Perfection and the Necessity of the Trinity in Aquinas

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Abstract

For Aquinas, the very meaning of perfection demands that there could be no absolute perfection that was not shared by three Persons. My first aim in this paper is to establish this point, which has been acknowledged only rarely by readers of Thomas, yet which follows unavoidably from Thomas's theology of the Word. I show as much by engaging with scholars who, rightfully attentive to Thomas's teaching on faith and reason, and to his rejection of "necessary reasons" for the Trinity, deny or fail to recognize this link between the meaning of perfection and the necessity of the Trinity. Such scholars, however, all end up running aground on claims that Thomas consistently registers. I hope to show, therefore, that new approaches to this area of Thomas's Trinitarian thought are needed: approaches that can acknowledge his presentation of perfection as necessarily Triune without violating the limits he places on natural reason.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, Trinity, perfection, faith and reason, necessary reasons, word

Introduction

For St. Thomas Aquinas, the very meaning of perfection demands that absolute perfection could not exist at all if it were not shared by three Persons.

That's a big claim. And there's good reason to think it can't be true. For, all through his career, Thomas is clear that it is only through faith that we can discover the truth of the Trinity.[1] Once the Trinity is accepted, theologians can offer *probable* arguments for the

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[1] See especially I *Sent*., d. 3, q. 1, a. 4; *In Boeth. de Trin.* q. 1, a. 4; *De Veritate* [=*DV*] q. 10, a. 13; and *Summa Theologiae* [=*ST*] I q. 32, a. 1.

Trinity; and these arguments can show a certain *congruence* or *fittingness* between belief in the Trinity and truths accessible to natural reason.[2] But no such argument can *prove* the Trinity, and Thomas's Trinitarian theology as a whole is normed by the limits he places on natural reason.[3] Yet it seems just as basic to Thomas's thought that natural reason *can* discover the meaning of absolute perfection.[4] But if natural reason *can* discover the meaning of absolute perfection, and if the meaning of absolute perfection intrinsically requires that an absolutely perfect God be a Triune God, then it would seem that natural reason can discover the Trinity. And, by the same logic, because Thomas is clear that natural reason *cannot* discover the Trinity, and because he is just as clear that natural reason *can* discover the meaning of absolute perfection, we would seem forced to conclude that Thomas does not—and cannot—bind the meaning of absolute perfection to the necessity of the Trinity.

Yet things are perhaps not so simple.

For, all through his mature corpus, Thomas consistently lays out a series of principles which seem to lead seamlessly and inexorably from the meaning of perfection to the necessity of the Trinity. We will work through all of these principles at some length in what follows. For now, we can just sketch them in the barest of terms. In brief: because God is absolutely perfect, He must understand, for understanding is a pure perfection; because God is intelligent, there must be a Word in God, for a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding; because there is a Word in God, there must be procession in God, for procession belongs to the *ratio* of a word; because there is procession in God, there must be real relation in God, for real relation follows on any procession within any unity of nature; because there is real relation in God, there must be real distinction in God, for real distinction belongs to the *ratio* of real relation; because God is simple, each of these really distinct entities must *be* the self-subsistent divine nature, and so each must *subsist* in God; and because a person is defined as that which subsists in a rational nature, each of these really distinct subsistent things in the intelligent divine nature must be a distinct divine Person.

Elsewhere, I have walked systematically through a number of Thomas's works in which he lays out these principles.[5] And, in so

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[2] See *Summa contra Gentiles* [=*SCG*] I, chs. 7-8; *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2.

[3] For more on the reach and role of reason in Trinitarian theology, see Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003), 1-32.

[4] For the "common" in God (including God's absolute perfection) as accessible to natural reason, see *ST* I q. 32, a. 1.

[5] See my "Giving Perfections, Receiving Perfections: The Essential Divine Attributes in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology," (PhD Diss., The Pontifical John Paul II Institute, 2017), 41-160, where I also give some sense for the parallel path that Thomas lays out with

doing, I have attempted to show that the logic at work here is, in fact, airtight and ironclad: Thomas begins with the intrinsic requirements of absolute perfection; he ends with personal plurality in God; and every step he takes follows unavoidably from the previous step and leads unavoidably to the subsequent step.

In our reflections here, we will reach the same conclusion. Yet we will do so to a particular purpose: for we hope to defend it from those who would deny it—or from those who, at the very least, come short of embracing it. For it is true—and it is important, and it is encouraging—that a small band of prominent scholars have acknowledged that Thomas, through the principles we just outlined, binds the meaning of perfection to the necessity of the Trinity.[6] Yet these scholars are dwarfed by others who act as through these principles did not exist, and who confidently register claims which, if these principles were accounted for, would need to be heavily qualified if not altogether scrapped.[7] And, finally, and most importantly for us, there is still another cluster of scholars who actively engage these principles, but who either argue or assume that there is something less than strict necessity at work here. This final set of scholars do not always actively deny that Thomas binds the logic of perfection to the necessity of the Trinity; yet they all read the above principles without embracing—or so much as acknowledging—this conclusion. And they thereby give the impression that these principles can be engaged without this conclusion's being reached.

I hope to show here, however, that they can only avoid this conclusion by failing to reckon with the plain meaning of the principles in question. I hope to show, that is, that these attempts to scale back the collective force of these principles ultimately fail to acknowledge the

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reference to the love that necessarily proceeds in any act of will. For an earlier treatment of these same principles, see Cyprian Vagaggini, "La hantise des *rationes necessariae* de saint Anselme dans la théologie des processions trinitaires de saint Thomas," trans. J. Evard, in *Specilegium Beccense. Congrès International de ixe centenaire de l'arrivée d'Anselm au Bec* (Paris: Vrin, 1959), 103-139; Vagaggini, however, comes short of acknowledging the full force of the principles to which he himself calls attention.

    [6] See John Milbank, "Truth and Vision," in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, eds. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (New York: Routledge, 2009), 69-115, especially 101-103; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Vol. I*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 287-288; and Wayne Hankey, *God in Himself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 134 and 147.

