

Article

Creation and Grace: Understanding the Pre-Modern Frame of Aquinas' Approach to Sanctification

Reginald Lynch, OP 

Dominican House of Studies, Washington, DC 20017, USA; rlynch@dhs.edu

Abstract: This article proposes a Thomistic account of graced human nature that emphasizes the importance of underlying developments in Aquinas' doctrine of creation that inform his approach to the doctrine of grace. While post-Cartesian accounts of the human person often reduce the complex causal structure that marks the relationship between God and the human person in Aquinas' pre-modern theological anthropology, this article recovers a more comprehensive account of Aquinas' account of human sanctification and divine causality. Where modern and postmodern anthropologies are often marked by scientific determinism or subjectivism, Aquinas's anthropology of grace refuses the modern dichotomization of immanence and transcendence, proposing instead an understanding of grace as the divinization of the human person as image of God that is marked not only by the supernatural finality of beatitude, but the intrinsic and personal immanence of divine indwelling.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas; grace; creation; science; theological anthropology; immanent frame

From a Thomistic perspective, the connection between the doctrines of creation and grace concerns a number of interrelated ideas that are not infrequently understood in modern—and now, post-modern—thought. For Thomas Aquinas, the concept of creation establishes a complex and intricate analogical relationship between God and creatures, in which divine being serves not only as an exemplar for created being, but as efficient creative cause as well. In the context of modern scientific accounts of reality and the human person, the value of a Thomistic lens for these same subjects is seen at both a natural and a supernatural level. Aquinas' pre-Cartesian approach to the concept of causality—and the implications of this for our understanding of the relationship between God and created being—shapes his understanding of the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of grace in important ways. For Descartes and many other thinkers who influenced the philosophical context in which modern scientific methodologies and cosmologies developed, the concept of causality is frequently reduced to a version of efficient causality (Ariew 2015). In addition to the absence of causality's other species—namely, formal, final and material causality—descriptions of efficient causality from this period often reduce the concept of efficiency to empirically observable physical motion. By contrast, Aquinas' description of efficient causality includes not only the dynamic between act and potency within created being, but the implications of divine activity as well. For Aquinas, the four-fold concept of causality is deeply engrained in the structure of reality—understood in this way, the different causes provide a vocabulary for speaking about the way in which a given entity has being, its relation to other created beings and ultimately to God Himself.

Aquinas' approach to causality—and the implications of this for the relationship between God and the world—does not fit easily into modern (and now post-modern) cosmologies of the real or accounts of the subjectivity of the human person. Charles Taylor, in his now famous book, *A Secular Age*, describes modernity as characterized by what he terms the 'immanent frame'—that is, a way of thinking about reality that tends towards personal and social construals of reality; whether the rationalism of Enlightenment social projects or the empirical and experimental methodologies of early modern scientific theories, for Taylor these approaches share a tendency towards a self-contained view of reality,



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accompanied by a reluctance to acknowledge the transcendent (Taylor 2007). As a pre-modern thinker, Aquinas sits uneasily in the modern landscape and does not accommodate himself to either rationalism or subjectivism in a way that would dispel a certain modern unease that surfaces at times, with those aspects of his thought that transgress Taylor's immanent frame. Rather than a fragmentary anachronism, however, Aquinas' thought can offer something more to the present than a reminder of our collective pre-modern past. Indeed, important conversations about the relationship between modern science and divine action continue, using resources from Aquinas (see Dodds 2012; Tabaczek 2021). In tandem with these important conversations, this article will propose that Aquinas can convey to us important, and properly sapiential, modalities from the Latin patristic and medieval theological tradition that frame the relationship between divine action and created being in a way that not only escapes Taylor's immanent frame, but offers a far more robust account of transcendence than may be found in the modern transcendentalism of Kant and of later German idealism. Despite his historical distance from ourselves and from the many important developments in modern science that continue to unfold in the present, Aquinas' account of God and contingent being has much to offer us today; where the limitations of rationalism and determinism have tended to categorize the claims of divine revelation and empirical science as simply a series of irreconcilable binaries, Aquinas challenges us to embrace a more expansive perspective that moves beyond these dichotomies to a grasp of the whole of reality itself as a product of divine creative causality. This article will argue that the doctrines of creation and grace represent important conceptual locations in Aquinas' thought, where seemingly opposed dichotomies such as creation and natural causality, nature and supernature, grace and human causality, and immanence and transcendence, are recast—without effacing their distinction, these same concepts are caught up in the larger frame of divine wisdom.

These contingencies can pose particular problems for understanding the connection between the concepts of grace and creation from within a modern frame. In order to properly address this question, this article will begin by establishing a Thomistic understanding of the doctrine of creation, as it relates to created being in general, and the human person in particular; in the case of the human person, particular notice will be taken of the specific contours of the relationship between human nature and the concept of grace, taking into account Aquinas' decidedly pre-modern assimilation of Aristotelian causality, and the implications of this for so-called 'created' grace in the context of created human nature.

