

3. Religious Language

Perhaps no other topic treated in this book has generated more secondary literature among Thomists in the twentieth-century than the problem of religious language. The *crux interpretatum* concerns Aquinas's central claim that certain predicates derived from creatures can be said to be true of God *analogically*. Aquinas offers analogical predication as steering a middle course between the Scylla of univocity (where the predicate has the same meaning), which would compromise divine transcendence by purporting to compass God within a creaturely concept, and the Charybdis of equivocity (where the predicate has no shared meaning), which would evacuate the language of faith of any cognitive content and so lead to agnosticism. In working out his doctrine of analogical predication, Aquinas is thus trying to balance the demands of apophatic or positive theology, the legacy of the western tradition, and kataphatic or negative theology, the legacy of the eastern tradition. Thomists have typically hailed the results as one of the most original and enduring features of Aquinas's thought, while non-Thomists have sometimes wondered what all the fuss was about.

Two factors are chiefly responsible for the proliferation of studies on analogy in this century. The first is criticism from outside the Thomistic tradition in both theology and philosophy. On the theological front, Karl Barth's well-known dictum that the supposed Catholic doctrine of *analogia entis* (the analogy of being) is "the invention of the Anti-Christ," and because of it "one cannot become a Catholic,"¹ was rooted in the conviction that God's transcendence requires that God be absolutely inaccessible from any purely creaturely point of departure; human speech about God is only possible on the basis of God's self-revelation in the Word. Other Protestant theologians, most notably Wolfhart Pannenberg,

¹ *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, Part I: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936) p. x. It has since been argued by many that Barth's critique of analogy does not really apply to Aquinas himself and that there are actually points of deep agreement between them. See Hans Urs von Balthasar in *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. J. Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Henri Bouillard, *La connaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1967); Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, second edition (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968); and Henry Chavannes, *L'analogie entre Dieu et le monde selon Thomas d'Aquin et selon Karl Barth* (Paris: Cerf, 1969). A recent work is Eugene Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

likewise criticized analogy on the grounds that it compromised both the primacy of God's self-revelation and God's transcendence.² On the philosophical front, the persistent critique of analogy, going all the back to John Duns Scotus, has been that analogy is really nothing more than veiled univocity.³

The second factor explaining the proliferation of studies on analogy has been the realization within the Thomistic tradition that its own understanding of Aquinas had long been distorted by the normative status accorded to the interpretation of the great sixteenth-century commentator Cardinal Cajetan in his *De nomine analogica et de conceptu entis*.⁴ Cajetan's views on analogy largely held sway among Thomists up until around the midpoint of this past century, when a series of ground breaking studies displayed the discrepancy between Aquinas's texts and Cajetan's doctrine.⁵ The critics of Cajetan have identified three basic deficiencies in his account.⁶ First, Cajetan failed to grasp the way in which Aquinas's thought on analogy developed over the years. Cajetan erroneously assumed a uniform doctrine and so unwittingly based his account on early texts that do not represent Aquinas's mature view. Specifically, what Cajetan identified as the true Thomistic doctrine of analogy – which he called the analogy of proportionality, as distinct from what he called the analogy of attribution – was only a provisional position that was ultimately abandoned by Aquinas.⁷ Second, Cajetan's doctrine tends to run together logical, epistemological, ontological, and theological considerations that need to be distinguished. Analogy is a logical doctrine of naming that is connected with how we know, and that can be applied in the domains of metaphysics and theology. Third, Cajetan is reproached for having located analogy at the level of concepts instead of recognizing it as a feature of judgments; concepts only function analogically as embedded in the lived usage of judgments. Thomists now generally agree that Cajetan was in error on all three points, and have spent the last few decades reconstructing Aquinas's authentic doctrine in

² See Elizabeth Johnson, "The Right Way to Speak about God? Pannenberg on Analogy," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 673-692.

³ On Scotus's views, see Olivier Boulnois, "Analogie et univocité selon Duns Scot: La double destruction," *Les études philosophiques* 3-4 (1989): 347-369. For critiques of analogy as veiled univocity from two different perspectives, see Patrick Sherry, "Analogy Today," *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 431-446 and Kai Nielson, "Analogical Talk about God: A Negative Critique," *The Thomist* 40 (1976): 32-60.

⁴ This work has been translated into English by E. Bushinski and H.J. Koren as *The Analogy of Names and the Concept of Being*, Duquesne Studies, Philosophical Series, no. 4 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1953).

⁵ Georges Klubertanz, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy. A Textual Analysis and Systematic Synthesis* (Chicago: Loyola, 1960). Ralph McInerney, *The Logic of Analogy: An Interpretation of St. Thomas* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961). Bernard Montagnes, *La doctrine de l'analogie de l'être selon s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1963).