    [7] See Jean-Pierre Torrell, introduction to *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas*, by Leonard E. Boyle (Louvaine-la-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Institued d'Ètudes Médiévales, 2000), xxiv; Christopher J. Malloy, "The 'I-Thou' Argument for the Trinity: Wherefore Art Thou?" *Nova et Vetera* 15 (2017), 113-159, especially 115-116, 118, and 125-137; and Dominic Holtz, "Divine Personhood and the Critique of Substance Metaphysics," *Nova et Vetera* 12 (2014), 1191-1213, on 1213. For an earlier example, see Ralph Masiello, "Reason and Faith in Richard of St Victor and St Thomas," *New Scholasticism* 48 (1974), 233-243, especially 234-236.

actual force of these principles, and that they thereby end up running aground on the plain meaning of these principles—and on the plentiful texts in which Thomas articulates them. And, in showing as much, I hope to establish that the conclusion *is* unavoidable: for Thomas, the very meaning of absolute perfection, on its own terms, demands that it must exist as shared and as Triune, or it could not exist at all.

To see as much, we will begin, in Section I, by laying out the assorted ways in which these scholars—out of an entirely appropriate and praiseworthy desire to uphold the limits that Thomas places on natural reason—uncouple the meaning of perfection from the necessity of the Trinity. As we will see, these scholars can, at least for our purposes, be roughly divided into two closely related "camps": the first camp holds that natural reason cannot discover that a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding, or that such a Word is necessary present in God; and the second camp holds that, while natural reason can discover that an inner word is *present* in God, it cannot conclude that this word is a distinct divine *Person*. After presenting these two positions, we will see that neither can do justice to—and that neither can be sustained in the face of—principles that Thomas presents all through his mature Trinitarian theology. Specifically, Section II will show the shortcomings of our first camp, and Section III will draw out those of our second camp. Section IV, finally, will hone in on a basic difficulty common to both camps: for, as we will see, neither of these positions can be coherently maintained unless one holds, at least implicitly, that natural reason cannot, under any circumstance, discover some facet of a reality that we encounter among sensible creatures. This point will be central to our argument here, so we can repeat it: the particular strategies by which each of our two camps shroud the Trinity from natural reason end up—usually inadvertently—*shrouding a reality we encounter among sensible creatures from natural reason.*[8]

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[8] While I hope that this point will be enough to show that both of these positions are too problematic to be ultimately tenable, we will not have space to respond in detail to all of the arguments that might be marshalled out in their favor. First of all, we cannot address the texts that each camp cites in support of its position (members of the first camp cite *De Potentia* [=*DP*] q. 8, a. 1, ad 12 and *DV* q. 4, a. 2, ad 5; those in the second camp cite *SCG* I, ch. 53 and IV, ch. 11; and either camp might also cite *DV* q. 10, a. 13, ad 2 and *In Boeth. de Trin.*, q. 1, a. 4, ad 6). Elsewhere, however, I hope to show that these texts, which might initially seem to stand as open-and-shut sources of support for these respective positions, are actually far more complicated than they initially appear. And, perhaps even more significantly, we cannot address ways in which each camp invokes Thomas's teaching on *analogy*, along with his *apophaticism* (and so his insistence that, even with faith, we cannot know *how* God exists, or *how* God understands) in order to downplay the force of these principles (for some examples of this move, see Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Murphy [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 185; Matthew Levering follows Emery here in *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016], 96n.108). I have addressed

Before beginning, however, I should make absolutely clear what I do *not* hope to accomplish here: I do not in any way hope to conclude that, for Thomas, natural reason can discover the Trinity, or that Thomas ultimately violates his own prohibition of "necessary reasons." This may come as something of a surprise. For it should be abundantly clear by now—and it will become clearer and clearer as we continue—that I *do* hope to establish, beyond any room for any real doubt, that, for Thomas, the very logic of absolute perfection requires that it be Triune perfection. And I have no plans of calling into question Thomas's teaching that natural reason can discover the meaning of absolute perfection. Yet my aim is *not* to conclude that, therefore, Thomas opens up the possibility of our discovering the Trinity apart from faith and apart from Revelation.

Instead, my aim here will be a bit more modest. Most immediately, it will be to expose the inadequacies that plague all of the currently available explanations as to *how* Thomas can avoid laying bare the Trinity to natural reason given what he says about the *ratio* of understanding, the *ratio* of a word, and so on. And, in showing as much, I hope to achieve a second, and deeper, goal. For I hope to show that there is a question here that has yet to be answered. Indeed, I hope to show that there is a question that has yet to be even *asked* with the requisite seriousness, and whose difficulty has yet to be acknowledged. This question comes overwhelmingly to the fore when one admits *both* that Thomas binds the meaning of perfection to the necessity of the Trinity, *and* that Thomas denies the possibility of the Trinity's ever being discovered by natural reason. For, when one acknowledges both these points, and when one refuses to let one of them crowd out the other, one is faced with a very difficult question: *how* Thomas can hold them both without merely contradicting himself?[9] In what follows, I hope to show that this question

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this point at length—and I have attempted to account for Thomas's claims in, for example, *ST* I q. 32, a. 1, ad 2—in "Giving Perfections, Receiving Perfections," 89-105; and we will speak to it, at least indirectly, at various points as we continue (see especially in n.32 below). For now, however, we can stress that, again, even though we will not be able to speak to every aspect of our two positions, we *will* see enough to conclude that they are untenable, and that no amount of appeals to analogy, to apophaticism, or to any "proof texts" can make them any more viable.

