

The Simplicity of the Divine Ideas in Light of Aquinas's Dionysian-Inspired Theology of the Divine Names

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Introduction

In contemporary theology, the doctrine of divine simplicity has become a controversial topic, and Thomas Aquinas's account found in the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) has often been at the center of this controversy.¹ How

¹ The recent surge of research began with the publication of Alvin Plantinga's *Does God Have A Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), which placed Aquinas's account of the doctrine in question for claiming that God is identical with God's properties, since that would imply that God only has one property (Himself), which to Plantinga was clearly false (47). Since then, the doctrine of divine simplicity has had many adherents, as well as many critics. Some have avoided Plantinga's criticism by drawing from alternative accounts of the doctrine, whether from Church Fathers like John of Damascus or modern figures like Karl Barth, while others have sought to defend Aquinas's account in the *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] against the criticisms leveled by Plantinga and others. For the former, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gavin Ortlund, "Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing a Contemporary Discussion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 4 (2014): 436–53; Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 133–78. For the latter, see James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); Dolezal, "Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God's Personal Relations," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2014): 79–98; Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 1 (2016): 66–93; Tyler Wittman, "Not a God of Confusion but Of Peace: Aquinas and the Meaning of Divine Simplicity," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 2 (2016): 151–69. It is important to mention also the wonderful special issue of *Modern Theology* 35, no. 3 (2019), entitled *Catholics and Evangelicals on Divine Simplicity*.

can the multiplicity found in God (whether Trinitarian or otherwise) be reconciled with the simplicity of the divine essence? One important type of multiplicity is that of the divine ideas, which are not only the exemplar causes by which God creates all things (like blueprints for created things) but also God's knowledge of things that are not God.² How can the multiplicity of such ideas be reconciled with divine simplicity? In answer to this question, Gregory Doolan, whose *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* is an essential text in the field, argues that only a close textual analysis of the development of Aquinas's thought on the topic throughout his vast corpus will suffice.³

Doolan finds that, throughout his career, Aquinas consistently affirmed the multiplicity of the divine ideas. If God is perfect and thus knows Godself perfectly, then God must know every way in which beings might imitate or participate in God's essence, which also entails knowing the infinite ways in which beings might fall short of the divine essence. Behind this argument is the principle that God's knowledge of God's essence can be understood either as a form that actualizes knowledge (that by which one knows an object) or as the object or terminus of such knowledge (what is known).⁴ The divine essence simply is the principle of God's knowledge of Godself, but what God knows is also the divine essence in itself and in its infinitude. The divine ideas, then, just are the infinite ways in which God's

A number of perspectives from the Christian Tradition are marshaled to explain the importance of the theme of divine simplicity. Many more could be added.

² Accordingly, the doctrine of the divine ideas is Aquinas's (as well as in Augustine's and Dionysius's) way of engaging the classical Platonic problem of the one and the many. In other words, how has the multiplicity of created things emanated from a single, simple divine source? For a classic treatment of the history of the doctrine of the divine ideas in neo-Platonic and Christian thought, see Norris Clarke, "The Problem of the Reality and Multiplicity of Divine Ideas in Christian Neoplatonism," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (New York: State University of New York Press, 1982), 109–27; Vivian Boland, *Ideas in God According to Saint Thomas Aquinas: Sources and Synthesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

³ Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

⁴ For this distinction between form as a principle of knowledge and form as the object of knowledge, see Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 88–92, 94–97. Discussing the *De veritate*, Doolan states: "[Aquinas] begins by drawing a distinction between two modes by which a form can exist in the intellect. According to the first mode, a form can exist there as the principle of the act of understanding. In this respect, the form is not a principle of the act of understanding (since it is itself produced by such an act), but is rather that which is understood; it is by means of such a form that the knower makes something."

essence can be imitated by creatures, and so they are ultimately identical with God's knowledge of Godself, though they are also multiple in terms of how they relate creatures proportionately to the divine essence. As a result, the multiplicity of the divine ideas does not entail "real" distinctions in the divine essence (only the distinctions between the Trinitarian persons are "real" in this sense), but only "logical" distinctions, such that the divine ideas are both multiple in one sense (as imitations) and one in another (as knowledge of the divine essence).⁵

Doolan's commentary on Aquinas's account of the divine ideas overcomes overly simplistic accounts such as those of Étienne Gilson and James Ross, who argued on the basis of divine simplicity that there is no multiplicity in divine knowledge.⁶ Even so, this recognition of coherence

⁵ For this distinction between real and logical distinctions in Aquinas, see the discussion in Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 87.

⁶ According to Gilson, "at bottom everything St. Thomas said about the Ideas was in his view one more concession made to the language of a philosophy that was not really his own. No doubt it was also the recognition of St. Augustine's authority in theology" (see *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction*, trans. Armand Maurer [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993], 103–6). To him, God only has one idea, namely God's single act of understanding which is identical with the divine essence. It is for this reason that James Ross argues against photo-exemplarist views of the divine ideas when it comes the status of pure possibles: "There is only one divine idea, the same no matter what God does; 'possibles' have no status at all prior to creation" ("Aquinas's Exemplarism; Aquinas's Voluntarism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 [1990]: 173–74). Ultimately, *possibilia* cannot be divine ideas. Ross was largely responding to what would later be a chapter in John Wippel's *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 163–90. These arguments sparked a controversy in which many responded to the positions of Ross and Gilson, both on the multiplicity of divine ideas and on the status of possibles. See Armand Maurer, "James Ross on the Divine Ideas: A Reply," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (1991): 213–20; Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "St. Thomas, James Ross, and Exemplarism: A Reply," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (1990): 221–34; Ross, "Response to Maurer and Dewan," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (1990): 235–43; John F. Wippel, *Thomas Aquinas on the Divine Ideas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993), 9–10, 26–28. Doolan himself provided an account of the divine ideas that stood between the two sides of the debate with his distinction between logical and real distinctions in the divine ideas. Divine ideas are multiple *logically* but one *really*. Moreover, even the *rationes* are divine ideas in terms of God's knowledge of the infinite ways in which God can be participated by creatures, though they are not exemplars, answering the major problem of Ross on the status of possibles (Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 111–17). See also, earlier, Gregory T. Doolan, "Is Thomas's Doctrine of Divine Ideas Thomistic?," in *Wisdom's Apprentice: Thomistic Essays in Honor of Laurence Dewan, O.P.*, ed. Peter A. Kwasniewski (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 153–72.

between the multiplicity of divine ideas and the divine simplicity would benefit from being placed in the wider context of Aquinas's theology of divine naming—the *triplex via*—an approach largely inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius (hereafter Dionysius). In the context of the divine names, Aquinas understood simplicity as part of a negative or apophatic theological stage (i.e., an inquiry into how God is not). For example, in question 3 of the *ST* I, Aquinas opens: "Because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not. . . . Now it can be shown how God is not, by denying Him whatever is opposed to the idea of Him, such as composition, motion, and the like" (prol.). For Aquinas, determining whether a theological concept is compatible or incompatible with divine simplicity is ultimately a consideration of whether the concept entails any form of composition in God. Treatments of the multiplicity and unity of the divine ideas rarely elaborate simplicity in this negative way as a rejection of forms of composition in this larger process of divine naming.⁷

Although many Thomistic scholars have noted the importance of Dionysius for Aquinas's theology and even his account of the divine ideas, what has been insufficiently explored is the way Aquinas utilizes the *triplex via* explicitly in his commentary on *De divinis nominibus* and implicitly in the *ST* to arrive at a solution to this particular problem regarding the simplicity of the divine ideas.⁸ To understand Aquinas's account, it is not

