

AQUINAS ON NAMING GOD

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THE SUREST sign of philosophical effort seems to be a penchant, sooner or later, for issues properly theological. Even though the concern be to legislate them out of the arena of human discourse, this very concern is haunting. Yet when a believer takes up the question of religious language, may we not suspect some unphilosophical forces at work? The doubt arises immediately, and so before attempting a synoptic view of Aquinas' position, we have to meet it head on.

But is it really as sinister as it looks? For we are really asking: How much does the wish to get somewhere betray one's philosophy? How much is unwittingly smoothed over in one's haste to get where he *wants* to be? There is, of course, no decision procedure available for such a question, just as there is no way of eliminating it—for who would admit to having no wishes at all? Aquinas certainly wanted to see divine discourse meaningful. He who devoted his life to learning about, teaching about, disputing over, and praying to God would not lightly admit the whole thing to be nonsense. But his kind is not alone in having wants. Turn the pattern inside out and it fits the skeptic as well. He, too, must confess to a more or less comprehensive set of preferences threatened by a compelling creed and a scientific theology. Once one steps outside certain common preconceptions about "objectivity," he can readily see that the skeptic's starting point is no more privileged than the believer's. The thought of each is to be judged on the skill with which he handles the facts of the case, the honesty with which he faces objections.

Exposing the features of Thomas Aquinas' carefully executed treatment of "divine names" would serve a dual purpose: to lay bare for critical appraisal a development of the possibility and structure of discourse about the divine which is not readily available, and to serve as well as a counterpoint to some contemporary fascination with the same subject. Counterpoint, however, need not be opposition, and

since our purpose is to understand, not to vindicate Aquinas, the contrasts will prove illuminating.¹

The question is: How is it possible to say anything whatsoever of God and be speaking truthfully? In the language of medieval semantics: How can we presume to "name" God?² Which means: What assures me that I can form a proposition about God and that it will be well-formed? Or in their terms: How can we attribute something to Him in a statement which we will be able to judge true or false? After carefully setting up the problem, Aquinas is ready to concede that the whole project "seems ridiculous."³

One can see in the objections he feels bound to consider an array of positions similar to that dramatized by Prior:⁴ Moses Maimonides for "Barthian," and some of the enthusiasts of the "new" (Aristotelian) logic for "logician." "Modernist Protestant" is missing, of course, yet not simply because we are seven centuries before Prior's staging of the event. "Barthian," after all, was there. The absence of "Modernist" introduces us abruptly into Aquinas' world. Much less homogeneous than we have been taught to believe, the various factions nevertheless did concur in having something to disagree about. One's position, one's faith, could be expressed, and the ensuing propositions were worth disputing, even fighting, about. Even the "school of unknowing" had recourse to a tortuous Neoplatonic dialectic. Whatever one's beliefs, all believed passionately in the intellect. No one dared renounce that. This attitude had been canonized as far back as Nicea, where

¹ *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (London, 1955), can serve as a convenient locus to estimate the drift of contemporary discussion. Although a detailed comparison with Wittgenstein is beyond the scope of this article, it is interesting to note the similarity of concern in the final propositions of the *Tractatus* (6.4 to 7.). For the moment we shall be content to remark it as it occurs.

² Hence the primary locus for Aquinas' treatment is in the *Summa theologica* 1, q. 13: "Names of God," while the foundations were laid in commenting on Pseudo-Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus* (hereafter cited as *In Div. nom.*).

³ "Ridiculum videtur velle tractare de nominibus rei quae nominare non potest" (*In 1 Div. nom.* 3, 77.—For citation of works of Aquinas, we shall follow the model given, where the reference is to Book 1, lectio 3, and the number following denotes the paragraph in the Marietti editions, published in Turin).

⁴ A. N. Prior, "Can Religion Be Discussed?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1942), reprinted in Flew and MacIntyre, pp. 1-11. For Aquinas' treatment, see *De pot.*, q. 7, aa. 5-6; and *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 1, obj. 2. The reader can judge whether Prior's "Catholic" faithfully represents a position like that of Aquinas.

the Greek spirit, in residence at Alexandria, triumphed over the Oriental to express the objective content of God's own word in the precise language of human science. Nor was it a question of constructing a theology—the pre-Nicene world was cluttered with them—but of imposing a creed. Henceforth, all who would follow Jesus Christ must believe him to be “consubstantial with the Father.”⁵

The implications of this step are far-reaching. Aquinas realized them full well. They set the stage for his treatment of divine discourse. He begins, not with his own belief, but with the *symbola fidei*, the documented faith of the Church. In believing, he accepts these propositions to be true, and hence meaningful.⁶ His task will be to show how this be possible—in the face of overpowering arguments to the contrary.

Here is the first counterpoint, all the more important in that it looks like a begging of the question. Given the fact that God has told man about Himself in human speech, the problem is to discover *how* such a thing is possible. No one need concern himself with *proving to* anyone that certain words are the words of the Lord. That is quite another matter. The problem first arises for the believer himself: Granted that these words are from God, what is it I am assenting to when I believe? How can the act of faith honestly engage the intellect?

These will not be our questions, but historically they were the well-spring of so-called natural or philosophical theology—a hopper of questions long regarded as *preambula fidei*.⁷ Yet any one of them may not occur to a believer until years after he has committed himself. Faith, while reasonable, is not the term of a rationalistic process. Aquinas understood this well, and so would never have confused his natural theology with an apologetic.⁸ In fact, we can be fairly certain that the

⁵ H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum* (28th ed.; Freiburg, 1952) n. 86. Cf. H. Bacht and A. Grillmeier (eds.), *Das Konzil von Chalkedon 1* (Freiburg, 1959) chap. 1.

⁶ *Sum. theol.*, q. 13, a. 12, *sed contra*; *De verit.*, q. 14, a. 12: because faith is an assent, it is carried by a proposition.

⁷ Cf. *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1m; 2-2, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3m; q. 2, a. 10, ad 2m. The general tone of Flew and MacIntyre lacks theological sophistication, since most of the contributors were content with apologetic or popular résumés of the theistic position. Compare, for example, chap. 2, “La connaissance de Dieu,” in H. Bouillard, *Karl Barth 3* (Paris, 1957) esp. pp. 129–39 for the controversy of Barth and Brunner.

⁸ This point, however, has not always been kept in perspective in post-Tridentine Catholic theology. Cf. Guy de Broglie, S.J., “La vraie sens de *preambula fidei*,” *Gregorianum* 34 (1953) 345–88.

thought of *proving* that man could come to know divine things without the fact of revelation would have staggered him.⁹ The clarity, the assurance of his writing on the God we can know from reason is only possible because the personal struggle is in the background. The reasons adduced for God's existence are not meant to persuade anyone, but to be just that: reasons adduced. In some other domains, the appropriate reasons amount to a proof. Not necessarily so here, where we find a certain distance or gap between the reasoning and the assent—and that not only because of the unfamiliarity of the procedure, but also because there is a great deal at stake. However detached we wish to make this discussion, we remain involved.¹⁰

AN ONTOLOGICAL KNOT

Aquinas' solution, we shall see, is at once epistemological and semantic. But before proceeding to it, he must loosen a metaphysical knot. If discourse about God is to admit truth or falsity, this God must exist. And if it is to be meaningful, this God must be the first principle of all things.

The first condition but exemplifies a general semantic theorem: true or false predication presupposes the existence of its subject, for a statement is true or false as it refers or not in the manner it purports to.¹¹ The second condition, more basic since any reference beyond the immediate is in function of a certain sense or meaning, is an epistemological corollary that carries us to the heart of the problematic. Knowing of any kind demands a certain proportion or similarity between known and knower.¹² (Since we cannot, for example, see a true spirit, we cannot say ordinary things about it, like: "there it is!") And since

⁹ Cf. *C. gent.* 1, 4-5. The lesson Aquinas draws from the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is how long it took men to recognize some factor other than the material in material things (esp. *In 1 Metaph.*, lect. 5). This has nothing to do with the *possibility* of knowing that God exists—a nineteenth-century question foreign to Aquinas' problematic.

¹⁰ This theme has been orchestrated by H. de Lubac, S.J., in *Sur les chemins de Dieu* (Paris, 1956); *The Discovery of God* (New York, 1960). On religious assent, compare J. J. C. Smart, in Flew and MacIntyre, pp. 40-46, with Bouillard's thematic discussion (pp. 41-70) of Barth on St. Anselm.

