

## A Thomistic–Aristotelian Model of the Latin Trinity as an Apologetic Resource for Evangelical Theology

Thomas Samuel

### ABSTRACT

This article develops a Thomistic–Aristotelian model of the Latin doctrine of the Trinity that may serve evangelical theology in its engagement with philosophical atheism and analytic philosophy of religion. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas’s account of divine simplicity, his Aristotelian metaphysics of act and potency, and his doctrines of intelligible species, the *verbum mentale*, and the psychological analogy of intellect–word–love, I construct a conditional, “schoolstyle” argument: if classical theism in a Thomistic form is granted—namely, that there exists a simple, purely actual, intelligent, and volitional first cause—then a Latinstyle Trinitarian model with internal processions of Word and Love and three subsistent relations of origin arises as a metaphysically coherent description of the inner life of God. I argue that Aquinas himself maintains that the Trinity cannot be known by natural reason alone but only by revelation, yet his metaphysics of God and mind provides a powerful rational framework for showing that the doctrine is not self-contradictory and is deeply fitting to a rich conception of the God of Christian Scripture. After reconstructing the relevant Aristotelian and Thomistic background, I present a stepwise argument from divine simplicity to the processions of Word and Love, treated as subsistent relations, and respond to major objections regarding representationalism, infinite regress, and the compatibility of internal processions with divine simplicity. I conclude by suggesting how this model can be fruitfully appropriated—and critically qualified—within evangelical systematic theology.

**Key Words:** *Trinity (Latin Trinitarianism), Divine simplicity, Act and potency, Subsistent relations, Processions of Word and Love, Classical theism, Hypostatic priority, Father as arche, Cappadocian Fathers, Evangelical–Catholic dialogue*

### 1. Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity stands at the heart of Christian confession and worship. For evangelicals committed to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the triune identity of God is fundamentally a matter of revelation, not of natural discovery. At the same time, the rise of analytic philosophy of religion and renewed evangelical interest in classical theism have raised anew the question of the rational coherence and metaphysical articulation of the doctrine.

Thomas Aquinas’s Latin Trinitarianism, situated within a robust metaphysics of act and potency and a strong doctrine of divine simplicity, offers one of the most sophisticated attempts to render the Western confession of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit intelligible. Yet evangelicals often regard Thomistic metaphysics with some suspicion, whether because of concerns about the knowability of God, the implications of strong simplicity, or the charge that the “psychological analogy” of intellect, word, and love unduly speculates about the inner life of God.

This article proposes that, when carefully qualified, Aquinas's framework can serve evangelical theology as a *conditional* metaphysical model that displays the inner coherence and fittingness of the Latin doctrine of the Trinity. The goal is not to "derive" the Trinity from nature, which Aquinas himself denies is possible, but to show that, given (1) a classical theist commitment to God as simple, purely actual, intelligent, and loving, and (2) an Aristotelian–Thomistic philosophy of intellect and will, the Latin Trinity emerges as a natural and internally coherent way of conceiving God's inner life.

The argument proceeds in six stages. First, I summarize Aquinas's understanding of the respective roles of reason and revelation in knowing the Trinity. Second, I sketch his account of God as a simple, purely actual first cause. Third, I outline his epistemology of intelligible species and the *verbum mentale*. Fourth, I present his doctrine of the two divine processions of Word and Love. Fifth, I show how these processions yield three "subsistent relations" that correspond to the three divine persons. Sixth, I organize these materials into a schoolstyle sequence of premises and conclusions and answer several major objections. I then briefly indicate how this model might be appropriated, with due caution, in evangelical systematic and apologetic work.

## **2. Reason and Revelation in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology**

Aquinas is unambiguous: the Trinity, as such, lies beyond the reach of unaided natural reason. In *Summa Theologiae*, he asks "Whether the trinity of the divine persons can be known by natural reason" and answers in the negative. Natural reason can prove that God exists and can demonstrate certain divine attributes such as simplicity, perfection, goodness, and so forth, but "the plurality of persons in God cannot be known by natural reason."