⁷ The closest Doolan comes to discussing the simplicity of the divine ideas in his book is when he states: "Thomas observes that it would be contrary to the simplicity of his intellect to be informed by many species, but it is not contrary to its simplicity that the divine intellect understand many things. Thus, the plurality of ideas does not compromise God's simplicity" (*Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 100–101). This is almost a direct quote from *ST* I, q. 15, a. 2 (which we will discuss in more detail later). Although Doolan comes to the proper conclusion of this text that the multiplicity of divine ideas does not contradict divine simplicity, he does not sufficiently explain why this is the case, why "species a quo" (species by which the agent knows some object) would be problematic. Doolan addresses this concern much more in his recent article, "Divine Ideas and Divine Simplicity," in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, ed. Jonathan Fuqua and Robert Koons (New York: Routledge, 2023), 211–32. Here Doolan reconciles divine ideas and simplicity on the basis of Aquinas's notion of *esse* and the way it grounds the analogy of proportionality, thus with a slightly different emphasis than what I seek to bring here. My purpose is to look more deeply into how Aquinas is making this argument with Dionysian negative and eminence logic in the context of the *triplex via*. Doolan's essay also provides a rich history of this issue of the simplicity of the divine ideas in Plato, Plotinus, and Augustine, which is immensely helpful background.

⁸ See Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 12–14, 107–9. See also Boland, *Ideas in God*,

sufficient to isolate his individual discussions of simplicity and the divine ideas in the *ST*. I argue that one must in fact approach such discussions according to his Dionysian-inspired method moving from the *via causalitatis* (way of causality), to the *via negationis* (the way of negation), and finally to the *via eminentiae* (way of eminence) as he illustrates in the commentary.⁹ Aquinas finds no conflict between the divine ideas and simplicity because he proceeds according to the threefold Dionysian-inspired method. He can make this judgment in the *via eminentiae* precisely because he has cleansed discourse about the divine ideas with the *via negationis* that the doctrine of simplicity simply accomplishes.¹⁰

This essay will proceed in the following way. First, I will lay out the multiple *triplex viae* (threefold ways) that Aquinas develops in his engagement with Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* (*DN*) and the metaphysical principles grounding those methods of divine naming. As we will see,

297–305, who recognizes Dionysius as a source for Aquinas but does not elaborate the importance of the theology of the divine names for his account of the simplicity of the divine ideas. The most notable exception to this is Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 126–29. O'Rourke published before Boland's and Doolan's accounts (in 1992 originally), and O'Rourke's account does show some connection between the divine ideas and the account of the divine names in Aquinas's Dionysian commentary, but does not elaborate on the divine ideas in the way these later scholars would focus their accounts. In many ways, what I am doing here is building and elaborating on what O'Rourke gestures towards in his account of Aquinas's use of Pseudo-Dionysius. I am also drawing heavily from Bernhard Blankenhorn's excellent account of Aquinas's utilization of Dionysius in the context of the divine names in *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 296–316. Blankenhorn's is the most comprehensive treatment on Albert's and Aquinas's uses of Dionysius, showing how they transformed Dionysius for their own theological purposes. The book draws connections throughout between the theology of the divine names and mystical theology in the two authors, modeling the kinds of connections that are relevant to this study.

⁹ Of course, Aquinas uses different language in different contexts, but the three stages are often present in some form.

¹⁰ My point here is not to say that Aquinas is Dionysian in the sense that Aquinas is saying exactly what Dionysius said. Indeed, it will be clear that Aquinas is going beyond what Dionysius said about divine naming and is applying Dionysius's thoughts in a new academic context. Rather, my point is only that Aquinas's commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* provides an important window through which to read his overall perspective, especially that of the *ST*, on the simplicity of the divine ideas. This text was written around the same time that Aquinas was composing the same articles of the *ST* I. Thus, this text represents the proper context in which such ideas were developed. Likewise, I am not trying to discern whether Aquinas understood Dionysius correctly or was a faithful inheritor of the latter's texts.

Aquinas eliminates symbolic naming in favor of a refined focus on causation and the negative dimensions of divine naming. Second, I will explain Aquinas's explicit discussions in the commentary concerning the simplicity of the divine ideas, in the context both of exemplar causality and of divine knowledge. The section will show how Aquinas's reflections on the divine ideas follow the causation, negation, and excess stages of the *triplex via* that he develops elsewhere in the commentary. Finally, I will show that such an approach is not restricted to Aquinas's commentary, but illumines Aquinas's discussion of the simplicity of the divine ideas in the *ST* I.¹¹ Ultimately, if a Thomist aims at fidelity to Thomas himself, a solution to this problem could do worse than following Thomas's own Dionysian-inspired method.

The *Triples Viae* in the Commentary on *De Divinis Nominibus*

In the prologue to his commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*, Aquinas provides a framework for organizing the entire Dionysian corpus in accordance with the various ways in which God is described in Scripture. He begins with a book that has been lost, the *De divinis hypotiposisibus*, in which Dionysius described the unity of the divine essence, as

¹¹ All English translations of the Latin are my own from the text available at aquinas.cc, except where noted. I have consulted the translation in Harry C. Marsh, "Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas' *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1994), 265–556, as well as the translation by the Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine online at aquinas.cc. For the *ST* I discussion in the third section, I use *Summa theologiae: Prima Pars, 1–49*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). The Latin of this text is based on the Leonine edition, transcribed by Roberto Busa and revised by Alarcón. The question of the dating of the commentary on *De divinis nominibus* in relation to the *ST* is a complicated one. Jean-Pierre Torrell admits that the dating of the text is uncertain, and there is some scholarly debate in this regard. Some have argued that the text dates to 1261, while Aquinas was teaching at Orvieto (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work, Third Edition*, trans. Robert Royal [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022], 191–92). However, others including Blankenhorn place the text between 1266 and 1268, while Aquinas was directing a Dominican studium in Rome (*Mystery*, 318–19). Assuming this late dating, Blankenhorn argues that Aquinas wrote the commentary simultaneously with his writing *ST* I, making the relationship and influence between the two texts reciprocal and mutual in nature. However, even if one accepts an earlier date for the commentary, my claim that the texts treat the problem of the simplicity of the divine ideas in similar ways, suggesting some form of connection or influence, still stands even if the question of dating is not completely discerned in the literature.

well as the distinctions between the divine persons. Such knowledge is beyond the capacity of natural reason, since there is no *similitudo* of such a unity-in-distinction among creatures. However, Scripture also describes God in various ways that share enough of a likeness with created things as to be intelligible to reason. One such way Scripture names God, according to the proemium of the commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, is through a similitude that is derived from God and exists in some limited way in creatures, such as “from the first Good are all goods and from the first life are all living things,” and these similitudes that have their source in God but extend to created things are the focus of this work of Dionysius. The other form of similitude is that which is drawn from created things and applied to God, whether symbolically or metaphorically, such as calling God a shepherd. They are the focus of the work *De simbolica theologia*. Finally, the same proemium to the commentary on the *Divine Names* concludes that, since none of these similitudes capture all that God is in the divine essence, both the symbolic descriptions and the divine names must ultimately be denied (*remotio*) of God insofar as they are known in creatures. Such a focus on the mystery of God as ultimately unknowable is the concern of the *De mistica theologia*, using *mistica* in the sense of hidden.”

