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APOPHATIC THEOLOGY'S CATAPHATIC DEPENDENCIES

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DURING TO SPEAK of the God “who dwells in light unapproachable” (1 Tim 6:16),¹ systematic theologians in the Western tradition regularly employ the twofold methodology of apophatic and cataphatic theology regarding knowledge and discourse of God. The former mode of theological discourse emphasizes that in knowing God we know more ‘what-God-is-not,’ rather than ‘what-God-is.’ And in the latter mode we associate with God terms about which we have solid understanding in our this-worldly experience, terms we apply first to this-worldly things, but whose signifying core we attribute to God as well. But even to this cataphatic mode of discourse—analogue naming of God—we are compelled to add a rectifying dose of apophasis, since in attributing to God a particular property by means of a name we also claim *not* to know the mode of that property’s existence in God, even as we are sure that such-and-such a property *is* in God. Thus even analogy when used of God must genuflect before God’s hiddenness, God’s incomprehensibility,² and it is fair to say that apophatic theology

¹ “φῶς οἰκῶν ἀπρόσιτον.” Hinting at my theme, I note that, grammatically, the prefixed alpha-privative modifies πρὸς (“towards”) + ι (“go” [coming from: εἶμι / ἵέναι]) + τον (“capable”), and so signifies by presupposing the positive content of “can-be-gone-towards” (πρόσιτον), which it then denies (ἀ). At first this is but a lexical point, but it points towards epistemological underpinnings, to be discussed below.

² Catherine LaCugna, “The Trinitarian Mystery of God,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, eds. F. Schüssler-Fiorenza and J. P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 1:151-92, notes that “one sees the apophatic dimension underlying the way of analogy” (158); or, as she notes in *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco:

appropriately has ascendancy in the Western tradition, despite the nuanced complexities of its Scholastic history.³

But for all that, is it possible that cataphatic theology might be being sold short? Could our familiarity with apophatic theology and claims of God's utter incomprehensibility do a certain injustice to the hard-fought victories of the human mind as it struggles to put together some 'composite picture' of what God is, however imperfect that likeness may be? My goal is not to suggest that we could abandon apophatic theology—as though the human mind could put God in a hammerlock!⁴—but is rather to ask whether in our confident use of apophasis we may be employing cataphatic theology more than we acknowledge, creating a dialogue of sorts between these two modes of discourse. In short, if it is true that sound cataphatic theological naming needs apophasis, could it also be true that apophatic theology depends in some genuine way upon positive, cataphatic knowledge of what God is? Might such cataphatic theological naming be epistemologically prior to apophatic naming, and might we accordingly be compelled to devote more attention to our assessment of the act of positive reasoning regarding God? Could it be the case that—to alter and rearrange what the late

HarperCollins, 1991), 324-35, "At the base of analogical predication lies apophasis" (330).

³ See Elizabeth Johnson "Classical Theology," in idem, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 104-20. Johnson's strong emphasis upon apophasis, and the virtual agnosticism that her book's delivery sometimes suggests to me (e.g., 117), sparked my interest in this topic, though my comments here do not bear upon her larger project regarding gender-based naming of God. See also her earlier "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 441-65, containing in germ the thesis of *She Who Is*. For background on the relationship between East and West on this topic, see D. Carabine, "Apophasis East and West," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 55 (1988): 5-29.

⁴ Johnson, describing Aquinas, puts it deftly (*She Who Is*, 109): "No created mind can comprehend the essence of God, that is, understand perfectly so that *nothing is hidden from view*" (emphasis added). My concern with "Johnson's agnosticism" (above, note 3) is that I suspect that in practice she, on the basis of the claim just quoted—with which any Thomist would be in general agreement—infers its contrapositive, thereby incorrectly changing the predicate's quantity from 'all' ("to understand God perfectly") to 'none' ("not to understand God at all"), when the median quantity of 'some' remains a genuine possibility. See *She Who Is*, 117, where 'he' when used of God is thought to be subject "to all the limitations found in *any other positive naming of God*, and in the end *does not really tell us anything* about the divine" (emphasis added). Is God alone able to have any knowledge of God?

Catherine LaCugna wrote⁵—“at the base of apophatic predication lies cataphasis”? In raising these questions with greater precision, and in working towards some answer for them, I will use the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas as a springboard, both because he is a key figure in Western Christian theology’s use of theological language, and because of my debt to his work.⁶ I will begin by considering what negation is, turn to the process of naming God, and close with some remarks concerning our reasoning about God.

