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Theological Epistemology and Trinitarian Ontology in Aquinas

Epistemologia teologiczna i ontologia trynitarna u Akwinaty

Abstract: Thomas Aquinas' theological epistemology is presented as a response to an aporia of classical metaphysical thought, which affirmed the relationality of the *episteme* but denied that of the First Principle. The path that led from a cause to another cause down to the ultimate cause thus remains without a true foundation. On the contrary, the Trinitarian ontology developed by the Fathers of the Church allowed Aquinas to recognize the foundation of the *episteme* with its immanent relationality of the triune God. This emerges from his rereading of John Damascene and from how Thomas – contrary to what happened in the thought of Boethius and Richard of Saint Victor – reworked the concept of person so that it could be applied both to man and to God. The very analysis of the act of faith and the rereading of the name *Verbum* in an exclusively notional sense reveal how Thomas developed a true Trinitarian epistemology as a reflection of his Trinitarian ontology.

Keywords: epistemology, Thomas Aquinas, trinitarian ontology, relation, faith–reason

Abstrakt: Epistemologia teologiczna Tomasza z Akwinu została przedstawiona jako odpowiedź na aporię klasycznej myśli metafizycznej, która potwierdzała relacyjność *episteme*, ale zaprzeczała Pierwszej Zasadzie. Droga, która prowadziła poprzez przyczyny do przyczyny ostatecznej, pozostawała bez fundamentu. W przeciwieństwie do tego, ontologia trynitarna rozwinięta przez Ojców Kościoła pozwoliła Akwinowi na uznanie fundamentu *episteme* wraz z jego relacyjnością w immanentnej relacji Boga Trójjedynego. Wynika to z ponownego odczytania Jana Damasceńskiego i z tego, że Tomasz – w przeciwieństwie do tego, co działo się w myśli Boecjusza i Ryszarda od św. Wiktora – zmienił pojęcie osoby tak, aby mogło być zastosowane zarówno do człowieka, jak i do Boga. Już sama analiza aktu wiary, a także ponowne odczytanie imienia *Verbum* w wyłącznym sensie pojęciowym ujawniają, jak Tomasz rozwinął prawdziwą trynitarną epistemologię jako odzwierciedlenie swojej trynitarnej ontologii

Słowa kluczowe: epistemologia, Tomasz z Akwinu, ontologia trynitarna, relacja, rozum–wiara

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Introduction

Since the beginning of Christian thought the epistemological dimension has been at the centre of dialogue with non-believers. It was not only a question of theoretical research, but above all it was an existential issue, as demonstrated by the works of the apologists. For them, the confrontation with the philosophical dimension was literally a matter of life or death. Were Christians "atheists" because they rejected the pantheon of the empire? Or polytheists because they spoke of three divine Persons? And were their angels not analogous to pagan gods? Why did their life clash radically with the *religio civilis*, to the extreme of martyrdom? Did faith not reduce everything to a superstition that had nothing to do with the scientific research of great metaphysicians?

These questions were gradually made explicit and addressed in the dialogue – at times even dramatic – that the Fathers of the Church carried out both *ad extra* and *ad intra*. In order to understand the strength of their proposal and the legacy on which Thomas built, it is necessary to start from one observation: in Greek thought the definition of the philosophical enterprise as a reconstruction of the necessary chain which leads to the ultimate cause encountered a checkmate. In fact, the episteme is defined precisely by this research which carried out through the intellect goes back little by little from the world towards the first principle, connected in a single finite and eternal ontological order. Think of the construction of the Aristotelian motors that lead to pure divine actuality of the unmoved motor as thought of thought. The epistemological roots are already constituted in Plato and in his answer to Parmenides, formulated in the *Sophist*. What is not Being is not necessarily not-being because there is the possibility of being something through participation while not identifying with the metaphysical purity of Being itself. Thus, the relationship between the one and the many goes through the whole search of human thought, as it refers to the existential, and therefore also religious, question of how to be and live in fullness.

The Aristotelian formulation, with its clarity, reveals an aporia. In fact, the Stagirite in his work of metaphysical purification arrives at identifying the first principle with the thought that thinks itself and, for this reason, is not related to anything, nor desires anything. It is an image of an autarchic and anorexic god, which, however, goes through a crisis precisely when confronted with the epistemic dimension. By definition science must belong to the relative because it refers to a known object and can be taught.[1] Instead, thought is not relative to

[1] Cf. Aristotle, *Caegoriae*, 6b.5.

what is thought,[2] just as the first principle is not relational because the relation is an accident and, therefore, cannot be a pure act.

This is a constant in Greek metaphysical thought, as shown by the chain of "friends" introduced by Plato in his *Lysis*, where the aporetic leap is highlighted by the passage from the friend of the friend to the first friend. If I am a friend of wisdom it is because I participate in the friendship of another who is a closer friend than I am, so that I can learn from him. This greater friend of wisdom in turn will depend on the participation of another friend, from whom he has learned, and so on until the first friend who learns from no one, but only teaches. The relationality of the first friends is denied in the principle that originates with them, which, precisely because he is the first, contradicts his own name of friend. Thus, the last passage poses a discontinuity that puts in crisis the whole construction, which cannot continue indefinitely because the only metaphysical order that includes the world and God is for the Greeks finite.

The epistemological consequences are serious because the first principle, although necessarily connected to man, is different, equivocal with the search of the thought. In some way the Plotinus' outcome is here already implicit as he places the One beyond thought and the *logos*, precisely because the *logos*, which refers to a thinker or a speaker, should be intrinsically relational. The anthropological translation of the question also highlights its relevance and practicality: man has faculties and virtues, which are for him the way of accessing being, but Being itself, that is, God, has neither faculties nor virtues because these would imply a potential dimension. Both Aristotle and Plotinus fail to safeguard man's unity because they are obliged to consider his intellect or superior soul as divine realities and not properly human. Therefore, they do not really "descend."