¹¹ *In 1 Peri herm.* 3, 24, 33-35 (= Commentary on Aristotle, *On Interpretation*).

¹² The general theorem is enunciated in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 84, a. 7: "... potentia cognoscitiva proportionatur cognoscibili," and worked out in detail in the commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* 2, lect. 5, to 3, lect. 8.

God is said to be outside *any* genus, there can be no similarity whatsoever, no proportion, between the world we know and Him, unless He be its principle.¹³

Yet to speak of a "principle of all things" betrays the unique character of the proposition "God exists," and indeed threatens the whole argument with circularity. For while it may be true that a set of propositions purporting to speak about God can be true (and hence meaningful) *only if* the world be related to their common subject, God, as to a single principle, it is also trivial, since speaking of the "order of all things to one principle" is already talking about God. We are, in fact, simply saying that "God" is a common name, which can always be replaced by "principle of all things,"¹⁴ but to what avail? What assures us that such a phrase has any meaning?

This booby trap was not hidden to Aquinas. He places his treatise on divine names after his schematic five ways for adducing God's existence; yet in the course of showing how one might establish the truth of the statement "God exists," he explicitly presupposes that one knows its meaning.¹⁵

The relation of logic and language can be illustrative. Language can admit of truth or falsity, and so be talking sense, we were told, only if it conforms to a workable logic. Yet even to speak of "conforming to a logic," much less to form its rules of operation, we must have recourse to language. Hence the irreducibility of language, that given-

¹³ God is not in a genus: *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 3, a. 5; though He is related to the "genus" of all intelligible things as its principle: *In Boethio de Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4. There is no proportion: *Sum. theol.*, 1, q. 64, a. 1, ad 2m; and to assume there is leads to error: *In 7 Div. nom.* 1, 704—unless it be that of principle to its effects: *In Boeth. de trin.*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 3m; *De verit.*, q. 12, a. 3, ad 13–14 m; *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 12, a. 1, ad 4m. For the shift in "proportion," see F. Crowe, S.J., "St. Thomas and the Isomorphism of Human Knowing," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 13 (1961) 178–80.

¹⁴ *In 1 Div. nom.* 2, 45: "... non cognoscimus [Deum] per divina nomina sicuti est—hoc enim est indicibile et inscrutabile, sed cognoscimus Eum ut principium..." Cf. also *In 7 Div. nom.* 4, 729, 733.

¹⁵ *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2m. The general theorem enunciated there: To prove something to be, the middle term must be the meaning of the name applied to it, is worked out in detail in the commentary *In Posteriora analytica* 1, lect. 2, 17; 2, lect. 8, 484. So each of the "five ways" ends with the phrase "quam omnes nominant Deum" or its equivalent. The genuine skeptic must indeed insist that the very statement "God exists" is meaningless, since to affirm or deny it already presupposes one knows something about God.

ness which cannot be analyzed out, at the risk of destroying analysis. Now is there a sense in which it is simply given, ordinary, if you will, to speak of "all things related to God as to a first principle?" Is it possible that everyone has a rough idea of this, as they could know what it means to "conform to a logic" from the experience of conforming, or not, to a set of rules? Not that just anyone's grasp of "conforming to a logic" would not have to be refined, but that any further analysis would have to be in terms of the rudimentary grasp. Is it possible that all men have such a rudimentary grasp of God as first principle of all things?

Aquinas insists that there is such a grasp, that it is common to all men, and recognizes it as presupposed to any chain of reasoning seeking to establish a valid use of the statement "God exists."¹⁶ But what kind of an understanding is this? In a sense, it is far from ordinary, as "God" need not often enter into ordinary speech, but the fact that it is common to all saves it a touch of the ordinary. It is a certain ability on the part of all men to use the word "God" or catch the drift of another's speech when he uses a different word in similar contexts. Is something known here? Is Aquinas positing some minimal knowledge which all men have if only they look hard enough? Not at all. In a literal sense, it cannot be said that *something* is known by the mere fact that we know how to use the term "God." In fact, we will never be able to speak of knowing God in the sense that we know anything else—through sensible familiarity and theoretic understanding.¹⁷ It is more like the ability to *recognize* apposite or awkward uses of the term, rather than develop new usages one's self. Here we are close to the *Meno* problem, yet far from a literal interpretation of Plato's solution. Aquinas deftly avoids the Neoplatonic modeling of understanding on sight, which would make God, or Truth, the first-known, that by which all claimants to truth are judged. He says simply that all know how to use this name "God" inasmuch as each has within

¹⁶ The general statement, "God is understood by everyone as one of a number of causes and a kind of principle of things" (*In 1 Metaph.*, lect. 3, 64), is given a stronger form in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1m: "... to know that God exists in a general and confused way is naturally a part of us, in so far as God is man's beatitude. . . ." The reason for the confusion is given in *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 11, ad 10m.

¹⁷ Cf. *In 1 Div. nom.* 3, 83; 2, 74-75; *In 13 Div. nom.* 3, 993-96; *In 1 ad Rom.* 6.

him the *power* of arriving at a knowledge of God's existence, and is aware of such a power.¹⁸

Now such awareness need not be direct; in fact, awareness never is. We use the word to denote the kind of knowing that is not knowing something, but presupposed in knowing anything. It is the defining feature of the intellect, that presence to itself in every knowing act that is not yet reflection, but the condition of its possibility.¹⁹ Aquinas is not postulating a pure consciousness of self, but merely recalling that each act of knowing something is conscious. Nor is he speaking of "reflection" in the ordinary sense of introspection, whereby I make myself an object, unrolling myself to the best of my ability out before me. He is simply saying that understanding would not be what it is, be able to do what it does, were it not present to itself in its actions. Indeed, this seems to be the only adequate explanation for certain facets of memory,²⁰ and certainly, as we shall see, for the process of theory formation that leads up to understanding, and the judgment that completes it. Nor is this awareness outside of experience, though it remains at the limit of each one's experience, as the sense of identity of the one experiencing.²¹

But what is this power of arriving at God's existence, of speaking of the "principle of all," that Aquinas calls our attention to, says we can be aware of? We may best illustrate his meaning by recalling the difference between asking questions and answering them.

¹⁸ *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 12, ad 1m. The shift from an Augustinian position is recorded most clearly in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 88, a. 3, ad 1m; *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 11, ad 12m. Yet *In Boeth. de trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, shows that the principle is maintained, although its applications differ: "Sed quia vi illorum quae ultimo cognoscimus, sunt nota illa quae primo cognoscimus, oportet etiam a principio aliquam nos habere *notitiam* de illis quae sunt per se magis nota. . . ." Note choice of verbs (italics ours).

¹⁹ Reflection, the most obvious mark of an intellectual nature (cf. *C. gent.* 4, 11, 5), is the act of a faculty which is by its very nature present to itself. Reflection will lead to a scientific knowledge of soul, but any such explanatory grasp is based on an experiential foundation. For this experience, Aquinas says that the "very presence of the mind suffices . . . so that it is said to know itself by its presence" (*Sum. theol.* 1, q. 87, a. 1). *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 8, specifies that such a habitual presence is activated only in knowing something. Cf. B. Lonergan, *Insight* (New York, 1957) pp. 320-28.

²⁰ Compare *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 2, with A. J. Ayer, *Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth, 1956), chapter on "Memory."

²¹ Compare Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 5, 632: "The subject does not belong to the world: rather it is a limit of the world."

The development of science testifies eloquently to the distinction between intelligence as a power of search, and the same intelligence as consolidator of explanations; the intellect as heuristic and as systematizing, as desire to know and interpretation of the known, as the realm of symbol (standing for the yet-to-be-known) and of sign (marking out the known-as-gained). The image we have inherited has a vast outer darkness—felt, not known—slowly giving way to the clarity of scientific explanation. Aquinas offers one not quite so black and white. There is a kind of knowledge which helps us form our questions, for the researcher must in some way know what he is looking for, and an even deeper source which pushes us to ask questions at all.²² Reason is not chained to the systematic, but knows how to forge out into the unknown as well.

We all know the use of "God" as long as our questions continue to outreach our answers, as we recognize an inborn desire for a total explanation.²³ But this is more awareness than knowledge. For the fact remains that almost everyone gives different meanings to "God," as they seek to express what is but a confused presentiment, give voice and finite form to what is known as mere propensity—propensity for an explanation of the world itself. Yet the interpretations, varied as they may be, are organically related to the common desire. They grow out of it, in an attempt to consolidate the findings as well as chart the future course of this moving desire to know *everything*.