Recent interpreters emphasize this point. Daniel Anslow, for example, argues that for Aquinas revelation provides both the *fact* of the Trinity and the *terms* in which it is to be confessed, while reason plays the subordinate role of showing that this revealed doctrine is not contrary to reason and of unfolding its implications. The Trinity is thus a "mystery" in Aquinas's sense: a truth that exceeds the natural capacity of the human intellect, though it does not violate the fundamental principles of thought.

At the same time, Aquinas believes that reason can discern a certain "fittingness" (*convenientia*) in the revealed doctrine of the Trinity when set against what can be known of God from natural theology. In particular, once God is known as simple, purely actual, intelligent, and volitional, certain structures and analogies—most notably the psychological analogy of intellect, word, and love, can be seen as apt ways of naming the triune God.

For evangelical theology, this distinction is crucial. The following argument must be understood as *conditional* and *clarificatory*: it does not pretend to establish the Trinity from nature, but to show that, given a Thomistic construal of classical theism, the Latin Trinity is metaphysically intelligible and may therefore be presented to skeptics as a coherent doctrine, not a contradiction.

## **3. The Simple, Purely Actual First Cause**

Aquinas's metaphysical project begins with an analysis of change, causality, and composition. Following Aristotle, he distinguishes act and potency: what is in potency can be actualized only by something already in act. Change is the reduction of potency to act, and such reduction requires a cause.

From here, Aquinas develops several “ways” to a first cause. For our purposes, the key points are:

- There cannot be an infinite regress of essentially ordered causes actualizing potencies here and now, or else no derivative act would be actualized. Thus, there must be a first, uncaused cause that is pure act (*actus purus*), containing no unrealized potency.
- Any composition in a being—of matter and form, essence and existence, or substance and accidents—introduces a principle of potentiality and dependence. A composite exists only insofar as its parts are unified by a cause.
- Therefore, the first cause must be absolutely simple: not composed of matter and form, not composed of essence and existence, not composed of substance and accidents. God is *ipsum esse subsistens*—subsistent being itself.

This strong doctrine of simplicity plays a regulative role in everything that follows. Whatever multiplicity we ascribe to God must not introduce parts or really distinct “components” in him; it must instead be understood as grounded in God’s one, simple act of being.

From the same metaphysical principles, Aquinas argues that God must be perfect, immutable, eternal, omnipotent, and so forth. Of special relevance to the Trinity is his conclusion that the first cause is both intelligent and volitional. Since intellect and will are pure perfections present in created minds, and since the first cause is the eminent source of all creaturely perfections, God must possess these perfections in a higher, more unified mode. God is not an impersonal force but a living, knowing, and loving agent—though his “life,” “knowledge,” and “love” must be understood analogically and without composition.

#### **4. Intelligible Species and the Mental Word**

Aquinas’s account of intellect and concept formation is deeply indebted to Aristotle’s *De Anima*. Aristotle holds that the intellect knows by receiving the form of the object without its matter: in fact, the intellect “becomes” the thing it knows, in an immaterial, cognitive mode. Aquinas elaborates this into a doctrine of intelligible species and the mental word. He distinguishes:

- An *impressed intelligible species* (*species impressa*), through which the possible intellect is actualized by the agent intellect, rendering the object knowable.
- An *expressed intelligible species* or mental word (*species expressa, verbum mentale*), which is the concept proceeding from the intellect’s act of understanding and representing the object.

On this account, every act of understanding generates an internal “word” of the mind: a concept that is a likeness of the thing understood. This word is not a separate object interposed between mind and world, but the very act by which the intellect is informed by the object’s form and thus knows it. The mental word is the “formal constituent” of the act of understanding: it is the object as present in the mind according to a cognitive mode.

Similarly, Aquinas follows Aristotle in holding that the will is a rational appetite that tends toward the good as it is presented by intellect. The will’s love is an immanent act by which the known good is embraced and united to the subject.

In the human soul, therefore, there are two basic internal processions:

- From the intellect, the procession of a word (concept) that images the object.
- From the will, the procession of love that unites the lover with the known good.

