

Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Unity: Revisiting the *De Unione* Debate

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■ Abstract

The claim that article four of Thomas Aquinas's *De unione verbi incarnati* is a reversal of his consistently held single *esse* position is challenged in this paper. The article argues that reading all five articles of the *De unione* as a single-structured argument discloses a single *esse* understanding of the Incarnate Word. The very nature of the radically hypostatic union between God and man in Christ is at stake in this dispute. According to Thomas, positing a second *esse* in Christ not only contradicts the tradition, especially of the Christian East, that he appropriates, but it would also compromise the reality of the hypostatic union itself.

■ Keywords

christology, Chalcedon, Christ's *esse*, Thomas Aquinas, Christ's unity, hypostatic union

■ Introduction and Preliminary Considerations

The "two natures, one person" orthodoxy forged by the Council of Chalcedon seems immediately relevant to the profession and content of the original truths of the Christian faith. However, the more ontologically nuanced and exacting precisions of later centuries may not present themselves to modern ears as evidently continuous with the mindset of the first followers of Christ. In the face of the questions raised about the unity of Christ and his wills and operations, the Second and Third Councils of Constantinople, the Second Council of Nicaea, and the later Greek fathers and schoolmen offer much in the way of developing the full

implications of the basic biblical truth that the “Word became flesh.”¹ Receiving the later contributions as organic developments of biblical faith and the earlier creeds is not a task that modern theologians have found easy to accomplish, or even desirable to undertake. Pondering this challenge, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger makes the following observation:

It is common enough for the theological textbooks to pay scant attention to the theological development which followed Chalcedon. In many ways one is left with the impression that dogmatic Christology comes to a stop with a certain parallelism of the two natures in Christ. . . . In fact, however, the affirmation of the true humanity and the true divinity in Christ can only retain its meaning if the mode of the unity of both is clarified. The Council defined this unity by speaking of the “one Person” in Christ, but it was a formula which remained to be explored in its implications. For the unity of divinity and humanity in Christ which brings “salvation” to man is not just a juxtaposition but a mutual indwelling.²

Ratzinger goes on to document how in the centuries following Chalcedon, individuals like Maximus the Confessor and councils like the Third of Constantinople (680–681) developed the metaphysical “oneness” of Christ’s personhood without “amputating” one of the natures or leaving them in a parallel dualism.³ The ongoing debate over the meaning and implications of the fourth article of Thomas Aquinas’s disputed question *De unione verbi incarnati* lies at the heart of this sustained, centuries-long, post-Chalcedonian development of the mode of the union of Christ’s two natures in the single subsistent Person of the Word.⁴

The *De unione* stands somewhat as a special test case in contemporary theology for how Aquinas fits in the tapestry of post-Chalcedonian christology because some scholars argue that he offers something novel (and better) in one line of one article

¹ Thomas Joseph White argues: “In some real sense it is true to say: ignorance of ontology is ignorance of Christ. The understanding of the Bible offered by the fathers and scholastics, then, is not something that can be justified as one possible form of reading among others (defensively, as against a post-critical anthropological turn in modern philosophy). Rather, it is the only reading that attains objectively to the deepest truth of the New Testament: a truth concerning the identity of Christ as the God-man” (Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015] 8).

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to Spiritual Christology* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 37–38.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ In Latin-French, Latin-German, and Latin-English, respectively, there are editions of Thomas Aquinas’s *De unione* that include extensive notes and theological commentary. See *Question disputée. L’union du Verbe incarné (De unione Verbi incarnati)* (Textes philosophiques; ed. Marie-Hélène Deloffre; Paris: Vrin, 2000). See also *Quaestio disputata “De unione Verbi incarnati” (“Über die Union des fleischgewordenen Wortes”)* (ed. and trans. Klaus Obenauer; Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2011), which includes a much-needed critical Latin text prepared by Walter Senner, O.P., Barbara Bartocci, and Klaus Obenauer. And see *De unione verbi incarnati* (trans. and intro. Roger W. Nutt; Leuven: Peeters, 2015), which reproduces (with permission) Obenauer’s critical Latin text.

of this work than what is found in the rest of his corpus.⁵ The intrigue around this one line in the fourth article of *De unione verbi incarnati* can be summarized as follows: In what is now held to be a rather late work,⁶ many scholars have argued that Thomas breaks with his otherwise consistent position that Christ is one and unified in the order of being—that there is one *esse*, or being, in Christ—and affirms a second *esse*, or being, that is contributed to by Christ’s human nature.⁷ Some of these scholars argue that this change in formulation saves Thomas’s christology from the error of Monophysitism.⁸

To provide just one example of his standard, single *esse* formulation, in the *Compendium of theologiae*, Thomas lays out his position as follows: “If, therefore, we consider Christ as a complete *suppositum* having two natures, there will be only

⁵ For a very helpful historical treatment of the developments in christology after Chalcedon that touches on the teachings of many of the most important schoolmen and the speculative issues surrounding Aquinas’s *De unione*, see Corey L. Barnes, *Christ’s Two Wills in Scholastic Thought: The Christology of Aquinas and Its Historical Contexts* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012).

⁶ For a summary of the debates over the dating of *De unione*, see Nutt, introduction to Thomas Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, 6–9. On Obenauer’s treatment of the dating of the *De unione*, see *Quaestio disputata* (ed. Obenauer), 169. For Sr. Deloffre’s discussion, see *Question disputée* (ed. Deloffre), 24–25. For a discussion and defense of the authenticity of the *De unione*, see Franz Pelster, S.J., “La *quaestio disputata* de saint Thomas *De unione Verbi incarnati*,” *Archives de philosophie* 3 (1925–26) 198–245. Pelster’s work is viewed as resolving the question of authenticity.

