

## Article

# The Ontology of Relations: A New Dialogue Between Thomas Aquinas and the Social Sciences

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## Abstract

This article proposes a newly developed dialogue between Thomistic thought and the social sciences by rethinking the ontological status of the relation. It argues that Thomas Aquinas inaugurated an unfinished ontological revolution when he distinguished a third order of reality, *secundum relationem*, alongside substance and accident. However, he then focused on the constitutive role of relation within Trinitarian theology and did not develop an ontology of relationality in secular and social life. This latter ontology is now being developed in the social sciences that show how social relations constitute an autonomous ontological reality. This autonomy, however, oscillates between an unfounded naturalism and a cultural relativism characterized by a flat ontology in which social relations are reduced to flows of events. At this point, the author argues, an encounter between Thomistic relational ontology and the social sciences can be fruitful, allowing both to overcome classical substantialism, for which society is a set of naturally sociable individuals, as well as modern constructivist relationism, for which society is a purely autopoietic historical construction. By connecting Thomistic theology, especially Trinitarian relationality, with relational sociology, this paper advances the idea of a social ontology capable of addressing the dilemmas of postmodern society.

**Keywords:** ontology; Thomas Aquinas; social sciences; relational sociology; cultural matrix

## 1. The Problem of the Ontological Status of Relation

### 1.1. The Place of Relation with Respect to Substance and Accident

The scholars who founded social science from the mid-nineteenth century onward (Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, as well as Pierre Bourdieu, Jurgen Habermas, and many others) rejected Thomistic metaphysics because they interpreted its doctrine of relations as ambivalent and even contradictory, rather than analogical. The ambivalence or contradiction, in their view, is as follows. When Thomas Aquinas speaks of the Holy Trinity, there is no doubt that the relation has a substantial ontological status (hypostatic, that is, of maximum dignity and causality). When he deals with secular realities, the relation takes on a lower degree of dignity and causality, and indeed seems to take on purely accidental and instrumental connotations. In short, Aquinas sometimes ascribes the category of relation to substance and other times to accidentality, with the consequence of placing relationality, both of being and of knowledge, in two domains that are somehow separate from each other.

A consequence of this is devaluing the secular social relationship that generates society, as if the reality of lived social life has no ontological value.



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Obviously, the Trinitarian relationship is substantially different from the secular inter-human relationship. But the question is: does the separation between these two realities correspond to the critical realist assumption that reality is stratified yet connected, or does separation instead mean a total lack of meaningful connections, that is, an unbridgeable chasm?

Some scholars in the field of the social sciences accept that an unbridgeable separation exists between relationality in God and social relationality among human beings. Social ontology is therefore interpreted on the basis of a sharp distinction between the two domains. The consequence is that natural law becomes, on the one hand, hypostatized at a supernatural level and, on the other hand, reduced in the secular sphere to a dilemma between conformity and degradation.

I believe the issue must be approached differently. First, because the concepts of analogy and participation prevent any rigid separation between the divine and the human worlds. Second, because natural law should not be understood as static, but rather as dynamic, that is, from the perspective of a relational social ontology situated within the framework of analogy and participation. In this contribution, I shall attempt to clarify this perspective.

### 1.2. Thesis of This Contribution

The purpose of this article is to address this apparent aporia and to resolve Aquinas's ambivalence regarding the meaning and significance of relation, so as to demonstrate the continuing relevance of Thomistic thought once its ontology is reformulated in light of the historical development of the concept of relation in recent centuries.

It is not my intention to resolve historical controversies within Thomistic theology, nor even within sociology. My aim is to demonstrate that, based on the analogy Aquinas draws between supernatural reality and human-secular reality, it is possible to delineate a field of shared rather than separate disciplines. If this shared reality is denied, the social sciences are thereby condemned to a blind immanentism, and theology no longer comprehends human reality as it exists on the actual plane.

The modern sociological critique of the Thomistic conception of relationship consists not so much in a direct refutation of Aquinas as in shifting the problem of relationship from the ontological–metaphysical plane to the processual, interactive, and historical–social plane. In Thomistic theology, relationship is a category of being; in creatures it has accidental status, while in God, there being no accidents, it coincides with the divine essence according to relative opposition. In the social sciences, however, relationship is not an accident inherent in already-constituted subjects, but the very process through which society is formed. Society is not a substance, but a mobile set of forms of mutual interaction.

In this sense, modern sociology expresses its own ontological conception. Generally, the social sciences do not criticize Aquinas by naming him; they diverge from him because they change the very meaning of relationship. For Aquinas, relationship belongs to the metaphysics of being; for the social sciences, it belongs to the dynamic ontology of social interaction.

The guiding thread of my argument is as follows.

Contemporary social sciences can no longer accept the classical philosophical definition of the social (and of human society itself) as a purely accidental reality. For the social sciences, society is a *sui generis* reality situated between necessity and contingency. What therefore requires radical reconsideration, with respect to the conception of the social according to the traditional interpretation of Aquinas, is precisely the relational nature of the social.

My thesis is that Aquinas introduces a genuine ontological revolution when he argues that, besides the two orders of reality identified by Aristotle—*secundum substantiam* and *secundum accidens*—there exists a third order of reality, namely *secundum relationem*. This relational order is distinct from the other two, and therefore, potentially, has its own autonomy. However, this revolution remained confined within the theological framework of Trinitarian doctrine. Consequently, relational ontology was never fully extended to ordinary social realities such as family, work, civil society, and everyday life relationships.

Modernity undertook this task, but did so by radically transforming the concept of relation and grounding it in a negative ontology of relationality. This negative ontology generated the sociocultural matrix that has shaped modernity up to the present day.

For this reason, theological and philosophical Thomism became progressively marginalized, since it appeared to be incompatible with the developments of the human and social sciences. Even today, Thomism struggles to engage with relational ontologies derived from social reality itself—that is, with social ontologies that interpret social facts as emergent effects generated “from below” within social reality, rather than as realities deduced from a superordinate metaphysical system.

At the same time, however, it is necessary to distinguish a truly relational ontology from the relationist ontologies that dominate much of contemporary social science. In my view, modern relationist ontologies are ultimately self-defeating. By contrast, Aquinas’s critical realism provides the conditions for developing a new ontology of relation capable of integrating the most valuable insights of the contemporary human and social sciences.

The relational ontology I propose can activate a new sociocultural matrix capable of addressing the dilemmas of postmodern society through a relational humanism grounded in a relational anthropology.

## 2. What Is Needed to Bring Aquinas and the Social Sciences into Dialogue?

### 2.1. Is Relation a Transcendental Category?

Following Aquinas, theological and philosophical debate long revolved around a fundamental question: can relation be considered a transcendental?<sup>1</sup> Aquinas himself identifies five “fundamental modes of being”: *res*, *unum*, *aliquid*, *verum*, and *bonum*.<sup>2</sup> Can relationality be added to these modes of being? I believe that, under certain conditions, it is possible. In any case, this thesis requires a thorough examination of its assumptions and the implications it entails.

To affirm that relation is a transcendental category certainly goes beyond the classical Thomistic conception and in some ways modifies it, but it does so to a different extent depending on what one means by “relation.”

For Aquinas, relation—*relatio*—belongs first of all to one of the ten Aristotelian categories, namely that of *ad aliquid*, or “being toward another.” It is therefore not normally placed on the same level as *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum*, which are predicated of every being insofar as it is being. To affirm that relation is transcendental means instead to maintain that every being, precisely insofar as it is a being, is constitutively relational. This thesis goes beyond the traditional Thomistic formulation. It does not merely say that some beings have relations, but that “being-in-relation” belongs universally to being itself. The fundamental change is therefore the following: in classical metaphysics, the already constituted being comes first, and relation comes afterward; in a relational metaphysics, the being is constituted, at least in part, through its relations. Relation would no longer be merely an accident added to a substance, but an original dimension of being.

Yet, the idea that relation can be a transcendental category is not necessarily a rejection of Thomism. The thesis may be formulated as an internal development rather than as a rupture, because Thomistic metaphysics contains elements that allow for a relational interpretation.

Let us look, for example, at the transcendental *aliquid*. *Aliquid* means that every being is “something other” in relation to other beings: *aliud quid*. A being is not only one in itself, but is also distinct from what it is not. This distinction already implies a reference to the other. In this sense, a relational dimension is contained in the transcendental *aliquid*. One could therefore argue that “relation” does not add a new transcendental, but makes explicit what *aliquid* already contains implicitly. However, *aliquid* indicates primarily distinction from the other, not yet a positive relation with the other. To say “this being is not that being” is weaker than to say “this being is constituted through its relation to that being.”

