

THOMAS AQUINAS' ANALOGICAL AND NEGATIVE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

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This Undergraduate Thesis is dedicated to my mother, Zelma Bowleg, to the Parishioners of St. Benedict's and Holy Angels Parishes, and to the Diocese of Nassau.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been argued by philosophers and theologians alike that because of the limitations of human nature, human beings cannot come to know God as He is in himself. Aquinas does not deny this, but he does believe that we can come to know some truths about God and His nature. The ways in which we come to know God are what Aquinas calls *the via negativa*, the negative way, knowledge of what God is not, and the way of analogy, knowledge of how certain perfections in limited beings are similar to perfections in unlimited being.

My thesis will be that this negative and analogical knowledge of God is really knowledge, and a knowledge that enables the knower to understand both the creator and creation and the relation between them, to a degree, and in a way that is not otherwise possible. This will be demonstrated in Aquinas' response to the standard objection that we can form no concept of God and therefore can not come to know Him as He is.

PART I

It is quite evident that we cannot ascribe every perfection in man to God. Man's perfection is not univocal to God's perfection. For example, a perfect man is also a brave man. Can we say that God is brave? Bravery presupposes human limitations. It presupposes fear and risk. Can these be predicated of God? Can we say that God behaves well in danger and takes prudent chances? If so, then God is vulnerable and can make mistakes, and is not the same God to whom we ascribe perfection, viz., omnipotence and omniscience.

This is what W.T. Stace calls the problem of anthropomorphism. Stace denies that we can come to know God by ascribing any human perfection to Him. He (Stace) wants to avoid making God a sort of tremendously super human. Against the Christian's claim that God "is a mind, a consciousness" that is "infinite, eternal, omnipotent, and perfectly good," Stace asserts that:

in this way[,] the mind of God must be something like a human mind, although it is no doubt more powerful, wise, and good. But the word "mind," taken in this literal way, means a stream of psychological states, flowing, changing, succeeding one another in a time-series. Consciousness, in the literal meaning of the word, cannot exist in any other way. It is not possible to conceive an unchanging consciousness, because consciousness depends on contrast which is possible only if one

thought or perception follows another with which it is contrasted; so that a consciousness which ceases to change ceases to exist.... Hence if God has consciousness in the only sense in which the word has meaning for us, it must be a changing consciousness. But that God's consciousness flows and changes in time contradicts that unchangeableness and immutability which is also...attributed to God. ...it also contradicts the infinity of God's mind (247-248).

Joseph Donceel, on behalf of the tradition, replies that critics like Stace present a false dilemma: either anthropomorphism or vacuity. Donceel insists that knowledge of God is attainable by analogy and negation, and neither is anthropomorphic or vacuous.

We can come to know God positively by ascribing perfections such as being, goodness, and intelligence to Him. Although "our very way of knowing makes us unable to conceive of an infinite perfection", our concepts being adequate only to limited, even material, sensible objects, there is a way in which we can "exclude this essential limitation and materiality." This way is by analogy. That is, by affirming that God is partially like and partially unlike the creatures to which our concepts apply. Aquinas uses two kinds of analogy to arrive at some knowledge of God. One is the analogy of proportionality, and the other is the analogy of attribution (Donceel, 126).

However, before we can even consider the possibility of obtaining knowledge of God via analogy, we must first clearly define analogy and state its purpose, and come to a clear understanding on the notion of "being". The latter is crucial in Aquinas' response to the standard objection against the notion that we can obtain knowledge of God.

Samuel Thompson presents this objection while engaged in a critical discussion about subjectivism. He realizes that it is impossible to form a concept of existence because in order to formulate a concept, "essence must be abstracted from existence." Thompson makes the Thomist point that in God, essence and existence are one, and since God's essence cannot be abstracted from His existence, we can form no concept of Him. Unfortunately, "If we can form no concept of God then it is a puzzle to understand how we can come to know anything about [His nature] except the bare fact that God is existence" (Thompson, 362).

Benignus asserts that "being" is simply the act of existence. It is a transcendental. This notion of *transcendental* will be explained later in this paper. Furthermore, as Aquinas would agree, we know that the only direct knowledge we have is of those things which we can

experience. Hence, human sensory-intellectual experience is the starting point of all our knowledge.

