

A Philosopher for Our Time: Aquinas and Critical Reason

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IT IS a commonplace observation that the many tomes of the *Summa Theologica* yield little of the personality of their writer, who breathed the bracing air of impersonal things; they are perhaps unlikely to quicken the pulse of the reader in search of spiritual thrills. Behind St. Thomas's dispassionate language of analysis, the clear, hard lines of his thought, there must have lain, however, an immense and pulsating excitement: no doubt he erased himself from his work because, like Socrates, he loved wisdom more than the thought of himself as wisdom's possessor. Like all truly great people, he was devoid of self-importance: a teacher and, like Aristotle, "master of those who know," but, before that, a slave of the truth and servant of God.

What remains arresting about Aquinas today is his conviction, now so dubiously held among believers themselves, that it is intelligent to be a believer: the bold assertion that the proper conduct of man's intellectual endeavor to make sense of the world leads of necessity to faith, viewed not as a substitute for reason but as the climax of reason's work. This is not, of course, to assert that the existence of God is self-evident; Thomas himself, in repudiating the ontological argument of Anselm, famously denied that this is the case, and there are, perhaps, few people more irritating than religious believers who speak as though it were. Aquinas writes always within an awareness of the difficulties of our fallen state: as

The author wishes to dedicate this article to the memory of Rev. Professor James McEvoy, who read it in draft form. It was from him that she learned her metaphysics, and she would like to pay him the highest academic and personal tribute. "Those who have instructed many in virtue will shine like stars for all eternity" (Dn 12:3).

a consequence of the Fall, man has lost what he might have had,¹ the intuitive knowledge of God enjoyed by the angels,² and has to proceed to the truth by the wavering light of a reason that is flawed and subject to error. The *Quinque Viae* are cosmological “ways,” showing how the intelligible structure of being proves it to require the existence of God.

Nor is it to overlook the fact that any attempt to rehabilitate the intellectual enterprise of St. Thomas in our time must take account of what has happened since, in the history of thought and the history of Western society. Those who think today think after the epistemological critique of Descartes and Kant, after existentialists, logical positivists, nuclear physicists, and molecular biologists. They also think after several savage centuries, when the humane dream of reason seems so many times to have crumbled into dust. All I can hope to do here is to suggest some ways in which the perennial philosophy, and St. Thomas himself, might continue to speak in our time and, in some ways, provide a corrective to it. I should like to draw attention, firstly, to his vigorous belief in the power of the human mind to lay hold upon reality; secondly, to the idea that the mind “lays hold” upon God when thought is pushed to its limits; and, finally, to the continuity between the intellectual and the spiritual life, philosophy and mysticism, suggested by this. But, especially, I should like to draw attention to a person from whom there is much to be learned and in whom there came together such grandeur of intellect and humility before God.

The Priority of Being to Thought

In trying to imagine the stance Aquinas might take today, one sees him, firstly, as summoning the modern world to thought, to the centrality of the intellect. For him, intelligence is, of all forms of life, the most perfect;

¹ In treating of the question “whether the first man saw God in his essence,” Aquinas argues that even in its prelapsarian state humanity did not see God “face to face,” since this would have made human freedom purely theoretical: “. . . nobody who sees God in his essence can wilfully and deliberately turn away from God, which is what sin is. And for this reason, all who see God in his essence are so solidly established in the love of God that never can they sin. Since then Adam did sin, it is obvious that he never used to see God in his essence” (see *Summa theologiae* I, q. 91, a. 1).

(All quotations from the *Summa*, henceforth referred to as *ST*, are from the Latin text and English translation by the Dominican Fathers, Blackfriars, in conjunction with Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1964ff.)

² “There is this difference between men and angels, according to Dionysius: an angel perceives truth by simple apprehension, but a man comes finally to gaze upon simple truth only by progressive steps” (*ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 3).

for human beings, all true vitality comes from the mind, from the free intercourse of the intelligence with the intelligible, the intellect with being. The problem with Aquinas today, which is our problem and not his, is that modern thought has blocked this free access of the mind to being, leading, Cartesian-style, to the endless, sickening return of consciousness upon itself, ultimately, as in Feuerbach (then Freud), acknowledging no reality higher than the human mind, of which God is a wayward and regrettable invention.

Aquinas took the priority of being to knowledge and, therefore, a correspondence theory of truth, simply as given, an indemonstrable first principle—although this is not to suggest that he was, any more than Plato, unaware of our incurable tendency to breed false and falsifying images of reality, “shadows of shadows.” (One might ask, however, whence our obscure recognition of them as false and our desire to re-align them with what is true.) For him, the spacious abstractions of being, totality, and eternity are not abstractions only, Kantian unifying ideas or regulative principles self-generated by a mind busily tidying up the phenomenal world, but constitutive features of reality, the really real, which lies beyond manipulation and possession and, as we shall see, even for Aquinas, beyond thought itself.