How would my argument change Thomistic metaphysics? The modification would concern at least four aspects. First. Substance would no longer be conceived primarily as that which exists “in itself” and not in another, but as that which exists in itself while at the same time being open to another. The *in se* would not be denied, but would have to be joined to the *ad aliud*. The formula might become: a being is in itself, but it is neither from itself nor solely for itself. Second. The identity of a being would derive not only from its internal essence, but also from the network of relations that makes its existence and actualization possible. This does not mean that the being dissolves into relations. It means that its concrete identity cannot be fully understood apart from them. Third. The individual would not be conceived as an ontologically self-sufficient atom. It would be a real and irreducible center, yet constituted through dependencies, origins, and orders.

This perspective is especially important for the human person: the person is not less substantial because relational; relationality belongs to the concrete mode in which the person subsists. In conclusion, my thesis modifies classical Thomism, but it does not necessarily contradict it. It modifies Thomism insofar as it attributes to relation a constitutive and universal character that Aquinas does not explicitly formulate for all creatures. Yet it may be understood as a development of Thomism because it finds support in the transcendental *aliquid*; the doctrine of creation and participation; the causal and final order of the universe; the relation between being, intellect, and appetite; the Trinitarian doctrine of subsistent relations. When I say that relation can be conceived as a transcendental, I think of relationality as something like a transversal structure of any other transcendental. This thesis preserves the proper consistency of being, while overcoming a substantialist reading according to which relation would always be merely secondary and extrinsic.

The debate that followed Aquinas produced two main interpretations of his thinking.

On the one hand, some authors argued for a sharp distinction between relationality in God and relationality within creation. In God, relation is substantial and constitutive; in created reality, by contrast, relation is contingent and therefore subject to accidental multiplicity and division. Krempel (1952), for example, denies that relation can be considered transcendental.<sup>3</sup> He bases his argument on Aquinas’s affirmation that, within the Trinity, the relation distinguishing the three divine Persons is a “minimal entity” (“*ens minimum, scilicet relatio*,” *I Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2). According to this interpretation, relationality in creation becomes increasingly variable and therefore tends to diminish its degree of dignity and causal power.

On the other hand, other scholars maintain that relationality is constitutive of being itself and therefore characterizes not only God but all creation in a non-accidental way. Ventimiglia (1990) and Mantovani (2003), for example, argue that Aquinas attributes to the relation a transcendental ontological status. According to this view, analogy and participation establish a continuity between divine and human realities sufficient to justify the foundational importance of relation throughout creation.

The issue is delicate. If relationality is transcendental, and therefore intrinsic to being as such, then applying it to contingent secular realities risks introducing contingency into the transcendentals themselves. Unity, truth, and goodness could become “relative,”

thereby undermining the classical Thomistic principle according to which “*unum, verum et bonum convertuntur cum ente*.” If being necessarily implies unity, truth, and goodness, then making being (the being of the *res*) dependent on contingent relationality could appear to threaten the necessary correspondence and convertibility of these properties.

One might even conclude that relationality can modify truth and goodness or destabilize the unity of being itself—for example, the unity of the person. Critics therefore fear that emphasizing relation inevitably leads to metaphysical and ethical relativism, because relation would then become synonymous with the “relative” as opposed to ontological and moral absolutes. From this perspective, the entire Thomistic philosophical–theological system would be endangered, since it depends upon an organic and coherent structure of being and knowledge.

This concern explains the suspicion with which many Thomists regard the category of relation. In their view, giving relation ontological primacy threatens the substantivist framework they attribute to Aquinas. According to this interpretation, (a) the unity of every entity expresses the absence of internal division (*ens est indivisum in se*), and therefore excludes any internal relationality, and (b) every entity is individual because it is divisible only externally, through its distinction from others (*ens est divisum ab alio*) (Alessi 1998, pp. 226–27). If the unity of being depended upon external relations, its integrity could be compromised (Morabito 1940).

I shall not enter here into the broader metaphysical debate concerning transcendentals. Rather, I wish to explain how relational sociology inspired by critical realism (Donati 2011) approaches the issue and what contribution it may offer. In my view, both theology and philosophy still lack a sufficiently developed concept of relation, understood simultaneously as an ontological and empirical category, capable of moving beyond the traditional dualism of substance and accident. What is needed is a more complex concept of relations and therefore of society—one that avoids reduction to naturalistic or organicistic models. Only in this way can Thomistic thought enter fruitful dialogue with the social sciences.

## 2.2. Is It Possible to Reconcile Aquinas with the Modern Social Sciences?

Aquinas famously defines the unity of civil society as a unity of order relations (“*Unitas societatis civilis non est unitas naturalis sed ordinis*”, *Ethicorum*, I, 13). Social relations are understood as expressions of the actions of persons, families, and social groups. Aquinas argues that civil society is natural in its foundation and purpose, but not natural in its type of unity. Its unity is not biological, substantial, or organic in the strict sense; it is moral, practical, and ordering. It is the unity of many who act in relation to each other according to an order oriented to the common good.

In this way, Aquinas avoids both ontological and methodological individualism, because he recognizes that human beings are naturally ordered to common life, and strong organicism, because he does not dissolve individuals and families within a substantial collective whole. Civil society is real, but its reality is that of an order of relations, not that of a single substance. The inclination toward relationships, toward family, toward coexistence, toward cooperation, and toward the common good is natural. The overall unity of civil society is not natural in a substantial sense, because it does not form a single natural organism, but rather an order among distinct subjects who regulate their relationships according to criteria of freedom oriented to the common good. Civil society is real, and its reality is that of an order of relations oriented towards the common good: where does such an order, oriented towards the common good, come from? Aquinas’s ambivalence is evident here: the ordering of relations is human work, but its orientation corresponds in some way to a purpose that goes beyond the human.

The underlying principle is *agere sequitur esse* (action follows being). One acts according to what one is, and one becomes what one loves.<sup>4</sup> This principle seems to imply an immediate connection between being and action, without relation itself functioning as a mediating reality. Consequently, traditional Thomism generally does not attribute a *sui generis* reality to society itself, but only to persons and their individual actions, while relations are interpreted merely as expressions of personal interiority. Here we encounter the root of the historical divide between Thomism and the social sciences, both theoretically and practically. Can we overcome this divide?

In my view, Aquinas's characterization of relation as a "minimal entity" reflects a compromise with Aristotle. It serves both to preserve continuity with Aristotelian philosophy and theology and to safeguard the simplicity of the divine One. Yet, minimizing relation weakens the concepts of analogy and participation and risks separating divine transcendence from divine immanence. Secular relations become incapable of participating in divine relationality except through supernatural grace.

This helps explain why Aquinas devoted limited attention to ordinary human and social realities such as family life, work, and social formations in general, except at the level of abstract principles concerning the person and the common good.

The question of work provides an illuminating example. Aquinas certainly affirms that work belongs to human nature, recalling Job 5, 7: "Man is born to work as the bird to fly." In this respect, he clearly differs from Aristotle, who regarded work as a sub-human activity. Yet, Aquinas does not fully develop the implications of understanding work as an activity that humanizes and sanctifies the human person.

Indeed, he remains partly tied to Aristotle's aristocratic ethics,<sup>5</sup> according to which the highest human life is contemplative and free from the necessity of labour. Thus, even for Aquinas, work ultimately appears as an instrumental activity—"work of reason and hands"—rather than as a constitutive social relation participating in supernatural relationality.

This ambiguity raises a decisive question: is the working relation accidental, or is it essential to the human being? Is work merely a necessity of subsistence, or does it belong intrinsically to human fulfilment?

Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas recognizes that God placed the human being in the garden "to work it and keep it" (Gen 2, 15). Theologically, therefore, work belongs to human vocation and is not merely punishment. Yet, Aquinas simultaneously confines work to the sphere of necessity (*res necessariae*), thereby preserving the Aristotelian ideal of contemplative freedom from labour (Tranquilli 1962).

To resolve this ambivalence, work must be reconceived as an essential human social relation connected to Trinitarian relationality. This, however, requires a more developed theory of relationships than the culture of the time made available to Aquinas.