Although Aquinas describes these as a structure for organizing the Dionysian corpus, they also have a unique role in introducing the themes found in the commentary itself. According to Fran O’Rourke in his *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, “already in the *prooemium*, therefore, Aquinas presents a comprehensive approach to the mystery of God” that contains its own *triplex via*.¹² There is a *via causalitatis* in which perfections are ascribed to God that are deficient in creatures as in *De divinis nominibus*, a *via symbolica* in which creaturely symbols are ascribed to God as in the *De simbolica theologia*, and a *via negationis* in which all creaturely descriptions are negated as in the *De mistica theologia*.¹³ In the *prooemium*, then, Aquinas not only introduces the positive and negative dimensions of divine naming and gestures towards one of the important threefold paths that is central to the commentary on the *De divinis nominibus*; he also places the entire discussion in the context of holy Scripture, which teaches believers how to name God according to this threefold way.

Aquinas further highlights this importance of Scripture in lectio 1 of his commentary on *DN I*, in which he draws from Dionysius’s citation of

¹² See O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 30. This structure and its implications for Aquinas’s appropriation of Dionysius have also been elaborated by Blankenhorn (see *Mystery*, 320–23).

¹³ O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 30–31.

1 Cor 2:4: "Not in persuasive words of human reason but in the manifestation of the spirit and of power." Human reason is not sufficient in itself to know divine things and so requires revelation as handed down by the Holy Spirit in Scripture because of the principle of proportion: "It is always necessary that the object of the cognitive power be proportionate to the power of the knower." This principle can be applied both to God and to created intellects. On the one hand, only God can perfectly know what God is, since only a supersubstantial (*supersubstantialem*) intellect (which God is) can know such a supersubstantiality, though God is in this way unknowable to us. The supersubstantiality is unknown to us not because it has some defect, but because it is an *excessum* of intelligibility "above created reason and intellect and even above created substance itself which is an object commensurate with created intellect." In other words, created intellects know created objects, and only an uncreated knower can know an uncreated, supersubstantial object, insofar as the respective intellects have a likeness to the object known.

In the same *lectio*, Aquinas further explains the disproportionality between human intellect and the divine essence by the principle that a "superior grade of beings cannot be comprehended through an inferior, as intelligibles cannot be comprehended perfectly through sensibles nor simple things through composites nor incorporeals through corporeals." In all of these cases, there is a higher grade of being that cannot be fully communicated by a lower grade, since the higher grade contains a greater unity than the lower grade. Since God is above every order of existing things (all of these categorical distinctions), God cannot be comprehended from anything that exists. Not only is God's supersubstantial essence incomprehensible because it is an excess of intelligibility, but it is also a higher grade of reality than any other, and so human intellect, which has knowledge only of things that are sensible, composite, and corporeal, cannot comprehend that which is above even intelligible, simple, and incorporeal things.

Although created intellects are unable to know God's supersubstantial essence in itself for these reasons, Aquinas maintains that humans are not left wholly ignorant of God. Using the image of light, Aquinas describes Scripture itself as "a certain light (*lumen*) through the mode of a ray derived from the first truth" (lec. 1). Scripture can be believed as wise and true because it is handed down by God who is Truth itself. The light of Scripture does not enable humans to see the divine essence or to know as God knows, but it does illumine the human intellect as much as possible "as if constrained by fixed limits, around divine things" (lec. 1). Aquinas states that the human intellect extends (*extendit*) towards divine things

only because Scripture itself extends towards divine things, and so the extent to which the light of Scripture can do so becomes a constraint on the possibilities of human knowledge. In other words, divine things can be revealed only according to the proportion of the recipient of such revelation. Humans cannot know God as God knows God, but humans can know God in a distinctively human way.

It might seem from this analysis that Aquinas is caught in a contradiction here, since he says that humans cannot know the divine essence but the human intellect can know God in a distinctively human way. How can these two statements both be true? It is here that Aquinas's account of the divine names—within his wider account of divine causality and the similitude that exists between effects and their cause—becomes so important. Since human (created) knowledge is commensurate with created things, “names imposed by us do not signify [divine things] in so far as it befits divine excellence, but in so far as it concerns the existence of created things” (*In I de div. nom.*, lec. 1). Names are able to signify the divine essence in this way (i.e., as it concerns the existence of created things) because:

The *esse* [existence] of created things is derived from the divine *esse* according to a certain deficient assimilation. Therefore, insofar as a similitude of any kind is of created things to God, names imposed by us are able to be spoken of God, not indeed as they are spoken of creatures, but through a certain excess. (lec.1)

Since all created *esse* is derived from the divine *esse*, these created effects bear a certain similitude to the divine *esse*, enabling humans to name God according to excess, meaning that whatever likeness is identified between created things and God exists more eminently in God than in the effect that bears that resemblance. In other words, the cause is always greater than the effect, but the effect always resembles the cause in some limited way. If created things did not bear such a limited likeness to their divine source, then their *esse* or existence could not be properly said to be derived from the divine existence.

This principle of divine causation, then, provides the grounds of the possibility for divine naming, which for Aquinas is the distinctive way in which humans, as created beings, can speak and make judgments about the divine essence on this side of the eschaton.¹⁴ However, divine causation entails the opposite being true as well:

¹⁴ For the connection between divine naming in Aquinas and judgment, see Blankenhorn,

But as the names imposed by us can be said of God in that there is some similitude of creatures to God, thus insofar as creatures defect from the representation of God, the names imposed by us can be removed from God and their opposites can be predicated. (*In I de div. nom.*, lec. 1)

By this, Aquinas does not merely mean that the names we apply to God should be simply clarified such as in the example of calling God “unintelligible intellect,” which is a way of saying that God’s knowing is beyond our created way of knowing. Rather, Aquinas means that, with every similarity that exists between the effect and the cause, there exists an even greater dissimilarity between the creaturely meaning of the names we apply to God and the divine essence. God can be described as reason and this can be denied of God as well in terms of its creaturely signification.

Divine causation ultimately provides the grounds for both of these postures towards the possibility of human knowledge of God, and both must ultimately be kept in tension with the other. We might call these the positive and negative moments in human cognition of God. However, these different postures towards the human capacity to know God are not merely reciprocal moments of spiritual or mystical experience that one might undergo at any one time; they describe an orderly process by which humans name God. Aquinas, in particular, draws from these two principles the entire method or set of methods for divine naming that I earlier described as the *triplex via*, the threefold process by which humans reliably name the divine essence. Aquinas provides different orderings and stages of his *triplex via* in different parts of the Dionysian commentary, but what remains consistent is how he extends these positive (similitude) and negative (dissimilitude) principles of divine naming into a theological method.

One particular instantiation of the *triplex via* found in the commentary reflects the meta-structure by which Aquinas arranged the entire Dionysian

Mystery, 302–3. According to Blankenhorn, what is being described in divine naming is not knowledge, but rather speech or signification: “Removing and referring involve acts of judgment. We know and signify that God’s goodness is without limitation, but we cannot know or say what this infinite goodness is.” In this, there is always an excess of understanding, since humans will never grasp the divine essence comprehensively. Only in the eschaton will we know God’s *quid sit*. Yet, in this life, humans are able to know that God is (the five ways) and are able to make true judgments about the divine nature (though not knowing God’s *quid sit*) through the divine names. Blankenhorn in this context is drawing from Gregory Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 350–51.

corpus in the prooemium.¹⁵ There, his order was the *via causalitatis* of *De divinis nominibus*, followed by the *via symbolica* of the *De symbolica theologia*, and finally the *via negationis* of the *De mistica theologia*. Likewise, Aquinas describes three modes of divine naming. The first mode is remotion, and Aquinas describes it as the most proper way to name God, since it entails the ultimate removal of all descriptions that do not befit the divine essence. Since God is above everything that can be thought by humans, the theologian must “praise God as superexcellently segregated from every disposition, which can be referred to created things” (*In I de div. nom.*, lec. 3). In other words, the theologian must praise God by describing what God is not, such as not having motion, the life of living things, fantasy, opinion, deliberation, and so on. Since God’s essence (what God is) surpasses all created things, all of these things that pertain to creatures must be denied of God in accordance with the *via negationis*.

