

Another byproduct is that we avoid to some extent the impression inevitably formed by speaking of "first, second, and third" Persons. In the imagination of the believer a "first" Person is somehow before and above and superior to the second and third persons; the "first" Person has *a se* something the other two "receive" and would otherwise lack. In the new perspective all three are immediately related in our thinking to the "because-of" attribute, for it is an attribute of the divine essence. Of course, in the traditional conception, once the Trinity is conceived *in facto esse* (as already constituted), then all attributes are from the Father and communicated to Son and Spirit; thus, for example, the divine simplicity is communicated to Son and Spirit by the Father. So also, then, is *ipsum quia* communicated to Son and Spirit by the Father. But there is a difference: the communication of the divine simplicity from Father to Son is a notional act following on the Trinity as conceived *in facto esse*, but the relation of *ipsum quia* to a possible procession is antecedent to the Trinity as conceived *in facto esse*. While our concept of the Trinity is still *in fieri* (as on the way to being constituted), the potential for an *emanatio intelligibilis* and so for the distinction of the three is already intrinsic to the conception.<sup>35</sup> When the psychological analogy is set forth, the Father will still be seen as "first," and the Son and Spirit as "second" and "third," but prior to the order of the psychological analogy there is the new attribute that potentially regards all three without assigning the order of first, second, and third.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The importance of the two orders of our concepts of the Trinity, one *in fieri* and one *in facto esse*, is set forth by Lonergan, *Verbum*, 213-16.

<sup>36</sup> This is not the place to discuss the history of theological thought on the Trinity, but I may at least indicate the relevance of this essay to the controversy between those who consider Augustinian-Thomist thinking a decline from Cappadocian thought and those who consider it a development.

## ST. THOMAS AND THE ANALOGY OF *POTENTIA GENERANDI*

JOHN F. BOYLE

*University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

In the intellectual achievement that is St. Thomas Aquinas's Trinitarian theology, the question of whether the *potentia generandi*—the power of generating—is essential or personal occupies a rather modest corner. The question is not, however, without interest, for it is one on which Thomas changes his mind. Such questions, even the modest ones, offer their own particular insights into Thomas's thought.

The question itself is an interesting one. In the life of the Trinity, the Father generates the Son. The act of generation is a personal act of the Father; as such, it is proper to the Father but not to the Son or the Holy Spirit. The act is a notional act, that is, an act that makes known something proper to a particular divine person. But acts do not come from nowhere: some agent must do the act, and that agent acts on the basis of powers that he has. The agent in this case is the Father. But what about the power of generating (*potentia generandi*)<sup>1</sup> by which he acts? Is it essential or personal? The answer is not obvious. Agents in the created order act on the basis of powers they have according to their nature or essence; acts are of persons, but the power is essential, that is, according to the person's nature. Thus one might be inclined to say that the *potentia generandi* is essential, a matter of the divine nature. Yet in the case of the Trinity, in

<sup>1</sup> Thomas usually speaks of *potentia generandi* but sometimes of *potentia generativa*; he seems to use these terms interchangeably.

which the three persons share one nature entirely, if the power were essential, then would not the Son and the Holy Spirit share that power and be able to generate too? Thus one might be inclined to say that the *potentia generandi* is proper to the Father, that is to say, it is personal and not essential.<sup>2</sup>

This question is not new with St. Thomas. It is found in this particular guise in the twelfth century. Peter Lombard attends to it in his *Liber sententiarum* where he holds that the *potentia generandi* is essential.<sup>3</sup> Once in this standard textbook of theology, the question was assured a life; it is found in almost all—if not all—of the Trinitarian literature of the thirteenth century, and indeed in the Scholastic literature well beyond.<sup>4</sup> Thomas inherits the question. Although it is not at the heart of his Trinitarian theology, he keeps coming back to it and reformulating his answer to it. The question nagged him, not because doctrinal fidelity hung in the balance, but because it demanded particular refinement and precision in analogical analysis.