⁶ I am following the outline here of Gregory P. Rocca, O.P. in *Analogy as Judgment and Faith in God's Incomprehensibility: A Study of the Theological Epistemology of Thomas Aquinas* (Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1989), 33-49. This dissertation is the most comprehensive and insightful treatment of the topic that I know and this chapter bears a substantial debt to Rocca's work.

⁷ Cajetan's major division of analogy into proportionality and attribution are unhelpful categories that have been largely abandoned by Thomists. I do not want to muddy the waters here by trying to explain his doctrine. The interested reader can find accounts of Cajetan in the references of the previous two notes.

ways that answer both the philosophical and the theological criticisms. This chapter is a distillation of that work.

One of the major clarifications to emerge out of the discussion of Cajetan has been the need to distinguish between analogy as a feature of our religious language about God and analogy as a metaphysical doctrine explaining how the various senses of being are unified. This chapter is designed as an explanation of the former rather than the latter.⁸ Yet at the same time as religious analogy has to be distinguished from metaphysical analogy, it nonetheless must be understood that Aquinas's doctrine of divine names rests upon epistemological and metaphysical foundations; we name God as we know God and our knowledge of God involves some metaphysical claims. Hence the first part of this chapter will articulate the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of analogy. The second part will be an analysis of how analogical predication works. While analogy is central to Thomistic accounts of religious language, it does not exhaust its domain. The third part of the chapter will discuss the other main types of religious language about God: metaphorical and relational. Finally, Aquinas considers the summit of religious language about God to be expressed in Exodus 3:14, and his metaphysical interpretation of that divine self-revelation will thus be the focus of the final section. There we shall consider the question of whether Aquinas constructs a metaphysical idol of God in terms of the contemporary discussion of onto-theology in the pejorative Heideggerian sense.

I. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND TO ANALOGY

Aquinas inherited from Pseudo-Dionysius a conception that the path to God must be threefold: the way of causality (*via causalitatis*), the way of negation (*via negativa*), and the way of eminence (*via eminentia*). While Aquinas's terminology is fluid and diverse orderings can be found in his writings,⁹ the order given here best describes the logic of his approach.¹⁰ Analogy belongs in the third moment, the way of eminence, and so logically presupposes the other two ways. We must first begin with the way of causality in order to establish the metaphysical link between God and the world that is needed to warrant the cognitive move from the world to God. The metaphysical realization that God is the cause of the world requires that God be utterly unlike any being in the world, so the way of causality leads immediately to the way of negation. The way of negation depends not just upon metaphysical considerations, however, but also on epistemological and anthropological claims regarding the limitations on human knowing. It is only on

⁸ It is well known that Aquinas never explicitly designates his doctrine of how being is unified by the term "analogy of being." Nevertheless it is generally agreed that such a term is appropriate for the way in which he adopts Aristotle's doctrine of *pros hen* equivocation. The classic work on this point is Montagne's *La doctrine de l'analogie de l'être*. See also Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 73-93.

⁹ Michael B. Ewbank, "Diverse Orderings of Dionysius's *Triplex Via* by Thomas Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies* 52 (1990): 82-109.

¹⁰ See Claude Geffré, "Théologie naturelle et révélation dans la connaissance de Dieu un," in *L'existence de Dieu*, Cahiers de l'actualité religieuse 16 (Paris-Tournai: Casterman, 1961), 297-317. Also, Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, O.P., "La théologie négative chez S. Thomas d'Aquin" *Revue thomiste* 93 (1993): 535-566; 94 (1994): 71-99.

the basis of these prior moves that analogy as a form of the way of eminence can be understood.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God are foundational to his theological approach to God. Aquinas emphatically eschews any sort of Anselmian *a priori* approach to the existence of God and hews instead to an *a posteriori* approach wherein certain features of the world are subjected to a metaphysical analysis that ultimately results in the conclusion that they are causally dependent upon some higher-order being. In the famous passage from *Summa theologiae* Ia. 2, 3, motion, efficient causation, contingency, degrees of perfection, and teleology are all shown to require a higher-order cause that cannot itself display any of the metaphysical limitations that characterize the explananda.¹¹ There must be a cause of motion that is not itself moved, an efficient cause that is not itself efficiently caused, a necessary being that has its necessity from itself, a cause of all perfections that is maximally perfect, and an intelligent cause of finality and order. Each of these formally distinct metaphysical first causes is theologically identified with the God of faith on the basis of the doctrine of creation. The Provident Creator God confessed in faith must be the ultimate source of all that is, maximally perfect, and the intelligent governor of the world.