PART II: ANALOGICAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Aquinas insists that analogy does not allow us to acquire direct knowledge of what God is in himself. Analogical knowledge is indirect knowledge, but it is the only way we have of acquiring knowledge of the immaterial world and of God. In trying to understand something we do not know directly, we compare it with something we do know directly.

It is not the job of philosophy nor the purpose of analogy to "perform the impossible feat of making our knowledge of God clear and distinct, but to make it clear why our knowledge of God cannot be clear, and to explain as well as possible what sort of knowledge we can have of him" (Gornall, 59).

The basis of analogy is the fact that God is the cause of creatures, the source of all beings, and that the effect must in some way resemble its cause. These will be demonstrated in Aquinas' explanation of both the analogy of proportionality and the analogy of attribution.

When we predicate the same attribute analogously of

God and creatures, we deny of its existence in God all the modes of imperfection in which it exists in creatures. We predicate of God only what we can see must belong to him in order to account for the universe of which he is the cause.

The analogy of proportionality seeks to convey a sort of mathematical proportionate relation that exists between God and man. It attempts to show that A is to B as C is to D, in something like the way that 2 is to 4 as 3 is to 6.

Consider the analogy of proportionality in predicating good of God and man. The notion of good is no doubt limited to our own experience. However, the claim is that man's goodness has the same relation to man's nature as God's goodness has to His nature (Thompson, 385).

How do we know this? Thompson explains that, having proved that God is existence, we know this because the analogy of proportion holds between any two real existents. Furthermore, Thompson asserts that predicates such as being, goodness, and truth are logically indefinable and cannot be attributed univocally to different things. He explains that:

If they cannot be attributed univocally then they either cannot be attributed at all to

different subjects, without equivocation, or else they have to be attributed analogously (387).

Thompson points out that these transcendentals cannot be logically defined because they are not class concepts. They cannot be given actual definitions. In defining, say, man, we locate the difference between him and other beings. We distinguish man from all other members of the genus 'animal', and thereby we determine his species. If we were to define being, we would have to distinguish it from what is not. But nothing is not being. Everything has being. There is no non-being. Hence 'being' is indefinable (387).

Thomas Gornall, S.J., in keeping with the tradition, asserts that being is identical to unity, truth, and goodness. Thompson agrees that the absence of good is the absence of being, and so it is with the absence of truth and unity. Every being is unique, and is an individual. There are never two identical beings. Every being has its own truth and its own goodness. The greater the perfection and the higher the type of being, the greater the unity, good, and truth (64, 65).

We can acquire knowledge of God in this way by comparing the existence of the transcendentals in creatures to that of a higher being. According to this

school of thought, truth, goodness, and being in creatures are proportionate to truth, goodness, and being in God.

Dulles, Demske, and O'Connell, summarize this approach to God, as follows:

..."being" is the "element" of a thing to which the intellect is proportioned, just as color is the aspect of a material being to which the eye is proportioned. Thus, just as anything that has color is visible, so anything that has "being" is intelligible, or knowable by an intellect (124). Thus, all beings are somehow alike in that they are undivided, knowable, and lovable, but different in the degree of unity, intelligibility, and loveableness realized in them. These varying degrees depend on the varying degrees of actuality possessed by different beings (127).

Unlike the analogy of proportionality, concerned with the degree of being, the analogy of attribution concerns the relation of an effect to its cause. Aquinas holds, having proved that God is the cause of all creatures, that every effect receives something from its cause. Benignus shows how knowledge of God can be obtained based upon this cause/effect relation. He states that, "Just as all proofs of [God's] existence had to start from His effects, so His effects supply us with the only road to a rational knowledge of His essence" (504). All creatures bear only an *analogous* likeness to God because God is not contained in anything. He is an equivocal cause of everything. His

likeness in a creature is not that of a father in his son but of an artist in his painting or a dramatist in his play (513).