⁷ For a very helpful summary of the issues surrounding the *De unione*, see David Tamsiea, “St. Thomas on the One *Esse* of Christ,” *Angelicum* 88 (2011) 383–402. There, Tamsiea also summarizes what Thomas means by *esse*: “that which causes a thing to exist in reality, and is only attributed to real things contained within the categories of being identified by Aristotle” (385).

⁸ Thomas G. Weinandy, for example, states: “I believe that Aquinas implicitly held two *esses* from the start (and so was never a Monophysite), but only explicitly stated this position on the one occasion in the *De Unione Verbi Incarnati*” (Thomas G. Weinandy, “Aquinas: God Is Man: The Marvel of the Incarnation,” in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* [ed. Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum; London: T&T Clark, 2004] 67–89, at 80). See also Jean Galot, S.J., *The Person of Christ, Covenant between God and Man: A Theological Insight* (trans. M. Angeline Bouchard; Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1984). Galot argues that Aquinas cannot be confidently invoked by advocates of a single *esse* understanding of Christ because, in article four of the *De unione*, “St. Thomas clearly declares that ‘the *esse* of the human nature is not the *esse* of the divine nature’; and that in addition to the eternal *esse* of the eternal Person there is an *esse* that belongs to the human nature, not a principal but a secondary *to be*” (Galot, *The Person of Christ*, 17). Finally, medievalist Richard Cross has frequently critiqued Aquinas’s single *esse* position; see Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); idem, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) esp. 114–15; and idem, “Aquinas on Nature, Hypostasis, and the Metaphysics of the Incarnation,” *The Thomist* 60 (1996) 171–202. What differentiates the *De unione* from Thomas’s other accounts, Cross explains, is “his abandoning the claim that the human nature is a truth-maker precisely in virtue of its sharing in the *esse* of the *suppositum*” (idem, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 64). The reference to an *esse secundarium* in Christ means that Thomas holds, at least in this one case, Cross argues, that Christ’s human nature “communicate[s] *esse* to its *suppositum*” (ibid., 63). For a response to Cross’s reading of Aquinas, see James Reichman, S.J., “Aquinas, Scotus, and the Christological Mystery: Why Christ is Not a Human Person,” *The Thomist* 71 (2007) 451–74.

one being (*unum esse*), just as there is but one *suppositum*.⁹ Variations of this *unum esse* formulation are standard throughout his corpus, except in the one line in the fourth article of *De unione*. In this line, Thomas says that although the being of Christ's human nature "is not accidental being—because man is not accidentally predicated of the Son of God, as was said above—it is nevertheless not the principal being of its *suppositum*, but a subordinated [*secundarium*] being [*esse*]."¹⁰

As a consequence of this unique formulation, many contemporary theologians have received the *De unione* as a kind of late-career recognition by Thomas that the single *esse* position of the rest of his corpus was problematic, unnecessary, and in need of revision.

In the remainder of this paper, the claim that the unique formulation found in *De unione* article four is a reversal of the single *esse* position will be challenged. The conclusion reached is that a reading of all five articles of the *De unione* as a carefully structured argument reveals a thought-out single *esse* understanding of the Incarnate Word. What is ultimately at stake in this dispute is the truth of the hypostatic nature of the union between God and man in Christ. As Thomas underscores, the positing of a second *esse* in Christ not only conflicts with the conciliar tradition that he appropriates, but it would also compromise the very truth of the hypostatic union itself.

■ Two Preliminary Aids

As a primer to Thomas's thinking in the five articles of the *De unione*, two items need to be reviewed so that the reader can fully appreciate the landscape of the discussion.

First, from the perspective of christological orthodoxy, considerations about the unity of Christ in the order of *esse* must be appreciated in relation to the teachings of the councils of the first millennium. The great fathers and councils that navigated the challenges of Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and later heresies related to Christ's operations established more than just the grammatical parameters of orthodoxy.¹¹ The pivotal Council of Chalcedon in 451, for example, which developed the anti-Nestorian teaching of Ephesus (431) against the Monophysites, qualified the grammar of orthodoxy with a firm doctrine of Christ's unity. Immediately

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, cap. 212: "Manifestum est enim quod partes divisae singulae proprium esse habent, secundum autem quod in toto considerantur, non habent suum esse, sed omnes sunt per esse totius. Si ergo consideremus ipsum Christum ut quoddam integrum suppositum duarum naturarum, eius erit unum tantum esse, sicut et unum suppositum." The other parallel passages where Aquinas also treats Christ's *esse* are: *Quodlibet* 9, art. 3; *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 17, art. 2; *Scriptum super Sententias*, III, dist. 6, q. 2, art. 2.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati* (trans. and intro. Nutt) 135.

¹¹ As early as the thirty-seventh article of the Athanasian Creed, which Aquinas quotes authoritatively in the *De unione*, analogical reasoning to affirm Christ's unity is used: "just as one man is a rational soul and flesh, just so the one Christ is God and man." See Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals; Latin-English* (ed. Peter Hünermann; 43rd ed.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) § 76.

following the profession of the unconfused and unmixed union of the two natures in the one Christ, the Chalcedon declaration added:

At no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person (*prosopon/personam*) and a single subsistent being (*hypostasin/subsistentiam*); he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.¹²

Further clarification on Chalcedon's teaching that Christ was a "single subsistent being" was a priority of the teaching of Constantinople II (553) against erroneous attempts to recognize a second subsistence in Christ. This point is deeply connected to the question of Christ's *esse* that is best understood as a development of the single subsistence doctrine. In Anathema five, the Council teaches:

