The Creature Makes Itself: Aquinas, the De-idealization of the Eternal Ideas, and the Fate of the Individual

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Abstract

The Christian Platonic tradition affirmed that human flourishing involves conjunction with the realm of eternal divine ideas. The account developed by Thomas Aquinas in effect denied this, rendering ideas contingent, unknowable and impossible as direct objects of attainment. Although no longer ideals for human aspiration, a role within spiritual or ethical striving might still be envisioned for such de-idealized ideas. Through discussions of Meister Eckhart, Kierkegaard and Manfred Frank, the essay outlines such a role: one's idea in God operates to ontologically ground personal existence, deploying the human agent as an irreducible individual entity engaged in a hermeneutical labor of self-creation.

Since at least the third century CE many Christian theologians have employed the notion of divine ideas, i.e. the contents of the divine mind in its timeless knowledge of temporal creatures. The continuity of the usage is deceptive, however, for it is not clear that they have all been talking about the same thing. In particular, it is arguable that Thomas Aquinas developed a notion of the divine ideas that marked a

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revolutionary break with their original, Platonic orientation.[1] Aquinas, in attempting to square God's perfect knowledge of creatures with the strict implications of creation *ex nihilo*, reconceived the ideas in terms of a double identity: ontologically, ideas are identical with the divine essence itself; cognitively, in terms of their epistemic content, ideas are identical with the creatures to which they respectively correspond.

Now, in their original Platonic milieu, and in most of their subsequent reappearances in Patristic and early Medieval theology, the divine ideas could serve an epistemic function (i.e. mediating the human grasp of eternal truth), an ontological function (i.e. anchoring the diversity of creaturely kinds and attributes as immutable expressions of the articulated structure of being itself), and/or a salvific function (i.e. providing an ideal realm, contact or conjunction with which constitutes human beatitude or communion with God).[2] It appears, however, that Aquinas's version of the ideas, with their double identity, plays havoc with the first two of these functions. As ontologically identical with the divine essence, the ideas turn out to be perfectly unattainable, cognitively speaking, for human beings in this life, and hence cannot provide an epistemic medium. And as identical in cognitive content with the actual creatures God creates, the ideas are completely bound up with the concrete divine will to realize this universe out of a potentially infinite number of worlds; the ultimately unfathomable contingency of this divine choice means that even God's eternal knowledge of creatures is chosen, not necessary, and hence the map of species with their "necessary" attributes cannot be projected onto being itself, i.e. God himself, as an immutable feature.[3] But what about the third Platonic function of the ideas? In light of Aquinas's revolution, can the ideas continue to play an ideal role for human striving? And if they cannot, if the divine ideas as he conceived them are truly anti-Platonic in all three senses, does that leave them any role in human salvation at all? Are they functional only for divine knowledge, while humanly irrelevant?

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1. The repeated usage in what follows of the (admittedly provocative) phrase "anti-Platonic" should not be misunderstood. The reader must take care always to relate the postulated opposition of Aquinas to "Platonism" strictly to the theory of ideas and its explicitly discussed implications. There might be, and are, any number of other facets of Aquinas's thought that could deservedly be labelled "Platonic" from our perspective, nor is the claim being made that he necessarily understood even his theory of ideas explicitly in terms of an opposition to the Platonic tradition.

2. No source with which I am familiar tells this entire story in detail. There is a selective but useful overview in Vivian Boland, *Ideas in God according to Saint Thomas Aquinas: Sources and Synthesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 17–192. The philosophical side of these developments is helpfully canvassed in Helmut Meinhardt et al., "Idee," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 4 (Basel: Schwabe, 1976), cols. 61–102.

3. I argue in separate essays respectively for the anti-Platonic epistemic and ontological implications of Aquinas's account of divine ideas. See Paul DeHart, "Improvising the Paradigms: Aquinas, Creation and the Eternal Ideas as Anti-Platonic Ontology," in *Modern Theology* 32 (2016): 594–621; and "The Eclipse of the Divine Mind: Aquinas, Creation and Eternal Ideas as Anti-Platonic Epistemology," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 93 (2017): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.2143/ETL.93.1.3203589.

In the following I will argue two connected theses. First, Aquinas's ideas are indeed anti-Platonic in the third sense, which means that if we accept creation *ex nihilo*, connection with God's ideas is no longer a meaningful role for human attainment: they are "de-idealized." Second, however, I will also suggest that divine ideas can still play a vital role in how we construe anthropology and soteriology, but that in order to see how, and thus to realize the full theological significance of Aquinas's position, it is necessary to go beyond him, to develop (with the aid of later thinkers) the implications of his new departure into a kind of "existential" ethic, built around the ontological and ethical primacy of the concrete human individual. The first section sketches the problem confronting Aquinas (that of reconciling divine knowledge and creation *ex nihilo*) along with his solution via the double identity of the divine ideas, and then shows how one side of the double identity, the perfect intentional or informational identity between the creature and God's idea of it, makes the divine idea an impossible ideal for the creature's attainment or even approximation. The second section begins with the other side of the double identity, the fact that the idea is not itself a creature but is identical with God's being, and goes on to show that by this move Aquinas has de-idealized the ideas in a further, deeper sense: not only is the idea not an ideal for attainment, it is not even (in Platonic fashion) a higher, "ideal" form of the creature, but rather is itself instrumental to the divine intention of realizing the creature's individual existence and agency.

Thus, for reasons having to do with the metaphysics of divine knowledge and the act of creation, Aquinas asserted both the unattainability of the divine idea, and the divinely intended pragmatic primacy of the real creature over its ideal representation in God's mind. But he did not fully unfold his position on the ideas by systematically extending their anti-Platonic implications into the realm of ethics and theological anthropology. The remainder of the essay turns to develop the possibility that Aquinas's account of the ideas gestures toward but that he chose not to exploit, tentatively and briefly sketching the implicit, proto-existentialist ethic of subjectivity that might consolidate the anti-Platonic dimension of his thought. The necessity of such an explicitly anthropological development will be shown in the third section: the remarkable vision of Meister Eckhart shows that even full acceptance of Aquinas's metaphysic of divine ideas in itself (i.e. the double identity), without a sensitivity to their implied anthropological orientation, can result in a view of human salvation almost completely at odds with that of Aquinas. Eckhart's stress on the creature's ideal preexistence in God undermined Aquinas's emphasis on the creature's own real existential agency, thereby allowing Platonism to return by another route.

If the example of Eckhart shows the necessity of anthropologically extending Aquinas's anti-Platonism, the fourth section turns to Søren Kierkegaard to show the possibility of such an extension. He both (unwittingly) diagnoses the Platonic malady of Eckhart's scheme and offers a positive alternative, one that understands the eternal truth of the creature in God (a close analog to Aquinas's divine idea) to be an integral component of an existential ethic of human freedom. The final two sections attempt to bolster, ontologically, this possible Kierkegaardian extension of Aquinas. Kierkegaard's ethic of selfhood, foregrounding freedom and "local" self-transcendence, presupposes an ontologically robust sense of the self that might seem ripe for deconstruction; post-structuralist critics

have inferred from the inextricably cultural and linguistic embeddedness of the self to its metaphysical exiguity as an unstable and partially illusory byproduct of impersonal symbol systems. To forestall this criticism, the fifth section draws on the German hermeneutic philosopher Manfred Frank to show how the possibility of linguistic use and interpretation itself presupposes the prior ontological reality of the individual self as creative agent. Finally, the sixth section shows how the irreducibly concrete *individuum* demanded by Kierkegaard and defended by Frank is not, as Frank thinks, an impossibility within Aquinas's "Scholastic" metaphysics, but is rather affirmed at the highest level: as the original divine intention in creation. Thus, by the end of the essay the deep significance of Aquinas's anti-Platonic turn in divine idea theory will have come to light, thanks to the suggested actualization of its anthropological potential.