The strict separation between hypostatic relations within the Trinity and accidental relations within the world is ultimately unconvincing. Since the world is created—and continuously sustained—by the triune God, Trinitarian relationality must necessarily leave traces within temporal and social reality. If the core of Christianity is relationality itself, beginning with the substantial relationality of the Trinity and extending to the *mandatum novum* of reciprocal love among human beings (Jn 13, 35), then human relations such as work and family cannot be treated as merely accidental or irrelevant for sanctification.

### 3. Some Observations on the Development of the Concept of Relation from Aristotle to Modernity

#### 3.1. From Aristotle to the Middle Ages

As is well known, for Aristotle the philosophical category of relation (*pros ti*—Categories, 7, 6a) designates a mode of being "in relation to" something else that possesses

substantial reality. Relation is the fourth predicament, after substance, quantity, and quality, and indicates the relative position of entities with respect to one another. It is a primary logical category that cannot itself be defined.

With modernity, however, this conception would undergo a profound transformation. The social sciences progressively developed new semantics of relations that made it possible to analyze relations according to dynamic, differential, and generative modalities of a morphogenetic kind.

Contrary to sceptical interpretations, Aristotle does not consider relation to be merely a mental reference. Relation possesses a certain reality. Yet, this reality remains derivative and secondary, since it depends on entities that possess substance. In Aristotelian philosophy, therefore, the social relation does not enjoy any genuine autonomy. The social sphere itself remains underdeveloped conceptually, situated between the private household (*oikos*, οἶκος) and the public sphere (*agorà*, ἀγορά), as [Arendt \(1958\)](#) later emphasized.

When Aristotle examines concrete social relations—familial, friendly, or political—he interprets them naturalistically, as expressions of human nature itself. Aquinas largely adopts this perspective, grounding relations in the natural law inscribed by God within human substance. If the human being is naturally a “political animal,” then self-realization necessarily occurs through relations with others and within the common good of the city. Yet, the modes of relating are still assumed to derive from the substantial nature of the individual person. More generally, relations within creation are interpreted as consequences of the intrinsic nature of each being. This interpretation still underlies many traditional formulations of Catholic social doctrine.

Nevertheless, Aristotle already reveals a certain ambivalence regarding the concept of relation. He recognizes that relation cannot be reduced entirely to accidentality, since no science of reality is possible without it ([Actis Perinetti 1959](#), pp. 65–69; [Mathieu 1967](#)). Aquinas inherits the same ambivalence: relation cannot simply be a derivative category, yet neither Aristotle nor Aquinas fully grants it autonomous ontological consistency.

Roman culture likewise lacked a developed concept of social relation. Etymologically, *relatio* derives from *referre*, indicating the reference of one entity to another. Here, the Aristotelian distinction broadens between relation as existing *in re* and relation as a mental operation. Roman law, however, still lacked the concept of a juridical relation understood as a normative relation between persons, which would emerge only later with the pandectist tradition.

It was between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, within the broader social transformations that marked the dawn of modernity, that a genuine “doctrine of relation” began to develop, especially through the works of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

Within scholastic debates, the relation gradually came to be conceived as an *ens sui generis*. The fundamental intuition was that, if the world exists independently of human thought, then its order itself must consist of relations that are real insofar as the order itself is real. Some interpreters, such as Krempel, argued that for Aquinas, predicamental relation possesses reality only accidentally with respect to the related terms. Others, departing from both Aristotle and Aquinas, claimed instead that relation constitutes the very foundation of being and of the created order. This was the position of the Suarezian school (Suarez, *Disp. Met.*, d. 47, s. 2) ([Morabito 1940](#); [Masi 1951](#)). Yet, Suarez transformed relation into a category of the mind.<sup>6</sup> In this way, modern ontology began to interpret relation increasingly as an activity of consciousness.

Although the medieval interest in relation remained predominantly metaphysical, a significant shift was already underway. The relationship increasingly became both a tool of knowledge and an object of investigation in itself, thereby preparing the epistemological

developments characteristic of modernity (Horstmann 1984), in which relation would be explored both as a logical–formal category and as an empirical reality.

### 3.2. *The Social Relation in Modern Thought*

With modernity, the concept of relation increasingly entered social and political thought. The idea emerged that relations constitute the very fabric of social life. This development first appeared within English empiricism and German idealism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the two traditions that profoundly shaped the modern concept of civil society.

Modern philosophy has produced widely divergent conceptions of what a relationship is. David Hume denied its objective reality. Immanuel Kant regarded relation as one of the four fundamental categories of the intellect, encompassing substantiality, causality, and reciprocity (*Critique of Pure Reason*, II, 1). Hegelian idealism, by contrast, substantially identified reality itself with dialectical relational synthesis, while materialist traditions—especially Marxist dialectical materialism—likewise treated relation as constitutive of historical reality.

What matters here is that relation progressively acquired an increasingly central role, moving far beyond the abstract formulations of previous centuries.

Properly speaking, within the social sciences, a genuine “doctrine of social relations” flourished between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Important contributions emerged from the English tradition (from Locke and Hume to Spencer), the French school (Tarde, Durkheim, and their followers), and North American sociology (especially E. A. Ross, the Chicago School, and pragmatism from C.S. Peirce to G.H. Mead).

Yet, it was above all in Germany—with Simmel, Weber, von Wiese, Buber, and Husserlian phenomenology—that the social sciences underwent a decisive “relational turn.” This transformation consisted in moving from a mode of thought centred on discrete and isolated entities to one centred on relations themselves. Reality increasingly came to be understood as existing only through relations, where the relation constitutes a category distinct from both substance and accident.

Relation thus became not only an instrument for revealing reality but, in certain respects, also a principle for constructing it. Modernity, from the standpoint of social ontology, is fundamentally constructivist precisely because of this new role assigned to the relation.

Statements such as Vierkandt’s claim that “relation is the fundamental category of social thought” (Vierkandt 1915, 1916), or Plenge’s assertion that “our reality extends as far as our relations” (Plenge 1930), reveal the emergence of an entirely new horizon for the social sciences.<sup>7</sup> This becomes even more evident today with the rise of a digital society and virtual reality, where relationality increasingly shapes lived experience.

The relational perspective demonstrates not only the opening of a new phase in social thought, but also the fact that every theory ultimately depends upon its conception of relation. Science itself is relational, since knowledge is produced through the continuous interaction between the knowing subject and the object investigated.

### 3.3. *The Birth of a Relational Theory of Society*

Beginning in the 1980s, a relational theory of society—or relational sociology—gradually took shape. In this perspective, relation becomes the central category guiding both social inquiry and social practice (Donati 1991).

The fundamental shift lies in this: rather than interpreting relation from the standpoint of substance, relational sociology interprets substance from the standpoint of relation.

Substances certainly exist, but they exist only through relations and are defined relationally. Substance and relation therefore become *co-principles* of reality.

I emphasize that my approach is relational rather than relationist, because it is grounded in a stratified ontology rather than in the flat and purely processual ontologies typical of relationism, where substance ultimately disappears (Cf. Donati 2021, pp. 4, 24, 53–54, 62).

The principal innovations of relational sociology may be summarized as follows.

Society is relation. Society does not simply “have” relations; rather, it consists of relations generated by human beings, both at the interpersonal level and within institutions and social structures.

The ontological status of social relations is that of an effect emerging from the interactions (=reciprocal actions) of the terms of the relation (*relata*). According to the theory of emergence,<sup>8</sup> there is more to relations than the contributions of the terms in relation. Certainly, therefore, relations are ontologically posterior to the terms, but they do not entirely depend on them. In relational ontology, in the Trinitarian perichoresis there is perfect circularity, while in the case of human relations, circularity is only analogical and partial. For this reason, we say that the human person is relationally constituted, and that he or she is, in a certain sense, the generator, but also the generated of society. The entire argument, obviously, is based on the analogy, however tenuous, between Trinitarian relationality and interhuman social relationality.

Relation is at the origin of every social reality. Every social entity exists because it is generated by relations and constituted through them. My formulation is sociological and should not be confused with Martin Buber’s theological statement that “in the beginning is relation.” In Buber, relation remains presupposed but lacks independent ontological reality, since it derives from the word spoken by the “I.” A similar limitation appears in Emmanuel Lévinas (Cf. Donati 2015, pp. 26, 98; 2021, pp. 175–76).