These two processions at the level of the created mind provide the analogical template for Aquinas's account of the Trinity.

## **5. Processions of Word and Love in God**

In *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 27, Aquinas asks whether there are processions in God, and if so, how many. He answers that there are two and only two: one by way of intellect and one by way of will.

First, since God is intellect in act, he knows himself perfectly. In this selfknowledge, there proceeds from the Father a Word that is the perfect expression or image of the divine essence. Aquinas writes that *"the procession of the Word in God is called generation; and the Word proceeding is called the Son, and the principle of this procession is called the Father."* This procession is not temporal or contingent; it is eternal and necessary, and it does not introduce composition, for the Word is numerically identical in essence with the Father. The distinction lies solely in the relation of origin: the Father as *"from no one,"* the Son as *"from the Father."*

Second, since God loves himself, there is in God a procession of Love. This procession is not by way of representation or image, but by way of will: *"there is another procession in God besides that of the Word, which is called the procession of love, and this is called the procession of the Holy Ghost."* Here the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as their mutual love. Again, this Love is not an accident or part, but the one divine essence as subsisting in a distinct relation of origin, what the Western tradition calls "spiration" or "procession" of the Spirit from the Father through the Son.

Thus, within the one simple God, Aquinas discerns two real but noncompositive internal processions, corresponding analogically to the human mind's word and love:

- Word (Son) proceeding from the Father by way of intellect.
- Love (Holy Spirit) proceeding from Father and Son by way of will.

These processions, in turn, ground the relations that constitute the three divine persons.

## **6. Persons as Subsistent Relations**

The Latin tradition, following Augustine and Aquinas, interprets the divine "persons" not as three substances nor as three centers of consciousness in a modern sense, but as three subsistent relations of origin within the one divine essence. A relation, as such, is an ordering of one term to another. In creatures, relations are accidents inherent in a substance. In God, however, real relations of origin—paternity, filiation, and spiration—cannot be accidents, since that would introduce composition; they must be identical with the divine essence. Yet these relations are not merely logical; they are grounded in the real internal processions of Word and Love.

Aquinas argues that among the four real relations in God (paternity, filiation, active spiration, passive spiration), three are mutually opposed and irreducible, and so constitute three persons:

- The Father: the subsistent relation of paternity, the unoriginated principle from whom the Word and Love proceed.
- The Son: the subsistent relation of filiation, the Word generated from the Father by way of intellect, a perfect image of the Father.
- The Holy Spirit: the subsistent relation of passive spiration, the Love proceeding from Father and Son by way of will.

In this way, the tripersonal distinctions in God are located not in three substances or parts, but in three relations of origin that are identical with the one essence yet mutually opposed. Triunity is, on this account, a triunity of subsistent relations within a single, simple act of being, knowing, and loving.

## 7. A Conditional SchoolStyle Argument

The foregoing materials can be gathered into a more explicit, schoolstyle sequence of premises and conclusions. The argument is conditional: it shows that *if* one accepts a Thomistic form of classical theism and the associated Aristotelian–Thomistic philosophy of mind, *then* a Latinstyle Trinity emerges as a coherent and fitting model of God’s inner life.

- The world contains beings that move from potency to act; such movement requires an actualizer.
- An infinite regress of essentially ordered actualizers is impossible; therefore there exists a first cause that is pure act, without potency.
- Any composition involves potency and dependence on a cause; therefore the first cause must be absolutely simple, *ipsum esse subsistens*.
- Creatures possess the perfections of intellectual knowledge and volitional love; as pure perfections, these must exist eminently in the first cause.
- Therefore the first cause is a simple, purely actual intellect and will.
- In Aristotelian–Thomistic epistemology, every finite act of understanding involves the presence of the object’s form in the intellect and gives rise to an internal “word” or concept that represents the object.
- The first cause, as supremely perfect intellect, knows itself perfectly; otherwise it would lack the perfection of selfknowledge found in rational creatures.
- This divine selfknowledge, by analogy with created intellect, entails the internal presence of the divine essence in the divine intellect in a mode proper to intellect, which Aquinas names the *verbum*, the Word.
- This Word is a perfect likeness of the divine essence and is “generated” by the Father; as such it is a distinct relation of origin (filiation) subsisting in the one essence.
- The divine will, informed by this selfknowledge, loves the divine essence with a perfect, necessary love; this gives rise to an internal procession of Love in God, proceeding from Father and Word by way of will.
- This Love is again a distinct relation of origin (passive spiration) identical in essence with Father and Son but opposed in relational terms; it is the Holy Spirit.
- Thus there are in God three subsistent relations of origin - Father, Son (Word), and Spirit (Love)—numerically one in essence yet really distinct by relations of origin.

