

Outline for presentation at 2006 Thomistic Institute, University of Notre Dame

**Christ: *Unum vel duo?*
*Esse, Union, and the Incarnation in St. Thomas***

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Memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne,
the Grandparents of God**

I. Texts:

- A. *Sententiarum* 3, d. 6, q. 2. a. 2
- B. *Quodlibeta* 9, q. 2, a. 1-4
- C. *Compendium Theologiae* 1, chap. 212
- D. *De Unione Verbi Incarnati (DUVI)* (five articles)
- E. *Summa Theologiae* 3, q. 17 (*ST*) (two articles) -- and, indeed, all of *ST* 3, qq. 2-6 on the nature of the union of Incarnate Word with His assumed human nature.

II. The questions:

- A. Is Christ one (*unum*) or two (*aliud et aliud*), absolutely speaking? (the ‘easy’ question — see *DUVI*, q. un, a. 3 and *ST* 3, q. 17, a. 1)
- B. Does Christ have, in addition to the ‘suppositional’ or unqualified *esse* of the Son of God, a second ‘non-suppositional’ and qualified *esse* that accrues to Him because of His assumed human nature (the not-so-easy question)? Concomitantly, are there any ordinary models that can help us understand, either positively or negatively, the union of the Son of God with His assumed human nature?
- C. What’s at stake here?
 - 1. Doing the best job we can of giving an accurate characterization of the metaphysics of the Incarnation — preserving the oneness of the person of Christ, the integrity of each of His natures (and especially of the human nature), and the intimacy of the union between the divine and the human in Christ.
 - 2. The integration of this doctrine with St. Thomas’s general use of the notion of *esse* in his metaphysics of creation.

III. The problem:

In the two late texts, thought to be very close in time of composition — viz., *DUVI*, a. 4 and *ST* 3, q. 17, a. 2 — St. Thomas gives two different and incompatible answers to question (B). The first and positive answer suggests the relation between a substance and its accidents as a (defective but not altogether misleading) model for the union of the Son of God with His assumed human nature; the second and negative answer uses the relation between a whole and its parts — more specifically, the organic integral parts of living substances — as a model for this union. Each of the answers can be set out in such a way as to preserve doctrinal orthodoxy, with the positive answer putting more emphasis on the duality of the natures and the negative answer putting more emphasis on the oneness of the person.

IV. Background

A. *Nomenclature* (from *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 1; *ST* 3, q. 2, a. 4, ad 2; and *Quodlibeta* 9, q. 2, a. 1):

1. Substance (two official senses and one in passing)
 - a. *Substantia* as form (or formal part):
 - i. *quidditas*
 - ii. *essentia* = Gr. *ousia*
 - iii. *natura* (in the common or indeterminate sense)
 - b. *Substantia* as independent ultimate subject of forms:
 - i. *suppositum*
 - ii. Gr. *hypostasis* (connotation: ultimate subject)
 - iii. *subsistentia* (exists *per se* and not *in alio*)
 - iv. *persona* (= *suppositum* or *hypostasis* or *subsistentia* with a rational nature)
 - c. *Substantia* as an individual entity with a nature (*res naturae*) but not its own *suppositum* — *ST* 3, q. 2, a. 4, ad 2: “Et similiter humana natura in Christo, quamvis sit substantia particularis” Note: The ambiguity of ‘*substantia*’ is cited by St. Thomas as a reason why the West shies away from the term in Trinitarian contexts, despite its etymological similarity to *hypostasis*, which in the West is taken to be equivalent to *suppositum*. For when *substantia* is used in these contexts, then unlike *hypostasis*, it is taken to signify the divine essence rather than the persons, as in ‘*consubstantialis cum Patre*’. Likewise, *substantia* can be misleading in Incarnational contexts as well, and St. Thomas normally does not use it to describe Christ’s human nature because of its easy association with *suppositum*. The Incarnation is, after all, the one case where we have an individual created substance that does not constitute a *suppositum*, i.e., a subsistent ultimate subject of characteristics.
 2. Names of singularity that can be used of substances, accidents, parts, etc., as well as of substances:
 - a. *individuum, particulare, singulare*
 - b. St. Thomas makes it clear in several places that when we speak of Christ’s human nature, we are not speaking of human nature *in communi* but are instead speaking of an individual (a) composed of *this* form (rational soul) and *this* matter and (b) united hypostatically or personally to the Son of God (see, e.g., *ST* 3, q. 4, a. 4 and, by implication, all of q. 6). (Note: St. Thomas insists that this union is direct and not mediated by any sort of habitual grace. Thus, the phrase ‘grace of union’ has to be taken in a very general sense. The question of Christ’s psychological relation to God as a man is a whole different matter from the question of the nature of the union between the Son of God and His assumed human nature.)
- B. *Esse*: “‘*Esse*’ signifies the act of a being insofar as it is a being, i.e., ‘*esse*’ signifies that by which something is denominated an actual being in the world (*ens actu in rerum natura*)”