This is the same acute observation that María Zambrano poetically describes as the irreconcilable tension between wonder, which moves the philosophical act in its concrete and existential beginning, and the consequent overcoming and abandonment of visible reality by the intellectual man to immerse himself in the purely intelligible reality beyond the world.[3] Once again, it is relationality that is faced with a crisis in the transition to the deepest regions of being.

The epistemological consequences are dramatic, or even tragic because in the end the one and the many have not really been reconciled, as neither has the particular and the universal. Precisely from the perception of this tension the literary output of the great Greek tragedians was born who paid homage

2 Cf. idem, *Metaphysica*, 1021a.31–32.

3 Cf. M. Zambrano, *Filosofia e poesia*, Bologna 2010, pp. 39–40.

through the highest art to the victims of this clash, shrouding their humanity in the eternity of the sublime and the beautiful.

Clement of Alexandria will realize this epistemological incompleteness and will make use of it to show the scientific value of knowledge based on faith. He explicitly cites the affirmation of the relationality of the epistemology from Aristotle to show that even in his construction the principles remain indemonstrable because the first principle itself is absolute. The deepest knowledge is reached, instead, through the other, in that epistemic relation which is faith.[4]

The new metaphysical architecture

In the following centuries the Fathers of the Church, both Eastern and Western, developed the criticism of the original framework of Greek metaphysics, going so far as to reformulate the ontological question around certain principles:

1. The Triune God represents an infinite and eternal ontological order radically distinct from the finite creation and constituted in time by a free act of the Creator.
2. Thus, from a metaphysical conception characterized as a single level we move to two distinct levels, of which the first is necessary, i.e. absolute and eternal, while the second exists by participation, so that between them we find an infinite ontological gap or hiatus.
3. This induces a gnoseological reconfiguration because reality is no longer intelligible in itself, but only through its Creator, and in such a way that, since God is unknowable to man, then even the world in its truest ontological depth cannot be grasped and reduced to the conceptual dimension by the human being.

This new metaphysical architecture opens up two fundamental questions:

1. Theology cannot define God; rather, its proper domain is the relationship between God and the world.
2. Knowledge by faith is not a fallback but the only way capable of touching the depth of being because it is knowledge through relation.

Apophatism becomes, therefore, the fundamental epistemological criterion of theology, as a gnoseological reflection of the new ontological framework.

What does not seem to have been sufficiently highlighted is that the medieval project, even with its excesses,[5] was made possible precisely by this new

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4 Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, II, 4, 13,4–14,1 (SCh 38, p. 43).

5 On the diverse attempts to establish a one-to-one correspondence between divine immanence and that of man in the Trinitarian context: Cf. R.L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, Cambridge 2010.

perspective. In fact, as seen, Greek epistemological incompleteness prevented the human mind from seeing the cosmos as a whole endowed with its autonomous laws. The world was rather a degrading extension of the first principle, from which it was necessary to tear oneself away in order to ascend upwards. The abandonment of the cave to take refuge in the eidetic purity of hyperuranion, proposed by the myth of the Platonic cave, is a clear example. Here everything is finite and everything is necessarily connected, in such a way that the differentiation is only due to ontological degeneration. In a word, to be different from the first principle meant to be imperfect and incomplete. Only the renunciation of the human dimension and of one's own identity and autonomy could lead to perfection. Romano Guardini expressed the idea very well by writing that in Greek thought there was no absolute point of support (*Stützpunkt*) that could be a valid place from which to observe the cosmos in its entirety and in its relationality.[6]

The end of the patristic era led to a synthesis presented in Augustine's *De civitate Dei*[7] or John of Damascus's *De fide orthodoxa*.[8] It is no coincidence that these authors appear, respectively, about ten thousand and a thousand times in Aquinas' corpus. The bishop of Hippo, who witnessed the barbaric invasion in the western part of the empire, after having shown the way of interiority, rereads history "from within" precisely because he has an observation point outside it. The Syriac monk, within the context already marked by the confrontation with the Muslim world, therefore from a historical periphery, would write a text that can be considered inspiring for the medieval *summae*.

Paradoxically, therefore, the very perception of the absolute ontological distance between the Trinity and the world makes it possible to reread the latter as a unity and to appreciate its perfection as a creature. The point is central because the relationality of the Creator has as its effect the relationality of creation. In this way the ontological dialectic between God and the world is overcome.

Thus, thanks to the syntheses that characterize the end of the patristic era, the Middle Ages inaugurated a new unified vision of the world. If the Fathers had built a Christian culture, now an attempt is being made to build a Christian civilization in such a way that every aspect of reality naturally finds its place and its meaning in its reference to God. The phenomenon is evident when one

6 R. Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, Würzburg 1950, p. 23.

7 On Augustine's epistemology, see: L. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Cambridge 2010.

8 See, for an introduction: A. Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford 2002.

thinks of the medieval city, where everything revolves around the cathedral. The theological *Summae*, which seek the same unification, are the thought equivalent to cathedrals.

This new possibility will also involve a risk because the attempt to offer a unitary vision of the world, made possible by Christian revelation and be the point of observation it has offered, can close in on itself, in a claim to the autonomy of reason, which thus loses the relationship that finds the strength of its epistemology.

Vladimir Solovyov, in his doctoral thesis published in 1874 and entitled *The Crisis of Western Philosophy*,[9] diachronically reads medieval thought from the double Augustinian category of *auctoritas* and *ratio*: the former represents the tradition and teaching of the Church, while the latter refers to the thought of the individual subject. As can be seen immediately, once again the question revolves around the relationship between the one and the many. At first the primacy was assigned to *auctoritas*, since the *ratio* had to submit to the superiority of the received data. In the golden age of scholasticism, which coincides with Thomas' activity, this relationship is rebalanced because the primacy of *auctoritas* is recognized by *ratio* as authoritativeness, rather than as authority, therefore without submission. The two principles thus recall each other in a relational way because *auctoritas* founds the *ratio* and the latter expresses itself precisely in its capacity to recognize *auctoritas*. This involved constant work to bring out the convergence of *ratio* and *auctoritas* that purified and strengthened both.