This epistemological optimism (so different from the famous optimism of the Enlightenment) is the fruit of Aquinas’s happy marriage of Greek thought with the creationist metaphysics of Christianity. When he moves from (in Scholastic terminology) *ens*, the particular, derivative being of existing things, to *ens in genere*, the being in which they are held, without which they could not be, to *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, the Self-subsistent Source of being, he is affirming the dependent relation of the material world to the creator-God of Genesis. The philosophical underpinning of this connection comes from the whole, marvellous Greek philosophical enterprise of identifying what is real and permanent (the two being largely synonymous in Greek thought) in a changing world, the Heraclitean flux of generation and corruption; notionally separating (in Plato’s Forms or Aristotle’s Separate Substances) what is real and permanent from that world; and establishing the relation of what is real and permanent to the world as a condition of the world’s reality and intelligibility.

In a curious paradox, which retains its place in Christian thought, those things which the senses most readily affirm as real have a derivative reality only;³ their being provides for the intellect only a temporary *quies*;

³ “Just as the eyes of owls are to the light of day, so is our soul’s intellective power to those things which are by nature the most evident of all.” Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on *Metaphysics* II, lect. 1, §149.

they frame a question. This is true not only of sensory objects and the complex causal relations among them but, less obviously, of the universe itself and of the “higher” realities of human experience, the higher sources of truth and value: beauty in art and nature, even relationship and love. In themselves, these also provide only a temporary *quies*; these also frame a question (whence? why? whither?)—for the unbeliever who will not turn away from it, a bleakly unanswerable question to be faced with despairing courage in a meaningless universe; for the believer, a question shepherding him toward the affirmation of God. In Plato’s famous allegory, the infatuated prisoners gaze only upon images, but the enlightened philosophic mind takes flight from the sensible to the intellectual world and ultimately to the Form of the Good, whence flow all reality and intelligibility. Aristotle’s philosopher, in the careful, painstaking process traced out in the *Metaphysics*, recognizes actuality as the form of sensible substance and extends this concept of form-as-act to the realm of the Separate Substances, so that the final resting place of knowledge is the *Actus Purus*, the Pure Actuality, eternal and supremely intelligible, of the Mover. For Aquinas, likewise, “from consideration of the ordered universe we ascend in ordered degrees, so far as we are able by our intellect, to God who is above all.”⁴

Our problem is that the critical reason of the Enlightenment throws up an impediment to this smooth transition from *ens* to *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* and so precludes from the outset the affirmation of God. Space and time are, for Kant, conditions of the possibility of all our knowing; yet God is, by definition, outside the spatio-temporal world of his creation. Faith is sundered from knowledge, as Kant admits, famously declaring that he has denied knowledge in order to make room for faith.⁵

How do I know that I know? For all rational agents, this stern, self-correcting question, reflexive and reflective, is legitimate and necessary. Within a realist epistemology, I can be said truly to know when my knowledge is adequate to a reality that precedes, measures, and exists independently of it. So far, so much in agreement with the principles of scientific investigation, which is impossible without the presupposition, at least as a working hypothesis, of a correspondence theory of truth, the belief in an objective, intelligible reality against which conclusions are tested. This presupposition, dubbed “empirical realism” by the French

⁴ *Commentary on ‘De Divinis Nominibus’* vii, 4. (Henceforth referred to as *Super De Div. Nom.*)

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 2d ed., trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929, 1976), 29

philosopher and physicist Bernard D'Espagnat, undermines the view that *esse est percipi*. D'Espagnat notes that

in physics, it often happens that fully consistent and beautifully rational theories are falsified by experiment. They have, in too many domains, verifiable consequences that turn out to be at variance with what is actually observed. Something says "no." This something cannot just be "us." There must therefore be something else than just "us."⁶

As Dr. Johnson remarked, I know that the pavement exists when I stub my toe against it.

According to the verifiability principle, then, my conclusion is true when the hypothesis fits the facts: *adaequatio rei et intellectus*,⁷ one might say. In both German Idealism and British Empiricism, however, this presupposition of the intelligibility of being carries us no further than the limits of the empirical world and, even as applied to that world, is heavily qualified by Kantian agnosticism about noumenal reality or (as in British Empiricism) the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. "How do I know that I know?": within a critical epistemology, there is no way out of the impasse that question ultimately engenders. As Tolstoy remarks, we have lost the vision of a reality outside ourselves. Correspondence gives way to coherence, and there is no longer any room for a science of God, in the full, medieval sense. After the Enlightenment, the physical sciences are the most objective thing we have—though, three centuries later, when scientific certainties have slipped and slid into probabilities only, we are increasingly aware of the multiple ways in which science has failed us.