⁵ See LaCugna, *God for Us*, cited above, n. 2.

⁶ Though I do not attempt a strict exegesis of Thomas’s teaching on the divine names, I have benefited from the following exegetical works: Lawrence Dewan, “St. Thomas and the Divine Names,” *Science et Esprit* 32 (1980): 19-33; Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40-184; Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas and Analogy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 152-63; idem, “Can God be Named by Us?,” in *Being and Predication: Thomistic Interpretations* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 259-86; Mark D. Jordan, “The Names of God and the Being of Names,” in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. A. J. Freddoso (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 161-90; and of course David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). More specialized studies that I have consulted are: Thomas S. Hibbs, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa contra gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 36-51; Armand Maurer, “St. Thomas on the Sacred Name ‘Tetragrammaton’,” in *Being and Knowing: Studies in Thomas Aquinas and Later Medieval Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 59-69; John F. Wippel, chap. 9, “Quidditative Knowledge of God,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 215-41; idem, *Thomas Aquinas on the Divine Ideas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993); Anton Pegis, “Penitus Manet Ignotum,” *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965): 212-26; J. B. M. Wissink, “Aquinas: The Theologian of Negative Theology. A Reading of ST I, qq. 14-26,” in *Jaarboek 1993* (Utrecht: Thomas Instituut, 1994), 15-83; T.-D. Humbrecht, “La théologie négative chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste* 93 (1993): 535-66; Albert Patfoort, “La place de l’analogie dans la pensée de S. Thomas d’Aquin: Analogie, noms divins et ‘perfections’,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 76 (1992): 235-54; Joseph De Finance, “Le double piège des noms divins selon saint Thomas,” in *Noetica, critica e metafisica in chiave Tomistica: Atti del IX Congresso Tomistico Internazionale* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), 2:275-81; Gregory Rocca, “The Distinction between *res significata* and *modus significandi* in Aquinas’s Theological Epistemology,” *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 173-97; idem, “Aquinas on God-Talk: Hovering over the Abyss,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 641-61; Juan Alfredo Casaubon, “Nuestro conocimiento real de Dios y los enunciados teológicos,” *Sapientia* [Buenos Aires] 46 (1991): 247-52; Michael B. Ewbank, “Diverse Orderings of Dionysius’s *Triplex Via* by St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Mediaeval Studies* 52 (1990): 83-109.

I. HOW DO WE NEGATE?

In a list of non-biblical, entitative, and operative attributes of God—simple, perfect, good, infinite, ubiquitous, immutable, eternal, one, knowing, living, willing, provident, omnipotent—one notices straight off that some of the attributes are negations; the negating Latin prefix *in*, found in ‘infinite’ and ‘immutable’, is a giveaway. Yet the notions of some other attributes betoken a negation, even though the word’s structure does not reveal it. To say that God is ‘simple’, for instance, is really to say that God is not composed of parts. God is said to be ‘ubiquitous’ in part because God is not bound to any one place by being a body. And to say that God is ‘eternal’ is really to say that God is not time-bound. A negating, a denying, seems central, then, to much of our speech about God, though it is too much to say that it covers all our speech, since terms such as ‘perfect’, ‘good’, ‘knowing’, ‘living’, and ‘willing’ seem to be manifestly affirmative, both in form and content.⁷

How do we negate? There is no sustained treatment in Thomas’s writings on the subject, or in those of his medieval predecessors,⁸ and most mention of the topic is found in texts concerning formal logic, distribution of terms, the square of

⁷ It remains intriguing that Thomas, having insisted in the prologue to q. 3 of the *Prima pars* of his *Summa Theologiae* that we are more able to know “how God is not [*quomodo non sit*]” than to know “what God is [*quomodo sit*],” almost immediately discusses the attributes of God’s perfection and goodness (qq. 4-6), and that the rationale for predicating perfection of God is principally that God is the first efficient cause—hardly a negative concept! I wonder whether the doctrinal strength of Thomas’s prologue here might need to be attenuated; the Latin text seems to have an impressive, almost liturgical, *cursus* (i.e., punctuated sentence-length in syllables) of 9-9-9, 14-4, 14-4. And of course Thomas has to make provision for the authority of Dionysius and St. John Damascene. For a thorough account of the need for the ‘way of remotion’ (*via remotionis*) see *Summa contra Gentiles* I, c. 14.