To get a better picture of it, one can think of the narrative dimension of Aquinas' *Summa*, highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre.[10] Here, Thomas does not simply demonstrate his own position, but feels a real need to ease tensions with respect to the authors who preceded him. The strength of the *sed contra* is precisely being a trace that gives the reader not only the point of arrival, but also the path made in history to reach it. This can be considered an intrinsically relational methodological element on which is also based the possibility that characterizes Thomist doctrine to be useful even where the conclusions have been questioned by subsequent research. It is, in fact, always possible to trace the theological path taken until one understands why Aquinas followed a different path at a certain crossroads.

While in the period of first scholasticism the *datum* automatically prevailed over the judgment of the *ratio*, with Thomas the centre of interest is precisely the relationship between *auctoritas* and thought, since the theological point of observation

[9] Cf. V. Solovyov, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy*, Hudson NY 1996.
[10] Cf. A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquire*, Notre Dame 1990, pp. 130–135.

of reality guarantees that the two perspectives cannot contradict each other. Research inspired by faith will better understand the data received by accepting it not as an imposition, but as a gift and foundation of one's own rational capacity.

Yet, according to Solovyov, the last part of scholasticism saw a break in this relational conception in such a way that reason itself came to be the judge of *auctoritas*, deciding what to keep and what to discard, as in the paradigmatic dynamic already present *in nuce* since *Sic et non* of Abelard, a title that means exactly "yes and no."

This outcome is made possible by the very medieval strength. In fact, the vision of the whole made possible by the perspective offered by the new Trinitarian point of view attracts reason in the enterprise of organizing everything around God, transforming the world and thought into a true icon. In order to arrange every element of society and culture around its Christological centre, thought must at times force interpretation by unconsciously jumping from the analogical dimension, which traces ontological participation at the cognitive level, to the metaphor, which instead operates at the subjective level. In the first case the relationship is highlighted *in re*, in the second – in *secundum rationem*. To give an example: in saying that a man is "as good as bread" there is a relationship between the goodness of a man and that of bread which is supposed to be more known and evident to the listener than the former. Everybody likes food as without it we cannot live. In a certain sense, there is a triangle between the two vertical and ontological relationships of bread and man with Goodness itself, that is God, as source of the goodness both in bread an in man, which as a bridge makes possible the link of the two at the level of language. Such a metaphor would not be comprehensible to an interlocutor who does not know bread, because he lives in a country where wheat does not grow but where potatoes or rice are commonly eaten.

Another liturgical example can clarify the point further. When the priest consecrates, he is Christ, ontologically, in a re-presentation in reality – and not mere representation as in a picture – of the Paschal Mystery. In the Middle Ages this coincidence between the culmination of Christ's life and the Eucharistic liturgy began to be extended to other elements, linking, for example, the priest in the sacristy with Jesus in Mary's womb. In this pious operation there is, of course, nothing wrong, but there is a substantial difference with the first because, while the Eucharistic identification is ontological and therefore not available from the point of view of the choices of the human intellect, the second identification could be realized in many different way according to the circumstances. For example, a priest who is afraid to preach could think of himself in the sacristy as Jesus in the Garden of Olives.

The point is that the desire to identify a one-to-one correspondence between that whole of life and the world perceived with the light of revelation and the very mystery that was the source of that light had unbalanced reason, leading it to overcome the limits of its own creatural being. From here began the voluntarist shift towards nominalism, which gave rise to the modern project.

The epistemological change is evident. Why does Aquinas instead remain in balance in the relationship between *auctoritas* and *ratio*? The thesis advanced here, also through some concrete examples, is that his theological epistemology is founded in a Trinitarian ontology.

Trinitarian Ontology

This term means, first of all, (a) the reinterpretation of metaphysics in the light of Trinitarian revelation to present the mystery of God. From this also comes (b) the reformulation of the relationship between God and the world, rethinking the latter from the place that Christ's revelation revealed, that is, from the bosom of the Father. In patristic terms one should speak of an original dimension of Trinitarian ontology which consists in the rethinking of metaphysics in its application to divine immanence (a), from which follows a re-understanding of the economy, that is, of the relationship between the unitary God and the world, between history and man (b).

To speak of Trinitarian ontology with regard to Aquinas is not an obvious or painless operation because several authors of Thomist circles have presented serious criticism of this approach.[11] And yet, from the Thomist realm itself, voices have been raised with respect to Trinitarian ontology itself.[12]

Perhaps it may be useful to read how Matthew Levering describes Trinitarian ontology to understand this dyscrasia: "In response to deist theological or philosophical depictions of God that make Christian revelation irrelevant,

[11] See, for example: D. Cunningham, *Participation as a Trinitarian Virtue: Challenging the Current 'Relational' Consensus*, "Toronto Journal of Theology" 14 (1998), pp. 7–25, and G. Emery, *Chronique de théologie trinitaire (V)*, "Revue Thomiste" 101 (2001), pp. 581–582, and his review to K. Obenauer, *Thomistiche Metaphysik und Trinitätstheologie: Sein-Geist-Gott-Dreifaltigkeit-Schöpfung-Gnade* (Münster 2000), in the same issue of the review, pp. 614–17.

[12] Cf. W. Norris Clarke, *Explorations in metaphysics: being-God-person*, Notre Dame 1992, and *The one and the many: a contemporary Thomistic metaphysics*, Notre Dame 2015. Interesting is also the Patristic reading in A. Lévy, *Le créé et l'incréé: Maxime le confesseur et Thomas d'Aquin: aux sources de la querelle palamienne*, Paris 2006.

Trinitarian ontology suggests that Christian revelation deconstructs and radically reconfigures any prior account of 'being' or 'God'."[13] He analyses the approach of Norris Clarke, Zizioulas and Hütter, Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran respectively, to exemplify his own definition.

Obviously, if the perspective from which one approaches Trinitarian ontology is the one just stated, the reading of the relationship of Thomas' thought with it can only be dialectical. On the contrary, if the Trinitarian light does not erase the dimension of being, but transfigures it, without ever opposing the classical substantial dimension to the Christian relational or communional one, then the perspective changes. This is what happened in the relational ontology developed by the Fathers of the Church, particularly at the level of Trinitarian doctrine in confrontation with the fourth-century Arians, but also as relational ontology which was later collected in the synthesis of the Damascene.