Despite their commitment to rational enquiry, many scientists work within the truncated Enlightenment view of reason, whether they know it or not. Yet the mechanistic Newtonian model of a universe governed by regular physical laws that are in principle exhaustively knowable has long since been superseded by science itself: modern physics would seem to be in search of a philosophy that will provide a better "fit" for the world of quantum mechanics, and will better accommodate such recent discoveries as nonseparability and decoherence, than do Empiricism and Idealism. How exciting if it were the perennial philosophy!

In his enormously interesting work *On Physics and Philosophy*, D'Espagnat finds support in contemporary quantum theory for a primacy of

⁶ Bernard D'Espagnat, *On Physics and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 240.

⁷ *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 2.

existence to thought that goes much further than the “empirical realism” espoused by some (the others being radical neo-Kantian Idealists) of those whom he calls “the sages” of developed societies and who “impart to the word ‘reality’ merely the sense of a sort of synthesis of all of what, in the field of (probabilistically [*sic*]) predictable phenomena, may be metaphorically represented by means of a descriptive language.”⁸ Initially, he suggests that the resistance of Kant’s noumenon to descriptive language (the “unreachability” of the noumenon) may be the philosophical counterpart to contemporary physics. The noumenon is, after all, a necessary concept which, nonetheless, may not be conceptualized: a “ground of being” or “necessary reality.” Yet he turns away from Kant to assert that

it is in no way necessary to side with him in thinking of reality-in-itself . . . as being a “pure x”, in other words, a mere, uninteresting, “limiting concept.” Now if it is not a “pure x”, it may count in our eyes. But at the same time, being veiled, it is not accessible to discursive knowledge. This being the very definition of mystery, it follows that these views imply that mystery exists.⁹

The similarity of this line of argument and this kind of language to traditional religious metaphysics is striking indeed: “ground of being”; “mystery”; “veiled Reality.” “Veiled Reality” might describe all the “manifestations” of God in Judaeo-Christian thought: the *Deus absconditus* of Israel, the “veiled” divinity of Jesus, the *latens deitas* of the Eucharist. It also describes the mystery we sense in other people and in ourselves, the elusive “self” behind the busy, interactive Freudian ego. “Would’st pluck out my mystery?” Hamlet asks. (Interestingly, the scientist, cross and impatient with that which cannot be conceptualized, forever seeking, to borrow Marcel’s distinction, to turn mystery into problem, must, for D’Espagnat, ultimately give way to the poet, characteristically more tolerant of a reality that can be glimpsed, intuited, affirmed, but not fully understood.)¹⁰

Not all physicists, of course, would agree with D’Espagnat. Yet it remains the case that science as we now conceive of it can neither answer nor fully articulate the questions of the origins of being. Physics may investigate the origins of life and so provide us with a description of the universe; the requirement for an explanation of the universe in its totality remains a metaphysical one. Since God is not an object within the material world, the question of God will always pertain to a different

⁸ D’Espagnat, *On Physics and Philosophy*, 450.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 430

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 456

order from that of the physicist. In its replacement of real metaphysical enquiry with a particularly self-defeating and narrow epistemology, the Enlightenment thinkers arbitrarily set limits to the scope within which reason might operate. Perhaps it is the task of education to make students aware of this particular prejudice of our time, to enable them to think outside the Enlightenment. If that task were successfully accomplished, they might become aware that no multiplication of universes to infinity can answer, or even pose, the fundamental metaphysical question, "Why is there being rather than nothing?"; they might be reluctant to accept the defeat of reason in the absurd hypothesis of the self-generation of being out of nothing. Classical metaphysics cannot be superseded by modern physics; no advance in science can challenge the statement "If there is ens, then there is *Esse*." To admit this is to open a line of enquiry that, of course, leads very far back in the history of thought: to the affirmation of Pure Act, *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, which requires no explanation beyond itself, but is the explanation of all other things. Perhaps the "dialogue-partner" of modern physics is, after all, not Kant, but Aquinas.

Analogy

To stress the importance of "metaphysical" thought in Aquinas's work is, of course, to pull it out of shape a little. For him, the value of the act of understanding derives not from that act itself, but from the object understood. The value of thought is specified by its object. The final object of thought, indeed the implicit object of all thought, is God: "All cognitive agents know God implicitly in everything they know."¹¹ Again we are conscious of pulling things a little out of shape: we exist and think at all because we are, firstly, the objects of God's creative thought; he has thought us into being. But in saying that the final object of thought is God, what one is saying is that the final object of thought is that which cannot be thought. And here we come close to the center of Aquinas's work.