But one might counter: meanings are founded in interpretations, not desire.²⁴ And the obvious fact is a multiplicity of interpretations and, as we have said, of meanings for the word "God." How can we continue to speak of a common meaning that is not yet an interpretation? A more exact response will come later. Let it simply be said now that the first meaning, the one everyone is supposed to know, corresponds to a rudimentary grasp of the usage of the word; the second, to an understanding of what it purports to signify: usually a demonstrated ability to use it in quite sophisticated contexts. The distinction is between *descriptive* meaning—the kind at play between an automobile

²² The role of the question in inquiry is underlined *In 3 Metaph.* 1, and worked out *In 1 Post. anal.* 3.

²³ *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 12, a. 1; 2-2, q. 3, a. 8; *C. gent.* 1, 10, 5; 3, 25, 11-13; 3, 50.

²⁴ *In 1 Peri herm.* 1, 3; 3, 24.

salesman and a customer, and an *explanatory* one—to be found between the automotive designer and the engineering foreman.²⁵

The awareness one has of always being able to ask a further question, of being oriented to an ever more comprehensive explanation, is sufficient to ground a sense for “God,” namely, the one who would provide such an explanation. Vague, as yet unformulated, and perhaps unformulatable by ordinary categories of explanation, the usage like the awareness remains a fact.²⁶

TOWARDS A THEORY

As one may suspect, we have been forced to describe what will become the explicit foundation for Aquinas’ theory of theological discourse. If a vague and general awareness of the orientation of one’s rational consciousness serves to ground a rudimentary meaning for the term, “God” as “principle of all,” then we would suspect the more refined uses of the term to be justified by a more explicit appeal to the structure of this orientation, to the inner workings of conscious judgment. This Aquinas will do, but not all at once or *in abstracto*, but rather as the occasion demands. So, rather than present his position as a *fait accompli*, we would rather show how he permitted the ordinary usage to clarify itself, as it was forced to meet more and more complex situations.

²⁵ The distinction, we shall see, plays a crucial role in Aquinas’ semantics, even though the essential statement *In 2 Post. anal.* 8, 484, was never systematically developed. Cf. Crowe, *art. cit.*, p. 184.

²⁶ *In 1 Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2; *In Boeth. de trin.*, q. 1, a. 2. It is common to refer at this point to a “sense of contingency,” of human time, to the tragic in human affairs. More poignant as illustrations, they recall too easily the philosophy of sentiment to clarify the issue; for preoccupation with feelings can trap one into a facile disjunction of heart and mind. We have tried to show that the transcendent impinges on the intellect itself, as reason is constantly questioning its own achievements. And these so-called “feelings” of contingency, of the tragic, have their roots here as well. The “sense of contingency” is not a feeling at all, but at best a reflection in depth—what Gabriel Marcel would call “secondary reflection.” It is not just a sense of finitude, but of a finitude undeserved—as an antinomy is not simply a contradiction, but an unexpected one. This gives a poignancy to human time which forbids its ever being reduced to the regular measure of mathematics. Similarly, what spawns the tragic is a sense of order, of truth, violated. A temporary philosophical “blik” may force such reflection to take refuge in literature, but the penchant remains, just as the desire to know is natural to man, and an unsatisfiable one (Cf. *In 1 Metaph.* 1; *In 2 Metaph.* 1).

We may proceed, for the ontological knot is untied. The fact of God's existence may be side-stepped. We are not concerned whether statements about God be true or false; only with the possibility of their being meaningful. That it is at least in some sense "ordinary" to speak of a "principle of all things" is enough for us.²⁷

The movement of Aquinas' thought is straightforward. Since any move beyond our world to its principle must be in function of the knowledge proper to that world, we must establish a theory of proportionate meaning before one that purports to be transcendent. Any knowledge *we* can have of the infinite must always be in terms of the finite, for the proper object of the human understanding is a material thing.²⁸ The negative judgment, which comes into play in any theological statement, must be exercised upon a meaningful empirical statement, whose formation and adequacy, we shall see, is attested by the same power of judgment, functioning in a different manner. The pervading role of judgment stamps Aquinas' discussion as basically epistemological. Whether this is the aspect Aquinas himself would have emphasized is beside the point. That his philosophical and theological writings contain an epistemological resolution of these basic questions has been definitively established by Bernard Lonergan in a series of studies to which we owe a great deal and which we will cite when the argument depends on them.²⁹

MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING

Before we look at Aquinas' theory of proportionate meaning, a word of warning may not be amiss. Standing alone, his formulae stating the relations of name, concept, and thing, his words on meaning and reference, might sound naive, even a bit wooden. Yet the naiveté would be ours, for plucking them out of context and unwittingly supplying that of the intervening Scholasticism, a tradition we

²⁷ This maneuver has been challenged by C. B. Daly as a *petitio principii*, in his excellent summary statement on "The Knowableness of God," *Philosophical Studies* 9 (1959) 90-137, esp. p. 100. He insists that the proven fact of God's existence is a necessary condition for meaningful discourse about Him. We hope to show that they are concomitant, the roots for both being one and the same, as meaning is *bestowed* by judgment in this domain. This would justify a tactical distinction of the questions.

²⁸ *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 84, a. 7-8; *In 2 Metaph.* 1, 285.

²⁹ "The Concept of *Verbum* in the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 7 (1946) 349-92; 8 (1947) 35-79, 404-44; 10 (1949) 3-40, 359-93.

hope to show had little or no connection with Aquinas. Conscious of this danger, we may approach his theory of meaning by isolating the major strands that make it up.

"Sense" (or signification) and "reference" are quite distinct from the outset, being the approximate semantic correlates of the epistemological distinction between understanding and judgment. The fact that a statement is intelligible is quite enough to assure its meaning. Whether it be finally decided to cohere enough with over-all experience to be true of something—this is a quite separate question.³⁰ Distinct as acts, they are related in process; for it is the statement that one seeks to verify, and the act of understanding has its natural term in the judgment, where, in the language of Aquinas, it is "resolved."³¹

To name a thing is to say something about it, just as to know a thing is always to know something about it, and if any statement is judged to be true, it obviously refers in and through its meaning.³² Is it the thing which is then known? Yes, but in and through one of its knowable aspects. The synthesis, or intelligible unity of all such aspects, would be *the* nature, or the thing in its intrinsic intelligibility, avowedly unknowable to us.³³ But to know anything beyond the sheerly accidental about a thing is to know (in some way) what it is, and so one can be said to know its quiddity or nature.³⁴ This is a loose way of speaking, much as we remark on being advised of a friend's latest escapades: "That is his nature." "Nature of" would best be translated by us as "some way of describing or understanding a thing." It is important to recognize this liberality of usage, quite absent from later Scholastic thought, which gave rise to the notion of nature as the inner, inner core, so fathering the thing-in-itself. For Aquinas, a near hit is as good as a bull's-eye. In fact, it is all we can ever hope to get.³⁵

³⁰ *In 1 Peri herm.* 3; *In 3 De anima* 11, 761–62; 12, 781–83.

³¹ *In proem. Post. anal.* 6; *Sum. theol.* 1–2, q. 74, a. 7.

³² *In 7 Metaph.* 1, 1253; *In 4 Metaph.* 7, 613, 620.

³³ The general statement can be found in *C. gent.* 1, 3, 5. This is the reason why explanation must rely so heavily on description: *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 1; a. 6, ad 2m; q. 4, a. 1, ad 8m; *In 7 Div. nom.* 2, 713, 711; *In 7 Metaph.* 12, 1552. Cf. Lonergan, *Insight*, chap. 7: "Things," pp. 245–54; it is but a short step to recognize the concomitant necessity for hypothetical constructivity.

³⁴ *In 2 Post. anal.* 8, 484; 9, 493; *In 4 Metaph.* 7, 620.

³⁵ Although the affirmation, "Omnis creata veritas defectibilis est . . .," is to be found in the context of the move to faith (*De verit.*, q. 14, a. 8), it sums up admirably the Aris-

Furthermore, all our knowledge about things comes from perception, issuing in descriptive statements. But description need not tell us anything about what a thing is. Understanding alone can bridge the gap, discovering more in the description than first met the eye, and so form a statement, in virtue of the representations, which purports to "signify" the thing described.³⁶ A child can describe a crowd demonstrating; we ask a political analyst "what it all means." The child's statements are not "purely descriptive," of course. He too understands, for he uses words to describe, but his understanding does not go beyond the here-and-now, beyond the audio-visual representations of the crowd. Understanding, for him, consists in knowing how to use the language to relate what he saw and heard. It is completely at the service of description. For the political analyst, on the other hand, the descriptive statements of the child—or his own view of the crowd—are like so many indices, pointers as it were, to an assay of what such a demonstration signifies.