If anyone understands by the single subsistence of our lord Jesus Christ that it covers the meaning of many subsistences, and by this argument tries to introduce into the mystery of Christ two subsistences or two persons, and having brought in two persons then talks of one person only in respect of dignity . . . and if he does not acknowledge that the Word of God is united with human flesh by subsistence, and that on account of this there is only one subsistence or one person, and that the holy synod of Chalcedon thus made a formal statement of belief in the single subsistence of our lord Jesus Christ: let him be anathema.¹³

Anathema four of the same council also shows how Christ's unity is preserved despite the presence of two real natures: "The holy Church of God . . . states her belief in a union between the Word of God and human flesh which is by synthesis (*secundum compositionem*), that is by a union of subsistence (*quod est secundum subsistentiam*). In the mystery of Christ the union of synthesis (*per compositionem*) not only conserves without confusing the elements that come together but also allows no division."¹⁴ This teaching on the composite mode of existence that the Word has as true God and true man according to a single subsistence is, of course, much more than a grammar of orthodoxy.

It is this quest to articulate Christ's unity in the centuries following Chalcedon that fueled the continued speculations of late-patristic and early-Byzantine figures such as Leontius of Byzantium, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus.¹⁵ For example, in his famous fifth *Ambiguum to Thomas*, which is a defense of

¹² *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J.; 2 vols.; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) 1:86–87.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:116.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:115.

¹⁵ For a summary of the influence of the later Greek fathers on Aquinas's christology and the influence of John of Damascus on the *De unione*, see, Nutt, introduction to Thomas Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, 23–41. For a related treatment of the contributions of Leontius, see Brian Daley, S.J., "A Richer Union: Leontius of Byzantium and the Relationship of Human and Divine in Christ," *StPatr* 24 (1993) 239–65.

Dionysius against the charge of monoenergism, Maximus the Confessor articulates Christ's divinity and humanity as two modes of a single unified existence and not two numeric existences. "[The Word] . . . [h]aving united His transcendent mode of existence," Maximus explains, "with the principle of His human nature, so that the ongoing existence of that nature might be confirmed by the newness of the mode of existence, not suffering any change at the level of its inner principle, and thereby make known His power that is beyond infinity, recognized through the generation of opposites."¹⁶ This post-Chalcedonian development on Christ's unity left a deep imprint on Thomas's thinking about Christ.¹⁷ Aquinas's knowledge of the Greek patrimony of Christian theology, read through Latin translations, in the words of Gilles Emery, "visibly makes its mark in the structure [of his] Christology."¹⁸ Although Aquinas is often viewed as a quintessential Latin schoolman, his use of Greek patristic sources, Emery explains, "designates Thomas as a pioneer: He was the first Latin Scholastic," for example, "truly to exploit Constantinople II in Christology and exegesis. His knowledge of the Third Council of Constantinople is no less evident."¹⁹ Disputes over Thomas's position on Christ's unity of being need to take a fuller account of his unique reception of these influences and later Greek developments.²⁰ Corey Barnes notes that Thomas's assimilation of these new sources and ideas about Christ's wills and operations shifts the focus of his dyothelite christology away from accenting the perfection of Christ's human nature to "elevating as central a proper understanding of the hypostatic union."²¹ This Greek-inspired development, which focused his thought on how to account for Christ's unity, sets Aquinas's various articulations within a broader framework than the scholasticism of the thirteenth century.

¹⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua* (2 vols.; Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 28; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) 1:45.

¹⁷ For a helpful treatment of the unique way that Dionysius influenced and informed Aquinas's christology, see Andrew Hofer, O.P., "Dionysian Elements in Thomas Aquinas's Christology: A Case for the Authority and Ambiguity of Pseudo-Dionysius," *The Thomist* 72 (2008) 409–42.

¹⁸ Gilles Emery, "A Note of St. Thomas and the Eastern Fathers," in idem, *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 193–207, at 194. Emery also points out that in several key theological passages of Aquinas's work, citations from the Greek fathers often double those from their Latin counterparts. Emery notes, further, that Aquinas's understanding of the "structure" of the hypostatic union is "fundamentally" Greek (at 202), and that his use of the term "instrument" (*organum*) to explain the causal merit of Christ's humanity is particularly indebted to the Greek fathers.

¹⁹ James Weisheipl points out: "Thomas d'Aquino was the first Latin Scholastic writer to utilize verbatim the acts of the first five ecumenical councils of the Church, namely in the *Catena aurea* . . . and in the *Summa theologiae*" (James Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983] 164). See also Martin Morard, "Thomas d'Aquin lecteur des conciles," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 98 (2005) 211–365.

²⁰ See *Thomas Aquinas and the Greek Fathers* (ed. Michael Dauphinais, Andrew Hofer, and Roger Nutt; Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2019), passim, esp. Khaled Anatolios, "The Ontological Grammar of Salvation and the Salvific Work of Christ in Athanasius and Aquinas," 89–109.

²¹ Barnes, *Christ's Two Wills*, 123.