Aquinas and the Unattainability of the Ideas

The critical intellectual situation in which Aquinas had creatively to appropriate the long-standing affirmation of divine ideas was shaped by two developments. The first can be traced all the way back to maybe the most original Patristic theorist of the divine ideas (or *logoi*, to use his preferred term): Maximus the Confessor. Although for Maximus the multiple ideas may be said to preexist in God's knowledge in a simple or virtual, unified form, it appears that he assigned them a different ontological status in their willed diversification by God, pursuant to his act of creation. Perhaps motivated by an anti-pantheistic urge to uphold the distinct and positive existence of the world over against God, Maximus did not identify the being of the diverse *logoi* with the essential being of God.[4] In an indirect way, this decision helped precipitate centuries later the new discussion of eternal ideas in which Aquinas participated. For Maximus's position, differentiating the being of the idea from the being of God was boldly developed by Scotus Eriugena; and the obscurities of the latter still later got caught up in the anti-pantheist controversy touched off by Amalric of Bene. The upshot was a firm ecclesiastical consensus by the early thirteenth century that the eternal ideas must be ontologically identical with the divine essence.[5] The other key development that influenced Aquinas was a powerful wave of Arabic philosophical speculation sweeping into the Latin Christian discussion along with the flood of newly available Aristotelian writings. In different but analogous ways Avicenna and Averroes developed an account of creation that stressed its necessity rather than its willed character, and that called into question the need or the possibility for divine knowledge of particular entities of the lower order. The Christian Scholastic theologians were united in repudiating these notions as incompatible with the tradition of a free and intentional creation.[6] Aquinas's

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4. Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed. (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1995), 73, 77.
5. For Eriugena and these complex developments in his wake see Meinhardt et al., "Idee" cols. 68–72, 81–84.
6. Meinhardt et al., "Idee" cols. 81–82; Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen, *Marsilius of Inghen: Divine Knowledge in Late Medieval Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 239–40.

new account of God's eternal ideas arose in response to these two developments, and in so doing distanced itself from its Platonic antecedents. It should be noted in this connection that although the basic inspiration of the Arabic schemes was Aristotelian, they were nonetheless suffused with Platonic elements, including a stress on general forms or essences as ontologically basic, rather than particular individuals. While many Christian critics viewed the Arabic threat in terms of its Aristotelianism, the striking thing about Aquinas's own use of idea theory against that threat was that it salvaged the Aristotelian elements of the idea tradition and instead dispensed with the venerable Platonic framework of the theory.

Aquinas deployed the notion of God's eternal ideas of things in order to insure, in opposition to the Arabic philosophers, that the created order is fully intended by God, both in the sense that it is perfectly foreknown and in the sense that it is freely willed. However, the earlier decisions against Amalric also demanded that in any account these ideas must be identical with God's own essence. On the one hand, they cannot be contingent accidents added to the divine substance; on the other hand, if they are substantively one with the divine essence, their multiplicity cannot be allowed to disturb the absolute metaphysical simplicity of God. The details would require much longer treatment, but briefly, Aquinas's doctrine of ideas can be seen as a brilliant response to these converging pressures.[7] God knows all creatures through perfectly understanding, in one eternal intellectual act, his own total perfection; any non-divine entity is thus always already known because it is itself an imperfect, participatory act expressing God's unified excellence in some partial way. However, this unified grasp does not mean that God's mind has always been populated with an infinity of determinate "possibles" as cognitive objects. God's grasp of mere possibilities is virtual—a single continuum of intelligibility; only the decision to constitute a particular cosmos, a beautifully ordered and interlocking pattern of necessary and contingent causality, "resolves" the continuum of intelligibility into a particular range of discrete exemplars, the intentional units of this freely elected world. As I discuss in the two companion pieces to the present essay (see footnote 3), Aquinas's reconfiguration of eternal ideas as components of a strict doctrine of creation from nothing brings in its wake two remarkable consequences. First, any functional role of the ideas within human cognition is effectively eliminated. Second, the articulation of being into differentiated multiplicity is no longer an ultimate ontological feature, as it was for Platonism (the intelligible cosmos as the demiurge's "plan") and for the Arabic schemes of emanation

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7. The elements of Aquinas's mature account of divine knowledge, ideas, and providence can be found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter cited as *SCG*), 1, chaps. 47–54 and 66, and *Summa Theologica* (hereafter cited as *ST*), 1, qq. 14, 15, and 22. Boland, cited above, provides a thorough overview of Aquinas's various discussions of these topics. The reading of Aquinas laid out in the following paragraphs is not simply a summary, however. Developing some of the details and implications involves interpretive decisions that are bound to be disputable. I have argued for this reading in detail elsewhere. See Paul DeHart, "What Is Not, Was Not, and Will Never Be: Creaturely Possibility, Divine Ideas and the Creator's Will in Thomas Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* 13 (2015): 1009–58.

(the "essences" necessarily preexisting in God's intellect); that differentiation is rather an inevitable by-product, contingent upon the divine wisdom and volition directed to expressing God's perfection in this particular universe.

For the purposes of this essay, however, attention must center on a third consequence of Aquinas's notion. Once the eternal ideas in God assume the systematic position he assigns them, any remnant of the older expectation that these archetypes can be goals or ends for human aspiration or salvation must simply be abandoned. This is not only because, as has already been mentioned, the ideas in Aquinas are no longer functionally necessary, nor even available, to account for the human intellect's grasp of truth. The deeper reason is that Aquinas's dual identification of the ideas, ontologically with God and intentionally (i.e. in terms of information or cognitive content) with creatures, prompts a new understanding of the relation of ideal exemplar and real creature that de-idealizes the former. There are two senses of "ideal" at stake here; the idea can be an ideal either as an object of creaturely attainment, or as a kind of higher reality of the creature itself, an ideal existence of which the creature is but a lower grade reflection. On either understanding, assigning an ideal role to Aquinas's version of divine ideas no longer makes any sense.

The first reason for this lies in what I have been calling the intentional identity of God's idea and its connected creature, by which I mean the utter exactness with which the creature matches God's eternal knowledge of it. Aquinas was committed fully to creation from nothing as an intelligent act of God. This means that all that exists in any way in the created realm has its source in God's creative act; it also means that, because God knows perfectly his own act, God perfectly knows all its effects, down to the minutest detail. But the eternal idea is God's knowledge of the creature as a willed and enacted participation of God's own being. And because God's omnipotent will cannot be hindered it is perfectly effective. The upshot of all these points is this: the creature replicates the eternal idea, or rather the informative content of the eternal idea, with absolute fidelity. If it did not, that would mean that God's power had somehow failed to create what God's intellect had intended, and that is impossible. But if this is the case, then to speak of any kind of "convergence" between a creature and God's idea of the creature is meaningless, since God's creative idea already perfectly coincides with God's creative effect, i.e. the creature itself. There is no gap, no room for "play" or "adjustment" between a creature and its idea. The creature always already is everything its idea determines it to be. If it were not, it would not be at all. It does not help to assume, with Maximus and with many Scholastics still influenced by Plato's privileging of universals or essences, that the convergence is between the creature and its essence or specific identity. For Aquinas, a dog could not fail to share the species "dog." True, a given instance of that species might exhibit more or fewer of the ideal qualities of the species; but at this point one would have to speak of a kind of providentially intended divergence between the idea God has of the species "dog" and the ideas God has of the individual substances, the dogs, that instantiate the species. Given Aquinas's clear assertion that the intended target in God's creative causality is not the universal form but the being of the individual substance, it is hard to see at any rate how the idea of one's species could function as an

eternal ideal that preempts, as it were, the concrete idea that corresponds to one's individual being.[8]