[9] Importantly, none of the figures mentioned in n.6 above end up asking this difficult question. Pannenberg merely notes that there is a tension here without any attempt to resolve it. Hankey goes further, arguing that this tension *cannot* be resolved: for Hankey, Thomas contradicts himself here in a flurry of "incongruities" (*God in Himself*, 134) and "incoherences" (147). Milbank, finally—to put the matter somewhat crassly—does not so much reconcile the strength of these arguments with Thomas's distinction between faith and reason as invoke these arguments in order to call this distinction (or at least any straightforward reading of it) into question. For more on Milbank on this score, see Paul J. DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 171-196.

needs to be asked. And I hope thereby to open up space for, and perhaps even to inspire, new attempts to grapple with this question.[10] In order to do so, however, we must spend the bulk of our time here establishing the most contested point: for Thomas, the very meaning of perfection requires that it be Triune perfection, and readings of Thomas that refuse to acknowledge as much ultimately run into serious difficulties.[11]

I. The Two Camps

a) The First Camp

Bernard Lonergan articulates the position of our first camp clearly enough when he writes that

> though our *intelligere* is always a *dicere*, this *cannot be demonstrated of God's*. Though we can demonstrate that God understands, for understanding is a pure perfection, still we can no more than conjecture the mode of divine understanding and so *cannot prove that there is a divine Word* . . . Aquinas regularly writes as a theologian and not as a philosopher; hence regularly he simply states what is simply true, that *in all intellects there is a procession of inner word.*[12]

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[10] I myself tentatively outline two possible approaches to this question—which can hopefully bring us further than can either of the two positions we will treat here—in "Giving Perfections, Receiving Perfections," 111-114, and in "The Reach of Reason and *The Eyes of Faith:* Pierre Rousselot and the Question of 'Necessary Reasons' in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology," forthcoming in *Gregorianum.*

[11] Before beginning, we should stress a basic point: if the arguments that Thomas so consistently lays out from the meaning of absolute perfection to the necessity of the Trinity are, in fact, airtight and logically compelling, then no amount of appeals to the limits that Thomas places on natural reason can make them any less so. These limits, therefore, *cannot be invoked in order to deny the conclusions to which these arguments unavoidably lead*. Instead, this conclusion could *only* be denied by showing that, in fact, there is a hole at some point in these arguments—and our main aim here will be to show that no such hole exists (indeed, there is good reason to think that Thomas sees *no incompatibility at all* between these arguments and these limits, for he often articulates them in immediately adjoining passages. See my "Giving Perfections, Receiving Perfections," 112-113 for more on this point). Indeed, speaking more generally, there are any number of other considerations which are doubtless relevant and important, but which we cannot treat in any detail here: the distinct ways in which Thomas treats the common the proper in God, the role of "*redoublement*" in his Trinitarian theology, and the more general distinction and relationship between faith and reason (and between theology and philosophy), just to name a few (plus the role of analogy and apophaticism mentioned in n.8 above). Yet, as important as all of these points are, it remains the case that, if the arguments that Thomas lays out really are as strong as we will contend that they are, then none of these points can be invoked in order to show otherwise. Again, our conclusions here can *only* be refuted by showing that there is a hole somewhere in the path that, as we will argue, make them unavoidable.

[12] *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 204; emphasis added.

Thus, Thomas may well hold that God's *intelligere* is, in fact, a *dicere*; and he may well tell us that "in all intellects there is a procession of inner word." Yet, in registering these claims, he speaks not as a "philosopher," but as a "theologian." These truths, therefore, cannot be proven through philosophical reflection; they can only be received through Revelation, and so it is only with Revelation that we can know with certainty "that there is a divine Word."

This first approach can also boast the adherence of the figure who has offered by far the most sustained and sophisticated engagement with the question of "necessary reasons" in Aquinas: R. L. Richard.[13] And Richard puts the matter even more strongly than Lonergan had: he writes that "the principle calling for universal procession of an inner word in intellectual activity was *not a philosophical law*, but rather a *strictly theological* generalization dependent for its ultimate formulation on knowledge of the first trinitarian procession *precisely as revealed*."[14] Thus, the fact that a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding—from which it follows that there must be a *divine* Word in the *divine* understanding—is available to us *only* through theological reflection on Revelation.[15]

More briefly, and more recently, David B. Burrell seems to have thrown in his lot with this camp: he affirms that Thomas's teaching on the word "in no way contradicts his previous strictures against knowing what divinity is like," and he treats a reference to Lonergan as sufficient in order to justify this claim.[16] With similar brevity, Matthew Levering writes that "Aquinas's knowledge of God's knowledge and will...does not make the Trinity rationally necessary"; and the only support Levering offers is a reference to the passage from Lonergan we gave above.[17] And, finally, Timothy L. Smith, again with reference to Lonergan, writes, "The fact that Thomas states 'that in all intellects there is a procession of an inner word' is *not* a datum of rational reflection *but* the truth as made known *by revelation*."[18]

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[13] Richard's *The Problem of an Apologetical Perspective in the Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1963) is the only monograph devoted entirely to this question.

[14] *Problem*, 230; emphasis added. Such strong language redounds throughout *Problem*: see also 188, 226, 302, 307, 308, and 330.

[15] Thus, Richard writes that "the *existence* and proper predication of the Divine Word" is unknowable apart from Revelation (*Problem*, 188; emphasis added).

[16] *Aquinas: God and Action*, third edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 175-176, quoted on 175; this passage comes at the end of Burrell's reflections on the divine Word on 172-176.

[17] *Scripture and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 83n.27.

[18] *Thomas Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 76; emphasis added. In a related move, a number of scholars not only argue that *we cannot know* that a word is necessarily present in every act of understanding; instead, they even argue that, *in fact*, this necessity is limited to human or creaturely understanding. And so they hold that, if a Word

b) The Second Camp

According to the second camp, in contrast, natural reason can discover that the *presence* of a divine Word follows necessarily on the meaning of understanding, but it cannot discover that this Word is really a distinct divine *Person*. Gilles Emery puts the matter quite clearly: he reminds us that "faith...alone causes us to know the divine Person of the Word";[19] and he justifies this claim by writing, "Philosophical thought can discover the *presence* of a word within the divine mind (see *SCG* I, ch. 53), but it cannot reach the *personal distinctiveness* and *hypostatic subsistence* of this Word (see *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2)."[20] Emery elaborates his position further elsewhere:

> St. Thomas certainly does not claim that the *real distinction* between divine Word and the Father who utters it can be proved by reason (that would mean proving something which only faith can teach us), but the reasoning showing the *existence* of a Word in God (irrespective of the form which its reality in God takes, that is, of the problem of its *personality* and of its *real relationship* with the entity from which it proceeds) would however seem to include all the rigor of mature Thomist thinking.[21]

Thus, Emery once more contrasts "the *real distinction* between the divine Word and the Father," which cannot "be proved by reason," to the "*existence* of a Word in God," which Thomas establishes with all desirable rigor.

