Andrew Murray


The Unknowability of God in Thomas Aquinas

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The idea for this paper arose out of a certain discomfort I felt following a paper at a previous Biennial Conference on Thomas Aquinas’s use of analogical language in talking about God.\(^1\) Thomas, indeed, used analogy, or Aristotle’s *pros hen* equivocation, as a very powerful linguistic tool with which to speak about God in positive terms (cataphatic theology). His claim is that certain positive perfections, like good, wise and living, can be literally and properly applied to God. My discomfort lay in the opposite direction. Thomas frequently claims that we can know that God is but not what God is. What are the depths of this unknowingness? Or, in other words what are the limits of the knowability of God?

This is not to depreciate analogy, which is a clever and useful doctrine. By denying the application of terms used univocally of God and creatures, Thomas avoids anthropomorphism in respect of God. By denying that such terms are necessarily used equivocally, he avoids atheism. A term used analogically conveys meaning that is somewhat the same in the two instances of its application though also different. In the case of a positive perfection like ‘good’ Thomas uses an important distinction between the thing signified and the mode of signification. The term ‘good’ applies more properly to God than it does to creatures in its primary meaning or as the thing signified, because goodness is best found in God. On the other hand, in its mode of signification, it carries with it its origins in the human invention of language. With such a tool, Thomas writes eight and a half million words, which apart from the Aristotelian commentaries is mostly theology – about God and our relationship to God – God as ‘the beginning of all things and their last end’.\(^2\)

The paper will have four sections: first, Thomas’ treatment of our knowledge of God in *ST* I 12; second, his use of negative or apophatic theology; third, his treatment of the Divine simplicity in *ST* I 3; and fourth, the unknowability of God as subsistent Being (*ipsam esse subsistens*).

Our Knowledge of God

Thomas raises the issue of our knowledge of God in Question 12 of the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*. His primary concern is clear in the first article, where he asks whether any created intellect can see the essence of God. His answer is yes, because what he wants to save is the knowledge of God had by the blessed in heaven. Multiple scriptural texts promise this, and Thomas’s own transformation of Aristotle’s depiction of ultimate happiness as the contemplation of the highest things sees the achievement of human destiny in the heavenly beatific vision. The mode of this knowledge is unusual. It comes not through the intellect’s own power and by forms or likenesses as is usually the case, but by the direct action of God through an infusion of ‘the light of glory’.

The reason that he puts the question in terms of knowing God’s essence is that if there is to be any quidditative knowledge of God it can be only of God’s essence. As we shall shortly see, God is identical with his essence and there is nothing of God outside this essence nor parts of God that could be considered separately. Thomas asserts that God is supremely knowable in Himself as ‘pure act without any admixture of potency’.\(^3\) However, as an object of human knowledge the divine intelligibility is far beyond the human capacity to receive it.

Two other questions apply limits to the eschatological knowledge of God. In Article 7, Thomas asks whether the blessed in heaven can comprehend God. To comprehend is to know perfectly or to know something to the degree it can be known. Even the blessed are denied this because the created light of glory cannot be infinite as God is. The second question, treated in Articles

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2. *Summa Theologiae* I q. 2 praeem. The latest discussion of analogy is in *Summa Theologiae* I 13. Parallel earlier discussions occur in the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, in the *Compendium of Theology* and in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, as well as in various places in the disputed questions. For the purposes of this paper.

3. *ST* I 12, 1, p. 49.
Thomas reverses this. His project, as we know him from his writings, is focussed on discursive and positive theology. He proposes three ways to God: the way of causality, whereby created effects give rise to knowledge at least of the existence of their cause; the way of negation, whereby we clarify our understanding of God by denying all imperfection in God; the way of pre-eminence, whereby whatever we grasp of God is understood to be exceeded by the super-eminence of God. Thomas uses each of these ways variously and with a terminology that is quite fluid, and together they enable him to build a rich and vigorous theology.

Nevertheless, we ought not to neglect the mystical dimension of Thomas’ life. In his early work, The Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, he writes, ‘We know God most perfectly in the present life when we realise him to be above all that our intellect can conceive; and thus we are joined to him as one unknown.’

Though the language is not that of Thomas, Rocca analyses three kinds of negation in Thomas. A qualitative negation is the absolute denial that a quality or a characteristic could be applied to God in any way whatsoever. To say that God is immaterial implies that matter should not be thought in any way in relation to God. An objective modal negation denies the creaturely mode of a perfection, even if it can be said of God in a supereminent way. When we say that God is good, we abstract every aspect of creaturely particularity. A subjective modal negation holds open the possibility of denying even those things that we analogously affirm of God. Hence, it is just as true to say that God is not wise as it is to say that God is wise, because, while in the light of our earlier distinction, ‘wise’ understood as the thing signified can be said primarily of God, nevertheless, ‘wise’ understood in terms of the mode of signification falls far short of the reality of God. In other words, even with the care and precision with which Thomas applies language to God either negatively or analogically, subjectively he recognises that we are always at risk of collapsing into our ordinary meanings of the terms.