Pseudo-Dionysius, in his *De Divinis Nominibus*, upon which Aquinas wrote an extensive commentary, can be said to have taken up the ringing question of Aeschylus, which resonates, even to Feuerbach and Freud, even to our own day, throughout the history of Western philosophy: "Let good prevail!/So be it! Yet what is good? And who is God?/How name him, and speak true?" How can finite mind "name" infinite being, the being which, in the neo-Platonic tradition, is above all being and knowledge? St. Thomas addresses this question most fully, and, therefore, the question of God most centrally, in his treatment of the concept of analogy, a concept in which his

¹¹ *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 1.

own rich notion of “critical reason,” operating freely within a metaphysics of finite and infinite, stands revealed.

For Aquinas, the knowledge of God to which the human mind can lay claim is an analogical knowledge only. He asserts in the *Contra Gentiles* that because “the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches . . . we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not.”¹² This outlines the context in which his treatment of analogy must be situated. Creation is the distance between God and man: “created things are darkness insofar as they proceed from nothing.”¹³ The created intellect’s first object is inescapably the semi-darkness of created things, which Thomas calls the “phantasms”; yet this composite or created being which is proportionate to the intellect is non-being relative to God, who is uncreated or transcendent source of being. How, then, do we get from our knowledge of the phantasms to knowledge of God?

The first move in the complicated game must be, as it were, to protect God from the imperfections that our intellects might impose upon him, and so the paradoxical *via negativa* begins to tell us what God is by telling us what he is not, begins a process of notionally discarding all that pertains to material being *qua* material (and, therefore, relative to God, *qua* non-being) and locating the residue within the *Actus Purus* of the divine perfection, where it exists in a transcendent and uncircumscribed mode.

The reply to the twelfth article of the twelfth question of the *Summa* enshrines the near-paradox alleged to lie at the heart of analogy and expressed in the *De Divinis Nominibus* upon which Aquinas comments so approvingly: the paradox that whereas God’s “Wisdom in its depths . . . is unsearchable,” it is “yet to be known in all things.”¹⁴ For

the knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just as far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence. Sensible things are effects of God which are less than typical of the power of their cause, so knowing them does not lead us to understand the whole power of God and thus we do not see his essence. They are nevertheless effects depending upon a cause, and so at least we can be led from them to

¹² *Summa contra Gentiles* (henceforth referred to as ScG), ch. 1, par. 14. All quotations from the *Contra Gentiles* are taken from the translation *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1955).

¹³ *De veritate*, q. 18, a. 2, ad 5

¹⁴ *Super De Div. Nom.*, vii, 4.

know of God that he exists and that he has whatever must belong to the first cause of all things, which is beyond all that is caused.¹⁵

The two modes of cognition—affirmative and negative—that emerge from this passage illustrate its continuity with the whole Thomist system. Since God is sovereign cause of being and first truth, reality can be understood only with reference to him and must therefore bear a causal relation to him (hence affirmation). However, since the whole inaccessible reality of things is hidden within the divine mind—which, as *Actus Purus*, lies far beyond our materially oriented cognitive powers—God’s essence can never be circumscribed by any attribute carried over from created to uncreated being (even though, in virtue of his simplicity, every such attribute exists in God co-extensively with his being). All that can be known about him is gleaned, not from intuition of his essence, but from that scrutiny of his effects which will yield, through affirmative and negative cognition, the *via eminentiae*: “The entirety of creatures is set before us by God that thereby we may know him: for the ordered universe has some likeness and faint resemblance to the divine nature which is its pattern and archetype.”¹⁶

By the *via negativa*, “we esteem nothing of what we see to be God or worthy of God”; it is also the way of remotion, of the notional removal of all the imperfections that accrue to material being from the divine essence, in order to arrive at a “proper,” if incomplete, knowledge of what God is:

Thus if we say that God is not an accident, we thereby distinguish him from all accidents . . . and thus in gradation he will be differentiated by suchlike negations from all besides himself; and then when he is known as distinct from all things, we shall arrive at a proper consideration of him. It will not, however, be perfect, because we shall not know what he is in himself.¹⁷

By the ways of affirmation and transcendence are invoked both (positively) the principles of causality and participation and (negatively) the cognitive inaccessibility of *Actus Purus* to composite being, of infinite to finite.

Affirmation attests to the positivity of creation, the presence within it of the *vestigia Dei*, which are the condition of analogy’s possibility. God is first cause and pure act; since being and goodness are co-extensive, he is subsistent goodness, and the communication of being or actuality is

¹⁵ ST I, q. 12, a. 12.

¹⁶ *Super De Div. Nom.*, vii, 4.

