"Aquinas' doctrine of God between ontology and henology,"
for Colloque La philosophie et la question de Dieu. Histoire, développement, perspectives Université Laval les 10, 11 et 12 avril 2003 (dans le cadre des grands colloques organisés par Yves-Charles Zarka, du CNRS, Paris).

For more than half a century, the most important thinking about Aquinas' doctrine of God has rotated around Heidegger's inquisition of Western philosophical theology and the history of metaphysics under the figure of onto-theology. However, our view of the history is emerging from under this profoundly restricting and reductive horizon. Contributing to this was the 1998 Congrès: *La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*. Subsequently, and drawing upon its criticisms of Heidegger's history, Jean-Marc Narbonne's *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* appeared.[1] Narbonne considers henological Neoplatonism—primarily through texts of Plotinus and Proclus—, and the other great Western tradition of philosophical theology emerging from Antiquity, the ontological. The "metaphysics of pure being," or a "negative theology of being," which also has its origins with Parmenides and Plato, is associated with Aristotle. However, in the theologies of late Antiquity—Christian and pagan—of the Arabic and Latin Middle Ages, and of the Renaissance, Aristotle was rethought in a Neoplatonic context by way of the very widespread doctrine of the First Principle as pure being, *einai* or *esse*, which probably originates in Porphyry's modification of Plotinus.[2] Narbonne chiefly treats its development through texts of Pico della Mirandolla and Aquinas. Throughout he examines both Heidegger's representation and criticism of the history of metaphysics as well as his *Ereignis* as an alternative account of the foundation.

For much of the philosophical and theological world, Heidegger both inspired positively and negatively the study of the history of philosophy and theology and also motivated various retrievals of moments from its past. Paradoxically, Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* inspired the study and the retrieval of Neoplatonism while negatively misrepresenting it. Philosophers, theologians, and scholars either presented Platonism and its history in order to reveal the

---

[1] L'âne d'or, Paris: Belles Lettres, 2001. See R. IMBACH, "Heidegger et la philosophie médiévale," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 49 (2002): 426-34; W.J. HANKEY, "Why Heidegger's History of Metaphysics is Dead," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 78:3 (2004): 425-443.

[2] On the foundations laid by Pierre Hadot, see W.J. HANKEY. "Aquinas' First Principle, Being or Unity?" *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 133-172; A. DE LIBERA & C. MICHON, *L'Être et l'Essence. Le vocabulaire médiéval de l'ontologie deux traités* De ente et essentia, Paris: Seuil, 1986, 29-36; D. BRADSHAW, "Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being," *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999): 383-401.

faults of Heidegger's account, or they turned to Neoplatonism, having accepted Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as onto-theology, in order to find an alternative way for western philosophy, theology, and religion. Our understanding of Aquinas was much affected. Either these Neoplatonisms emerged in opposition to Thomism as the exemplar of the worst onto-theological metaphysics, or, alternatively, Aquinas's own thought was reinterpreted in a Neoplatonic fashion so as to discover that it was the very opposite of such Thomism, or, yet again, as with Narbonne, his thought is located with respect to henology and the "metaphysics of pure being," both constructions of a history of metaphysics rethought through Neoplatonism.[3] Thus, in our time, Heidegger, the Neoplatonists, and Aquinas are intimately connected.

Thomas' theology is illuminated within the poles of Narbonne's monograph, because Narbonne's relation to Heidegger's representation, judgments, and to his alternative foundation justifying the judgments, is critical. Narbonne rightly admits that, in a significant way, the structure of Thomas' theology is onto-theological. If Thomas' theology is presented so as to deny this, or adjusted so as to escape Heidegger's history accepted as beyond questioning—tactics adopted by many—, his teaching is badly distorted. Nonetheless, once the judgment implicit in the *Seinsfrage* has been faced, the questions which occur within a Heideggerian reflection on Western theology bring out much of the structure and content of Thomas' theology: How does God occur in metaphysics? What is the relation between revealed and philosophical theology? Is God understood through a conception of being? What is the character of the divine transcendence? How are the transcendent unknowability of God and what is known of him connected? What is the result of the reciprocity between theology and anthropology? Many of these questions are essentially related to the problem of the balance of ontology and henology in Aquinas. In consequence, I shall focus on how the pull of the simple One functions in Thomas' treatment of God as most properly understood and named by *esse*.

