, these texts provide strong evidence that Aquinas would again favor a non-mereological way of understanding of these modifiers, albeit one differing from the non-mereological way he understands such modifiers when they are used to qualify predications involving operations. (Again, rather than assume that Aquinas thinks every predication involving a *secundum quid* specification should be understood in the same way (e.g., in the mereological way, or in the operational way discussed in the previous section), we should instead take each such predication case by case and consider texts which can tell us how Aquinas thinks the *secundum quid* modifier functions to specify the predication in that particular case).

Let's start with the claim that Christ is immutable in respect to his divine nature but mutable in respect to his human nature. We can get a good grip on how Aquinas thinks the *secundum quid* modifier functions in these Christological cases by considering other, non-Christological cases in which Aquinas speaks of something being mutable or immutable in a certain respect (*secundum quid*). Consider, for example, Aquinas's discussion in *ST* I.9.2.c, where he writes,

in every creature there is a potentiality to change either in respect to its substantial being (*secundum esse substantiale*), as in the case of corruptible things; or in respect to its location only (*secundum locale tantum*), as in the case of the celestial bodies; or in respect to its ordination to its end and the application of its power to different objects (*secundum ordinem ad finem et applicationem virtutis ad diversa*), as in the case of the angels.

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*merely* human) and what follows from something's being God (or human). Beyond this, however, there is little in common between our two views. Here is an example which illustrates this: on Gorman's analysis, the claim that *Christ can suffer in respect to his humanity* does not entail that Christ can suffer but only that (i) Christ is human and (ii) if Christ is *merely* human then Christ can suffer. By contrast, on the analysis I attribute to Aquinas, the claim that *Christ can suffer in respect to his humanity* entails that Christ can suffer (see note 59 above).

When Aquinas claims here that a celestial body is mutable “in respect to its location” (*secundum locale*), the modifier “in respect to its location” (*secundum locale*) does not specify a part of the celestial body which can change in its own right, in virtue of having which the celestial body can change in a derivative way. Instead, the modifier “in respect to its location” (*secundum locale*) specifies which of the celestial body’s features are such that whether it has that feature can change; to be mutable *secundum locale* is to be such that where one is located can change. Similarly, when Aquinas says that corruptible things are mutable “in respect to their substantial being” (*secundum substantiale esse*), his point is not that a corruptible thing is derivatively mutable in virtue of having a constituent, viz., its substantial *esse*, which is mutable in its own right; rather, his point is that whether a corruptible thing has its substantial being (i.e., exists) can change.

In other words, there is direct textual evidence that Aquinas thinks that one way to specify “in respect to what” (*secundum quid*) a thing is mutable or immutable is to specify features of the thing such that whether the thing has those features can or cannot change. Furthermore, unlike in the case of a color predicate like “is white,” where Aquinas thinks one can specify the respect in which something is white by specifying which part of it is white, there is no textual evidence that Aquinas thinks one way to specify the respect in which something is mutable or immutable is to specify which of its parts are mutable or immutable. Given this, when Aquinas speaks of Christ being “mutable in respect to his human nature (*secundum humanam naturam*)” and yet “immutable in respect to his divine nature (*secundum divinam naturam*),” we should not understand him to be specifying which part or constituent of Christ can change and which cannot. Rather, we should understand him to be specifying the features of Christ such that whether he has those features can change and the features of Christ such that whether he has those features cannot change.

More precisely, when Aquinas speaks of Christ’s being “immutable in respect to his divine nature,” we should understand the *secundum quid* specification as limiting Christ’s immutability to certain features, viz., those which pertain his divine nature.<sup>64</sup> Thus, for example, whether Christ is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, or has any other feature which pertains to his divinity cannot change. Similarly, when Aquinas speaks of Christ’s being “mutable in respect to his human nature,” we should understand the *secundum quid* specification as limiting Christ’s mutability to certain features, viz., features which pertain to his human nature. Thus, for example, like any other human being, whether Christ is hot, hungry, perceiving something, experiencing pain, etc. can change.