Relational sociology analyzes relations internally. Relation is understood as being composed of three dimensions: a symbolic–referential dimension (*refero*), a structural bond (*religo*), and an emergent effect generated by the interaction between *refero* and *religo*.

The emergent effect constitutes the relation as a Third generated through Ego–Alter interaction. Relational sociology therefore enters “inside” relation itself, distinguishing its components, analyzing its internal dynamics, and studying its outcomes in ways previously undeveloped (Cf. Donati 2015, pp. 26, 98; 2021, pp. 175–76).

Within theology as well, increasing attention has been devoted to the idea that, if creation is the work of the Trinitarian God, then all reality possesses a relational structure. Naturally, Trinitarian relations must be distinguished from human and created relations. Yet, because distinction itself is relational, theology and the human sciences inevitably intersect.

Relational sociology thus develops a stratified social ontology inspired by critical realism, in opposition to the flat and praxis-based ontologies characteristic of relationist theories that reduce relation to pure events or processes. Such relational perspectives end up resulting in forms of antihumanism and, in their most radical versions, erase the distinction between human and animal life, arriving at proposing a “theoretical inhumanism” that presents itself as a new ideology.

## 4. The Emancipation of a New Ontological Status of Relation

### 4.1. Three Great Semantics of the Place of Relation in Defining Identity

The growing importance assumed by the category of relation throughout the history of Western thought becomes fully intelligible when we examine how its meaning and place of relation have changed within the three major symbolic codes that have historically guided the definition of identity: classical, modern, and transmodern semantics (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The place of the relation in the three great cultural semantics of identity.

| Classical Semantics<br>Monistic | Modern Semantics<br>Dualistic  | Transmodern Semantics<br>Relational           |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| $A = A$                         | $A = \text{non (non}A\text{)}$ | $A = \text{Relation (}A, \text{non}A\text{)}$ |

These semantics can be interpreted both historically, as successive stages in an evolutionary process, and sociologically, since all three continue to coexist within contemporary society.

#### 4.1.1. Classical Semantics: Monistic Identity

In the classical symbolic code, identity is conceived as a substance that does not require relation to anything external to itself. Relations do not constitute identity; rather, identity possesses its own substantial foundation independently of relations. The governing formula is  $A = A$ , i.e.,  $A$  is equal to itself without any mediation.

This semantics is grounded in the principle of non-contradiction. Identity is immediate and unmediated: every entity is identical to itself independently of relational mediation.

Although identity may contain internal differentiation and may even be conceived as a *unitas multiplex*, it nevertheless remains hierarchical and ultimately oriented toward the One. Consequently, this semantics tends toward monism. Identity precedes relation, and relation merely expresses an already-constituted substantial identity. Relation is therefore secondary to substance.

Social thought within this framework is purposive and fundamentally monistic. The person, for example, is defined as an “individual substance of a rational nature.” Civil society largely overlaps with the polis or the State. The family is understood primarily as a biological institution of reproduction. Likewise, a good life is ontologically predefined independently of historical and relational contexts.

#### 4.1.2. Modern Semantics: Dualistic Identity

Modernity radically transforms this framework. Identity is now constituted through relations, but specifically through relations of negation. An entity becomes what it is by distinguishing itself from what it is not. The formula becomes  $A = \text{non (non}A\text{)}$ .  $A$  is equal to the negation of everything that is not  $A$ .

Identity is established through opposition to what is external or different. Unity therefore becomes dialectical or binary; it is generated through antithesis, contradiction, or systemic differentiation.

Unlike classical monism, modern semantics is dynamic and dualistic. Civil society, for example, defines itself in opposition to the State, while well-being is understood as the negation of malaise. Identity is produced through differentiation and negation.

This framework introduces a fundamental instability. If identity is constituted through an indefinite series of negations, it can never achieve complete determination. Moreover, if identity depends upon negation, modernity risks sliding toward nihilism—an outcome that indeed characterizes many of its later developments.

#### 4.1.3. Transmodern Semantics: Relational Identity

I propose the existence of a third symbolic code, which I call transmodern semantics. Here identity is constituted neither through isolated substance nor through dialectical negation, but through relation with otherness. The formula is  $A = \text{Relation (}A, \text{non}A\text{)}$ , where  $A$  is a relation between  $A$  and non- $A$ .

Identity is generated through relational articulation with the Other. The Other is not necessarily a negation of A, but a distinct reality within which A enters into a relation of differentiation and integration.

This semantics presupposes a common relational belonging between Ego and Alter. Identity is no longer immediate but mediated relationally. Nothing is simply identical to itself independently of its relations with what is other than itself.

In theological language, even God knows and loves Himself relationally, through internal differentiation. Identity therefore contains contingency and relational mediation within itself. Identity becomes a *unitas complex*: a complex unity generated through interaction with otherness.

We thus arrive at a genuinely relational semantics. Civil society, for example, is no longer defined through opposition to the State, but through a differentiated yet connected relation with it. Likewise, well-being is understood relationally in connection with malaise, not necessarily as its negation but potentially as part of a dynamic and reciprocal process.

A comparative example clarifies the differences between these semantics. Consider the idea of social inclusion. In classical semantics, inclusion requires assimilation into a pre-existing identity and tradition, and community membership depends upon conformity. In modern dualistic semantics, inclusion is achieved through the negation of differences; this logic tends toward antagonism and permanent conflict. Postmodern multiculturalism attempts to neutralize conflict through indifference to differences—"all different, all the same"—but this often leads to cultural relativism. Transmodern relational semantics seeks to overcome both assimilation and indifference. Social inclusion is achieved through relations among distinct identities that generate relational goods such as trust, reciprocity, and cooperation.

The educational system offers a useful example. In monistic semantics, the student is integrated insofar as he assimilates a specific cultural tradition. In dualistic semantics, inclusion depends either upon competition or upon the denial of pre-established identities. In relational semantics, inclusion depends upon the capacity to establish meaningful and synergistic relations between differences, thereby generating relational goods within pluralistic school communities.

#### 4.2. *The Emancipation of the Concept of Social Relation*

Through the historical unfolding of these three semantics, relation progressively emancipates itself and acquires a new ontological and epistemological status. A genuine relational revolution emerges, requiring a profound reconsideration of earlier cognitive frameworks.

In the classical paradigm, relation derives from a pre-existing identity. In the modern paradigm, relations generate identity through negation of the Other. In transmodern semantics, relation generates identity through more complex and non-oppositional processes that may produce either relational goods or relational evils.

Traditional social thought interpreted relation within an ontology where substance remained primary and relation secondary. Modern social thought, by contrast, increasingly treated relation as being constitutive of social reality itself, within an epistemological framework concerned with understanding how society is actually produced through social interactions.

The social relation thus comes to be understood as a historical entity possessing its own consistency and dynamics rather than merely reflecting individual or structural properties.

However, when this perspective is radicalized to the point that relation absorbs and dissolves the entities it connects, we arrive at relationism. Relationism reduces relation to pure process, experience, or event. This occurs in phenomenological approaches that equate the social with lived experience, as well as in relativistic epistemologies and many forms of pragmatism (see [Dépelteau 2018](#)).

All of these approaches remain distant from relational sociology as I understand it ([Donati 2017](#)).

Relationist sociology treats relations as pure processuality without a stable structure. By contrast, relational sociology inspired by critical realism interprets social phenomena as realities existing “in relation to” something else while possessing their own structure, functions, and articulations. The relation is therefore not arbitrariness or pure flux, but the unity of distinctions.

Recent papal teaching—especially that of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis—has shown growing sensitivity to the centrality of relations and relationality. Nevertheless, in my view, this reflection remains incomplete because it does not sufficiently analyze the internal structure and dynamics of relations themselves.

In *Person and Act*, for example, [Wojtyla \(1980\)](#) emphasizes that the person transcends herself in her action. Yet, I would argue that the person transcends herself primarily in and through her relation, that is, through relational otherness capable of generating relational goods or evils. Through her actions, the person remains herself even if she tries to move towards the other. Focusing solely on first-person agency neglects the second- and third-person dimensions essential to social action ([Donati 2015](#)).

Similarly, Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* rightly links the quality of human life to the quality of relations. Yet, it does not explain how relations themselves should be judged as good or bad, nor how they are generated, sustained, and transformed. It merely affirms that relation deserves further metaphysical investigation.