A. METAPHYSICS AND ITS LIMITS

Aquinas left a late, historically sophisticated, commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and its *prooemium* treats the question of the unity of metaphysics. Its doctrine is similar to that in his early *Super Boetium De Trinitate* which treats the

---

[3] See HANKEY "Le Rôle du néoplatonisme dans les tentatives postmodernes d'échapper à l'onto-théologie," *Actes du XXVIIe Congrès de l'A.S.P.L.F.: La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*, éd. L. LANGLOIS & J.-M. NARBONNE, Paris/Québec: Vrin/ Presses de l'Université Laval, 2000, 36-43; ID., "Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold and Postmodern Hot," *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. L. AYRES & G. JONES, London: Routledge, 1998, 139-184.

relation between metaphysics and *sacra doctrina*. If the three sciences within what Aristotle wrote—first philosophy, being as being, and theology—were one, and metaphysics governed sacred doctrine, then Aristotle's metaphysics will be the pre-eminent instance of onto-theology and Thomas's *summae* uniting the God of philosophy and of Biblical revelation will be its summit: the divine of reason and revelation would be comprehended as simultaneously separate cause, the most intelligible being, and what is most truly being. In fact, "metaphysics" begins, not as the name of a science, but as the title given by the Alexandrine editors to a collection of writings emerging from Aristotle's school and Heidegger's history assimilated Aristotle to Hegel.[4] The status of Aquinas' theology is more problematic, however.

Thomas follows Aristotle in giving a number of names to metaphysics: it is the wisdom that regulates so as to draw together all arts and sciences in the service of their single aim, human happiness. It is the queen of the other philosophical sciences. Lacking our historical doubts about the unity of this science, it is: "divine science or theology" so far as it considers the separate or divine substances, "metaphysics" so far as it considers "being as being," "first philosophy" because "it considers the first causes of things."[5] The consideration of being in this unified divine science is "maxime intellectualis" because it concerns "substantie separate et communia omnibus entibus" (5.4, 155: 131-133). "Et quia id quod est principium essendi omnibus oportet esse maxime ens, ut dicitur in II Metaphisice."[6]

Although there are important qualifications, nonetheless, for Aquinas philosophy has real knowledge of divine substance. We are directed to the one true human good, happiness enjoyed by the contemplation of the divine, in two ways: one by philosophy the other by revelation: "Human happiness is two-fold: one is imperfect, which is while we are on the way, about this The Philosopher speaks. This consists in the contemplation of separate substances by means of the habit of Wisdom."[7] The knowledge the philosopher seeks, and imperfectly finds,

[4] See J.-L. MARION, "La science toujours recherchée et toujours manquante," J.-F. COURTINE, "Métaphysique et Onto-théologie," L. BRISSON, "Un si long anonymat," in *La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*, éd. L. LANGLOIS ET J.-M. NARBONNE, Paris/Québec: Vrin/ Presses de l'Université Laval, 1999, 13-36, 37-60, 135-157; and P. AUBENQUE, "La question de l'ontothéologie chez Aristote et Hegel," *La question de dieu selon Aristote et Hegel*, éd. T. DE KONNINCK & G. PLANTY-BONJOUR, Paris: PUF, 1991, 259-83.
[5] *In Metaphysicorum* (Marietti 1964) proemium 1.
[6] Ibid. 5.4, 155: 131-133.
[7] Ibid. 6.4 *ad* 3, 171: 176-185; see *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, SAFFREY (Fribourg/Louvain, 1954) proemium 2: 5-11. F. KERR, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, 119-120 argues that we cannot extract a purely philosophical ethics from Thomas' theology because

