

Epilogue: Reply to Michael S. Sherwin's Response, “Painted Ladies and the Witch of Endor”

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Having received the response of Fr. Michael Sherwin, O.P., to his paper, Prof. O'Callaghan, in the period after the Colloquium, during which he prepared his paper for publication, included two extended footnotes in reply to certain points made by Fr. Sherwin. They are reproduced below.

—Fr. Bryan Kromholtz, O.P.

On “god” as a Proper Name

FOR SIMPLICITY'S SAKE and the flavor of the talk as presented, I have retained the claim that God is a proper name in the context of article 2 of the first question of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa theologiae*.¹ In his comments on this paper at the Dominican Colloquium in Berkeley, California, Fr. Michael Sherwin OP correctly pointed out that a number of important figures maintain that the apparent use of the term “god” as a proper name in relevant contexts of Christian belief is really a hidden definite description for something like “the one true god,” “the one and only true god,” or “the real god.” He mentioned works by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, as well as Brian Davies.²

¹ See my “Can We Demonstrate That ‘God Exists?’” pp. 619–644 at note 11.

² Peter Geach, “On Worshipping the Right God” in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969), 108–109; G. E. M. Anscombe, “Faith” in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol.3 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1981), 119; and Brian Davies, “Aquinas and Atheism,” in

Anscombe and Geach are concerned with the semantics of the term “god,” that it is not a proper name but, rather, a definite description in those contexts of use they have in mind. Davies has another concern, namely, that to use “god” as a proper name inevitably leads to theological error concerning Christian Trinitarian belief. He asserts that to use it as a proper name is to use it like the name “Brian,” the name of a person, which inevitably leads to theological error concerning the Trinity. It can lead to the thought that there is some one being that is a person with the attributes of a person in conflict with the Trinitarian doctrines that there are three divine persons who are one god. A quick way to see his point is that one might think from the use of the term “god” as a proper name that there are the three persons of the Trinity, then there is another person “God,” and then the three persons of the Trinity are identical with this one person, God, with the result that three persons are identical to one person. And so he claims that Aquinas “never” uses it as a proper name.

Father Sherwin’s point is well taken with regard to both Anscombe’s and Geach’s semantic point and Davies’ theological point. I hope to address it at length in a more worked-out version of this paper. For now, as to Davies’ point, Davies is making a sociological-cum-psychological point about the tendency of those who use the term “God” as a proper name. He is not making a semantic point. Semantically, a proper name need not be the proper name of a person. And so, the assimilation of “god” as a proper name to “Brian” as a proper name of a person, while it may be a theological danger, is not a semantic necessity. So, the fact that using it as a proper name may lead to theological error does not imply that it will do so, any more than calling a star “Sirius” implies that one with the appropriate astronomical knowledge will make errors about it, treating it as a person. One simply has to be careful to use the term against the background of and guided by the theological truths one affirms about the Trinity.

As to the semantic point made by Anscombe and Geach, I would remark briefly that I do not think it actually undermines the point of this paper. First, it seems to be in conflict with Davies’ point. If they think it is a hidden definite description, it is functioning just as referentially as is “god” used as a proper name. Indeed, more so, since now it functions as part of a referring phrase with descriptive content, the descriptive content that whatever individual is being referred to has

the characteristics of a god, among which would presumably be life, intelligence, and will, in short, a person.

Second, it is not obvious to me that "god" is *always* used as a definite description, nor do I think that claim follows from what Anscombe and Geach pointed out. As I point out in my essay that begins on page 619 of this issue, it is often used simply predicatively and generally as a common noun, certainly a point Anscombe, Geach, and Davies would all grant. It cannot be used as an element of a definite description unless it has a predicative use.

Third, it strikes me that whatever theological problems might attend its use as a proper name (which is Davies' worry) from a strictly semantic point of view, speakers quite often do use it as a proper name, both in common speech and technical philosophical and theological discourse as well. Consider a believer's statement that "God is the one true god." Is that a trivial claim like "the one true god is the one true god?" It does not strike me as such. Does it strike Jews, Muslims, and Christians as such? Consider also "I do not believe in God." That grammatical string means something quite different if, for instance, one is a contemporary atheist addressing a contemporary theist in either ordinary language or the philosophy of religion, in which 'God' looks like a proper noun, from what it means if one is an historic polytheist engaging an early Christian or Jew. After all, the polytheist using "god" as a definite description in the way the early Christian or Jew may be using it is simply denying that there is only one true god, as the Jew or Christian claims, because in fact there are many true gods. Presumably the contemporary atheist is denying something other than and quite different from that there is only one true god. The contemporary atheist is using the term to deny that the being theists—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—believe exists does, in fact, exist. He is using it referentially and as a proper name because they use it as a proper name, and his denial is different from the polytheist's denial because their assertion is different from and more than the assertion that there is only one true god.

