

**Zeitschrift:** Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie = Revue philosophique et théologique de Fribourg = Rivista filosofica e teologica di Friburgo = Review of philosophy and theology of Fribourg

**Band:** 42 (1995)

**Heft:** 3

**Artikel:** Supposition, signification, and universals : metaphysical and linguistic complexity in Aquinas

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-761422>

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EILEEN C. SWEENEY

# Supposition, Signification, and Universals

## Metaphysical and Linguistic Complexity in Aquinas<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Aquinas wrote no treatise on supposition, but he did make use of the concept, although almost exclusively in a Trinitarian or Christological context. More precisely, it is the special problems surrounding both the meaning and reference of terms said of God, either *per se* or of one of the three persons, which provide the context for Aquinas' use of the various types of supposition and its distinction from signification. What I wish to examine in this essay are these comments and discussions related to supposition in *De Ente et Essentia*'s discussion of the problem of universals in order to construct a <Thomistic> theory of supposition and its relation to signification, one which would reflect Aquinas' logical and metaphysical views.

Although the main argument of this paper is that Aquinas' use of supposition theory illustrates and reflects his theological and metaphysical commitments, the other is to show, though only by example, something about the medieval notion of supposition – its connection to the metaphysical and theological context in which it developed. Though they have been woefully understudied, there are abundant examples of the use of supposition in theological and metaphysical discussions in thinkers as diverse as Aquinas and Ockham. Some studies of supposition cite evidence that the theory might have arisen as a solution to problems surrounding predicates proper to the God-head vs. one of the three persons or to Christ's divine vs. his human nature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used to refer to the works of Thomas Aquinas: *Commentum in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum*: *In Sent.*; *Compendium Theologiae*: *Comp Theo*; *De ente et Essentia*: *De ente*; *In Libros Perihermeneias*: *In peri Herm*; *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potencia*: *QDP*; *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*: *QDV*; *Summa Contra Gentiles*: *SCG*; *Summa Theologiae*: *ST*. All quotations are from the Busa edition of Aquinas' works; translations of passages from these and other medieval texts are my own unless otherwise noted. – I wish to thank Patricia Burton for suggesting I look at supposition in Aquinas and in two of his followers, Vincent Ferrer and John of St. Thomas. I also wish to thank Stephen Brown for his very helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Hence a distinction was made between a single term's different suppositions to adjudicate disputes and contradictions over predicates applying to Christ; for example, <Christ> can

However, with few exceptions,<sup>3</sup> such contexts for either the development or use of supposition theory once mentioned are simply ignored.<sup>4</sup> Even if problems concerning the divine nature in itself and as triune and incarnate were not any part of the impetus for the development of supposition theory, its connection to such issues is a reminder that supposition, like other medieval logical innovations, did not arise autonomously but formed and were formed by a larger set of issues and problems, from which it cannot be extracted without distortion. In this paper I will argue for a specific version of this claim, that the theological and metaphysical context shaped Aquinas' account of supposition, i.e., his division and definition of different types of supposition and its relation to signification, and it is these contexts which explain and support the use he makes of supposition.

supposit *personally* for Christ's individual nature as divine or *simply* for his human or divine nature. Peter of Spain defines simple supposition as the «acceptio termini communis pro re universali significata per ipsum.» PETER OF SPAIN, *Summule Logicales*, ed. L.M. De Rijk (Assen, NL, 1972), VI, 5. A term supposits or stands personally, William of Sherwood writes, for «a thing bearing the form signified by the name,» or, in more nominalistic terms, for some or all individuals who could be correctly named by the term (e.g., human being runs). WILLIAM OF SHERWOOD, *Introductiones in logicam*, ed. M. Grabmann. *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philos.-hist. Abteilung*, Jg. 1937, H. 10, Munich, 1937. English version, *Introduction to Logic*, ed. and trans., Norman Kretzmann (Minneapolis 1966), 110. On this issue as the origin of supposition theory see J.M. BOCHENSKI, *A History of Formal Logic*, trans. Ivo Thomas (New York, 1970), 170 and William and Martha KNEALE, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford, 1962), 256. The Kneales mention Boethius' «De Persona et Duabus Naturis Contra Eutychen et Nestorium» and its distinction between the *personhood* and divine and human *natures* of Christ as a possible source for the name *personal supposition*. Others take the origin of personal supposition to be grammatical, citing Priscian and Quintillian, as well as Boethius, as using *persona* to designate any individual being. See J.P. MULLALLY, *The Summulae Logicales of Peter of Spain* (Notre Dame, 1945), Introduction, pp. xxxix–xlvi; for a survey of 12th century grammatical contexts in which *supponere* appears in this sense, see L.M. DE RIJK, *Logica Modernorum: The Origin and Early Development of the Theory of Supposition*, 2 vols. (Assen, 1967), vol. 2, part 1, pp. 516–528. De Rijk's volume length study does not consider the theological context and uses of supposition, nor does his «The Origins of the Theory of the Properties of Terms,» in: *The Cambridge History of Later Mediaeval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 161–173.

<sup>3</sup> For an exception to this rule, see A. MAIERÛ, «A propos de la doctrine de la supposition en théologie trinitaire au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle,» in: *Mediaeval Semantics and Metaphysics*, Ed. E.P. Bos (Nijmegen, 1985), pp. 221–238. See also Stephen F. BROWN, «Walter Burleigh's Treatise «De Suppositionibus» and its Influence on William of Ockham,» in: *Franciscan Studies* 32 (1972) 18 and also BROWN, «Medieval Supposition Theory in its Theological Context,» in: *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 3 (1993) 121–157.

<sup>4</sup> Sten Ebbesen's attitude is perhaps typical. He concedes on the one hand that the «ultimate» use of supposition theory for medieval thinkers was probably to help understand propositions about Christ and the Trinity, but adds that its «non-ultimate» use was in the solution of sophisms. Ebbesen, however, focuses exclusively on the sophisms. My question is whether there might be any connection between the «ultimate» and «non-ultimate» uses of supposition. See Sten EBBESEN, «Early Supposition Theory (12th–13th cent.),» in: *Histoire Epistémologie Langage* 3 (1981) 39.

However, though my goal is to illustrate the connection between supposition as a logical doctrine and Aquinas' metaphysics, or rather to show that Aquinas' use of supposition reflects and gives us a fresh perspective on some of his most basic metaphysical principles, a word of caution about the nature of the relationship between this aspect of logic and ontology is necessary. For Aquinas the connection between language and being, specifically between signification, supposition, and different types of supposition, on the one hand, and the structure of the real, on the other, is not and could not be one of simple correspondence, partially because of the nature of language, partially because of Aquinas' metaphysics.

Let me note first the lack of exact correspondence between our ways of knowing, and hence words, and reality which, I think, medieval theories of supposition and signification express. In medieval logic, supposition, both in its different forms and as distinct from signification, is most fundamentally a «second intention,» i.e., a relation which follows upon the way things are *known* rather than the way they *are*. Hence even in forming the notion, we are a level «removed» from reality, in the realm of signs of signs; moreover, the multiplication of distinctions, i.e., of types of supposition, moves us further and further from the one-to-one correspondence of an ideal language, i.e., one which would perfectly mirror reality in language.

Insofar as supposition is distinct from signification, i.e., the meaning of a term irreducible to its reference (or vice versa), a one-to-one correspondence between words and things is impossible. Their difference is a reflection of the fact that even given a single, fixed lexical meaning for a term or a series of related meanings, there are meaningful uses of the term which cannot be accounted for completely by an appeal to the definition (or definitions). Moreover, for the most part differences in supposition and types of supposition follow upon the propositional context.<sup>5</sup> This aspect of supposition implies that even reference, the relationship of words to things, cannot consist in simply «drawing a line» from word to thing because it is conditioned by the relationship of word to word. Further, the distinction between material and formal supposition (i.e., between the *use* and *mention* of a term) is a

<sup>5</sup> So-called *natural supposition* constitutes a partial exception to this rule but only in early thinkers like Peter of Spain, for whom natural supposition seems to be the supposition a term would have «naturally» before a specific propositional context limits the field of possible supposits. See PETER OF SPAIN, VI, 5 (ed. cit. n. 2). This is the view of Peter's natural supposition argued for by L.M. De Rijk. See L.M. DE RIJK, «The Development of *Suppositio Naturalis* in Mediaeval Logic,» in: *Vivarium* 9 (1971) 72–80. Cf. Alain DE LIBERA, «Supposition naturelle et appellation: aspects de la sémantique parisienne au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,» in: *Histoire Epistémologie Langage* 3 (1981) 64–77. Qualifying de Rijk's account, de Libera argues that some thirteenth century writers attribute natural supposition to nouns occurring within propositions. On Peter's view of natural supposition see also Ernest MOODY, *Truth and Consequence in Mediaeval Logic* (Amsterdam, 1953), pp. 21–22 and Philotheus BOEHNER, *Medieval Logic: An Outline of its Development from 1250 to c. 1400* (Manchester, 1952), pp. 33–34.



formalization of a realization about the nature of language found in Augustine and Anselm, that words are not completely transparent signs but something in their own right, different in kind from that which they signify or for which they stand, again complicating the relationship of words to things.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the distinction between simple and personal supposition (i.e., the different references for the subject in sentences like <human being<sup>7</sup> is a species> and <human being runs>) reflects the difference between the common nature, concept or term (depending on one's theory of universals), and the individuals who instantiate it.<sup>8</sup> And once again, even under the sparsest account of universals, we are still left with a single term common to many individuals, and, hence, an uneven correspondence between words and things.