Pope Francis, in *Laudato si'*, states that “everything is intimately related” (LS 137). Yet, the concrete meaning of this relationality often remains unspecified. For example, if one blesses a couple (as in the declaration of the dicastery for the doctrine of the faith *Fiducia supplicans* of 2023), what is blessed is not merely two individuals but their bond.

Awareness of this bond is not a given. Relational theory emphasizes that, in the order of creation, the marital relationship between a man and a woman is intrinsically a relational good, manifested in the generation of children. Marriage is a *sui generis* social relationship, generated by two people through mutual giving, commitment, sexuality, and procreation. It gives rise to an emerging “we” that cannot be reduced either to individual spouses or to an externally defined institution. How does the bond affect the human person? Marriage contributes to the constitution of the person by generating real relational identities, expanding personal reflexivity into relational reflexivity, and actualizing the capacities for recognition, self-giving, fidelity, responsibility, and procreation. However, it does not create the fundamental ontological being of the person. The person existed before marriage and retains an irreducible dignity outside of it. In short, the relationship can be summarized as follows: the person constructs the marriage; the marriage constructs their being-with-the-other. And this emerging being-with-the-other contributes to what each person concretely becomes.

Therefore, in relational sociology, the person is neither an isolated substance nor a mere product of relationships. The person is a real and irreducible subject whose humanity is actualized through participation in meaningful relationships, and marriage is the most intense and generative form of this relational actualization.<sup>9</sup>

I do not intend to criticize the magisterium, whose guidance remains illuminating. Rather, the previous critical observations underscore the need for a deeper integration between metaphysical ontology and the human and social sciences. We are still trying to integrate divine relationality with human relationality, as in the time of Aquinas, and yet I wonder if Aquinas is not telling us something more.

## 5. Aquinas's Position with Respect to the Three Semantics of Relation

Which of the three semantics presented in Table 1 can best describe Aquinas's conception of relation? Until recently, most interpreters located Aquinas firmly within classical semantics. In my view, this interpretation depended—and still depends—on two main factors: first, the desire to emphasize continuity between Aquinas and Aristotle; second, Aquinas's adoption of Boethius's definition of the human person, which clearly belongs to the framework of classical semantics.

My thesis, however, is that the historical development of the concept of relation requires us to reconsider Aquinas's position in comparison with Aristotle's. I believe that a significant discontinuity exists between them, rooted in their different theological frameworks: Aquinas's Trinitarian ontology versus Aristotle's conception of the unmoved mover. This discontinuity also requires a reconsideration of Boethius's definition of the human person. For a more detailed discussion of the ontological discontinuity between Aristotle and Aquinas concerning relation, I refer to studies in Trinitarian theology (Donati et al. 2019).

Regarding the classical definition of person inherited from Boethius, it must be acknowledged that Aquinas never fully developed a genuinely relational anthropology.

As is well known, Boethius defines the person as an "individual substance of a rational nature" ("persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia": *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, c. 4). Today, this definition appears insufficient and requires reformulation, but one must certainly recognize its historical importance. In the turbulent context following the fall of the Roman Empire, during the late fifth and early sixth centuries, emphasizing the individuality, rationality, and autonomy of the human person represented a decisive achievement. It was neither obvious then nor entirely obvious today to affirm the human person's rational self-consciousness and freedom.

Aquinas adopts Boethius's definition and further describes the person as "that which subsists in an intellectual nature" ("Omne subsistens in natura rationali vel intellectuali est persona": *Contra Gentiles*, IV, c. 35). This emphasis on intellectual subsistence is undeniably important. It highlights the human being as an intellect incarnated in a body and therefore affirms the intrinsic dignity of the person, who cannot be reduced to a mere instrument.

Yet, difficulties arise when the person is understood as existing entirely "in and of herself," independently of the social relations that shape her existence. Problems emerge especially if one adheres too rigidly to Aquinas's ontological principle according to which "forma dat esse," as Martínez Porcell (2009) does. The crucial issue is that the criterion of distinction employed by Aquinas is often interpreted non-relationally (as in Martínez Porcell 2010), while I propose to understand the distinction itself in relational terms, if we assume that the relation is necessarily distinct in itself, as Aquinas states when he considers it from the Trinitarian point of view.

Although historically justified, the Boethian framework can no longer be accepted without revision, because the three characteristics that Boethius uses to distinguish the human person—individuality, substantiality, and rationality—must now be reinterpreted within a relational social ontology.

This implies several important consequences.

First, individuality itself is relationally constituted. The individual emerges through relations both among her internal components and with what is other than herself. Sociologically speaking, each person becomes differentiated through the unique intersection of social networks and social circles in which she participates.

Second, the substantial union of body and intellect is not immutable or self-contained. Although substantial, the person exists *secundum relationem*, that is, through the relationality connecting her to the world.

Third, rationality must be redefined relationally. Human rationality differs from the cognitive capacities of other natural or artificial beings—including AI—because it involves relational rationality grounded in personal and social reflexivity. Human reflexivity is not limited to internal self-consciousness but necessarily includes reflexivity within and upon relations with others. Consequently, first-person consciousness alone is insufficient; the second-person perspective is equally essential.

If we adopt a relational interpretation of the person based on divine filiation—one that connects Trinitarian relationality with human relationality—then the Thomistic paradigm can be relocated from the first semantics to the third, relational semantics described in Table 1.

Such a reinterpretation makes it possible to integrate into Aquinas's relational order of reality the contributions that modern human and social sciences have made to the understanding of relationality.

## 6. Aquinas's Doctrine Conceals an Unfulfilled Revolution

My thesis is that Aquinas's thought can provide some crucial resources for understanding the place of relations in postmodern society and for confronting, in a new way, the dilemmas inherited from modernity.

The decisive turning point consists of recognizing fully that the relational order constitutes a distinct order of reality—one upon which Thomism and the human and social sciences may converge. Aquinas distinguishes three orders or modes of reality and of knowledge: (i) reality *secundum substantiam*, (ii) reality *secundum accidens*,<sup>10</sup> and (iii) reality *secundum relationem* (Aquinas 2000).

Although Aquinas formulates this distinction within a theological framework, it can also acquire profound ontological and epistemological significance for the human and social sciences.

The autonomy of the relational order becomes clearer if we consider Aquinas's position regarding causality. Aquinas adopts a form of moderate or critical indeterminism. For him, the first cause—God—does not mechanically determine secondary causes, but allows created causes to operate contingently, thereby contributing to the richness and perfection of creation. Secondary causes genuinely exercise their own causal powers, and their effects are not rigidly predetermined (Silva and Pinsent 2016).

This Thomistic perspective is particularly important because it allows us to understand the relative autonomy of social relations and their causal properties. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, this position was progressively replaced by mechanistic philosophies that rendered the interaction between primary and secondary causes problematic and gave rise to occasionalist and deist conceptions that deeply influenced the human and social sciences.

I propose using Aquinas's tripartite distinction between the orders of reality as a framework for comparing the three major theological, philosophical, and sociocultural matrices that have shaped Western thought. These are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Three cultural matrices of the identity of the human person and the way of conceiving social relationality.

| (I) Monistic Cultural Matrix<br>(Substantialism)                                                                                                                                 | (II) Differential/Dialectic Cultural Matrix<br>(Constructivism)                                                                                                                                                          | (III) Relational Cultural Matrix<br>(Relational Critical Realism)                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A = A                                                                                                                                                                            | A = non (nonA)                                                                                                                                                                                                           | A = Relation (A, nonA)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| The identity of the person (A) is given by a simple relation of equality with herself (according to a <i>symbolic identity code</i> )                                            | The identity of A is given by a relation of negation of what A is not (it is a double negation, according to a <i>binary symbolic code</i> )                                                                             | The identity of A is given by a relation R (reciprocal action) with the Other (the nonA) which generates the identity of A as an emergent effect (according to a <i>generative symbolic code</i> )                                                                                   |
| Identity as <b>the same (idem)</b><br><i>I am I, the same as always</i> , despite all the changes over time and all the comparisons with others; identity as self-referentiality | Identity as <b>difference (my idem vs. the idem of the Other)</b><br><i>I am the “non-Other”—I am different—compared to everything and everyone; I seek my identity through the denial of the Other</i>                  | Identity as <b>relational ipseity (ipse)</b><br><i>I rediscover myself</i> by reflecting on the relation with an “Other” from which I am stimulated to find my identity in what, at the same time, distinguishes me and connects me to the Other throughout life                     |
| <b>Traditional humanism</b><br>The human person is conceived as a substantial nature which has within itself its reasons for existence<br>( <i>unrelated ontology</i> )          | <b>Anti-essentialist humanism</b><br>The person does not have a given nature, but is constructed by the processes of differentiation, more or less favoured by society<br>( <i>constructivist dialectical ontology</i> ) | <b>Relational humanism (relational essentialism)</b><br>The human person has a nature which is that of an original intransitive constitution which emerges through the relations that the Self has with an Other who constitutes it “relationally”<br>( <i>relational ontology</i> ) |
| <b>Social sciences based on an identity ontology and methodological individualism</b>                                                                                            | <b>Social sciences based on a praxis ontology that follows methodological holism</b>                                                                                                                                     | <b>Social sciences based on a stratified and plural ontology that follows a relational methodology</b>                                                                                                                                                                               |

### 6.1. Monistic Ontology: Substantialist Social Ontology

The first matrix corresponds to the premodern world and is grounded in a substantialist or monistic ontology. Here, the identity of the person (A) is given by a simple identity relation with herself:  $A = A$ . Identity is immediate and self-contained, and one does not need relation in order to know who one is. The person remains “the same as always,” despite changes over time and interaction with others.