The general contours of St. Thomas's development on this question are clear. The question admits, as Thomas always notes, of three possible answers: the *potentia generandi* is purely personal, purely essential, or both personal and essential. When he first addresses the question in his Parisian *Scriptum* on Lombard's *Liber sententiarum*, he maintains what we might call a strong middle position, that is to say, that the *potentia generandi* is equally essential and personal. He considers the question again a number of times during his sojourn in Rome

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty is captured well by John of St. Thomas, *In primam partem Summae theologiae*, disp. 36, a. 3, from his *Cursus theologicus* (Paris: Desclée, 1946), vol. 4, fasc. 2, pp. 330-31. This was in the early printed editions disp. 16 of *Cursus theologici in Primam Partem D. Thomae Tomus Secundus, a quaestione decima quinta usque ad vigesimam septimam*.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, I, d. 7, c. 2, ed. Patres Collegii S. Bonaventurae (3d ed.; Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 93-94.

<sup>4</sup> Bañez gives a concise and systematic summary of the various Scholastic answers to the question in his commentary on *Summa theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 5 in *Scholastica commentaria in universam primam partem* (Venice: Apud Petrum Mariam Bertranum, 1611), vol. 1, col. 957.

antecedent to his return to Paris for his second regency. The principal texts are three. In the disputed questions *De Potentia*, Thomas again holds the middle position, but the central features of the analogy are increasingly clarified. In the *Roman Commentary*, his second commentary on the first book of Lombard's *Liber sententiarum*, Thomas thinks the position that the *potentia generandi* is purely essential to be the truer. Having said that, he then qualifies his position. Finally, in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas explicitly rejects the middle position, takes the essential position, and again qualifies it. He is never a strict essentialist on this question; he always qualifies his position. Interestingly, he articulates his final position as a modified essentialist position and not a modified middle position. Although his final position might be categorized more easily as a soft middle position, Thomas nonetheless places himself firmly in the essentialist camp, but with qualifications. Why this should be will become clear with a focused consideration of the positions in the four texts.

In his Parisian *Scriptum* on Lombard's *Liber sententiarum* at the beginning of his career, Thomas poses the question as whether the *potentia generandi* is *ad aliquid*, that is, relational as opposed to essential.<sup>5</sup> In a Trinitarian context, to say something is relational is necessarily to say that it is personal, since the persons are subsisting relations. In his response to the question, Thomas denies that the *potentia generandi* is *ad aliquid*. He refutes this position throughout his career, and his answer is always along the same lines: the position makes no sense given the meaning of the terms in the natural order.

Consider Thomas's argument here in the *Scriptum*. The position that the *potentia generandi* is *ad aliquid* arises from a confusion of categories. In analyzing operations or actions, one speaks of their principles. Commonly noted are two: the *principium quod* and the *principium quo*, that is, the principle which acts (the agent) and the principle by which the agent acts. *Potentia* is a *principium quo*, the power by which the agent acts.

<sup>5</sup> "Utrum potentia generativa sit ad aliquid" (I *Sent.*, d. 7, q. 1, a. 2; ed. P. Mandonnet [Paris: Lethielleux, 1929], vol. 1, pp. 178-80).

The argument for the purely *ad aliquid* is this: *principium* considered precisely as *principium* is relational or *ad aliquid*; since *potentia* is a *principium*, it is also *ad aliquid*. Unfortunately, a category mistake is lurking in the argument. While it is true that *principium* considered as *principium* is *ad aliquid* (i.e., in the category of relation), it is not true that the particular thing that is the *principium* is itself *ad aliquid*. *Potentia* is properly in the category of quality, not relation, and thus the argument fails. In fact, there are no instances in the created order in which a *potentia* in its most proper sense is *ad aliquid*.