All these distinctions and tensions between various kinds of supposition and signification are the attempt, I think, to formalize characteristics about language and its relationship to reality that are complex but unavoidable. My view, then, is fundamentally opposed to that of William and Martha Kneale, for whom supposition is a mistake, caused by the chance convergence of peculiarities of Latin (rather than *all* language) and peculiarities inherent in Aristotle's discussion of general terms.<sup>9</sup> I take it that language's capacity to

<sup>6</sup> Anselm's *De Grammatico* and its discussion of the noun *grammaticus* (even as the title and its relationship to the content of the dialogue perfectly blurs the distinction) not only distinguishes between what will later be called material and formal supposition but also between signification and supposition (which it calls *appellatio*). See ANSELM, *The De Grammatico* of St. Anselm, ed. and trans. Desmond P. Henry (Notre Dame, 1964) 4.621 (Latin, p. 44, English, p. 73) and 4.234 (Latin, p. 37, English, p. 64). Henry has also tried to correlate distinctions made in Anselm to moves made in the Burley–Ockham disputes over supposition. See Desmond P. HENRY «The Early History of *Suppositio*,» in: *Franciscan Studies* 23 (1963) 205–212. Augustine's *De Magistro*, which is not usually associated with supposition or other developments in later medieval accounts of language, also makes many sophisticated observations about the nature of language, arguing against a naive representational view of language, and paying attention to language's self-referential capacity. See AUGUSTINE, *De Magistro*, in: *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, vol. XXIX (Turin, 1970), II, 3–VIII, 24, pp. 159–84.

<sup>7</sup> The standard medieval example was, of course, *homo*, traditionally rendered <man> rather than <human being>. Because many of the nuances would be lost if I used a different example, combined with my reluctance to use <man> in propositions applying to all human beings, I have chosen to translate *homo* as <human being>, even though in some places it is awkward.

<sup>8</sup> Thus supposition theory becomes the locus for much of the later scholastic debate over universals. Displaced into supposition theory, the problem of universals as debated by Walter Burley and William of Ockham, for example, becomes whether a term in simple supposition (<human being is a species>), supposits for a common nature *outside* the mind or a concept *in* the mind. See Paul Vincent SPADE, «Some Epistemological Implications of the Burley–Ockham Dispute,» in: *Franciscan Studies* 35 (1975) 212–222.

<sup>9</sup> See KNEALE, *Development*, pp. 273–274 (ed. cit. n. 2) for this overall evaluation of supposition theory. They argue that the «uncertainty» about supposition «became a serious matter when the old notion of *significatio* was rejected by Ockham. For now the whole theory of language was made to rest on an imperfectly conceived metaphor» (i.e., that of standing under or for applied to the relationship of reference). The mistake is compounded, the authors continue, by the extension of supposition theory to «cover oddities like <*homo est nomen*> and

refer to itself rather than to other things (in propositions like «human being is a name»), to refer to the thought that mediates the connection between word and thing (in propositions like «human being is a species») are not «oddities» but necessary (though messy) aspects of language.<sup>10</sup> Whereas modern logic would take account of the differences between terms used for themselves (material supposition), for concepts/natures (simple supposition) and for things (personal supposition) by symbolizing each differently, medieval logic notes their difference by distinguishing between their supposition, but also notes their connection by retaining the same verbal/written sign for each.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the medieval account of meaning and reference organizes but does not attempt to dissolve the ambiguities and complexities of language; it takes the multiplicity of meanings and references and, hence, the need for interpretation as intrinsic rather than curable aspects of language.

This view of supposition and language in general, at any rate, is the view I would like to argue is implied by Aquinas' use of it. That is, I would like to argue that Aquinas does not try to dissolve these complexities, but uses supposition to illustrate the peculiarities of language and the difficulties attending attempts to «map» it onto reality. While Aquinas develops and applies his notions of signification and supposition within a philosophical community that on the whole understands words as independent units of meaning and reference, it seems to me that he both attempts to maintain this

«*homo est species*» as well as universal and existential quantification. I take it that their more general criticism is of the attempt to cover different topics in the philosophy of language, in logic, and in metaphysics using this one theory. But it seems that this is only a fault of supposition theory if you accept the view that these are truly distinct and absolutely separable topics, as they are in classical formulations of analytic philosophy, something which medieval thinkers' use of supposition theory helps to show they would not concede. What I hope to show here are some of the ways in which supposition theory *is* and *must be* connected to this larger context in Aquinas.

<sup>10</sup> KNEALE, *Development*, pp. 273–274 (ed. cit. n. 2); see above, n. 9. Cf. Ernest A. MOODY, «The Medieval Contribution to Logic,» in: *Studies in Medieval Philosophy, Science and Logic: Collected Papers* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 381. Moody's assessment shares with the Kneales' the notion that supposition theory tries to cover too many essentially unrelated bases; while conceding that the distinctions between word, meaning, and referent are important, Moody sharply opposes supposition as used to make these distinctions to the use of supposition in «the syntactical analysis of propositions whose terms are used in personal supposition for their normal referents.» To draw lines between «normal» and «abnormal» uses or referents is a philosophically loaded rather than neutral gesture. My view, though only partially supported by this essay, is that for the medievals these lines are drawn somewhat differently and with somewhat less certainty and fixity.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. BOCHENSKI, *History*, p. 173 (ed. cit., n. 2), who compares supposition to modern theories as follows: «The most notable difference between the doctrine of supposition and the corresponding modern theories lies in the fact that while contemporary logic as far as possible has one sign for one function..., the Scholastics took equiform signs and determined their functions by establishing their supposition. And this brings us back to the fundamental difference already remarked on between the two forms of formal logic; scholastic logic dealt with ordinary language, contemporary logic develops an artificial one.» See also MOODY, «Medieval Contribution to Logic,» pp. 383–385 (ed. cit. n. 10), who expresses a similar view.

view's commitment to the connection between language and the real, while developing and balancing a series of distinctions which serve to complicate and even undercut that more naive picture of language.<sup>12</sup> The complications which obscure and clutter the direct path from word to thing are, for Aquinas, reflections of our imperfect imitation of the immediate and complete understanding which characterizes only the divine intellect. But they are reflections not only of our epistemological state, they are also reflections of a metaphysical reality, of the composite and fragmented nature of created being. Supposition brushes metaphysical questions for Aquinas directly on the issue of the relation and distinction between persons and natures, *suppositum* and essence, and on the metaphysical implications of linguistic structure<sup>13</sup>, e.g., whether the distinction between subject and predicate corresponds to a real distinction in the object named, between subject or *suppositum* and attribute or nature.<sup>14</sup> Aquinas' discussion of this issue centers

<sup>12</sup> The standard distinction drawn about medieval theories of language is between those medieval theorists who concentrate on supposition and the so-called modistic theories. The former are understood to emphasize the propositional context of terms, the latter, to analyze words by examining their grammatical form and inflection which they carry with them individually. For a statement of this view, see EBBESEN, «Early Supposition Theory,» p. 45 (ed. cit. n. 4). For general introduction to the modistic view see Jan PINBORG, «Speculative Grammar,» in: *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 254–269. However, both of these views assume an atomistic and representative view of language compared to any number of modern theories of language, including those of the later Wittgenstein, of Saussure and structuralist and post-structuralist accounts which argue, albeit in different ways, that words acquire not only their reference but even their meaning contextually; merely looking at propositions vs. individual words does not radically challenge the model that words are understood by reference to things rather than contextually; the «atoms» of meaning are just simply taken to be slightly larger for supposition theorists.

<sup>13</sup> The sense in which and the degree to which grammatical/logical structure corresponds to ontological structure in Aquinas is much debated. Veatch, equating any view positing a similarity between the two with a referential theory of meaning like that found in the early Wittgenstein, argues stridently against any such conformity in general and Peter Geach's version of it in particular. See Henry VEATCH, «St. Thomas' Doctrine of Subject and Predicate,» in: *St. Thomas Aquinas 1225–1274: in: Commemorative Studies 2 vol.s* (Toronto, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 401–422, and P.T. GEACH, «Form and Existence,» in: *God and the Soul* (New York, 1969), pp. 42–62. My own view, as will become clear below (sec. IIIB and IV), is somewhere between these extremes.