⁸ A possible exception seems to be Anselm’s *De casu diaboli*, c. 11, in P. Schmidt, O.S.B., ed., *Obras Completas de San Anselmo* (Madrid: BAC, 1952), 1:622-28, who struggles mightily with the intention ‘nothing’ (*nihil*). For more on theological language in the twelfth century, see M.-D. Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle*, 3d ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1976), 90-107 (“Grammaire et théologie”), 366-85 (“Le vocabulaire théologique”).

opposition, and so on.⁹ But the concern here is that of material logic, of seeing what the mind's warrant is as it denies one characteristic or attribute of another thing. And here there is not much to go by.

But there is an adage or "tag" that will be of help, which Thomas on an occasion or two takes the time to explain. In more than one place in his writings he employs the premise that "every negation has its basis in some affirmation" (*omnis negatio fundatur in aliqua affirmatione*). The adage and some variants are common enough in his writings,¹⁰ and he uses it both in his personal teaching and in presenting difficulties to be addressed in the course of determining a particular question—the "objections" that are found in the beginning of a Scholastic article. But in no text does Thomas provide any reference to the proposition's precise source,¹¹ and the manner of its use suggests that he took

⁹ As, for instance, in Peter of Spain's *Summule logicales*, in L. M. De Rijk, ed., *Peter of Spain (Petrus Hispanus Portugalensis) Tractatus* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972), tr. 8, nos. 13-14 (pp. 190-91); tr. 12, nos. 23-25 (pp. 224-25), all calling to mind Aristotle's *On Interpretation*. Thomas has an incomplete commentary on the latter work, which addresses in detail how negation is related to distribution of terms, etc., in the formal syllogism. See *Expositio libri peryermenias in Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, vol. 1/1, 2d ed., Leonine ed. (Rome: Ad sanctae Sabinae, 1989).

¹⁰ A version of the premise pertaining to formal logic was deemed useful enough by Nunzio Signoriello to make its way into his *Lexicon Peripateticum Philosophico-Theologicum* (Naples: Biblioteca Catholica Scriptorum, 1906), N, no. 13, p. 231, as "negatio reducitur ad genus affirmationis," followed by some texts of Thomas that explain it, to be discussed below. See also the medieval Dominican Peter of Bergamo's (†1482) *Tabula Aurea*, s.v. *negatio*, nos. 3-6, in his *In opera sancti Thomae Aquinatis index seu tabula aurea eximii doctoris f. Petri de Bergamo* (Rome: Editiones Paulinae, 1960), p. 651a, who seems to be the source for Signoriello's references to Thomas.

¹¹ The Leonine source editors for Thomas's *De Malo*, A. Kenzeler and A.J. Peters, refer us in *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 1, arg. 9 and ad 9, to Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* 1.46 (51b34) and to *Categories* 10 (12b12-15)—perhaps something of a stretch. The passage is found *ad sensum* in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.25 (86b27-8; 86b33-35), trans. H. G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press, 1981), 39-40: "a negative [demonstration] is made known through an affirmative [demonstration] . . . an affirmative is prior to and better known than a negative [premise] (for a denial is known through an affirmation, and an affirmation is prior to a denial just as being is prior to nonbeing)." Another Aristotelian locus is *On Interpretation* 5 (17a8-9).

its truth to be undisputed.¹² A look at a couple of texts will show how the proposition functions in his thinking.

Among the several passages in which Thomas uses the principle,¹³ there are two in particular where he spells out its import, both generally having to do with the divine names, and both addressing Thomas's sense that the solutions of Moses Maimonides are insufficient.¹⁴ In his *scriptum* on Book 1 of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* he faces the question whether 'knowledge'

¹² For Thomas's detailed exposition of the passages in the *Posterior Analytics*, see his *Expositio libri posteriorum* 1.39 (86a35-86b37), 2d ed., Leonine ed. (Rome: Ad sanctae Sabinae, 1989), 1/2:146-47. As a matter of historical interest, Thomas's teacher, St. Albert, invokes the principle in his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*, a copy of which we possess in the student Thomas's own hand (cf. Leonard E. Boyle, "An Autograph of St. Thomas at Salerno," in *Littera, Sensus, Sententia: Studi in onore del Prof. Clement J. Vansteenkiste, O.P.*, ed. A. Lobato [Milano: Massimo, 1991], 117-34). See Albert's *In Dionysii de divinis nominibus*, c. 1, no. 50, obj. 3 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1993), vol. 37/1:31.43-46: "Preterea, sicut docet Philosophus, omnis negatio ab affirmatione causatur; si igitur aliquid dicitur de deo negative, oportet etiam aliquid nominare affirmative."