If the premises are granted, the conclusion is that a Latin Trinitarian structure is metaphysically coherent and naturally suggested by a robust Thomistic classical theism. This does not show that God *must* be triune, only that such a Trinity is a fitting and internally coherent way to conceive of the God whose existence and nature have been established on classical theist grounds.

## **8. Objections and Replies**

### **8.1 Representationalism and “Knowing Only Images”**

One worry is that if every act of knowledge involves an internal “word” that represents the object, then the knower never reaches the object itself but only its representation. Transposed to the Trinity, the Son as “Word” might seem to be a mere picture of God rather than true God.

Aquinas’s account of intelligible species is not a representationalism in the modern sense. The intelligible species and mental word are not objects interposed between mind and world, but the very form under which the object itself is present in the intellect; they are “formal constituents” of the act of knowing, not standing for the thing. The object known is the extramental reality as existing in the mind according to an intelligible mode, not a *tertium quid*.

Analogously, the divine Word is not a created representation “in” God; it is the divine essence itself as expressed in a relation of origin. The Son is image and Word because he is from the Father and perfectly like him; but in terms of essence, he is numerically identical with the Father.

### **8.2 An Infinite Regress of Images**

Another objection argues that if understanding generates a word, then understanding that word requires another word, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Aquinas’s distinction between the act of understanding and reflective acts blocks this regress. The primary act of understanding terminates directly in its object, through the mental word as its formal constitution. Reflection on that act—“I know that I know”—is a further act with its own concept, but such reflection is contingent and not presupposed by every act of understanding. In God, who is pure act, selfknowledge and knowledge of his own knowledge coincide in a single, simple act. There is one eternal Word, not a sequence of images about images.

### **8.3 Processions and Divine Simplicity**

A more fundamental concern is that admitting processions of Word and Love in God introduces composition and thus contradicts divine simplicity. If Father, Son, and Spirit are really distinct, does this not yield three parts in God?

For Aquinas, the key is that in God relations are not accidents inhering in a substrate, but are identical with the divine essence. Paternity, filiation, and spiration are real relations of origin grounded in the processions of Word and Love; yet these relations “are” the one simple act of divine being as it subsists under different relational aspects. The persons are not three parts of a whole, but three “whos” that are the one “what” in three mutually opposed relations of origin.

If “composition” is defined so broadly as to include any plurality of really distinct relations, then of course this model involves “composition” in that sense. But that would amount to rejecting any form of Trinity on definition, not merely Aquinas’s version. On Aquinas’s own notion of simplicity, the Latin Trinitarian model is internally consistent: there is no composition of essence and accidents, nor of parts, but only relational distinction in a simple essence.

#### 8.4 The Psychological Analogy as Speculative

Finally, some evangelicals may object that the psychological analogy rests on a speculative and perhaps outdated philosophy of mind and so should not play a major role in Trinitarian doctrine. Two responses are in order. First, Aquinas himself sees the analogy as subordinate to revelation: it is a way to understand, not to discover, the Trinity. The analogy may therefore be revised or even replaced if better philosophical accounts of mind emerge, without abandoning the revealed doctrine. Second, the Thomistic account of intellect, concept, and will remains a serious option in contemporary philosophy, with recent work defending intelligible species and mental language as viable ways of bridging the “mind–world gap.”

Evangelicals need not bind themselves to every Thomistic commitment to find in this framework a rich and fruitful way of articulating and defending the doctrine of the Trinity.