<sup>14</sup> *Suppositum* as used here is not identical with but is related to the *supposit* or *supposition* of a term in a proposition. Roughly, the *suppositum* is the ontological *subject*, the *hypokeimenon* of all further forms or attributes. The *supposit* of a term names a logical rather than an ontological property and refers to the subject of which the term is verified, its reference. The two are related when terms *supposit* personally, i.e., the reference of a term is an individual or individuals of which other attributes are predicated; thus the personal *supposit* of a term is the individual who *qua* individual is the *suppositum* of some form or essence. See below (sec. II) for my discussion of Aquinas on the relationship between *suppositum* and nature and its link to supposition theory. Even Ockham also links the two; see WILLIAM OF OCKHAM, *Scriptum*, I, d. 4, a. 1, in: *Opera Theologica*, IV, ed. Girard I. Etzkorn and Francis E. Kelly (St. Bonaventure, 1979), 12. Kneale cites Roger Bacon's listing of several meanings of *suppositio* which cover the range between a purely metaphysical and purely grammatical notion (I omit the first definition

around the division of supposition for terms relating to divine versus created natures, and he uses the logical doctrine of supposition to illustrate the difference between their metaphysical structures. Supposition also touches metaphysical issues indirectly by its relationship to the problem of universals. The distinction between divine and created natures and the solution to the problem of universals are both accomplished, it is well-known, by the distinction between essence and existence, and Aquinas' use of supposition, I will argue, makes of supposition another vehicle for the expression of this distinction; ultimately, Aquinas' supposition theory reiterates the dependent, composite, and divided character of creatures and the subsistence, simplicity, and unity of the divine.

I will begin by attempting to cull a theory of supposition from Aquinas' explicit discussions of supposition (section I), but partially because these uses are scattered and not part of a systematic account, I will argue no clear theory emerges from these passages taken in isolation, or rather that two different and in many ways contradictory views can be drawn from these passages. In light of the questions raised by Aquinas' discussions I will then attempt to resolve these tensions by placing them more carefully in the larger context of Aquinas' metaphysical commitments (section II).

### *I. Aquinas' explicit use of supposition theory*

A survey of the Thomistic corpus reveals first that Aquinas did not use *suppositio* in its technical logical sense very often.<sup>15</sup> The related metaphysical notion of *suppositum*, meaning <subsisting subject> and as roughly equivalent to *persona* or *hypostasis* and as distinct from essence or nature occurs much more often.<sup>16</sup> These uses of *suppositum* range from the purely metaphysical, as in the discussion of the unity of essence and *suppositum* in God and the

of *supposita* as something *supposed* or assumed at the outset of a proof): «Alio modo dicitur suppositio substantive rei designatio, sicut dicimus quod substantive nomina supponunt rem suam, id est, substantive designant. Tertio modo dicitur proprietas termini communis per comparisonem ad individua quae sunt eius supposita, secundum quod dicimus quod nomen communi, ut homo, significat qualitatem cum substantia, sive humanitatem, et supponit individua, scilicet Socratem et Platonem et alia. Quarto modo dicitur suppositio proprietas termini subjecti, sive termini in quantum alii supponit et subicitum in oratione.» ROGER BACON, *Opera Hactenus Inedita Rogeri Baconi*, Fasc. XV, ed. R. Steele, 1940, p. 268; cited in: KNEALE, *Development*, p. 251 (ed. cit. n. 2).

<sup>15</sup> The passages containing the word *suppositio* are collected in the *Index Thomisticus*, but of the 349 passages listed, most are uses of the term to mean a <supposition> or, we might say, a <presupposition> of an argument. See «Suppositio, in: *Index Thomisticus*, ed. Robert Busa, *Seccio 2: Concordantiae*, vol. 21 (Stuttgart, 1975) pp. 930–933.

<sup>16</sup> *Comp Theol*, I, c. 50. On the relationship between this more metaphysical sense and supposition theory, see above, n. 14, and my discussion of Aquinas' account of this difference below.



definition of personhood, to those connected with supposition theory by means of propositions whose terms' supposition is unclear.<sup>17</sup>

The most basic set of distinctions used to solve these difficulties is between supposition and signification, and between *suppositum* and essence. The first arises in a Christological context in the *Commentary on the Sentences* invoked to help solve a problem about how <human being> is said of Christ. At issue is whether <human being> names a composite of *two* substances, body and soul, or *three* substances, human body and soul, and the person of Christ. The problem is that if it implies three substances when applied to Christ, and two when applied to other human beings, Christ would only equivocally be called a human being. Aquinas' response begins with the distinction between signification and supposition:

Respondeo dicendum, quod in quolibet nomine est duo considerare: scilicet id a quo imponitur nomen, quod dicitur qualitas nominis; et id cui imponitur, quod dicitur substantia nominis: et nomen, proprie loquendo, dicitur *significare* formam sive qualitatem, a qua imponitur nomen; dicitur vero *supponere* pro eo cui imponitur.<sup>18</sup>

Hence Aquinas can conclude that the name <human being> includes three substances, two from its signification (body and soul), and one from its supposition (the person of the Son of God), without equivocation because whether <human being> means the composition of two or three substances is caused by different supposits for the term (i.e., by different referents, Christ and other human beings), not different significations.<sup>19</sup> Though the case of Christ threatens to blur this distinction, the general principle, that only distinct significations not distinct supposits causes equivocation, helps mediate the problem of the connection and difference between individuals and the single, common term they share. With it Aquinas can maintain the unity of meaning

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between the divine essence and *suppositum*, see *ST I*, q. 3, a. 3; on the persons or *supposita* of the Trinity, see *ST I*, q. 29, a. 2–3 and *QDP* q. 9, a. 4. On the relationship between Christ's one *suppositum*/person and two natures, see *Comp Theo*, cc. 210–211 and *In III Sent* d. 6, q. 1, a. 1–3, *ST III*, q. 16, a. 1–12. The most systematic account of these matters is to be found in question 39 of the prima pars of the *Summa Theologiae*, which discusses the relationship between the divine persons and the divine essence; articles 3–8 are devoted to an account of the types of predicates, personal vs. essential, abstract vs. concrete, substantive vs. adjectival which can be attributed to God, the Godhead, and the persons individually. In these questions, discussed in detail below, the metaphysical distinction and relationship between *supposita* and essence is often brought to bear on the more logical/linguistic question of the supposition of the terms in propositions about God and the persons of the Trinity.

<sup>18</sup> My emphasis. *In III Sent* d. 6, q. 1, a. 3. Cf. the similar distinction given in *QDP* q. 9, a. 4, and similar argument about the term <human being> applied to Christ in *SCG IV*, c. 49.

<sup>19</sup> «Et ideo hoc nomen homo comprehendit tres substantias; sed duas ex parte significati, tertiam ex parte suppositi.» And he answers the first objection, «quod diversitas suppositionis non facit aequivocationem; sed diversitas significationis.» *In III Sent* d. 6, q. 1, a. 3 c. & ad 1.

of the common noun that would ground and justify our use of it for many individuals, without obliterating the differences between those individuals.

The related but not perfectly symmetrical metaphysical distinction is between *suppositum* and essence. In the context of the simplicity of God, Aquinas argues that while in material things *suppositum* and essence are distinct, they are united in God; Socrates and humanity are not identical, but there is no distinction between God and divinity.<sup>20</sup> This is, of course, complicated by the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus Aquinas must maintain that essence and *suppositum*, divinity and God, are not really distinct but that the three persons are distinct from each other while sharing the same, single divine nature. Without going into detail on the Trinitarian doctrine, it is easy to see how such issues would touch supposition theory. On the one hand, the relation of the persons of the Trinity to the divine nature bears some likeness to the relationship of individuals to a common nature, some predicates having as their supposit the shared nature, some having as their supposit one, two, or all three of the divine persons.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the unity of supposits in one divine nature is different from and more complete than the unity of human beings in human nature; hence, Aquinas concludes,

(N)omina significantia divinam essentiam substantive, singulariter, et non pluraliter, de tribus personis praedicantur. Haec igitur est ratio quare Socratem et Platonem et Ciceronem dicimus tres homines; patrem autem et filium et spiritum sanctum non dicimus tres deos, sed unum deum, quia in tribus suppositis humanae naturae sunt tres humanitates; in tribus autem personis est una divina essentia.<sup>22</sup>

In this text, the metaphysical relationship of individuals and natures conditions not only what we say but how we say it, both signification and the mode of signification, and as we will see below, it also conditions supposition. What remains to be seen is exactly how these two sets of distinctions (between signification and supposition, and *suppositum* and nature) condition each other and inform Aquinas' division and definition of the various types of supposition. It is to these passages dealing more directly with supposition theory I would like to turn.