The second and third modes of divine naming are grounded in the principle of similitude between created things and their source, as discussed earlier. The first and most important is the *via causalitatis*, or naming God as the cause of all things. Since effects proceed on the basis of a certain assimilation to their cause, the cause pre-contains within itself all similitudes that it has with everything that proceeds from it. In the case of the relationship between God and created things, all things share or participate in the divine *esse* or existence to a certain degree, and so, from created *esse*, the divine source of all *esse* can be named as *Esse* itself, or Being itself. However, naming the transcendent cause of all *esse* does not entail using terms as if they were univocal in both senses, as it is when the term “human” is used of “one generating and one generated,” both being humans in the same sense. Rather, the name *esse* is ascribed to God from creatures in a supereminent way, just as he describes the sun as the source of heat while distinguishing it from fire, which only participates in that source and is a limited instantiation of it.¹⁶

¹⁵ For a discussion of the diversity of orderings and arrangements of the *triplex via*, see Michael Ewbank, “Diverse Orderings of Dionysius’s *Triplex Via* by St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Mediaeval Studies* 52 (1990): 82–109.

¹⁶ See *In I de div. nom.*, lec. 3. For Aquinas, the sun was the source of all heat. He would later use this image again in a similar context in *ST I*, q. 4, a. 3, resp. That said, what is strange in the commentary is that Aquinas discusses the sun as having heat in a supereminent way while he would deny that the sun is hot in other writings, such as *In I sent.* d. 8, q. 1, a. 2, corp. Why would Aquinas describe the sun as hot supereminently when he would say in other earlier and later texts that the sun as hot is an equivocation? Much of this can probably be explained by the commentary form, as Aquinas will later use Dionysian supereminent language much more sparingly. Still, the issue of the sun’s

In lectio 1 of the commentary on *DN V*, Aquinas says the same of other universal perfections by which humans name God such as Good itself, Life itself, and Wisdom itself. Concerning these perfections, the Platonists, according to Aquinas, “reduced universal effects into [distinct] universal causes,” in the sense that the Good is the most universal cause of goodness in things, and below the Good there is the cause that gives *esse* (existence) to things and a cause that gives life to things among others.¹⁷ In other words, there are many deities that account for different aspects of reality. Against this so-called Platonic view, however, Aquinas interprets Dionysius as arguing that, rather than multiple universal causes of things, there is only one principle which is the Good itself, *esse* itself, Life itself, and so on, all at once. All of these so-called principles are really names that refer to the one divine essence as the universal principle or cause, since they pertain to the universal perfections reflected in created things, just as *esse* was ascribed to God supereminently and to creatures derivatively in lectio 3 on *DN I*. Likewise, God is Life itself and creatures participate in the divine life as living effects of the source of all life.

The second positive or similitude-based mode of divine naming is that of the *via simbolica*, by which the theologian even describes God in terms of particulars such as those seen by the writers of Scripture in visions, rather than merely in terms of universal perfections.¹⁸ In these prophetic contexts, God is displayed in a variety of created forms, sometimes human or even fire, as in the case of Moses seeing God as a burning bush in Exodus. However, such symbols, being true of God only in a metaphorical sense and not in the supereminent way of the *via causalitatis*, would already be negated in the *via negationis*, so this mode of divine naming does not bear as much weight for the commentary as the former two *viae*.¹⁹ In fact,

heat is an interesting one for him to go back and forth on. Another interpretive option is that he means something more like light here, which Aquinas is willing to ascribe to the sun as opposed to heat. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

¹⁷ See *In V de div. nom.*, lec. 1. See also the discussion in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, and Richard Taylor (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 19–27. Here, Aquinas discusses the *Platonici* once again and cites Dionysius’s *DN V* (lec. 1), against their account of gods and divine causality. The text concerns proposition 3 of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology*.

¹⁸ By “even describes God in terms of particulars,” I mean as opposed to naming God only through those names that denote *universal* causes.

¹⁹ As I mentioned at the start of the section, another reason that the *via simbolica* does not receive as much attention is that Dionysius dedicated the topic to another work

Aquinas's alternative rendition of the *triplex via* in lectio 3 on DN VII eliminates the *via symbolica* entirely in favor of a different stage.

According to O'Rourke, such a shift displays Aquinas "bringing refined metaphysical insight" to the text of Dionysius.²⁰ In this latter threefold path, Aquinas distinguishes between naming God (1) according to ablation, (2) according to excess, and (3) according to causation (lec. 4 on *De div. nom.* VII). Ablation is the stage where everything unfitting to say of God is denied, thus capturing the *via negationis* of Aquinas's earlier structure. Causation corresponds to the earlier *via causalitatis* wherein God is named according to universal perfections, since God is the single principle of all perfections. Unlike ablation and causation, however, Aquinas's principle of excess entails denying even the perfections of creatures as fitting for the divine nature, at least in terms of their creaturely or finite meaning. Thus, God is named Wisdom according to causation, but this is also denied of God in its creaturely mode of signification, revealing God as Wisdom beyond wisdom. As O'Rourke states, "[Aquinas] is able to distinguish between concepts which must be removed from God absolutely and those which are denied only in their creaturely mode in order to be attributed to him [positively] in a pre-eminent manner."²¹ Such an approach to divine

that has been lost. The *De divinis nominibus* focuses on the universal perfections rather than the particular symbolic names.

²⁰ See O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 34–35. However, O'Rourke understood the development here as a distinguishing of different modes of negation. Against this perspective on Aquinas's account of eminence as a form of remotion, see Blankenhorn, *Mystery*, 312–16, e.g.: "For Dionysius, transcending negations (*aphaireseis*) surpass affirmations and their complementary negations (*apophaseis*) so as to emphasize the God–creation difference and to posit God's transcendence. It is here that we find such names as 'beyond Good.' Thomas was unaware of the distinction between these two types of negations. Consequently, he seems not to have recognized that the Dionysian way of eminence has a primarily negative meaning. Aquinas could thus split eminent names from transcending negations, even as his way of eminence includes part of the Areopagite's doctrinal intention behind transcending negations. Thomas's doctrine of divine eminence depends on the manner in which he intertwines eminence with the way of causality—two ways that Dionysius keeps neatly distinct." In other words, eminence is a stage of divine naming that follows remotion but maintains the application of a certain perfection to God. In fact, Aquinas's position is that perfections have their meaning more fundamentally in God than in their creaturely mode of signification. To put it in more recent terms, his account of divine naming is a movement from cataphatic to apophatic to a higher cataphatic approach that has been cleansed of creaturely signification. I am in agreement with O'Rourke that this is a development in Aquinas's thinking, but I agree with Blankenhorn's explanation of the significance of this development.

²¹ See O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 34–35. Rocca also describes the importance of these

naming, then, includes not only a negative and a positive dimension but a way of eminence (*per eminentiam*) as well.²²

The *Triplex Via* and the Simplicity of the Divine Ideas

It is this latter form of the *triplex via* (especially the ways of causation and excess) that has the most relevance for Aquinas's account of the simplicity of the divine ideas in the commentary, especially because lectio 3 on *DN VII*, which contains Aquinas's discussion of this particular form of the *triplex via*, is itself situated in a larger discussion of the divine ideas that runs throughout VII. In this text, whose focus is the divine name *sapientia*, Aquinas explains the divine ideas in terms of how God can know things other than Godself, which is one function of Aquinas's doctrine of the divine ideas, according to Doolan.²³ In addition to this function, the divine ideas also serve as the exemplar causes of all created things, and Aquinas treats this dimension of the divine ideas in *DN V*, which focuses on the divine name *esse*. Although each text pertains to a distinct function of the divine ideas in Aquinas's thought, both texts (*De div. nom.* V and VII) treat the problem of the simplicity of the divine ideas by following the *triplex via*, even if *DN V* does not lay out the structure as explicitly.