How does this help address the putative incoherence in the claim that Christ is both immutable and mutable? The key is that there is no

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<sup>64</sup>By the features which “pertain to a nature,” I mean the features which something has or can have because it has that nature. For Aquinas’s talk of such features, see *ST* III.16.4.c; *SCG* IV.34.2; *SCG* IV.34.6; and *CT* I.211.

incoherence in an individual being such that whether it has certain features can change and yet also such that whether it has certain *other* features cannot change. On Aquinas's view, a celestial body, for example, is such that where it is located can change but whether it exists cannot change.<sup>65</sup> If one says that a celestial body is both immutable and mutable without specifying the respects in which it is mutable and immutable, one may appear to have said something incoherent. However, one can dissolve the appearance of incoherence by specifying that the celestial body is immutable in respect to its substantial being (*secundum substantiale esse*) but mutable in respect to its location (*secundum locale*), i.e., by specifying that what cannot change is whether the celestial body exists and that what can change is where it is located. Likewise, the seeming incoherence in the underspecified claim that Christ is both immutable and mutable is dissolved by specifying that Christ is immutable *in respect to his divine nature* (*secundum divinam naturam*) and mutable *in respect to his human nature* (*secundum humanam naturam*), i.e., by specifying that what cannot change is whether Christ has the features which pertain to his divine nature and that what can change is whether Christ has the features which pertain to his human nature.

Importantly, like §6's analysis of the *secundum quid* predications involving Christ's operations, the analysis offered here also fits Aquinas's general claim that "[though] it is impossible that opposites are predicated of the same thing in respect to the same thing. . . nothing prohibits that they be predicated [of the same thing] in respect to different things."<sup>66</sup> Given the analysis proposed here, it is impossible for something to be mutable and immutable in respect to the same nature but possible for something to be mutable and immutable in respect to different natures.

So much for the case of Christ's immutability and mutability. What of the claim that Christ is both temporal in respect to his human nature and yet eternal in respect to his divine nature? Though Aquinas does not discuss these particular predications in detail, he does discuss a closely related pair of predications, viz., the claim that Christ both "began to be" and "did not begin to be." In *ST* III.16.9.c, Aquinas says that if "nothing [i.e., no specification] is added" to the claim that Christ began to be, i.e., if the claim is that Christ began to exist (rather than that Christ began to be *F*, for some *F*), it is false: Christ, an uncreated divine person, did not begin to exist but rather exists eternally. On the other hand, Aquinas observes, if some specification is added to (or implicitly understood in) the claim "Christ began to be" so that the claim is not that *Christ began to exist* but instead that *Christ began to be F*, then the claim need not be false since, for various *F*, it is the case that Christ began to be *F*. For example, as Aquinas

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<sup>65</sup>More carefully, whether a celestial body exists cannot change *by any creaturely power*. God created it and has the power to annihilate it, and hence in this sense even whether it exists (i.e., has its substantial *esse*) is mutable (see *ST* I.9.2.c).

<sup>66</sup>*ST* III.16.4.ad1.

notes in his replies to the second and third objections, it is true that Christ began to be human.<sup>67</sup> In short, Aquinas addresses the seeming incoherence in the claim that Christ both began to be and did not begin to be by specifying what Christ began to be (e.g., he began to be human, he began to experience suffering, etc.) and distinguishing this from what Christ did not begin to be (e.g., he did not begin to exist, he did not begin to be omniscient, etc.).