but for which the Christian waits *in patria*, is no mere possession of concepts. Aquinas inherits from Plotinus and Porphyry, by way of Macrobius, a hierarchy in which the moral virtues required by the philosophical life in its ascent toward contemplation are possessed according to diverse modes at every level of spiritual reality from human life in the city to divinity itself.[8] A different kind of ascent up the ladder of the sciences as forms of abstraction and separation, a structure originating in the reconciliation of the Aristotelian treatment of abstraction with Platonic reminiscence proposed by Syrianus, was developed and transmitted by the Arabs. Found as a common doctrine in the Faculty of Arts at Paris in the 13th century, it is set out by Thomas in the *De Veritate,* the *Super De Trinitate*, and the *Super Librum De Causis*, and elsewhere.[9] When the moral virtues and the disciplines of learning are combined with the levels of scientific abstraction, and when the ascent by way of the natural light of reason and our natural powers is united with the ascent by way of divine revelation and the theological graces, the whole constitutes an *itinerarium* towards self-knowledge, knowledge of separate substance, and union with subsisting separate substance. By this scientific ascent, the individual retraces a journey which Aquinas thinks philosophy itself also made in the progress from the Ancient *Physikoi* through Plato to Aristotle so as to arrive at the true and certain knowledge about the divine which is required of it.[10]

For Aquinas, philosophy begins with two errors which theology requires it to overcome. One is the denial that humans can know with certainty. The second is that nothing exists separate from bodies. God is a separate substance, even though the human way of knowing makes it difficult for us to understand this. Without certain knowledge, Romans 1.20—which holds that the invisible things of God are understood from creation—would be false, because we cannot know anything about God unless we can demonstrate that he is (*ST* 1.2.2 sc.). Thomas asserts that: "we discover that God exists, by unbreakable reasons proved by the philosophers."[11] The most cursory reading of the *Summa Theologiae*

---

he interpreted Aristotle's ~~on~~ human happiness in Christian terms; however, Aquinas did not understand himself to have done so.

[8] *Summa theologiae* (Piana, 1953) 1-2.61.5; see HANKEY, "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas," *LTP*, 59:2 [Le Néoplatonisme] (Juin 2003): 193-224.

[9] *Super De Causis* proemium 2: 14-25; see A. DE LIBERA, *La querelle des universaux: De Plato à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris: Seuil, 1996, 69-121.

[10] See HANKEY "'Knowing As We are Known' in *Confessions* 10 and Other Philosophical, Augustinian and Christian Obedience to the Delphic *Gnothi Seauton*," *Augustinian Studies* 34:1 (2003): 23-48 and "Thomas' Neoplatonic Histories: His following of Simplicius," *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 153-178 at 166-69.

[11] *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate* (Leonina 22, 1972-1975) ii, 10.12, 340: 137-39.

reveals that the knowledge of God gained in the *quinque viae* proving the existence of God is used at very every stage of the vast argument. One example may serve for all, because its location is so surprising. When we come to the questions on grace, the notions of God by which the demonstrations proceed are God as prime mover and pure act: "omnes motus tam corporales quam spirituales reducantur in primum movens simpliciter, quod est Deus." Moreover, the reduction of all motions including those of the human free will to God, Aquinas finds in Aristotle (*ST* 1-2.109.1 and 1-2.109.2 *ad* 1).

The Philosopher is not by any means the only source for the logical figures and concepts by which we know separate substance and by which *sacra doctrina* is enabled. The *Summa* as a whole, and particular treatises within it, describe the Neoplatonic structure of remaining, *exitus*, and *reditus* by which all things except the One return upon their principle.[12] The first particular circle (that on the divine names, Questions 3-11) is constructed when, beginning with simplicity, we arrive back at unity by way of the existence of God in all things. The circles succeeding it, i.e. those described by the internal operations, by the trinity, by the creation, and, ultimately, by salvation, return back to the principle by way of more and more differentiated processions. We have a unification of the Platonic dialectic of the one and the many with Aristotle's logic of activity as *entelecheia* in a Neoplatonic hierarchy.[13] Moreover, the Neoplatonic figures determine content as well as form.