¹³ Arranged chronologically with their dates (J.-P. Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. R. Royal [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 330-59), the texts are the following: I *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2 (1256); *De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 5; *ibid.*, q. 10, a. 5 (1265); *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 33, a. 4, ad 3 (1266); *ibid.*, I-II, q. 71, a. 6, ad 1; q. 72, a. 6; q. 75, a. 1 (1269-70); *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 9 (1269); *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 79, a. 3, ad 1 (1271). In Thomas's recently discovered "Roman Commentary" on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* there are four articles dealing variously with the divine names, none of them addressing the issues at stake here. See my "'Alia lectura fratris Thomae': A List of the New Texts of St. Thomas Aquinas found in Lincoln College, Oxford, MS Lat. 95," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 57 (1990): 34-61, where I transcribed the beginning and end of each of the ninety-four new articles. John Boyle, who is preparing the critical edition of these texts, very kindly sent me his edition of texts numbered 2, 20, 89, and 90.

¹⁴ On Thomas's relationship to Maimonides generally, see David Burrell, "Aquinas's Debt to Maimonides," in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture: Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. R. Link-Salinger (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 37-48. See also Alexander Broadie, "Maimonides and the Way of Negation," in *Historia Philosophiae Medii Aevi*, ed. B. Mojsich et al. (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1991), 1:105-13; and, on Thomas's use of Maimonides, Neil A. Stubbens, "Naming God: Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 54 (1990): 229-67; Isaac Frank, "Maimonides and Aquinas on Man's Knowledge of God: A Twentieth-century Perspective," in *Maimonides: A Collections of Critical Essays*, ed. J. A. Buijs (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 284-305. There are those who think that Thomas simply got Maimonides wrong on the subject of the divine names. See Seymour Feldman, "A Scholastic Misinterpretation of Maimonides' Doctrine of Divine Attributes," in Buijs, ed., *Maimonides*, 267-83.

is in God, and has to field a particular difficulty, which he recognizes as really posing the question of how the divine names signify.¹⁵ As a possible answer Thomas entertains the position he elsewhere assigns to Maimonides,¹⁶ for whom names such as ‘knowledge’ do not signify that God actually has knowledge, but signify rather that God is not ignorant, as a rock would be. In short, the divine names, even the ones whose structure does not imply negation, still signify what God is not, rather than what God is.

But this explanation is not up to the task for Thomas, and his response rests on the adage concerning the relationship of negation to affirmation. Every negation concerning some thing, he points out, is based upon something existing in that thing. An example would be what happens when we make the denial: “a human being is not a donkey.” The truth of this claim depends upon the nature of being human, a nature which is not compatible with that of being a donkey—Thomas seems to have in mind here the irrevocable opposition between the human being’s specific difference of ‘being rational’ and the absolute lack of rationality in a donkey. Applying this logic to the case at hand, Thomas notes that when we deny ignorance of God—Maimonides, he thinks, holds that the term ‘knowledge’ used of God means ‘not ignorant’—we are able to do so only because of something, some characteristic, that exists in God, which is opposed to ignorance. That, of course, is knowledge.¹⁷

In his disputed question *De Potentia Dei*, in another passage dealing with the divine names, Thomas suggests a kind of thought-experiment to bring out that the understanding or truth of a negation depends upon some affirmation. Suppose—to use

¹⁵ *I Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 2.

¹⁶ *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 5; *STh* I, q. 13, a. 2.