Aquinas and the Pragmatic Primacy of Created Existence

On the other side of his double identification, Aquinas's theory of ideas identifies them ontologically with God's being, and that disrupts the other possibility for their ideal status mentioned above. Though (as has just been seen) their intentional or informational content is identical with the respective creatures to which they correspond, because the being of the eternal ideas is identical with that of the divine essence their ontological status is not creaturely at all. All that is in God, is God; what God knows (*qua* known) is God, even when God knows what is not itself God. Hence, the being of the ideas is one with the unique divine act of existence, and shares its attributes: eternal, immutable, simple, etc. At first sight this seems to open up space for another, obvious sense in which ideas might be ideals for creaturely attainment. Even if their intentional content differs in no way from their respective creaturely counterparts, their mode of existence surely does. Perhaps, then, one might say that the salvific ideal is to attain the timeless and unchanging status of the realm of ideas. Indeed, this is an integral part of the ancient Platonic ideal; the height of wisdom is precisely to rise in theoretic contemplation of the ideas to share their life, so to speak—a kind of home-coming achieved by a human intelligence purified of the encumbrances of embodiment and passionate attachment to ephemeral worldly goods. Indeed, this tradition received fresh impetus from the Platonized Aristotelianism of the Arabic philosophers. From Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi onward an influential tradition saw human beatitude to consist in an intellectual apprehension, through theoretic discipline, of the pure, higher life of the creative archetypes contained in the single agent intellect illuminating all human beings, or even in the higher separate substances.[9]

Aquinas thoroughly refutes the notion that human beatitude lies in union with anything but God himself,[10] but there is another difficulty with the fundamentally Platonic notion that sets the higher life of ideas as a human ideal. Briefly, once Aquinas reconceived eternal ideas their possible status as a "higher" form of creaturely life suddenly looked problematic, and in more than one way. First, when it comes to the ideas generally, Aquinas does not see them substituting for or even mediating the beatific union with God to which human beings are called. He is careful to note that the quasi-angelic illumination by infused species that human souls separated from their bodies can experience is not in fact a view of the ideas.[11] And even in the beatific vision, it is the direct union with God and the Word that mediates any awareness of the ideas, not vice

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8. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 45, a. 4.

9. Lenn E. Goodman, "Happiness," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnau (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 1:457–71 at 465–69.

10. Thomas Aquinas, *SCG* 3, chaps. 26–63.

11. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de anima*, a. 20, ad 9.

versa.[12] Second, built into Aquinas's theology is a broader metaphysical bias against the very notion that the eternal idea of a creature is a kind of better or truer version of that creature. Insofar as the idea is immutable, eternal, etc., it is not the creature at all, but God. And insofar as it contains the complete truth of the creature, it is not thereby "more true" than the creature itself. For the truth that is genuinely proper to the creature itself is not its truth in God's mind, but the truth connected to its inherent act of creaturely existence, given by God.[13] Finally, there was a tradition based on John 1:4 ("that which has been made was life in him [i.e. the Word]") that spoke of the creature's preexistence in God's Word as a higher and better form of life than its being as created. This immediately introduces the old conundrum mentioned above: if better versions of creatures already exist in God, then why are actual creatures produced at all? Aquinas's reading of the John passage reframes the issue in a fascinating way. Yes, the idea is "higher" and "life" compared to the creature, but only because it is causally prior with respect to the creature. Neither its divine mode of existence nor its perfect cognitional content are the proper grounds for comparison to the creature; rather, it is its exemplary effectiveness that counts.[14] But that means, in fact (and this is the point of the "voluntarist" note in his theory), that the whole point of the eternal idea is to result in the actual creature. Just as the divine exemplar is not the creature's proper "truth," so the divine exemplar is not the creature's end. In fact, one could even say, speaking very loosely, that the creature is the "end" intended by the divine exemplar! "Pragmatically" speaking, that is in regard to God's will to create, it is the existence of the creature that has primacy even vis-à-vis the divine being of its discrete exemplar.

God fully intends the created individual, willing its actual concrete existence as a substance relationally intertwined with the universe of other substances: this, and nothing else, is the meaning encoded in its divine idea. This means that the ideas cannot be the "forms" or "essences" of things, as a number of Christian theologians even in Aquinas's day and beyond had taught, perpetuating the Platonic scheme where ideas are the true entities somehow dispersed and vitiated by their multiple instantiation in matter. This connects closely with a characteristic element of Aquinas's anthropology, the subject (in its day) of bitter controversy. Gilson has shown how many of the tenets that most disturbed the more traditionalist Scholastics of his period can be traced back to his insistence that it is essential to the human soul to be the substantial form of a body. Indeed, it is the sole substantial form of the integral person.[15] William de la Mare's notorious set of "correctives" to Aquinas, required reading among Franciscans, pointed out the scandalous consequence of this unicity of substantial form: since the form actualizes, gives existence to, what it informs, then in the human being one and the same form would give existence to both spiritual and bodily components.[16] It is

12. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 12, aa. 8–9.
13. Armand Maurer, "St. Thomas and the Eternal Truths," in *Mediaeval Studies* 32 (1970): 91–107 at 94–6, https://doi.org/10.1484/j.ms.2.306075.
14. Boland, *Ideas in God*, 245.
15. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955), 361–2, 376, 381–3.
16. Ibid., 731n60.

difficult to appreciate how absurd and indeed revolting a conclusion this was to many, perhaps most—a register of how deeply embedded Platonist assumptions still were in theology. The Archbishop of Canterbury, a Franciscan, angrily denounced the Thomist deviations as showing contempt for the Fathers;[17] within a few years of his death many were convinced his characteristic teachings were under an ecclesiastical ban. But Aquinas, true to Aristotle, maintained the metaphysical privilege of the concrete sub-stantial individual as an integrated actuality (and agent) and firmly pursued the logic of this position right into anthropology. He dismissed the still reigning Platonic dual-ism, where the human soul is a substance in its own right adventitiously yoked to a second substance, the material body. Against the Arabic interpreters of Aristotle, he dragged the agent intellect down from an illuminating heaven to become the individu-ated and most personal possession of each individual human, its cognitive antenna tuned specifically to the likewise materially embedded universal. Finally, he located the peculiar dignity of the created order in the reality of its particular agents and their acts, each of them intended as an imitator of the God who is totally act.