We see something similar in Hyacinthe Paissac's classic study on the inner word, where Paissac claims that Thomas "demonstrates simply...that, in God, because there is intellection, *there is necessarily* a principle and a term [i.e., a word] of this intellection; but the principle and the term (or word) are not really distinct, *or at least one cannot know it*, and there is still no allusion to a *personal* word."[22] Paissac continues that Thomas does not make "'manifest'...that the Word in God is *really distinguished* from its principle; but simply that, in God, there is the *presence* of a Word."[23] Thus, for Paissac as

is present in God, then this presence is not required by the structure of understanding-as-such. Cesar Izquierdo gives, and refutes, some examples of this approach in "La theologia del verbo de la 'Summa Contra Gentiles,'" *Scripta Theologica* 14 (1982), 551-580, on 570n.54 and 571n.55. We will return to this point ourselves in Section II.

[19]   *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2007), 82.

[20]   *Ibid.*, 82n.44; emphasis added.

[21]   *Trinity in Aquinas*, 98; emphasis added.

[22]   *Theologie du Verbe. Saint Augustin et saint Thomas* (Paris: Cerf, 1951), 167n.1; emphasis added.

[23]   *Ibid.*, 172n.1; emphasis added. See also 175n.3. Paissac also offers some developed thoughts on faith, reason, and the word in *ibid.*, 220-231; yet these final reflections, while often rich, cannot ultimately resolve our question here.

for Emery, a clear line runs between the presence of a Word in God and the distinct personal subsistence of that Word. Even more briefly, Emmanuel Durand seems to join his francophone confreres when he writes, "Even if the word belongs to the perfection of human knowledge, there is no rational necessity that it be *personal* in God."[24] Finally, John McDermott offers a somewhat different, and far more sustained, iteration of this position, arguing that "Thomas considers the divine *processions* and *relations* naturally knowable; supernatural revelation is required only to identify these relations as *persons*."[25]

Having presented these positions, we can now begin showing their shortcomings. And we can do so by tracing out in detail the path by which Thomas links the meaning of absolute perfection to the necessity of personal plurality in God.

II. Necessarily Present

No one contests that natural reason has access to the first step of this path: an absolutely perfect nature must be an intelligent nature. For God, as absolutely perfect, must enjoy all perfections found in creatures; understanding is such a perfection; God, therefore, must understand.[26]

Things begin to get interesting, however, with the next step: that a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding, which means that a word must be present in all acts of understanding everywhere, no matter what—including, analogously, in God. Thomas puts this point most strongly in two passages, both of which we can run through in some detail. The most relevant chunk of the first passage, which comes from the *DP*, begins as Thomas writes that

> we must attribute to God every perfection that is in creatures, *as regards the ratio of the perfection absolutely*, but not as regards the way in which this perfection exists in this one or that one . . . Now in creatures nothing is more excellent or more perfect than to understand . . . It follows then that understanding is in God *as well as whatsoever belongs to the ratio of understanding*, although it belongs to God in one way and to creatures in another.[27]

With these points in the background, Thomas introduces "the concept of the intellect"; he identifies this concept with "the interior word"; and he continues: "Therefore, *because there is understanding*

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in God, and because He understands all other things in understanding Himself, there must be in Him the conception of the intellect, *which belongs absolutely to the ratio of understanding*."[28]

This claim, which is presented in the strongest of terms, is of the greatest importance for us: if a Word is present in God, then it is because such a word "belongs *absolutely* to the *ratio* of understanding." It is not merely that the structure of *human* or *creaturely* understanding requires the presence of such a word; and so the necessity entailed here does not arise from any features unique to human or creaturely intellects which might distinguish them from the divine intellect. Thomas is absolutely clear on this point: he begins by distinguishing "the *ratio*" of a given perfection from "the *way* in which this perfection exists in this one or that one," and he goes on immediately to *again* distinguish "whatsoever belongs to the *ratio* of understanding" from anything that might follow on the "way" in which understanding exists in God or in creatures. And, after drawing these two rapid-fire distinctions between the *ratio* of understanding and the different *ways* in which understanding exists in different natures, Thomas plants the inner word squarely within the *ratio* of understanding: the necessity of such a word is not limited to any of the *ways* in which understanding exists, and it is certainly not limited to human or creaturely understanding. Instead, a word "belongs *absolutely* to the *ratio* of understanding." The very *ratio* of understanding, then, requires that there could be no understanding anywhere, or of any sort, without *some* sort of word being *somehow* present. And so the very meaning of understanding demands that if a word were simply absent from God, then God could not understand at all.

And we see much the same point at the end of Thomas's career: in his Commentary on John, he writes that "it is *necessary* to have a word in *any* intellectual nature, for it is *of the very ratio of understanding* that intellect, in understanding, should form something. Now what is formed is called a *word*, and so it follows that in *all* who understand there must be a word."[29] Again, Thomas does not limit this necessity to acts of understanding in a human or a created nature; instead, he extends it, analogously, to "*any* intellectual nature" and to "*all* who understand." Indeed, the very next sentence finds Thomas writing, "Now, intellectual natures are of three kinds: human, angelic *and divine*."[30] Thus, immediately after writing that "it is *necessary* to have a word in *any* intellectual nature," Thomas *explicitly includes* the divine nature within the "intellectual natures" in which such a

[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *In Ioan.*, #25.
[30] *In Ioan.*, #26.

word is "necessary."[31] Again, Thomas could not be any clearer: a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding simply. Were God to lack such a Word, therefore, there would be no analogy, but *equivocity*, between our understanding and His. Simply because of *what it means to understand*, an act of understanding—including, analogously, the *divine* act of understanding—would necessarily *cease to be an act of understanding* were it to lack such a word.[32]

Thus, we take our most basic point to be established: according to Thomas, a word belongs absolutely to the *ratio* of understanding, and so merely from the fact that God understands—and regardless of the unknowable mode of divine understanding—it follows unavoidably that a Word must necessarily be present in God.[33] The members of our first camp, for their part, hold that natural reason could never, under any circumstances, conclude that a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding, or that such a word is necessarily present in God. As we will see in detail in Section IV, however, they can only do so by holding—either explicitly or implicitly—that *some dimension of what it means to understand*—and so some dimension of *a reality that we encounter among sensible creatures*—must be absolutely inaccessible to natural reason. Before pursuing this point, however, we will lay the groundwork for seeing that those in our second camp ultimately end up in a similar spot. For, as we will argue presently, Thomas proceeds as inexorably from the presence of a divine Word to its distinct personhood as he does from the meaning of understanding to the presence of that Word. And we will also see that the path he lays out demands that this second position can only be sustained

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[31] Thomas makes clear in ##26-28 that doing so by no means requires that he paper over the radical differences between human, angelic, and divine acts of understanding; instead, it simply requires that, *no matter how radical* these differences might be, they cannot open up any space at all for an act of understanding that is simply word-less.