For example, a concept taken from Proclus, that incorporeal substances have complete return upon themselves, enables the *Summa*'s progress from the circle described by simple *esse* returning to itself as unity, to the questions on the divine activities of knowing, loving, and power. These activities determine the emergence of the trinitarian processions, which Aquinas also calls emanations, within the essence, and the emanation outside it, creation. From Aristotle, by way of a profound transformation among the Arabs, especially Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, Aquinas takes the law of spiritual emanation, *ex uno non nisi unum*, by which the processions of the divine *Verbum* and Spirit occur, and are distinguished as necessary, natural, and prior *vis-à-vis* the voluntary emanation of creation. Another figure, by which the Neoplatonists reconciled Plato and Aristotle, the idea of motionless motion as characterising the activity of the perfect, enables Aquinas to call God living and is manifest in the trinitarian circumcession. Another such figure, taken from Proclus via the pseudo-

---

[12] What follows summarises the argument of HANKEY *God in Himself,* OUP, 1987/ 2000, as supplemented by my subsequent studies.

[13] See HANKEY "*Theoria versus Poesis*: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 387-415 at 397-408.

Dionysius and the *Liber de causis*, provides the structure for the consideration of all spiritual substances from the soul to the divine: they have essence, power and act.

The necessity for the dependence of *sacra doctrina* on philosophy, which these structures and concepts display is given in the first question. Because human knowing begins in sense, we naturally suppose that all things are corporeal and have the characteristics of sensible substances. To climb from this to an understanding of what revealed theology teaches is very difficult, especially because, as Thomas learns from Dionysius and the Platonists, revelation is normally given in sensible symbols, images, and signs wherein sacred intelligible and super-intelligible realities are adapted to the form of our knowing by being veiled (*ST* 1.9 and 1.3.1 *ad* 1). Everything ascribed to God in Scripture which—at least since Plato's criticism of the poetic depiction of the gods—would make the divine imperfect is seen as a veil which must be lifted, if we are to know God truly. Plato's standards for purifying poetic theology were radically intensified by his Neoplatonic successors, of whom Aquinas is an heir: thus the corporeality, division, mutability, potentiality, causing evil, etc. ascribed to God in Scripture must be understood as signifying their opposites. In consequence, the climb by which we can see the truth about spiritual substance which Scripture reveals is both necessary and meritorious; the philosophical sciences are our way of ascent. The power of mind is increased corporately and individually by reaching higher levels of abstraction, by our rising to and becoming one with higher levels of reality.[14] Using Aristotle's opposition between what is more knowable in itself, and what is more knowable to us, Aquinas writes:

> [Revealed theology] uses the philosophical sciences not because of any defect or insufficiency of its own, but because of the defectiveness of our intellect, which is more readily led to the realities above *ratio* treated in sacred doctrine, when it proceeds by way of those things which the other sciences know through natural reason (*ST* 1.1.5 *ad* 2).

Given that philosophy is necessary for our right understanding of God and that knowing God is proper to him alone, it is not surprising that Aquinas supposes that philosophy is a kind of revelation: "studium philosophiae secundum se est licitum et laudibile, propter veritatem quam philosophi perceperunt, Deo illis

---

[14] See L-B. GEIGER, "Abstraction et séparation d'après saint Thomas *In de Trinitate*, Q. 5, A. 3," in *Penser avec Thomas d'Aquin: Etudes thomistes de Louis-Bretrand Geiger OP*, éd. R. IMBACH, Paris/ Fribourg, 139-183 & xxi-xxiii.

