

On Thomas Joseph White's *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*

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THIS SUBSTANTIVE study of Aquinas does eminent justice to the Dominican tradition of inquiry, carrying out its argument in lucid, step-wise fashion. After sketching the charge of “onto-theology” which any move to articulate transcendence must meet after Heidegger, the author proceeds to an explicit and rather didactic outline of “Aquinas’s natural theology,” that is, the set of philosophical strategies Aquinas will employ when attempting discourse about divinity (chapter 3). Yet not divinity *tout court* (if there be such a One), but as a key subtitle puts it: “the *esse*/essence distinction and the metaphysics of creation” (81). This sketch of what will follow is bolstered by a dialectical treatment of three recent thinkers who have reflected on these issues in philosophical theology—Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Karl Rahner—allowing him to use these three eminent analysts to position his detailed elaboration (chapter 7) of the strategies already outlined. This will help him construct a “metaphysical study [which] does in fact attain to true knowledge of the existence and structure of things in themselves . . . [which] will eventually allow one to speak truthfully about God in analogical terms (by means of the analogy *ad alterum*), even while respecting the divine transcendence” (203). That ambitious and impressive goal will require a dialectical positioning with still other thinkers, which he carries out *inter alia*, since the key terms employed can often be interpreted in various ways: *substance*, *accident*, *potency*, *act*. One could indeed observe that presuming such key terms to be accessible—not to say univocal—can give Thomistic argumentation a deceptive simplicity, and one which thinkers outside the “school” find irritating. White’s dialectical positioning helps to save his

treatment from that curiously unwitting ambiguity, though one of his own strategies will render him vulnerable to it.

He also tries to avoid the trap of deceptively simple terminology by offering ways to relate “an Aristotelian causal analysis of being [with] Aquinas’s metaphysics of the real distinction between *esse* and *essence*” (203), which is the true *telos* of these philosophical strategies for his (and Aquinas’s) extended argument. Yet as indispensable as this “Aristotelian causal analysis of being” will be, it will hardly be able (in Aristotle’s own terms) to arrive at what the Thomist traditions insists upon:

that an authentic, metaphysical knowledge of God is indirect, apophatic, and radically incomplete. Therefore this knowledge itself calls for a deeper completion that can come about only by way of grace. . . . Furthermore, the classical Thomistic claim is that the identification of a philosophical approach to God *is needed even within theology* if we are to manifest this intrinsic, natural ordering of the subject toward the knowledge of God, such that the authentic revelation of God in Christ is not understood as something wholly *extrinsic* to human nature. (252)

Here we see the judicious balancing act which executing this study will require, redolent of Denys Turner’s deft exposition of Vatican I’s insistence that the existence of God can indeed be proved, only to remind us that human reason can at best attain to the One as a “known unknown” (Lonergan). Rather than try to trace specific arguments, I shall focus on the points where the tension (between statement and expression) surfaces, asking whether his strategies are adequate to display its inner dynamics, or whether at crucial points the tension is simply reiterated. White advances his position in critical conversation with Gilson, Maritain, and Rahner. As White knows, my position on his topic makes common cause with such thinkers as David Braine, Sara Grant, Bernard Lonergan, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Victor Preller, and Robert Sokolowski. In what follows, I engage White’s project from this perspective.

White’s central chapter 7—“Towards a General Order of Inquiry”—makes a sustained case for what he calls “an Aristotelian causal analysis of being,” which he insists must be preliminary to grasping “Aquinas’s metaphysics of the real distinction between *esse* and *essence*” (203). In fact, his extensive appreciation of the way Denys Turner deftly uses reason to arrive at God’s existence (in *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*) is pointedly critical of the way Turner’s argument for “the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures [turns on] a consideration of the gratuity of being in all things. All that we experience can be conceived of in light of the possibility that it not exist at all” (260–61). By side-step-