¹⁷ ScG I, ch. 14, par. 3.

therefore the communication of goodness, so that whatever is, is good. The englobing analogy of being is also the analogy of goodness, and creation, approximating to God in its varying degrees of perfection, becomes, in virtue of its participation in his subsistent perfection, radically good: "... no created substance is its own being. Whereof, if a thing is good insofar as it is, and nothing is its own being, none is its own goodness, but each one is good by having a share of good even as, by having a share of being, it is a being."¹⁸ Attributes that do not entail any imperfection—and foremost among these are the transcendentals—may thus, by the affirmative way, be located in God as the first cause of created being and, therefore, of the perfections found in creatures.

But Thomas has still to deal with the diversity of modes in which they are found in God and in which they are specified by creatures, for, since the first cause is also supreme being and pure act, God possesses such attributes in a real and transcendently perfect mode, *formaliter-eminenter*. The way of pre-eminence, which leads to the heart of analogy, asserts that he possesses them in a simplicity and fullness of perfection inconceivable by the human intellect *in statu viae*.

For, by exploring the modes of human knowledge in order to uncover the relation between the predicates found in human experience and the perfections that subsist in the source of perfection, the twelfth and thirteenth questions raise the whole issue of the appropriateness of human experience, reflected in language, as a vehicle for discourse about the interior life of a god who is one, simple, and transcendent. Again, the questions proceed in a negative manner, searching out the limitations imposed by finitude upon the transcendental perfections, seeking to purify them of accidental and material specifications and then to consider whether the residue is recognizable by human cognitive powers, operating from within experience. Their rootedness within Aquinas's whole metaphysical doctrine of creation is indicated by their oscillation between the assertion of a radical discontinuity between the orders of infinite and finite being and the simultaneous assertion of all the intelligibility that flows from the ordered declension of being from being's first source and center of attribution. Analogy, he says, is "a way of using words . . . which lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity . . . that is in accordance within a certain order between [God and creatures]."¹⁹

The idea of order dominates the primary, most simple type of analogy, which is attribution, whereby "the several senses of a word used analog-

¹⁸ ScG III, ch. 20, par. 2.

¹⁹ ST I, q. 13, a. 5.

ically signify different relations to some one subject,"²⁰ in this case, God, who, as universal cause, possesses the attribute *virtualiter*, so that "whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of the order that creatures have to God as to their source and cause."²¹ Since no agent can communicate an attribute that it does not itself possess, such predicates pre-exist pre-eminently in God; but they do not pre-exist *formaliter*, since to say that "God is the cause of bodies" cannot mean that "God is a body." Attribution, then, does not say that all attributes are located in God *substantialiter*; it says nothing about what he is in himself but primarily explains his efficient causality of those attributes which cannot exist *per se* in him since they would be inconsistent with his nature as *Actus Purus*.

The crux of the analogy problem is to find words, necessarily drawn from human, finite experience, which will in some way transcend the limits of their finitude, or the range of their finite applicability, to say something about the inaccessible God "in the category of substance," as he is in himself. St. Thomas accomplishes this by the subtle, sometimes elusive, and absolutely crucial distinction between *substantialiter* or *fomaliter*, and "quidditatively," a distinction that amounts to saying that, although such attributes really exist in the divine essence and are co-extensive with it, they do so transcendently and eminently, so that, as it were, whereas they are in God, God is not in them. In affirming that such attributes "fail to represent adequately what he is," Aquinas points out that although they are co-extensive with God's being in its simplicity ("when we use the word we do not intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence"), they are inadequate in the mode of human perception, since their essence *quoad nos* is conditioned by the finite imperfections from which they are inseparable in human cognition, grounded as it is in the empirical world. The mind (a defective image of God) cannot conceive of such perfections without the limitations of their created analogues and hence "words like 'good' and 'wise', when used of God, do signify something that God really is, but they signify it imperfectly, because creatures represent God imperfectly";²² but the essence of the transcendental attributes (those without intrinsic imperfection) is not bound by the conditions imposed by finitude and so, in a humanly inconceivable, uncircumscriptive mode, may be *formaliter-eminenter* located in God:

We have to consider two things, therefore, in the words we use to attribute perfections to God, firstly, the perfections themselves which

²⁰ ST I, q. 13, a. 5.

²¹ ST I, q. 13, a. 5.