In other words, no one denies that Aquinas reformulated the ontology of divine immanence, developing a first sense of Trinitarian ontology as extension of classical metaphysics. The question, instead, is whether this reinterpretation has had repercussions on the declination of the divine economy. Paradoxically, some of those scholars who criticize Trinitarian ontology can be cited as masterful examples of the study of this second dimension of Thomas' thought. Gilles Emery's works are admirable and paradigmatic examples of this approach.[14] What is claimed in reference to Trinitarian ontology is that:

1. It must be understood as an extension and not a deconstruction of classical metaphysics.
2. Such extension is an inescapable task of any theological enterprise.
3. Thomas is exemplary in this, so much so that it must be proposed as an epistemological paradigm.

The strength of the Thomist construction is, in fact, precisely the capacity to assume the data of truth transmitted by the philosophical tradition, to integrate them into one's own thought thanks to the power of epistemology generated by Trinitarian revelation. The narrative dimension of his method of exposition recalls precisely that *usus iustus* which characterized the approach to the non-Christian sources of the Fathers of the Church, analysed and explained by Christian Gnilka, who recognized it in Thomas himself.[15]

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[13] M. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, Maiden 2004, p. 200.

[14] G. Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas*, Naples 2008.

[15] C. Gnilka, *Chrêsis: die Methode der Kirchenväter im Umgang mit der antiken Kultur: Der Begriff des "rechten Gebrauchs*," Basel 2012. See also: idem, *Voraussetzungslose Wissenschaft?*, "Annales Theologici" 32 (2018), pp. 301–316.

The adjective *iustus* is fundamental here because it refers to a judgment which, in the light of Christian revelation, discerns what can be kept and what must be left of the ancient heritage, as well as the context in which these previous elements can be inserted and, therefore, used. Aquinas, therefore, had to necessarily and radically change the Greek metaphysical approach, as already highlighted. In fact, Christian revelation imposes a new ontological architecture, whose development required centuries and even dramatic efforts: from a single graduated ontological level, characterized by eternity and finiteness, the Christian thinker had to switch to a picture with two levels divided by an infinite metaphysical hiatus, an ontological gap which separates the Trinity, eternal and infinite, from creation, finite and temporal.

It should be noted here that the Greek tension between the one and the many illustrated at the beginning is revealed from the ontological-trinitarian perspective already in the simple assignment to the world and to God of the attributes of eternity and finiteness. The first, in fact, says unity, while the second refers to multiplicity. The eternal return held the two dimensions together, but aporetically they remained unconnected and irreconcilable. In this sense, the Trinitarian revelation is not added from the outside as a superstructure to classical thought, nor is it dialectically opposed to it, but comes to fulfil an aspiration and an impetus that inhabited its own most intimate dynamic.

In other words, it can be said that the new theological architecture frees metaphysical thought by completing its path. For this reason, it is necessary to highlight both the continuity and the discontinuity between Thomas and the Greek heritage. For example, the five ways to prove God's existence, present in different passages of Aquinas' work and dealt with in *Summa* in STh I, 2,5, cannot be uncritically compared with similar arguments present in Aristotelian thought or more generally in ancient metaphysics. In fact, the new ontological context radically changes its meaning from *a priori* to *a posteriori*.

The meaning of a text is always given by the relationship between the text itself and its context, so the way of perfection or that of movement does not say exactly the same in a theoretical framework transfigured by the doctrine of creation compared to what happened in Aristotle's graduated metaphysics. According to Thomas it is possible to go back from creation to the Creator because the Creator put the world into being, giving it existence through a free act of love. Instead, the first motionless motor is necessarily connected to the lower motors that are moved by it.

This question is fundamental for the epistemological perspective because according to the Greek approach, being identifies with the intelligible, so much so that for Aristotle the process of abstraction is infallible. The intelligible form

is extracted from the intellect in an automatic way, while the possibility of error is only at the level of judgements, that is, it can result from the connection between the different forms. Instead, in the patristic perspective inherited by Aquinas, knowledge of both God and the world is limited by apophatism.

To know God, in fact, means to recognize His unknowability. Since it is the Trinity that creates the world, this means that the very meaning of the world and the truest depth of it cannot be drawn without faith, that is, without a sort of knowledge made possible by the personal relationship with the Creator.

From the Trinity to the World

Apophatism is precisely one of the fundamental epistemological elements that Thomas assumed from the Fathers. Leo Elders showed his points of contact with Mansūr Ibn Sarjūn, known in the West as John Damascene, which primarily concern apophatism and the affirmation of God's unknowability.[16] In this area emerges a rereading that is repeated in several points in Aquinas' thought.[17] This is the interpretation of the affirmation by this Father of the Church that the divine Persons are one, but are distinguished only by reason (*tres personae re idem sunt, ratione autem et cogitatione distinguuntur*).[18] The text is contained in *De fide orthodoxa*, a work translated from Greek into Latin by Burgundio of Pisa, and immediately used by Peter Lombard in his *Sententiae*.

Beyond the philological questions about the translation used by Aquinas, from a theological point of view it is extremely interesting how the text is reread. In fact, to the *auctoritas* cited in the first argument of the article, Thomas answers in the body:

> One must therefore know that the personal property, that is the relation (*relatio*) that is the reason of the distinctions, is identical *in re* to the divine essence, but differs from it according to reason, exactly as said with regard to attributes. It is precisely of the very nature of relation to place a relationship to another (*ut referatur ad alterum*). Therefore, the relation in the divine Persons can be considered in two senses: (i) in reference to the essence, therefore only as the attributes; (ii) in reference to what it refers to, from which, by the very nature of relation, it really differs. Persons are distinguished by the comparison of the

[16] Cf. L.J. Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and his Predecessors: the Philosophers and the Church Fathers in his Work*, Washington 2018, p. 263.

[17] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 2 q. 1 a. 5; *De Potentia*, q. 9, a. 5 e *STh* q. 30. a. 1.