Because the metaphysics of *esse* considers a thing from the perspective of its existence *qua* existence as the highest perfection that makes each thing to be and not from a particular aspect of its being, such as the substance underlying a thing, it is important not to conflate *esse* with subsistence. The claim of this paper is not that the medieval metaphysics of *esse* and the doctrine of Christ's single subsistence are exactly the same. The metaphysics of *esse* is a higher and more terminal understanding of a subsistent entity. In a question meant to parse the received definitions on the commonality and difference between theological terms like person, hypostasis, and *suppositum*, Thomas clarifies the meaning of subsistence:

[Substance] is also called by three names signifying a reality—that is, “a thing of nature,” “subsistence,” and “hypostasis,” according to a threefold consideration of the substance thus named. For, *as it exists in itself and not in another, it is called “subsistence”*; *as we say that those things subsist which exist in themselves, and not in another*. As it underlies some common nature, it is called “a thing of nature”; as, for instance, this particular man is a human natural thing. As it underlies the accidents, it is called “hypostasis,” or “substance.” What these three names signify in common to the whole genus of substances, this name “person” signifies in the genus of rational substances.²²

The question, therefore, of Christ's *per se* existence (subsistence) and the singularity of his *esse* must be intimately related. Without a second subsistence, what would a second *esse* be the perfection of in the order of existence? While not identical with the medieval metaphysics of *esse*, Maximus the Confessor's distinction, as noted above, between Christ's unity of existence and dual (divine and human) “modes” of that one existence presses the same point that Aquinas is attempting to spell out. Indeed, some criticisms of Thomas's single *esse* position would equally rule out the single subsistence doctrine of Chalcedon and its later developments, as would the addition of a second *esse*.²³

As a second primer, some reference to the christological framework established by Peter Lombard is crucial to understanding what Thomas and the other schoolmen were trying to pinpoint in their speculations about Christ's *esse* and unity. Lombard dutifully received the christology of the first millennium and endeavored to give a scholastic account of Christ's manner of existence.²⁴ Thomas makes direct reference to Lombard's famous three opinions about the hypostatic union in *De unione*,

²² *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 29, art. 2. Taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcon; trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P.; 60 vols.; Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012) 13:310 (emphasis added).

²³ See Aaron Riches, “After Chalcedon: The Oneness of Christ and the Dyothelite Mediation of His Theandric Unity,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008) 199–224.

²⁴ For a presentation of the theological and philosophical issues in the century prior to Aquinas that includes a thorough and original analysis of Peter Lombard's christology, see Lauge Olaf Nielsen, *Theology and Philosophy in the Twelfth Century: A Study of Gilbert Porreta's Thinking and the Theological Expositions of the Doctrine of the Incarnation during the Period 1130–1180* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982).

so Lombard's work is not far from his mind.²⁵ Lombard frames the speculative challenge posed by the incarnation with the following question: "Whether a person or nature took on a person or nature, and whether God's nature became flesh."²⁶ While Lombard's own position on the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation was something disputed even by his own disciples in the twelfth century, Thomas is clear in the *De unione* (and the *Summa theologiae*) that the Second Opinion, the "subsistence theory,"²⁷ is not merely an opinion but the faith of the Catholic Church.²⁸ A less appreciated but equally important point that Lombard leaves for subsequent generations to clarify is the status of Christ's human nature. Having laid out the "opinions" of the past generations on the hypostatic union, Lombard raises what later is referred to as the problem of "christological nihilianism." This problem serves as a catalyst for the speculations about Christ's *esse*.²⁹ It is called "nihilianism" because of Lombard's formulation of the problem: "Whether Christ, according to his being a man, is a person or anything. It is also usual for some to ask whether Christ, according to his being a man, is a person, or even is anything."³⁰ Lombard's parsing unveils the possible answers to this mercurial question: either Christ is a second person as man, which would negate the union, or he is a person as a man but not a numerically second one, which would make him, as a man, Lombard reasons, a person of the Trinity, which would then make him, as a man, God.³¹ So, if he is not a person according to his being a man, then, Lombard wonders whether, as a man, he is anything at all. In short, Lombard understood that in the order of being, without positing two persons, which vacates the union, it is difficult to account for both the divinity and the humanity of Christ with just one person and being for each.³²

²⁵ See, for example, the corpus of *De unione*, a. 2.

²⁶ Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, book III, dist. 5, ch. 1 (trans. Giulio Silano; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008) 17–18. For Nielsen's original conclusion about Lombard's preference for the Third Opinion, see Nielsen, *Theology and Philosophy in the Twelfth Century*, 264.

²⁷ The adherents of the Subsistence Theory, Lombard explains, "profess this Christ to be only one person; however, that person was simple only before the incarnation, but in the incarnation he was made into a person composed of divinity and humanity. . . . And so the person [of God] which before was simple and existed only in one nature, then subsists in and from two natures" (Lombard, *Sentences*, book III, dist. 6, ch. 3, 26).

²⁸ See, for example, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 2, art. 6. For a discussion of the "three opinions" in relation to developments within Aquinas's christology over the course of his career, see Michael Raschko, "Aquinas's Theology of the Incarnation in Light of Lombard's Subsistence Theory," *The Thomist* 65 (2001) 409–39.

²⁹ See Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 131.

³⁰ Lombard, *Sentences*, book III, dist. 10, ch. 1, 41.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For a helpful treatment of this issue that contextualizes Thomas's teaching, see Stephen F. Brown, "Thomas Aquinas and His Contemporaries on the Unique Existence in Christ," in *Christ among the Medieval Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers* (ed. Kent Emery and Joseph Wawrykow; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) 220–37.

The Greek patrimony of Christ's composite mode of existence as a single subsistence and Lombard's struggle to account for the human nature of Christ are two loci that spurred on medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas to wrestle with the question of Christ's unity in the order of being.³³

■ Reasons for a Single *Esse* Reading of the *De unione verbi incarnati*

The Argumentative Progression of the Articles Does not Allow a "Second Esse" Reading of Article Four

Many of the scholars who refer to article four to claim that Thomas abandoned a single *esse* position cling to his use of the word "*secundarium*" without any reference to other articles of the disputed question.³⁴ In fact, each preceding point leading up to article four and the one article that follows it hem the consideration into very narrow parameters rooted in the doctrine of the single composite subsistence of the Word as God and man. A sketch of the key hinges in this progression demonstrates why the second *esse* arguments betray Thomas's actual position.