²² ST I, q. 13, a. 2.

are signified . . . and, secondly, the way in which they are signified. So far as the perfections are concerned, the words are used literally of God and, in fact, more appropriately than they are used of creatures, for these perfections belong primarily to God and only secondarily to others. But so far as the way of signifying these perfections is concerned, the words are used inappropriately, for they have a way of signifying that is appropriate to creatures.²³

This pervasive distinction between the *significatum* and the *modus significandi* protects the divine essence from deformation by a ratiocinative, empirically oriented intellect; and it governs the most important type of analogy, analogy of proportionality, which also leaves the veil on God's face. Proportionality operates within Aquinas's assertion of "a certain order between God and creatures." It asserts two parallel horizontal movements between subject and predicate (although these categories belong only to human discourse about God, not to God as he is in himself) in the community of being, and so allows the relation between God and attribute to be compared to (and, since they belong to different orders, implicitly distinguished from) the relation between creature and attribute.

This may be a metaphoric, indirect predication which, when it says, for example, "God is my fortress," means "God is to me as is a fortress." Such metaphoric predication is distinguished by the inseparability of the sense of the attribute from its created imperfection: "all words used metaphorically of God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God . . . the meaning of such a word as applied to God depends on and is secondary to the meaning it has when used of creatures."²⁴

Transcendental attributes and the pure perfections, however, are limited only *quoad nos*, according to human perception. Containing no intrinsic imperfection or material limitation, they soar beyond the finite context from which they are inseparable for us, to the infinite essence, inaccessible to reason, wherein they exist in a mode that is unknown, although the perfection is per se identical:

There are other words, however, that simply mean certain perfections without any indication of how these perfections are possessed—words, for example, like "being", "good", "living" and so on. These words can be used literally of God. The reason why Dionysius says that such words are better denied of God is that what they signify does not belong to God in the way they signify it, but in a higher way; thus in the same passage, he says

²³ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 3.

²⁴ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 6.

that God is “beyond all substance and life”. These words have a bodily context, not in what they mean, but in the way in which they signify it.²⁵

The mode, then, in which goodness, for example, subsists in God is specified by infinite being, in whom it is primarily (*formaliter-eminenter*) located:

From the point of view of what the word means it is used primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for what the word means—the perfection it signifies—flows from God to the creature. But from the point of view of our use of the word, we apply it first to creatures because we know them first.²⁶

The attribute exists inevitably for us in the modification of finite being; man cannot know the mode in which it subsists in God. But he may know that the intrinsic perfection that the attribute brings to the finite being by which it will be modified is identifiable *per se* with the perfection that incomprehensibly subsists in God, however dim may be the reflection.

The passage from essence to existence, which characterizes the whole Thomist doctrine of analogy makes it singularly appropriate that the penultimate article of this question should consider whether *Qui Est* is the most fitting name for God. Analogy begins and ends with the judgment that God exists: in analogy's beginning (the assertion of a created order of being) is its end (the affirmation of a transcendent source of being and excellence). And in its end is its beginning: its purpose is a judgment of existence rather than any conceptualization of knowledge about the divine essence: “we do not know what God is; yet, although what he is remains unknown, we do know *that* he is.” Analogy considers the individuality of things, not in their essence²⁷ but in their actuality within being, and it traces that being and actuality to the *Actus omnium actuum*, which takes flight with its uncircumscribed perfection from all our circumscribed knowledge. Knowledge of God's existence, in the transcendent richness and plenitude of his being, attains to an indirect, diminished, and imperfect apprehension of his essence—and that only insofar as every judgment that supreme being *is* asserts that such being is good in its “excess of positivity.”²⁸

It is the divine perfection that grounds both participation and analogy, for God's perfection is not superadded to his being, since other than his being nothing is. God's perfection is the perfection of his own existence:

²⁵ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 3.

²⁶ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 6.

²⁷ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 11.

²⁸ The phrase is Étienne Gilson's.

"Now although things which exist and live are more perfect than those which only exist, yet God, who is not distinct from his own existence, is universally perfect being. And by universally perfect I mean that he lacks not the excellence of any genus. . . . God, who is his own being . . . has being according to the whole possibility of being itself: and consequently he cannot lack any excellence that belongs to any thing."²⁹ The mind that knows this finds itself eating at God's table because, being refreshed by the goodness of God, it is refreshed with that with which he is refreshed and so participates in his very life: "What is it to eat at the table of God? It is to delight in and to be refreshed by that with which God is refreshed. And what is that with which God is refreshed? It is his goodness. When you are refreshed by the goodness of God, then you are eating at the table of God, and that is the blessedness of the saints."³⁰