[32] Thomas writes that "whenever something that is of the *ratio* of a thing is taken away, it must be that *the thing itself is removed*, just as were reason removed, man would be destroyed" (I *Sent*., d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3); and, "[f]rom the very fact that something is attributed to anything, everything that is of the *ratio* of the former must be attributed to the latter" (*ST* I q. 28, a. 3). Thus, no amount of apophatic or analogous distance between God and creature, and no amount of (rightful) insistence that we cannot know the *way* in which a given perfection exists in God, can soften the necessity with which all that belongs to the *ratio* of a given term (as a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding) must be present *in some way* in God if that term is predicated properly of God. This point will be just as relevant when we come to the *rationes* of a word and of relation with reference to the second camp, and so we must bear it in mind throughout.

[33] Indeed, in addition to the two more striking passages we have treated here, Thomas makes much the same point all through his mature Trinitarian theology: see *SCG* IV 11§9, 11§10, and 14§3; *CT* I, 37; *DP* q. 8, a. 1 and q. 9, a. 9; and *ST* I q. 27, a. 1 and q. 37, a. 1. Also relevant here—though very different, and quite a bit more complicated—is *in Metap*., #2539, where Thomas seems to suggest that *Aristotle* discovered that a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding. For more on *in Metap*., #2539 in this connection, see my "The Reach of Reason and *The Eyes of Faith*."

if natural reason cannot, under any circumstances, know something belonging to the inner meaning of a word, of procession, of relation, of simplicity, or of personhood—all of which, like understanding, we can discover through reflection on sensible creatures.

III. Necessarily Personal

a) From a Word to Procession

The path Thomas lays out from the presence of a divine Word to the distinct personhood of that Word is a bit longer and more involved than the one leading from the meaning of perfection to the presence of a divine Word. Tracing it out, therefore, will take more time. Yet, though there are more steps involved here, we will see that each such step follows unavoidably from the one immediately before it in order to form an inescapable chain of reasoning.

We can begin where our engagement with the first position left off: because a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding, a Word must necessarily be present in God. Again, all members of the second camp happily accept that we can know as much by natural reason. Yet their position begins to falter as Thomas thinks through the nature of an inner word. For Thomas tells us quite plainly that "it belongs to the *ratio* of an inner word, which is the intention understood, that it *proceed from the one understanding*."[34] And again, "the very concept of the heart *has of its ratio* that it *proceed from another*."[35] Thus, just as a word belongs to the *ratio* of understanding, so too procession belongs to the *ratio* of a word. Were a word to cease to proceed, therefore, it would cease to be a word. Indeed, Thomas even applies this claim directly to the divine Word, writing of "the *divine* Word" that, "*from the very fact that it is a word,* it has the *ratio* of *proceeding* from another," and that "the Word of God . . . [has] the *ratio of proceeding* from another."[36] Thus, if there is a *word* in God—and if, as Thomas makes clear with some frequency, "word" is predicated *analogously*, and not equivocally, of us and of God—then there must necessarily be *procession* in God.

And this note of procession within God takes on added heft in light of Thomas's teaching that, because of divine simplicity, the divine Word that *proceeds in* the divine essence must be *identical to* the divine essence. As Thomas puts it, "in God, to understand and to be are the same; and so the Word of the divine intellect is

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[34] *SCG* IV 11§13.
[35] *ST* I q. 34, a. 1. Thomas makes clear in the same passage that such a "concept of the heart" is an inner word.
[36] *De rationibus fidei*, ch. 3.

not an accident but *belongs to its nature*, because *whatever is in the nature of God is God.*"[37] Because of divine simplicity, "whatever is in the nature of God *is* God." If, therefore, there is a Word *in* the divine nature, then divine simplicity demands that this Word must *be* the divine nature.

b) From Procession to Real Relation

The next step Thomas takes follows just as naturally and inevitably from the intrinsic demands of procession within a single nature: he writes that

> when something *proceeds from a principle of the same nature*, it is *necessary* that both the one proceeding and the source of procession agree in the same order, and in this way it *must* be that they have *real relations* to each other. Therefore, because the divine processions are in the identity of the same nature, as above explained, *it is necessary* that these relations, according to the divine processions, are *real relations*.[38]

Thus, we saw above that understanding follows on the very meaning of perfection; that a word follows on the very *ratio* of understanding; that procession follows on the very *ratio* of a word; and that the identity of the divine Word and the divine nature follows on the very meaning of divine simplicity. And we see now that reciprocally real relations follow *necessarily* on any procession within "the identity of the same nature." It is true that Thomas does not use the language of "*ratio*" in drawing out this note of reciprocally real relation: he does not, that is, claim that real relation belongs to the *ratio* of procession. Yet, he *does* use the language of "necessary"; he uses it twice in two sentences; and he presents this necessity as following *directly* and *exclusively* from the fact that the divine Word proceeds within the one divine nature.[39]

Indeed, the specifics of Thomas's claim here should already be enough to establish the necessity with which real relation in God follows on procession in God. Yet, because Thomas does not use *ratio*-language to secure this point, we can reinforce it by showing that it follows from a number of angles.[40] First of all, Thomas

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[37] *In Ioan.*, #28. Thomas makes similar points with great regularity in his Trinitarian theology: see *SCG* IV 11§11; *CT* I 42; *De rationibus fidei*, ch. 3; *DP* q. 8, a. 1; q. 9, a. 5; *ST* I q. 27, a. 2.