Given the close connection Aquinas draws elsewhere between not beginning to be and being eternal and between beginning to be and being temporal, it is reasonable to think Aquinas would address the seeming incoherence in the claim that Christ is both eternal and temporal in a similar way.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Aquinas's idea is not, as proponents of the mereological interpretation claim, that Christ is temporal only derivatively, in virtue of having a human nature which is temporal in its own right, and eternal only derivatively, in virtue of having a divine nature which is eternal in its own right. Rather, Aquinas's strategy is to distinguish those features which Christ has temporally (*viz.*, features pertaining to his human nature) from those features which Christ has eternally (*viz.*, features pertaining to his divine nature). Put more precisely, when Aquinas says that Christ is "temporal in respect to his human nature" and yet also "eternal in respect to his divine nature," we should interpret these predications as follows:

(A4) Christ is temporal in respect to a nature *n* (*secundum naturam n*) iff for any feature which pertains to *n*, if Christ has that feature, Christ has it temporally.

(A5) Christ is eternal in respect to a nature *n* (*secundum naturam n*) iff for any feature which pertains to *n*, if Christ has that feature, Christ has it eternally.

Just as there is no incoherence in something being such that there are certain features such that whether it has those features can change and certain other features such that whether it has these latter features cannot change, likewise there is no incoherence in something being such that there are certain features which it has temporally and certain other features which it has eternally. What *would* be incoherent would be a state of affairs in which a thing has the same feature both eternally and temporally. (Notice that, again, this analysis fits Aquinas's claim that "[though] it is impossible that opposites are predicated of the same thing in respect to the same thing. . . nothing prohibits that they be predicated [of the same thing] in respect to different things").<sup>69</sup>

To complete the analysis, we need to unpack what it is to have a feature "temporally" or "eternally." On Aquinas view, whatever occurs in

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<sup>67</sup>See also QQ 9.2.ad3.

<sup>68</sup>For this connection, see ST I.10.1 and ST I.10.2.

<sup>69</sup>ST III.16.4.ad1.

time stands in relations of “before” and “after” to other states of affairs.<sup>70</sup> Hence, for something to have a feature temporally is for the state of affairs of it having that feature to occur earlier than or later than other states of affairs. Thus, for example, the event of Christ’s suffering on the Cross occurs after various other events (such as his having the Last Supper with his disciples) and before various other events (such as his bodily resurrection). By contrast, for Aquinas, whatever is eternal occurs neither earlier than nor later than anything else and is “interminable,” i.e., without beginning or end.<sup>71</sup> Thus, for example, Christ’s existing, being omnipotent, and having any other feature which pertains to his divine nature occurs neither earlier nor later than anything else and is without beginning or end. In short, taking into account Aquinas’s views on time and eternity, we can reformulate (A4) and (A5) as follows:

(A6) Christ is temporal in respect to a nature *n* (*secundum naturam n*) iff for any feature which pertains to *n*, if Christ has that feature, the state of affairs of his having it occurs earlier than or later than other states of affairs.

(A7) Christ is eternal in respect to a nature *n* (*secundum naturam n*) iff for any feature which pertains to *n*, if Christ has that feature, the state of affairs of his having it (a) occurs neither earlier than nor later than any other state of affairs and (b) is without beginning or end.

In Aquinas’s ontology there are no ordinary cases in which something has some features eternally and other features temporally. But there is something analogous which Aquinas *does* think holds in ordinary cases. For example, on Aquinas’s view, a celestial body exists for all time but does not have its present location for all time.<sup>72</sup> Analogously, Christ has certain features (viz., those which pertain to his divinity) eternally but other features (viz., those which pertain to his humanity) temporally. The temporal modalities here are different, but the key point is the same: just as there is nothing incoherent in an individual having some features for its whole duration and other features for only a part of that duration, likewise there is nothing incoherent in Christ having some features (viz., his divine features) eternally and other features (viz., his human features) temporally.

Is this an adequate response to the alleged incoherence in attributing to Christ both divine immutability and human mutability, or both divine eternity and human temporality? Again, one might worry that the proposal discussed here only works given an unduly weak account of the attributes in question (in this case, divine immutability and eternity). For example, one might claim that to be God something must be *altogether* immutable, i.e., such that for any of its features, whether it has that feature

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<sup>70</sup>See *ST* I.10.1 and *ST* I.10.4.