In lectio 3 on *DN V*, Aquinas contextualizes his account of the divine names as exemplar causes by once again drawing from the opposition between Dionysius and the *Platonici*, for whom God could be described only as the source of all *esse*, but not of the plurality found in created things. To account for the differences among things, they posed various secondary causes "by which things are determined to their proper natures"

two categories of negation for Aquinas's theology, calling ablation "absolute qualitative negations" and calling excess "objective modal negations" (*Speaking the Incomprehensible*, 60–62).

²² Although here, Aquinas uses the language of *excessum*, he also often uses the term *eminentiam* as a synonym. O'Rourke mentions this term being used in the *triplex via* in Aquinas's commentary on Lombard's *Sentences—In I sent.*, d. 3, proem. (*Pseudo-Dionysius*, 35–36). Another important example is *Super Rom* 1, lec. 6, no. 115. Although causation and negation remain consistent, Aquinas uses different terms for the way of eminence/excellence/excess, though all three terms denote the same meaning. As we will see, Aquinas often uses a different word for this *via* in the *ST* as well.

²³ Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 12–14. This is where Doolan traces the development of Aquinas's understanding of these two functions of the divine ideas. In fact, the commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* marks a turning point in Aquinas's thought, where he gains greater clarity on how to delineate these two sides of the divine ideas: *exemplaria* and *rationes*.

(i.e., what distinguishes this thing from that thing). As a result, such causes were called the exemplars (*exemplaria*) of created things, since they provided the perfect and ideal archetype for which a created thing is a mere instantiation, as humans are instantiations of the ideal human being, the exemplar of humanness. However, Dionysius placed all of these exemplars together in the mind of God because God is the cause not only of the *esse*, the unity of all things, but also the diverse properties that things have.

In order to clarify how God, who is simple, can be the source both of the unity and of the multiplicity of things, Aquinas distinguishes in this *lectio* between two types of divine ideas, *rationes* and *exemplaria*. On account of God's knowledge of God's infinite divine essence, including knowledge of divine unity and power, God knows "whatever exists in God virtually." By "virtually" (*virtualiter*), Aquinas simply means that God knows the many diverse ways (i.e., properties) in which divine *esse* can be participated by creatures, including ways that are never actualized. However, not all of these virtual *rationes* are exemplars, since "not all things which God knows to be able to be produced from Godself does God will to produce in the nature of things."²⁴ For a divine *ratio* to be an exemplar, it must be a *ratio* that God intends to actualize or to which God wills to grant *esse*. Moreover, Aquinas describes God's exemplarity as an artist who produces artifacts (*artificiata*) in accordance with the plan in the artist's mind. Such *rationes* are productive of created things, and are predefinitions (*praediffinitiones*) or predestinations (*praedestinationes*) by which God creates diverse things with diverse participations in divine *esse*.

Since Aquinas follows Dionysius in understanding God as the source not only of *esse* in things but also of their plurality by posing the divine ideas, he is adamant that such ideas do not entail a plurality in God, at least not in terms of posing a real plurality in the divine essence in addition to the plurality of divine persons. The exemplars might be multiple in terms of their relationship to diverse kinds of created things, but they are ultimately one in God:

For in themselves all creatures are finite; but in God they are infinite, since in God they are the divine essence itself; . . . in themselves they

²⁴ *In V de div. nom.*, lec. 3. This is a development from Aquinas's account of the theme in his *De veritate*. See Carl Vater, "An Inconsistency in Aquinas's *De veritate* Account of Divine Ideas," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 18, no. 2 (2020): 639–52. Aquinas's earlier teaching on divine ideas as exemplars was ambiguous on Vater's account, but Aquinas later began to sharply distinguish between divine ideas as *rationes* and as exemplars (the ideas to be created or actualized).

have opposition and diversity, but in God they are conjoined simultaneously; . . . in themselves they have multitude, but in God they are one. (*In V de div. nom.*, lec. 3)

In accordance with the *via causalitatis*, the divine ideas (the *rationes* that are exemplars) are proposed by Aquinas to account for how God could be the source or principle of diverse things such that the multiplicity of things pre-exists in God as the single source of all. There is plurality in creation because of the divine exemplars, the divine ideas that God actualizes by bestowing a share of *esse*, but this plurality is ultimately unified in the divine essence. In positing the divine ideas, Aquinas is naming God as the cause of all or as *esse* itself, since even in plurality, created things bear a similitude to divine *esse* as they participate according to their exemplar.

After elaborating on how all things pre-exist in the mind of God on the basis of divine causation, Aquinas turns toward naming God as simple *esse* in accordance with the principle of ablation (*via negationis*) and excess (the *via eminentiae*). God “pre-possesses” the exemplars of all things in the divine mind, but God has these exemplars in a way different from how created things share in them. Repeating his apophatic refrain, Aquinas states, “God is above all things as existing supereminently before all things” (bk. V, lec. 2). God contains all things in Godself, but not “according to some composition, but in that God according to a single unity infuses *esse* into all things” (lec. 2). In other words, the divine ideas exist in the divine mind *simply* or in accordance with divine simplicity. As he would later articulate, “since the divine essence bestows *esse* to all things, it prepossesses all things in itself, not according to some composition, but according to the most simple [*simplicissimam*] unity, refuting all plurality” (lec. 3). It is key that simplicity is not merely synonymous with saying that the divine ideas are one in the divine essence; rather it clarifies that such divine unity lacks all forms of composition, and so it grounds the eminence or excess claim that God is supersubstantial, a unity above all created things.

Rather than granting the theologian greater understanding of the similitude that exists between creation and God, simplicity describes how God is different from created things, since all created things are composed in some way. In its most basic form, composition means being made up of parts, but the kind of composition that Aquinas is most concerned about is composition of potentiality and participation, wherein a thing is not equivalent to what makes it intelligible, and so is ultimately derivative from that higher source as forms are ontologically prior to that which participates

in the form.²⁵ Created things relate to their divine cause as things which move from potentiality to actuality, whether in terms of their coming to be at all or of their coming to have particular properties that distinguish them from other things, that determine them in a certain way as the form of a dog gives intelligibility to a concrete dog. In other words, their concrete existence (that they exist) is distinct from their essence (what they are, their intelligibility). However, all things are not in God in such a way that, by containing within Godself the exemplars of all things, God shares in or participates them as if they were prior to the divine essence, nor is God actualized in any way by granting a bestowal of *esse* to created things. Following Dionysius, Aquinas illustrates such simplicity or lack of composition by the image of the sun. For him, the sun “changes those things which are changed in the nature of things” while remaining itself unchanged as it shines upon them (*In V de div. nom.*, lec. 3).

Aquinas further elaborates on the composition entailed in participation by discussing Dionysius’s statements regarding Clement the Philosopher, providing another reason for Aquinas’s objection to the *Platonici* understanding of exemplarity as he understands it. Aquinas describes how Dionysius attributes to Clement the opinion that “certain supreme separated beings” are the principles of things in such a way that some principles are higher and others are lower (lec. 3). For Aquinas, these exemplars are not perfect, since they need other exemplars: “They are not even simplicities, since they are simultaneously exemplars and exemplified” (lec. 3). Such exemplars would not be simple, because their existence depends on the higher exemplars which they participate. Their unity would certainly be a higher unity than that of material and bodily things that exist in the realm of change and alteration, but their unity would still be a composed unity, since they themselves would participate in higher principles only to a certain degree and they would have their existence from those higher principles (and so their existence would be derivative).