Building on this, the second section of this article will examine the implications of the doctrine of creation for grace specifically, and the sacramental means by which grace is caused within the human person. Here, Aquinas' distinction within the created order between that which is 'image' and 'trace' of God as first cause, will be employed to understand the respective roles of human nature as image, and those inanimate natural elements that are used in the sacraments, to better understand the different ways in which created nature can be said to function as a cause of grace. This will further involve the distinction between creation *ex nihilo*, and other uses of the concept of creation that Aquinas will employ. For example, in the case of the human person who receives grace and the sacramental instruments normally used to impart it, both the person and the sacramental elements exist as created *ex nihilo*, prior to their involvement with the creation of grace. Here, building in part on my own previous research (see Lynch 2017), I will argue that developments in Aquinas' later thought make it possible to adopt a nuanced approach to the concept of creation in relation to grace as a special form of accidental being, brought into existence within the human person by divine causality through the elevated instrumentality of created natural forms.

1. Grace and the Human Person: Nature and Its Finality in the Context of Divine Wisdom

Although thoroughly grounded in the experiential anthropology of Aristotle, the understanding of the human person that Aquinas advances in his *Summa theologiae* is

fundamentally articulated within the parameters of divine wisdom itself, rather than the partial subjectivities of human experience. While the *Summa* is intended for students, it would be a mistake to think of it as a textbook in the common sense. The *Summa theologiae* is a sapientially ordered text—unlike a textbook that is arranged according to a student’s order of learning, wisdom sees the order of the whole of reality, rather than that of its individual parts. Reaching even beyond the strict sense of scientia in the classical understanding, wisdom in this sense is the ordering principle for creation itself; as a part of this broader whole, the human person is understood not only as a kind of rational animal, but as *image*¹. Further, wisdom is also the principle that governs the ratio of the Incarnation and its effects, in which the second Person of the Trinity assumed the nature this image, and continues to apply the effects of his own incarnational activity to our humanity in the present through the sacraments. The pattern of theological life, as it emerges for Aquinas in the *Secunda* and *Tertia pars* of the *Summa*, implies an elevation of nature as created—as a kind of ‘re-creation’, therefore, the life of grace takes the form of a kind of amplification of the natural.

Accordingly, it would be a mistake to think of the doctrine of grace as an additional story added to a building, in which nature itself serves as a kind of ground floor. All created things, by their nature, exist in reference to God—more than a simple affirmation of God as a distant first mover or isolated exemplary cause, however, to say that a given thing is ‘created’ is to implicitly acknowledge a multi-dimensional causal relationship with God as first cause². Using the language of Aristotle and Aquinas, this causal perspective on being is not only an explanation of the origins a certain thing—it also provides a description of the final end towards which a created thing moves, and the efficient means by which it reaches that perfection in act³. Without disrupting the integrity of created natures, Aquinas is careful to give an account of individual creatures that situates the scope of formal, final, and efficient causality that is proper to their own nature and its proportionate, perfecting ends that is framed against the backdrop of divine causality. In this context, divine being not only provides a kind of pattern for created being as formal exemplar, but also sustains and guides the efficient motion of created things towards the achievement of their ends.⁴ This non-competitive relationship between divine and created causality characterizes the relationship between God and creatures—between divine and created being—according to the wisdom of God’s original creative intent (Dodds 2012, pp. 11–45). Understood in this way, the concept of creation for Aquinas refers to a relationship that exists between God and creatures at the most primary level of their being.

In the case of the human person, these same larger principles apply—in no sense is human activity radically autonomous or self-determinative, establishing its own patterns of self-understanding and meaning apart from God; if these tendencies have become more pronounced in modernity, it should be noted that it would be equally false to claim—as some medieval voluntarists did—that the absolute power of divine causality minimizes the causal integrity of created natures to such an extent that being and action in creation are primarily attributable to divine causality, and only to humans (and other creatures) in as much as their (now highly relativized and accidental) sense of being provides an occasion for the activity of divine being. Prescinding from both of these false anthropologies, what sets the human person apart from other creatures—even sentient ones—is the faculty of reason. Where modernity portrays faith and reason as opposing categories, or at best uneasily related noetic paradigms, for Aquinas and the medieval tradition more generally, the faculty of reason is conceptually orientated towards contemplation, and ultimately trinitarian communion (Van Nieuwenhove 2012, 2021). In contrast with modern body–soul dualities, this pre-modern understanding of *ratio* begins with an integrated understanding of the relationship between reason and materially instantiated powers of human nature. More than a cogitative or computational appendage to a biologically generic physical body, for Aquinas the concept of reason informs the definitional set of all human characteristics in the most fundamental way. Where some early modern accounts of human reason tended towards idealistic and dualistic conceptions of the function of human reason and its relationship with the lower faculties of the human soul, imagining the rational soul as a