Throughout his career, Thomas denies that the *potentia generandi* is to be understood as purely personal or relational. Notably, he is much more lax in addressing the position that the *potentia generandi* is purely essential. Why the consistent concern to deny the purely personal character of the *potentia generandi*? The answer is in the analogical character of the analysis. If the *potentia generandi* is purely personal, then there is no analogy since there are simply no such *potentiae* in the created order. It is not that one could not engage in such speculation, nor is it that such divine *potentiae* are impossible; rather, it is that such *potentiae* do not assist one in coming to a deeper understanding of the Trinity in an analogical way. What had started as clearly and properly analogical—the consideration of the divine essence and divine acts—is now shifting. The language of the natural order is now being so restricted by Trinitarian demands as to be rendered meaningless, or perhaps we might better say, purely equivocal. In short, if one holds *potentia generandi* to be purely personal, one has inverted the ordinary order of analogical analysis.

So how is one to understand the *potentia generandi*? Thomas first affirms (from what has already been argued in I *Sent.*, d. 4) that the *principium* of any divine operation whatever is the divine essence. He is on firm analogical ground here as it is also true that the essence of any given creature is also a *principium quo* of its actions. Nonetheless, God is of a different order from created things. God's properties are his essence. The *principium quo* of the Father's act of generation is indeed the divine essence but the

essence according to which it is paternity itself. The *potentia generandi* is thus not purely essential. The Father's paternity—that subsisting relation that constitutes the person of the Father—is the divine essence. Because in God person is essence, Thomas locates relation in the very understanding of the *potentia generandi* as essential. By introducing paternity into the consideration of *potentia* as *principium quo*, Thomas sees the personal as constitutive of the *potentia generandi* precisely as a *potentia*. He firmly grounds the analogy in what is properly to be understood of a created *potentia*, but also locates the difference, the point at which the comparison fails, in the introduction of paternity into the divine *potentia generandi*. He concludes that it is thus a kind of—*quasi*—medium between essential and personal.

In his first consideration of this question, we can see Thomas's attentiveness to its analogical character. He rejects the purely personal understanding of the *potentia generandi* for the reason that it is not in accord with a natural understanding of *potentia*. In the created order *potentia* is essential. At the same time, Thomas thinks the purely essential understanding of the *potentia generandi* is inadequate from the vantage point of the divine reality in which the persons are the essence itself. Thomas concludes that the *potentia generandi* is both essential and personal, thus maintaining the analogy with created reality and the truth of the divine mystery.

In the disputed questions *De Potentia*, Thomas returns to this question but formulated a bit differently. He asks whether the *potentia generativa* in God is said essentially or notionally.<sup>6</sup> That the question is posed in terms of how the term is said of God makes the analogical character of the issue clear. Of the three possible answers to the question, Thomas first considers that the *potentia generandi* is wholly notional. As he had in the Parisian *Scriptum*, he rejects this position, but at greater length. The argument's details need not detain us. It is, at least initially, a fuller elaboration of the argument found in the *Scriptum*. The

<sup>6</sup> "Utrum potentia generativa in divinis dicatur essentialiter vel notionaliter" (*De Pot.*, q. 2, a. 2, in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al. [8<sup>th</sup> ed.; Turin: Marietti, 1949], vol. 2, pp. 27-29).

proponents of the purely notional understanding of the *potentia generandi* have made a categorical mistake; *potentia* is in the category of quality not relation. Thomas's point is the same: if the *potentia generandi* is purely notional, there is no natural analog.

Thomas not only argues against this position by countering the arguments of its proponents, he also poses an argument of his own directly against it. With it, we see a shift in his analysis. He turns his attention from the analogical uses of *principium* and *potentia* to the analogical use of *generare*, to generate or beget. Here he articulates what he understands generation to be, and from this he will not waver throughout the remaining considerations. In natural generation in the created order, the begotten is made like the begetter. A man begets a man; the begotten is made like the begetter in their shared human nature. As it is by virtue of his human nature that a man begets another man, and as it is in that nature that the son is made like the father, the *principium* of generation is the nature. The defining feature of generation is likeness in nature, the assimilation of the begotten to the begetter in the begetter's nature. In turning to the divine, one can thus say that the begotten Son is conformed to the Father in the divine nature and thus the divine nature is the *principium generandi*.