This framework underlies traditional humanism and classical personalism, according to which the human person possesses within herself the reasons for her own existence. Ontologically, this is an unrelated conception of being.

In the social sciences, this ontology gives rise to methodological individualism: society is interpreted as the aggregate projection of individuals. From this perspective, theories emerge such as rational choice theory and even the claim that “society does not exist, only individuals exist,” famously associated with Margaret Thatcher.

Krempel’s position ultimately leads in this direction.<sup>11</sup> By denying transcendental relationality, he reinforces ontological and methodological individualism.

### 6.2. Differential or Dialectical Ontology: Constructivist Social Ontology

Modern ontology introduces a radically different cultural matrix. Identity is now constituted through negation and differentiation:  $A = \text{non (nonA)}$ . The person becomes herself by distinguishing herself from what she is not and identity emerges through opposition.

This semantics generates a constructivist ontology. The person no longer possesses a stable nature but is socially constructed through processes of differentiation conditioned by historical and social dynamics. Niklas Luhmann, for example, reduces the person to a “point of reference for communication,” somewhat analogous to the *prosopon* of ancient Greek theatre.

From this matrix, the oppositional sociologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emerge, many of which culminate today in forms of cancel culture and negative dialectics.

The resulting humanism is anti-essentialist: the person possesses no intrinsic nature but is entirely constituted through differentiation processes.

### 6.3. Relational Ontology: Relational Critical Realism

The third matrix—the transmodern or relational matrix—arises from the crisis of modernity. It does not seek a return to the past but attempts to overcome modern aporias while considering contemporary scientific developments (such as quantum theory) and the communicative environment created by ICT, AI, and robotics. This relational ontology defines identity through relation with the Other:  $A = \text{Relation}(A, \text{non}A)$ . Identity emerges through relational interaction (“rel-action” as reciprocal action) with otherness according to a generative symbolic code.

From the standpoint of relational critical realism, this paradigm seeks to respond to the widespread contemporary need for a new culture of human and social relations after modernity has produced an increasingly unbound morphogenesis of social relations (Archer 2013).

Within this paradigm, the person certainly possesses a persistent identity (*idem*), but this identity must continually rediscover itself in a world increasingly characterized by artificial and unstable relations (*ipse*). Identity therefore becomes *ipseity*: a relational selfhood continuously transformed through relations with others.

Relational ipseity means that the self rediscovers itself through reflection upon relations with an Other who simultaneously distinguishes and connects it. Here emerges a new form of humanism—neither traditional nor dialectical—namely *relational humanism*.

The essence of the human person consists of an original and intransitive dignity that becomes concretely specified through relations with others who relationally constitute the self through alterity (Donati 2023).

The person therefore discovers herself as both the same (*idem*) and transformed (*ipse*) through social relations. Personal identity (“Who am I for myself?”) and social identity (“Who am I for others?”) become inseparable, although they remain distinct.

Inner reflexivity cannot be separated from reflexivity regarding relations with others. Here, relational sociology identifies the ambivalence of human relations: persons are driven by their interiority while simultaneously responding to the expectations and relational dynamics of their social environment.

This is also where human freedom emerges. For relational sociology, freedom is relational because it consists of choosing the relations upon which one depends, rather than imagining absolute independence. At the same time, relational freedom rejects the determinism characteristic of many relationist theories, according to which freedom is merely the effect of structural contingencies.

If we take Aquinas’s distinction among the three orders of reality—substance, accident, and relation—seriously, it becomes possible to move from the first ontology toward the third, relational ontology. This transition depends upon Aquinas’s crucial intuition that distinction itself is relational (“*relatio quae est principium distinctionis*”).<sup>12</sup> Distinction is neither pure dialectical opposition nor the expression of a pre-given substantial identity.

Aquinas's decisive statement is the following: "Id quod distinguitur relatione, est ipsa relatio" ("What distinguishes by relation is relation itself") (Aquinas 2001, *Super Sent.* lib. 1, d. 26, q. 1, a. 2 ad 1). This statement is decisive for moving from cultural matrix 1 (monistic) to cultural matrix 3 (relational), skipping that modern matrix 2 which intends the distinction as a radical binary separation (see Table 2).<sup>13</sup> The principle reveals why the human person realizes herself neither in isolated acts of self-determination nor through oppositional differentiation from the world, but rather through social relations with others.

What specifically characterizes the human being is precisely this capacity for relational self-transcendence—the capacity to give oneself while remaining oneself. No other natural or artificial being possesses this capability in the same way.

## 7. A New Vision of Otherness as a Meeting Point Between Thomism and the Social Sciences

### 7.1. Social Ontology and Otherness

Today, we are witnessing the progressive reversal of both essentialist and dualistic ontologies into forms of materialistic relativism that seek to overcome the distinction between human beings and non-human entities—animals, plants, technologies, and artificial intelligences—in the name of a post- or trans-human horizon. According to these perspectives, the individual increasingly constructs herself through hybridization between the human and the non-human.

Faced with these developments, we need a form of thought capable simultaneously of connecting and distinguishing human beings from one another and from non-human entities. Human beings can and must enter meaningful relations with animals, nature, technologies, and creation, but without dissolving the specificity of the human into the non-human. Such a perspective becomes possible only if rooted in Trinitarian relational thought (Donati et al. 2019).

If we reread Aquinas through the lens of a Trinitarian relational paradigm applied to created realities, we discover that Thomistic thought allows beings to be related without being hybridized. Aquinas attributes a fundamental value to difference and otherness because he cannot conceive the *Unum*—the unity of being—without multiplicity and alterity (Mantovani 2003).

For Aquinas, difference is not something externally added to already-constituted beings, as if there existed a neutral common substratum subsequently modified by accidental distinctions. Rather, *quid aliud*—otherness itself—permeates the fundamental structure of being. In this sense, we may affirm that Aquinas effectively treats *aliud* (otherness) as a transcendental category of being.

The differentiation of being is therefore original and constitutive. Being is not merely identical and one; it is also intrinsically multiple and differentiated. Difference and otherness belong to being itself. Multiplicity becomes coextensive with unity and participates in the perfection traditionally attributed only to the One.

As Mantovani (2003, p. 20) observes, for Aquinas, the *diversum* possesses a completely fundamental ontological importance because it expresses the distinctive character of *esse* insofar as it is irreducible to *genus*. Otherness protects reality from reduction to abstract essentialism. It safeguards the irreducible individuality of beings and the intimacy of *esse* within entities.

If, as social sciences increasingly demonstrate, *diversum* is coextensive with *ens*, then the human person must be understood relationally. The person is subsistent and called to enter into intersubjective relations and into relation with the world in a specifically human way, thereby realizing the richness of belonging to the human family.

The human person therefore structurally requires society and communion with others. Society becomes the space within which people realize the richness of their being through reciprocity and self-giving relations.

This perspective opens the way toward a conception according to which the Other allows the self both to attain deeper awareness of itself and to transcend itself. The social sciences help clarify how the Other becomes significant for the subject. When the encounter with the Other is motivated not by utility but by concern for the good of the Other, the Ego realizes itself not through self-absolutization but through dialogue and relational gift.