We may say, then, that the name or sentence "signifies" the thing, through one or more representations of it, so that what corresponds to the name or sentence is not directly the thing, nor indirectly a picture, but an act of understanding.³⁷ Now a complete act of understanding is a concept, so we have the formula: "a name (or term) signifies a thing by way of a concept."³⁸ This distinction or incommensurability of representation and concept will prove crucial to the semantics of transempirical statements. But let us first consider how the two are related. From the previous remarks on "nature of," we may well suspect that Aquinas' treatment of concept formation is a good deal more flexible than the Scholastic doctrines, which early empiricists unwittingly borrowed when they sought to replace the "metaphysical" notion of "concept" with interior pictures.

totalitarian position that the only certitudes in natural science are the vague general ones, which saves the essentials of the *Meno* problem as well as the integrity of scientific inquiry (*In 2 Post. anal.* 15, 545; 16, 557; 20, 592-94). That science can never be content with such generic certitudes, cf. *In 1 Sensu et sensato* 1; *In 1 Phys.* 1, 5-7.

³⁶ The classic locus is the commentary *In 2 Post. anal.* 20, 593-95. Also *Quaestio disputata de anima*, a. 15; *In 3 De anima* 13, 791; *In 1 Metaph.* 1, 15-18.

³⁷ The gap between representation and meaning—already incipient in simple descriptions (for how many witnesses can agree?)—is explained by the act of understanding: *De verit.* q. 4, a. 1; *In 7 Metaph.* 1, 1253; *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 50, a. 2.

³⁸ *In 1 Peri herm.* 2, 15.

FROM DESCRIPTION TO EXPLANATION

As description leads to explanation, so representations lead to a concept. What answers to the concept is not a flow of images, but some recurring pattern, an intelligible set of relations which reveals something about the thing independent of the individuating conditions—think of the definition of a circle in Euclid. But this pattern is always found within, or picked out of, if you will, the sensible representations of the thing.³⁹ The knower seeks for universality, for a knowledge increasingly independent of particular time and place, and ideally invariant under all linear and temporal transformations. While such knowledge demands insight, it is not insight given in one fell swoop, but insight into comprehensive descriptive data, assisted by bold hypothetical guesses, based often on a ready familiarity and skill in handling one or more organizing disciplines, such as mathematics, logic, or philosophical anthropology. The brightest student usually possesses the most fertile imagination, but he also requires discipline, for the imagination alone does not distinguish what is relevant. Aquinas represents the imagination as “lending a hand” to the understanding, and sees here the basic relationship that will come into play in divine discourse: “as what the senses apprehend takes the mind in hand to lead it further, so one’s understanding of what the senses present lends a hand to lead him to an understanding of things divine.”⁴⁰

Once the mind has grasped something of what a thing is, the name

³⁹ The general theorem is announced in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 84, a. 6; the process described, *In 9 Metaph.* 10, 1888–90; applied to “divine things,” *In Boeth. de trin.*, q. 6, a. 2, ad 5m; and extended to show how an example is necessary to grasp universals we think we know: *In 1 Post. anal.* 19, 164. Cf. Lonergan, *THEOL. STUDIES* 7 (1946) 372–80.

⁴⁰ *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2m. In any move to understanding which is not deductive—where what is given is not adequate to the ensuing result—the data are said to “lead one by the hand” (*manuducere*) to the formation of a general statement. The contexts are numerous: the classroom: *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 117, a. 1; *De verit.*, q. 11, a. 1; ethical principles: *In 1 Eth.* 4, 53; basic notions in metaphysics: *In 9 Metaph.* 5, 1826–27; knowledge of any spiritual being: *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 51, a. 3 ad 1m; *Quaestio disp. de anima*, a. 16 (*ad fin.*); and especially in knowing God. The general theorem is given in *Sum. theol.* 1 q. 12, a. 12; used in a semantic difficulty: *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 5, ad 3–4m; and completed *In 7 Div. nom.* 4, 731. This is Wittgenstein’s ladder (*Tractatus* 6, 54), which nothing short of mystical vision can induce us to throw away, but which judgment alone—as it turns out—can license us to use.

becomes one's own property, as it were. One will be able to justify one's use of it, and depending on one's powers of imagination be able to use it in new and diverse circumstances. Where the thing named is quite straightforward, like a baseball bat, or one's grasp of it is limited to a quite practical aspect—like the average man's attitude toward a car or a bank—then there is little more to the concept than a rather uniform pattern of representations fusing into a single image. In such a case, "meaning" can be fairly well assimilated to "representation." There is very little "leading up to knowledge." The thing meant is readily reducible to descriptive terms. If we should limit "ordinary language" to common-sense conversation, it would reveal little of the gap between representation and meaning.

But when one can no longer rely on descriptive language, where meaning is far removed from representation, as in any theoretical science—or statements said to mean precisely in so far as *any* representation falls short, as in theological discourse⁴¹—then a further "leading up to knowledge" is required. What is the "meaning" of a theorem? Often simply the role it plays in the system. Yet a real grasp of the system demands a certain descriptive build-up, plus a skill in mathematics or logic. Here it is quite clear that to expect an image or a descriptive answer would be to mistake the mode of inquiry that is in play, and amount to demanding that every kind of meaning be reducible to a representation. Evidently this is not the case, for highly theoretical scientific developments have led to quite significant results, revealing that the procedures finally do "refer" to something and so are meaningful on anyone's count.

There comes a point then where descriptive statements are no longer useful, where the rules of pure logic must take over. The meaning of words—while not entirely losing touch with primary experience—is gradually subsumed under the more rigorous norms of logical connection, where further usage is governed, not by ostensive familiarity, but by rules of deductive procedure, and new hypotheses suggested by symbolic affinities.

Something of this process is involved in the move to any universal statement or hypothesis—as Aquinas sees it, a move hinging finally on an act of understanding, but relying throughout on the evidence

⁴¹ *In Boeth. de trin.*, q. 6, a. 2; *In 1 Sent.*, d. 4, q. 2, a. 1 ad 1m.

carried by sensible similarities and differences. Indeed, on the absence of any such evidence, no act of understanding is possible.⁴² And we speak of "evidence" quite appositely, since a kind of judgment must intervene here. Whether Aquinas saw this is a historical question. He is usually content to describe the formation of general notions in Aristotelian terms of classification, where things are ordered according to rather gross sensible characteristics. Science as we know it never seems to get much beyond description.⁴³ Yet he left room for another kind of scientific procedure, where the bold generalities of mathematics would provide an intelligible order for what the senses could but classify,⁴⁴ and gave such a process epistemological status by distinguishing radically the "potential generalities" of a classificatory method from the "formal" considerations of mathematics.⁴⁵ If, then, classifying by way of sensible similarities and differences can yield only a vague and general knowledge of things, one must have recourse to intellectual constructivity, to hypothetical method. Although Aquinas had no acquaintance with such procedures and was himself so absorbed in other concerns that his scientific remarks and examples are usually drawn verbatim from Aristotle, he would certainly have welcomed its advent, sensitive as he was to the incommensurability between the similarities and differences available to sense, and the

⁴² The general theorem: "It follows, then, that without some use of the senses we can neither learn anything new, as it were for the first time; nor bring before our understanding any intellectual knowledge already possessed. Whenever the intellect actually regards anything, there must at the same time be formed in us a phantasm, that is, a likeness of something sensible" (*In 3 De anima* 13, 791). This is applied to knowledge of God in *De malo*, q. 16, a. 8, ad 3m; and in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 84, a. 7, ad 3m. Karl Rahner considered the latter article so crucial to a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge that his *Geist in Welt* (2nd ed.; Munich, 1957) is construed as a commentary on it.

⁴³ Cf., for example, how Aristotle rejects the atomistic hypothesis that something is always in motion by appeal to gross sensible evidence: *In 7 Phys.* 6, 1014, 1019. *In De trin.*, q. 6, a. 2, 2.

⁴⁴ *In 1 Post anal.* 25; 41, 357-60. Cf. B. Mullahy, C.S.C., "Subalternation and Mathematical Physics," *Laval théol. et philos.* 2 (1946) 89-107.