Following this line of argument from generation as assimilation in nature, some hold the *potentia generandi* to be purely essential. Thomas rejects the purely essential position and again adopts a middle position. The argument, however, has shifted from the Parisian *Scriptum*. In the *Scriptum*, Thomas qualified the wholly essential position on the basis of Trinitarian doctrine. Here he does so on the basis of the natural analog of generation. In acts that arise by virtue of a common nature, the mode of the acts themselves is often affected by properties of the agent. So, Thomas observes, actions arising from common animal nature are of a particular kind when found in man since they are affected by what is proper to man; for example, the imaginative power is more perfect in man than brutes because of man's rationality. Likewise in the case of individuals, one man will understand something more clearly than another; although the act of

understanding arises from shared human nature, the greater clarity of understanding in one man arises from some personal particularity of his own affecting the act. The point is that such a particularity is a *principium quo* of the act. Thomas then applies this to the question at hand. If the common divine nature is a *principium* of some operation which belongs to the Father alone—precisely the circumstance under consideration, that is, the *potentia generandi* is essential and also the *principium* of the Father's unique act of begetting—then it must be a *principium* according to which it pertains to the Father by some personal property. From this line of analogical reasoning, Thomas concludes that in the very understanding (*ratio*) of this *potentia* paternity is in some way (*quodammodo*) to be included, even with regard to that which is the *principium* of generation. Thus *potentia generandi* signifies at the same time both essence and notion.

This is a splendid bit of analogical reasoning. Thomas maintains the essential character of *potentia* as *principium quo*. But in considering acts that arise from a common nature (i.e., that have a common nature as *principium quo*), he finds that these acts are, as it were, further specified by properties of the agent, which properties are themselves *principia quibus* of the act. The great value of this consideration is that Thomas has articulated a natural analog for the middle position with regard to the *potentia generandi*. In the *Scriptum* the demands of Trinitarian doctrine seemed to force him to the middle position. Here, he has a full analog from the natural order that provides an illuminating account of the *potentia generandi* in the divine as both essential and notional.

Within the year, Thomas abandons this line of analogical argument and indeed the middle position itself.

When Thomas comments a second time on the first book of Lombard's *Liber sententiarum*, he asks whether the *potentia generandi* is notional or essential.<sup>7</sup> The response is short and the

<sup>7</sup> "Utrum potentia generandi in diuinis sit notionale uel essentielle." The text of the second commentary is found in Oxford, Lincoln College Ms. Lat. 95. The attribution of the text to St. Thomas was established by Leonard E. Boyle, in "Alia lectura fratris Thome," *Mediaeval*

shift is clear. He says there are three opinions on this question: the *potentia generandi* is purely notional, it is between them having something of each, and it is purely essential. He says almost nothing about the first two. Of the last he says that he holds it to be the truer. His reason is the argument from assimilation according to nature in generation. The *potentia generandi* is that by which the begetter begets, and is that in which the begotten is assimilated to the begetter. Since the begotten is assimilated into the begetter's nature, the nature is that by which the begetter begets; and since nature is essential in God, the *potentia* is essential in God. The extended analogical argument of the *De Potentia* is gone. Without further explanation, we find only this gentle qualification: because *generandi* is added, the *potentia* is said to be in God with an order to the notional.<sup>8</sup> A similar move is found in the *Summa Theologiae*, written the next year. Let us consider it together with the *Roman Commentary*.

In the *Summa*, Thomas poses the question whether *potentia generandi* signifies relation and not essence.<sup>9</sup> From the very posing of the question, Thomas has the purely relational understanding of the *potentia generandi* in his sights, and it is to it that he turns first in the response. His argument is again the argument from assimilation. When any agent produces, it makes what it produces like itself with regard to the form by which it acts. So in human generation, the son who is begotten is like the

*Studies* 45 (1983): 418-29. The critical edition is being prepared for publication by Leonard E. Boyle and John F. Boyle.