It is understandable that many Scholastics saw in all this a reckless abandonment of a hallowed Patristic inheritance. Aquinas's contemporary, the great Bonaventure, was at the very same moment giving to this inheritance a brilliantly elaborated and system-atic form. The key to it all was once again ideas in the Platonic sense, which for Bonaventure (similarly to Maximus) provided the ontological joint connecting the light of human intellects, the cosmos of creatures as signs turned toward God, and the eternal Word of the creator as the receptacle of infinite possibilities.[18] For him, to deny the ideas was to deny the Son. In Aquinas's writing, by contrast, the connection of eternal ideas with the Word is affirmed but hardly developed; it appears customary and vestigial rather than necessary and systematic.[19] For all his enormous debt to Augustine in so many areas, in idea theory Aquinas went his own way. He gladly took the basic point necessary to secure a creation as an intelligent act, but he quietly let the Platonic husk of the theory fall away. Their role in human illumination; their necessity as a divinely envisioned world of infinite possible items; their incorporation within the theory of Trinitarian generation: all these themes traceable back to Augustine were laid aside. And with them, too (to return to the special concern of this essay), disappeared the apparatus of traditional contemplative and even soteriological or eschatological positions that were built around the divine ideas. For Aquinas, our higher life is not to be sought there. Salvation cannot fundamentally turn on the ontological harmony between disembodied souls and a heaven of paradigms. The point of connection is rather the personal impetus of desire, drawing the individual as knower and as willing

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17. Ibid., 359.

18. Two older but still very useful discussions are Jean-Marie Bissen, *L'Exemplarisme divin selon Saint Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1929), especially 19–99; and Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1938), chap. 4.

19. This was argued some time ago (1949). Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, CW 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997), 202.

agent through the humanity of the incarnate Son into a face-to-face encounter with the Father. In that beatifying communion, the world-creative thoughts of God are at best secondary objects seen in the Son, and only insofar as they pertain to the identity built up in one's particular personal history.[20] If Aquinas, recasting the eternal ideas to fit them into the demanding framework of creation from nothing, finds that he has de-idealized them as well, then this turns out to harmonize nicely with his anthropological and soteriological emphasis on the drama of personal agency. For Aquinas, the ideas cannot be imitated or attained, nor are they a higher version of the creature, but are rather God's cognition of his own will to realize actual creaturely existence. But the anti-Platonic impulse revealed in these positions remained, in Aquinas's writings, restricted mostly to discussions of the divine knowledge. In particular, Aquinas did not give greater play to that impulse by developing a systematic connection between the non-ideal divine exemplar and the crucial agency just sketched of the human sojourner it creates. The wager of the remainder of this essay is that without a fuller and more systematic extension into anthropology or soteriology the full scope of Aquinas's departure from Platonism will remain veiled. That the suggestive outlines of such a connection might appear in later thinkers is therefore the possibility to be explored in the remaining sections.

Eckhart and Aquinas's Ideas: Re-Platonizing the Double Identity

To recapitulate: responding with other Scholastics to the dual threat of Amalrician pantheism and Arabic emanationism and necessitarianism, Aquinas had developed a position that insisted upon a double identity within the divine idea. On the one hand, the divine idea is ontologically identical with God or the divine essence; on the other hand, the divine idea is intentionally or informationally identical with its respective created reality. Any wavering on these identifications leads the theologian into the forbidden zone of a *tertium quid* between God and creature. It has been seen that the latter identity eliminated in principle any possibility that its own divine idea might serve the creature as a kind of ideal. There is no room for a replay of Platonic aspirations; the idea in God's mind cannot be approached, converged upon, or "lived up to" by the creature, since the latter is already its perfectly effected product. Does this mean that the divine idea had to become a purely technical notion—the solution to a systematic theological problem that had no direct relevance for the understanding or living of Christian life? Meister Eckhart provided perhaps the first and certainly the most influential attempt to recreate the spiritual or ethical role that ideas had played in Platonic tradition, only now under the conditions mandated by Aquinas's double identity theory. But it will be claimed here that, though adopting the theory itself, he allowed his anthropology to remain untouched by its anti-Platonic subtext, and so could not protect the deeper meaning hidden in Aquinas's theoretical turn.

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20.   Boland, *Ideas in God*, 283; Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 3, q. 10, a. 2.

The broader roots of Eckhart's teaching lie in a particular tradition of reflection on spiritual praxis, and especially in a theme developed among a series of Beguine authors, beginning with Hadewijch of Antwerp. That God has eternally foreknown me, along with all other creatures, is of course a centuries-old theme in Christian spirituality, closely related to the divine idea tradition. It seems that around the middle of the thirteenth century certain circles of female contemplatives began to reflect in profound and daring ways upon this timeless presence of the creature with God. Combined with related themes from the tradition, such as the human being's status as image of God, and the classic Pauline stress on the Christian's unity with Christ or her true life in Christ, the powerful notion of an existence of the human person within God's being, apart from and prior to her existence as a creature ("outside" of God), helped to bring about a new epoch (as Bernard McGinn has argued) in Western contemplative practice.[21] The older masters of the spiritual life had spoken of a spiritual unity with God, a state that is for the most part only rarely and fitfully experienced, but to which the practitioner aspires through prayer and discipline. The new emphasis on the believer's exemplary or eminent unity with God pointed to a state of affairs that has always obtained, and that is a fact regardless of one's own striving (though one must nonetheless struggle to realize the truth or effects of this state of affairs in one's own thoughts and actions). Above all, it pressed beyond the idea of a mere spiritual unity or identity of will between God and believer, to speak of a unity of complete identity, a unity without distinction. My reality, my true identity, is my utter unity with the eternal being of the creator.

With his university training, Eckhart was able to take up this theme and give it a more systematic and conceptually precise treatment. The still ongoing discussions around divine ideas proved a particularly fruitful avenue for this. In such a context, Eckhart must have recognized the spiritual potential of the double identity (i.e. with God and with the creature) contained within the divine idea insisted upon by his famous predecessor in the Dominican Order. He casts the double identity as a paradox; the resolution of this technical paradox leads directly to the essence of his theory of contemplative praxis:

> Things themselves and their forms are not in God, but the ideas of things and of forms. God is the Word, that is, the Logos, which is the Idea … But nothing is as equally similar and dissimilar as the idea of something and the thing itself, for an idea is not truly and affirmatively predicated of a thing … unless it is similar to it … But on the other hand, what is as dissimilar as the eternal uncreatable and the temporal created?[22]

The true depth of Christian existence is only realized with the total awareness, the full acceptance in and through each conscious moment, that my truth, my actuality, my being,

21.   McGinn discusses this motif and its influence in several places in his history of mysticism. See especially Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 2, *The Flowing of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 214–6.

22.   Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 41–146 at 83.

thanks to its eternal presence in God's intellect, just is God's being. That is, in the true depth of the self the dissimilarity is already overcome: I am my divine idea. The theorization of this state of affairs is worked out in concentrated form in a few paragraphs from Eckhart's commentary on the Book of Wisdom. A creature has no formal existence of its own in God, only virtual or causal existence, identical with God's own being. Hence only its formal existence is mutable, or even creatable. Formal existence (*esse*) marks the creature's similarity (as effect) to the creative causality of the divine essence, an act common to the three divine persons just as the divine existence is common to them; but it also marks its separateness from God, indicated by its remaining "external" to the interior life of God, the Trinity. The idea of a creature, however, is not and cannot be created. And in the Son or Word, the primal idea, I (that is, in my idea) am life and intellect beyond all being.[23] To use the language of Eckhart's sermons, when I have cultivated utter detachment from all created difference, I become one with my own uncreated reality (the "ground" or "spark" of the soul), and thereby "break through" beyond creation, into the uncreated realm of inter-Trinitarian relations.[24] When this happens, what can be said of Jesus can and must equally be said of me. The Son is truly born (temporally) within me, because his divine generation is (eternally) equally my own. "[W]e should never rest until we become that which we eternally have been in [the Son]," for then "[m]y body and my soul are more in God than they are in themselves."[25]