kind of ‘ghost in an otherwise materialistic machine’ (such as Descartes or Leibnitz), for Aquinas the formality of reason animates the whole of the human person, even the lower passionate and vegetative powers⁵. While these ‘lower’ powers differ from the rational powers of intellect and will, it is not the case that they function in hermetic isolation from these higher aspects of human existence. The passions especially, governed as they are by the moral virtues, come to participate in the higher purposes of reason, even as the properly immaterial objects of both the intellect and the will escape their grasp, formally speaking. This ‘quasi-rational’ understanding of human emotional life implies the capacity of even the physiological aspect of human emotions (variously understood on neuro-chemical and biological grounds) to be understood in a conceptual context that extends beyond the confines of physical determinism and embraces a properly immaterial and transcendent horizon for human flourishing. ‘Higher’ and ‘lower’ faculties are not more or less human in this understanding; rather, the lower powers participate according to their own proper formalities in the purposes and pursuits of the highest faculties—it is the integrated totality of these equally human powers working in consort that constitutes the perfection of human nature⁶. Although reason imparts a teleological orientation towards universals that distinguishes human nature from other animal natures, for the individual human person to be a rational animal also implies the internal integration of all of the powers of the soul. Rather than an immaterial ghost in a materialist machine, in this understanding reason comes to supply a unified *ratio* for the whole nature as an authentically human reality.

In addition to this intrinsic integration of the powers of human nature, the formality of reason further implies an external ordering of the human person to God as creator. Aquinas argues that, as a condition of one’s status as a creature, the human person owes God fitting worship according to the pattern of the virtue of religion. As a moral—rather than a theological—virtue, religion indicates a relation to God in which His role as first principle is acknowledged, and He is honored with fitting worship⁷. As a general virtue, religion has the ability to effectively lend the formality of this relation to all other forms of virtuous human activity, making them an expression of our obedience to God and an offer of fitting praise. As a rational creature, the human person is ordered to God as their final end in a way that surpasses the ordering of other creatures.

For Aquinas, our first parents, prior to their fall from grace, exhibited both an intrinsic and extrinsic ordering, in which the lower, materially instantiated powers were integrated into the higher immaterial ones, and the person as a whole was ordered in obedience to God⁸. In this understanding, it is precisely rationality that delineates the authentic dignity of the human person, as made in the image of God and made for God. One need not appeal to grace, revelation, or theology, according to Aquinas, to formally identify the shape of this dignity.

And yet, although in one sense this dignity is understandable according to a purely natural horizon, for Aquinas, the integration necessary to achieve it—an integration which was enjoyed by human nature prior to the fall—is directly attributable to divine grace. For both Adam and Eve, God’s grace exercised an integrating effect that at once made the lower powers of the emotional life obedient to the higher powers of reason, and the person as a whole—under the direction of their rational faculty—obedient to God as first principle⁹.

We have seen that for Aquinas, wisdom concerns the ordering of the whole, in which individual parts are arranged in relation to each other according to a formality which necessarily exceeds the intrinsic formalities of the individual parts themselves. We know that God creates all things in wisdom, whether animate or inanimate—taken within this frame, the concept of grace represents a particular, anthropologically specific form of divine ordering, however, in which the rational person—taken as a whole—is able to first achieve the full integration of their natural form. Without yet alluding to the economy of grace that is gradually deployed over the course of salvation history or the divinizing effects of our participation in the Church’s life, we find that in nature itself, grace already functions as a type of ordering principle, by which the creative intent of divine wisdom is fulfilled and brought to perfection in the individual existence of discrete human persons, situated as

they are in historical place and context. Placed in reference to modernity, this perspective implies that not only is grace not something extrinsic and foreign to human nature, but that what may appear as natural for the human person may well reflect more of the unnatural disintegration of the natural powers of the human soul; if Taylor's analysis is correct, the disinclination to transcend the 'immanent frame' may well reflect this disintegration, that leads, in turn, to a certain blindness concerning the actual identity of the human person, not only with reference to supernatural beatitude but with respect to the human person's natural teleology itself; while this blindness can certainly be religious, inhibiting our awareness of the human person's natural obligations to God as a consequence of the person's status as a rational creature, it can also extend to the intrinsic ordering of human nature itself.

Understood against the backdrop of human nature's ordering within itself and towards God, however, the concept of created grace plays an intrinsic role in the identity of the human person as *imago Dei*—rather than a secondary and extrinsic imposition upon nature, divine created grace is already the means by which human nature finds its intrinsic integration and ordering towards God as its final end. What does it mean, in this context, to refer to grace as 'created'? Understood by Aquinas under both created and uncreated modalities, grace represents a specific dimension of the analogical fabric that relates Creator to creature. As uncreated, the term 'grace' is predicated of God essentially, referring only to the divine essence and in no way to created being; as created, grace represents an anthropological reality that exists intrinsically within the created human substrate, effecting the totality of the individual's existence¹⁰. As a habit adhering within the essence of the soul, grace represents a new mode by which the human soul is related to God—while God is in all created things by His essence, power, and presence, in the case of the graced human person God is also present according to a special mode, by which the Trinity itself dwells within the rational soul, becoming present in a direct sense as the object of the rational faculties—known to the intellect by faith, and as the object loved by the will in hope and charity¹¹. Aquinas tells us that this modal shift in the relationship between God and creatures allows the human person to attain to God Himself through the operation of these intrinsic rational faculties¹².