Human sociality reaches its authentic realization when intersubjectivity becomes reciprocal commitment. The human being is structurally oriented toward encounter, and it is within freely chosen interpersonal relations that she realizes herself most deeply. For this reason, love represents the highest form of freedom.

However, if we wish to avoid remaining at the level of abstract moral statements, this ethical–theological vision must be translated into social ontology. A further step is required.

Certainly, the person is intrinsically relational, and the I–Thou relation is constitutive of personal existence. Yet, identity alone generates nothing; only relation is generative. In secular life, however, this generativity depends upon concrete social conditions.

For otherness to become genuine dialogue and reciprocal self-giving, persons must understand and appropriately cultivate the qualities and causal powers of the specific relations in which they participate. Here, the human and social sciences can contribute decisively to the Trinitarian relational paradigm, which otherwise risks remaining merely an abstract ideal detached from lived social realities.

Ontology therefore requires dialogue with phenomenology, just as phenomenology requires dialogue with ontology (Donati 2023, pp. 35–43). Aquinas thus helps us recognize difference and diversity as positive structures of being (*esse*). Following Aristotle yet going beyond him, Aquinas argues that *divisio* (distinction) is the cause of multiplicity. Unlike Aristotle, however, Aquinas locates distinction within being itself. Since God is being par excellence, distinction exists within God. Every created distinction derives from this intradivine differentiation.

Aquinas writes:

“The order of distinction can be considered either with regard to the quantity of distinction or with regard to dignity and causality. Concerning quantity, the distinction of the divine hypostases is the smallest possible real distinction. Therefore, the smallest entity—namely relation—belongs to this distinction. But regarding dignity and causality, this distinction surpasses all others; and likewise, relation, which is the principle of distinction, surpasses in dignity everything that distinguishes creatures, not because it is relation as such, but because it is divine relation. It also surpasses all in causality, because every procession and multiplication of creatures is caused by the procession of the distinct divine persons” (Aquinas 2001. *Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d. 26, q. 2, a. 2 ad 2).<sup>14</sup>

This passage is crucial because Aquinas grounds every created distinction and multiplicity in intradivine relational differentiation itself. If *diversum* possesses fundamental ontological significance because it expresses the irreducibility of being, then essence itself must be understood relationally. This is why I speak of “relational essentialism” (Donati 2021, p. 180).

From this perspective, *aliud* becomes Aquinas’s safeguard against Aristotelian essentialism. The *diversum* is a coextensive property of *ens* understood relationally, and relationality possesses the same ontological dignity as unity itself.<sup>15</sup>

As Ventimiglia notes, Aquinas’s belief in the real distinction of the divine Persons enabled him to recognize the transcendental character of difference and to elaborate an

ontology of original differentiation (Ventimiglia 1990). Nevertheless, I disagree with Ventimiglia when he argues that being differentiates itself autonomously “without the addition of anything else” (Ventimiglia 1990, p. 295). Such a position risks rendering being as self-referential and autopoietic. Once we recognize the relational structure of being, we must also acknowledge that being continuously exchanges qualities and causal properties with what is other than itself. This requires a deeper investigation of the concept of otherness.

### 7.2. Otherness as a Possible Point of Convergence Between Thomistic Theology and the Social Sciences

Within the alterity between Ego and Alter, we encounter all three dimensions of reality: substance, contingency, and relation. The crucial issue is how to connect them. The relational paradigm proposes that otherness is itself a relation connecting two substantial persons who become actualized through their relation and whose interaction generates contingent outcomes. These contingencies appear both in the causal powers of individual actions and in the social structure emerging between persons—what I call *the Third*.

A genuine relation between Ego and Alter does not arise merely because the Ego recognizes the Thou as a subject rather than an object, as in Martin Buber, nor simply because the Ego reflects itself in the face of the Other, as in Emmanuel Lévinas. Such approaches still remain at the level of intersubjective reflection.

A meaningful social relation emerges only when a Third arises between the I and the Thou (See Donati 2022, redacted, pp. 284–304). Modernity largely developed relationality in a self-referential way, as a projection of subjectivity. To overcome the self-referential closure of modern social systems, it is necessary to rediscover the Third—something relational sociology can perceive where substantialist and dialectical approaches cannot.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche once wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “The third is the cork that prevents the conversation of the two from sinking.” The crisis of modernity demonstrates precisely the necessity of this Third.

The Third is not reducible either to the individual subject or to the simple interaction between two subjects. It is an emergent social reality generated through relation itself. The human and social sciences allow us to analyze how this Third emerges, stabilizes, transforms itself, and produces either relational goods or relational evils.

Here lies one of the most promising points of convergence between Thomistic theology and the social sciences, at least those sympathetic to critical realism. Thomistic relational ontology provides a metaphysical grounding for understanding otherness positively, while the social sciences provide the empirical tools necessary for understanding how relational dynamics concretely unfold within history and society.

Only through this dialogue can we adequately confront the relational crises of post-modernity without collapsing either into individualistic substantialism or into relationist relativism.

## 8. Conclusions: Rethinking the Ontology of Relations Through the Synergy of Theology, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences

The encounter between Aquinas’s thought and the authentically relational social sciences helps to dissolve Aquinas’s supposed ambivalences. Much of theology still stops at the threshold of the relation because it does not see the social sciences. The social sciences, moreover, stay away from theology, although they would have a great advantage in considering Aquinas’s ontological perspective.

The historical development of the concept of relation compels us to rethink the ontology of relations through a new dialogue between theology, philosophy, and the social sciences. My central thesis has been that Aquinas’s thought contains the premises for such

a dialogue, even though the revolutionary implications of his relational insights remained historically underdeveloped.

Aquinas introduced a decisive innovation when he distinguished, alongside the orders of substance and accident, a third order of reality: *secundum relationem*. Yet, this intuition remained largely confined within the Trinitarian theological sphere and was never fully extended to the social realities of ordinary human existence.

Conversely, modernity has tried to fill the void of factual knowledge of social relations, but it did so by progressively transforming relation into either a constructivist or purely processual category. The result was the emergence of relationist ontologies that dissolved stable human identity into endless relational flux, ultimately generating forms of relativism and antihumanism.

Against both classical substantialism and modern relationism, Aquinas's thought helps to develop a relational ontology grounded in critical realism. Such an ontology avoids reducing relation either to a mere accident of substance or to a pure process without structure. Relation possesses its own ontological consistency, causal powers, and emergent properties.

The social sciences have contributed decisively to this development by showing that society is not merely a collection of individuals nor simply the product of overarching structures, but a relational reality *sui generis*. Social facts emerge through relations and cannot be adequately understood outside of them.

At the same time, theology—especially through Trinitarian reflection—offers the deepest ontological grounding for relationality. If creation originates from the relational life of the Trinity, then relationality cannot be considered secondary or accidental within created reality. Human and social relations participate, analogically and contingently, in a relational order that ultimately has its source in divine relationality.

The convergence of the various sciences on the relational paradigm, in my opinion, can be illuminated by Aquinas's thought if it is read from this perspective.

In the truly relational theological and sociocultural matrix (Table 2), there is no need to contrast reason and faith, or ontology and theology. To relaunch the Christian perspective, it does not seem necessary to subordinate ontology to theology, as Radical Orthodoxy (RO) proposes. According to Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank and Oliver 2009), "everything is theology," and theology itself becomes a "metadiscourse" capable of addressing all questions. Within this perspective, "Christ appears as the archetype of any type of relation. This new focus changes the character of Christology, which does not concern so much the analysis of the structure of the person of Christ, but its dialogical activity. Christology is also converted into science over relations, and the basis of ecclesiastical and political theory" (*ibidem*).

In my opinion, however, this approach risks going too far when it opposes the traditional Thomistic understanding of human rational nature with the claim that reason cannot operate truthfully unless grace radically transforms its very nature—the "graced nature" emphasized by Radical Orthodoxy. Such a perspective tends to weaken the relative autonomy of human rationality and risks collapsing theology into a form of "pantheologism."

Roszak (2012) has already observed the problematic character of this tendency, and I share his concern. In my view, the point is not to transform human nature into something other than itself, but rather to enable it to act and elevate itself relationally. From this perspective, natural law can be understood as a reticular structure that is human and divine, although at different levels, guided by the norm according to which life is a gift that calls for reciprocity within networks of relations. In this sense, the social sciences increasingly converge with Aquinas's theology in recognizing the fundamentally relational character of human existence.