This is only the briefest outline of a multilayered complex of thought that shifts its terminology with disconcerting ease, but already it is clear how it could find expression in controversial and easily misunderstood utterances. Even so, it represents a brilliant incorporation of Aquinas's post-Platonic theory of ideas into a highly charged and insightful theorization of prayerful existence. Yet it cannot be denied that Eckhart's appropriation of Aquinas is selective and somewhat disorienting. In fact, several points of tension indicate the way in which Eckhart has forcibly wrenched Aquinas's revisionary stance on ideas out of its broader metaphysical and anthropological context. It is of course no secret that Eckhart can hardly be called a Thomist. The very real debts he bears to Aquinas are more than balanced by his deep alignment with the peculiar conceptual lineage of the German Dominican houses, where sympathies with Albert the Great remained strong and Latin translations of Neoplatonic sages were eagerly studied. The broadly differentiated orientations are nicely summarized by McGinn: "Unlike Thomas Aquinas, for whom formal existence was essential for giving creatures a reality of their own, Eckhart's attention focused on the virtual, true, that is, the 'principial' existence of things in God."[26]

This critical shift in overall emphasis plays out in more specific displacements, such that Aquinas's theory is apparently accepted but its meaning is turned on its head. First,

23. Meister Eckhart, "Commentary on Wisdom 1:14," in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, 148–9.

24. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 4, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005) 149–50.

25. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon 39," in *Meister Eckhart: Preacher and Teacher*, 296–99 at 298; Eckhart, "Sermon 10," in *Meister Eckhart: Preacher and Teacher*, 261–66 at 261.

26. McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 145.

Eckhart has no patience with Aquinas's careful distinctions between natural philosophy, metaphysics and revealed doctrine. Indeed, it is one result of his continual stress on the eternal Word as the specific site of the creature's virtual pre-existence that the natural, creaturely world of "formal existence" is seen less as a distinct realm with its own integrity than as merely an illustrative extension of the higher dynamics of soteriology. Thus the Gospel of John is mined for "truths of natural principles, conclusions and properties"[27]: "The Word universally and naturally becomes flesh in every work of nature and art … [T]he incarnation itself exemplifies the eternal emanation and is the exemplar of the entire lower nature."[28] This merging of natural and supernatural somewhat tips the ontological scales in favor of the "higher" pre-existence of the creature. The trend is exacerbated on the anthropological level, where a genuinely Aristotelian and Thomist celebration of the immediate identity of intellect with its cognized object is used, in a very un-Thomist way, to denigrate the role of willing. For the will's desire for God grasps him under the aspect of the good, a stance that interposes between me and God a defined medium that separates. Unlike the will, the intellect "is not satisfied with goodness or with wisdom or with truth or with God himself [i.e. as differentiated in any way from me] … [I]t bursts into the ground from which goodness and truth come forth … [It] enters in and pierces through to the roots from which the Son pours forth."[29] Finally, Eckhart's stress on "my own" idea in God is not as intimate or personal as one might think, for he returns to the old Platonic theme of the idea as primarily the universal, the general definition or species. This fits his spirituality exactly, since the individual person is called to the deepest embrace of that lack of differentiation which characterizes the unified pre-existence of creatures in the Word.[30] Paradoxically, unification with one's idea in the Word is the eradication of its separate identity: "[A]bandon yourself, all things, and everything you are in yourself, and take yourself according to how you are in God."[31]

The mutation which Aquinas's vision undergoes at Eckhart's hands is striking. The concentration of the former on the creature's own inherent act of existence is dissipated. The tenacious focus on the individual human substance and its freedom, its self-creative agency by which repeated choices build up decisive dispositional inclinations within the self, all this is outweighed by detachment, a letting go of personal identity and of intelligent desire in a spirituality of radical unity with God. Aquinas's compelling embrace of the reality and dignity of creaturely causality as the very rationale of creation has receded from view in Eckhart, allowing the old question to return: if I am "already" God, why is there a "lower" reality at all? In comparison with the creature itself, Aquinas limited the superiority of the creature's idea to its

27. Meister Eckhart, "Selections From the Commentary on John," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, eds. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1981), 122–76 at 123.

28. McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 154.

29. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon 69," in *Meister Eckhart: Preacher and Teacher*, 311–15 at 315.

30. Meister Eckhart, "Commentary on Wisdom 7:11," in *Meister Eckhart: Preacher and Teacher*, 155–65 at 157.

31. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon 24," in *Meister Eckhart: Preacher and Teacher*, 284–86 at 285.

exemplary causality, thus circumventing the idealization of the idea. In a remarkable turn, the very same notion in Eckhart ushers in a re-idealization of the exemplar:

> Where man still preserves something in himself, he preserves distinction. This is why I pray God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God as the principle of creatures. Indeed, in God's own being, where God is raised above all being and all distinctions, I was myself, I willed myself, and I knew myself to create this man that I am.[32]

For Aquinas, the drama of my existence is my willed self-creation in time; for Eckhart, my self-creation has always already happened. This reversal constitutes impressive evidence for the necessity of exploring how the anti-Platonic turn implicit in Aquinas's theory of divine ideas might play a fuller and more explicit role in theological anthropology; failing that, the technicalities of Aquinas's position on ideas in themselves (the double necessity) can, as Eckhart shows, be accepted but yoked with an anthropology that neutralizes their deeper meaning.

An Eschatology of Existence: Kierkegaard

This is very far from the last word to be said on Eckhart, a conceptual enthusiast and a fearless cartographer of far reaches within the realm of prayer. There are two cautionary points in face of the above positioning of Eckhart against Aquinas. First, some recognition is in order of the different modes of existence traditionally labelled the "active" and the "contemplative" life. Second, the success of Eckhart's schematization of human existence as an account of graced, "supernatural" life within the Triune deity must be balanced against any apparent distortions of the basic architecture of "natural" created human agency. That being said, with Eckhart it looks as if Aquinas's anti-Platonic revolution has been turned against itself, his ideas forced back into a broadly Platonic conceptual frame which no longer really fits them. A structurally analogous diagnosis, that of a return, supposedly in the name of Christianity, to a pagan or Greek frame of mind that secretly undermines faithful existence, animates the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. For in his case, too, the divine idea in something like its Thomist guise, with its dual identity, plays a (disguised) role, but the result is an entirely different sort of self-creation than Eckhart speaks of. He will provide a model for the genuine anthropological and ethical theorization of Aquinas's post-Platonic divine idea.

Kierkegaard's fierce indictment of his age, in both its political and intellectual manifestations, was that it sanctioned a massive evasion of the fundamental human task, that of thinking and acting fully into one's own finite individuality as a self-choosing agent. The success of Hegelianism and its variants in Denmark was the presenting symptom. For Hegel, individual decisions and acts in history acquire their ultimate meaning only

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32. Bernard McGinn, "Meister Eckhart on God as Absolute Unity," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Norfolk, VA: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1982), 128–39 at 135.

within the ongoing unfolding of collective social and cultural forms; this unfolding follows the dialectic of intelligence whereby the multitude of phenomena is progressively ordered by the logical movement of concepts toward ever greater scope, richness and interconnection. This dialectic in nature and history is finally deciphered by philosophy as also the life of infinite spirit, the concrete realization of the absolute or God. This scheme was intolerable from Kierkegaard's point of view. First, it invited a stance toward one's own historical and existential position that was finally "objective," i.e. impersonal and contemplative; my finite standpoint, and hence my limited agency, is completely relativized within a necessary play of cumulative masses. Second, it disastrously blurred any boundary between the temporal and trans-temporal spheres of reality. Not only did it wrongly submit the transcendent complex of eternal truth, the divine mind, to a kinetic process, a falsely "mobilized" logic, but it also presented the ideal human relation to the divine as participation via philosophical intellection, rising to share the adventure of concepts. The ultimate aspiration was thus to a view from nowhere, divorced from the passion of living here and now. For Kierkegaard, even if pure thought could relate to the absolute through thinking itself, "I" cannot; no actual human individual is capable of this. Each is ceaselessly confronted with the unfinished task of being herself, in a particular way, in the next moment.