While the dichotomizing language of 'nature' and 'supernature' is not intrinsically inaccurate, it refers specifically to a finality, towards which the human person can be moved, which falls outside of the powers attributed to the essence of human nature as created—both of these finalities are thoroughly rational, however. Indeed, the later end—so-called 'supernatural' grace—is a further and more complete perfection of the rational faculties themselves. While certain rhetorical deployments of these categories may insinuate a simple binary existing between the created human person, naturally considered, and grace as a secondary and extrinsic additive, in the hands of a competent interpreter of Aquinas, the language of nature and supernature is rightly employed to differentiate Aquinas' perspective from that of certain modernist authors, who would collapse this important distinction into a single teleological horizon. Understanding the human person as a created image of the Trinity, however, yields an understanding of reason itself that not only places the human person in relation to God according to nature, but leaves this same nature open to the further, supernatural perfection of sanctifying grace.

Although grace clearly remains gratuitous and supernatural in relation to created human nature, what is 'natural' in this sense should not be reduced to a binary exclusion of grace from the fulfillment of this same nature, even according to its natural teleology—recall that for Aquinas, prior to original sin, in a certain sense, grace played an important, integrative role in the human person's achievement of their natural ends.

2. Aquinas on 'Created' Grace

Aquinas' use of the language of creation in relation to grace implies a certain understanding of the doctrine of creation—in relation to both substantial and accidental being—that is the result of developments in thirteenth century scholastic applications of

the Aristotelian causes to the existing Christian doctrine of creation, and developments within Aquinas' thought specifically.

The way in which Latin scholastic authors articulated the relationship between the doctrines of creation and grace underwent a number of developments during the thirteenth century. Due to the influx of new Aristotelian sources (many of which were transmitted through Arabic commentators such as Avicenna and Averroes), the doctrine of creation itself became a contested issue in thirteenth century scholasticism—in particular, the question of the eternity of the world would prompt some Latin Averroists to promote an interpretation of Aristotle that many others saw to be at variance with the received doctrine of Scripture. The concept of creation *ex nihilo*—or, creation from nothing—was associated by many scholastics with the creation narrative in *Genesis* (see Burrell 2010). Beyond the biblical narrative itself, however, Aquinas and other scholastics would begin to clearly associate this biblical doctrine with specific accounts of divine causality, and its relation to created being. Understood from this perspective, to create out of nothing implies that God creates without the intervention of secondary causes. Despite this immediate relationship between divine causality and created being, however, the created term of the divine act of creation does not itself participate in the eternity of its causal source—unlike divine being, created being has both a beginning and an end.

To describe the unique contours of this relationship, in his early work in his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas contrasts God's activity as creator with that of a creaturely artist. Distinguishing between efficient causality in the created order and the primary sense of efficient causality that is applicable to God alone, Aquinas argues that, although some created efficient causes certainly exist in instrumental relationships with the finalities they educe, when creation taken as a whole is considered in relation to its source, there is only one principal efficient cause—namely, God Himself—who is responsible for the existence of both motion and being itself within the created order. Aquinas associates this understanding of the relationship between divine and created causality with the biblical description of creation found in the first chapter of *Genesis*¹³. For Aquinas, all created efficient causality and the motion of created agents from potency to act is framed against the backdrop of God's efficient causality—in this context, God's act of creation represents an version of efficiency that is different in kind from the motion that can be attributed to created efficient causes. In as much as these created efficient causes remain related to this species of divine efficiency, they are properly instrumental, rather than autonomous or self-contained, causes. To illustrate this, building on Lombard's text, Aquinas engages Plato's description of creation in the *Timaeus*. In Aquinas' reading of this text, there are in fact three first principles at work: God (or the 'Demiurge,' in Plato's terminology), the exemplarity of forms, and matter. While God or the Demiurge is seemingly described as uncreated, the other principles—both forms and matter—also appear to be uncaused first principles that are not formally or efficiently dependent on the Demiurge. Because the formal exemplars exist outside of the Demiurge, Aquinas argues, they have a subsistence that differs from that of Demiurge—according to this model, the creator is not actually responsible for the being of matter and form, as such—for Aquinas, this error on Plato's part effectively reduces the creator to a creaturely artist, who manipulates existing matter and form, rather than creating being from non-being. For Aquinas, the act of creation differs from this type of creaturely artistry precisely because the formal exemplarity that guides the act of creation is not external to God Himself—rather, the divine ideas themselves provide this formality¹⁴. Freely choosing to create according to the pattern of His own goodness, God's will extends to created being in the full sense—not only to a creature's initial existence, but to all subsequent potentialities of the same nature as well¹⁵. Aquinas invokes a metaphorical comparison between God and a human artist to illustrate the way in which the concept of principle efficient causality comes to be grounded in God's creative will: the formal cause is found in the mind of a human artist, in such a way that the object of his will—that which will be built—constitutes the final cause intended. Similarly, in

choosing to bring a given creature into being, God uses His own goodness as the exemplar, internal to Himself, as He creates a finality that is external to Himself¹⁶.