ping an Aristotelian approach which “begins with the contingency of individuals and reasons by causal series to something that transcends them,” Turner (with others like McCabe and Sertillanges before him) focuses baldly on existence to “treat the logical possibility of nothingness as the medium through which we conceive of the creation of things” (265). (White should have recognized Sokolowski’s pivotal *God of Faith and Reason* at this point as well.)¹ So while both acknowledge the centrality of the “real distinction between essence and existence” in arriving at the need for a creator, for Turner that very distinction, with its “notion of *esse*, is closely aligned with his consideration of *creation*, that is to say, with the radical giving of existence to all things by God” (260). White, on the contrary, argues extensively (in chapter 7) that this distinction can and will emerge from a “causal analysis of actuality and potentiality in creatures [which] provides a metaphysical basis for understanding why God must be said to be pure actuality, and therefore permits the ascription of analogical names to God” (225). All that sounds quite plausible until one attends to the (surreptitious?) use of “creatures” in the argument, which suggests a revelatory dimension not ordinarily present in “causal analysis” as such. Yet White sees that, and so he expounds “places of continuity between Aquinas’s Aristotelian metaphysics of substance and actuality and the Thomistic metaphysics of creation, construed in terms of *esse* and essence” (226–27). This juxtaposition will allow him to conclude that “the real distinction of *esse* and existence can be analyzed as a metaphysical composition of actuality and potentiality in realities we know *in via inventionis* prior to the demonstrative arguments for the existence of God” (234).

It will not surprise White that in my view what remains problematic is the very *via inventionis* which he champions. By his cannily relying on “Aquinas’s Aristotelian metaphysics of substance and actuality,” one might well query (with Josef Pieper) whether what moves Aquinas beyond Aristotle is not the affirmation of free creation itself?² That is, whether the very premises of argumentation to the “real distinction” do not themselves presume—not a demonstrative argument for the existence of God but—the avowal of a creator? And if so, then one can wonder whether it

¹ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982; rpt. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

² Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1957): “The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas,” 47–67; for a critical look at traditional lines of delineation between “philosophy” and “theology,” see my “Theology and Philosophy” in *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 34–46.

is the case that “Turner and McCabe, like Gilson before them, introduce a properly theological perspective into the order of metaphysical argumentation prematurely” (266), as White insists; or whether the sharp division White presumes (between “metaphysics” and “theology”) is not itself questionable. Literally everything turns on this point, which I find quite undecidable. But even more telling for his presentation, such a sharp division between “theological” and “properly philosophical” argument also seems to fuel the central polemic of the critical penultimate section (260–82) which turns on an equally sharp opposition between *positive* and *negative* strategies, where terminological ambiguities introduce a confusion preventing his accurately articulating the very tension which animates the study: how “the Thomistic tradition [can and must] insist that an authentic, metaphysical knowledge of God is indirect, apophatic, and radically incomplete” (252).

Clarity is crucial here, for this section attempts to develop what White presents as an authentic Thomistic position against “a series of modern Thomistic thinkers [who] have stressed the apophatic dimensions of Aquinas’s monotheistic thought” (253), though (we have already seen) his instincts will lead him to incorporate the concerns of Sertillanges, Gilson, Victor Preller, David Burrell, Herbert McCabe, Denys Turner, and Gregory Rocca as well (253, note 4). What keeps him from doing so, I contend, is the diptych—“positive” / “negative”—which I would suggest is virtually empty, thus terminally misleading, and will inevitably undermine attempts to illuminate the central tension of his provocative and challenging study. White sets up the opposition between “negative” and “positive” in this way:

We can in no way be inclined naturally to the knowledge of God as a final end if we can know nothing of his existence, goodness, and perfection. In consequence, excessively apophatic interpretations of Aquinas risk to render this sapiential dimension of the human person nearly indecipherable, or so paradoxical as to be almost unintelligible, [whereas] this teleological dimension of the human person must be rendered perceptible by and through some kind of positive knowledge of God. (254)

Henceforth what White calls “negative” will be deemed “knowing *nothing* of his existence, goodness, and perfection,” so “excessively apophatic,” yet the parentage between “apophatic” and a customary use of “negative” in “negative theology” is acknowledged. For White, what makes the position of myself and related thinkers “excessively apophatic” is that the knowledge I deem possible to human beings of divinity is not “positive” enough.

This contrast between “negative” (as “excessively apophatic”) and “positive” pervades the following section, with little illumination as to

what the contrast term ("positive") might portend except something like "real knowledge" (apparently without paradox [?] and not *excessively* paradoxical). Before scrutinizing his attempt to clarify his use of "positive" (270), let us recall what he presents as the Thomistic position: "that an authentic, metaphysical knowledge of God is indirect, apophatic, and radically incomplete." We should recall that the contrast term for "negative" or "apophatic" (which intimates a radical inadequacy of expression) is not a generic "positive," but the conviction that our expression in these matters is adequate to capture the subject at hand. White rightly remarks that "because God is known as pure actuality, the identity of God transcends all conceptual comprehension" (255). So then, what does his preference for "positive" amount to? I would urge him to simply drop the adjective and to substitute his more accurate: "we may speak truthfully of God through such language" (256), which captures Aquinas's culminating remarks on "naming God" in article 12 of question 13 of the *Summa theologiae*: "whether affirmative propositions can be formed about God?" Aquinas's response displays deft linguistic sophistication:

Although [the human intellect] understands Him under different conceptions, it knows that one and the same simple object corresponds to its conceptions. Therefore the plurality of predicate and subject represents the plurality of ideas; and the intellect represents the unity by composition.