A discussion in the *Commentary On the Sentences* agrees with the account of natures and *supposita* given above, but goes on to use the notion of supposition to clarify its consequences. Given that while three human persons cannot share one human nature, are three human beings not one, and

<sup>20</sup> *ST I*, q. 3, a. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See *ST I* q. 39, a. 2 for one place where the analogy between created natures and individuals and the divine nature and its persons is made. The general principle that some predicates refer to the divine essence, some exclusively to the person or persons receives its classic formulation by Boethius in *Utrum Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus de divinitate substantialiter praedicentur Liber*, PL 64, 1299–1302.

<sup>22</sup> *ST I* q. 39, a. 3.



the persons of the Trinity share one divine nature, are one God not three, the question asks whether the persons of the Trinity could share one human nature. One objection argues that if they did, it would follow that the Father would be the Father, but also the Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> Aquinas' reply tries to forestall this contradictory result by distinguishing between two different suppositions of the term <God>: one for the persons and one for the divine nature:

Dicerentur tres unus homo, si unam humanam naturam assumpsissent, sicut propter unam naturam divinam dicuntur unus Deus: et sicut dicitur tota Trinitas unus solus verus Deus. ... Ita posset dici: Iste solus homo, est Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus; et tunc iste terminus *homo* supponeret rem humanae naturae sine distinctione trium personarum, sicut iste terminus *Deus* supponit in praedictis locutionibus rem naturae divinae indistincte; et haec est suppositio sua naturalis, et quasi termini communis respectu trium personarum; suppositio autem qua supponit pro Patre vel Filio, est sibi accidentalis, et quasi termini discreti.<sup>24</sup>

Two aspects of the passage seem to express an extreme realism. First, it defines *natural* supposition as the term suppositing for the *nature* itself rather than for *individuals* who could be named by the term. Second, it describes *personal* supposition as <accidental>, and hence understands reference as primarily to the nature, not to individuals.<sup>25</sup>

However, the passage's realist implications are counterbalanced by a more careful look at the context. The human nature the three would share is an already *individuated* nature, not the *common* nature which different individual human beings share; hence, the natural supposition of the term <God> is only *like* (*quasi*) the supposition of common terms, i.e., terms which are said of many different individuals who have the same nature but are different substances. The whole discussion of three persons sharing one

<sup>23</sup> *In III Sent* d. 1, q. 2, a. 4, obj. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 6.

<sup>25</sup> What Aquinas seems to mean here by <natural supposition> could be both the supposition of the term for the nature as opposed to some specific individuals possessing the nature, and the <normal> or default supposition of a term, the supposition a term would have unless something in the propositional restricts or shifts it. Using De Rijk's distinction between the radically different 12th and 14th century views of natural supposition, we could say that the first meaning is closer to the later view which describes the subject term in essential predication as having natural supposition; the latter sense is closer to Peter of Spain's view, in which natural supposition is the supposition a term has before being placed in a propositional context. See L.M. DE RIJK, «*Suppositio Naturalis*,» (ed. cit. n. 5), and the continuation of this subject under the same title in: *Vivarium* 11 (1973) 43–79. There is, however, an obvious connection between Peter's natural supposition and the later version in the nature itself, common ground indicated by Aquinas' use of the category here. For Peter in natural supposition, the term <human being> supposits for «for all human beings who were, are, and will be,» exactly the same set of possible referents for the subject term in essential predications, for since all have the same nature, all possess the same essential attributes. See DE RIJK, Part II, especially pp. 49, 53, 62–67. Cf. above n. 5 and PETER OF SPAIN, *Summule Logicales*, VI, 4 (ed. cit., n. 2).

human nature is couched in the subjunctive, not only because the three persons of the Trinity do not share one human nature, but also because human beings do not share human nature in the same way the persons of the Trinity share the same divine nature, and *would* share the same human nature. Hence it is not clear what conclusions to draw from this passage about the supposition of common and discrete terms in general, or, in other words, about the definitions and relative priority of natural/simple or personal supposition for Aquinas.

In another discussion of both divine and human nature, Aquinas invokes the distinction between personal and simple supposition. Aquinas is offering different interpretations of the proposition, «(a) human being was made God.» One interpretation which would make the statement true, Aquinas explains, would consist in taking <human being> to supposit *simply* rather than *personally*; this might be justified, he argues, because «(l)icet enim hic homo non sit factus Deus, quia hoc suppositum, persona Filii Dei, ab aeterno fuit Deus: tamen homo, communiter loquendo, non semper fuit Deus.»<sup>26</sup> Hence, it seems that the abstract or common nature, which here is given as the simple supposit, can be the supposit for attributes other than those which pertain to the concept as concept for Aquinas; thus, the common nature seems to have some reality independent of the individual supposits of the nature which is not merely conceptual. This view is strengthened by a reply to an objection which gives another possible way of taking the statement as true: «Si tamen» Aquinas writes, «ex parte subjecti poneretur aliquod nomen significans naturam humanam in abstracto, posset hoc modo significari ut subjectum factionis: puta si dicatur quod <natura humana facta est Filii Dei>.»<sup>27</sup>

If this is Aquinas' view of simple supposition, it aligns him more closely with older, more realist versions of simple supposition. While for Ockham simple supposition is a non-significative use of the term for the *intentio animae* (and *only* serving as supposit for explicitly intentional predicates like <species>), for Peter of Spain and William of Sherwood simple supposition is both primary and significative.<sup>28</sup> Though William and Peter the subjects in essential predications supposit personally not simply, both still designate the subject as suppositing simply in some propositions when the subject term is functioning through its meaning not *qua* concept or word. For William of Sherwood, for example, a term supposits simply in sentences where the subject seems to refer to a nature which must be understood both as *real* and as *common*, and, hence, where it is impossible to descend to singulars; for example, in sentences like <human being is the noblest of creatures> and

<sup>26</sup> ST III q. 16, a. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., ad 4.

<sup>28</sup> WILLIAM OF SHERWOOD, p. 77, ed. Kretzmann, p. 111 (eds. cit., n. 2); PETER OF SPAIN, *Summule Logicales*, VI, 6 (ed. cit., n. 2). Sherwood defines it as «the taking of a term for what it signifies», and Peter as «acceptio termini communis pro re universali significata per ipsum.»

«color is the primary object of sight».<sup>29</sup> In neither case is it valid to substitute for the subject an individual falling under the subject term; e.g., blue is not the primary object of sight, nor is John Smith the noblest of creatures. Peter of Spain describes the *predicate* in sentences like «every human being is an animal» and the *subject* «human being» in sentences like «every animal apart from human being is irrational» as having *simple* supposition because they «supposit for the generic nature (*pro natura generis*)» and not for its inferiors; the reason also seems to be to prevent descent to singulars, i.e., the drawing of conclusions like «every human being is *this* animal» and «every animal apart from *this* human being is irrational.»<sup>30</sup> Thus Aquinas in arguing for supposition for an «abstract nature» seems to draw on this tradition of appealing to a nature as supposit to save the truth of a proposition in which the subject functions meaningfully but not by direct application to singulars.

Once again, however, the realism of one part of the answer is undercut by other aspects of the passage. First, Aquinas does not endorse the taking of the supposition of the subject as simple; he argues that the «proper» interpretation is to take the subject as suppositing personally; on this interpretation, he argues, the sentence, «(a) human being was made by God,» must be false: «non enim esse deum verificatur de homine ratione humanae naturae, sed ratione sui suppositi (i.e., the person of the Son of God).»<sup>31</sup> The suppositum/person of Christ's human and divine natures are the same, Aquinas argues, so when human being is said of Christ and when «human being» supposits personally, i.e., for Christ, what is attributed to human being must be true of the person of Christ; but, since Christ was not made God but was God from eternity, human being cannot be said to be made God. Further, Aquinas rewrites the sentence to make it true, changing the subject from «human being» to «human nature», a change that specifies the reference as an abstract nature rather than Christ. It is an argument which seems to draw a sharp line between the simple and personal supposit, a line which would not be necessary unless one also held the view that the simple supposit is exclusively conceptual and, hence, unconnected to things as they really exist.

<sup>29</sup> For William a term can stand for what it signifies (i.e., supposit *simply*) in three ways: «... sine omni comparatione ad res (e.g., human being is a species) vel pro significato comparato ad res et hoc dupliciter, aut inquantum salvatur actualiter in unaquaque re et de ea predicabilis est (e.g., human being is the noblest of creatures) aut inquantum communiter et vago modo se habet ad quodlibet et cum nullo determinate est idem (e.g., pepper is sold here and in Rome).» WILLIAM OF SHERWOOD, p. 77 (ed. cit., n. 2).

