

The Analogy of “Homo” and “Deus” in St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Lectura romana*

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DISTINCTION four of Peter Lombard’s *Liber sententiarum* is principally concerned with understanding the proposition “Deus genuit Deum” (God begat God). Peter is particularly concerned with how the term “Deus” is to be understood in relation to the Trinity of persons. “Deus genuit Deum” becomes the focus of his attention, but other propositions are also mentioned, among them, “Deus est Trinitas” (God is Trinity) and “Deus est tres personae” (God is three persons).

The articles of distinction four of St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Lectura romana* on Peter Lombard’s *Liber sententiarum* are wholly dedicated to understanding Trinitarian propositions.¹ The first two articles specifically address the use of the term “Deus” in such propositions. The first article considers the central proposition of the distinction: “Deus genuit Deum”; the second article considers two of the additional propositions found in distinction four: “Deus est Trinitas” and “Deus est tres personae.” In explaining how these propositions are to be understood, Thomas articulates with particular clarity the analogical use of “homo” in understanding “Deus.”

The problem with the proposition “Deus genuit Deum,” the subject of 4.1, is a neat one. As each of the initial arguments states, “Deus” is an

¹ The *Lectura romana* is the *reportatio* of Thomas’s teaching on the first book of the *Liber sententiarum* in Rome in 1255–1256. The text can be found in Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura romana in primum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, ed. Leonard E. Boyle and John F. Boyle (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2006). References will be to the internal divisions as established in the edition, with page and line numbers to the edition in parentheses.

essential term, not a notional one; that is, it refers to the divine essence, not to divine persons. The verb “genuit,” however, refers to a notional operation of the Trinity, that is to say an operation of persons; thus, one can say, “the Father begat the Son,” but not “the essence begat the essence.” Can one then simply reject “Deus genuit Deum” as false with its essential subject and object and its notional verb? No; for as the *sed contra* states, the creed describes the begetting of the Son from the Father as “God from God.”

In his response, St. Thomas says that while all concede the truth of the proposition, they differ in how to account for its truth. He then considers two opinions.

According to the first opinion, both the signification and supposition of “Deus” are, by the very nature of the term, the same, that is, the divine essence.² Signification considers what a word signifies taken by itself, whereas supposition considers what the word stands for when used in a sentence. If according to the first opinion “Deus” naturally both signifies and stands for the divine essence, how is the notional aspect of the proposition to be understood? Although both signification and supposition are of the divine essence, when “Deus” is joined to a notional verb it is drawn to standing for a person. Thus with the notional verb “genuit,” “Deus” is drawn to personal supposition.³ Such is the first opinion.

According to the second opinion, “Deus” signifies essence. When, however, “Deus” is considered with regard to the mode of signifying, it can stand for a person. Thus, the second opinion agrees with the first in the essential signification of “Deus” but disagrees with the first in positing notional supposition. Thomas finds this second opinion the better one. In explaining this opinion, Thomas appeals by way of analogy to the use of the term “homo.” In what seems at first blush unilluminating, he says that “homo” simply signifies “homo.” How this is to be understood becomes clear when he then considers “homo” with regard to the mode of signification. In this regard, “homo” can be taken as standing for a particular man, that is, for one who has human nature. Thus the simple signification is “man signifies man” without any specification to an indi-

² “Quidam enim, attendentes in Deo idem esse essentiam et suppositum, dicunt quod hoc nomen ‘Deus’ de natura sua et significat essentiam et supponit pro essentia. . . .” *Lectura romana* 4.1.resp. (p. 122, lines 22–23).

³ “[S]ed tamen ex aliquo notionali adiuncto trahitur ad supponendum pro persona, et sive illud notionale sit verbum sive participium. Et ideo dicunt quod haec ‘Deus genuit Deum’ est vera, quia licet hoc nomen ‘Deus’ significet essentiam, tamen per hoc verbum ‘generat’ trahitur ad supponendum pro persona.” *Lectura romana* 4.1.resp. (p. 122, lines 23–27).

vidual; but the use of the term in a sentence may be such as to specify an individual in so far as that individual is one that has human nature.⁴

Thomas then applies this distinction to the term "Deus." "Deus" in its signification is essential. But one can nonetheless say, "Deus genuit Deum," when "Deus" is considered with regard to the mode of signification by which it stands for that which has divine nature. In this case it means, "That which has divine nature begat that which has divine nature." "Deus" does indeed stand for a person but does so indistinctly, as that which has divine nature. As such it can stand for both singular and plural persons; thus, not only the proposition "Deus generat" is true, but so is "Deus est Trinitas."⁵ Here ends the response to 4.1.

Given the ending of this response, the question of 4.2 is a bit of a puzzle: "Utrum haec sit vera, 'Deus est Trinitas' vel 'Deus est tres personae.'" Has not Thomas just answered this question?

Thomas poses the problem in this way in the response. The following two propositions are clearly false: "homo est omnis homo" (man is every man) and "homo est tres personae" (man is three persons). Given the analogy developed between "homo" and "Deus" in the previous article, would it not follow that the two parallel propositions are also false: "Deus est Trinitas" and "Deus est tres personae"?⁶ The analogy between the use of "homo" and the use of "Deus" that had proven helpful in the previous article in explaining "Deus genuit Deum" seems to work mischief in considering "Deus est Trinitas" and "Deus est tres personae." At the end of the response of 4.1, Thomas said that "Deus" can stand for both singular and plural persons; the analogy with "homo" suggests the contrary.