However, this method of analogy has to be approached carefully to avoid the danger of supposing that God resembles His creatures. Inasmuch as they possess anything from God, creatures resemble their creator and not vice versa. Gilson uses the analogy of the sun to explain the relationship between God and creatures. He explains that the warmth caused by the sun possesses some resemblance of the actual power of the sun, hence, allowing us to say that the sun is, at least, warm. Similarly, the perfection found in creatures, having been conferred by God, enables us to discover in all things their resemblance and unlikeness to God (109).

Having explored the concept of analogy in regard to obtaining knowledge of God, one can see that there are no affirmations that can be applied in the same sense to God and to creatures. God "is" not in the same sense in which creatures "are". Creatures have perfection inasmuch as they have received them, but in God there is nothing which is not his own being. Hence, Gilson asserts that "We must consequently expect to find that every proposition about the nature of God, even when it conveys some positive

knowledge, retains a good deal of negative meaning" (108).

It is therefore evident that we cannot attain to the essence of God. However, we can endeavor to ascertain what it is not. For knowledge of some sort is worth more than sheer ignorance. This is the basis for Aquinas' *via negativa*. In speaking of God by way of negation, we deny all that is limited in the perfection as it is found in creatures (Gilson, 99).

PART III: THE VIA NEGATIVA

Aquinas' method of approach begins with the conclusions of his proofs of God's existence. It is evident that the conclusion of each proof implies some immediate negation; God is not moved, not caused, and not imperfect. Aquinas insists that negative knowledge is real knowledge. In this way, we do not show what God is, but we do show that, and how, He is different from everything else (Benignus, 505).

Having explored the analogy of attribution, it can be said that God possesses all of the perfections found in creatures except those which are essentially limited to limited beings. It is also understood that created perfections are, without exception, limited. The reason

that they are limited is the mere fact that they are found in creatures. How, then, can they be present in God? First, we take a perfection, say, intelligence, then we strip it of everything that pertains to creatures or that makes it creaturely. (Dulles, Demske, O'connell, 218).

To begin with, the highest intelligence we know is human intelligence. This is evident because we experience it empirically (i.e., in the world of experience). We do not experience God, and therefore cannot attribute intelligence to Him in the same sense that it can be attributed to creatures. To speak of intelligence as a perfection found in God, we negate the limitations of intelligence as found in creatures. We know that creatures learn from experience, by trial and error. To attribute this way of knowing to God is to say that God learns from mistakes. Furthermore, it implies that God is capable of making mistakes. These limitations, then, must be negated if we are to attribute intelligence to God (219).

So, in order to attribute a limited perfection to an unlimited being, we have to consider something we do know, a positive knowledge. For example, we know that God is infinite. Therefore, all perfections in creatures, including intelligence, must be realized in God in an

infinite manner. Hence, Dulles et al state that God's intelligence, as a higher perfection, is divine intelligence. It is found eminently in God. Thus, the perfection as found, as a result of its infinity, will be identical with God's existence, and thereby, is outside the limits of human\creature conception (220).

CONCLUSION .

It has been emphasized repeatedly, and I think it needs to be reemphasized for all those who remain critics, as well as for those who just do not understand, that Aquinas insists that because of our human nature, human beings cannot come to know God as He is in Himself. However, Aquinas, although he admits that we cannot form an adequate, positive concept of God, denies that we can form no concept of God at all. Aquinas' position is clearly stated in J. Maritain's The Degrees of Knowledge:

...at the end of our knowledge we know God as unknown. For it is then...that the mind has the most perfect knowledge of God, when it is known that [H]is essence is above everything that can be apprehended in this present state of our life. And thus, by the very fact that in itself the Godhead remains unknown, there is a greater knowledge than ever of God even as [H]e is... It is not that [H]e remains unknown to us, but that [H]e is known by us, is known in [H]imself, as remaining unknown (291-292).

Hence, whatever exceeds the limit of a given nature, cannot be acquired by that nature except through another agent. It is proper to every created intellectual nature to understand according to the mode of its substance. Therefore, in order for humans to come to know God's essence, they must become like God. As noted by Aquinas, God's essence cannot become the intelligible form of a created intellect except the created intellect participates in the divine likeness (Pegis 470-473).

From the knowledge of sensible things the essence of God cannot be known. However, we can be led from them so far as to know of God whether He exists, and what must necessarily belong to Him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him (93-94).

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