²⁵ See the definition of simplicity given by Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 78: “Being composed in one or another way means that a concrete thing does not coincide with its—substantial or accidental—form by which it is determined in a certain respect. By means of the language of composition, Thomas wants to account for the fact that concrete reality, as it is given in human experience, is not immediately intelligible, but only becomes intelligible through reducing discursively the complex whole into its intelligible principles and causes. Composition is the essential mark of being constituted by principles or causes, in the light of which the composed thing becomes intelligible. What is composed is thus necessarily derivative in character and as such dependent on something that is simple and prior.”

Such composition, pertaining to existence that is derived in any sense, does not apply to God, since God's communication of Godself in terms of *esse*, life, wisdom, and so on entails composition only within created things. In addition to the sun, Aquinas also uses the image of a sound or voice: "One voice existing the same is participated by many hearers; for it is one voice according to principle but multiple according to diffusion" (lec. 3). The divine exemplars or ideas are not to be understood as making up diverse parts of the divine essence that make God divine, but rather to "virtually pre-exist in His simple essence," since divine ideas simply are the infinite ways in which God can be participated, not the infinite ways in which God participates. By arguing for the simplicity of the divine ideas in the divine essence, then, Aquinas is applying the rule that "nothing that we see in the order of creatures [i.e., composition] do we esteem to be God or something befitting God" apart from the perfections that flow from God into creatures in virtue of divine causation (*In VII de div. nom.*, lec. 4). Simplicity or the denial of composition in God, then, just is the way of ablation or remotion as it appears in *DN V*, and it sets up the claim of the way of eminence that the divine ideas are simply one in God in a super-substantial way beyond any finite understanding of exemplarity, whether Platonic or otherwise. One begins with the claim of the simple unity of the divine ideas, denies or removes its creaturely signification, and with the way of eminence, returns to the judgment of its truth with its supersubstantiality in mind.

Aquinas follows a similar, though less detailed, approach to the simplicity of the divine ideas in *DN VII*, as he articulates how the divine ideas or exemplars are God's knowledge of things that are not God. Considering *Sapientia* as a divine name for God, Aquinas questions how God can know sensible things or any other things at all, since God in Godself is not sensible, an issue raised by Heb 4: "Everything is bare and open to his [God's] eyes and no creature is not in his vision" (bk. VII, lec. 3). In accordance with the *via causalitatis*, God knows all created things as effects which have proceeded from Godself through God's bestowal of *esse* on all created things. God knows such effects by knowing God's own essence because, in knowing God's essence, God knows the infinite ways in which divine *esse* can be participated by creatures. Doolan specifies that, in this knowledge of his essence, the divine ideas "are constituted in his considering his essence according to the different proportions it has in relation to his effects."²⁶

²⁶ Doolan, "Divine Ideas and Divine Simplicity," 223. Again, see Doolan's helpful analysis of the analogy of proportionality (of *esse*) for understanding how God knows things

Further, God's knowledge of those ways of participating in divine *esse* that are actualized (i.e., exemplars) just are God's knowledge of created things, since they are not merely *rationes*, but God's knowledge of actually existing things.

Since God knows things outside of God through Godself as the cause of those things, Aquinas describes God as knowing "material things immaterially and divisible things indivisibly and many things unitively, namely in so far as it knows all things and produces them through one thing which is its essence" (bk. VII, lec. 3). In other words, God knows all things, as described in Heb 4, but in a uniquely divine way, as a source. In order to further clarify the nature of this divine mode of knowledge, he contrasts divine knowledge with human knowledge, maintaining that God knows created things only through Godself (not through created effects), whereas humans can know God only through creatures, which bear a similitude to God by participating divine *esse*. Even though God knows the effects that proceed from the divine essence, such knowledge, according to Aquinas, God "pre-receives in Godself, though not in the mode of composition, but through the mode of uniformity and simplicity" (lec. 5). Through the way of ablation, Aquinas affirms the simplicity of God by denying any composition in the divine ideas as God's knowledge of created things.

Human knowledge entails composition, since it operates by sensation and deliberation, wherein humans are in a state of potential with regard to knowledge until they come to know particular objects separately and singularly (i.e., one at a time) by abstracting the form of the thing and by participating God who enables the human passive intellect to be in act. However, the divine essence is beyond these forms of knowing:

Not that God sends Godself out separately by seeing singulars as we separately apply our intellect to diverse things, but through one containing of a cause, namely since by knowing one cause containing all things God knows all things. (*In VII de div. nom.*, lec. 3)

By describing the divine ideas (or God's knowledge of created things) as simple in God, Aquinas denies of God any form of composition pertaining to knowledge, especially the composition whereby one moves from a state of potentiality to actuality in knowing or the composition wherein one must participate in another in order to know, just as humans can

know only by participating God as the source of intellectual light. Such composition is unbefitting of the divine essence (the source), and so must be removed (*remotio*) from God absolutely.

Although composed forms of knowing are removed from God through the affirmation of divine simplicity, knowledge or wisdom itself is still affirmed in accordance with the *via eminentiae*, maintaining as it does the creature's relation to God in causality along with the denial of that creaturely mode of signification. Nothing is outside or beyond the scope of God's knowledge, but as a result of divine simplicity, such divine knowledge cannot be understood in a finite way. Whatever God's mode of knowing is, it is beyond anything that finite creatures can comprehend, leading Aquinas to conclude: "Divine reason is more simple above all simplicity and is absolute, . . . insofar as it is above all things according to its supersubstantiality" (bk. VII, lec. 5). After the removal of what is unbefitting of the divine essence, namely composition, Aquinas returns to God's knowledge of all things as a supersubstantial knowledge. Even though the divine ideas are plural in their relation to creatures, Aquinas maintains that such plurality does not contradict divine simplicity as long as one follows the *triplex via*, naming God as cause of all things, as removed from all things, and as exceeding all things.

The Simplicity of the Divine Ideas in the *Summa Theologiae*

As we have seen, Aquinas follows the *triplex via* closely in his commentary on *DN VII* as he argues for the simplicity of the divine ideas in God. However, how does he align this approach to the problem with his discussion of the divine ideas in question 15 of *ST I*, where he answers in the affirmative that there are many ideas in the divine mind? Analyzing this classic passage on the divine ideas in the wider context of the *ST I* will help us to see precisely *how* Aquinas makes his argument about their simplicity, rather than merely *what* he says. Even though Aquinas does not always cite Dionysius explicitly in these contexts, it will become clear how Aquinas follows the relevant stages of the *triplex via* in terms of both the order of topics and the manner of argument.²⁷

²⁷ Understanding questions 2–4 of *ST I* as reflecting the structure of the *triplex via* has been proposed and elaborated by Te Velde in *Aquinas on God*, 77–82. Te Velde argues that there is in fact a dialectic between simplicity and perfection throughout the *ST I* discussion of the divine essence. For him, Aquinas goes back and forth between the negative and eminentive dimensions of divine naming throughout the discussion of topics. Blankenhorn adds some complexity into the mix, since he finds the entirety of

Even before Aquinas discusses the simplicity of the divine ideas explicitly, he already lays the groundwork for his solution in questions 2–4. In article 3 of question 2, Aquinas provides five ways for proving the existence of God (*an deus sit*) in which he moves from the plurality of created things to their transcendent source. For example, the third way is an argument from possibility and necessity. Aquinas states that, among the things found in nature, some things are possible either to exist or not to exist, since they are generated and are subject to corruption (resp.). However, such generated and corruptible things cannot always exist, since it is possible for them not to exist, and at some point they in fact did not exist, but came into existence through something that already exists. However, if everything was possible not to exist, then at some time there was nothing in existence, and such nothingness could not generate the many things that are observed in nature. Aquinas points out that, since many things do in fact exist, there must be something that exists necessarily, having no potentiality, since mere potentiality could not account for created things.