¹⁷ *I Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2: “quando dicitur Deus sciens, intelligitur non esse ignorans, sicut lapis: . . . Sed hoc non videtur sufficiens . . . quia omnis negatio de re aliqua fundatur super aliquid in re existens, ut cum dicitur, homo non est asinus, veritas negationis fundatur supra hominis naturam, quae naturam negatam non compatitur. Unde si de Deo negatur ignorantia, oportet quod hoc sit ratione alicujus quod in ipso est: et ita oppositum ignorantiae oportet in ipso ponere.”

an illustration he gives elsewhere¹⁸—that we made the claim that “Ethiopians are not white,” and that we were compelled to justify it. Since postulating the claim as a basic truth of reason is not an option, the only way to prove that “Ethiopians are not white” is to show that Ethiopians are endowed with a characteristic that is not convertible with, or compatible with, being white. And being black, of course, is such a characteristic. Hence we would not be able to prove the truth of the claim “Ethiopians are not white” without using the affirmation “Ethiopians are black” as the warrant for the truth of the negation.¹⁹

Therefore on Thomas’s account affirmation is epistemologically prior to negation, so much so that it is in some way the ‘cause’ of negation. And in one passage he says just that, seemingly meaning that the causality the affirmation exercises is more than just a material causality (i.e., providing the ‘parts’ of the negation, the terms of which it is composed), but is formally the cause of why the negation’s predicate is disjoined from its subject.²⁰

¹⁸ *De Pot.*, q. 10, a. 5: “patet quod veritas cuiuslibet negativae in existentibus supra veritatem affirmativae fundatur: sicut veritas huius negativae ‘Aethiops non est albus’ fundatur supra veritatem huius affirmativae ‘Aethiops est niger.’”

¹⁹ *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 5: “Et preterea intellectus negationis semper fundatur in aliqua affirmatione: quod ex hoc patet quia omnis negativa per affirmativam probatur.” Thomas implicitly uses this principle in his discussions on whether God knows the bad through the good. See *Quodl.*, 11, q. 2, a. 1: “In cognoscibilibus autem quedam sunt que habent propriam rationem absolutam, ut homo et lapis, quorum propria ratio non dependet ex alio; quedam uero sunt que non habent propriam rationem absolutam, set ex alio dependentem, sicut est in relatiuis et priuatiuis et negatiuis, quorum ratio dependet ex ordine quem habent ad alia: nam ratio cecitatis non est absoluta, set dependens, in quantum habet ordinem ad uisum, cuius est priuatiua.” See also *I Sent.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 2; *De Verit.*, q. 2, a. 15; *ScG I*, c. 71; *STh I*, q. 14, a. 10; q. 15, a. 3, ad 1; q. 18, a. 4, ad 4.

²⁰ *STh I-II*, q. 72, a. 6: “Semper enim in rebus negatio fundatur super aliqua affirmatione quae est quodammodo causa eius; unde etiam in rebus naturalibus eiusdem rationis est quod ignis calefaciat, et quod non infrigidet.”

Thomas draws his account of the demonstrative syllogism from Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, and more specifically employs the philosopher’s four modes of *per se* predication in the formation of the major or minor premise (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.4 [73a35–73b24]). The Latin preposition *per* (“through”) always carries the aspect of a cause, so *per se* in the first way indicates that the predicate is a formal cause of the subject (e.g., “rational” is a formal cause of being human in the proposition: “humans are rational animals”), while in the second way of saying *per se* the subject is materially the cause of the predicate, for the definition of the predicate would always include the subject, in which it

He finishes his thought-experiment by applying his logic of negation to the case of making negations of God, concluding naturally enough that our ability to make negations of God depends on our ability to make affirmations of God, because we could not be said to know anything of God at all were we not able to verify it affirmatively²¹—a conclusion whose emphasis upon the sequence of propositions regarding God calls to mind the process of how we name God.

II. THE PROCESS OF NAMING GOD

While in our personal histories we receive from our faith traditions or theological education a host of divine names “ready-made,” as it were, and usually in varying arrangement, it is interesting to note that Thomas presents each of the divine attributes or names to his readers in a very carefully worked-out order. Actually, the treatment of the divine names in his *Summa Theologiae* is located thirteen questions into the work, treated under the rubric of God’s knowability, itself but one of many divine attributes or names. So, much studied discourse and

inheres (e.g., “rational” is included in discussing the ability to laugh in the proposition: “rational beings are risible”). The third way does not apply to the demonstrative syllogism (for *per se* here means “exists by itself,” and is therefore an existential, not causal, enunciation), but the fourth way is important, because in it the subject is the efficient or productive cause of the predicate through the form by which the subject is named (e.g., in the proposition “the doctor is healing,” the doctor heals precisely as a doctor, not insofar as the person who is the doctor is tall, left-handed, or a Cubs fan). The second and fourth ways sometimes coincide, because it is possible for a subject that is always included in the definition of the predicate to be also the productive cause of the predicate. A good example is the case just given for the second way: defining the ability to laugh requires one to include “rational being” or “human being” as the subject, but in reality it is rationality that produces laughter in human beings. See Thomas’s *I Post. Anal.*, lect. 10 (ad 73b1-25) (Leonine ed., 1/2:38-41). See also *STh* I, q. 77, a. 6, ad 2.