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas adopts a substantially similar approach to the doctrine of creation. Concerning the concept of creation ex nihilo, Aquinas describes creation as the emanation of all being from non-being, otherwise characterized as ‘nothing’¹⁷. Unlike natural generation, in which substantial form comes into being where it was not previously, in creation from nothing there is not material continuity underlying the substantial change—when a tree dies, decomposes, and becomes another plant, for example, the substantial form of one thing—in this case, the new plant—comes to be where it was not previously. In natural generation, however, it is matter itself that provides the originating term, from which the new substance emerges¹⁸. Accordingly, distinguishing the divine act of creation from the phenomenon of natural generation allows Aquinas to position God’s creative causality in relation to a more fundamental aspect of created being—without disrupting or unduly relativizing the process of natural generation, creation from nothing accounts for the very existence of a given substance itself. This fundamental relation between creature and creator at the level of existence also accounts for all subsequent accidental change and motion that may take place within the context of a given substance’s existence—for Aquinas, God’s creative causality is responsible for these aspects of created being as well¹⁹. Although responsible as principal efficient cause for these subsequent movements, the act of creation from nothing is itself a relation—it is not something adhering within the created substance, or a form of local movement or change in itself²⁰. This relation to God as creative principal cause—as differentiated from all other forms of causality operative within the created order—imparts a special likeness to the divine in all things, by reason of their relation at the level of their being to their creator. Aquinas argues that a ‘trace’ of the Trinity can be found in all things caused to be from nothing by God. All effects bear the imprint of their cause in some sense—in some cases, only the basic fact that they were caused is discernable, even if the form of the cause is not immediately manifested by the effect. Invoking an Augustinian example, Aquinas argues that smoke represents fire in this sense—one may see smoke, and infer that it was caused by fire, even if the fire itself is not visible²¹. This form of representation is termed a causal ‘trace’ by Aquinas—like footprints in the snow, a trace shows that someone has passed by, although the person in question is no longer present in the footprints. In another sense, however, a created thing may represent its cause by a kind of similitude that is discernable between the form of the created thing and the form of its cause. Seeing the fire burning, generating more fire in what it consumes, is an example of this—in this case, the fire that is effected signifies its cause not only by means of trace, but by means of similitude as well. For Aquinas, this second sense of representation by similitude can be termed an image—understood in this way, while all created things bear the trace of the Trinity as first cause, only a certain subset of created effects are said to be a similitude or image. Because the Trinitarian Persons proceed in distinction from each other according to God’s immanent acts of intellect and will, the processions of these same faculties in *some* creatures functions not only as a trace but as a kind of image, in which a formal similitude between the creative causality of the Trinity and the rational creature can be discerned²². The concept of image places the rational creature in a special relationship with God as creator—although the analogical principles that govern the relation between all creatures and God still apply, the rational creature is, by very existence, a formal image of the Trinity; as the subsistent human individual—created from nothing by divine causality—comes to be perfected in the rational acts of knowing and loving the true and the good, however, this image itself is intensified and perfected—recall that God’s creative efficient causality extends not only to the coming to be from nothing of a substance, but the subsequent perfection of all forms of motion and accidental being possible for that substance²³. Within the larger frame of divine wisdom, creative efficient causality preserves and promotes the reflection of divine exemplarity within created being, most especially within the rational creature who grows as *image* according to the progress of their own perfection in second act—that is, first within the actually existing subsistence of

human nature found in each human individual, and secondly in the progress of that same individual towards the authentic connaturality of habitual virtue and virtuous activity, both according to nature and grace; from the perspective of the human person created as image, nature and grace appear as a two-fold valence for the human person, according to which the human person can be authentically understood as *image*. The full significance of the human person emerges when these two valences are intertwined, however, not only because of nature's need for grace to achieve the full integration of its lower powers with its rational ones, but because grace itself supplies a re-proportioned, supernatural finality for human nature itself. Amplifying the natural interrelation between the moral and intellectual virtues, the infused species of not only the intellectual theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, but the infused species of the moral virtues as well, draw the human person towards the supernatural finality of beatitude.

As context for the question of nature as a 'cause' of grace, the lexical distinction between 'image' and 'trace' in Aquinas' (and Augustine's) theological vocabulary is not only important for distinguishing the unique contours of the relationship between God and the human person, as distinct from other aspects of creation, but is also important for identifying the answer to our immediate question here in this essay: 'how is creation a cause of grace'? In the following, it will become clear that creation, understood as both 'image' and 'trace', function causally in relation to grace in different—although related—respects.