[38] *ST* I q. 28, a. 1. See also *DP* q. 7, a. 10, arg. 3 and ad 3.

[39] Importantly, we will see in a moment that such real relations necessarily attend not only on procession within a numerical identity of nature, but even on any procession within a shared specific nature.

[40] Doing so will also allow us to speak more directly to certain members of the second camp, who seem to suggest (at least at times, and not without ambiguity) that natural

elsewhere—while asking whether there is real relation in God—make an even more basic point. For he makes clear that if only some processions require a *reciprocally* real relation, then *any procession of any kind at all* intrinsically requires at least *a* real relation. He tells us that

> *whenever* one thing originates from another *there must be a real relation*—either *only on the part of that which originates*, when it receives not the same nature as its principle, as in the creature's origination from God—or *on the part of both*, when that which originates attains to the nature of its principle, as when a man is begotten, and a real relation results between father and son.[41]

As we saw above, when the one proceeding shares in "the nature of its principle," there is a *reciprocally* real relation between the one proceeding and its principle. Indeed, Thomas is even clear here that such reciprocal real relation follows not only from procession within a numerical unity of nature—which is found only in God— but also from any procession within the same specific nature, which can be found "when a man is begotten"—or, indeed, in any univocal generation. And, even more importantly, he is explicit that even when there is no such unity of nature, *any* procession of *any* sort requires at least *one* real relation, even if it is not reciprocated. That is, even procession outside of a unity of nature requires that the one proceeding be really related to its principle, even if that principle is only rationally related to that which proceeds from it.[42]

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reason can advance up to, but that it cannot take, the step from procession in God to real relation in God. Paissac, for example, seems to vacillate between suggesting that natural reason falters at the move from procession to real relation and suggesting that it falters at the move from real relation to real distinction (see *Théologie du Verbe*, 175 and 175n.3). Emery, at least at one point, seems to deny that natural reason can take the step from procession in God to real relation in God: for he draws a line between the existence of the divine Word (which we *can* know by natural reason) and its "*real relation* with the entity from which it proceeds" (which he suggests that we *cannot* know: recall n.21 above). Yet, elsewhere, Emery writes that "word" is "a relative term," and even that "*the notion of 'word'* implies a *real relationship* with the intellect that is its principle" (*Trinity, Church, and the Human Person*, 78-79; emphasis added). Thus, for Emery, real relation enters (at least implicitly) into the very "*notion* of 'word'"—from which it seems to follow that, if natural reason can know that there is a *Word* in God, and if it can know "the notion of 'word,'" then it can know that there is necessarily *real relation* in God. Thus, as with Paissac, there is perhaps an ambiguity here. Yet, again, both thinkers seem to insert an unbridgeable gap either at the transition from procession to real *relation*, or at the transition from real relation to real *distinction*. We will see here, however, that neither such position is ultimately viable (R. L. Richard had already noted as much, with reference to Paissac, in *Problem*, 32; Vagaggini puts the same criticism a bit less diplomatically in "La hantise," 135n.94).

[41] *DP* q. 8, a. 1.

[42] Returning to the procession of a word, Thomas also suggests—without using language quite as strong as he does elsewhere—that reciprocal real relation follows on *any* procession of *any* word in *any* intellect: see *ST* I q. 28, a. 1, ad 4 and q. 28, a. 4, ad 1.

This point is most significant because, as we will see in a moment, the very *ratio* of real relation—even when it is not reciprocal—includes a *real distinction* between the things related. Yet we can conclude these points on intra-divine procession by noting that Thomas not only presents such real distinction as following from real relation; instead, he even presents it as following from *any procession of any kind*. Thomas puts this point most strongly when he writes that "procession, *insofar as it is procession*, means a *real distinction* with respect to the principle from which it proceeds."[43] Just so, coming from the other direction, he writes that "a principle implies *distinction* from that of which it is the principle,"[44] and he does so after having tied "principle" directly to "procession" earlier in the same work: "The word 'principle' signifies *only that from which another proceeds*; since *anything* whence something *proceeds* in any way we call a principle."[45] Thus, anything that proceeds is from a principle, and the very word "principle" implies a "distinction" between this principle and that which proceeds from it. Finally, Thomas puts this point most plainly when he writes that "the same thing does not proceed from itself."[46] And, indeed, this point may be obvious. Yet it will prove crucial for our purposes, and so we can reiterate it: Thomas explicitly presents this note of *distinction*—and he even makes explicit, in one case, that the distinction in question is *real*—as *following on the very meaning of procession*.[47]

c) From Real Relation to Distinct Persons

The most basic point regarding procession, however, had already been secured by Thomas's explicit claim that, "because the divine processions are in the identity of the same nature, as above explained, *it is necessary* that these relations, according to the divine processions, are *real* relations."[48] For, later in the same question, Thomas goes on to bind real relation indissolubly to real *distinction*:

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[43] I *Sent.*, d. 15, q. 1, a. 1.

[44] *ST* I q. 41, a. 4, ad 3. The context makes it clear enough that Thomas is speaking here of *real* distinction.

[45] *ST* I q. 33, a. 1.

[46] *CT* I, ch. 52.

[47] On this note of real distinction, one might object that, in fact, Thomas speaks quite frequently of something proceeding from itself: that is, he claims regularly that "the free is the cause of itself [*liber est causa sui*]." For ways in which this maxim in no way undermines our claim here, however, see Jamie Anne Spiering, "'*Liber est Causa sui*': Thomas Aquinas and the Maxim 'The Free is the Cause of itself,'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 65 (2011), 351-376, especially 354n.8.

[48] *ST* I q. 28, a. 1.