[18] John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, I, 2.

> relation to its opposite correlative and not by the comparison of the relation with the essence. For this reason the plurality of Persons is real and not only a plurality according to reason.[19]

It is evident that one finds oneself at the heart of Trinitarian thought, therefore precisely in the maximum speculative depth of the metaphysical reformulation of the mystery of God in the light of revelation. It is a discourse in the line of the first sense of Trinitarian ontology introduced in the previous section. The point immediately has to do with the second sense, which articulates the relationship between the triune God and the world. Precisely this was a fundamental contribution of the Damascene, who connected the Christological *perichoresis* to the Intra-Trinitarian *perichoresis*. The need to affirm the real distinction of the two natures of Christ, which, however, could only be distinguished by thought, had led the Father of the Church to create such a profound synthesis, which avoided any possibility of reading in a Monophysite key by anchoring the distinction of natures in Christ to that between the divine Persons.[20] Thomas sees the question from the opposite perspective and is rightly concerned to clarify that the impossibility of separating the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit does not imply denying their real distinction.

The point is fundamental both from the epistemological point of view and for the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics. In fact, the solution will be to show how thought recognizes relationships within the perfect unity of essence. In fact, Thomas says in the corresponding *respondeo*:

> At the first point we can, therefore, answer that the authority of the Damascene must be understood in the following way: *ratione* is here understood as *relatione*, and the *ratio* is called relation in relation to the essence, as explained in the *corpus*.[21]

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[19] *Sciendum est igitur, quod proprietas personalis, scilicet relatio distinguens, est idem re quod divina essentia, sed differens ratione, sicut et de attributis dictum est. Ratio autem relationis est ut referatur ad alterum. Potest ergo dupliciter considerari relatio in divinis: vel per comparationem ad essentiam, et sic est ratio tantum; vel per comparationem ad illud ad quod refertur, et sic per propriam rationem relationis relatio realiter distinguitur ab illo. Sed per comparationem relationis ad suum correlativum oppositum distinguuntur personae, et non per comparationem relationis ad essentiam: et ideo est pluralitas personarum realis et non tantum rationis* (Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 2 q. 1 a. 5, co.)

[20] Cf. G. Maspero, *La perichoresis e la grammatica teologica dei primi sette Concili ecumenici*, "TheoLogica" 4/2 (2020).

[21] *Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod auctoritas Damasceni sic intelligenda est. Ratione, idest relatione; et dicitur relatio ratio, per comparationem ad essentiam, ut dictum est, in corp* (Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 2 q. 1 a. 5, ad 1).

Access to the thought of divine immanence requires, therefore, that the possibilities of recognizing relations and working with essences be affirmed for human knowledge at the same time. If apophatism expresses the consciousness of the radical impossibility of knowing the divine essence by conceptual means, the personal distinction is accessible *per viam relationis*. Hence the possibility of rereading the world in the Trinitarian light, that is the possibility of developing a Trinitarian ontology in the second sense. In fact, in the Thomist construction the divine *surplus* prevents the scholastic method from weakening the difference between the ontological and logical planes, as will later happen, paving the way to modern dialectics, in which *ratio* takes over *auctoritas*. The possibility to solve every question by introducing intellectual distinctions, in fact, is not for Aquinas an automatism and a method similar to what happens in the Porphyrian tree. The distinctions found by the intellect, instead, allow for recognizing the relational dimension, first of all in God and then in the relationship between the Trinity and the world.

This relationality intrinsic to the theological method also explains why Aquinas took a stand against Anselm and Richard of Saint Victor in the Trinitarian context. In the sort of theology developed in the abbeys all aimed at seeking a synthesis between philosophy and theology to offer that unique overall vision that was the true aspiration of the medieval spirit. Thomas is always careful to distinguish nature and supernature, not to separate them, but to recognize their relationship as a free relationship of gift. Thus, despite the *vestigia Trinitatis* present in the world, it is clear that the latter can never be the basis for a demonstration of God's unity.[22] The Trinity can only be reached *a posteriori*, through salvation history and the personal encounter with Christ and His Spirit.[23]

The redefinition of the concept of the person in Thomas can serve to illustrate the point. If one considers the history of the definitions of person, one observes an extremely interesting development for the question under consideration. The link with Trinitarian ontology is evident because it was precisely Christian revelation that made it possible for the first time to fully perceive this dimension of the *who* with respect to the simple *what* of Greek metaphysics.

A classical definition is that of Boetius, in the sixth century: *rationalis naturae individua substantia*.[24] The person would be the individual substance

[22] Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, q. 32, a. 1, ad. 2 e *In Boetium*, q. 1, a . 4.

[23] To understand what excesses Scholastic thought had reached, see: R.L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, Cambridge 2010.

[24] Boethius, *De duabus naturis* 3.

of rational nature. It is evident that this choice has a classical philosophical matrix that is well suited to the definition of man and the angel. However, if applied to the triune God, it presents a serious drawback because the three divine Persons could be understood as three substances.

The impossibility of applying the definition both to the first principle and to the creation contradicts the spirit of the Middle Ages, which always tries to present the world and its Creator in unitary terms. The synthesis between philosophy and theology developed with originality in the abbey led Richard of Saint Victor, in the 12th century, to propose a new definition of divine person, no longer based on the concept of substance, but on that of existence: *divinae naturae incommunnibilis existentia*.[25] If the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit cannot be distinguished at the substantial level, it will be necessary to move on the plane of existence, since their *sistere* is distinct from the point of view of the relationship indicated by the preposition *ex*. The progress is significant because we arrive at an elaboration that allows us to describe more properly the being of the triune God. It is essential to note, however, that we are not yet talking here of Trinitarian ontology, but only of the ontology of the Trinity. What is meant to say is that the result applies only to the first principle but by definition cannot descend to the created level and illuminate our world with the light of the Trinity.