Within this framework, otherness acquires a central ontological significance. The Other is not merely an external limit or negation of the self but becomes constitutive of personal and social identity. Relations with the Other generate the possibility of self-transcendence, reciprocity, and the production of relational goods.

A renewed ontology of relation therefore offers the possibility of overcoming many of the dilemmas inherited from modernity: the opposition between individual and society, the conflict between freedom and dependence, the fragmentation of identities, and the growing conflation between human and non-human.

This is why the distinction between *relational* and *relationist* social sciences is crucial. Relationism dissolves reality into pure process and contingency, whereas relational ontology recognizes that relations possess structures, emergent properties, and causal efficacy. Relations are neither arbitrary nor merely subjective; they are real social realities.

The rise of a digital society, artificial intelligence, and post-human ideologies makes this relational rethinking even more urgent. Contemporary societies increasingly risk reducing human beings either to isolated consumers or to nodes within anonymous communication networks. A relational ontology grounded in critical realism offers an alternative capable of preserving both human dignity and relational interdependence.

If we follow Aquinas's legacy, we conclude that the future of relational thought depends upon the capacity to establish a genuine synergy among theology, philosophy, and the social sciences. Theology provides the metaphysical horizon of Trinitarian relationality; philosophy clarifies the ontological and logical structure of relation; and the social sciences analyze the concrete forms through which relationality unfolds historically and socially, giving them meaning.

Aquinas's relational approach allows us to see how human and divine reality are incommensurable but not separate. The *analogia entis* (Erich Przywara) applies, through which we see the similarity and at the same time the abyss that distances them. The concept of relation allows us to see what connects them and at the same time distinguish them without isolating them.

The human and the divine are related because both are constitutively relational; they cannot exist only in themselves but exist in relation to each other.

In relational ontology, the distinction is not a clear separation but a relationship. Therefore, the distinction between the Creator and the creature lies in the relationship that connects them. The Father is not a father without the Son and vice versa. For this reason, the Holy Spirit is not merely an emanation of the Father, but the emergent effect of their relationship. Indeed, we say that the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son as from one principle and through one spiration. If we adopt the perspective of relational analogy, we also better understand human relationships of paternity and filiation, as well as all family relationships, which are emergent effects. We understand the family as a relational good that constitutes the paradigm of every community.

The point I make, however debatable, but justified in the final section of the book "*The Enigma of Relationship*", is that both Karol Wojtyła (*The Acting Person*) and Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI, *Charitas in Veritate*) hint at the relationship but never define or articulate it. Ratzinger states that it is a metaphysical category that requires further exploration, which he himself does not develop. I propose to Wojtyła that the person is not transcended in the act, as he claims, but is transcended in the relationship, because it is the relationship with the Other that makes the Ego capable of transcending itself. Social sciences can help us better understand these perspectives.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term “transcendental” has assumed different meanings throughout the history of philosophy. In medieval thought, it designated a maximally universal property of being. Later, Kant and German idealism reinterpreted it in reference to conditions of knowledge, while Husserl gave it a phenomenological meaning centered on the transcendental Ego. From my perspective, saying that relation is transcendental means that it is a real property common to all entities—divine and created, human and non-human—whereas modern philosophy tends to subjectivize relationality. An anonymous reviewer rightly pointed out to me that, on the topic of transcendentals, my article overlooks an important study by Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*. In this book, the author claims that transcendental philosophy did not begin with Kant. A distinctive form of transcendental thought had already emerged in Medieval philosophy, beginning with Philip the Chancellor’s *Summa de bono* and reaching a highly systematic formulation in Francisco Suárez’s *Disputationes metaphysicae*. Aertsen argues that the doctrine of the transcendentals is not a marginal chapter in medieval metaphysics. It is one of the principal structures—perhaps the principal structure—through which medieval thinkers understood philosophy as a whole. The book does not describe medieval transcendental thought as one uniform theory. It reconstructs a long series of transformations and disagreements concerning which concepts belong on the list of transcendentals, whether being is a unified concept, whether being is predicated analogically or univocally, whether truth is primarily in the intellect or in things, how goodness is related to being, whether beauty should be counted as a transcendental, how transcendental notions apply to God, and whether the doctrine belongs principally to metaphysics, logic or first philosophy. According to Aertsen, Suárez should be considered both an endpoint and a bridge: he consolidates centuries of medieval discussion while preparing some of the conceptual structures of modern metaphysics. I agree with this study, which however does not substantially change my argument.
- <sup>2</sup> These five properties, later called “transcendentals” by scholastic commentators, transcend the Aristotelian categories and therefore accompany being universally (Mondin 1998a, pp. 320–21; 1998b, pp. 564–65).
- <sup>3</sup> “Il semblera peut-être que cette relation transcendantale, réelle et identique à l’absolu créé, soit la déviation la plus tragique de la scolastique décadente” (Krempel 1952, p. 670).
- <sup>4</sup> To recall a modern formulation: “who you are is what you care about” (Frankfurt 1988, p. 91).
- <sup>5</sup> The aristocratic (or noble) ethics is that of the figure of the “lord”, free from the need to work, as opposed to that of the “servant”, who is instead subject to work. For aristocratic ethics (*etica signorile*) in Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s work, see Tranquilli (1962).
- <sup>6</sup> According to Suarez, reality is grounded in modes of knowing. This turn toward the primacy of consciousness profoundly influenced both rationalism and empiricism and prepared the epistemological foundations of modern philosophy.
- <sup>7</sup> It is worth remembering that the debate that developed in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century on the relationship as a sociological and metaphysical concept is found at the basis of the thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI (in particular the encyclical *Charitas in Veritate*).
- <sup>8</sup> I maintain that social relations are created by humans, but immediately afterwards I argue that this is not entirely true because relations do not entirely depend on the terms in question. These claims are not contradictory, but must be understood in light of emergence theory. Relations are emergents that possess a sui generis ontological status. The core of emergence theory is the assertion that, when elements interact within an organized whole, they can generate properties, structures, and causal powers that are not reducible to the properties of the elements taken separately. The entity that emerges from the interactions (the relationship) has the characteristics of necessity, but at the same time is not determined in form. It may not correspond to the nature or purposes of the interacting elements. It has its own intrinsic reality which, in accordance with the principle of realism, manifests itself in its capacity to produce its own distinct effects.
- <sup>9</sup> An anonymous reviewer, commenting on this point, observes that the marriage bond, while valid, creates a temporary bond between souls, and the presumed ontological reality of relationality is rooted solely in the Sacrament that communicates Grace through the Divine Nature. The bond is contingent on the fact that both souls are tied to their respective bodies. For a deeper understanding of marriage and how it defines and contributes to the constitutive creation of the ontological reality of the person, see Caffarra (2006).
- <sup>10</sup> I translate the Aristotelian concept of “accident” sociologically as contingency, understood both as dependence upon other realities and as the possibility of being otherwise, always in a relational sense.

- 11 From the beginning of his work, Krempel strongly opposed transcendental relation and concluded that relation remains grounded in substance. I disagree because such a position ultimately remains within the first, monistic ontology inherited from Aristotle.
- 12 Aquinas (2001). *Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d. 26, q. 2, a. 2 ad 2.
- 13 The prototype of this theory is Niklas Luhmann's, as Spaemann (2005) astutely observed.
- 14 Original Latin text: "Ordo distinctionis potest considerari: vel quantum ad quantitatem distinctionis, vel quantum ad dignitatem et causalitatem. Si quantum ad quantitatem distinctionis, sic distinctio divinarum hypostasum est minima distinctio realis quae possit esse, ut supra habitum est. Et ideo tali distinctioni competit ens minimum, scilicet relatio. Sed quantum ad ordinem dignitatis et causalitatis, illa distinctio excellit omnes distinctiones; et similiter relatio quae est principium distinctionis, dignitate excellit omne distinguens quod est in creaturis: non quidem ex hoc quod est relatio, sed ex hoc quod est relatio divina. Excellit etiam causalitate, quia ex processione personarum divinarum distinctarum causatur omnis creaturarum processio et multiplicatio, ut supra habitum est."
- 15 As Ventimiglia writes, "'Aliquid'" does not mean simply "something," but "aliud quid," and therefore expresses the transcendence of difference (Ventimiglia 1990, p. 245).
- 16 I refer particularly to the reflections developed within relational sociology beginning from Georg Simmel's concept of social relation as *Wechselwirkung* (reciprocity effect).

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