In one respect, Kierkegaard saw this intellectual development as a falling away from ancient wisdom.[33] The Greeks at least never forgot that the philosopher was first and foremost a living person. Ideas were passionately appropriated to the sage's own existence; they were only real as suffered and lived into. But in another respect Hegelianism rejoined Greek thought, or at least its essence as distilled by Platonism, at just the point at which it had been forever surpassed by the Christian revelation of sin, redemption, and eschaton. Owing to the close kinship between the human intellect and the divine realm of changeless truth, the realm of ideas, the Platonic counsel of wisdom lay in withdrawal from the myriad snares of worldly desire and active involvement with lower diversity, to seek theoretic reconnection with the soul's eternal homeland. Kierkegaard was struck by the way in which Hegelian philosophy aligned itself with this older Platonic ethos; the supposedly Christian idealist philosophy actually entered into a secret compact with paganism to sap and scatter the concentrated energies marshalled by the living individual faced with choosing her path through life, and taking total responsibility for her self-formation (and de-formation). Platonic and idealist wisdom presumes that the ultimate truth about oneself has always already been decided. But the essence of the Christian message, as Kierkegaard saw it, was precisely the opposite: my fate, the authentic definition of myself that will persist beyond temporal flux, can only be worked out in my own individual agency. God has put my soul, as a task, into my hands.

Kierkegaard discovered this opposition between the ancient and modern views of life partly through reflecting on a classic conundrum: if deity, or the unbreakable

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33. Detailed argumentation and citations for the account which follows can be found in Paul DeHart, "'The Passage from Mind to Heart is So Long': The Riddle of 'Repetition' and Kierkegaard's Ontology of Agency," *Modern Theology* 31 (2015): 91–122.

chain of causes, has already determined the future, what meaning is there in my own choices or acts? The answer lay in the recognition of one's own necessary participation as a free agent in the causal nexus; wise choice is causally efficacious, and is ingredient in the determined complex of future effects. This solution struck Kierkegaard as paradigmatic of the Christian belief in human beings as free creatures of an omnipotent, providential creator. Yes, God has eternally foreseen, in his idea of me, all that I will do. But the intention of that idea is precisely my creaturely agency; it incorporates my free and contingent acts, the very acts that I, and only I, can and must freely perform. (The resonance with Aquinas here should be evident.) So both Greek and Christian/modern orientations understand the final verdict on a human's temporal career to lie in a trans-temporal or eternal truth. For the Greek the key is to "recollect" that truth as something already finished and behind me, as it were, while for the Christian the eternal idea of myself must be "repeated" forward by my full engagement in the temporal progress of existing.

The metaphysical scheme underlying Kierkegaard's anthropology of freedom demands a maximum both of proximity and of tension between the human self's temporal dimension (centered on the will and its repeated finite choices, each one reshaping the psychological context of later choices), and its transcendent dimension (centered on intellect's grasp of truth in the medium of thought, though always from the ever-shifting standpoint of existential commitment). Selfhood is precisely the paradoxical unity-in-opposition of time and the timeless; the flaw of both paganism and Hegelianism lies in their false reconciliation ("Better well hanged than ill wed!"[34]), a merely notional arrangement which volatilizes the individual's essential temporality and lifts the weight of eternal consequence from the self-shaping process of freedom. The tension of time and eternity is not a problem to be solved by a philosophy of finite spirit or by myth-making about a semi-divine soul. Only the passion of existence ("earnestness") repeatedly brings time and timeless into fruitful union in the chosen act; the opposed stance, which passively cultivates the variety of experience, and toys with selfhood rather than committing oneself to it, Kierkegaard calls the "esthetic" stage of existence. Its pessimistic maxim is a version of the older sophistry: Why do anything? (Get married: you will regret it. Don't get married: you will regret it.[35]) Genuine selfhood only commences with the full realization of itself as its own most basic task, that is, with submission to the claim (as a commission from the absolute) upon every moment of my life of the universal idea of the human person (the "ethical" stage). Yet for every individual this awareness always comes too late, by which time freedom has already crippled itself by its previous failed decisions. There remains only faith, the religious, which suspends the ethical relation to the absolute in the name of that very relation. In faith, the individual faces the divine directly, no longer mediated

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34. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985), [3].
35. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part One*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1987), 38.

by the universally human. Only in this way can I as an existing subject truly access the eternal, always beginning anew from total indigence and total forgiveness, to take on my own eternal idea in God as my endless responsibility.

The paradox of the dual identity in the divine idea, already noted by Eckhart, finds resolution as a practice, necessarily repeated: the constant, free elaboration of one's identity through chosen responses to one's living context must be continually, consciously embraced rather than evaded. As the self struggles to find the path that allows continued openness before God, it "repeats" its idea. Recall the paradox. Each of the two identifications found in Aquinas's divine idea, taken by itself, presents an unanswerable question. If the exemplar in God's mind codifies to the least detail the shape and the course of the creature, then why does God create anything? If my entire progress is already enclosed within my eternal exemplar, then why do anything? In Kierkegaard's theory of personhood before God, the answer to both questions turns out to be the same. God creates that we might act; that is, God is (now … and now) creating our act precisely as ours, so that there can be agency beside God's. Created agency is what the creative exemplar intends, and what complements it. But the profundity of this answer is only realized in the living practice of selfhood, only as the two questions are continually connected to each other in the subject's repeated exercise of its freedom. Though he could not know it, Kierkegaard's theological anthropology was actuated by the same Thomist premise as Eckhart: the de-Platonized, i.e. de-idealized, yet eternal exemplar of myself in God. But he arrived at an ethos of the idea that was very different. Everything turns on the shift in grammatical mood. In place of Eckhart's indicative "You are your idea", Kierkegaard supplies an imperative: "Be your idea!"

The Linguistic Self as Ontologically Irreducible

If Eckhart shows the necessity of extending the anti-Platonism of Aquinas's idea theory into anthropology, Kierkegaard shows its possibility. But is Kierkegaard's position itself possible? Two obstacles present themselves. First, is his anthropology of subjective freedom not highly vulnerable to the post-structuralist reduction of selfhood to a derivative and largely illusory effect of language? Second, even if the metaphysical irreducibility of selfhood implied by Kierkegaard's theory can be sustained, can this quintessentially modern emphasis on individuality be reconciled with the ancient and medieval metaphysical assumptions of Aquinas? Full discussion is impossible, but the remaining two sections will suggest ways around these obstacles. First is the problem of the compatibility between the self's linguisticality and its irreducibility.