(*Quodlibeta* 9, q. 2, a. 2). One helpful way to approach the distinction between *esse* and *essentia* is to see it as the specification of the actuality/potentiality distinction corresponding to creation as an instance of efficient causality, just as the form/matter distinction is the specification of the actuality/potentiality distinction corresponding to unqualified (substantial) change as an instance of efficient causality, and the accident/substance is the specification of the actuality/potentiality distinction corresponding to qualified (accidental) change as an instance of efficient causality. Following Bañez, we can note the two aspects of substantial *esse* in created things: (a) that which accounts for the substance in question (and by implication all its parts and accidents) being something rather than nothing (“*Esse* is that by which a being (*ens*) exists insofar as it is a being”), and (b) the ‘contraction’ of *esse* to a particular form that constitutes a natural kind and is inseparable from the *esse*. Obviously, in the present case Christ’s substantial/suppositional *esse* is just the divine *esse*.

Our question then becomes whether Christ also has created ‘substantial’ (though ‘non-suppositional’) *esse* because of His assumed nature. Is a positive answer a good (or even mandatory) way to characterize metaphysically what it is for the Son of God to be a man? Or does it put us on the road to Nestorianism? St. Thomas seems to waver on these questions, and for good reason.

In a sense, he wavers because his doctrine of *esse* contains different elements that seem to lead in opposite directions when confronted with the Incarnational issue at hand. At least this much seems true: There is a tension that needs to be resolved in the one direction or the other, and the resolution of this tension is underdetermined by the Church’s teaching on the Incarnation. Maybe another way to put this is as follows: The question of whether some created substantial *esse* accrues to the Son of God by virtue of His assumed nature pushes St. Thomas toward developing his teaching on *esse* in one of two directions, but it is not immediately obvious which of the two directions is best. There’s something to be said for both.

My own view is that the development suggested in the *Summa* texts is in fact the best line for him to take. Michael Gorman disagrees and thinks the development suggested in *DUVI* is the best, in part because it is more open-ended.

V. *Undisputed theses*

- A. In Christ there is one person (*suppositum, subsistentia, hypostasis*) in whom are united two natures, the divine nature and an assumed human nature. Another way to put this is that the Son of God subsists in two natures.
- B. The number of something in the unqualified sense equals the number of supposita, and so Christ is, *pace* Nestorianism, *unum simpliciter*. Also, the ‘semi-Nestorian’ attempt to split *unum* from *unus* and to claim that Christ is one person (*unus* in the masculine) but two supposita (*duo* in the neuter) is both heretical and philosophically inept. (See *DUVI*, q. un, a. 3 and *ST* 3, q. 17, a. 1.)
- C. *Esse* in the unqualified sense tracks the suppositum — so in Christ there is just a single suppositional or personal *esse*, and this is His *esse* as a divine person. The question before us, then, is this: Does the human nature confer on the Son of God a distinctive non-suppositional ‘secondary’ *esse* — human-*esse*, as it were?