For this reason, Thomas felt the need to modify the definition of Boethius in such a way as to make it valid in both ontologies, both the eternal and the created one. Aquinas defines the person *subsistens in rational nature*.[26] It is an ingenious operation that replaces the substance with the *subsistens*. As in Richard, the need is to move at the level of the subject, which here, however, is defined by the present participle of the verb *subsistere*, which means to really exist in oneself and not in another. In this way Thomas will obtain as a result that the divine Person will be defined as *distinctum subsistens in divine nature*[27] and, therefore, since the only distinction in God can be the relational one, he will conclude that the divine Person is the *relatio subsistens*.[28]

From the point of view of the relational ontology of the Fathers this constitutes a truly fundamental development because formally the *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is identified with three eternal and perfect relations. Moreover, Aquinas goes so far as to affirm that he *abstracta relatione in Deo nihil manet*.[29] Surely this

[25] Richard of Saint Victor, *De Trinitate*, IV, 22.
[26] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3, in c.
[27] Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* q. 9, a. 4.
[28] Idem, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 4, in c.
[29] Idem, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 2, in c.

result is not extended to the created ontology as the difference with respect to the Trinity is always stressed. And yet the construction of the definition of the person as existing of rational nature in such a way as to pass vertically between the ontology of the Trinity and the created one seems to be considered a vertex and a model of Trinitarian ontology.

Thomas, in fact, recognizes that the task of theology is precisely that of elaborating a thought that not only can formulate the divine mystery, always preserving its excess to offer it to worship, but that in addition it can illuminate the created way and highlight the relationship between the two ontologies. The theological act can be said to be accomplished, then, when it succeeds in offering words and expressions that allow one to move from the Trinity to the world and vice versa.

It is true that the investigation of the creation's relationality was not developed by Aquinas. The deep rootedness of the creative act in eternal processions allows us to affirm that the true *ratio* of the world with its multiplicity is the intra-Trinitarian *relatio*.[30]

Trinitarian Epistemology

This is tantamount to considering the Trinitarian faith as an epistemological principle, i.e. as the source of light that allows us to observe the world from the perspective of its Creator's excess. For this reason, the analysis of faith itself is fundamental, particularly with regard to the formulation of its theology and its dual relationship with the intellect and the will. As is well known, Thomas dedicated the first 16 questions of the II-II of his *Summa* to this topic. Faith is presented as a theological virtue, since it is a supernatural habit that perfects the power of the intellect: "To believe is an act of the intellect which, under the impetus of the will moved by God through grace, gives its consent to divine truth."[31]

Thomas' strength is the defence, at the same time, of the theological dimension of faith, as an absolutely free gift of God to man, and of the effective perfection of human faculties, for faith is specific to the intellect. One can see how the ontological hiatus between the Trinity and man is here in action, affirming the divine excess without hurting man's relational autonomy.

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30 (...) *processiones personarum aeternae sunt causa et ratio totius productionis creaturarum* (Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, co.).

31 *Credere est actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam* (idem, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 2, 9).

Aquinas' analysis starts from the object of faith, identified in God himself as the first Truth. It affirms with radicality that we are talking about "an intellectual habit with which eternal life begins in us, and which makes the intellect adhere to realities that do not appear."[32] Although it is evident that in believing the whole man comes into play, with all his powers and his passions and inclinations, "nevertheless believing is directly an act of the intellect, having as its object truth, which belongs properly to intelligence."[33]

The vision is profoundly theological, since the Truth before it has an essentially Trinitarian dimension: faith is nothing other than participation in the knowledge that the Father has of Himself, knowledge that identifies with the eternal Word. To have faith then means to be identified with the Son, in Christ. It is not simply a matter of knowing in an abstract sense, but of being united in a personal way: in fact, "the act of faith does not stop at the enunciation, but reaches reality (*actus fidei non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*)."[34]

Thomas moves from the Augustinian definition of faith as *cum assensione cogitare*,[35] where the verb is not intended rationally, but in the fullness of its meaning: *cogitare* indicates thinking as meditation and planning, that is, as a dynamic activity characterized by a "tendency towards." It is not simply intellectual activity because the verb expresses an extraordinary richness.

While following the Aristotelian gnoseology, Thomas remains perfectly faithful to Augustine in his analysis of the act of faith, as we see in q. 14, a. 1 of *De Veritate*: "in faith one has simultaneously assent and thought" (*In fide est assensus et cogitatio ex aequo*). In the same *questio* he discusses from the point of view of faith the five ways of human knowledge, starting from the principle that, in general, investigation (*cogitatio*) and assent (*assensus*) should be mutually exclusive. The analysis of the five ways is as follows:

1. *Doubt*: there is no assent and the possibilities for investigation are total, even if those who doubt do not actually investigate.
2. *Opinion*: a certain assent is given, accompanied by doubt, so the investigation can begin.
3. *Science*: assent is present because of the evidence reached through reasoning and which concludes the investigation.
4. *Evidence*: assent is immediate and there is no need for any investigation.

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32 Idem, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 4, a. 1, r.
33 Ibidem, q. 4, a. 2, r.
34 Ibidem, 1, 2, ad 2.
35 Augustine, *De praedestinatione sanctorum* 2,5.

5. *Faith*: it occupies an intermediate position because assent is not present due to the evidence, but because will pushes the intelligence to overcome the distance that separates credibility from faith. It is precisely credibility that is the object of investigation before assent. Then the investigation continues as a search for the *intellectus fidei* (theology). Precisely because the assent comes from will, the investigation does not end with assent.

	Doubt	***Opinion***	***Faith***	***Science***	***Evidence***
Cogitatio (investigation)	Absent	Incipient	Investigation before assent (credibility) and continuing after (theology)	Investigation before, culminating and ending in the evidence of the demonstration	Excluded
Assensus (Assent)	Excluded	A certain assent is given, but accompanied by doubt and fear	Total, full and sure, moved by the will because there is no evidence	Sure assent to the evidence reached through reasoning and demonstration	Immediate

Therefore, faith can be reduced neither to opinion nor to science, since assent is certain and reason shows that it is reasonable for the will to give assent. Scientific criticism has a role in theology because it avoids fideism, i.e. the recourse to the supernatural to explain the mere gnoseological aspect of the mystery. For faith concerns the mystery in an ontological sense, that mystery from which reason itself springs. Reason is indispensable both to draw on the true novelty introduced into history by Revelation and to welcome and deepen the content of Revelation itself. All the more so, since this content is inexhaustible and a source of infinite virtuality, so that, once the relationship between *fides* and *auctoritas* has been conceived in a harmonious way, the scholar cannot know boredom.