To expound the example Thomas gives concerning fire (*STh* I-II, q. 72, a. 6), one would say that fire’s heating is a property of fire (second way) that is caused immediately by fire’s nature (fourth way), and that, since heating and cooling are opposed actions, fire’s inability to make things cold follows directly from its nature of making things hot—in order to cool fire would have to become something other than what it is. In a less mundane way certain things would be denied of God.

²¹ *De Pot.*, q. 7, a. 5: “unde nisi intellectus humanus aliquid de Deo affirmative cognosceret, nihil de Deo posset negare. Non autem cognosceret, si nihil quod de Deo dicit, de eo verificatur affirmative.”

predication about God has already taken place long before Thomas introduces a formal discussion of discourse about, and predication of, God; even the treatment of divine names must wait its turn until other attributes of God, about which we speak via a divine name, have been dealt with. For Thomas there is no mere naming of God in a list whose contents have no other interconnection save that they are all predicated of the self-same God, and whose contents could be rearranged into any other order at will. For him there is an intelligible flow from one attribute to the next, just as a negation's intelligibility flows from a prior affirmation.

It is easy to see where, in the *Summa*, this intelligible flow begins: namely, with Thomas's famous 'five ways' for proving God's existence. Thomas chose to provide these five different arguments because the conclusion of each way gives him information—a premise, eventually—from which he can proceed to investigate God further.²² Thus, while the conclusion of each way is, in one sense, "God exists," in another sense it is "there exists a first, unmoved mover," or "there exists a first efficient cause," and so on.²³ And these five conclusions—all of them affirmations—form the basis of a number of the arguments Thomas later uses to show that God has the attributes traditionally assigned to him by the Christian tradition, both east and west.

The very first question following the arguments for God's existence is a perfect illustration of Thomas's practice and strategy. Beginning his consideration of God with an investigation into God's simplicity, Thomas has to consider whether God has 'parts,' a multiplicity of elements out of which he might be composed. The first item to be considered is whether God is a body, a material reality, and Thomas wastes no time in providing his determined answer to the question: "Without any quali-

²² I made a case for this view in my "Why Five Ways?," in *Religions and the Virtue of Religion: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 65 (Washington, D.C.: The American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1992), 107-21.

²³ *STh* I, q. 2, a. 3. See also Cajetan's commentary *ad locum*, where he claims that the five ways arrive at five distinct predicates, each of which is proper to God.

fication whatsoever, God is not a body.”²⁴ Yet this negation, stated at the very outset of his response, is in fact the conclusion of three arguments that Thomas rehearses in the body of his response, and in each argument one of the premises used to support the conclusion is itself the affirmative conclusion of one of the five ways for proving God’s existence—more precisely, from the first, third, and fourth ways. Hence, for instance, God cannot be a body because all bodies, when they move other things, are moved movers, and God had been demonstrated in the ‘first way’ to be the prime mover, unmoved by anything.

Neither can God be a being consisting of matter and form, because God’s having any matter at all, even in addition to form, entails his being in potency, something ruled out by the conclusion of the ‘third way.’²⁵ Nor can God be a composite of both matter and form, because that contradicts his being the first good and best being, for which Thomas argued in the conclusion to the ‘fourth way.’ So what is left is that God is pure form, with no admixture of matter, and the minor premise for this argument, it perhaps comes as no surprise, is the conclusion of another of the five ways, in this case the second, claiming that God is the absolutely first efficient cause.

Thomas continues his investigation into God’s simplicity with other combinations of both negations based upon the affirmations in the five ways and new affirmations based derivatively upon the conclusions of the five ways. Eventually he claims that God is utterly simple, which then allows him to claim that God is perfect or all complete (q. 4), and, because things are called ‘good’ to the extent that they are complete, to claim that God is most good of all (qq. 5-6). And when he then turns to address God’s infinity or not-being-bounded, Thomas bases his contention that God is infinite by referring his reader to the prior affirmations of God’s being the most formal (q. 4, a. 1) self-subsisting being (q. 3, a. 4). Having successfully shown that God is infinite he is then able claim that God is present to all things, once again based on an affirmation (q. 4, a. 1) that itself was the conclusion of one of the five ways. Discussions of God’s immutability, eternity, and unity

²⁴ *STh* I, q. 3, a. 1: “Dicendum quod absolute Deum non esse corpus.”