Over the course of his authorship, Kierkegaard's ethic of free subjectivity was supported by philosophical reflections on the shape of the self and the nature of its relations to world and God. The roots of human freedom lie in the person's dual structure—a tense unity of opposition between the organic body and the "soul" as its actualizing or animating formal principle, continually requiring mediation by a third principle that actively rebalances and reconnects the two unstable components. This rather precarious structure that must consciously negotiate the potentially explosive instability of its

own dynamic elements is what Kierkegaard calls "spirit," and its unique natural status is marked by its temporality, i.e. the disclosure within itself of time succession as such. The task of self-construction that arrives with self-awareness implies that something has levered the human subject out of mere psychic unity, out of an animal totality of presence, and precipitated it into "the present." The present, in turn, only appears as the rolling point of connection between an internally sedimented past and an array of projected futures.

As many philosophers besides Kierkegaard have remarked, it is the projection of possible futures that makes human selfhood a free venture, indeed an exercise in constructive self-interpretation. Since his time, however, there has also been the gradual discovery (already adumbrated, to be sure, in some of the German romantic thinkers) of the key role of language in enabling the increment of local transcendence that marks human selfhood and freedom. Such a discovery is not necessarily incompatible with Kierkegaard's insights. In fact, his stress upon the founding dialectic of mind and flesh at the basis of spirit is only enhanced by the realization that the interpretive construction of self-presence occurs by means of a traffic with signs in their concrete, material opacity: semantic bodies. But, as is well known from the philosophical history of the previous century, a number of influential theories have arisen that begin from this linguistic insight in order to demote or abandon the ontological solidity of selfhood. Theorists of this bent have often begun from a certain reading of the Swiss linguist De Saussure, who argued that sign-systems only work by the simultaneous opposition of each semantic element to every other one, thereby making a language equivalent to an achronic chain that is in principle endless. The conclusion drawn from this has often been that, since the self can only mediate its own identity through meaning-complexes that are in fact interminable and shifting, then something like self-presence is endlessly deferred, and thus the subject itself is reduced to an ideal that is impossible in fact.

The issue is too enormous to explore here, other than to assert that the matter is far from settled. One philosopher in particular, the German hermeneutic theoretician Manfred Frank, who has offered powerful analyses of these claims (in discussions of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, etc.), has vigorously and convincingly argued the incoherence of this reduction of the subject, and for the continued viability, and indeed inevitability, of real subjectivity.[36] Two theses are basic to his argument. First, he completely affirms the material mediation of self-presence by means of an endless commerce in signs; but he argues that the supposed disruption by meaning deferral of all subjective stability is a false inference, based upon an inherently defective model of perfect self-presence grounded in a primordial "reflection." Frank, working from the earlier research of Dieter Henrich, has shown how the

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36. Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine Wilke & Richard Gray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989). This work offers a marvelously lucid and fair-minded treatment of the family of (largely French) deconstructions of selfhood, even while exposing (in light of his own case for its irreducibility) their shared, questionable assumptions.

post-structuralist reduction of the subject rests upon an uncritically assumed account of subject-formation that was in fact exposed as flawed as early as Fichte and Novalis. Frank's second thesis is based on his rejection of the widespread assumption that linguistic interpretation is analogous to decoding, the substitution of meaning units according to a fully rule-determined and (in principle) calculable procedure. Against this "code-model" he argues for the indispensably creative moment in all interpretation. The interpreting subject in every act of linguistic understanding infinitesimally extends the semantic chain in a new direction, not determined in advance by the existing stock of shared meaning, and thereby recreates the entire complex of signs, incarnating it anew.

In other words, there is no getting "behind" the hermeneutic subject, as if it were an already completed ideal linguistic system that "utters" selves, speaks through them, creating the subject as a mere effect (as argued by post-structuralist reductionism). Frank shows the subject to be "*unhintergehbar*" (irreducible); it is living human language-users and the ongoing events of communicative creation they enable that first realize the abstract sign system, temporalizing the achronic chain of signs, constituting language as speech. For Frank, the seminal theorist of the irreducible hermeneutic subject was Schleiermacher. It was Schleiermacher who accurately formulated the relation between the interpreter and the linguistic system, and who realized the unique ontological status of the former. As the site and engine of the irreducibly new semantic realization, each particular subject continually constitutes itself as an utterly unique configuration, an impenetrable kernel of reality rather than an "instance" of a set or a "construct" of overlapping, more general categories: a precipitate of the hermeneutical event, it is *individuum*, in a technical sense, incommensurable with other individuals.[37] One purpose of pointing to Frank's discussion in this context is to suggest that his retrieval of Schleiermacher's irreducible hermeneutic self is an effective commentary upon and elaboration of Kierkegaard's existential self, helping to situate the psychological and metaphysical structures explored by the latter with respect to cultural processes. Kierkegaard and Frank share a common perspective: the ontological unity and identity of the individual subject is never simply given but is an achievement, bought at the price of a restless need for the self to actualize itself by freely interpreting itself into its world. If Kierkegaard's "repetition" provides the better attempt to capture the ethical implications of Aquinas's post-Platonic divine idea (as opposed to Eckhart's almost perfect anticipation of what Kierkegaard calls "recollection"), then Frank's discussion helps to alleviate the suspicions likely in our contemporary intellectual setting that the Dane's ontology of the subject can be dismissed as an obsolete holdover of idealism or "logocentrism."

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37. Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, 438–49. Manfred Frank, *Die Unhintergehbarkeit von Individualität* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), especially 116–31. Manfred Frank, "The Text and its Style: Schleiermacher's Theory of Language," in Frank, *The Subject and the Text*, ed. Andrew Bowie, trans. Helen Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 1–22. Manfred Frank, "Style in Philosophy: Part I," *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999) 145–67, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00119.

Reconciling Frank and Aquinas on Individuality

In resisting a powerful contemporary trend, Frank and Aquinas might thus find themselves on the same side. The human self is indeed finite: situated, in transit, multiply and uncontrollably conditioned, continually subject to contingent deformations. It does not, however, thereby forfeit a certain ontological priority, a unity and solidity of being; it is not a mere derivate, an epiphenomenon, a necessary fiction, an effect thrown off from more basic impersonal structures. But one problem remains to trouble this proposed liaison between the free subject and Aquinas's world of thought. Frank names Aquinas specifically as a prime representative of the dominant Western misunderstanding that has always diluted the status of the authentically individual to a mere "particular":

> Humboldt's and Schleiermacher's concept of individuality is noticeably at odds with a far more powerful tradition … [For this tradition] the peculiarity of the individual cannot only be reached by a categorical leap from the general but can be derived by continuous transitions from the universal. This means of course that the "incommensurability" of individuals in relation to each other is limited; they are—according to the unanimous teaching of, say, St. Thomas Aquinas and Leibniz—centred toward God and can also communicate with one another through him—through shared participation in the "esse commune" … This is the thesis of the sameness in kind [*Gleichartigkeit*] between the general and the individual.[38]

In suggesting that Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology is a de facto extension of certain insights of Thomas Aquinas on divine exemplarity, am I falsely yoking his own thesis of incommensurable individuality to the kind of standard ontology that, Frank says, refuses this ultimacy of individuality?