revelante, ut dicitur *Ad Rom*. 1.19" (*ST* 2-2.167.1 *ad* 3). He understands Aristotle and Plato to teach this so far as they maintain that our knowledge of God is a participation in the divine self-knowing, a doctrine Aquinas finds in the *Metaphysics* as well as the *Nicomachean Ethics* and which he takes to be the condition of metaphysics as knowledge of divinity.[15]

Despite this, the philosophical knowledge of God and, indeed, our knowledge of God in this present life, are severely limited. Both limits have to do with the character of the human *lumen naturale*. Aquinas follows Aristotle on how the human soul knows, whom he finds in accord with the Dionysian view lying in the tradition of Iamblichan henology. With innovative daring, Aquinas maintained that the human soul is the form of its body—a teaching condemned by ecclesiastical authority soon after his death—so that human knowing is tied to sense.[16] For Aquinas, in opposition to his neo-Augustinian contemporaries, we do not know our own minds immediately, nor do we know by ideas above us in the Divine Word in virtue of an illumination of which the sun is the image.[17] Instead, in a contrast borrowed from Themistius, he judges that we know by the activity of an inherent intellectual light, a power essential to each human soul, given each by God: "ipsum lumen naturale rationis participatio quaedam est divini luminis" (*ST* 1.12.11 *ad* 3). This light creates the universal in our minds, which are passive as well as active and must be moved by the sensible phantasm.[18] Two Neoplatonic principles, one Porphyrian in origin, the other Iamblichan, and both found by him in Dionysius as well as in many other of his sources, require that we know in our own proper way, i.e. rationally. These laws are respectively the Porphyrian, "a thing is known according to the mode of the receiver,"[19] and the requirement of Iamblichan henology for complete mediation: the *Lex divinitatis*, which, in the judgement of Aquinas, governs the operations of

---

[15] *In Metaphysicorum* 1.3,18-20 §§ 60-68; *In librum Beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio* (Marietti 1950) 1.1, 7-11, §§ 17-39; *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* (Leonina 47, 1969) ii, 10.11, 587-88: 60-164.

[16] See ALAIN BOUREAU, *Théologie, science et censure au XIIIe siècle. Le cas de Jean Peckham*, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1999.

[17] See *De Veritate* 10.6; *Quaestio Disputata de Spiritualibus Creaturis* (Leonina 24:2, 2000) 10, 106: 276-84; 10 *ad* 8, 113: 509-27; *ST* 1.79.4; *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo* (Leonina 23, 1982) 16.12*ad* 1, 333: 150-57; *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas* (Leonina: 43, 1976) 4, 307: 15-18 & 5, 314: 354-63.

[18] See HANKEY "Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas," *Heythrop Journal* 42:3 (2001): 329-348 at 336-340 & H. Smit, "Aquinas's Abstractionism," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001): 85-118.

[19] See HANKEY, "*Secundum rei vim vel secundum cognoscentium facultatem*: Knower and Known in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius and the *Proslogion* of Anselm," *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002, 126-150.

God, gracious and natural.[20] The human mode of knowing is discursive and situated midway in a hierarchy; the universe is a hierarchy of cognitive powers where humans have the animals below us and all the ranks of angels above. Our thinking has the simplicity of intellect as opposed to *ratio*, not by proper possession but "by a certain participation in the simple cognition which is found in the superior substances."[21]

This intellectual coming together of the divine and the human, is on the human side and according to the mode of the rational soul. An essential of Thomas' doctrine of creation derived from Dionysius, restricts what is received from the divine goodness to the limited capacity of each recipient in an ordered hierarchy. Human knowledge of immaterial substances is limited "naturaliter" to the power of our minds, knowing through sensible things. Although, our power of abstraction makes us capable of understanding revelation, and ultimately even makes us open to knowing the essence of God, it also limits our knowledge of divine substance in our present state. According to our "natural perfection" we know God only *ex creatura*. Thus, our knowledge of God is either attained at the end of a long, difficult, and error filled upward road, or it must be given us from above. It is in fact given, but the gift by itself only solves part of the problem. Like his Neoplatonic predecessors, Thomas is always aware that our two theologies, the one which is a part of philosophy, and *sacra doctrina*, exist in us according to the lowest form of intellect, that of reason in a soul. Thus, within the limits of philosophy itself, a primarily negative theology begins to appear, as does the need for more certain way of attaining union with God. Because we know by abstraction, not in the way proper to separate substances, our knowledge of these is more negative than affirmative. Still, we are able to make affirmative proper predications of God.