<sup>30</sup> Peter describes «animal» in «omnis homo est animal» as suppositing simply, «quia solum supponit pro natura generis.» PETER OF SPAIN, *Summule Logicales*, VI, 6–8 (ed. cit., n. 2). Mullally's introduction to Peter's text argues that this view leads to conclusions like «this man is the universal generic animal» and various problems of conversion. See MULLALLY, pp. lvi–lvii (ed. cit., n. 2). Ockham also criticizes this view at some length for similar reasons. See WILLIAM OF OCKHAM, *Summae Logicae*, ed. Philotheum Boehner, Gedeon Gál, and Stephen Brown (St. Bonaventure, 1974), II, c. 2, pp. 249–254.

<sup>31</sup> *ST* III q. 16, a. 7.

The implication, one might argue, is that only when the subject term explicitly refers to a common nature, can we take the supposit to be the nature/concept rather than the individual, and that personal supposition is the <natural> or <normal> supposit for a concrete, common noun, a view much closer to Ockham's than Peter of Spain's or William of Sherwood's. Ockham interprets propositions which seem to refer to a common or abstract but real nature as ambiguous or malformed; they must be retranslated in a way that makes clear whether their referent is real or merely intentional. Thus «human being is first and foremost risible» must be understood as designating either what he calls the *signified* act («of <human being> the predicate <risible> is first and foremost predicated»), or alternatively, the *effected* act («every human being is risible and nothing other than human being is risible»).<sup>32</sup> Just as Aquinas implies by rewriting «human being was made God,» for Ockham the disjunction between personal and simple supposition is exclusive and complete; there is no nature nor way of referring to a nature distinct from or common to both simple and personal supposit.

The most puzzling passage by far, however, is also the one which discusses different types of supposition most thoroughly and, though occurring in a trinitarian context, gives a more general account of supposition. The question is whether the proposition, «God generates God» is true, and Aquinas begins his response by disagreeing with the view that God and terms like it «*proprie secundum suam naturam supponunt pro essentia, sed ex adjuncto notionali trahuntur ad supponendum pro persona.*»<sup>33</sup> If Aquinas strongly disagreed with this view, it might be taken as a sign that he views

<sup>32</sup> OCKHAM, *Summa Logicae*, I, c. 66, pp. 199–205 (ed. cit., n. 30). Cf. Walter BURLEIGH, *De Puritate Artis Logicae Tractatus Longior*, ed. Philotheus Boehner (St. Bonaventure, 1955), 11–19. Burleigh makes a similar distinction between *suppositionem simplex absolutam* and *suppositionem simplex comparatam*. The first, the supposition of the subject in sentences like «human being is the noblest creature», is defined as «the supposition of the subject for its significate as it is in supposits.» The second, in propositions like «human being is a species», is defined as «the supposition of a term for its significate as it is predicated of its supposits» (p. 11). Burleigh then goes on to argue against the view that the supposition is personal in such propositions, unless the proposition is changed to make descent to singulars valid, i.e., if the proposition is «among corporeal creatures human being is nobler than other non-human corporeal creatures» (p. 14). Cf. Vincent FERRER, *De suppositionibus*, ed. John A. Trentman (Stuttgart, 1977) 118.

<sup>33</sup> *ST* I q. 39, a. 4. This view was supposedly Gilbert of Poitiers's, though he never articulates precisely this principle; the objections to Gilbert's view in Alexander of Hales and William of Auxerre seem to be based on his view that *trinitas* cannot truly be predicated of God because, given that the supposition of the term «God» is for the divine essence, it is not true that the essence or substance of God is triune; see GILBERT OF POITIERS, *Expositio in Boecii Librum Secundum de Trinitate*: The Commentaries on Boethius by Gilbert of Poitiers, ed. Nikolaus M. Häring, 2, 72, p. 178. Cf. GODFREY OF CLAIRVAUX, PL 185, 597–98, ALEXANDER OF HALES, *Summa Theologica* (Quaracchi, 1924), vol. 1, Lib. I, m. III, c. 1; pp. 535–536, and WILLIAM OF AUXERRE (Guillelmus Altissidorensis), *Summa Aurea*, ed. Jean Ribaillier (Paris, 1980), vol. 1, Lib. 1, trac. IV, c. IV, pp. 44–49). According to Aquinas, Gilbert of Poitiers's mistake consisted in his view that the divine relations are external to the divine nature. See *ST* I q. 28, a. 2.



*personal* supposition as the primary form of supposition, and, like later nominalists, explains reference and meaning primarily by reference to really existing individuals rather than to abstract or common natures. But in the *corpus* he does not diametrically oppose the view that terms supposit *per se* for the nature or essence; rather he only repeats with approval the view of others that the term <God> *can* properly supposit for the person. The term <God> (as opposed to the term <divinity>) can supposit for a person, Aquinas argues, because according to its mode of signifying the term <God> «significat divinam essentiam ut in habente ipsam, sicut hoc nomen homo humanitatem significat in supposito.»<sup>34</sup> He expands on this view in a way that gives priority neither to supposition for the person nor the essence; the supposition of the subject depends in both cases on the predicates, some of which pertain to the essence, some to a person or persons.<sup>35</sup>

The passage is further complicated by a reply to an objection. Having already said that <God> can properly supposit for a *person*, Aquinas then argues that «unde per se supponit pro natura communi, sed ex adjuncto determinatur ejus suppositio ad personam.»<sup>36</sup> This is a contradiction, Ockham objects, because if a term from its *mode of signifying* supposits for a person, then it does not *only by reason of an adjunct* supposit for a person.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, it seems that Ockham has missed that when Aquinas refers to the mode of signification for <God>, he is contrasting its concrete way of signifying the nature, which means it *can properly* supposit for a person, to the abstract way of signifying this nature in the term <divinity>; this claim does not directly contradict the view given in the reply.

Another way of dissipating the contradiction Ockham finds here is to say that the *corpus* makes a primarily linguistic point (using the language of the modistic grammarians), while the reply makes a primarily metaphysical one (using the language of supposition).<sup>38</sup> The linguistic character of the first point becomes clearer from a later article in which Aquinas argues that we can properly say <God begot God>, with <God> properly suppositing for a person, but we cannot say, <Essence begot essence> even though «propter divinam simplicitatem, non est aliud deus quam divina essentia,» because <essence> «non habet ex modo suae significationis quod supponat pro persona, quia significat essentiam ut formam abstractam.»<sup>39</sup> So the term

<sup>34</sup> *ST I* q. 39, a. 4. 1

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 3.

<sup>37</sup> My emphasis. WILLIAM OF OCKHAM, *Scriptum*, I, d. 4, 1, p. 5 (ed. cit., n. 14). I am indebted to Stephen Brown for pointing out Ockham's comments on this passage in Aquinas. For Brown's view of the passage and the role of this dispute in the history of supposition, see Stephen F. BROWN, «Medieval Supposition Theory,» (ed. cit., n. 3).

<sup>38</sup> See above n. 12.

<sup>39</sup> *ST I* q. 39, a. 5.

«God» does not exclude the supposition of persons as «essence» or «divinity» does; nonetheless, (and this is the metaphysical point) the reply makes clear, because of the unity and simplicity of the divine nature, the term «God» *per se* supposits for the nature. Ironically, Ockham somewhat begrudgingly makes a similar point, though none of the secondary literature on Ockham seems to have noted it. After vigorously arguing for the primacy of personal supposition even for the term «God», Ockham concedes, «quia tamen natura divina et suppositum sunt unum realiter, ... iste terminus «Deus» supponit et pro natura et pro supposito respectu omnis praedicati quod potest competere tam naturae quam supposito.»<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, Ockham is ultimately sensitive to a real tension in the text, to its vacillation between viewing the essence and the person as the primary supposits. It only seems to make matters worse when, in the same reply, Aquinas goes on to reassert the priority of personal supposition for terms like «human being» – though not for «God» – because, he argues, «forma significata per hoc nomen homo, idest humanitas, realiter dividitur in diversis suppositis.»<sup>41</sup> Aquinas here gives what I think is the key to unraveling his views on supposition, hidden in this distinction between supposition for «God» and «human being»; the distinction and whole account of supposition is based ultimately on their different metaphysical structures, the different relationship between natures and individuals for creatures and Creator. Here, in other words, the linguistic/logical and metaphysical distinctions with which I began come together. Whether terms naming God and creatures supposit primarily for the nature or for the individual, whether the nature *per se* can serve as supposit at all depends on that nature's unity, on whether it receives or is its own *esse*, and on its relationship to individual *supposita*. Without this distinction, Aquinas seems irresolvably ambivalent on whether his account of language places the bulk of its weight on the nature or on the existing individual as the ground of meaning and reference.

Since in a way both of these views of supposition rest on the three-fold division of the consideration of the nature in *De Ente et Essentia* for support, I want to consider more carefully the passage in *De Ente et Essentia* in terms of its explicit subject, the problem of universals and the metaphysical structure of material, spiritual and divine being. Only then will it be clear how Aquinas' use of supposition corresponds to his metaphysics and solution to the problem of universals.