In the first article, Thomas treats the mode of the hypostatic union in a fashion that is consistent with his other works, with his preference for the subsistence theory among the Three Opinions, and with the influence of the Greek fathers and early councils on his thought. Considering seventeen speculative objections that assert that a union between God and man in Christ must result in a conflation of the natures

³³ In *Super Sententiis*, lib. 3, dist. 6, q. 3, art. 2, ad 1, Thomas catalogs some attempts to account for Christ's human nature as an accident of the Word. Interestingly he refers to these as accounts of "antiqui" that are inaccurate. From his early writings, Thomas considered the question of Christ's unity and the status of his human nature to be a long-standing problem and not simply one of 13th-cent. speculations. "Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod humana natura in Christo habet aliquam similitudinem cum accidente, et praecipue cum habitu, quantum ad tria. Primo, quia advenit personae divinae post esse completum, sicut habitus, et omnia alia accidentia. Secundo, quia est in se substantia, et advenit alteri, sicut vestis homini. Tertio, quia melioratur ex unione ad verbum, et non mutat verbum; sicut vestis formatur secundum formam vestientis, et non mutat vestientem. Unde antiqui dixerunt, quod vergit in accidens; et quidam propter hoc addiderunt, quod degenerat in accidens: quod tamen non ita proprie dicitur; quia natura humana in Christo non degenerat, immo magis nobilitatur." Sr. Deloffre catalogs the different ways in which the other major authors of the 13th cent., with the issues raised by Lombard as a point of reference, framed Christ's human mode of existence in the order of being. These formulations included, among others: *esse simpliciter* and *esse personale* (used by Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great, and Bonaventure) and *esse hypostasis* (Albert the Great and Alexander of Hales). Conversely, many of these same authors, especially the Franciscans, employed the phrase *esse humanum* to speak of Christ's human nature. See Aquinas, *Question disputée* (ed. Deloffre), 45–50. A problem arose for these authors, however, regarding Christ's unity. How can the unity of Christ be articulated in terms of *esse simpliciter* "without eliminating the reality of the human nature?" (ibid., 46). To address this problem, Bonaventure spoke of the categorical status of Christ's human nature in relation to the divine *esse* of the Word as "inclining toward an accident" (*vergit in accidens*) (ibid., 47; Bonaventure formulates this position in the commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, book III, dist. 6, art. 1, q. 3.).

³⁴ See n. 8 above for a list of authors and works.

into something new or be only accidental, Thomas develops the distinction between person and nature to clarify precisely how the Incarnate Word is truly God and man. Having established that nature is the specific difference that makes something the certain kind of being that it is, and that this person is a concretely subsisting *suppositum* of a rational nature, Thomas draws the following conclusion: “nothing prevents some things that are not united in a nature from being united in a person, for an individual substance of a rational nature can have something that does not belong to the nature of the species: this is united to it personally, not naturally.”³⁵

Because it is possible for things that are not united in a nature to be united in a person, Thomas clarifies that in Christ “the non-composite divine person subsists in two natures.”³⁶ He then makes a conclusion about Christ’s being, or *esse*, that must be kept in mind when reading the fourth article: “the being [*esse*] of the person of the Word Incarnate is one from the perspective of the person subsisting, but not from the perspective of the nature.”³⁷

Having concluded in article one that the union of the two natures is according to the single subsistence of the person of the Word, Thomas then asks in the second article whether there is hypostatic (personal) unity in Christ, and, if so, how the duality of natures are maintained. The objections that Thomas considers raise two perennial concerns: first, that anything that is one by hypostasis cannot be identified as two things without duplicating the hypostases according to each nature; and, second, that the infinite being of the hypostasis of the Word cannot be the hypostasis of Christ’s created human nature. So, the objections press the problem raised by Lombard to their logical conclusions: Christ’s human nature, as something real and not nothing, it seems, is a hypostasis. As a result, there must be two *esses* and no substantial union, which is the Nestorian heresy; or Christ’s human nature takes on the status of some accidental property in relation to the Word, which would compromise the integrity of his human mode of existence.

Thomas dismisses any attempt to reduce Christ’s human nature to an accident. However, since the nature is complete, possessing a rational soul and body, what, if anything, would prevent it from being a *suppositum* and hypostasis, thereby making it a numerically second *esse*? Thomas answers this challenge in the following way:

So, then, because the human nature in Christ does not subsist separately through itself but exists in another, that is, in the hypostasis of the Word of God—not indeed as an accident in a subject, nor properly as a part in a whole, but by means of an ineffable assumption—on that account, the human nature in Christ can indeed be called something individual or particular or singular; but nevertheless, as it is not a person, Christ’s human nature cannot be called either a hypostasis or a *suppositum*. Hence it remains that in Christ there is but one hypostasis or *suppositum*, namely, that of the Divine Word.³⁸

³⁵ Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 1, 93.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ad 6, 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, ad 10, 101.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, art. 2, 113.

The work that Thomas does in this passage can be easily passed over without a full appreciation of its significance. Because Christ's human nature is whole and complete, it enjoys the status of individuality and singularity in the order of substance. On the other hand, what enables Thomas's account to avoid the Nestorian error of vitiating the union is that in the order of being the individual and singular nature, while being complete, is not a hypostasis or *suppositum*. This point is crucial for how one reads the formulation of article four. Thomas's explicit reference to the condemnation by the Second Council of Constantinople of any attempt to add a second subsistence or person to the mystery of Christ in the body of this article shows a self-awareness of how his account of Christ's unity stands in continuity with the post-Chalcedon patrimony.