It would be erroneous, however, to infer that the ascription of all these metaphysical titles to God warrants an immediate move along the path of positive or affirmative theology. Indeed precisely the opposite is the case. Once God is accorded metaphysical primacy as ultimate actuality, then the immediate conclusions to be drawn are along the *via negativa*. The reason for this is that the First Cause must be utterly unlike everything else; it must transcend all the features of the world that bespeak metaphysical limitation or imperfection. So the affirmation of the *via causalitatis* leads immediately to the *via negativa* as the negation of anything that is incompatible with God as First Cause and Pure Act. Negative judgments about God are made on the basis of prior positive claims about God's metaphysical primacy. The *via negativa* logically presupposes the minimal positive knowledge acquired by the *via causalitatis*; otherwise, the process of negation would be incoherent in that there would be no basis for determining what to negate about God.

At the heart of Aquinas's negative approach to God is the central claim that we cannot know what God is, but rather only what God is not or rather how God does not exist; Aquinas typically makes this claim after proving God's existence and before discussing his attributes.¹² This claim thus governs the entire discussion of divine attributes and it must be carefully parsed. One consequence of it is that much of what looks *prima facie* like positive predications of God are really negative: divine simplicity, immutability, eternity, infinity, etc. are all negative claims about God rather than positive attributes. These topics will be explored in Chapter Eight. In this context what is important is to note the way in which Aquinas thinks that a careful process of successive negations can lead to a kind of knowledge of what is proper to God. By denying more and more features of created being as applicable to God, we come to a clearer sense of how God

¹¹ For more on these arguments, see Chapter Eight, pp. 179–185.

¹² See the prologue to question 3 in ST I and SCG I, 14.

transcends created being. While this is a crude way of putting it, it is perhaps helpful to see much of Aquinas's doctrine of divine attributes as a skillful exercise in a theological game of Twenty Questions where the cumulative effect of the negations is to point the questioner in the direction of God without revealing what God is. As Aquinas notes, it is natural for us to advance in our knowledge of something by distinguishing it from what it is not. Normally the process precedes on the basis of a prior positive grasp of the genus of the object and the negations serve to pick out the differentiating features of the species. In the case of God, however, the process is exclusively negative because it is not governed by any positive grasp of God's essence in terms of genus or species. We cannot know what is proper to God in the positive sense of grasping the divine essence, but rather only in the negative or indirect sense of knowing what is proper to God as transcending every other being: "we arrive at a proper consideration of God's substance when we know God as distinct from all other things."¹³

The claim that we cannot have any definitional or classifying knowledge of God is expressed as the denial that we can have *quidditative* knowledge of God.¹⁴ Quidditative knowledge, which literally means knowledge of a thing's "whatness" (quiddity), would be comprehensive and defining knowledge of a thing's essence. This kind of knowledge cannot be had of God for two reasons. The first and more basic is the metaphysical disproportion between Creator and creature. In discussing whether any created intellect is able by its own nature to grasp God's essence, Aquinas argues that such knowledge is impossible because God's transcendent mode of to-be or *esse* – unparticipated, uncomposed, and infinite – is beyond the intellectual ken of any being whose *esse* is participated, composed, and finite.¹⁵ Even angels cannot naturally grasp God's essence, despite their superior cognitive capacities, due to their metaphysical limitation in the face of God's immensity of being. The second reason is species-specific: human intellects are naturally suited to grasp quiddities that are abstracted from material instantiation; obviously God is not such a quiddity.¹⁶ Even the aid of divine grace does not make it possible for the human intellect to achieve quidditative knowledge in this life because faith knowledge never completely transcends the natural human mode of knowledge.¹⁷ Knowledge of God's essence can only be had in the beatific vision by the light of glory; even there, however, quidditative knowledge will not be comprehensive knowledge: the Holy Mystery of God eternally remains beyond human comprehension.¹⁸

Aquinas's stress on the *via negativa*, expressed in the denial that we can attain any quidditative knowledge of God and in the ultimate assertion of God's

¹³ SCG I, 14 and III, 39 and 49.

¹⁴ See John F. Wippel, "Quidditative Knowledge of God" in his *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, 215-241 and *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 502-543. The seminal piece on this topic is H.F. Dondaine, "Cognoscere de Deo 'quid est'," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 22 (1955): 72-78.

¹⁵ ST I, 12, 4.

¹⁶ ST I, 12, 11.

¹⁷ ST I, 12, 13, ad 3 and II-II, 1, 5 ad 1.

¹⁸ ST I, 12, 7. See Karl Rahner, "An Investigation of the Incomprehensibility of God in St. Thomas Aquinas," in his *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 16, trans. D. Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979), 244-254.



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Shanley, B.J.

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