The point is that Trinitarian ontology shows how the recourse to assent does not consist in a limit of that knowledge which is reached through faith, but rather, on the contrary, it is the foundation of the metaphysical depth of this knowledge which is given through relations because the world is radically constituted by the relationship with the one and triune God that in Himself is relations.

The epistemological force of Aquinas is therefore based on the new relational picture of the relationship between the triune Creator and the creation, a picture

that, thanks to the ontological hiatus that separates them, respects the autonomy of the world, precisely for the same reason that it presents creation as radically dependent on God. The ontological root of this epistemology can be found in the new metaphysical understanding of divine immanence, as demonstrated by the reworking of the Greek heritage by Thomas in relation to the Trinitarian *Verbum*. His first teachings in this area diverge, in fact, from the position taken in maturity. In the early *In I Sentiarum* it is said that *Verbum* is the name of both the second divine Person and the essence. In technical terms, *Verbum* is understood both as an essential name and as a notional name.[36]

Verbum is not considered a name that only says relationship, but it is stated that it also expresses God in his essence. It would be a name similar to good, eternal, etc., which, once purified through the triple path, can be applied to God. *Verbum* would not only be the name of the second Person.

This position on the Trinitarian level has an immediate gnoseological and anthropological reflection. The creation of man in the image and likeness of God, in fact, together with the identification of the faculties of the intellect and the will as the foundation of his uniqueness, imply that the change of conception at the Trinitarian level is linked by a double thread to a change in the conception of man's knowledge and understanding of his anthropological structure.[37]

Gilles Emery points this out in explaining that the interpretation of *Verbum* as an essential or only notional name is connected to the theory of knowledge that Thomas assumes from Aristotle, particularly to the fact that God knows Himself through his essence: knowing subject, cognitive act and object known in God coincide perfectly.[38]

Thus for the first Thomas' *Verbum* can indicate both the cognitive act and the personal relationship.[39] In *De Veritate* Thomas maintains this position, highlighting how *verbum* means the relationship to the mind that conceives it, a relationship that can only be of reason as in the case of God.[40] In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, however, he clearly distinguishes the cognitive act from the *verbum* as an expression of the known reality formed by the intellect: from

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36 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 27 q. 2 a. 2 qc. 1 co.

37 To get an idea of how narrow the consciousness of interconnection was in the Middle Ages, see: R.L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, Cambridge 2010.

38 G. Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford 2010, pp. 209–214.

39 The problem is common in Scholastic time, as the cases of Albert and Bonaventure show.

40 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 4, a. 2.

this perspective its existence is purely relative.[41] This change in the theory of knowledge implies that the term can now be recognized in all the ontological depth of its relational dimension, and applied univocally to the second Person of the Trinity. For this reason, in *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas affirms that *Verbum* is an exclusively notional name, predictable only to the second Person, while the divine substance cannot be defined as *Verbum*.[42]

This switch from the conception that sees *Verbum* as both an essential and a notional name to the affirmation that *Verbum* is an exclusively personal name marks a fundamental moment not only in Thomas' vision, but concerns all the Masters of Theology of Paris, who between 1270 and 1271 came together to condemn as contrary to the Fathers' and Augustine's teaching the affirmation that *Verbum* was also an essential name.[43]

In *Summa Theologiae* we see how Thomas criticizes Anselm and his intellectualism, clearly distinguishing *Verbum* and *intellectus* in God. The former is the second Person of the Trinity, while the latter, as an act, is identified with the divine essence. *In divinis*, in fact, *intellectus* and *intellectum* coincide perfectly, while being spoken implies an authentic relationship. The intellect knows only a necessary proportion which in itself can be – in God – nothing but identity. Different is the *Verbum*, which cannot be understood as *cogitatio* because there is no search of truth in God; it can only be thought of as an expression of the fruit of cognitive activity. Therefore, the fruit of knowing is distinct from the act of knowing and is indicated precisely by *Verbum*. The concept, fruit of God's self-knowledge, is thus, for Thomas, the conceived, that is, the *Verbum* who is the eternal Son of the Father. For this, Aquinas explains:

> As, properly speaking, Word in God is said personally, and not essentially, so likewise is to "speak." Hence, as the Word is not common to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, so it is not true that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one speaker. So Augustine says (*De Trinitate*. VII, 1): "He who speaks in that co-eternal Word is understood as not alone in God, but as being with that very Word, without which, forsooth, He would not be speaking." On the other hand, "to be spoken" belongs to each Person, for not only is the word spoken, but also the thing

41 Cf. idem, *Summa contra gentiles* I, c. 53 e IV, c. 11.

42 Cf. idem, *Summa Theologiae* I q. 34 a. 1 co.

43 Cf. M. Schmaus, *Der Liber propugnatorius des Thomas Anglicus und die Lehrunterschiede zwischen Thomas von Aquin un Duns Scotus*, II, Münster 1930, pp. 613–614, no. 40. The number of Masters, among whom was Thomas, was about 24. On the date see: F. Pelster, *Roger Marston O.F.M. (+1303), ein englischer Vertreter des Augustinismus*, "Scholastik" 3 (1928), p. 545.