In the third article, Thomas ties the ripening implications of these principles together in preparation for the direct account of Christ's *esse*. The careful linguistic formulation of the third article can be difficult to penetrate for modern readers. The question that Thomas asks at the start of the article is "whether Christ is one in the neuter or two" (*unum neutraliter vel duo*). What Thomas is aiming for with this construction follows upon the conclusions of the previous articles. Since he is not two persons, Christ cannot be said to be *alius et alius* (one person and another), but, as true God and true man, could he be said to be *aliud et aliud* (one reality and something else)? By reference to the neuter category, Thomas opens the way for a consideration of how Christ's hypostatic unity is related to his numeric unity (after Chalcedon, some had tried to say that Christ was one person but two things, each with its own separate subsistence). All of the fourteen objections that Thomas considers press the point of Christ's duality of natures, offering variations of the following conclusion: "Therefore Christ is one reality and something else (*aliud et aliud*), and accordingly he is two."³⁹

His terse response to these objections in the first *sed contra* is arresting and seemingly unorthodox: "Christ is not two persons nor two hypostases nor two *supposita*. . . . Christ is also not two natures since human nature is not predicated of Christ. Therefore Christ is not two."⁴⁰ What could Thomas mean by asserting that Christ is not two natures? The specificity of the question is important for understanding his point. The one Christ certainly has two natures, but it is the one person of the Word who *is* both God and man. So, Christ is not two natures in the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 3, arg. 6, 120–21. Thomas maintains this same point in *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 17, art. 1, ad 2: "Ad secundum dicendum quod, cum dicitur, Christus est aliud et aliud locutio est exponenda ut sit sensus, habens aliam et aliam naturam. Et hoc modo exponit Augustinus in libro contra Felicianum, ubi, cum dixisset, *in mediatore Dei et hominum aliud Dei filius, aliud hominis filius* subdit, *aliud, inquam, pro discretionem substantiae, non alius, pro unitate personae*. Et Gregorius Nazianzenus, in epistola ad Chelidonium, *si oportet compendiose dicere, aliud quidem et aliud ea ex quibus salvator est, siquidem non idem est invisibile visibili, et quod absque tempore ei quod sub tempore. Non autem alius et alius absit. Haec enim ambo unum*."

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati, Sed contra*, 123.

sense of being two different realities in the order of being: the union of the two natures in the one subsisting person constitutes the one Christ.

Any being can be considered one thing or many things, depending on whether or not the consideration is made from the perspective of its substantial unity or accidental or composite diversity. Thomas appeals to the distinction between something considered *secundum quid* (in a certain respect) or *simpliciter* (absolutely speaking) to demonstrate how this is true. Recognizing that a particular person is tall, dark, handsome, and skinny is to acknowledge many true things about them *secundum quid*. However, it does not make them many things *simpliciter*. Even in the order of substance, Thomas notes, following Aristotle, that two aspects are included: the “*suppositum*, which is not [a] predicate of something else, and [the] form or nature of the species, which is [a] predicate of the *suppositum*.”⁴¹ In the case of Christ, as true particular man, the human nature is predicated of the *suppositum* of the Word, but not according to a *per se* (subsistence) or absolute standing as a person or *suppositum* of that particular nature but as the nature assumed by the *suppositum*. So Thomas concludes that “Christ can in some way be called one because he is one by the *suppositum*, and he can in some way be called many, or two, because he has two natures.”⁴² This means that “if one certain *suppositum* has many substantial natures,” as is the case with Christ, “it will be one *simpliciter*, and many in a certain respect.”⁴³ Thomas clearly forges this conclusion as a first clarification of the *esse* question in Christ. Whatever is two or multiple in Christ is recognized *secundum quid* and not in the order of being.

Thus, when Thomas arrives at the famous fourth article of the disputed question, which asks “whether in Christ there is only one being (*esse*),” he very evidently considers the question to be answered already. So much so that, in the opening line of the body of the article, he says, “It should be said that the argument of this question is, in a certain sense, the same as that of the previous question, because something is said to be one and a being on the same grounds.”⁴⁴ Likewise, the *sed contra*, from whence the title of this paper is derived, invokes the distinction of the previous article to conclude that Christ is not two in the order of *esse*: “Everything that is one *simpliciter* is one according to being. But Christ is one *simpliciter*, as was said above. In Christ, therefore, there is one being [*esse*].”⁴⁵

What, then, does Thomas mean by his unique use of the word *secundarium* if it is not meant to indicate a second *esse*? It is clear that he means to qualify the truth of Christ’s human nature according to the *secundum quid*, or composite duality, that follows upon the Word’s possession of two existent natures.⁴⁶ In fact, he says

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, art. 3, 125.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 4, 133.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, *Sed contra*, 133.

⁴⁶ John Emery explains Aquinas’s intention as follows: “By means of this *hapax legomenon*, Aquinas does not posit a new distinct act of being in Christ; instead, he attempts to account for the

as much in the line preceding the famous passage: “there is another being of this *suppositum*,” he explains, “not insofar as this other being is eternal, but insofar as the *suppositum* was made man temporally.”⁴⁷ Why not conclude, as many have tried to claim,⁴⁸ that the *secundarium* entity, the human nature of Christ, contributes *esse* in a numerically second sense? The words of the sentence that follow his reference to the *secundarium* entity make the second *esse* conclusion impossible by clarifying that *esse* cannot be recognized without a corresponding *suppositum*: “If, however, there were two *supposita* in Christ, then each *suppositum* would have its own principal being of itself. And thus there would be in Christ a twofold being *simpliciter*.”⁴⁹ Given that this is not the case, the subordinate or secondary *esse* mentioned clearly pertains to Christ’s *secundum quid* duality and does not contribute *esse* in a numerically second manner, because there are not two *supposita* in Christ.⁵⁰ John Froula’s assessment seems to capture most strongly the sense of Thomas’s intention:

Christ does have a human life and principle of his assumed created nature that is not the divine *esse*. There is a secondary, or subordinate, *esse* of the human nature of Christ that is other than the divine *esse* and not the divine *esse*, that is, the act by which Christ is human. It is *esse* not in the suppositional sense, but in a legitimate analogical use of the word.⁵¹

What Christ’s human nature does contribute as numerically second is specified by Thomas in the fifth and final article of the disputed question, namely, the truth of his operational duality. “It should be said,” Thomas recognizes, “that Christ is one *simpliciter* on account of the *suppositum*. Nevertheless, there are two natures

creaturely character of his human nature, whose participated degree of being is different from the divine nature’s limitless being” (John Emery, “A Christology of Communication: Christ’s Charity according to Thomas Aquinas” [PhD diss., University of Fribourg, 2017] 87).

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 4, 135.

⁴⁸ See n. 8 above. In addition to the authors and positions outlined in n. 8, for a consideration of Aquinas’s ontology of the hypostatic union in relation to the work of Karl Rahner, Friedrich Schleiermacher, John Hick, Jacques Dupuis, and Jon Sobrino, see White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 91–111.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 4, 135.

⁵⁰ One of the great commentators on Aquinas, Dominic Bañez (1528–1604), recognizes that an *esse* cannot be posited without a suppositional reality: “The constitutive mode of a supposit is really distinct from that supposit as one thing from another. . . . All the more distinct then is *esse* from essence, for *esse* does not come to essence except through suppositality” (Dominic Bañez, *The Primacy of Existence in Thomas Aquinas* [trans. Benjamin S. Llamzon; Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1966] 49 [emphasis added]). For a helpful exploration of this issue, see Thomas M. Osborne, Jr., “Which Essence Is Brought into Being by the Existential Act?” *The Thomist* 81 (2017) 471–505.

⁵¹ John Froula, “*Esse Secundarium*: An Analogical Term Meaning that by which Christ Is Human,” *The Thomist* 78 (2014) 557–80, at 580. The article is also extremely helpful for its summary of a number of different readings of article four of the *De unione*. See also Victor Salas, “Thomas Aquinas on Christ’s *esse*: A Metaphysics of the Incarnation,” *The Thomist* 70 (2006) 577–603; and, Corey L. Barnes, “Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas on Person, Hypostasis, and Hypostatic Union,” *The Thomist* 72 (2008) 107–46, at 144.

in him: and therefore Christ is one agent, but there are two actions in him.”⁵² The human nature truly acts in a human mode; however, the truth of the human nature and its act do not constitute a second agent of action, but a second mode of being by which the one agent acts.⁵³ Corey Barnes recognizes that Thomas’s specification of Christ’s unity *simpliciter* in the order of *esse* and his *secundum quid* duality “prepares for consideration of Christ’s wills and operations.”⁵⁴ If Christ had more than one *esse*, his human actions would not enjoy a theandric character.

A Brief Note on Thomas’s Use of Secundarium in the “De unione”

There is a final contextual thought that indicates Thomas’s single *esse* mindset in this disputed question. It is understandable why readers are induced to read Thomas’s use of the word *secundarium* in a numerical sense, because of its semantic affinity to the number two and natural cognates from the root “second.” Translating *secundarium* as “secondary,” which is not inaccurate, leads the mind to think of something numerically or quantitatively second. The fact is, however, that the comparison made in *De unione* article four is not between that which is *primus* and that which is *secundus*, between numerically first and second things. Rather, the contrast is between that which is “predicated” of the Word Incarnate according to the *suppositum* and that which is predicated according to the created nature. Comparing what is *principale* and *secundarium* in Christ is a way of affirming the modes of being that the Word has through his composite natures.⁵⁵

Few scholars who have interpreted *De unione* article four as a break from his *unum esse* position have tested their readings on other places in his corpus where Thomas uses the distinction between *principale* and *secundarium*—a tool that he turns to not infrequently to clarify diverse aspects of a composite reality.⁵⁶

⁵² Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 5, ad 14, 145. Romanus Cessario clarifies this point in Aquinas’s thought by distinguishing the person and the natures as “effective subject” and “possessive subjects.” “As a personal unity,” Cessario argues, “Christ enjoys only one effective subject, the eternal Logos. But besides the effective principle of unity which Christ receives through his uncreated personhood, he also enjoys two possessive subjects, since each nature does what remains proper to it” (Romanus Cessario, *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* [Petersham: St. Bede’s Publications, 1990] 134).

⁵³ For a very tentative, but somewhat compatible, reading of *De unione*, article 4, see Michael Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) esp. 161.

⁵⁴ Barnes, *Christ’s Two Wills*, 244.

⁵⁵ This is why I have translated *secundarium* as “subordinate” in this article in my own translation of the *De unione*. *Secundarius* denotes a reality of a secondary or subordinate order and not a numeric continuum of discrete realities. Roy Deferrari offers the following English choices for *secundarius*, *a*, *um*: “coming in second place, subordinate, secondary, the opposite of *principalis*” (Roy J. Deferrari, *A Latin-English Lexicon of Saint Thomas Aquinas* [Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 1948] 1006).