⁴⁵ The distinction is drawn *In De trin.*, q. 5, a. 3; and the weakness of the classificatory generality underlined in *Substantiis separatis*, c. 15, 134; *Quaestio disp. de anima*, a. 15 (*ad fin.*). Without the means to implement it, the import of the distinction was lost to Scholastic thought, so that Ernst Cassirer, in *Substance and Function* (Chicago, 1923; New York, 1953), must destroy the pseudoscientific status accorded "abstraction by way of generality" to establish the "formal abstraction" of mathematical order. Compare chap. 1 with references given above and in n. 35.

intelligibility we seek in things. Finally, his cognizance of the structure and utility of hypothetical argumentation, together with the privileged epistemological position he reserved for mathematics, would suggest a methodology more consonant with ranging constructivity and testability than with an appeal to some "principle of induction."⁴⁶

The formation of any universal statement or hypothesis, then, involves a preliminary judgment—a decision that a certain set of properties, a particular set of relations, will harness more explanatory power than another, and so are worth testing in the domain one is studying. Examples need not be abstruse. We find ourselves "taking the measure" of any situation which we meet and need to come to grips with. Experience brings facility, but the secret of success is adaptability: recognizing which factors are relevant enough to revise one's original appraisal. So, constructive intellectual power must be wedded to a certain familiarity with the discipline, which decides which possible explanations will be more relevant to the matter at hand. This is the role of judgment: to weight the relevant—a judgment already at play in the formation of a theory that will seek corroboration in the testing.⁴⁷

WINGS OF JUDGMENT

Yet abstract as theory may become, we still have not realized the supreme role of the judgment. For if meaning has lost all ties with representation in a theoretical structure, it is still carried by rules of algebraic procedure, justified by a rigorous analogical extension of the natural number system.⁴⁸ The role of the intellect is accentuated, and with it the incommensurability of descriptive and theoretical statements. Yet the judgment here is at the service of theory: suggesting apposite hypothetical structures and contriving means of testing them.

⁴⁶ Such is the thesis, abundantly illustrated, of Lonergan's *Insight*.

⁴⁷ The use of "judgment" here may be misleading for those familiar with Thomistic literature, which usually fails to distinguish the senses implicit in Aquinas' liberal usage. Lonergan has discerned two senses: the *formation* of the hypothesis or "synthesis," and the *posing* of it (THEOL. STUDIES 8 [1947] 36-52; 10 [1949] 38-39). We are accenting here the first of these senses, the role of judgment in the coalescence and development of insights to form a theory; Thomistic literature seems to know only the second.

⁴⁸ A. Eddington has admirably described this process in "Theory of Groups," in *New Pathways in Science* (Cambridge, 1934) chap. 12; reprinted in J. Newman, *World of Mathematics* (New York, 1956) pp. 1558-73.

A yet bolder move beyond the logic of scientific inquiry, even beyond the theoretical pretensions of mathematics which represent the "most complete generality consistent with . . . our metaphysical situation"⁴⁹—such a move would not so much be bold as it would be reckless.

And yet Aquinas proposes it, as he speaks of a "negative" function of the judgment in any statement about God.⁵⁰ And while this is an immensely more tenuous and incredible move than the most daring hypothesis of theoretical physics, many find it much more natural a thing than abstract scientific speculation.⁵¹ While there may be a sense in which this is true—as we shall see—Aquinas' first reactions are to the unnatural, indeed impossible character of such a move. In his earliest comprehensive treatment of the question, he states from the outset: "God is simply incomprehensible to any created intellect. . . . Hence no creature can attain to a perfect way of knowing Him . . . as long as our knowledge is tied to created things as connatural to us."⁵² And this thoroughgoing agnosticism is bolstered by semantics: "the reason being that the names we impose signify after the fashion in which things fall under our knowledge. And since God is above our knowledge . . . names we impose do not signify in such a way as to conform to divine excellence, but only as they are measured by created things."⁵³ Nor can he be said to have backed down from this position. It underlies all of his writing on man's philosophical search for God, and is strongly reiterated in one of his latest works: "Whatever can be thought or said of God falls short of Him . . . because the names we impose signify in the way in which we understand. And our intellect can only grasp participated natures, while God's nature is *to be* and so beyond our ken."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ A. N. Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World* (New York, 1925; Mentor edition, 1956, p. 27); reprinted in Newman, *World*, p. 407.

⁵⁰ The general proposition is enunciated *In 1 Sent.*, d. 22, q. 1, a. 1; explicated in *C. gent.* 1, 14; 3, 39, 1; and used to advantage *In 1 Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3–4m; *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 12, ad 3m.

⁵¹ Hence the tendency for those who would not recognize any meaning "beyond" that of theoretical science to reduce any such pretensions to something quite "natural," indeed elemental, needs of security, etc. We shall see if there is a more consistent explanation of this state of affairs.

⁵² *In 1 Div. nom.* 1, 27. Compare with total agnosticism *In 4 Metaph.* 12, 680.

⁵³ *In 1 Div. nom.* 1, 29.

⁵⁴ *In Lib. de causis* 6 (ed. Saffrey [Fribourg–Louvain, 1956] pp. 43, 47).

But we need not go so far as God. Anything immaterial is simply unknowable to us, because it has no facets to describe. Without the raw materials of description, all the machinery of theory formation is of no avail. One would either know everything about such things or nothing, since nothing short of a direct intuition can take their measure, an intuition which man in no wise possesses.⁵⁵ Yet there is one way out. Should such an immaterial thing be the cause or principle of things we can describe, then while we still have no hope of approximating to *what* it is, we may come to know *that* it is, by taking in the place of descriptive statements its effects. This general epistemological theorem implies that any knowledge we can have of God will be of Him as principle, and from His effects.⁵⁶

And just as the judgment bridged the gap between descriptive and explanatory statements, so must it here account for the move from effects to cause, but the function is different. As Aquinas puts it (and we paraphrase), the role of the explanatory hypothesis in science about the divine is supplied by our realization that we do *not* know what God is.⁵⁷ The analogy is from the structure of scientific knowing as he took it from Aristotle, where the explanatory hypothesis (or definition) is that through which the conclusions are known. So it serves to emphasize the central role of negation in speaking of God. But the logical cast of the example ought not mislead us. It is no more than a similitude. To be sure, the Neoplatonic systems, themselves a kind of hypostasization of logic, thought they were saying something about God in simply negating of Him any possible predicate; but Aquinas demands more than this.⁵⁸ Yet if the logical example is not to be taken logically, how can we understand it? As a sign that a negative judgment must intervene, just as the passage from descriptions to a general hypothetical notion betrays the judgment at work. But what is denied? The answer usually given is the *modum significandi* is denied so that the *res significata* can be affirmed, supposing always a select

⁵⁵ *In 9 Metaph.* 11, 1901-19; *In 1 Post. anal.* 30, 254.

⁵⁶ *Quaestio disp. de anima*, a. 16; *In 1 Post. anal.* 41, 363; *In 7 Metaph.* 17, 1669-71. Applied to knowledge of God in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3m.

⁵⁷ *In De trin.*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2m. The analogy is from the general structure of scientific knowing, applied to knowledge of God in *De verit.*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 9m; q. 10, a. 11, ad 4-5m.

⁵⁸ For the Neoplatonic variations of Avicenna and Avicbron, cf. L.-B. Geiger, O.P., *La participation dans la philosophie de s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1942) pp. 111-20.

range of predicates that are not incompatible with God. Without technical trappings, this says that certain predicates are applied in such a way as to deny anything descriptive and to affirm the pure idea.⁶⁰

Now such is quite impossible, as we have seen, on Aquinas' own admission, since "everything which we know . . . must be by comparison to sensible things," which *measure* our knowledge.⁶⁰ It is simply not possible for the human intellect to detach, as it were, the universal statement from the instances which led up to it and exemplify it, pretending that he possesses thereby the pure notion.⁶¹ Aquinas does distinguish between the origin of a term's usage (*modus significandi*) and the way in which a term can be used to signify (*res significata*), and this distinction is crucial to theological discourse.⁶² Yet he reminds us as well that the names which we use to attribute something to God signify in the way in which *we* understand them, as material creatures.⁶³ What is at stake is a viable theory of meaning.