VI. *Conceivable types of union*

- A. *Union of natures* — union *from* two natures but not *in* two natures, since the result of the union is a nature distinct from the two natures of which it is composed. In Incarnational contexts, this is what is posited by the Monophysite heresy (Eutyches and Dioscurus), which preserves the oneness of Christ's person but destroys the integrity and distinctness of the natures.
- B. *Accidental union* — St. Thomas denies that the union of the two natures in Christ is accidental. But there seem to be at least three distinct models of accidental union he has in mind in the various texts, and all of them come together in ST 3, q. 2, a. 6 (“Utrum humana natura fuerit unita verbo Dei accidentaliter?”), to be summarily rejected — even though mode 3 is in effect actually accepted in a certain generalized form in *DUVI*, q. un., a. 4.
1. *Accidental union, mode 1: “suppositum-mates”* — In Incarnational contexts, this sort of union is posited by Nestorians. (It is also reminiscent of the account of the Trinity called Social Trinitarianism, which is popular in some Protestant circles these days and is the most recent version of the ancient heresy of Tritheism, whose proponents include such stellar figures as John Philoponus, Roscelin, and Joachim of Fiore, in addition to some prominent Protestants.) Still, Nestorians can't be accused of not going the extra mile by way of sophistication and persuasiveness. According to St. Thomas (*ST* 3, q. 2, a. 6) they emphasized five different aspects of union in order to assure their listeners that on their view the human and divine persons are related ‘closely enough’. (My personal favorite is the last one.)
 - a. *union with respect to indwelling*: The Word of God lives in the assumed man as in a temple.
 - b. *union with respect to affect*: The assumed man's will is always conformed to the will of God.
 - c. *union with respect to operation*: The man and his powers are the (conjoined) instruments of the Word of God.
 - d. *union according to dignity*: Every honor given to the Son of God is also given to this man because of his unique relation to the Son of God.
 - e. *union according to equivocation*: In fact, the two persons are so closely identified with one another that, like lovers and soulmates, they can even share each other's names, with the result that “we say that this man is the Son of God.” This *communicatio nominum* is obviously meant to supplant the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes) of the orthodox view. You have to admit, that's pretty close — but not nearly close enough, according to St. Thomas and according to the Church. (Question: Why didn't they go all the way and allow ‘having Mary for His mother’ to be said of the Son of God? That might have saved Nestorius a lot of grief.)
 2. *Accidental union, mode 2*: — “In order to preserve the unity of Christ's person some claimed that Christ's soul was not united to the body but that the two of them, separate from one another, were united to the Word as accidents (*accidentaliter*), and so the number of persons did not increase.” St. Thomas calls this position “worse than what Nestorius says” because you don't even get a human being out of it.

3. *Accidental union, mode 3* — How about conceiving of the union of the divine and human natures as akin to the union of an accident and the subject in which it inheres?
 - a. The first point is that this seems a lot closer to what we want than the type of union just described under modes 1 and 2, and in fact it's a model that St. Thomas at least broadly suggests in *DUVI*, q. un., a. 4: “There is, however, another *esse* that belongs to this suppositum (*aliud esse huius suppositum*) — not insofar as He is eternal but insofar as He becomes a man in time. Even though this *esse* is not accidental — for as was shown above, ‘man’ is not predicated accidentally of the Son of God — nonetheless it is not the principal *esse* of His suppositum, but is instead a secondary *esse*.” St. Thomas thus leaves it open what other sorts of ‘dependent’ *esse* — besides accidental *esse* properly speaking — there might be; and as we see with the example of whiteness and musicality, dependent *esse* can be multiplied as much as you please without threatening the fundamental oneness of the suppositum that has these various instances of dependent *esse*. So why not just say that Christ’s human nature confers on the Son of God its own dependent, non-suppositional, substantial *esse*? That seems to highlight the integrity and relative autonomy, as it were, of the human nature without threatening Christ’s oneness.
 - b. However, in *ST 3*, q. 2, a. 6, ad 2, St. Thomas rejects this model, claiming that in the paradigmatic example of suppositional *esse*/non-suppositional *esse*, viz., an accident and its subject, the two entities, substance and accident, are *aliud et aliud*, two different entities in the unqualified sense — more specifically, each having its own *esse* despite the fact that the one *esse* is the *esse* of a suppositum and the other the *esse* conferred by a dependent accident. In effect, I believe, he is worried that on this model Christ’s human nature has the status of an appendage and that this threatens His oneness. Here is the relevant passage: “What arrives after completed *esse* (*post esse completum*) comes as an accident (*accidentaliter*) unless it is drawn into union with that completed *esse*. For instance, in the resurrection a body will come to the preexistent soul, but not as accident, since it will be assumed into the same *esse*, so that the body will have life-giving-*esse* (*esse vitale*) through the soul. But it is otherwise with whiteness, since the *esse* of what is white (*esse albi*) is one thing (*aliud*) and the *esse* of the man to whom the whiteness comes is another thing (*aliud*).” The implication is that Christ would turn out to be two things instead of one thing on this view — and that is unacceptable according to the argument of *ST 3*, q. 17, a. 1).
4. *Union into one suppositum* — a mereological model. This is consistent, as far as I can tell, with everything St. Thomas says in the *Summa* treatments of the Incarnation and Trinity.
 - a. First, consider this passage from *ST 3*, q. 17, a. 2:

“..... Therefore, if, as some have claimed, the human nature came to the Son of God as an accident (*accidentaliter*) and not hypostatically or personally (*non hypostatice vel personaliter*), it would be necessary to posit two *esse*’s in Christ, one with respect to His being God and the other with respect to His being a man — just as in Socrates one *esse* is posited with respect to his being white and another *esse* with respect to his being a man. For white-*esse* does not pertain to Socrates’ personal *esse* itself.

“By contrast, the *esse* that pertains to having a head (*esse capitatum*), and the *esse* that

pertains to being corporeal (*esse corporeum*), and the *esse* that pertains to being alive (*esse animatum*) all have to do with the one person of Socrates, and so only one *esse* in Socrates comes from all of them. And if, after the person of Socrates were already constituted, it happened that Socrates received hands or feet or eyes — as occurred in the case of the man born blind — then no further *esse* would accrue to Socrates because of them, but instead what would accrue to him would be only a certain relation to such things. For *esse* would be said not only with respect to what he had before, but also with respect to what comes to him afterwards.

“So, then, since, as was explained above, the human nature is joined to the Son of God hypostatically or personally and not as an accident, it follows that no new personal *esse* accrues to Him because of His human nature (*secundum humanam naturam*). Instead, what accrues to Him is merely a new relation to the personal *esse* that preexisted the human nature, so that this person is now said to subsist not only with respect to the divine nature, but also with respect to the human nature.”

- b. Second, consider the following excerpt cribbed from a paper I published over twenty years ago on a related topic. The main point is this: St. Thomas can affirm both (a) that no new *esse* accrues to Christ because of His assumed human nature and (b) that Christ’s human nature can nonetheless serve as a mediate and non-ultimate subject of characteristics. We can understand this by reflecting on ordinary instances of part/whole relations — especially in the case of organic parts of living substances of the sort adumbrated above:

[Beginning of excerpt from [“Logic, Ontology and Ockham’s Christology”](#)]

Let us turn to what St. Thomas has to say about the proposition ‘Christ as man began to exist’.

The reduplicative particle ‘as’ (*in quantum or secundum quod*), Thomas claims, has two senses When ‘as’ is used in the first sense, then the term following it is made to stand for the suppositum named by the subject term. This reading renders the proposition false, since it then implies that the Son of God can, without qualification, be properly said to have begun to exist. [This is to take] the reduplication as being made, in St. Thomas’ terms, *ratione suppositi*.

However, St. Thomas then claims that on the most natural reading reduplications are made not *ratione suppositi* but rather *ratione naturae*. And “since by reason of the human nature, or with respect to the human nature, it belongs to Christ to be a creature,” the proposition ‘Christ as man began to exist’ is true when the reduplication is taken in this way. It is absolutely crucial to note that when Thomas says “by reason of the human nature” he is speaking of Christ’s individual human nature, i.e., that individual composed of a body and an intellectual soul and united hypostatically to the Son of God. He is not, as he makes clear in several places, speaking of human nature *in communi*. In other words, he is reading the reduplication not only as made *ratione naturae* (rather than *ratione suppositi*) but also as bearing the *specificative* (rather than the *reduplicative*) sense. Hence, propositions such as ‘Christ as man was born in Bethlehem’ and ‘Christ as man has the grace of union with a divine person’ are no less true than ‘Christ as man has an intellectual soul’—even though this last proposition picks out a characteristic that Christ shares with every possible human being, while the first two do not.