Aquinas and Critical Reason

Is analogy just a language-game? Certainly, as we have seen, language about God must be rigorously purified, even to the point where "what God is" and "what he is not" seem almost, but not quite, to cancel one another out. Yet at that indivisible point of "almost, but not quite", God is; and because God is, words, despite the imperfections of human discourse, "refer through thought to things."³¹ We are taught how to name God and "speak true" in the curiously agnostic knowledge yielded by analogy: "agnostic" because it leaves intact the inaccessibility of the divine essence, "knowledge" because, simultaneously, it affirms the participation of finite in infinite being, attests to the intelligibility that flows to human words from the creative Logos, rescues the created universe from absurdity, obscurity, and meaninglessness. And in this careful, delicate, advance-and-retreat movement, it attains to one of the perfections of rational life: the ability of reason reflexively to judge its own judgment. God knows his own knowledge: "the last perfection of life belongs to God, for whom to know and to be are equivalent."³² Man also knows his own knowledge. Now God's knowledge is without limitation or extent; man, however, knows the limitations of his own knowledge, knows it by its limitations. The supreme dignity of his mind is to know its inadequacy to being: "By the fact that, in itself, the godhead remains unknown, there is a greater

²⁹ *ScG* I, ch. 28, par. 2.

³⁰ "Sermon for the Feast of All Saints," in *Selected Writings by Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Martin D'Arcy (London: Dent, 1967 [1939]), 21.

³¹ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 1.

³² *ScG* IV, ch. 11, par. 1.

knowledge than ever of God even as he is.”³³ In recognizing its own limitations, the mind implicitly projects itself beyond those limitations and finds itself inexpressibly within being. It sees its own place within the order of the world; it sees itself justly, “as if through the eye of God.”

And here we come to a teasing question about Aquinas’s relationship to the Enlightenment. If “critical” (that is, self-critical) reason is so actively at the center of his science of God, are Aquinas and Kant then simply saying much the same thing, that God cannot be understood? Or is the resemblance a superficial one only?

It is true that, in his teaching on analogy, St. Thomas has reason critically turn back to survey its own operations, to define (that is, to limit) its *modus operandi*. It is true that the mind must be continually purifying its own images, so that ultimately, as in apophatic mysticism, the idea of God must always be left, in a sense, empty (although, for the believer, this “emptiness” of the idea of God remains in dialectical tension with the belief that it is “filled” in historical form by Christ, in whom, unsurpassably, we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see).³⁴ It is in this context that T. S. Eliot writes when he counsels his soul to “be still, and wait without hope/For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love/For love would be love of the wrong thing.”³⁵ The ideas of eternity, perfection, *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* baffle and defeat Aquinas as they do us: the only mastery he gains over them is his ability, as it were, to comprehend why we cannot comprehend them. Because all knowledge begins with the senses, because we are creatures of space and time, our knowledge comes to rest at the threshold of infinity; we cannot imaginatively move into it. Blessed are those who cannot imagine, yet believe.

Yet there is a huge, qualitative difference between the gap, in Kant, between phenomenon and noumenon and the gap, in Aquinas, between *ens* and *Esse*. For both, knowledge must ascend from the material world. But, for Aquinas, the ascent of the knowing mind to highest being is made possible by the prior declension of being from *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* through all the orders of reality; for Kant, on the other hand, critical reason remains tethered in agnosticism about the objective order of things, the noumenal world whose real existence is for him only a postulate, a “pure x.” It is what I have called Aquinas’s epistemological optimism, his belief in the possibility of the mind’s access to the extra-mental

³³ *Commentary on the “De Trinitate” of Boethius*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2.

³⁴ See the *Roman Missal* for the First Solemn Preface of the Nativity.

³⁵ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 200.

world, the objectively existing order of things, that enables him to argue that although God cannot be understood (*quid est*), his existence (*quia est*) may be affirmed, not just by faith but by the intellect, as the self-subsistent reality on which all other realities depend; intelligence and the intelligible *ens* are enfolded in *esse*, and to understand the fullness of truth and intelligibility that reside in *esse* is to understand how indissociable are intelligibility and being for Aquinas. For to apprehend anything at all, to say that anything, however circumscribed and finite, is, is to catch at the coat-tails of the perfect and infinite. Being—*ens*—is an instantiation of being—*esse*; *ens* announces by its mere existence and cognitive accessibility the whole possibility of being, and when this existence is affirmed by the judging mind, then such a possibility becomes necessary. “Our intellect in knowing anything is extended to infinity. . . . There must be an infinite object of thought for this infinite demand”;³⁶ *ens* perforce initiates intelligence into a hierarchy of reality and intelligibility, at the summit of which is posited an act of utter positivity from which is excluded nothing of what is—a full, total manifestation, self-realization of the whole possibility of being, which act is God.

The surging optimism and freedom within being for the Thomistic mind are, of course, a “given”; without them, it is ultimately impossible to show that God is anything other than a construct of the human mind, even when the mind is performing the clever intellectual somersault of acknowledging that he is always going to be different from our every idea of him. For the believer, God is precisely *not* an idea (which is presumably why Meister Eckhart prays “to God to rid me of God”)³⁷ but the reality which grounds yet transcends all ideas. Only thought gives access to that which is ontologically prior to thought, and which is the condition of thought’s possibility: this is, admittedly, a difficult, if exhilarating notion, but it is not an incoherent one. The real incoherence lies in the absurd (and Absurd) alternative of a reason doomed to ask unanswerable questions of an irrational universe. In which case, whence reason?