How, then, is the move to be understood—the transition from what we mean by a term and what we "intend it to mean" in applying it to God?⁶⁴ Evidently it is something like this. Certain properties can be conceived to admit of a perfectibility beyond their noblest human embodiments: virtues such as justice, wisdom, and mercy—anything readily admitted to be a perfection and not limited to corporeal nature.⁶⁵ Such speculations result, not in a pure idea conveying the

⁶⁰ I. M. Crombie has described the usual caricature quite well in Flew and MacIntyre, p. 122. That even the astute can be misled is illustrated by J. F. Ross in his "Analogy as a Rule of Meaning for Religious Language," in *Inter. Philos. Quarterly* 1 (1961) 493: "*Res significata* is what is common to all activities which we can call 'knowing.'" Although he avows that we cannot separate knowing from kinds of knowing, the tendency to a "pure idea" is too strong. Cf. *infra* n. 66.

⁶¹ *Sum. theol.*, 1, q. 84, a. 8; *In 1 Div. nom.* 1, 29.

⁶² *Sum. theol.*, q. 84, a. 7; *In 3 De anima* 13, 791–2.

⁶³ *Sum. theol.*, 1, q. 13, a. 3; a. 2, ad 2m; a. 9, ad 3m; *C. gent.* 1, 30.

⁶⁴ *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 2; a. 1, ad 2m; *In 1 Sent.*, d. 22, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2m; *In Lib. de causis* 6 (ed. Saffrey, p. 43).

⁶⁵ For use of "intend to signify," see *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 5; a. 8, ad 2m; *C. gent.* 1, 35.

⁶⁶ *De verit.*, q. 2, a. 11; *In 1 Div. nom.* 3, 104. Even if we are incapable of imagining a person without his body, we may certainly conceive that, should there be such, he might well practice justice in company with his fellows, but would scarcely need a sex morality. This is all that is necessary to grant.

“essence” of the perfection at hand, but in a metalinguistic notion (called a *ratio communis* by Aquinas) which simply calls attention to the fact that such a notion as “justice” is eligible for transempirical predications. The *ratio communis* carries no determinate meaning, though it may be characterized in a vague and general way which stakes out the range of application of the term, such as “justice.”⁶⁶

Now any use of such a predicate to signify God always presupposes an intervening negative judgment, whereby the specifically human and finite connotations of the term are denied it. This is the import of the distinction in divine names between the origin of a usage and its new intended role.⁶⁷ So, for example, when “justice” is linked with “God” in the affirmation “God is just,” it looks as though the *ratio communis* is applied to God, devoid as it is of any concrete meaning. But to explain it thus is to confuse levels of discourse and tempt one to smuggle some “minimal meaning” across by way of the metalinguistic notion, as though it were a “pure idea”—whereas all that we do know is that “justice” can be said of God. We do not know at all, as yet, what this means.

For statements like “God is just” do mean something, even though they can be analyzed as well as “God is not just.” But they have meaning not in virtue of some “analogous notion” of justice, but precisely because of the negative judgment which intervenes to constitute them.⁶⁸ Here one notices the shift in the notion of “meaning”: usually presupposed to a judgment, as sense is to reference, here it is constituted by the judgment. There is an analogy to the role of the judgment to bridge the gap between descriptive statements and hypotheses. But this is a more radical use, and will serve to define any metaphysical

⁶⁶ We have tried to work this out in detail in *Inter. Philos. Quarterly* 2 (1962), 643–58: “Religious Language and the Logic of Analogy,” which owes a great deal to R. McInerny, *Logic of Analogy* (The Hague, 1961). For indications, cf. *De pot.*, q. 10, a. 1, ad 9m; Aristotle, *Topics* 6, 10 (148a 27); and McInerny, pp. 134–35, 144–52.

⁶⁷ Ross has shown this clearly (pp. 488–95), though by neglecting the function of judgment, tended to let the *ratio communis* carry the meaning. For Aquinas on negative judgment intervening, cf. *supra* n. 50.

⁶⁸ The “analogous notion” or *ratio communis* is a halfway house on the road to judgment. It is not something we possess, but something we can use. We do not affirm it of God, but use it as an instrument to form the negative judgment whereby God is said to realize it in such a way as to deny any determinate meaning we might have.

statement—one whose meaning rests on an intervening negative judgment; in Aquinas' language, a *separatio*.⁶⁹

METAPHYSICAL STATEMENTS

Schematically, one may say that any metaphysical statement is tantamount to affirming that the world is intelligible. (The opposite is a metaphysical denial of metaphysics; the ruling excluding statements about the world, an antimetaphysical denial of it, though perhaps just as metaphysical in its own right.) And to speak thus implicitly speaks of ordering it to a principle, since a unity that is intelligible demands an explanation. Now that such an affirmation cannot be made on the strength of experience, every noteworthy philosopher has recognized, although Aquinas and Aristotle might mislead by their continual insistence that there be constant reference to experience. But the affirmation itself—as Aquinas clearly recognized—must be shown to be contained implicitly in every question, to be in fact presupposed to that which impels man to question, which defines him as one who must question everything.⁷⁰

For Aquinas, the ability to ask questions which one *can* answer finds its source in the power to ask questions which cannot be answered. Or to put it another way, the drive to more and more comprehensive explanatory systems is rooted in the demand for a total explanation. (Hence it would be rather strange to extol the one as science while reducing the other to the status of an infantile need.) The apostles of the

⁶⁹ The radical difference between metaphysics and other modes of knowing, signaled *In De trin.*, q. 5, a. 3, has been obscured in the Thomistic literature by a doctrine of “three degrees of abstraction.” We may simply note here that the proper object of metaphysics, according to Aquinas, is what is separate or separable from space-time conditions (*In 7 Metaph.* 2, 1299–1305; *In 8 Metaph.* 1, 1682–85; 11, 1526, 1534–36), and such things can only be known by us negatively (*Sum. theol.* 1, q. 88, a. 2; *In 5 Metaph.* 7, 865; *In 10 Metaph.* 4, 1990; *In 3 De anima* 11, 758: “Of ‘separated’ substances we only know that they are immaterial and incorporeal and so forth”). Indeed, to neglect this is to fall into the naive realism of the Platonists: *In 7 Metaph.* 16, 1643–46. For some pointers on the discontinuity of metaphysical from other concerns, compare *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 85, a. 1, ad 1m with ad 2m; and cf. Geiger, *La participation*, and “Abstraction et separation d’après s. Thomas,” in *Rev. sc. phil. theol.* 31 (1947) 3–40, esp. p. 29.

⁷⁰ *In De trin.* q. 3, a. 1, 2; compare *De verit.*, q. 1, a. 1, with q. 10, a. 11, ad 10m; and cf. Lonergan, *THEOL. STUDIES* 7 (1946) 390–91; *Insight*, chap. 12: “Notion of Being.” For man as one who must question, cf. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, pp. 71 ff.

well-formed question, the one that can be answered, have done the great service of distinguishing a scientific from a metaphysical statement, and so pin-pointing what is to be scientifically meaningful or not.⁷¹ In doing so, they have not been able to definitively exclude the extension of meaning to a new level, but have placed rigorous restrictions on such a move. The result is fortunate for a study of Aquinas, since it serves to bring into sharper focus the uniqueness of metaphysical statements.

These tell us nothing *about* the intelligibility of the world; they simply state *that* it is intelligible. They cannot characterize the order of all things to a principle, but only affirm that *there is* such an order.⁷² Finally, talk about such a principle gives us no insight into it, but contents itself with asserting the consequences of the affirmation that *there is* such a principle to which all things are ordered.⁷³ Such a "consequence" would be attributing to the principle perfections which one can recognize as not limited to the mode of achievement in which one finds them. Yet when we attribute them to their principle, we *intend* them to be realized there in a totally different manner.⁷⁴

But *what* is realized there? Not the perfection as we experience it. Not some detached idea or pure intuition of it. What is realized there is the demand of the intellect itself for a total explanation. This is concretely linked, for Aquinas, with the person's desire for authentic fulfilment.⁷⁵ Hence he does not fear to take such perfections as cohere with the good to which men are most profoundly attracted, and attribute them to that which each confusedly surmises as his supreme fulfilment—the principle of all things, God Himself. Yet no one is more

⁷¹ This is, of course, the contention of Karl Popper in *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959) pp. 34-38; and one could also read Wittgenstein 6,5 in conjunction with 6,51 and 5,62, and find room for a metaphysics which contented itself with *manifesting*, by way of negative judgments, *that* the world must be intelligible.