<sup>40</sup> OCKHAM, Scriptum, I, d. 4, q. 1, p. 12 (ed. cit, n. 14).

<sup>41</sup> ST I q. 39, a. 5.



## II. Aquinas' Theory of Supposition

### 1. Universals and <Natural> Supposition

On the simplest level, as a solution to the problem of universals, the argument of chapter III of *De Ente* is that to the nature absolutely considered belongs all and only what is proper to the nature as such. So, for example, animality and rationality are proper to the nature <human being> considered absolutely. However, since unity and plurality, universality and singularity are *not* proper to the nature so taken, none of these can be said of the absolute consideration. Hence, the paradoxes the critic of realism poses, which result from making the nature *both* one and common, are dissipated because, for Aquinas, neither of these are attributable to the nature. The other two considerations of the nature follow upon the nature coming to exist either in things or in the mind; yet to the nature absolutely considered «no act of existing is due.»<sup>42</sup> Thus when one predicates <human being> of Socrates, no regresses, <third man> or otherwise, are generated because the <human being> which is predicated of Socrates is the nature *per se*, which is not *something*, some reality distinct from Socrates of which <human being> could be further predicated. Nonetheless, Aquinas is able to maintain that the predication of <human being> of Socrates is not arbitrary or meaningless because the nature that comes to exist really in Socrates comes to exist in the mind, and this nature, which links Socrates and the concept of <human being>, grounds the truth and meaningfulness of the predication.

As a solution to the problem of universals, this view has a kind of slippery elegance which, I think, its placement in the context of supposition theory brings out even more strongly, and which also, I think, makes it possible to construct two different supposition theories based on it. On one view, the foundation in both the orders of being and knowing provided by the nature absolutely considered could serve as the ground for a theory of supposition; thus the nature absolutely considered would become the natural or <normal> supposit for the term until and unless it is deflected by some accident befalling it, and comes to exist either in the mind or in things.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the equally important recognition that the nature exists *only* in singulars or in the mind, not in itself, so to speak, could serve as the ground for a second theory; thus even what is proper to the nature as such is verified *only* of existing individuals (i.e., the personal supposits) not the unified nature

<sup>42</sup> *De ente* ch. 3.

<sup>43</sup> This is the view formulated by Vincent Ferrer based on Aquinas' remarks in: *De ente et Essentia*. See Vincent FERRER, *De Suppositionibus*, pp. 100–121 (ed. cit., n. 32). Vincent argues first for the distinction between natural and accidental supposition based on Aquinas' distinction between the two ways of considering the nature (p. 100), absolutely according to its proper *ratio* and according to the *esse* which it has in individuals, and then argues for the priority of natural supposition because a term supposits primarily for its signified, and what a term signifies is its nature taken absolutely (p. 103).

immediately signified by the term and existing only in the mind (i.e., the simple supposit for the term).<sup>44</sup> Which supposition theory we take as the correct extrapolation from the text depends on how we understand the nature absolutely considered.

If we take Aquinas' 'evacuation' of all characteristics except those which are proper to it from the nature absolutely considered seriously, we must admit that he has robbed it not only of unity and community but of existence, of any reality of its own whatsoever. That is, if essence lacks existence, that nature in a very literal sense *is not*, is *nothing* until an act of existence is communicated to it, an act of existence which is not proper to it. Existence is thus in some sense an 'accident' that befalls it. Existence can only be an accident 'in some sense', Joseph Owens notes, because while the nine predicamental accidents may come or go without affecting the substance, the 'accident' of existence, though like the others in being beyond or outside the essence, is nonetheless necessary for the thing to be at all.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note, however, that this nature or essence which 'is not' is still for Aquinas, as it is for Aristotle, the *ousia* of the thing, the core of its being, that which pervades and makes possible all of its aspects and acts. As Cornelio Fabro notes, Aquinas maintains the distinction of *esse* and *essentia* along with what Fabro calls «the characteristically Aristotelian principle,» *forma dat esse*.<sup>46</sup> So, for Aquinas, following Aristotle, form is *act* in relation to matter; however, this Aristotelian principle is qualified by the distinction between essence and existence, because what this distinction comes to is that form, identical to or the ground of essence,<sup>47</sup> while *act* in relation to matter, stands in *potency* to *esse*, is made actual by receiving *esse*. Put in a way that perhaps emphasizes but, I would argue, does not distort the paradox we are left with, to the essence that

<sup>44</sup> This is the view taken by JOHN OF ST. THOMAS in: *Ars Logica*, ed. Beato Reiser, O.S.B. (Turin, 1930), pp. 177–8. Here John argues that natural supposition must in effect be a species of personal supposition since essential predicates, those contained in the definition, belong only to the individuals possessing the nature, not to the nature as concept, i.e., the simple supposit. Thus there is no natural supposit different from the individuals named by the term or the concept in the mind. Cf. E.J. ASHWORTH, «The Doctrine of Supposition in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,» in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 1969, p. 277.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph OWENS, «The Accidental and Essential Character of Being in the Doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas,» in: *Mediaeval Studies* 20 (1958) 1–40, especially pp. 10–19. Owens argues that Aquinas understands *esse* as an accident in this broader sense, unlike Avicenna, who makes it a predicamental accident and so subsequent to essence.

<sup>46</sup> Cornelio FABRO, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tomaso d'Aquino*, 3rd. ed. (Turin, 1963), 341–2; cited and translated in Helen James JOHN, *The Thomist Spectrum*, «Fabro, Participation and the Act of Being,» (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966) 102.

<sup>47</sup> Aquinas distinguishes between form and essence in corporeal creatures, whose form does not but whose essence does include a reference to matter. To be human is to be corporeal, and thus the essence of human being, though not the form, includes a reference to what Aquinas calls non-signate or indeterminate matter, i.e., not *this* flesh and bones, but to flesh and bones in general. See *De ente* ch. 3.

serves as the link between our minds and the things it knows, to the nature which is what an existing thing *is* in the most fundamental sense, it is not proper *to be* at all.<sup>48</sup>

I will return shortly to the metaphysical aspect of the nature absolutely considered, but it is already clear that when we apply these results to the division of supposition we find that it is hard to see how this nature could serve as the supposit, as that for which the subject of a sentence stands. The peculiar character of the nature absolutely considered explains, I think, why it is never taken as supposit by Aquinas and why he does not refer to a <natural> as opposed personal supposition.<sup>49</sup> A term cannot supposit or stand for the nature taken absolutely because such a nature does not exist. As soon as we start to talk about it, to have it serve as *subject* of a proposition, we are talking about it *as existing*, and as such it must supposit either for the universal in the soul or the individual or individuals existing outside the soul.

Aquinas does, of course, claim in *De Ente* that the nature absolutely considered *is* what is *predicated* of the subject, but it does not follow from this that as predicate the nature has some kind of supposition (and hence some kind of existence) distinct from the supposit for the subject.<sup>50</sup> In fact, it follows from the discussion of universals in *De Ente* that when we predicate A of B, we are not predicating one *thing* of another *thing* or, to put the same thing in terms of supposition, subject and predicate do not have distinct *supposits*, only different *meanings*. In normal as well as in self-predication there is one supposit but two *rationes*. Hence, Aquinas argues, «Huic vero diversitati quae est secundum rationem, respondet pluritas et subiecti; identitatem vero rei significat intellectus per ipsam compositionem.»<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The objection that we only have an apparent paradox here which disappears once one distinguishes between the <is> of predication and existence misses the point. Aquinas shares with Aristotle the notion that the form or essence is the *ousia*, what the thing is in the most fundamental sense; a thing's essence, while not the same as its existence, assumes and grounds that existence. In the Posterior Analytics (92b4–11) Aristotle argues that though *what* (*to ti estin*) a human being is and *that* she is are different, only real (existent) objects have essences and hence definitions, i.e., essential predicates. I take this to be the logical form of the metaphysical claim already stated, that to have an essence is, for Aristotle, to be real. What we should find surprising, and in a way what I want to make surprising here, is Aquinas' attempt to remain faithful to Aristotle and at the same time to distinguish essence from existence, to retain the Aristotelian principle, yet to place it in a context which radically qualifies it.

<sup>49</sup> The passage from the Sentences discussed above (*In III Sent* d. 1, q. 2, a. 4) does use the term <natural supposition> but as opposed to <accidental> rather than <personal> supposition. See above n. 25. Given that the term never reappears in later works, it makes sense to take the natural supposition of the term as the <normal> or default supposition, the supposition a term has unless its field of references is restricted by a specific propositional context, and not as referring to a natural supposit distinct from the simple or personal supposit.