Though this might at first not be apparent, St. Thomas' treatment of the proposition 'Christ as man began to exist' reveals the course by which he steers between the Christological counterpart of Scylla and Charybdis, viz., Nestorianism and Monophysitism.

How, we want to know, does St. Thomas understand reduplication made *ratione naturae*? Let a purely human characteristic of Christ be one which he has but would have lacked had he not become incarnate. What St. Thomas means to suggest, I think, that Christ is the ultimate but mediate subject of His purely human characteristics. That is, such characteristics have as their immediate subject Christ's individual human nature and as their immediate but ultimate subject the divine person Himself. Since they are ultimately the characteristics of the Son of God, the doctrine of the communication of attributes is, *pace* Nestorianism, upheld. The Son of God himself, and not just an independently existing man intimately related to Him is truly said to be hungry, thirsty, moved by the death of His friend Lazarus, etc. On the other hand, since the purely human characteristics are only mediately the characteristics of the Son of God, St. Thomas is able, *pace* Monophysitism, to preserve the doctrine that the divine and human natures remain integral and unmixed in Christ. The Son of God has the divine attributes necessarily, but he has His purely human characteristics only because He has freely assumed an individual human nature which alone serves as the immediate subject of those characteristics. When the reduplication in 'Christ as man began to exist' is made *ratione naturae*, then according to St. Thomas what is implicitly denied is that Christ's divine nature is the immediate subject of the characteristic of having begun to exist.

But why can we not infer from this qualified assertion the unqualified proposition 'Christ began to exist'? This question becomes even more perplexing when we notice that orthodoxy requires — and St. Thomas concurs — that unqualified propositions like 'Christ suffered', 'Christ died', etc., should be acknowledged as true. Isn't it embarrassingly arbitrary to treat these cases differently?

We might be aided here by the mereological model explicitly proposed in St. Thomas' commentary on the *Sentences* and adumbrated once again in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Some characteristics of an integral whole are predicated of it mediately in virtue of their being had immediately by proper parts of that whole. There are two types of cases to be considered. In the first type the characteristic in question may appropriately be predicated of the whole either with or without qualification. For instance, given that the facing surface of the apple before me is red, I may properly say either 'This apple is red with respect to its facing surface' or simply 'This apple is red'. Likewise, we may properly say either 'Christ died with respect to his human nature' or simply 'Christ died'. For on the cross Christ's human nature, "which is related to the composite person of Christ as a part," came to be such that its soul no longer informed its body. By contrast, in the second type of mediate predication it is improper and misleading to omit the qualification. To use a standard medieval example, it is improper to say of a black man 'This man is white', even though the man's teeth are white. We must instead say 'This man is white with respect to his teeth' if we are to predicate whiteness of him appropriately. Similarly, because of heresies such as Arianism and Psilanthropism it is misleading and even wicked to assert without qualification 'Christ began to exist'. We should instead say, more cautiously, 'Christ began to exist with respect to his human nature' or, equivalently according to Aquinas, 'Christ as man began to exist'.

As these examples demonstrate, it is to some extent a matter of convention whether an unqualified proposition is permissible in a given case. One important question in the Christological cases, as in the more mundane mereological examples, is whether hearers are in general likely to be misled by an unqualified assertion. The emergence of new heresies or the revival of old ones will affect the answer. However, there is no danger of insurmountable confusion as long as the mereological model is kept vividly in mind, since it enables us to state precisely what we do and do not intend to affirm.