God is unknown to us in this present life and, crucially, philosophy understands its own ignorance. Combining two Neoplatonic strategies, (1) the relation between the grade of a substance in the hierarchy and its way of knowing with (2) the systematic analogy between the ways of knowing and the grades of being, Aquinas develops his own doctrine of analogy in order to prevent all our judgments about God being false. As against both Moses Maimonides and Dionysius, who may be taken to stand for an extreme negative theology, Aquinas argues that we rightly make affirmative and proper predications of God—because God possesses the qualities predicated most properly, the qualities are not ascribed to God only as the cause of what is in

---

[20] See HANKEY "Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6," *AHDLMA* 64 (1997): 59-93 at 59-60.

[21] *De Veritate* 15.1, 479: 314-6; see HANKEY, *God in Himself* 165.

creatures. [22] The correction of the mode of our knowing of God by comparing it to the mode of his own being requires that we are simultaneously looking at reality in a human way and also looking at our place in the cosmos from the divine perspective. This capacity to look at ourselves from beyond ourselves is consequent on our participation in the higher knowing of separate substances. This participation is as much a fact about the psychological and ontological structure of the cosmos—and thus about the constitution of our nature and how it functions within its hierarchically situated place—as it is something vouchsafed by revelation.

This consideration brings us to *sacra doctrina*, the theology which is of a different genus from the philosophical because it is known not by our inherent natural light but treats what is known "lumine divinae revelationis" (*ST* 1.1.1 *ad* 2).

B. *SACRA DOCTRINA* AND METAPHYSICS

Metaphysical theology does not begin from God but rises toward him as universal cause; in consequence, its subject is not the divine, but being as being, *ens commune*. It rises to the consideration of the divine, that is to theology. Its aspects: "metaphysics," "first philosophy," and "divine science or theology," are connected as beginning, middle, and end of a single science. For reasons we have already given, its knowledge of the divine is primarily negative, a knowledge that God exists rather than what he is. Thomas is clear, however, that knowledge of existence and nature can never be totally divided, because, if they were, we would not know what we were talking about (*Super de Trinitate* 6.3). If the identity of *esse* and *essentia* in God has as a consequence the ultimate inseparability of the knowledge that God is and what God is, it has also another side: "the act of existence by which God subsists in himself" is just as unknown as is his essence.[23]

In contrast to the theology which is part of philosophy, *sacra doctrina* has God for its subject in virtue of his gracious revelation of himself.[24] The two theologies, metaphysical and sacred, are related as two sides of a circle: the metaphysical moving up to God, the sacred moving down from him–and thus *sacra doctrina* follows the direction of God's own knowledge. They must meet, as Thomas declares: "because the natural reason ascends to the knowledge of God through creatures and the knowledge which faith has descends from God to us

---

[22] *ST* 1.12.4; *ST* 1.13.1 *corpus, ad* 2 & *ad* 3; *ST* 1.13 articles 2,3, 5, 6 & 12; see HANKEY, *God in Himself* 88-95.

[23] *Summa contra Gentiles* (Marietti 1961) ii, 1.12.