Having shown in 4.1 how the use of "homo" and "Deus" is the same, Thomas now shows in 4.2 how that use is different. The difference is twofold based on two differences between God and man.

⁴ "Alii autem, attendentes quod in huiusmodi significationibus non minus debet attendi modus significandi quam natura rei, dicunt et melius quod hoc nomen 'Deus' de natura sua significat essentiam; tamen ex modo significandi supponit pro persona, sicut hoc nomen 'homo' de natura sua significat hominem simpliciter, et ex modo significandi potest poni ad supponendum pro quolibet homine singulari ut pro habente humanitatem." *Lectura romana* 4.1.resp. (p. 123, lines 28–33).

⁵ "Et ideo dicunt ex modo significandi haec est vera scilicet 'Deus genuit Deum,' id est habentem divinitatem, cum ex modo significandi hoc nomen 'Deus' supponit pro persona tamen indistincte, quia aliquando supponit unam sicut cum dicitur 'Deus generat,' aliquando plures sicut cum dicitur 'Deus est Trinitas.'" *Lectura romana* 4.1.resp. (p. 123, lines 33–37).

⁶ "[S]icut haec falsa est 'homo est omnis homo' vel 'homo est tres personae,' ita etiam haec esset falsa 'Deus est Trinitas' et 'Deus est tres personae.'" *Lectura romana* 4.2.resp. (p. 124, lines 8–10).

First, the form that is signified by the term “homo,” namely “humanitas,” is not numerically one; that is, the humanity of one man is numerically other than the humanity of another man. God is different: the form signified by the term “Deus,” namely “divinitas,” is numerically one; that is, divinity is numerically one in the three divine persons.⁷

This brings us to the second difference. In the case of man, the form signified and the supposit are not the same; as Thomas says, in man the “quo est” and the “quod est” are different. In God, however, the form signified and the supposit are the same because God’s essence is his “quod est.”⁸

From these two differences, Thomas concludes that in the case of “Deus” the term in fact does stand for the essence.⁹ He is not taking back what he said about the supposition of “Deus” in 4.1; rather, he is noting the implications of the uniqueness of God. Thus he can say that this supposition is “ex natura rei” in the case of God. It is not so, of course, for man, and thus we have the precise point at which the analogy between “homo” and “Deus” fails. Since the essence is common to the three divine persons, we are able to say, “Deus est Trinitas,” and “Deus est Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus,” and “Deus est tres personae,” even though we cannot say, “homo est omnis homo,” or “homo est tres personae.”

In so considering 4.1 and 4.2 together, a puzzle in the text of 4.2 is solved. The article has only one initial argument, but the response begins in this way:

Dicendum quod opinio Porretani fuit quod haec locutio scilicet “Deus est Trinitas” sive “Deus est tres personae” sit falsa. Et hoc dicebat propter rationes inductas, et etiam quia loquebatur de hoc nomine “Deus” sicut de hoc nomine “homo.”¹⁰

⁷ “Nam in hoc nomine ‘homo’ forma significata per ipsum nomen non est una numero, alia est enim humanitas in hoc et in illo homine. Forma vero significata per hoc nomen ‘Deus’ est una numero, scilicet divinitas, quae est una numero in tribus personis.” *Lectura romana* 4.2.resp. (p. 124, lines 11–14).

⁸ “Item, in homine non est idem suppositum re cum forma significata, quia aliud est in homine quo est et quod est. In Deo vero forma significata et suppositum idem re sunt, quia idem est in Deo essentia et quod est; . . .” *Lectura romana* 4.2.resp. (p. 124, lines 14–16).

⁹ “[E]t ideo ex natura rei hoc nomen ‘Deus’ supponit pro essentia. Unde cum essentia sit communis tribus personis, possumus dicere quod Deus est Trinitas et quod Deus est Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus, et quod Deus est tres personae.” *Lectura romana* 4.2.resp. (p. 124, lines 16–19).

¹⁰ *Lectura romana* 4.2.resp. (pp. 123–24, lines 5–8): “It is to be said that it was the opinion of Gilbert of Poitiers that this sentence ‘God is Trinity,’ or ‘God is three persons,’ is false. He said this for the reasons already given and also because he spoke of this word ‘man.’”

As 4.2 has only one initial argument, the question arises, to what do "rationes inductae" refer? The "rationes inductae" are, I think, best understood as the initial arguments of 4.1 which work as much against "Deus est Trinitas" as against "Deus genuit Deum." Those initial arguments are all addressed in 4.1 with the introduction of the analogy with "homo." But, as we have seen, it is precisely that analogy that opens the door to a new argument against "Deus est Trinitas" and "Deus est tres personae" that needs to be addressed here in 4.2, that is, the "et etiam quia loquebatur de hoc nomine 'Deus' sicut de hoc nomine 'homo'."

While we do not find anything substantially new to Thomas's thought in these two articles of distinction 4, we do find a fine example of his care in the articulation of analogies. He is perhaps especially cautious here because he is teaching beginners. This may account for why it is only in the *Lectura romana* that the proposition "Deus est Trinitas" gets an article of its own. As it is, Thomas first shows what the points of analogical agreement permit (4.1), and then, having articulated the possible mischief arising from such agreement, he articulates the points of analogical difference (4.2). The result is that long-standing propositions of the faith are not only defended, but his students are guided in how to understand them properly.