3. Grace, Creation and Con-Creation Development

Concerning the relationship between the doctrines of creation and grace, Aquinas' approach to these concepts developed substantially during the course of his career²⁴. In his early *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas follows a certain prevailing sentiment, found among many of his contemporaries, which used the doctrine of creation ex nihilo as a model for explaining the new life of grace infused into the soul by God. There is some biblical precedent for this, found in the fifth chapter of *Second Corinthians*: "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation"²⁵. As we have already seen, however, the translation of the biblical doctrine of creation into the causal language of Aristotle had implications for scholastic understandings of both divine and created being. After his *Sentences* commentary, however, Aquinas begins to develop a more nuanced approach to the relationship between the doctrines of grace and creation. Beginning in his *De veritate*, which Aquinas completed during his first years as a master of theology at Paris, shortly after completing his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas offers a lengthy treatment of the concept of grace in question twenty-seven, drawing specific connections between grace and the concepts of accidental being and instrumental causality. In the *Sentences*, Aquinas drew an all but univocal comparison between creation and re-creation precisely because of the supernatural character of grace and charity—if charity is understood as a participation in the life of God, then the grace which makes this possible must be attributed to an act of creation, precisely because this form of deified participation escapes the natural potency of human nature. Here, Aquinas' described grace as an ontological reality that effects the being of the person in a fundamental manner—this *esse gratiae*—the 'being' of grace—as Aquinas puts it in this early text, is the metaphysical explanation for this supernatural elevation of the human person. In the *De veritate*, however, Aquinas begins to adapt his language in this regard. While he continues to speak of grace as a created form within the soul itself²⁶, Aquinas also begins to expand on the implications of considering grace within the metaphysical context of accidental being—responding to an objector, who argues that grace itself could not be educed from the potency of created matter (as accidental and substantial forms are, naturally understood), Aquinas responds by arguing that, because grace is a kind of accidental being, it is not created, properly speaking, if we restrict the term 'creation' to creation *from nothing*. Recall that, for Aquinas, creation ex nihilo implies that the substantial form of a given thing itself comes into existence. In the *De veritate*, however, Aquinas describes grace as 'con-created'—with the introduction of this modified sense of creation, Aquinas is able to preserve the newness of grace—and its supernatural proportionality with respect to the natural potencies of

created human nature—without denying the accidental status of grace itself. Rather than bringing something into existence from nothing, in this context, God’s creative causality interacts with the existing potentiality of the human creature to bring about the reality of grace as an accidental perfection of the same creature’s being. While Aquinas is clear that the term ‘creation’ in the proper and univocal sense refers to substantial being, by its nature, created being is characterized not by static substantial existence, but by *becoming*—the dynamic of act and potency, which characterizes the creature’s movement to act at the level of substance, continues to define the unfolding of the same creature’s actual existence in second act, as it comes to be perfected accidentally. To continue to apply the term creation to this second sense of becoming, an analogically modified sense of the term ‘creation’ is employed. This reflects the analogical application of the term ‘being’ itself within the context of created substrates. While substances are said to have being *per se*, accidental potencies have their being in another—accidents *subsist in* substance. While substances have their being *from* matter, individuated as real substrates of a given essential form by matter itself, accidents have their being *in* matter, depending on the existing, materially individuated subsistence of a given substantial form. Accordingly, Aquinas underscores that, because accidents have their being *in* matter, their process of coming to be involves a kind of change proper to accidents, by which their being is *educed* from the existing substance (and its matter), rather than being created from nothing in the strict sense²⁷.

It should be noted, however, that even in his early work in his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas does use the language of accidental being to describe grace—where he previously described grace as a ‘created habit,’ however, in the *De veritate* he now clarifies that this habit is con-created. More than a simple semantic shift, in the *De veritate*, Aquinas shows that the metaphysical principles by which an accidental habit comes to be are compatible with a certain analogical understanding of the doctrine of creation. This is significant because it allows Aquinas to capture the newness of grace in the full sense—while there is certainly a sense in which a natural habit may come to be where it was not before, being educed from the natural accidental potencies of a given substantial form, in the case of grace the potential for an eduction of this kind is in fact not found in the natural potencies of human nature. Although we have earlier established that God’s creative efficient causality does extend to the actuation of natural accidental potencies, in the case of grace it must be said that there is something ‘new’ within the nature itself that extends beyond the causal interaction between God’s creative efficient causality and human nature, considered in itself according to its natural essence and potentialities²⁸.

In his *De potentia Dei*—a later text, Aquinas expands on his work in the *De veritate* on this question, restating his arguments about the application of the principles of accidental being to the question of grace. In this text, Aquinas argues that, similar in some respects to the infusion of the human soul at conception, grace is infused with no cause within the subject itself—that is, no natural agent can effectively educe grace from the natural potencies of human nature²⁹. In the case of natural accidental being, the substance itself would have either an active or passive potency for the accidental being in question, according to its nature as a substance—that is, the substance would either have the power to act towards a given accidental finality itself, or would have the passive capacity to be acted upon by the agency of a different created substance. According to nature, the reach of God’s creative efficient causality extends to both of these forms of natural potency; even in the case of natural passive potency, where a certain nature has the capacity to be acted upon by another created nature, God’s causality extends to both substances involved, working through the latter to effect an accidental change in the former. These developments that take place in the *De veritate* and *De potentia* have a wide array of implications; for our purposes here, however, the principle of con-creation allows Aquinas to speak of God’s properly creative causality not only in relation to substantial being, but to accidental being as well, even when no intermediary created cause can be called upon to educe a certain reality from the substrate. Although never distant causally from what He creates, the concept of con-creation gives God’s creative efficient causality a certain immediacy with respect

to accidental being as something (con)created, not unlike the immediacy with which He creates substantial being from nothing.