There are telling indications that Frank's rather casual mention of Aquinas too hastily assimilates the latter to an undifferentiated "Scholastic" consensus. In fact, as several scholars of medieval philosophy have suggested, Aquinas's metaphysical stance is markedly accommodating to just the sort of "individuality" Frank seeks to secure. Anton Pegis had already seen that for Aquinas God's essence "is compared to the essences of things, not as the general to the particular, but as a perfect actuality to imperfect actualities" and that "the individual, existentially considered, contains a uniqueness and an incommunicability which no Platonic method of unlikeness will ever produce," i.e. "the reality of the singular cannot be derived by the method of contracting universals."[39] Edward Booth, likewise, pointed out that the way Aquinas radically unites divine ideas in the divine essence allows him to make the divine creative act terminate directly in the individual existent; the "individuation of God's activity with regard to each individual" (a rejection of his teacher Albert's mediation of

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38. Manfred Frank, "The Entropy of Language: Reflections on the Searle–Derrida Debate," in Frank, *The Subject and the Text*, 178–9.
39. Anton C. Pegis, "The Dilemma of Being and Unity: A Platonic Incident in Christian Thought," in *Essays in Thomism*, ed. Robert Edward Brennan (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 178, 166–7.

creation through radiated universal forms) means that the concrete individual is the intent of the divine exemplar, not the species.[40] Nor is Frank's reading of the role of "being in general" (*esse commune*) correct, for the latter is an abstraction and not the divine plenitude; it is not a common ontological formality in which creatures commensurably participate. As Rudi Te Velde shows, it is the realm of shared non-divinity (where ontological difference reigns of necessity), a complex of mutually overlapping and negating limitations of the divine perfection whose pattern is no direct "derivation" from God but is specific to this created order.[41] Finally, a close examination of the voluntarist distinction Aquinas makes between God's ideas as "intelligibilities" and as "exemplars," the latter emerging only with the willing, in infinitesimal providential detail, of the actual universe, suggests that Aquinas saw in divine creation itself the ground for Frank's proposed "categorical leap" (rather than a "continuous transition") from universal to individual.[42]

Schleiermacher made it a mark of the individual that it cannot be encompassed in a concept; Kierkegaard drew the theological correlate—that God "has no concept," but knows the created individual directly, with no created generic conception as medium; and Aquinas agreed when he argued that God knows every created event the way any casual observer might, through direct inspection, and not like an Avicennist "scientist," through accumulated generalities.[43] And as God knows, so God creates, for God creates as (in Kant's phrase) *intuitus originarius*, simply through knowing what he wills. And what God knows and wills, God's creative idea, is first and foremost the individual substance, albeit as thoroughly embedded in its world's causal grid. The marvel of Aquinas's theory of divine ideas, as I have tried to suggest in this essay and its two companion pieces (see footnote 3), is its escape from a perennial dilemma: on the one hand, the theory accepts the tradition of the divine and eternal exemplar but voluntarizes it (that is, de-Platonizes it), and thereby allows the individual creature a kind of metaphysical ultimacy; but on the other hand, it retains the eminence of all created truth and meaning in the divine intellect, instead of resorting to the "blank" God of Ockham's voluntarism.[44] On Aquinas's conception, creatures add nothing to God's being, since they are merely contingently ordered decompositions and complex negations of the simple divine fullness; yet they have their distinct reality, and do not occur via a "straight" descent by piecemeal deletions of that fullness, as if particulars could be defined simply by piling up a big enough selection of generalized attributes. In short, Aquinas views the production of creatures not as an incremental, rule-bound

40. Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983), 235, cf. 264.
41. Rudi te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 128.
42. For the significance of this distinction see DeHart, "What Is Not, Was Not, and Will Never Be," 1020–22, 1031–38.
43. Frank, *Unhintergehbarkeit*, 115; Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 41; Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 5.
44. Pegis, "Dilemma of Being and Unity," 169–71.

exhibition of instances of a preexistent set, but rather as more akin to a unique, imaginative articulation of infinite possibility, an act of divine self-interpretation, even. For this reason, there is room also among creatures for the acts of human meaning-creation that constitute freely existing subjects.

In a forthcoming work ("Eclipse of the Mind"; see footnote 3), I suggest that the significance of Aquinas's departures from earlier notions of God's ideas was masked not just at first; consideration of philosophical and theological theorizations of divine creation across subsequent centuries seems to reveal that its full implications have still not been absorbed. An anti-Platonic time bomb, one might say, lay hidden in the thought of this medieval man, and its slow-moving shock wave is still rumbling toward us. If in the present essay plausible use has been made of Kierkegaard and Frank to help register its full force, perhaps that is further testimony to its delayed impact. The keynote of Aquinas's revision of the theory of exemplars is divine voluntarism, a specifically Thomist voluntarism that integrates divine will and intellect, rather than the rival "Franciscan" voluntarism that pitted will against intellect. The final lesson of the present discussion is that the spiritual and anthropological response to this divine voluntarism is a similar fusion of intellect and will in the human self, a shift in the impetus of Christian life toward free, self-shaping existence.

The Platonic consensus on ideas tended to equate discernment of the universal and necessary structures of physical and moral reality with an ascent to union with God's mind. Aquinas's alternative disrupts that elevation which read the created order as a direct expression of the divine being. On this alternative, the sheer freedom with which the exemplars arise in God points to the contingency of the world's "style": as beautiful, the world is certainly not arbitrary, it is a genuine participation of divine perfection, but still as just *this* participation it is accidental, one of an infinity. There could have been another beauty. With this in mind, the focus of existential discernment must accordingly shift, from universal structure to providential unfolding; the balance tips away from the ancient contemplation of interlocking orders, microcosmic and macrocosmic, and tips toward the navigation of history. Worldly things are no longer to be understood as "signs" of God in any straightforward sense. On the old Platonic model the analogy of human and divine intellect meant that God's disclosure in the world was really more akin to a single mind speaking to itself. But with the more voluntarist cast given to creation, something like a real labor of aesthetic or artistic interpretation is required in "reading" the world. The obstacle to our grasp of the creator's mind is no longer our material embodiment or even our sin; it is the very fact of creation as an act of will, as like a work of art rather than a selective transcription of God's eternal thoughts.

Kierkegaard offers the fitting ethical extension of Aquinas's revised idea theory. The human ideal ("repetition") is not to merge with the realm of the static and universal "thought." Each person is rather assigned one divine idea, one eternal exemplar to concern her ultimately: that of herself. It is not to be contemplated (it is actually unknowable by us), but is rather to be "operated" by the self, through the interpretive labor of existing freely, the work of interpreting myself and my situation in each new moment in order to create my next act, and thereby my next self and my next situation. In other words, for Kierkegaard, the effect of God's creation of myself is nothing other

than my cumulative creation of myself. The very meaning of human existence, its authentic maneuver through the world through free self-interpretation, must be differently symbolized in light of this shift from the more ancient Platonic model. We might image the displacement of categories required here as a move from a "linear dynamics," which saw the hermeneutic of existence as like a decoding of the world, to a "chaotic dynamics," where the world confronts the self in the radically unanticipatable form of history. Reading the world in that form is a creative act of free interpretation, not the implementation of a program. And this ongoing creativity of existence is only possible, as Frank indicates, because of the reality of the subject as irreducible, as individual, as agent; it is due to the primordial relation of the free self, in its ontological priority and density, to the linguistic order "upon which" it moves. What Aquinas and his theory of divine ideas adds to this is an encompassing and rigorously consistent metaphysical scheme: that of the creator God who in his fullness affirms a world of diverse creatures who make things happen. In this way, the mystery of otherness within the world is divinely grounded. Yet, crucially, it turns out not to spring from some differential negation within God's being but rather from an erotic positivity; the world of individuals who act, and of some who create themselves, is the voluntary overflow of God's desire (in Jacques Pohier's words[45]) "not to be everything."

Author biography

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45. Jacques Pohier, *God—in Fragments*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 266–70.