[24] *ST* 1.1.7; see HANKEY, *God In Himself* 165.

in the opposite way through divine revelation, the way up is same way as the way down" (*ScG* 4.1). If they did not, sacred doctrine would not know the existence of its subject matter according to a scientific demonstration and would not have the means to make revelation intelligible. Their meeting involves a subordination: philosophical theology is ancillary to the sacred, but in fact both our theologies are subalternate to God's knowledge of himself and to the knowledge which the blessed have of God. Neither knowing can be perfect in this life because all our present knowing of separate substance is according to the mode of a reason tied to sense. We have, at present, neither face-to-face knowledge of God who is separate substance nor proper knowledge of material singulars (*De Veritate* 2.5, 2.6 & 10.5). For human knowing, the cosmic connecting points are in fact unhinged.

Having unified metaphysics, and then linked it to the revelation of God in *sacra doctrina*, so that God's primary name is "He Who Is" or *ipsum esse* (*ST* 1.13.11), is Aquinas' theology as a whole onto-theology? Jean-Luc Marion, along with many others, have thought so. However, Marion retracted his position in *Dieu sans l'être* and, as an alternative constructed Aquinas' theology as theo-ontology, by carefully preserving Thomas' distinction between the two ways in which God is the subject of theology. According to Marion, there is for Aquinas an irreducible difference between metaphysics and sacred doctrine allowing Aquinas "*penser l'être à partir de l'inconnaissabilité de Dieu*."[25] The distance has been widened by Marion and others partly through keeping the triple aspects of metaphysics separate both in Aristotle and in his successors and coheres with such refusals to reduce the gods to philosophical idea as *Aristote et la théologie des vivants immortels* of Richard Bodéüs.[26] While correct as against even more fideistic accounts, Marion's approach is incomplete, especially as compared to that of Narbonne, because it amounts in the end to a separation of the religious relation to God from the philosophical in a way that Aquinas would not recognise. At the heart of Marion's turn to Dionysius for a theology of charity without ontology is the Neoplatonic elevation of the Good beyond being. An acknowledged relation to Neoplatonic henology or to a negative theology of being seems too metaphysical for him. In fact, an historically accurate explanation of the unknowability of the divine *esse* for Aquinas certainly requires a more forthright embrace of its Neoplatonic determination. Aquinas himself treats Dionysius as if he were a part of the same world to which Aristotle, the Platonists, and the *Liber*

---

[25] J.-L. MARION, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie," *Revue thomiste* 95 (1995): 31-66 at 65, note 82. John Milbank has adopted the opposite strategy with respect to Heidegger by "evacuating" philosophy. For a consideration of why Marion is right about Aquinas, see HANKEY, "Why Philosophy Abides"*:* 341-345.

[26] Bellarmin 1992; MARION, "La science toujours recherchée."

de causis belong and uses him as a source of philosophical positions, logical figures, and concepts in the same way that he uses them. Aquinas combines giving the Dionysian texts a quasi-Biblical authority with subjecting them to the fundamental laws of metaphysics. Thus, as a matter of fact, Aquinas will not allow that for Dionysius God is beyond *esse*.[27]

Thomas' *summae*, uniting the two theologies, escape belonging to onto-theology in the Heideggerian sense, to the degree that they do for two reasons. First, in this present life because of the inadequacy of our way of understanding to his way of being, we know God primarily negatively and are joined to him as to one unknown. Second, there is a relation to God as revealed that Aquinas refuses to reduce to what is known by metaphysics. After the manner of the later Neoplatonists, there is a religious relation to God which surpasses philosophy, using it within a theological system whose beginning and end are beyond reason. This inevitably brings us to the question as to whether this Thomistic and Neoplatonic surpassing of philosophical reason is the same as the Heideggerian and suffers from its defects.

C. *Sacra Doctrina* and the Salvation of Man

At the conclusion of his study of henology, ontology, and Heidegger's *Ereignis*, Professor Narbonne arrives at the judgment that the paradoxical language of henology is not nearly so destructive of the rationality necessary to discourse as what is used by Heidegger. Moreover, he finds a good basis to regard the *Ereignis* as brute fact, its play mere chance, a game without rules; it is the whirlwind or maelstrom. Granting to Heidegger that henology remains metaphysical because the One is a vertically mediated and elevated ground, Narbonne finds the *Seyn* of *Ereignis* as immediate horizontal ground (280) to be gravely problematic. The denial to philosophy of any definiteness in that to which it must attend, reduces it in some way to "zero" (256). Philosophy has nothing to sustain it; equally, because the gods depend on a decree external to them, they are neutralised (269). In this context we should ask whether the Thomistic reduction of philosophy to a limited place within sacred doctrine according to the pattern established by the theologians in the henological tradition from Iamblichus to Damascius also reduces human reason.