<sup>50</sup> On the nature absolutely considered as what is predicated, see *De ente* ch. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *ST* I q. 13, a. 12. Whether both subject and predicate supposit for Aquinas is unclear, though he does seem always to hold the view, also held by Ockham, that there is only one supposit *per* true proposition, which is all he must hold to support my interpretation of the

## 2. Supposition and its Metaphysical Corollaries

As should already be clear, Aquinas' position on universals and the views on supposition I have attributed to him do not just function as solutions to logical problems but have metaphysical corollaries. It is a rule admitting of perhaps few exceptions that in Aquinas important metaphysical claims ultimately have a bearing on the difference between God and creatures, and his solution to the problem of universals and use of supposition theory confirm rather than break this rule. One consequence of Aquinas' discussion in *De Ente* of the nature or

implications of *De ente* for supposition theory. In much of the secondary literature, this issue is translated into a debate over whether Aquinas holds an identity or inherence theory of predication, i.e., thinks of propositions as asserting the *identity* of subject and predicate (as Ockham does) or the predicate as *inhering* in the subject. Aquinas has two ways of talking which seem to imply both views. Sometimes Aquinas speaks of the subject as «taken materially» and the predicate, the nature absolutely considered, as «taken formally» (ST III q. 16, a. 7, ad 4.). This seems to imply that the subject supposit and the predicate signifies a form or quality which inheres in the subject and does not supposit, which is Vincent Ferrer's view, and the one he attributes to Aquinas. Vincent FERRER, *De Suppositionibus*, p. 97 (ed. cit., n. 32); see also n. 1, p. 97, of Trentman's edition for his discussion of Ferrer and Aquinas on this point. Based on this passage, Aquinas seems to assert an inherence theory of predication. However, Aquinas seems to express the opposite view, an identity theory, in his discussion of the term *principium* in the sentence «Pater et Filius sunt unum principium». Aquinas argues that «this word «principle» has not determinate supposition but rather it has confused supposition for two persons together» (ST I q. 36, a. 4, ad 4). Although Aquinas seems to be using «confused supposition» in a non-standard way here, he is here discussing the supposition of the *predicate* not just the subject, and implying that the supposit of subject and predicate are identical. On confused supposition, see MOODY, *Contribution of Mediaeval Logic*, p. 382 (ed. cit., n. 10). Arguing against Peter Geach and John Trentman, John Malcolm argues convincingly that Aquinas does not unequivocally assume an inherence theory of predication. See John MALCOLM, «A Reconsideration of the Identity and Inherence Theories of the Copula,» in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979) 383–400. Cf. Peter GEACH, «Subject and Predicate,» in: *Mind* 59 (1950) 465, and Veatch's discussion of the distinction between predicate and subject in: Aquinas, op. cit. above n. 13, pp. 416–422 et passim, and John TRENTMAN, «Predication and Universals in Vincent Ferrer's Logic,» in: *Franciscan Studies* 28 (1964) 48. I would go further than Malcolm and suggest that Aquinas' ambivalence on the topic follows the same lines on his ambivalence on the relative priority of the nature vs. the individual as primary supposit, and I would argue that it should be resolved the same way. So long as the nature which is predicated has no independent reality apart from its existence in individuals or the mind, Aquinas can speak of the nature or form of the predicate inhering in the subject without implying by this the existence of a form or nature independent of the existing individual of which the form is predicated. Hence, he can also say that the only reference or supposit for the predicate must be identical to that of the subject term. Cf. Malcolm's distinction between the identity and inherence theories, pp. 384–385. Malcolm says that on the inherence view «the predicate signifies something other than the subject,» but for Aquinas while the predicate *signifies* something different (i.e., has a different *ratio*) than the subject term signifies, it does not *refer* to anything other than the subject. See below for what I take to be Aquinas' resistance to reducing signification to reference or vice versa. See also OCKHAM, *Summa Logicae*, I, c. 63; II, c. 2 (ed. cit., n. 30). Cf. Marilyn MCCORD ADAMS, «What does Ockham Mean by «Supposition»?», in: *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 17 (1976) 378–380. See also WILLIAM OF SHERWOOD, *Introductiones*, pp. 78–79 (ed. cit., n. 2) and PETER OF SPAIN, *Summule Logicales*, VI, 5–6 (ed. cit., n. 2), who argue for the separate and distinct supposition of predicates and subjects.



essence of composite things, and perhaps *the* consequence the account was designed to promote, is that creatures, as composed not only of matter and form but also of essence and existence, are absolutely and directly dependent upon that which is its own existence, i.e., on God.<sup>52</sup> Since existence is not proper to the nature as such, it must receive its existence from elsewhere, ultimately from the only nature capable of conferring that existence, that which does not receive but is its own existence.

This is significant for the creature in two ways; first, and most obviously, the creature has no act of existence which gives it concrete, individual reality, but receives this act from God, or, in other words, the nature has no suppositum, no subsistence as individual, apart from that conferred on it from the outside.<sup>53</sup> But the creature not only depends on God for its existence but also for its essence, the reality which material creatures share in *common* with other creatures of the same type.<sup>54</sup> In the context of the question, whether there can be anything which is not from God, Aquinas is confronted with an objection which seems to follow from his own distinction between essence and existence. It claims that the creature depends on God only for its existence, not for its nature or quiddity.<sup>55</sup> Aquinas responds, «(Q)uod ex hoc ipso quod quidditati esse attribuitur, non solum esse, sed ipsa quidditas creari dicitur: quia antequam esse habeat, *nihil* est, nisi forte in intellectu creantis, ubi non est creatura, sed creatrix essentia.»<sup>56</sup> Fabro expresses this view of the creature as follows: «The nothingness from which God by his creative act brings forth the creature is precisely that which the creature is, the *that-which-is-not*, before and apart from the creative act of God.»<sup>57</sup> What is denied, though without precision, of the nature absolutely considered for logical reasons (to solve the problem of universals) is what is denied of the material creature *of itself* for ontological reasons. And what is denied the material nature is not only what follows on existence, subsistence as *individual*, but also what follows on essence for a material creature, *community*. Both are

<sup>52</sup> As Cornelio Fabro argues, «the Thomist distinction of *essentia* and *esse*, expressed by the notion of participation involves the total dependence of the creature in relation to God, owing to the emergence of *esse* which constitutes creation.» Fabro, p. 29; in John, p. 100 (ed. cit., n. 46). Cf. *QDV* q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *De ente* ch. 5.

<sup>54</sup> While all creatures, material and immaterial, for Aquinas are dependent on God both for essence and existence, since matter is the cause of the multiplication of individuals in the same species, only material creatures have an essence which *can* be common to many individuals, and so are dependent not only for individual existence, but also for their common nature.

<sup>55</sup> *QDP* q. 3, a. 5, obj 2.

<sup>56</sup> My emphasis. *QDP* q. 3, a. 5, ad 2.

<sup>57</sup> Fabro, p. 29; in John, p. 100 (ed. cit., n. 46).

kinds of reality which are not proper to it but which it must receive from God.<sup>58</sup>

To this two-fold *lack* in the creature corresponds a two-fold reality in the Creator. The divine nature is, in reality and not just in the order of knowing, truly one and truly common, i.e., one God in three persons, both the most individual, since completely actual and unique, and supremely universal, since containing simply and completely all possible forms and perfections which creatures imperfectly share. Arguing for God's simplicity and perfection Aquinas writes, «(Q)uod sicut sol ut dicit Dionysius «sensibilium substantias et qualitates multas et differentes, ipse unus existens et uniformiter lucendo, in seipso uniformiter praeaccipit, multo magis in causa omnium necesse est praeexistere omnia secundum naturalem unionem»».<sup>59</sup> Thus Aquinas argues that both concrete and abstract names are appropriately attributed to God. After noting that the forms of creatures as simple and one are not subsistent and as subsisting are composite, Aquinas writes, «Quia igitur et Deus simplex est, et subsistens est, attribuimus ei nomina abstracta ad significandam simplicitatem ejus, et nomina concreta ad significandam subsistentiam et perfectionem ipsius...»<sup>60</sup> Thus, though concrete names derived from creatures signify a composite being, because they signify something as actual, individual and subsistent, as a «this», they capture some shadow of the divine nature as subsistent. And though abstract names derived from creatures signify forms which do not of themselves subsist, because they signify something as simple or one and common, they point to the incomposite, unlimited completeness of the divine nature.