So "knowing that one and the same object corresponds to its conceptions" is a matter of *judgment*, which the technical term "composition" intends here. So those who prefer to emphasize the "negative" in our knowledge of God intend to unmask an omnipresent *judgment* which must ever attend what we try to articulate. Indeed, a specific judgment: that we will probably get it wrong (put more gently in Aquinas's insistence that our articulations can at best "imperfectly signify divinity" [*ST* I, q. 13, a. 4]).

Have we found a (non-excessive) way to articulate how our knowledge of God is inherently apophatic? In the context of parsing Denys Turner's approach to these matters, as he has been doing in this section, White explains: "Turner follows David Burrell in distinguishing between positive analogical characteristics of God [the 'names' in q. 13] and his merely 'formal features' or negatively derived characteristics" (262). Again, the term "positive" is either misleading or redundant here if one is referring to the "names of God" (in q. 13), which White will aver are profoundly analogous in use; and one can signal the difference between "names" and "formal features" by diagramming (as I have done) Aquinas's

explicit way of dividing his treatment between qq. 3–11 (“formal features”) and q. 13 (“names”).³ The signal difference, as David Braine so clearly articulates,⁴ is that “formal features” are grammatically not *features* at all. The “names” parsed in q. 13 do intend to express *features* of God, however analogically they must be understood, taken as they are mostly from the psalms. Yet since q. 3 (on divine simpleness) reminds us that God can have no *features*, we must understand the “names” analogically, that is to say, apophatically (though let us hope, not excessively so). So to speak of “merely ‘formal features’” is to fail to appreciate the role they play in Aquinas’s thought and my own. Later White endeavors to correct this misapprehension in his own terms:

The so-called negative perfections of God (which Turner and Burrell call “formal features”), such as simplicity, eternity, infinity, immutability, and impassibility, are in fact employed in order to qualify our truly positive designations that pertain to God’s preeminence as primary cause, [so] . . . the *premise* of such negations is the *affirmation* of the pure actuality of God, and the unique perfection of the latter. (272)

Indeed, but note how his “explanation” of the difference turns on the diptych “positive”/“negative” (“truly positive designations”), when arguably the very structure of Aquinas’s treatment yields a differentiation between “formal features” and “names.” Apparently put off by this way of designating the difference à la Wittgenstein, White refers to “simplicity, infinity,” and so forth as “divine names,” perhaps in service of the “positive”/“negative” diptych, insisting that they “are employed in true judgments concerning God *as he is in himself*” (272). Indeed they are, yet not as premises but rather as rules of inference are employed in valid argumentation to structure the argument, for that is precisely what “formal features” do. Again, he acknowledges as much, but lacks a precise way to articulate the role, having missed the role that “formal features” play in argument, though he approximates it in his insistence that they are “employed in order to qualify our [true] designations that pertain to God’s preeminence as primary cause.” All this may seem overly refined except to philosophers, so not to Thomas Joseph, yet my primary intent is to eliminate the “positive”/“negative” diptych, as it threatens to confuse White’s otherwise illuminating exposition.

³ See my *Exercises in Religious Understanding* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974) and *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979; reissued, Scranton, PA: Scranton University Press, 2011).

⁴ In his *Reality of Time and the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

A final remark about “pure actuality,” for this expression is hardly as clear as it portends, which White himself must acknowledge, since it emerges only at the term of his exposition of “Aquinas’s Aristotelian metaphysics of substance and actuality.” Yet knowing how utterly analogous it has to be, White offers the expression as the very paradigm of “the positive divine preeminence in its transcendence” (272). So lest his final argumentation fall prey to that deceptive simplicity to which Thomistic argumentation can be prone, and which thinkers outside the “school” find irritating, he must remind us again how expressions like “pure actuality” (“positive” as they are) must ever be modified by the reminder that “an authentic, metaphysical knowledge of God is indirect, apophatic, and radically incomplete” (262). Then any differences between his view and mine fairly vanish, once they are no longer exacerbated by the misleading diptych “positive”/“negative.” Amen!

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