#### Latin Thomism and Eastern Hypostatic Priority

From an Eastern perspective, the fundamental Trinitarian datum is the hypostatic priority of the Father as *arche* (principle) of the Son and the Spirit, rather than a metaphysical derivation from abstract divine attributes. The Cappadocian Fathers insist that God is not first an impersonal essence that subsequently “unfolds” into three persons, but from all eternity the one Father who begets the Son and spirates the Spirit; the one divine essence is known only as the shared, coequal life of these three hypostases. By contrast, the Thomistic Latin model I develop proceeds from a natural theological account of God as simple, purely actual, intelligent, and loving, and then shows that—*given* such a God—internal processions of Word and Love and three subsistent relations of origin are metaphysically coherent.

Yet the Eastern and Latin approaches need not be regarded as rivals. On the Eastern side, the Father’s personal monarchy safeguards the concrete, relational primacy of hypostatic life and resists any reduction of the Trinity to a set of properties abstracted from Scripture and worship. On the Latin side, the Thomistic framework clarifies how a God who is absolutely simple and purely actual can eternally be Father, Son, and Spirit without composition, thereby offering a disciplined account of the inner coherence of the Cappadocian insight. Put more simply, Eastern theology tends to begin from *who* God is—Father, Son, and Spirit—and then speak of *what* they share; Thomistic Latin theology tends to begin from *what* God must be as first cause and pure act, and then articulate how this one God is eternally tripersonal.

This interface has direct significance for Christian–Muslim dialogue and for broader ecumenical theology. Muslim critiques often portray the doctrine of the Trinity either as a logical contradiction within the divine essence or as a mythological multiplication of deities. A Cappadocian emphasis on hypostatic priority helps clarify that Christians confess one God whose oneness is the living communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, not three competing beings; a Thomistic Latin account shows that, given a strong doctrine of simplicity and pure actuality, such tripersonal communion is not only noncontradictory but fitting to the God of classical monotheism. Taken together, these approaches allow evangelicals to present the Trinity as both faithful to the patristic intuition of the Father’s monarchy and intellectually serious within a shared theistic framework, an important asset in sustained conversations with Muslim theologians and philosophers.

## **9. Implications for Evangelical Theology**

The Thomistic–Aristotelian model outlined here has several potential implications for evangelical theology and apologetics.

First, it shows that the Latin doctrine of the Trinity can be fitted into a robust classical theism without contradiction. A God who is simple, purely actual, intelligent, and loving is not obviously incompatible with tripersonality; rather, on this model, tripersonality is a natural flowering of such a conception. This may help counter both unitarian deism and certain contemporary “social” Trinitarianisms that risk reintroducing composition at the level of substance.

Second, it offers evangelicals a structured response to atheistic charges that the Trinity is irrational. While we cannot prove the Trinity from nature, we can demonstrate that, under plausible metaphysical assumptions many theists already accept, the doctrine is intelligible and deeply integrated with a rich picture of God and mind.

Third, it opens a path for constructive dialogue with Catholic and other classical theist traditions. By engaging Aquinas’s metaphysics critically yet appreciatively, evangelicals can refine their own accounts of divine simplicity, immutability, and Trinitarian processions, and can draw on centuries of careful reflection as they articulate the triune God of Scripture in contemporary terms.

## **10. Conclusion**

Aquinas’s Latin Trinitarianism, grounded in an Aristotelian metaphysics of act and potency and a strong doctrine of divine simplicity, offers evangelical theology more than a historical curiosity. When represented in a schoolstyle, conditional argument, it shows that a robust classical theism can naturally accommodate, and indeed suggest, a Trinitarian structure consisting of a mental Word and proceeding Love, understood as three subsistent relations in one simple essence. This does not dissolve the mystery of the Trinity, nor does it claim to extract the doctrine from general revelation. It does, however, provide a philosophically serious model that can underwrite evangelical claims that the triune God confessed in Scripture is not only to be believed but is also, in some measure, intelligible to reason illumined by faith.



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