The Divine Simplicity

Thomas begins his Summa with a discussion of the nature of theology or Sacred Science and then in the second question investigates the existence of God, producing in Article 3 his famous Five Ways. In the Proem to Questions 3 – 11, he says:

When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence.
Now, 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. It is clear that Thomas is going to engage in negative theology and we might expect the standard traditional or modern treatment of the negative attributes of God. To some extent we are satisfied, as he deals with God’s infinity, immutability and eternity, but the discussion is broader and deeper than this. He deals also with God’s goodness and perfection. Further, the Five Ways have already established things about God: complete actuality, first efficient cause, necessary being and so on. It is a richer tapestry, which will, nevertheless, be investigated and clarified in the negative mode, by peeling away attributions that are not appropriate to God. We will examine only Question 3 on the divine simplicity.

The first article asks whether God is a body. It may seem a strange question, but the view had been proposed and the objections show that Thomas’s concern was with the multiple images in Scripture that depict God in bodily form. His response is an example of a simple qualitative negation. There is no sense whatever in which God has a body. The reasons he gives are interesting, because they flow from the conclusion of the Five Ways: bodies are subject to motion, but God is the unmoved mover; bodies carry with them potentiality, but God is purely actual; God is most noble (4th Way), but bodies are at the lower end of the spectrum of being.

The remainder of the articles read like a textbook in metaphysics and amount to denials that God is composed of parts, elements or principles in any of the ways known to our experience: matter and form, substance and essence, essence and existence, genus and species, substance and accident. The final Article Eight rejects pantheism or the Divine composition with the World. So what is simplicity? In the first instance, it is the lack of composition in any of the senses that are fundamental to our human experience. We and the world around us are manifestly composite, but God is nothing like this. In Article 7, an implication of this is noted. Since God is simple, we cannot predicate things of God on the basis of parts, as we do when we say ‘the tree is green’. While we might predicate things of God on the basis of creatures’ relationship to God, of God as such, the best we can say is ‘God is God’.

The Unknowability of Ipsum Esse Subsistens

The most interesting discussion in Question 3 is Article 4, which asks whether, in God, essence and existence are identical. The term used for existence is esse, the Latin infinitive, ‘to be’, used as a noun. For Thomas, it means the actuality of being. He holds that in all created things, including angels, there is composition of essence and esse, essence being the defining form that determines something to be what it is. Esse participated and limited by essence brings particular things to be in the world.

Aristotelian metaphysics did not contain this distinction. For Aristotle, change in the physical world was adequately explained by the composition of form and matter. Separate substances, whether god or angels or spheres, were eternal and unchanging forms. The tenth century Persian Islamic scholar, Avicenna, recognised the distinction, but it was fully brought to light only in Thomas’s early work, On Being and Essence, where he explained the possibility of generation of angels through the composition of essence as potentiality and esse as actuality brought to essence. In the same discussion, he pointed out that a being in which essence and esse were not distinguished would be divine.

Although Thomas argues this distinction philosophically and although it is philosophically interesting, there is good reason to accept that it was occasioned by theological interests. The Christian created world is radically contingent. It need not have been and God would not have been any the lesser either for not creating or for the world not being. Aristotle certainly knew contingency, but it was not so radical. Things came and went, but cosmos as a whole wandered on, and was, in Aristotle’s view, probably eternal.

Thomas understands creation as the participation of esse or being into the world. Esse as it is in God is unlimited, but its reception in creatures is limited by the essence into which it is received. Again, this is a radical inversion of the Aristotelian position in which essence is identified with actuality. For Thomas it is, at this level, potential and open to receive the actuality of being or esse.

This is why Thomas can call God Ipsum Subsistens Esse, or the subsisting actuality of being itself. We might say that God’s essence is identical with God’s being or esse, which is what Article 4 is about and what ultimately it means for God to be simple.

It may seem that we have finally defined God, but this is deceptive. We can distinguish the act of being from essence in creatures, but it is through their essence or form that we know them. Maybe we grasp the distinction in the subtle change that occurs at the moment of death. But this gives us nothing with which to give formal content to the notion of esse and a being whose essence is identical with its esse. On one hand, the distinction captures the enormous gulf between a transcendent God and a created world; on the other hand, it leaves our grasp of God’s essence empty and dark.

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Conclusion

Thomas does not confuse or conflate mysticism with discursive philosophy and theology. One does, however, get the sense that even early in life his sensitivity to the greatness of God had a mystical element. In the Commentary on the Sentences, he wrote:

When we proceed into God through the way of negation, first we deny of Him all corporeal realities; and next, even intellectual realities as they are found in creatures, like goodness and wisdom, and then there remains in our understanding only that God exists and nothing further, so that it suffers a kind of confusion. Lastly, however, we even remove from him his very existence, as it is in creatures, and then our understanding remains in a certain darkness of ignorance according to which, in this present state of life, we are best united to God, as Dionysius says, and this is a sort of thick fog in which God is said to dwell.10

At the end of his life, when he stopped writing following an experience presumed in the tradition to have been mystical, Brother Reginald tried to persuade him to return to work to complete the Summa Theologicae, he simply said, ‘All I have written is straw.’

Bibliography


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10 Sentences 1, 8, 1, 1, ad 4, translated Rocca, p. 65.