In order to stand in the orthodox Christological tradition, as he wishes to do, Thomas Aquinas must affirm that Christ is one person, and not two, despite having two natures, not one. Now if we grant that Christ is truly human, then we are granting that he really does have a human nature. But it would seem that a human nature is a principle that exists or functions most fully when it serves as a principle in virtue of which a person subsists; it would seem, that is, that if any human nature did not serve as such a principle, its not doing so would count as a kind of weakness or failure on its part. This leads to a dilemma. If Christ’s human nature serves as a person-grounding principle, it grounds or constitutes a second (human) person in Christ, with the result that there are two persons in Christ, a clear heresy. But if Christ’s human nature does not serve as a person-grounding principle, then it is hard to see how it is really a human nature, or at any rate it is hard to see how it is a completely fulfilled human nature.

The basic notion of a substantial nature, as Thomas understands it in non-theological contexts, does in fact present him with the sort of problem described above. Interestingly, Thomas nowhere gives us a complete and explicit account of how to address the problem. It can be solved, however, in accordance with his thought, by finding an appropriate way to broaden the notion of substantial nature. After explaining how to do this, I compare the proposed solution to certain positions that Thomas holds about an analogous problem, namely, the problem of accidents in Eucharistic theology. I conclude with some reflections on the sense in which Thomas’s ideas render theological mysteries intelligible, and the sense in which they do not.