> From the very fact that something is attributed to anything, everything that is of the *ratio* of the former must be attributed to the latter . . . Belonging to *the ratio of relation* is the regard of one to another, according as one is relatively *opposed* to another. Therefore, because there is in God real relation, there must also be real opposition. And *relative opposition, in its ratio, includes distinction*. Hence, *there must be real distinction in God* . . . according to what is relative.[49]

Thus, Thomas is explicit that opposition belongs to the *ratio* of relation, and that distinction belongs to the *ratio* of opposition. Thus, if there is real relation in God—and, again, there *must* be reciprocally real relation in God if there is procession within the identity of the divine nature—then there must be real distinction in God. The very *ratio* of real relation makes this conclusion unavoidable.[50]

Yet if the *ratio* of real relation demands that the divine Word must *exist* as really distinct from His Speaker, then the meaning of divine simplicity demands that this same divine Word must *subsist* as really distinct from His Speaker. For Thomas is clear that, because God is simple, the divine nature must be self-subsistent,[51] and he regularly argues that

> in God existence and understanding are the same: hence the Word of God is not an accident in Him, or an effect of His, but belongs to His very nature. And therefore it must be something *subsistent*, for *all* that *is in the divine nature subsists*; and *therefore* Damascene says that 'the Word of God is substantial and has *hypostatic* being.'[52]

As we saw above, divine simplicity demands that the Word cannot be *in* the divine nature without *being* the divine nature;[53] we see now that the self-subsistence of the divine nature demands that the Word cannot *be* the divine nature without *subsisting* in and as that nature. To *be in* God is to *subsist as* God, and so if the divine Word *is* really distinct from His Speaker, then the divine Word must *subsist* as really distinct from His Speaker.

And, finally, because Speaker and Word each subsist in the supremely intelligent divine nature, and because Thomas defines a

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[49] I q. 28, a. 3.

[50] See also *DP* q. 8, a. 2, ad 3: "just as things which pertain to goodness or wisdom, such as intelligence and so on, are really in God, even so that which is proper to a real relation, namely *opposition and distinction*, is really in God."

[51] See *ST* I q. 3, a. 3. Thus, while Thomas is careful to distinguish the common from the proper in God, he here suggests strongly that the logic we are pursuing here (in brief, if a term is predicated properly and analogously of God, then so too must be all that "pertains" to that term) holds in things said of God relatively no less than things said absolutely (such as goodness and wisdom).

[52] *ST* I q. 34, a. 2, ad 1. See also *ST* I q. 27, a. 2, ad 2; q. 29, a. 4; *SCG* IV 26§7; *DP* q. 9, a. 9; and *In Ioan.*, #28.

[53] Recall n.37 above.

"person" as a "subsisting thing in a rational nature,"[54] it follows that Speaker and Word must, by definition, be distinct *Persons* in God. Thomas puts the matter plainly: "there are *multiple real relations* in God; hence it follows that there are also *multiple realities subsisting* in the divine nature; which means that there are *multiple Persons* in God."[55] Personal plurality in God follows necessarily from a plurality of really distinct subsisting things in God; and a plurality of really distinct subsisting things in God follows necessarily from the existence of multiple real relations in God. Yet, as we saw above, the existence of these multiple real relations in God follows directly and necessarily from the procession of a divine Word within the one divine nature; and the procession of a divine Word within the one divine nature follows directly and necessarily from the *ratio* of a word and from the meaning of simplicity. Thomas, therefore, builds up patiently and ineluctably from the mere existence of the divine Word—through the *ratio* of a word, the demands of procession, the *ratio* of relation, the demands of simplicity, and the meaning of personhood—to arrive inevitably to, as Emery puts it, "the personal distinctiveness and hypostatic subsistence" of the divine Word.[56]

IV. Common Difficulties

Casting our gaze over Thomas's argument as a whole, we can stress the most basic point: the path Thomas lays out from the meaning of perfection to the multiplicity of divine Persons holds with the strictest necessity, and it does so because of *the intrinsic meaning of the terms involved*. This link between perfection and personal plurality, that is, holds because of the intrinsic meaning of perfection, understanding, a word, procession, relation, simplicity, and personhood.

We can linger with this point for a moment, for establishing it is at the heart of our concern here. Thus, to take the example of the Word's procession, Thomas does *not* write that all of *our* words proceed from us, and that we can therefore *conjecture*—or we can conclude that it would be fitting, or at least not impossible—that the divine Word should proceed within God. Nor, from the other direction, does Thomas say that, in Revelation, we see that the divine Word does, in fact, proceed from Another, but that He does so for some reason owing to His unique status as the *divine* Word, which separates Him from our own Words, and so which is *not* rooted in anything we might learn about the nature of a word as such.

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[54] Quoted from *ST* I q. 29, a. 3.

[55] *ST* I q. 30, a. 1. Thomas argues again from the simplicity of the divine nature, and the subsistence of the divine Word, to the Personhood of that Word in *SCG* 26§7.

[56] *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person*, 82n.44.

Instead, Thomas teaches explicitly and consistently that procession belongs to the *ratio* of a word. This procession does not follow on the *way* in which a given word—either human, angelic, or divine—exists; it follows on the *ratio* of a word, which holds analogously in all words everywhere, no matter *how* a given word might exist. If, therefore, we can know the *ratio* of a word—and if "word" is predicated analogously, and not merely equivocally, of God and of creatures—then it seems to follow that to know a divine Word as *present* in God is to know that Word as necessarily *proceeding* in God.

In Section I, we saw a similar point regarding the *ratio* of understanding and the presence of a divine Word. We can stress now that similar points could be made regarding *all* of the steps by which Thomas reasons from the meaning of perfection to the plurality of divine Persons. For Thomas never teaches that, because of the shape that understanding, processions, relations, and personhood take *among creatures*, we can *conjecture* that the divine understanding *might possibly* require a word, that intra-divine procession *might possibly* yield a real relation, that intra-divine relation *might possibly* entail real distinction, or that distinct subsisting realities in God *might possibly* be Persons in God. Nor does he present any of these conclusions as following simply from some revealed datum, or from some incomprehensible feature unique to *divine* understanding, processions, relations, or Persons. Instead, he presents these conclusions as following *with the strictest necessity* from the very meaning of understanding, procession, relation, and personhood, he makes clear that these conclusions must hold *anywhere* those terms are predicated properly or analogously.