<sup>8</sup> "Responsio. Dicendum quod circa hoc sunt tres opiniones. Quidam enim dicunt quod potentia generandi sit pure personale siue notionale in diuinis, et ad hoc moti sunt propter rationes inductas in obiciendo. Alii dixerunt quod potentia generandi sit medium inter personale et essenziale, habens tamen aliquid de utraque. Alii fuerunt sicut Magister qui dicit quod est pure essenziale; et hanc reputo ueriores. Illud enim quo generans generat est potentia generandi, et illud ergo quo generans generat est potentia generatiua, et hoc est in quo generatum assimilatur generanti. Assimilatur autem in natura sua, et ideo natura est quo generans generat. Cum ergo natura sit essenziale in Deo, dico quod potentia est pure essenziale in Deo. Set quia additur hoc quod dicitur generandi, dicitur esse in Deo cum ordine ad notionale" (f. 22v.).

<sup>9</sup> *STh* I, q. 41, a. 5: "Utrum potentia generandi significet relationem et non essentialiam" (ed. Institutum Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis [Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953], vol. 1, pp. 261-62).

father who begets and is like him in that human nature by virtue of which the father begets in the first place. Thus, that in which the begotten is assimilated to the begetter is the *potentia generandi* in the begetter.

Thomas now applies this to the Trinity. "The Son of God is assimilated in the divine nature to the Father begetting. Hence, the divine nature in the Father is the *potentia generandi* in Him." Thomas concludes that the *potentia generandi* principally signifies the divine essence. He explicitly denies that it signifies essence in so far as it is the same as relation such that it might signify both equally. If the Father begat according to those properties proper to Him as a person He would beget the Father, whereas he begets the Son who is like Him not in person but in nature. Thus paternity is to be understood as constituting the person of the Father, the *principium quod* of the begetting, but not the *principium quo* or *potentia* of the begetting which refers to the divine nature. Thomas concludes clearly enough: "That by which the Father generates is the divine nature in which the Son is assimilated to Him."

As he had in the *Roman Commentary*, Thomas then qualifies this position. "And thus the *potentia generandi* signifies the divine nature *in recto*, but relation *in obliquo*." The explanation is found in the reply to the third objection: *potentia* signifies *in recto* and generation *in obliquo*. "Hence with regard to essence which is signified, the *potentia generandi* is common to the three persons; with regard to the notions which are connoted, it is proper to the person of the Father." What was articulated in the *Roman Commentary* as signifying essentially but with an order to the notional is here articulated as signifying essentially *in recto* but connoting notionally *in obliquo*.

Given the shift in Thomas's thinking in the *Roman Commentary* and the *Summa Theologiae*, three questions arise: What has happened to the *De Potentia* analogy used to argue for the middle position? Why does Thomas consider his new position that of purely essential and not simply a more modest form of the middle position? What is the point of the qualification of the purely essential position?

First, what happened to the *De Potentia* analogy? Thomas makes no direct reference to it in either the *Roman Commentary* or the *Summa*. As it was the argument for the middle position, he has presumably not simply omitted it, but has now rejected it. He has further distilled his understanding of the place of nature in generation. Or better, he has come to see that, most properly, generation is a question of nature: the assimilation of the begotten to the begetter in that nature in virtue of which the generation takes place. Considered most formally, generation is assimilation in nature and the *potentia generandi* is that nature. As for the various particular properties that had functioned as *principia quibus* in the *De Potentia* argument, Thomas simply denies that in generation they are *principia quibus*, now situating them in the agent as constitutive of the agent. What seems to be at work here is a formal refinement of the terms. The particular properties are now more properly placed in the *principium quod*, that is to say the agent, and not in the *principium quo* or *potentia*, which is most properly understood to be purely and formally the nature according to which generation takes place.<sup>10</sup> In the *De Potentia*, Thomas's consideration of the natural analog moved him to reject the purely essential position and maintain the middle position by which *potentia generandi* signified both essentially and notionally. The natural analog has now been refined and with that the argument from analogy for the middle position has been lost. Indeed, Thomas is left with a particularly strong form of the argument from assimilation for the purely essential signification of *potentia generandi*.