In a certain sense, God is always going to be coterminous with my idea of him, just as the world, for me, is limited to my experience of the world. How could it be otherwise? Creation is the distance between God and man. Yet the acceptance of this particular “given” is rationally defensible, if not rationally demonstrable according to the arbitrary criteria of scientism, since, without it, we are left in an ultimately inexplicable universe, a hypothesis at which reason balks, or recoils into something like the

³⁶ ScG I, ch. 63, par. 10.

³⁷ From the sermon “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit” in Raymond Bernard Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), 231.

metaphysical horror of Nietzsche. God is “under the world’s splendour and wonder”³⁸ and, unless “critical” reason be rehabilitated within Thomistic metaphysics, we are left with the tragic, if noble (and perhaps faintly ridiculous) figure of existentialist man (a direct descendant of Kant) forever spinning out of his own entrails meaning within a meaningless world. Aquinas and Kant both look into the dark; for Aquinas, but not for Kant, the dark is full of meaning. “The faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting”:³⁹ in this Christian act of waiting for what has yet to be revealed, God exists, and he does not play tricks upon the creatures he has loved into being from all eternity.

Philosophy and Mysticism

Faith for Aquinas, then, is belief in what is real but unimaginable—in *statu viae*, as he was fond of saying, in this present, pilgrim’s state of our life. Therefore, we do not know what God is, but only what he is not; we know God best when we know that we do not know him—that is, “possess” him cognitively, as we might possess lesser objects of thought. Rather, it is he who possesses us. God has exhaustive knowledge of us, not we of him, since the lower cannot, by definition, contain the higher.

But, says St. Thomas, who spent his life in pursuit of it, an imperfect knowledge of what is perfect is worth infinitely more than perfect knowledge of an imperfect thing. The little knowledge of God that we can attain to in this life is immeasurably better than all knowledge of lesser things. The point is well made by the story that,⁴⁰ when St. Thomas had completed some writings on the Blessed Sacrament, Christ appeared to him, saying, “You have written well on this sacrament of my body. What would you ask of me?” In the huge simplicity of the answer, “*Non nisi te*” (nothing except thyself), philosophy passes into mysticism. This was Thomas’s summit-realization: nothing except thyself. Apart from God, nothing is to be desired or enjoyed, since apart from him—nothing. In him is the fullness of life; without him, nothing is.

The “negative theology” of Aquinas has, then, a clear counterpart in mysticism. A French mystic of the Middle Ages, Marguerite Porete,⁴¹

³⁸ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 53.

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, p. 200.

⁴⁰ The legend is recounted by William of Tocco. See Kenelm Foster, O.P., *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Longmans, 1959), 42.

⁴¹ Marguerite Porete’s sad story is told in Anne Carson’s *Decreation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006). See p. 176.

before she was burned at the stake for writing her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, coined, in Old French, her own “divine name”: God is, for her, “*le Loing-pres*,” the FarNear. Negative theology preserves our distance from God, prevents our reducing him to an aspect of ourselves: a safeguard against projection, it will not allow us to assimilate him to merely human “categories.” And so, in this life, we pray into the dark unimaginable, always running, as it were, to catch up with someone who constantly eludes us: our *Deus absconditus*. That is the negative side. It could provide a rich spirituality for our time, whereby belief is seen not as stopping short of unbelief, but as somehow taking unbelief into itself: the unbelief of existentialist man, the unbelief of our despairing century, the unbelief of believer and unbeliever alike.

The positive correlative is the beatitude that awaits those who stay with the darkness here and for whom, when they are delivered from their bondage to space and time, God will stand still for them—or, as the mystic would have it, they will at last learn to stand still before him. What they now see as in a glass darkly they will then see face to face. Thought and the object of thought will be one, and in that union eternal vitality and love.

But that is for later. For now, there is the Veiled Reality—and the sentiments expressed in the Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi, composed by St. Thomas Aquinas. The final verse of the beautiful, impassioned hymn “*Adoro Te devote*,” where the mind’s search for truth is seen under its other aspect, the soul’s desire for God, is a distillation of the philosophy and of the philosopher:

The veil is on thy face; I cannot see.
 I cry to thee for grace
 That that may come to pass for which I thirst,
 That I may see thee with thy face unveiled
 And in that vision rest.⁴²

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⁴² Helen Waddell’s translation in her *More Latin Lyrics from Virgil to Milton* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976), 309.