Moreover, the mereological model has the additional virtue of enabling us to deflect at least temporarily the popular objection that the dogma of the Incarnation as traditionally formulated entails evident contradictions. Suppose that I have before me a sheet of paper that is blank on one side and has printing on the other. The terms ‘having printing on it’ and ‘having no printing on it’ are contraries if any are. Yet both can be truly predicated of the sheet of paper before me, the one with qualification and the other without. For I can truly assert both ‘This sheet of paper has printing on it’ and ‘This sheet of paper has no printing on it with respect to one of its sides’. In the same way, the terms ‘omniscient’ and ‘nonomniscient’ are contraries if any are. Yet both ‘Christ is omniscient’ and ‘Christ is nonomniscient with respect to his human nature’ seem to be proper and orthodox. And they are not, at least not obviously, incompatible with one another. Of course, I am not claiming that no further elaboration is called for here. But I am maintaining that the mereological model furnishes the Christian apologist with an interesting first-stage response to what is often assumed to be a self-evidently invincible objection to orthodox belief, or at least one which the believer cannot even begin to answer without playing fast and loose with the concept of identity.

It is also worth reiterating that in many cases unqualified assertions relating to Christ’s purely human characteristics are perfectly appropriate. In fact, to qualify needlessly smacks of Nestorianism, since it suggests that Christ’s human nature is the ultimate as well as the immediate subject of those characteristics, where an ultimate subject of characteristics is, again, a suppositum or person.

To sum up, St. Thomas uses the mereological model as an aid, albeit an imperfect one, in understanding the hypostatic union. And this strategy provides him with the resources to preserve the central elements of the Church’s teaching about the Incarnation.

[End of excerpt from “Logic, Ontology and Ockham’s Christology”]

- c. So here’s my view (at least at this point in time): In the *Summa Theologiae* St. Thomas denies that Christ receives a new *esse* from the individual human nature which He assumes from its inception — and he does this in order to preserve Christ’s oneness. But in denying that a new *esse* accrues to Christ because of the human nature, St. Thomas assimilates the assumed nature to a part — and not to just any part, but to an organic part of a living organism. (In discussion, Fr. Stephen Brock suggested that the relation of soul to body — in other words, physical parts — might work as well as integral parts.) This, I think, is his best attempt to illuminate the oneness of Christ’s being. The question is whether it undermines the integrity of Christ’s human nature. As I have tried to show, the lack of its own *esse* does not prevent the human nature from being the mediate subject of attributes of the Son of God.

- d. By contrast, Michael Gorman thinks this is a mistake on St. Thomas's part. He takes it to mean that on St. Thomas's view, Christ "has no human existence." Gorman likes the open-ended conclusion of the *DUVI* text, which cites accidental *esse* as one possible instance of qualified 'non-suppositional' *esse* but leaves open the possibility that there are other sorts of dependent *esse*.

VII. *Disturbing question for my view*

One thing I haven't mentioned is the question of just what it would mean for the human nature to exist via the divine *esse*. Does this pose more of a problem than any other instance of creation? Is the divine *esse* itself contracted? St. Thomas is not very forthcoming in his reply to this worry in the *Summa* text: "The eternal *esse* of the Son of God, which is the divine nature, becomes the *esse* of a man insofar as a human nature is assumed by the Son of God in the oneness of the person." How should we think about this? Is Gorman right to insinuate that somehow the human nature is "swallowed up" on the *ST* view, driving St. Thomas too close to Monophysitism? On the other hand, is the attribution to Christ of dependent *esse* via His human nature a little too close to Nestorianism?

In discussion, Doug Flippen, applauded by Fr. Michael Sherwin and other Dominicans, thought that instead of thinking of the divine *esse* as being contracted in this case, it might be better to think of the divine *esse* as overflowing into Christ's human nature. The thought occurred to me that one form of pantheism would be God's being hypostatically united to every created thing. Obviously, this is not the case and St. Thomas doesn't think it so much as (even epistemically) possible. But if there were one case in which this way of thinking is not completely beyond the pale, wouldn't it be precisely the case of the Son of God's union with His human nature?

On the other hand, Dave Twetten and a few others thought that the very idea that Christ's human nature should exist 'by' the divine *esse* completely outrageous and downright incompatible with St. Thomas's teaching on *esse*.