Fourth, as for its use in Aquinas's work, given the referential use of a definite description in which it can substitute for a proper name, it is not at all clear to me just exactly how one would go about showing that Aquinas *always* uses it as a definite description and *never* as a proper name when he is not using it as a general predicate. Just consider the question on faith I mention in my essay that begins on page 619. Is the point of the question really best understood by substituting "the one and only true god" for every instance of "god" that occurs non-pred-

icatively within it? I do not know. And certainly I do not know the answer to that if one considers the entirety of Aquinas's writings. It is worth keeping in mind that while polytheism was a theoretical position for Aquinas and his theological contemporaries to consider in ordinary life and religious practice with its discourse it was not a live possibility.

Finally, the point I will make in what follows does not actually hang on the notion of a proper name as such, but, rather, specifically on the referential character of proper names. So, if the definite description is used referentially it will suffer from the same problems I intend to raise on the simpler case of "god" used as a proper name. Keep in mind that a definite description need not be used referentially, since the standard formalization of it in the predicate calculus will not employ any referring terms (as for example the formalization of "the present king of France is bald" will involve no referring terms). It may be used referentially, but it need not be.

On Whether Philosophers Prove "*deum esse*"

Here in his remarks on the paper at the conference,³ Fr. Sherwin seemed to agree with me that Aristotle counts as an "unbeliever" for the purposes of *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2. He seemed to disagree, however, with my claim that, when a philosopher like Aristotle proves *deum esse*, he is not proving that God exists. He distinguished between two senses of "*deum esse*," the sense it has when proven by the philosopher, in which case presumably "*deus*" is used as a definite description consistent with his earlier point about Anscombe and Geach, and the sense "*deum esse*" has when used by the believer. According to Fr. Sherwin, here too "*deus*" appears to be a definite description, but a quite different definite description than the one Anscombe and Geach have in mind, because according to him, "*deus*" seems to be a definite description that involves the descriptive content "triune life and . . . redemptive mission of his son." In fact, now for the believer, "*deum esse*" is not a simple existence claim, as it appeared to be in the objection. Recall that the objection grants that the unbeliever can believe "*deum esse*," and the sense of the claim is that, in doing so, that is a very minimal thing to believe. But as Fr. Sherwin would have it, "*deum esse*" as uttered by the philosopher and as uttered by the believer mean two quite different propositions involving two quite different subject

³ See my "Can We Demonstrate That *God Exists*?" above, at note. 17.

phrases in the sentences that express them. "*Deus*" simply means something different for the unbelieving philosopher than for the believer.

But then I would respond that Aquinas's response appears to be trivial. On this construal, it is simply asserting that the unbelieving philosopher does not believe that "the god whose life is triune involving the redemptive mission of his son exists." But what does the latter amount to? Not being a simple existence claim that a particular being exists, "*deum esse*" as expressed by the believer broadly means or implies "the faith is true." And of course no one thinks the unbeliever gets that, that "the faith is true," including the unbeliever who otherwise demonstrates "*deum esse*." That is why he is called an unbeliever. And we knew that about the philosopher *qua* philosopher from the beginning of the *Summa*, where Aquinas had argued that such articles of faith as the triune character of God and the Incarnation as the presupposition of Christ's redemptive mission are not subject to philosophical demonstration.

In addition, Fr. Sherwin's response simply begs the question by asserting that the philosopher does demonstrate that "God exists," whether or not "God" is being used there as a proper name (me) or a definite description (Anscombe and Geach) but not the definite description of the believer (Fr. Sherwin). The charming example Fr. Sherwin employed involving a guide dog not named but known by observation to one homeowner as a dog, but not as a guide dog, and known also to another shut-in homeowner who, rather, knows it is a guide dog by testimony, is not pertinent to my argument. It is not pertinent precisely because in the example the first homeowner, who stands in for the philosopher, has knowledge of the dog by acquaintance, seeing it frolic around the backyard, which is precisely what no philosopher *qua* philosopher ever has of God, particularly according to Aquinas. Philosophers have knowledge of God by effects distinct from God. To address my argument, Fr. Sherwin would need to come up with an example in which the first homeowner cannot possibly have knowledge by acquaintance with the dog, but argues instead from certain effects that there is a dog and only one dog. He would then need to explain how such an argument demonstrates that the dog known by testimony to the shut-in exists.

Finally, Fr. Sherwin suggested that the reason even the believer must use "god" as a definite description is that God remains a mystery to us even in belief. It is certainly true that God remains a mystery to those who have belief in this life. However, since both a proper name

and a definite description would be used referentially in the context we are discussing, it is rather the case that the definite description removes more mystery from its referent than the simple use of a proper name, since the definite description has descriptive content not had by the proper name. *Vis-à-vis* mystery, there is more mystery to “Aristotle wrote *On Generation and Corruption*” than there is with “the greatest student of Plato, teacher of Alexander, and author of the *Physics* wrote *On Generation and Corruption*.” In that respect, the simple use of a proper name protects the mystery of its referent rather better than a definite description used in its place. N V