Another example is the fourth way, which argues from the gradation found in things. Among created things, some things are better (in terms of goodness) or worse than others, but this aspect of human language entails a certain maximum goodness or wisdom, for example, to which these greater or lesser forms are compared (what enables them to be described as less or more). There must, then, be “something truest, something best, something noblest and consequently, something which is uttermost being” (q. 2, a. 3, resp.). In other words, there must be something which is the maximum or highest cause of all being, goodness, and every perfection since the highest thing in any genus is the cause of everything in that genus. Of course, God is not a part of any genus, but he is the highest source of all perfection. Even though Aquinas does not cite Dionysius in these arguments, he already provides a *via causalitatis*, which provides the positive dimension of naming God as possessing the quality of existence and actuality as cause of all beings.²⁸

Immediately after arguing for God’s existence, Aquinas argues for divine simplicity as a way of speaking not about what God is (*quid sit*), but rather what God is not (*quid non sit*). His approach is not to define simplicity such that it is a positive attribute that can be understood and applied to

the *triplex via* in each of the topics under discussion, including the account of the five ways (*Mystery*, 298–300). I think it is possible to maintain both of these applications of the *triplex via* in *ST I*.

²⁸ See again Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 76–77.

God as the divine names like *esse*, *bonum*, and *veritas* are used.²⁹ Instead, Aquinas shows how God is not “by denying Him whatever is opposed to the idea of Him, viz. composition, motion, and the like” (q. 3, prol.). Simplicity just is the denial of any composition in the divine essence, and so as a purely negative mode of reasoning, it aligns with Aquinas’s earlier approach to the Dionysian *via negationis* or ablation, wherein things are denied of the divine essence that are not fittingly ascribed to God in any sense. An important example of this for our purposes can be found in article 1 of question 3, where Aquinas determines whether God is a body. In the objections, Aquinas raises examples where Scripture ascribes a body to God, whether as having dimensions (Job 11:8–9), having a figure or quantity (Gen 1:26, Heb 1:3), having eyes and hands (Job 40:4, Ps 33:16), or having posture (Isa 6:1).

In the *respondeo* of article 1, Aquinas argues on the basis of remotion or ablation that such qualities cannot be attributed to God because they entail a form of composition, namely potentiality. If God is ontologically first as the cause of all beings, then there cannot be any potentiality in God, since, “absolutely speaking, actuality is prior to potentiality; for whatever is in potentiality can be reduced to actuality only by some being in actuality.” As we saw in the third way, God cannot have any potentiality if God is understood to be the necessary source of all that exists, since otherwise God would need some other being in act to account for God’s actuality and would not be ontologically first. As a result, God cannot have a body, because bodies entail potentiality; they can be either animate or inanimate, and they can be infinitely divided in terms of their continuity. Even though Scripture ascribes a body to God in various contexts, such passages must be relegated to metaphorical status, and so ultimately denied of God (*via negationis* or ablation), since they ascribe potentiality, and so composition, to the divine nature.

With the *via causalitatis* and the *via negationis* in place with questions 2 and 3, Aquinas proceeds in question 4 to discuss the perfection of God, which extends the argument of the fourth way of question 2 into a *via eminentiae*. In article 2 of question 4, more specifically, Aquinas argues that the perfections of all things are in God. Citing *DNV*, Aquinas states in the

²⁹ Yet, see Blankenhorn, *Mystery*, 310–11. Blankenhorn maintains that Aquinas employs negations as quasi-eminent names, saying of simplicity that it “removes complexity and unfolds a positive divine attribute.” I largely agree with calling even negative terms like simplicity quasi-eminent names, but my point here is that such names are used by Aquinas to perform a negative function. There is something being said of God in calling God simple, but the word’s function is negative in denying any composition.

sed contra: “God in His one existence prepossesses all things.” Utilizing the same argumentation found in his Dionysian commentary, Aquinas argues that whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in an effective cause, either in the same way as when humans beget humans or in a more eminent way, as in the sun producing lesser participants in the sun’s power (this exact example was found in *In V de div. nom.*, lec. 5). The latter example illustrates the way effects relate to God as cause, leading Aquinas to conclude: “Since therefore God is the first effective cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way” (q. 4, a. 2, resp.). Although Aquinas has dropped the “super-” language of the commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, he retains the language of eminence (*secundum eminentiorum modum*), enabling him to say that perfections are found in God and can be attributed to God, though such attribution must be understood in a more eminent way than can be communicated by creaturely attribution.³⁰ The *triplex via* thus provides an important structural principle for the early questions of *ST I*.

In addition to merely structural influence, the *triplex via* of the commentary on the *De divinis nominibus* also shows up more directly in Aquinas’s account of divine naming.³¹ In *ST I*, q. 12, a. 12, Aquinas argues that God’s

³⁰ See Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible*, 49–50: “The terminology of the *triplex via* is very fluid in Aquinas. The way of causality is expressed by *causa* (cause), *causalitatis*, and infrequently *habitus* (relation); the way of preeminence is signified by *excessus* (excess), *eminentia* (eminence or pre-eminence), *excellencia* (excellence), and the prefix *super* (above); and the way of negation is denoted by *ablatio* and *privatio* (removal), *separatio* and *segregatio* (separation), *abnegatio* (denial), *remotio* (removal), and *negatio* (negation)—the last two being the frequently used terms.” Thus, *eminentia* is a proper way of articulating the way of eminence. Aquinas continues this line of reasoning in *ST I*, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1: “The same things are similar to God and dissimilar; similar according to how they imitate Him, just as it pertains to him who is not perfectly imitable to be imitated; dissimilar according as they are deficient from their cause; not only according to intension and remission as something less white is deficient from a something more white but because it is not fitting, neither according to species, nor according to genus.” Notice especially that what makes creaturely perfection so different from God is the way such perfections are participated in the context of species and genus, both of which are types of composition found in things. Thus, what sets God apart from created things is God’s simplicity, which as the *via negationis*, provides the grounds for the *via eminentiae*. Moreover, the particular structure of the *Summa* discussion here is an interesting and logical way of structuring the *triplex via* (cause, negation, eminence), considering the fluidity of the structure and terms found throughout Aquinas’s corpus.

³¹ For the importance of the *triplex via* in this particular context, see Blankenhorn, *Mystery*, 301–8. See also O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 37–41.

essence cannot be known by natural reason. In doing so, he lists the three stages of the *triplex via* without necessarily attributing it to Dionysius:

Hence we know His relationship with creatures as He is cause of them all; also that creatures differ from Him, inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him; and that creatures are not removed from Him by reason of any defect on His part, but because He superexceeds them all. (resp.)

Aquinas includes not only God's relationship to creatures as cause (*via causalitatis*) and as different from creatures (*via negationis*), but also the *via eminentiae*, in which he explicitly utilizes the "super-" language of Dionysius (*superexcedit*). Another relevant example is article 1 of question 13: "In this life we cannot see the essence of God; but we know God from creatures as their principle, and also by way of excellence and remotion" (resp.). Though brief, this text reiterates the importance of the *triplex via* for divine naming, even though the order has been rearranged: causation, eminence, and ablation/negation.