> understood or signified by the word. Therefore in this manner to one person alone in God does it belong to be spoken in the same way as a word is spoken; whereas in the way whereby a thing is spoken as being understood in the word, it belongs to each Person to be spoken. For the Father, by understanding Himself, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and all other things comprised in this knowledge, conceives the Word; so that thus the whole Trinity is "spoken" in the Word; and likewise also all creatures: as the intellect of a man by the word he conceives in the act of understanding a stone, speaks a stone. Anselm took the term "speak" improperly for the act of understanding; whereas they really differ from each other; for "to understand" means only the habitude of the intelligent agent to the thing understood, in which habitude no trace of origin is conveyed, but only a certain information of our intellect; forasmuch as our intellect is made actual by the form of the thing understood. In God, however, it means complete identity, because in God the intellect and the thing understood are altogether the same, as was proved above (Question 14, Articles 4,5). Whereas to "speak" means chiefly the habitude to the word conceived; for "to speak" is nothing but to utter a word. But by means of the word it imports a habitude to the thing understood which in the word uttered is manifested to the one who understands. Thus, only the Person who utters the Word is "speaker" in God, although each Person understands and is understood, and consequently is spoken by the Word.[44]

The distinction is between 'saying/speaking" (*dicere*) the Word, which belongs only to the Father, and 'being spoken' (*dici*), which is convenient for all three divine Persons, because with the Word is also meant the signified reality. In this way all the Trinity and even every creature is spoken in the Word. This element is extremely significant because it reveals that the eternal *Verbum* is the foundation of every reality, even creatural reality. Everything is done through the Son and in view of the Son, so everything is spoken by the Father in the eternal relationship of Filiation. The meaning of everything is, therefore, the Son.

From this perspective God is known in the Word and the root of all knowledge is personal. The relationship with reality is founded on the level of personal relationship, and not of essential necessity, in such a way that the source of all knowledge is the Son in his being pure relation to the Father. Man by himself cannot access God because true knowledge is not played out on the level of essence. Essences cannot be translated into concepts, but the path

[44] St Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, New York 2007, p. 179 (I q. 34 a. 1 ad 3).

to them passes within the Trinity, in that immanent dimension which is not available to man except through the Gift of Self Revelation. The identification of the cognitive act and its fruit in the first epoch of Thomas is exposed to the intellectualist risk. Instead, it is possible to arrive at the heart of reality only through the relationship with the Son.

This is a radical critique of intellectualism, born of the extrapolation to the triune God of the essentialist vision of the one metaphysical level that characterized the approach of the Greek philosophers. As seen, for them the First Principle and the world are connected in a continuous way. Instead, in the Christian vision the uncreated ontology is original with respect to the created one and clearly distinct from it. The vision of participation is deeply different with respect to the Greek one, because the analogy is now based on the free act of the Creator and therefore on the metaphysical gap between the two ontological levels. There is no longer a continuum of degrees of being, but there is an unbridgeable hiatus, which only divine will and love can fill. Freedom and personal dimension demand apophatism that reality not be reducible to concepts, following the law of necessary proportion, but that true knowledge be given only on a personal level, in the relationship, simply because the First Principle is an eternal relation of love.

This is connected with a change in the theory of human knowledge: man knows in the word, but not through the word because the word is not the species, but the fruit in the mind of the knowing person of the cognitive act addressed to reality. For this reason, it is precisely the word that unites the knowing subject and reality. The human word has a function of relational mediation.

The transition is extremely relevant because it implies the understanding that the logical structure of creation is personal, and therefore that the deepest and most authentic thought is personal. The true meaning of the world is Christ, *Logos* incarnate, because creation itself is a prolongation of the eternal generation, according to the daring Thomist formula.[45]

From a purely dogmatic point of view, there are many reasons to deny that *Verbum* is an essential name: a first risk would be the possibility of thinking that the Son is generated by the essence and not by the Person of the Father, a proposition condemned in the 4th Lateran Council in 1215. To this is added precisely the question, seen in Aquinas' rereading of John Damascene, of the difference between the real distinction of relations between them and the distinction only of reason between relations and the substance *in divinis* which

[45] (...) *processiones personarum aeternae sunt causa et ratio totius productionis creaturarum* (idem, *In I Sentiarum*, d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, co.).

the essential meaning of *Verbum* would overshadow. The most serious danger would be the possible confusion between nature and super-nature, which is of particular concern to Thomas, as can also be seen from his criticism of Richard of Saint Victor and Anselm.

If *Verbum* were an essential name, the knowledge that God has of Himself would prescind from the Spirit, from personal Love, without reference to the two processions with their mutual and inescapable interweaving. Thus, the statement that *Verbum* is only a notional name seems intimately connected with that vertex of the Thomist Trinitarian formulation of the *Verbum spirans Amorem*.[46]

Conclusion

In the proposed path we have tried to show how the strength of Thomas' thought is based on a Trinitarian epistemology that is made possible by a Trinitarian ontology that he inherited from the Fathers and in turn developed. Precisely this epistemology, which in its root can be defined relational, is what preserves Aquinas from the logical excesses that brought other authors of that time to pave the way for modern dialectics.

Although the talk of Trinitarian ontology in reference to Thomas may seem to contradict some positions of well-known Thomists, in the proposed perspective, the Middle Ages itself is the fruit of the Trinitarian ontology of the Fathers because the affirmation of an infinite hiatus between God and the world allows the human thought to reread the latter in its unity and autonomy from the new point of observation made accessible by faith. In this way men become aware of the possibility of drawing a unique picture of creation in order to praise the Creator and live in fullness their identity as children of God.

Trinitarian ontology is, therefore, an inescapable question in theology and especially when it comes to medieval theology. What we have tried to highlight is how Thomas' strength in this context depends on his epistemology, which is essentially Trinitarian because it links the relationship between *auctoritas* and *ratio* to the possibility of identifying relations corresponding to real distinctions in the unity of reality. This allows Aquinas to develop a thought capable of declining categories suitable for speaking about both God and the human being.

Thus, the metaphysical rereading of divine immanence by Thomas, which can be defined as Trinitarian ontology according to the first meaning cited,

[46] Idem, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 43, a. 5.

becomes in relation the foundation of the possibility of rereading creation in the light of the Trinitarian depth of its Creator. The example of the definition of person reveals precisely this possibility, which has its roots in the epistemological value of the theological faith. This in connected to the exclusively personal or notional rereading of the *Verbum*, for which the divine economy can be understood as a free expression of love of the immanent processions. The full sense of the world is, therefore, in God, without whom it cannot be thought of, not a *priori* because of a necessary connection, but only *a posteriori* for the constitutive relationship with the triune Creator.

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