Seeing as much, finally, should be enough to allow us to draw our final conclusion, and thereby to call the positions of both our camps here fundamentally into question. For we suggested at the close of Section I that our first position can only be sustained if there is some facet of the *ratio* of understanding that natural reason cannot, under any circumstances, discover. And we can see now that our second position is ultimately beholden to a similar commitment, if only implicitly, and if perhaps unbeknownst to any of its proponents. For we have seen at great length that the combined force of the *ratio* of a word, the demands of procession within a single nature, the *ratio* of relation, the demands of divine simplicity, and the meaning of personhood is enough to make unavoidable the conclusion that no word could possibly be *present* in God without subsisting as a distinct *Person* in God. And so it seems to follow straightforwardly that, just as to espouse the first position is to hold that natural reason cannot discover some facet of the *ratio* of understanding, so to espouse the second position is to hold that natural reason cannot discover some facet of a word, procession, relation, simplicity, or personhood.

Things become difficult for both of our positions, however, when we recall that natural reason can encounter or discover *all* of these realities *among sensible creatures*. It follows, therefore, that to espouse the either of our two positions is to hold, at least implicitly, that *natural reason cannot know some facet of a reality that it encounters in the normal course of its affairs among sensible creatures*. For it is true that neither an act of understanding nor an inner word nor procession nor relation nor simplicity nor personhood are themselves sensible creatures. Yet it seems plain enough that, for Thomas, we regularly encounter processions and real relations and persons in our dealings with sensible creatures; that we encounter acts of understanding and inner words within ourselves, who are sensible creatures;[57] and that reflection on sensible creatures by natural reason is enough, at least in principle, for us to conclude with certainty that the world must be caused by a *simple* Creator.[58] Thus, even if these realities are not *themselves* sensible creatures, it seems plain enough that our encounters with sensible creatures are enough to introduce us to them. Again, natural reason can discover *all* of these realities through its routine dealings with sensible creatures; yet neither the position of our first camp nor that of our second camp can be sustained unless natural reason *cannot under any circumstances* discover some facet of at least one of these realities. Our second position may tend in this direction less obviously than does the first. Yet it tends there just the same, and, like the first, it does so inescapably.[59]

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[57] For more on our knowledge of our own intellects and acts of understanding, see Therese Scarpelli Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[58] See, among many others, *SCG* I, ch. 22.

[59] It ought to grab our attention that R. L. Richard—who, again, has engaged these questions at far greater length than has anyone else—admits this point quite openly. Towards the beginning of *Problem*, he asks, "Does Aquinas himself admit the instance where A can be *de ratione formali* of B, without this *de facto* truth being evident to merely rational or philosophical analysis? It might well be that the ultimate solution of the *verbum* dilemma would depend on the answer to that question" (40). Richard continues that "if Aquinas does admit that something can pertain to the *ratio formalis* of a certain perfection or reality, without unaided reason being able to arrive at the fact relying exclusively on its own resources," then we could easily square the strength of Thomas's arguments for the Trinity with the limits he places on natural reason. Finally, Richard goes on to argue at length that, in fact, part of the solution to this difficulty lies in holding that natural reason *cannot* discover some facet of the *ratio* of understanding (recall n.14 above). Thus, Richard—who, again, has thought about these questions at far greater length and in far greater depth than has anyone else—all but *explicitly* acknowledges that his solution hinges on claim on which, as we have seen here, all of the members of both of our camps *implicitly* depend: that natural reason cannot discover some facet of a reality that it encounters among sensible creatures.

Conclusion

We cannot here ask the obvious question: can one claim—as both of our camps *require* that one claim—that natural reason cannot discover some facet of a reality that we encounter among sensible creatures without thereby running afoul of Thomas's basic epistemological commitments? Again, we cannot ask this question here.[60] Instead, we can conclude with three points. First, and most briefly, we can note that *none* of the members of *either* of our camps has addressed—or so much as acknowledged—this cluster of epistemological questions which their solutions open up.[61] Secondly, the challenge that both of our camps face seems daunting enough to warrant new approaches to this question: approaches that differ fundamentally from both of the positions we have engaged here; approaches that can do justice *both* to the plain meaning of the texts we have explored here *and* to Thomas's rejection of "necessary reasons" for the Trinity; and approaches that can avoid barring natural reason from realities that seem to lie within its ambit.

The third and final point is perhaps the deepest. For, so far as our purposes go, we can leave open the possibility that, on Thomas's terms, some facet of a reality we encounter among sensible creatures might well be inaccessible to natural reason. And so we can leave open the possibility that one of our two positions here might be sustained. Yet we can stress that, were this the case, then our main burden here—that is, the conclusion that *none* of the members of *either* of our camps have explicitly acknowledged—would still stand. For it would still be the case that, *in fact*, the very meaning of perfection requires that absolute perfection could not exist at all unless it were shared by multiple Persons. On such a reading, *we could not know* of this truth apart from Revelation, precisely because we could not know the meaning of understanding, of a word, of procession, of relation, of simplicity, or of personhood apart from Revelation. Yet, with Revelation, we would see that, *in reality*, the meaning of absolute perfection is such that it must necessarily be shared by multiple Persons.

And, again, this is the most basic point we hope to have shown here: for Thomas, the very meaning of perfection demands that one can *only* be absolutely perfect if one is perfect with another Person.

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[60] Though we can at least note that a great number of texts—such as *ST* I q. 12, a. 12: "our natural knowledge can extend as far as it can be led by sensible things"—would suggest that the answer is "no."

[61] R. L. Richard comes the closest through his analysis of the relation between theology's *ordo inventionis* and *ordo doctrinae*. Yet not even Richard ever deals directly with the specific difficulties entailed in the claim that natural reason cannot discover something of the *ratio* of understanding.

The texts on which we have focused here demand this conclusion; they defy any reading that comes short of embracing it; and they cannot be dismissed—and the conclusion they demand cannot be evaded—on the grounds that Thomas denies natural reason access to the Trinity. Of course, these texts *do* demand that we take on the very difficult task of reconciling Thomas's Trinitarian reading of absolute perfection with the limits he places on natural reason. And so, having shown *that* Thomas binds the meaning of perfection indissolubly to the necessity of the Trinity, I hope to have shown something of the urgency of asking *how* he can do so given the limits he places on natural reason.

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