⁷² Whatever is said of God is said "according to *some* respect or relation to creatures" (*De pot.*, q. 7, a. 7, ad 7m (2a series), according to the formula: "Deum cognoscimus ex perfectionibus procedentibus in creaturas ab Ipso" (*Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 3).

⁷³ *C. gent.* 1, 3, 3; *In 1 Div. nom.* 3, 104.

⁷⁴ *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 5; *C. gent.* 1, 36; *In 7 Div. nom.* 4, 732.

⁷⁵ The general theorem, "truth is the good of the intellect" (*De verit.*, q. 22, a. 11, ad 3m; a. 5, ad 9m), is illustrated in *C. gent.* 3, 25, 11-13, and carried to the limit in 3, 37. The spontaneous harmony between intellectual search and personal desire at this level is underlined in *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 11, ad 6m, and *In 13 Div. nom.* 3, 993.

conscious than Aquinas that these "perfections" are realized in Him in a completely different manner. This consciousness, in fact, is the peculiar property of the judgment, and the reason why we have said that it is the judgment which "bestows" meaning here—or provides, if you will, the means of an orderly extension of the notion of meaning.

UNDERLYING PRESUPPOSITION

It is clear that the cardinal presupposition of Aquinas here is a theory of the person, said to be "rational," which for him means, above all, capable of judgment—indeed, able to judge of one's own judgment; for judgment permits the knower to take the measure of his understanding, to critically establish the object.⁷⁶ He would not propose thereby the judgment as a unique power, but merely underline the highest range of a consciousness that operates on the descriptive, explanatory, and reflexive levels, and knows as well how to distinguish them. Each descriptive and explanatory understanding is "conscious" in the root sense of "present to itself," whereas judgment enjoys the perfection of reflective consciousness, for it is a presence to the knower of the very conditions of his knowing. This permits him to judge the bearing of his conceptions on the data, for he is conscious of the angle from which he is trying to explain it. Everyone is aware *that* he knows; the man of judgment is aware of the conditions under which he is knowing—the point of view he has taken—and so knows which objections to count as relevant.⁷⁷

But the same consciousness which can reflect on the conditions necessary for a valid scientific question and so proceed to work out a methodology, can also become aware of itself as having to ask ques-

⁷⁶ While Aquinas' intellectual milieu did not elicit a systematic development of the critical question, it is not for that foreign to his thought, as can be seen from *De verit.*, q. 24, a. 2: "homo . . . potest de suo iudicio iudicare," and *In 9 Metaph.* 6, 2240: when we speak of knowledge, "we not only judge of other things, but also of human nature"; and especially in *De verit.*, q. 1, a. 9. Cf. Lonergan, *THEOL. STUDIES* 8 (1947) 57-61.

⁷⁷ Hence, to abstract is not to falsify (*Sum. theol.* 1, q. 85, a. 1, ad 1m; and the intellect can know separated substances, judging them to be immaterial (*Quaestio disp. de anima*, a. 16, ad fm.). Cf. Lonergan, *Insight*, chap. 10: "Reflective Understanding." It ought to be clear that we are not speaking of some "pure consciousness," but of a reflexive power of critically appraising one's attempts to know anything. If the subject is conscious of himself, it will only be in and through his acts of knowing something (*De verit.*, q. 10, a. 8).

tions, as a demand for explanation. Call it what you will—the unity of the inquiring subject—Aquinas would concur with Wittgenstein that we can do no more than show it, manifest the fact.⁷⁸ Has this fact significance? Everyone, it seems, would agree that it has. It is too widely attested by centuries of art, literature, philosophy, and theology to be relegated to the individual consciousness *as* individual. It somehow defines the human world. Can questions arising from it be said then to be meaningful—questions like “what has the anticipation of a total explanation to do with the explanation itself?” “If the demand for intelligibility underlies any endeavor which is properly human, what does this demand presuppose in its turn?” What, in short, is the significance of the need to question and to question everything? While such queries are clearly not scientific, are not even answerable in an ordinary sense, neither do they seem to be able to be banished from discourse. Aquinas proposes a manner of extending the use of “meaningful” to include them, even though, as we have seen, he too would eliminate much of what passes for metaphysics as empty exercises of a transcendental reason.⁷⁹

SIGN OR SYMBOL?

As Aquinas had it posed for him, the key question is whether statements made of God actually signify Him, or might we be content with accepting them as symbolic? It roughly expresses the variant theological postures of the Eastern and Western Churches down through history, and last came to the fore as a struggle within the Western Church, in Modernism. Aquinas stands firmly in the Western camp in insisting that the names we impose actually signify God. The issue comes to a head when one asks whether all these names—each one infinitely this side of representing God—are not really but synonyms for the “name-

⁷⁸ So the activities of the subject *manifest* that it is “the limit of the world” (Wittgenstein 5,641), but say no more than this: *In 3 De anima* 10, 743-45. In general, the move to a metaphysical affirmation is by way of manifestation: as accidents manifest specific differences (*In 2 Post. anal.* 13, 533), so things understood can manifest things divine by leading up to the proper negation (*In De trin.*, q. 6, a. 3). So by saying clearly what can be said, one can manifest what cannot directly be said (cf. Wittgenstein 4,115 and *supra* n. 40).

⁷⁹ Cf. *In 7 Metaph.* 17, on the proper metaphysical question: one which manifests what it is searching for; and the warning *In 2 Post. anal.* 1, 408-9, that only the expressible is knowable.

less essence of God.”⁸⁰ A tempting way out, but theological suicide. Hence Aquinas, who insisted that God was incomprehensible to any created intellect, will take the enormously stronger position: each name is truly and distinctly predicated of God. Not, of course, in the sense that God is made up of aspects, but that there is something in God corresponding to the distinct meanings we give to words like “just,” “merciful,” and “liberal.” The ensuing discussion sharpens the semantic tools to an even finer edge.

How can we signify something distinctly of God when there is no residual meaning connecting the world and its principle—no rapport, no proportion, no common genus? By way of a set of judgments whereby God is recognized, for example, as the cause of justice, as realizing it in Himself, and doing so in a manner that is completely other. The result is a completely nonrepresentational use of the term “justice,” retaining nonetheless the mark of the process of purification: the person who understands justice more profoundly grasps that much more how God must be just, for He exceeds even this. But this is deceptively simple. The parallel, as we recall, was from theory formation: as the mind is led from description to explanation via a certain shrewdness of judgment, so a reflexive grasp of its understanding can lead it to God.⁸¹ But there is a crucial difference: the explanatory hypothesis can be tested, falsified—a difference which Aquinas recognized, noting that statements made of God could only be “radically verified” in Him as the cause of all. Distinct attributions cannot correspond to distinct aspects in God, for these perfections must exist in Him in utter simplicity and unity. Such discourse is not false, then, if it falls short of representing the reality of God. It would be false only if there were nothing there at all to correspond.⁸² We are reminded: natural or philosophical theology can concern itself with the order of all to one and the consequences thereof.

But heartening as it is that Aquinas recognizes how different verification must be here, we are concerned not with the fact but with the

⁸⁰ *Sum. theol.* 1 q. 13, a. 4; *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 5–6.

⁸¹ *De verit.* q. 10, a. 6, ad 2.

⁸² The early statement on “verification” is found *In 1 Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5m; and later in *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 6 and ad 4m. The theorem that whatever exists in God does so *unite et simplice* is in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 4. Cf. also *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 12.

possibility of such discourse. What is the meaning which might correspond to such a process of verification? It is clearly quite different from an ordinary usage: "correspondence" and "signification" have been pushed to the limit. For we can be said to signify truly, only when something corresponds to our understanding, and presumably then, signify distinctly only when something distinct corresponds. This is why accurate descriptions are so important in any desire to understand. Yet here we are said to signify something distinct by the diverse propositions "God is just" and "God is merciful," thereby truly signifying God when there corresponds nothing distinct in Him. The difference is carried by the negative judgment which intervened to form the innocent-looking affirmation about God. Any proposition like "God is just—must in fact be analyzed into three statements: the first negating any ordinary meaning: "God is not just"; the second affirming the attribute to be realized in the principle of all: "God is the source of justice"; the third making explicit that such a realization is quite beyond our ken: "God is justice."⁸³ This last "logical barbarism" is used quite consciously by Aquinas, who justifies his recourse to the abstract term to show the simplicity or identity of the subject with its attribute.⁸⁴

This is the complete denial of our mode of knowing, the final admission that we can never know God in Himself, as we are forced to recast the very structure of our language to truly signify Him. And in doing so, we have shifted the very notion of "meaning." For a term like "just" said of man is used to signify a perfection distinct from the man himself, while in using this term of God "we do not intend to signify anything distinct from Him; with the result that 'just' said of man in some way circumscribes and comprehends what it signifies, while when it is said of God it leaves what is signified uncomprehended and exceeding, as it were, the meaning of the term."⁸⁵ The meaning of the term incapable of containing what it intends to signify is, of course, the meaning connatural to us, the meaning derived from an insight into

⁸³ The analysis is suggested in this order *In De trin.*, q. 6, a. 3, *ad fin.*; the order is slightly altered in *Sum. theol.* 1, q; 84, a. 7, *ad 3m*; and *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 5, *ad 2m*.