As a vocabulary for the presence of that creative newness which is properly reserved to God alone at the level of accidental being, the development of the category of con-creation has implications for both aspects of created being under consideration here: image and trace in relation to divine causality. In the case of image—the human person—the category of con-creation allows Aquinas to describe grace as ‘habitual’ in a meaningful way. For Aristotle, the concept of habit is necessarily accidental—of the ten categories of being, only the first is substantial—the subsequent nine all represent different forms of accidental being³⁰. ‘Habit’ in this sense is understood by Aristotle as a species of quality—an intrinsic characteristic of a substance (as opposed to externalities such as stance and clothing), which allows varying degrees of permanence, depending on which species of quality is at play. ‘Habit’ in this sense is a relatively stable disposition towards a certain sphere of action—although it can be lost, the loss of any habit does not come easily, having first to cut against the grain of the habit itself. Although Aquinas uses ‘habit’ as early as the *Sentences* to describe the reality of grace³¹, in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas uses habit in a specific sense to describe the eduction of grace from the substance of the rational creature—although accidental being usually adheres in substance, in the *Summa*, Aquinas adopts a further modification of the structure of being itself, arguing that grace, entitativity considered, is in the essence of the soul, rather than its powers³². From the perspective of theological anthropology, this enables Aquinas to accomplish (at least) two things: first, although he elided the distinction between the infused virtue of charity and grace in the *Sentences*, by clearly situating grace in the essence of the soul in the *Summa*, he is able to articulate more clearly the distinction between the infused virtues and grace itself—while the concept of ‘habit’ is used to describe both, grace represents the more fundamental creative change, at the level of the essence of the human person directly, which enables the subsequent habituation of the powers by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, to directly reach the supernatural end of God Himself. Previously, we established that in grace, the Trinitarian Persons dwell within the soul by the power of sanctifying grace; further, this indwelling represents a modal change in the causal relation between God as creator and the human person as creature—where previously God was related to the human person substantially by essence, power, and presence: by mode of indwelling, the powers of intellect and will—which differentiate the human person as *image*—come to possess God as object, and, by means of the invisible missions of the Trinitarian Persons, God comes to dwell in these faculties as in a temple³³. Both of these changes—grace in the essence of the soul, and subsequently the infused virtues in the powers—represent a properly creative change that is not attributable to any active or passive power within human nature itself³⁴. Accordingly, Aquinas positions grace as a change within the essence of human nature itself, which enables a new field of human potentiality to emerge in relation to God, in which God functions as the object of human acts in a direct sense³⁵. Nevertheless, the creative change that grace represents is specifically conditioned by the rational character of human nature—for Aquinas, it is important to affirm that grace does not represent a substantial change in any way—if grace were to transform the human person into something radically different at the level of substance, the divinizing results of this change would take place in some new kind of nature, differentiated essentially from human nature itself by substantial change. If this were the case, human nature would not be saved through the Incarnation, but rather be abandoned. Accordingly, at the outset of the *Prima secundae*, Aquinas is careful to indicate that rationality, taken in itself, has a capacity not only for the task of abstraction but for universal truths themselves—as immaterial, the intellective faculties of rational creatures are meant to know universals, as distinct from the multiform particularities in which these same universals are encountered in the sensible world³⁶. For Aquinas, in the final analysis it is only the divine essence—the one universality which serves as the exemplar cause of all other universals experienced in the created order—that can fully perfect the human intellect and will; all pursuits of truth, goodness and the authentic

happiness that these transcendental and universal properties can yield find their rest in God alone³⁷. Nevertheless, as he makes clear at the beginning of his treatment of grace at the close of the *Prima secundae*, there is simply no proportionality within human nature for this end—the powers of human nature, essentially considered, have neither the passive or active potency for God as object in this direct sense³⁸. To underscore the point, grace is a creative change which, while essentially a habitual accident, represents a qualitative change that effects the totality of human nature, enabling a participation of that same nature in divine life³⁹. Where before I described this change as a shift in valence, enabling a deeper understanding of the person as *image* according to the mode of indwelling, now we see that the same shift has a causal effect on the powers of the same soul, enabling an intellectual and volitional possession of God as object through an amplification of the rational creature at the level of both essence and power.