The ultimate account of human knowing for Aquinas comes not from Dionysius but from Augustine and the doctrine of the beatific vision he bequeathed the Latin church. The most important discussion of beatitude occurs in Question 12 of the *Summa theologiae* on how God is known by us; there Aquinas begins by arguing that both philosophy and faith demand human vision

---

[27] See HANKEY, "Aquinas and the Platonists," *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages*: *A Doxographic Approach*, ed. S. GERSH AND M. HOENEN, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002, 279-324 at 317-9.

of the essence of God. Without face-to-face knowledge, faith would be nullified because its purpose is human beatitude: "Since the final happiness of man consists in his highest activity, which is intellectual activity, if no created intellect could see God, either it would never achieve happiness, or its happiness would consist in something other than God. This is foreign to faith" (*ST* 1.12.1). Reason, in turn, would be denied. It is fulfilled in the knowledge of the principles and causes. This frustrated, man's natural desire would be vain. Both faith and reason require that "the blessed see the essence of God." In these questions, we find Thomas' notorious doctrine of created grace which he developed in order to explain how we can have the demanded knowledge of God's essence. Much criticised, it is, nonetheless, determined by Thomas' desire to preserve the integrity of human nature until the end, even when we are united to God.

Problems with a human knowledge of the divine essence are the incapacity of the creature for the creator and of the human mind for the knowledge of separated substance. Because of the first, God cannot be adequately known through an intermediating likeness: no concept, by nature finite, can convey the uncreated infinity. Beatifying union must be immediate. However, humans have some capacity for knowing separate substance and to this a gracious addition can be made:

> Since the created intellect through its own innate nature is able to apprehend in abstraction by way of resolution concrete form and the concrete act of being, it is able through grace to be raised so that it can know subsisting separated substance and separated subsistent being (*ST* 1.12.4 *ad* 3).

Divine grace gives a power to the creature in order, by an addition, to raise its natural created capacity beyond its natural scope, i.e. forms in matter. Grace continues, even at this absolute limit of creaturely existence, to conform itself to the specific nature of the creature. The *Lex divinitatis* is not broken. We shall be made "deiformis," by means of the light of glory without ceasing to be human (*ST* 1.12.5 *ad* 3). In asserting the necessity of direct vision of God's essence for human happiness, Aquinas sets Augustine against the Pseudo-Dionysius. Indeed, in his late exposition of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, Aquinas accuses Eriugena of heresy because Eriugena has absorbed the Dionysian negative theology more completely than Thomas will himself.[28]

CONCLUSION

---

[28] *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos Lectura* (Marietti, 1953) ii, 354, § 85.

Presence, vision, essence, *theoria* are ultimate for Aquinas. At the end of sacred doctrine with its henological structure, the ontology of pure being prevails, so that the human way of knowing can be preserved even when seeing God's essence. The human does not pass into the divine but an addition is made to its powers so that they can reach beyond themselves to knowledge. Thomas' exalted humanism has part of its basis in his bias toward an Aristotelian and Augustinian metaphysics of being. Equally, in contrast, it depends upon a strong sense that the human is a particular and irreplaceable link in a great chain reaching without gaps from the first to the last. Here the doctrines of the Iamblichan successors of Plotinus, given enormous authority by Dionysius, exert their henological influence. Thomas' theology is reducible to neither Neoplatonic tradition, but in its negotiation between them certainly founds human knowing and the impulsion of love more surely than Heideggerian *Ereignis* can.