Thomas now claims this position as his own. In both the *Roman Commentary* and the *Summa* he qualifies his position so as to introduce something of the notional. In so doing, he would seem to be returning to the middle position but in a soft form. Why insist that the purely essential is the truer and that this is now his position? The answer lies in his statement that *potentia generandi* signifies essence *in recto* and generation *in obliquo*. This is a way of saying that it signifies primarily the divine essence and

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* I, c. 63 (*Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. Edita*, vol. 42, p. 101).

secondarily the person of the Father. In this a strong middle position of equal signification is clearly abandoned. But the *in recto/in obliquo* distinction carries a more precise meaning. To say that the *potentia generandi* signifies the divine essence *in recto* is to say that it can be predicated of the essence; to say that it signifies the person of the Father *in obliquo* is to say that it cannot be predicated of the Father.<sup>11</sup> Hence one finds the still weaker language in the reply to the third objection that the divine essence is signified, but the person of the Father connoted. Such a distinction makes for a particularly vigorous analogy. In the created order, the *potentia generandi* is essential, that is to say it signifies the nature; more truly it is simply predicated of that nature. By now insisting on the purely essential character of the *potentia generandi* in the divine, Thomas maintains the analogy in the divine analog in which the *potentia generandi* is essential, signifies *in recto* the divine nature, and therefore can be predicated of that nature. The analogy in its fullness is thus most rightly preserved in maintaining that the signification is most properly understood as purely essential.

So why the gentle qualification of the purely essential position in both the *Roman Commentary* and the *Summa*? For the simple reason that God is different. The analogy is not perfect and thus in the case of the Trinity the *potentia generandi* does, in a secondary way, signify notionally. In the divine, the *potentia generandi* does make the Father known, but by connotation. In this, *potentia generandi* in the divine is different from the *potentia generandi* in creation—importantly, but, from the vantage point of the *potentia* considered most formally, only secondarily.

The line of development in Thomas's thought on how to understand *potentia generandi* is an exquisite example of the boldness of his analogical thinking. The natural analog is uncompromised and increasingly clarified. With increasing precision in articulating the natural analog comes increasing simplicity in articulating the divine analog. *Potentia generandi*

<sup>11</sup> The use of *in recto* and *in obliquo* is particularly prominent in a similar discussion among the theologians about the signification of the term "person." Cf., especially for the use we have made of it here, *De Pot.*, q. 9, a. 4 (ed. Bazzi, p. 232).

speaks to the divine essence, illuminating the place of divine nature in divine generation without compromising the unity of essence and person. This is all, as noted in the beginning of this essay, a modest corner of St. Thomas's Trinitarian thought; it is, nonetheless, an interesting one in which to watch Thomas work through an analogy with clarity and precision.

## WISDOM AND THE VIABILITY OF THOMISTIC TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

MATTHEW LEVERING

*Ave Maria College  
Ypsilanti, Michigan*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Although we see today evidence of increasing appreciation for Aquinas's Trinitarian theology, Karl Rahner's critique of the Thomistic approach—a critique voiced in similar ways by Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar—remains the standard way in which the Thomistic approach is understood by contemporary theologians.<sup>1</sup> One way to contribute to a new reading of Aquinas's treatise on God (one and three) is to begin with Rahner's critique.

In an oft-cited passage, Rahner remarks:

As a result [of beginning with God's essence] the treatise becomes quite philosophical and abstract and refers hardly at all to salvation history. It speaks

<sup>1</sup> Rahner's seminal work was "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendeter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in *Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus*, vol. 2 of *Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik* (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967). It has appeared in English as *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (2d ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1998). The new edition contains an introduction by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, who lauds Rahner's work as the foundation of contemporary Trinitarian theology. For Barth's and Balthasar's positions, cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 2: *Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), esp. 128f. Thanks in large part to the work of French Dominicans, preeminently Gilles Emery, the time seems ripe for a new appreciation of Aquinas's approach. In addition to numerous articles, Emery has contributed a monograph, *La Trinité créatrice* (Paris: Vrin, 1995), that responds masterfully to Rahner's claim that Aquinas's Trinitarian theology isolated the doctrine of the Trinity from the other doctrines of Christian faith.