Even Aquinas's famous account of analogy in article 5 of question 13 is ultimately grounded in the *triplex via*. Creaturely perfections are not attributed to God *univocally* (in the same sense), because of the vast difference between divine and creaturely existence. In other words, when it comes to creatures and God, no effect is able to approximate the perfection of the efficient cause that produced it, but can participate the cause (God) only in such a way that it falls short. Alternatively, divine naming is not equivocal (a term applied in different senses to God and to creatures), since equivocation would render Rom 1:20 false in its statement that "the invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (*ST* I, q. 13, a. 5, resp.). Since humans can know God only from creatures, humans would be left unable to name God at all. With these two options, either the *via causalitatis* or the *via negationis* is left out of the account of theological language. However, he elaborates here that analogy, by which a term used in multiple senses "signifies various proportions to some one thing," is able to hold the *via causalitatis* and *via negationis* together in tension, since it stands between equivocity and univocity. Indeed, analogy here means that, "whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently," another term for

eminence.³² Theological language must be analogical, because only analogy is able to affirm that God can be named from creatures (*via causalitatis*) while *not being* a creature (*via negationis*), in such a way that God transcends any attribution of creaturely perfection (*via eminentiae*).

Not only is *ST I* structurally influenced by the *triplex via*; but it is also riddled with citations from Aquinas's commentary on the *De divinis nominibus* (whether explicitly attributed to Dionysius or not), which provide the wider context within which Aquinas's discussion of the simplicity of the divine ideas emerged. In article 2 of question 15, Aquinas argues that the divine ideas are many, though in such a way that they do not disrupt divine simplicity. He begins his respondeo with a reflection on causation: "In every effect, the ultimate end is the proper intention of the principal agent, as the order of an army is the proper intention of the general." Since, for Aquinas, the highest good in things is the order of the universe, this order must be wholly intended by God, who is the principle agent of all creation.

Aquinas argues this point against those who would see the order of the universe as an "accidental result of a succession of agents" (q. 15, a. 2, resp.). Such thinkers would pose that God has only one idea of a first creature, and the first creature has an idea only for the second creature, and so on. Aquinas obviously has in mind the same *Platonici* against whom he argues both in the commentary on *De divinis nominibus* and in that on *Librum de causis* for conceiving a succession of secondary causes in order to explain the plurality of created things, rather than ascribing both the unity and multiplicity of things to the single divine essence.³³ Unlike these *Platonici*, Aquinas argues that God intends and creates the whole order of the universe, which entails not only that God has an idea for this whole order but also that he has ideas for all the parts that make up this whole, namely ideas for all created things, "just as a builder cannot conceive the idea of a house unless he has the idea of each of its parts" (*ST I*, q. 15, a. 2, resp.). On the basis of divine causation, then, there must be a multiplicity of divine ideas, indeed a divine idea for every created thing, as all things are the expressed intention of the creator.

After establishing why there must be a plurality of divine ideas, Aquinas then treats whether such a plurality entails the denial of divine simplicity: "Now it can easily be seen how this is not repugnant to the simplicity of God, if we consider that the idea of a work is in the mind of the operator

³² See again Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible*, 49–50.

³³ For example, see again Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, 19–27.

as that which is understood, and not as the image whereby he understands, which is a form that makes the intellect in act" (a. 2, resp.). The key issue is that divine ideas are the objects of understanding (what is understood or known) and not a form that makes the intellect be in act. Similarly, he states here, "it is not repugnant to the simplicity of the divine mind that it understand many things; though it would be repugnant to its simplicity were His understanding to be formed by a plurality of forms." Here again, the problem is not that there might be a plurality of divine ideas, but that such ideas might be forms, by which the divine intellect would move from a state of potentiality to act.

Instead of providing a metaphysical account where many ideas are logically reconcilable with the unity and oneness of the divine essence, Aquinas treats simplicity negatively or according to ablation. Simplicity just is the denial of any form of composition in the divine essence, and as was shown in the Dionysian commentary, the most important kinds of composition that he denies are that of the movement from potentiality to actuality and that entailed in participation (derived existence). In both of his statements regarding the simplicity of the divine ideas, Aquinas shows that, although the divine ideas are multiple, they in no way imply that the divine intellect is moving from a state of potentiality to actuality in having such ideas, nor are they higher principles that God in Godself participates. God is not learning from such ideas, but rather the ideas are God's infinite knowledge of the divine essence and every way, every possible proportion of existence, in which it can be participated by creatures. In other words, God has many divine ideas for all created things (and potential things), but not according to any creaturely mode of knowing; in the multiplicity of divine ideas, everything pre-exists in God as the cause of all.

In article 2, then, the structure of the *triplex via* illuminates the way in which Aquinas argues for the multiplicity and simplicity of the divine ideas. Because of the *via causalitatis*, there must be a multiplicity of divine ideas for all created and possibly created things, since God intends the order of the universe and all that is within it. Moreover, because of the *via negationis*, any implication of composition, especially that of potentiality in the divine essence (God has such ideas in accordance with simplicity), must be simply denied. Even so, God's knowledge of things that are not God, the divine ideas for created things, just are God's infinite knowledge of Godself and the infinite ways in which God's Being can be participated.

Even though Aquinas does not explicitly have eminence or way-of-excess terminology in this passage, as he did in his Dionysian commentary and in the previous texts in the *ST*, the wider presence of the way of excess

in *ST I* certainly means such an interpretation is warranted. In light of the discussions that precede question 15 and the text's emphasis on simplicity, the reader of the *ST* is led to conclude that how God then knows all created things (divine ideas) remains a mystery in God's supersubstantial essence that "superexceeds" all creaturely forms of knowing. The theologian can make the judgment that there is a multiplicity of divine ideas and that God knows created things in light of causation, deny that this entails any sort of composition, and still maintain the judgment, even if human understanding cannot comprehensively grasp how this is so in the divine essence. We cannot know what God is (*quid est*) in this life, but humans can make true judgments about God through the *triplex via*.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the *triplex via*, in its many instantiations, played an important role in Aquinas's thought regarding the simplicity of the divine ideas. In his commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, he situates the problem of whether the multiplicity of divine ideas conflicts with divine simplicity within his wider account of divine naming, including the way of causation, the way of negation, and the way of eminence or excess. By following this Dionysian-inspired method of divine naming, Aquinas ultimately identifies the doctrine of simplicity with the negative or apophatic stage (ablation), wherein attributes or properties are denied of the divine essence due to their inherent unfitness for God. As a result, the question of whether a concept or idea conflicts with divine simplicity is ultimately a matter of whether the concept entails a type of composition, especially a form of composition that entails God moving from a state of potentiality to actuality or describing God's existence as arising from a simpler, more fundamental source. Such forms of potentiality implying any lack of knowledge in God or implying that God relies on another source for divine knowledge other than Godself must be wholly denied of the divine essence. Such a negative moment purifies the language used of God and indeed grounds the way of eminence where such creaturely perfections (such as knowledge and wisdom) are able to be applied to God, but in a supereminent way.

It might be tempting to say that there really is no multiplicity in the divine ideas, since they are all simply God's knowledge of Godself, but what I hope I have shown is (1) that this multiplicity and unity of the divine ideas can both be true and (2) that they can be best understood within the context of Aquinas's Dionysian *triplex via*. By following this approach to

making judgments about God, one can understand how Aquinas can say somewhat paradoxical things about God's knowledge of creatures while still maintaining divine transcendence. How Aquinas makes his arguments is often just as important as what he says in them. 