²⁵ *STh* I, q. 3, a. 2.

then follow in questions 9-11, all of them weaving together as premises in argument the various conclusions that have been garnered from the preceding questions. And with all of this consideration of how God is *in se* in tow, Thomas in question 12 considers how God is “in our knowledge” (*in cognitione nostra*), turning only then in the famous question 13 to a formal, official consideration of the divine names. But the predication of divine names does not cease there, for in subsequent questions Thomas serially addresses God’s knowledge (qq. 14-18), from which follows God’s will (q. 19), and from God’s will follow love (q. 20), justice, and mercy (q. 21), providence and predestination (qq. 22-23), with omnipotence (q. 25) following from both God’s knowledge and will, and blessedness (q. 26), finally, being the fruit of the divine essence.

III. REASONING ABOUT GOD

This cascade of argumentation suggests that naming God is not a discrete event, as when we say “God is good” in a single sentence, and stop. Rather, it hints that names predicated of God in single phrases or sentences are, in reality, the result of a process of our mind, by which it moves from one item, known through human experience or from God’s self-revelation,²⁶ expressed in notions garnered from human experience,²⁷ to another item with which it is directly related. In short, we are reasoning about God, and the success of the whole process underlies each of our predications as its foundation. Thus we cannot let the seemingly self-contained character of our predications about God lure us into thinking that our accomplishment lies in using correct theological grammar. And this is especially true of our negations, if the foregoing holds. The apophatic utterance “God is incomprehensible” sounds right to Christian ears, but it implicitly calls

²⁶ See *STh* I, q. 1, a. 7, ad 2: “Dicendum quod licet de Deo non possimus scire quid est, utimur tamen eius effectu, in hac doctrina, *vel naturae vel gratiae*, loco definitionis, ad ea **quae** de Deo in hac doctrina considerantur” (emphasis added).

²⁷ See *In Boet. de Trin.*, q. 6, a. 3: “Unde quamvis per revelationem elevemur ad aliquid cognoscendum, quod alias esset nobis ignotum, non tamen ad hoc quod alio modo cognoscamus nisi per sensibilia.” This is also why Thomas says that sacred Scripture must use visual images and metaphors. See *STh* I, q. 1, a. 9; *In Boet. de Trin.*, q. 2, a. 4.

for a warrant, a justification that details what it is about God that precludes comprehensibility. And the warrant we provide for that will likely have its own warrant, and so on. So while our reasoning about God appears never ending, and while it is true that even our best knowledge and speech of God comes up short,²⁸ the detection of apophatic theology's cataphatic dependencies may be a small but genuine accomplishment, for it helps to clarify one of the systematician's many tasks: precisely in order to express 'what-God-is-not' the systematician must try to detail 'what-God-is', even if the endeavor forever proves humbling.

²⁸ I hope that my emphasis upon affirmation will not be taken to indicate that I believe the systematician capable of knowing God in such a way that "nothing is hidden from view." See *STh* I, qq. 12-13, *passim*, for Thomas's many epistemological genuflections in the presence of God's supereminence (for more on Thomas's confident use of pseudo-Dionysius's ways of causality, negation, and eminence, and his creative ordering of the Dionysian ways, see Michael Ewbank's article [above, n. 6]). The very fact that we must use multiform language to speak of God indicates that our knowledge is a far cry from representing God as he is, who is "altogether one and simple" (*STh* I, q. 13, a. 12), while by constitution our language is not altogether one and simple. Even the affirmative name we use of God shows its distance from the God it attempts to attain; we need to name him via an abstract name (e.g., goodness, truth, justice), in order to indicate that he does not enter into the composition of other things. But no sooner do we do that than we realize that abstract names in our experience cover the domain of things that don't subsist or have separate existence! So we are then compelled to name God with a concrete name (e.g., good, true, just) in order to insist that he does, indeed, enjoy a separate existence. But existing things in our experience that are good, true, and just are composed of many elements, are not essentially good, true, and just, and can therefore cease to be thus—something Christians could not tolerate in the case of God! *Marana tha!*