<sup>71</sup>See *ST* I.10.1.c.

<sup>72</sup>See *ST* I.10.5.c.

cannot change, and *altogether* eternal, i.e., such that for any of its features, it has that feature eternally.

Since this article's aim is correct our interpretation of Aquinas's response to the coherence objection, not defend that response as wholly adequate, I will not attempt to offer a detailed response to this concern here. However, I will say this much in defense of Aquinas's view: his proposal is strong enough to be consistent with the idea that it belongs to the perfection of God to have whatever attributes pertain to divinity (e.g., existence, omniscience, omnipotence, perfect goodness, etc.) immutably and eternally. Does divine perfection require anything more? I for one doubt that it does and indeed have defended such a position elsewhere.<sup>73</sup>

### 8. Concluding Remarks

I have offered what I take to be a decisive exegetical argument against the dominant, mereological interpretation of Aquinas's solution to the coherence objection. I then proposed a new alternative interpretation of Aquinas's response to that objection, focusing on his account of the coherence of attributing to Christ both divine and human operations, mutability and immutability, and temporality and eternity. There are, of course, other cases of allegedly incompatible divine and human attributes (e.g., divine infinitude and human finitude), but I leave discussion of these other, less central cases for another time.

Instead, I conclude by drawing attention to a point of broader significance both for work on the history of the concept of the person and for contemporary discussions of the Incarnation. In the course of presenting my challenge to the mereological interpretation in §4, I noted that Richard Cross and Timothy Pawl, two leading contributors to philosophical discussions of the Incarnation, have claimed that, in general, patristic and medieval authors (including Aquinas) employed a concept of a person according to which something can be an individual which can think, will, love, and, in general, do all the things that a human person can do and yet not be a person. In fact, Richard Cross has gone so far as to claim that

any orthodox Christology would have to accept some form of this distinction—such that it would be true to state that the ultimate metaphysical subject of characteristics cannot be simply identified with the psychological centre of rational and sensitive experience. . . . to talk of a psychological centre of consciousness is, in an orthodox Christology, to talk of what pertains to nature, not to person.<sup>74</sup>

In a similar vein, Timothy Pawl writes,

if one defines "person" . . . to mean "something with the ability to perform some rational activities," where rational activities might include acts of

<sup>73</sup>See Hauser, "On Being Human and Divine," 27–28.

<sup>74</sup>Cross, "Nature and Personality in the Incarnation," 250–251. See also Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 220.



intellection or rational desire. . . then, the definition of "person" is apt of the (concrete) human nature of Christ, according to Conciliar Christology.<sup>75</sup>

I have argued here that Aquinas, one of the most influential exponents of orthodox, conciliar Christology, does not hold this view. On Aquinas's view, only persons, i.e., supposit/hypostases of a rational nature, can think, will, love, and, in general, perform the operations proper to rational nature. Indeed, for this very reason, Aquinas rejects the idea which the aforementioned scholars claim was commonplace, viz., that Christ's human nature, though not a hypostasis/supposit or person, is nonetheless a thing which can think, will, love, and, in general, do what human persons can do. Whether Aquinas's position is in fact an outlier among medieval and patristic authors is a question that I believe is worth further investigation. In fact, in another article for this journal, I have already contributed to this effort by arguing that the main conciliar and patristic texts cited by Pawl and Cross do not in fact support their claims about the conception of personhood at play in orthodox, conciliar Christology.<sup>76,77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology*, 214; see also 33.

<sup>76</sup>See Hauser, "On Being Human and Divine," §4.

<sup>77</sup>I owe thanks to Dean Zimmerman, Jeff Brower, participants in the Rutgers Center for Philosophy of Religion Reading Group, and two anonymous referees for their very helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

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