⁵⁶ In addition to the examples provided below, here are two other texts that demonstrate Thomas’s recourse to the distinction between *principale* and *secundarium*: *Summa theologiae*, II–II, q. 17, art. 4, co: “In genere autem utriusque causae invenitur principale et secundarium. Principalis enim finis

Thomas's most concentrated use of this distinction is found in the section of the *Prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* devoted to the New Law or Gospel of Grace (qq. 106–114). It is used in this sequence as his preferred tool for clarifying the spiritual and material aspects of the New Law. In the first article (a. 106, a. 1) of this treatise, where Thomas asks whether the New Law is a “written law,” he answers: “the new law is chiefly (*principaliter*) the grace itself of the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who believe in Christ.”⁵⁷ Thomas teaches that the other elements of the New Law, which are not the grace of the Holy Spirit but are integrally related to it, are

of secondary [*secundaria*] importance, so to speak, in the New Law; and the faithful need to be instructed concerning them, both by word and writings, both as to what they should believe and what they should do. Consequently we must say that the New Law is in the first place [*principaliter*] a law that is inscribed on our hearts, but that secondarily [*secundario*] it is a written law.⁵⁸

Likewise, in a subsequent article on the same question, Thomas makes use of the same distinction to establish the unity of the New Law while also affirming its composite nature: “There is a two-fold element in the Law of the Gospel,” Thomas teaches, “there is the chief element [*principaliter*], viz., the grace of the Holy Spirit bestowed inwardly. . . . The other element of the Evangelical Law is secondary [*secundario*]: namely, the things of faith, and those commandments which direct human affections and actions.”⁵⁹

Thomas returns to this distinction numerous times throughout this sequence of questions to accentuate the primacy of the grace of the Holy Spirit in relation to the material components of the New Law.⁶⁰ It is clear from this usage that Thomas in no way intends to identify those secondary (or subordinate) aspects of the New Law that are related to the grace of the Holy Spirit as a numerically “second” law. Rather, Thomas invokes this comparison to accentuate the relationship of the two aspects, spiritual and material, of the New Law as one law with an ordering to the primary reality of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

est finis ultimus; secundarius autem finis est bonum quod est ad finem. Similiter principalis causa agens est primum agens; secundaria vero causa efficiens est agens secundarium instrumentale.” And, *De veritate*, q. 23, art. 1, ad 3: “Ad tertium dicendum, quod voluntas est alicuius dupliciter: uno modo principaliter, et alio modo secundario. Principaliter quidem voluntas est finis, qui est ratio volendi omnia alia; secundario autem est eorum quae sunt ad finem, quae propter finem volumus.”

⁵⁷ *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 106, art. 1. Taken from Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ed. Mortensen and Alarcon) 16:408.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 2, 409.

⁶⁰ Thomas also uses this distinction to distinguish the primary and subordinate ends of a composite action and the primary and secondary agents of a composite motion. In both cases the secondary component depends on the primary aspect. See, for example, *Summa contra gentiles*, book III, ch. 109, no. 5: “ut scilicet secundarius finis a principali dependeat, sicut secundarium agens a principali dependet” (Leonine ed. 14:341).

From this perspective, the position of the *De unione* is hardly as novel as it might appear when studied in christology without reference to other instances of the distinction between that which is *principale* and *secundarium* to underscore the ultimate unity of composite realities.⁶¹ Given the order of dependency or subordination of the *secundaria* to whatever is principal, many of the confusions surrounding article four could be avoided if *secundarium* were not presented by means of the potentially misleading cognates like “second,” but with ordered comparatives like primary or principal and subordinate.⁶²

■ Conclusion

What advantage is to be gained by wrestling with these complicated issues that putatively belong to a bygone age? These post-Chalcedonian attempts to articulate Christ’s unity are not merely academic, scholastic, or even thomistic. They pertain to the union of God and man in Christ as affirmed in the most basic sources of the Christian faith. As Thomas Joseph White observes, key passages in the New Testament about Christ

point us toward [a] deeper ontological mystery. How is it that God the Son and Word subsists as a human being, having a human nature, even while he retains the prerogatives of his divine identity and nature? Christ is able to cure the sick, raise the dead, and even forgive sins. Christ is also subject to human suffering, death, and resurrection from the dead. The subject who acts is one, but he acts always both as God and as man, simultaneously able to do what only God can do, and able to suffer what only a human being can suffer. To approach this mystery in its depth is to approach the heart of New Testament teaching. But this approach can only be one grounded in a distinctively metaphysical mode of Christological reflection.⁶³

Like the Greek authors after Chalcedon, Aquinas sought to illumine Christ’s unity and duality in terms of their metaphysical implications. By his appropriation and development of the post-Chalcedon tradition, Thomas understood that Jesus did not need a second *esse* to authenticate the truth of his humanity. What he assumed did not give him a new, second being; it gave him a new human mode of being, through which he loved and suffered in the single subsistent existence of the Word. Thomas’s formulation of Christ’s unity in the *De unione* is unique, but

⁶¹ Jason L. A. West (in “Aquinas on the Metaphysics of *Esse* in Christ,” *The Thomist* 66 [2002] 231–50) argues that there is no sense in which the *esse secundarium* of the *De unione* can be read without contradicting Aquinas’s metaphysics and consistent arguments against the christological heresies. West’s metaphysics are correct, but his reading of the *De unione* is not. If Aquinas were distinguishing between two numerically distinct *esses* in one subsistent being, his position in the *De unione* would contradict his principles. However, that is not the case. The subordinate, or *secundarium*, *esse* is not some metaphysically incoherent attempt to affirm a half-*esse* but an affirmation that the human nature of Christ is an existent particular but not a *per se* subsistence or person.

⁶² On translating the *De unione* in light of these controversies see, Nutt, introduction to Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, 58–59.

⁶³ White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 21.

it is precisely the uniqueness of this formulation, so vexing to commentators, that underscores his ultimate commitment to Christ's ontological unity: the *secundarium* of this enigmatic work is not another *esse* but the created mode of existence that Christ acted through as a human being.