⁸⁴ The general principles are given in *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 1, *ad 2m*, and worked out at length *In 7 Metaph.* 5, 1738–80. Cf. *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 12, esp. *ad 3m*, for the freedom of the intellect to *consciously* tamper with the structure of language to *say* what it wants. (The principle of such freedom is, of course, the judgment.)

⁸⁵ *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 13, a. 5.

representations, and so intrinsically dependent on description. Yet the extended sense of "meaning" must be based on the connatural. So we find Aquinas repeating again and again as he sets up the problem: "terms we use must signify in the way we understand."⁸⁶ Any meaning we "intend to give" must be in function of a connatural, representational one. God is only known by using the things He has created as signs, which can be used to lead the mind to some understanding of Him, as perceptions lead to a grasp of recurring patterns, to a possible explanation.⁸⁷ Yet certain things are better signs than others, and by insisting on extending the range of "signification" as he has, Aquinas has deliberately sought to provide a falsification principle for these remote regions, a method for judging any given sentence as well-formed: what is said of God must be an "intelligible attribute," one drawn from the world of experience, but conceivable as not limited to its mode of realization in space and time.⁸⁸ But how can we know how to *use* such notions beyond their connatural range? The response is always the same.

The compulsion to move beyond the mode of knowing that is properly ours is the same that moves man to ask questions which he cannot answer. And the same reservations are in order. To isolate certain notions, such as fidelity, and say that they are not limited to the mode in which we have come to know them is not to say that we *know* what a fidelity other than the human might be like. It is simply a recognition that there *could* be such, that the notion is open to it, and that we do have some indications as to what it might be. These indications are supplied by the examples we have met, as we know that a more authentic realization would surpass any of these—surpass not in any fashion which the imagination might suggest (à la science-fiction or the literature of the bizarre) but always in a line presaged by our deepest longings. The "natural desire" for complete fulfilment, which is the person's confused awareness of his own capacity for the infinite, under-

⁸⁶ *In Lib. de causis* 6 (ed. Saffrey, p. 43); cf. supra n. 63.

⁸⁷ "Only through *signs* is it possible for us to have some inkling of divine things . . ." (*In 1 Div. nom.* 2, 69, 65, *ad fin.*); "Deus investigare posset . . . per *documenta* aliqua" (*In 1 Div. nom.* 1, 34–35); and Aquinas defines *investigare* so as to reinforce what has been said about *manifestare* and *manuducere* (cf. supra nn. 78 and 40).

⁸⁸ *In 1 Div. nom.* 3, 104–5; and there is an upper bound, fencing off truths which cannot be known by reason: *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 13.

lies and penetrates all pretensions of the understanding to come to some knowledge of God. So the statement made of God only to be denied does not leave us with a perimeterless concept devoid of any definite meaning, for it purports to speak about an object already present to oneself—in his desire to be and to live to fulfilment.⁸⁹

CONCLUDING APPRAISAL

This much should make it clear that Aquinas is far from a “transcendental application of the category of causality.” In fact, he is expressly outside of causality, just as he is outside the category of explanation, as we know and can fruitfully employ it.⁹⁰ What he demands is that the vestiges of order we find in things be explained, or better, be explicable—not that anyone explain it. In fact, what defines these questions and removes them from the category of problems is precisely that no one can provide an answer for them.⁹¹ Yet his universe extends beyond problems to include mysteries, beyond explanations to make room for the wonder that gives them birth, beyond even the possible human answers to take in the range of human questions. This is why he can only be described as an “intellectualist”—forbidding as the term may be—for he presses on to affirm a final intelligibility which is as far from a final rationality as our longing for truth and order is from our expression and realization of it. This intelligibility will never be known, for man’s proper instrument of knowing is reason, but it can

⁸⁹ *In De trin.*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 4m; *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1m. This would be one reason why talk about God—semantically much more questionable than the most abstruse theoretical procedures—is considered quite natural to many who balk at symbolic acrobatics. Not because one deals in reason and the other in sentiment, but because authentic metaphysical discourse answers to the very wellsprings of intelligence, operative in every human act (scientific or not) and so part of one’s implicit awareness if his attention be skilfully drawn to it.

⁹⁰ Explanation as we normally use it must tell *how* an event comes about, as P. Nowell-Smith has remarked in Flew and MacIntyre (pp. 249–53); and to offer one that does not where such is called for is certainly bogus science. But to recognize that “explanation” and “cause” can have extended meanings and to consciously use them so is something else again: cf. *In 8 Phys.* 2, 974; *In 1 Peri herm.* 14, 197. Although some Thomists may well be accused of a “transcendental application” of causality as we use it in science, Aquinas cannot be. But only a theory of judgment can make his move legitimate.

⁹¹ This goes for knowledge of “the world” (*In 2 Metaph.* 1, esp. 278–85) and of its principle (*In De trin.*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 7m).

be affirmed, for the underlying dynamic of reason is the thrust towards intelligibility.⁹²

The possibility of such an affirmation is the key to man's knowledge of God. It rests in the power of judgment, the power which permits us to discern the relevant and discard the rest to make an assertion which is definitive and yet relative: relative because like any assertion it rests on selected premises; definitive because in making it, the person is conscious of how it depends on these premises, and so knows what can count as evidence against it. Any such judgment is a *prise de conscience* of the knowing subject, in the fashion proper to man. In passing judgment on an object, he passes in review his state of knowledge of the object, and then decides what judgment to make and how definitive it can be. When, as by so many indications, he becomes conscious of this searching demand for the relevant in every knowing act, he may inquire as to *its* relevance. At this point he is on the threshold of the universe of Aquinas—ready to affirm intelligibility as the only guarantee of proportionate rationality.⁹³

One may accept other guides into this extended universe. Aquinas holds no exclusive title. Yet the burden of our essay has been to show that he does possess pre-eminently the virtues of a reliable guide. For he knows and respects the boundary between the known and the known unknown. Acquainted in the main with the known, he welcomes any viable method of charting it more accurately. But this does not permit him to dampen our enthusiasm for what lies beyond, though he knows full well we will never chart it. Where he can, he points out, by specific examples, how the unknown cannot be known, and in the end suggests that the older and wiser we become the more we will realize how much this unknown that never ceases to beckon lies beyond our ken, refusing to be adjudged by the tools we have or any we might make.⁹⁴ Yet this will not stop him from insisting that such knowledge

⁹² Indeed, reason begins and ends in an understanding which is immediate (*De verit.*, q. 15, a. 1; q. 16, a. 1); yet not so much an intuition that would dispense with scientific inquiry as the fundamental *habitus* which makes it possible. Aquinas' commentary *In 2 Post. anal.* 20 (esp. 592) preserves Aristotle's struggle to position the *Meno* problem, and *De verit.*, q. 10, a. 11, ad 12m registers his own recasting of Augustine.

⁹³ Cf. Lonergan, *Insight*, chap. 19: "General Transcendent Knowledge."

⁹⁴ The formula can be found in *De verit.*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 9m: "The highest knowledge

is worth more than all the charts we might ever produce, though he has good sense enough to know that it will never replace them.

we can have of God is to know that He is above and beyond whatever we might think of Him"; and *In 7 Div. nom.* 4, 731: "To know God [truly] is to know that we do not know of Him what He is." The principle is given *In De trin.*, q. 1, a. 2: such negative knowledge admits of degrees, such that one can always realize the more how distant is God from his idea of Him. Indeed, from the places cited, as well as *In 1 Div. nom.* 3, 83, it appears that a rudimentary grasp of the meaning of negative propositions is possible to the human intellect, but the more profound degrees are the fruit of divine inspiration. This would befit a knowledge which is not properly ours.