4. Conclusions

In this essay, I have proposed Aquinas' more robust, pre-modern understanding of creation as a viable model for thinking about divine and created causality in the present. In the context of wider contemporary questions about the relationship between modern science and divine action, Aquinas' account of divine artistry and its relation to created causality provides a model for preserving important doctrinal aspects of the Church's faith—ranging from the doctrines of creation and grace to the status of the human person as image and the instrumentality of the sacraments—in a manner that need not upend or contravene the legitimate conclusions of modern science, but rather offers a perspective that expands the philosophical and theological context in which these findings are understood, proposing a properly theological anthropology that extends beyond the immanent frame.

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Notes

¹ ST I^a Q. 93.

² ST I^a QQ. 103–5.

³ ST I^a Q. 44, a. 4, co.

⁴ ST I^a Q. 44, a. 3, co.

⁵ On the contrast between the rationalist cosmologies of Descartes, Leibniz (and other similar perspectives) and Aquinas' own approach to divine and created causality, see [Dodds \(2012\)](#), pp. 11–118.

⁶ On the integration of the lower and higher powers of the soul in obedience to God, see ST I^a Q. 95, a. 1, co. On the relationship between grace as a re-creative reality within the essence of the soul and the integration of the soul's powers according to the pattern of the infused virtues, see ST I^a II^{ae} Q. 110, aa. 1–4; Q. 62, aa. 1–4.

⁷ ST II^a II^{ae} Q. 81, a. 1, et al.

⁸ In the *Prima pars*, Aquinas is clear that the end for which the human person was created is found in the identity of the same person as divine image. (ST I^a Q. 93). As the discrete parts of the soul which underly his discussion of human acts (ST I^a II^{ae} QQ. 6–21) and the subsequent habituation and direction of the powers towards these acts by habit and passion (ST I^a II^{ae} QQ. 22–70), the intellectual, sensitive, and appetitive powers of the soul exhibit a diversity within the unity of the rational soul, the differentiation of which corresponds to the diverse range of human acts and their corresponding objects that perfect the human person (ST I^a Q. 77, aa. 1–4). At the outset of the *Prima secundae*, Aquinas places all of these parts of the human soul, considered in themselves and in relation to the phenomenon of human acts, within the larger horizon of the human person's ultimate perfection in relation to God as the ultimate end of the human person and human acts (ST I^a II^{ae} QQ. 1–5).

⁹ ST I^a Q. 95, a. 1, co.

¹⁰ For a treatment of the distinction between created and uncreated grace in Aquinas and in contemporary scholarship, see [Cross \(2018\)](#), pp. 106–32.

¹¹ ST I^a Q. 43, a. 3, co. ST I^a II^{ae} Q. 110, a. 3, co., et al.

¹² ST I^a II^{ae} Q. 110, a. 3, co.

¹³ *Super Sent.* Lib. 2, dist. 1, prolog.

- 14 *Super Sent.* lib. 2, dist. 1, Prolog. See *Timaeus*, 28a–b.
- 15 *Super Sent.* Lib. 2, dist. 1, exp. text.
- 16 *Super Sent.* lib. 1, dist. 38, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 6.
- 17 *ST I^a Q.* 45, a. 1, co.
- 18 *ST I^a Q.* 45, a. 1, ad 3.
- 19 *ST I^a Q.* 45, a. 2, ad 2.
- 20 *ST I^a Q.* 45, a. 3.
- 21 *ST I^a Q.* 45, aa. 2, 7.
- 22 *ST I^a Q.* 45, a. 7, co.
- 23 See *ST I^a QQ.* 103–5.
- 24 For more on this subject, see Lynch (2017), pp. 100–43.
- 25 2 Cor. 5:17. In-text translations of scripture are taken from the *New American Bible Revised Edition* (NABRE).
- 26 *De Ver.* Q. 27, a. 1.
- 27 *De Ver.* q. 27 a. 3 ad 9.
- 28 Aquinas does use the term ‘con-creation’ several times in the *Sentences*, although he does not apply its full implications to the doctrine of grace. See *Super Sent.* lib. 3 d. 23 q. 2 a. 5 co; *Super Sent.* lib. 3 d. 14 q. 1 a. 3 qc. 2 co.; *Super Sent.* lib. 4 d. 50 q. 1 a. 1 co.
- 29 *De Pot.* q. 3 a. 3 ad 7.
- 30 For a description of the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident and its broader metaphysical implications, see Wippel (2000), pp. 197–237.
- 31 *Super Sent.* lib. 1, dist. 17, q.1, a. 1, ad 3. Mandonnet/Moos, vol. 1 (1929), pp. 395–96.
- 32 *ST I^a II^{ae} Q.* 110, aa. 1–4.
- 33 *ST I^a Q.* 43, a. 3, co.
- 34 *ST I^a II^{ae} Q.* 109.
- 35 *ST I^a II^{ae} Q.* 62, a. 1.
- 36 *ST I^a QQ.* 54–55, 77–79.
- 37 *ST I^a II^{ae} QQ.* 1–5.
- 38 See *ST I^a II^{ae} Q.* 109, et al.
- 39 For grace as both a qualitative accident in the essence of the soul and a habituation of the powers of intellect and will through the theological virtues and the gifts of the Spirit, see *ST I^a II^{ae} QQ.* 110–111.

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