To this difference in the metaphysical structure of creatures and Creator, then, correspond the two different versions or divisions of supposition which we saw in Thomas' direct remarks on supposition. On the one hand, a term for

<sup>58</sup> For this formulation, that the creature of itself lacks both singularity and universality, unity and community, I am indebted to Louis MACKAY, «Singular and Universal: A Franciscan Perspective,» in: *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979) 130–164. The «Franciscan perspective», Mackey argues, is one in which «universality and singularity vary directly, not inversely» because «the universal achieves full reality – concreteness – only in the singular; and the singular is only fully individuated – fully determinate – insofar as it is replete with universals» (p. 130). Thus both singularity and universality are real and are realities in the creature (albeit possessed by it imperfectly) for Bonaventure and Scotus. Without entering into the technical difficulties of the Scotist view nor implying that Aquinas' and Scotus' view are identical, we might say that for Aquinas too universality and singularity vary directly rather than inversely; however, on his view both universality and singularity are denied to be realities which belong to the creature *per se*, i.e., to the absolute consideration of its nature, since it cannot even be said to be of itself at all. For Aquinas as an idea in the divine mind, the only reality it has until created by God, the creature is identical with the creative essence, i.e., with God, and is not something in its own right.

<sup>59</sup> *ST* I q. 4, a. 2, ad 1; PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *De Divinibus Nominibus*, I, 4; PG 3, 817. Cf. BONAVENTURE, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Mystero Trinitatis*, Q. II, a. II, 1, ad 1, quoted in: MACKAY, «Singular and Universal,» p. 133, n. 5 (ed. cit., n. 58).

<sup>60</sup> *ST* I q. 13, a. 1, ad 2. Cf. David BURRELL, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London, 1979) 4–7.



a creature stands or supposits only for the nature to which something has been added, some act of existence which confers on it the subsistent, concrete reality that allows it to serve as the suppositum for further attributes or perfections. Because it can exist only in some suppositum and not of itself, its most <natural> supposition is personal, i.e., for the subsisting and composite individual. Such a term may also supposit for the common nature, but because what makes it one and common follows on its existence not in the real order but in the soul, when the single common nature serves as supposit, only those things that pertain to it exclusively as existing in the soul are true of it, *not* essential attributes. Essential attributes, which are found in all the individuals possessing the nature, are indeed proper to the nature taken absolutely, but it (i.e., the nature) cannot serve as the supposit for these attributes because it, of itself, is nothing. Nor can the nature as existing in the mind so serve, because essential attributes are not true of it as it exists in the mind. Hence, even what is common to the nature in all its instances comes to be only in truly diverse, discrete, and composite individuals.

For God, on the other hand, supposition is divided differently. The claim referred to earlier, that terms like <human being> supposit for the common nature, i.e., simply, only when the predicate requires it, occurs in a text which argues that the <normal> or default suppositions for the terms <God> and <human being> are different. They are different, Aquinas writes,

Quod aliter habet hoc nomen Deus ad supponendum pro persona et hoc nomen homo. Quia enim forma significata per hoc nomen homo, idest humanitas, *realiter dividitur in diversi suppositis, per se supponit pro persona* etiamsi nihil addatur quod determinet ipsum ad personam, quae est suppositum distinctum. Unitas autem sive communitas humanae naturae non est secundum rem, sed solum secundum considerationem. Sed forma significata per hoc nomen Deus, scilicet essentia divina, *est una et communis secundum rem*, unde *per se supponit pro natura communi*, sed ex adjuncto determinatur ejus suppositio ad personam.<sup>61</sup>

Because divinity is really both one and common, then, the term <God> can and does normally supposit for the one, common nature; human nature, on the other hand, is neither one nor common of itself and hence normally supposits for a distinct individual or individuals.

### III. Conclusions

What I have tried to argue here, then, is that there is not only consistency but symmetry between Aquinas' metaphysics and his supposition theory, or, in other words, that the metaphysical complexity of the creature and its

<sup>61</sup> My emphasis. *ST* I q. 39, a. 4, ad 3.

distinction from the creator is, in Aquinas, reflected in the complexity of language.

Let me explain this by first explaining the linguistic <complexity> I take to be operative in Aquinas' remarks on universals and supposition. Aquinas maintains that signification and supposition are really distinct; thus he maintains *contra* both the nominalists *and* the realists that what a term means and what it stands for or refers to are distinct. Realists, on the one hand, maintain that what a term stands for is something other than the individuals to which the name is normally applied, i.e., that its (at least primary) supposit is that which it *signifies*, a common nature belonging to all the individuals. Nominalists like Ockham, on the other hand, maintain that the signification of a term is ultimately *just* its capacity to supposit personally, i.e., for the individuals called by that name.<sup>62</sup> Nominalists, by reducing signification to supposition, and realists, by reducing supposition to signification, attempt to make language stand in something resembling a one-to-one correspondence with reality.

For Aquinas, however, the nature absolutely considered is, in a sense, what is *signified* by the name but is not its *supposit* or reference. To the nature taken absolutely belong only the essential features, those found in the definition, which, of course, express what the word *signifies*. However, since neither existence nor unity belong to it, since we never encounter the nature as we signify and define it, but only other than in its pure form, i.e., as existing in individuals or as an idea or concept, only these latter can serve as supposits for the term.

On a linguistic level, maintaining the difference between the two means maintaining a richer conception of language, of what we might call signification in a broad sense. For, in a broad sense, the various kinds of supposition a term may have in addition to its lexical meaning enriches its significance. But distinguishing the supposition of a term from its signification in the *narrow* sense allows one to control the expansion of meaning so that it does not become a flood. As Aquinas remarks more than once, a plurality of

<sup>62</sup> OCKHAM, *Summa Logicae*, I, c. 33 (ed. cit., n. 30). Ockham gives several definitions of signification here, the first two of which use supposition explicitly in the definiens and which are designated as the primary senses of *significatio*; the first is: «uno modo dicitur signum aliquid significare, quando supponit vel natum est supponere pro illo.» Hence, even though Ockham distinguishes between signification and supposition, it is only to define signification *in terms of* supposition, something Aquinas does not do. Cf. Michael J. LOUX, «*Significatio and Suppositio*: Reflections on Ockham's Semantics,» in: *New Scholasticism* 53 (Autumn 1979) 407–427. Loux tries to undercut the view that «Ockham's theory is simply a nominalistic variant on traditional atomistic semantics» by arguing that Ockham's equation of signification and supposition makes the meaning of a term «just its capacity to play certain kinds of propositional roles.» While I think he is correct in noting that Ockham and other medievals to some degree recognize that meaning is context dependent, he reaches his conclusion about Ockham by overemphasizing the degree to which supposition is an intra-linguistic relation, i.e., determined by context, and ignoring the sense in which it is inter-linguistic, i.e., an account of how words refer to things.

supposits for the same term does not make for equivocation, only a plurality of significations.<sup>63</sup> Aquinas' account of supposition is an attempt to qualify without destroying the principle of <one word, one meaning>, and hence the possibility of reasoning. Thus the oft-quoted maxim based on Aristotle's discussion of the principle of non-contradiction, «that which does not signify one thing, signifies nothing,» stands, but only just barely and only if we take <signify> in the narrow sense.<sup>64</sup> In the broad sense it seems to me that Aquinas is well aware that terms signify more than one thing; his task in distinguishing signification from supposition is, like his attempt to distinguish analogy from equivocation, not an attempt to *reduce* multiple meanings to one, but rather to order and distinguish them until such time as meaning and reference, signified and supposit are united in our language and understanding as they are in the divine nature and divine intellect.

Until such time, they remain distinct, and their distinction reflects distinction, composition, and plurality in the creature. This brings me to the metaphysical complexity I mentioned earlier. That supposition and signification are distinct, or, what amounts to the same thing, that the nature signified by the name cannot stand as supposit, reflects the composite and incompletely unified character of the creature, composed of essence and existence. That simple and personal supposition are distinct, or, again, what amounts to the same thing, that the nature of a creature exists as one and common only in the mind, reflects that the unity and community of the created nature is not actual but only provisional. So perhaps, in a sort of negative sense, there is a correspondence between language and reality, at least between *our* language and the reality *we* have any experience of, i.e., in the sense that *both* the creature and the ways of signifying it are not one but many, while both the divine nature and its knowledge are not many but one.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, *QDP* q. 9, a. 4; *SCG* IV, c. 49; *Comp Theo* I, c. 211; *In III Sent* d. 6, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1.

<sup>64</sup> See *QDP* q. 9, a. 4. If, Aristotle argues, one were to claim an unlimited number of meanings for a term, «obviously reasoning would be impossible; for not to have one meaning is to have no meaning, and if words have no meaning our reasoning with one another, and indeed with ourselves, has been annihilated.» *Metaphysics*, IV, 1006b7–10, trans. Richard MCKEON, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941) 738. Though the claim that «qui non unum significat, nihil significat» seems to have been a saying often abstracted from the precise context of Aristotle's text, Aquinas uses it with reference to this context and with a clear understanding of its philosophical significance. Cf. Jacqueline HAMESSE, *Les Auctoritates Aristotelis: Un Florilège Médiéval* (Louvain, 1974) 123. John of St. Thomas also the same maxim with the same Aristotelian context in mind and in his discussion of simple and personal supposition. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Ars. Logica*, p. 177.(op. cit., n. 44)