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Hyperousios: God 'without being,' 'Super- being,' or 'Unlimited Being'?

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It has been argued by John Milbank and the *Radical Orthodoxy* sensibility that a genealogy can be traced directly from the univocity of being in scholastics such as Duns Scotus and William of Occam to modern atheism¹. However, it can also be argued that such a genealogy can be traced from the equivocality of religious language amongst certain mystics to modern atheism. This link is clearly seen in the Vienna Circle for whom the 'nonsense' talk of mystics was a special object of attack and derision, prompting in part the reactionary turn towards an insistence on univocal language in an attempt to save meaning² (a turn which ultimately ended in failure). Anthony Flew famously questioned the essential difference between a God who 'dies the death by a thousand qualifications' and no God at all³. Finally amongst the 'death of God theologians' such as Altizer and Hamilton or more recently Caputo, Rollins *et al* the equivocality of being and atheism become effectively coterminous with each other.

As a contribution to the debate on the meaningfulness of theological language, this paper will focus on examining Pseudo- Dionysius the Areopagite⁴ and how far his reception by Thomas Aquinas might overcome some of the problems arising in modern and postmodern readings of his work. I will examine the appellation of God in Dionysius as 'Beyond Being,' it's interpretation in Jean Luc Marion as 'God

¹ E.g. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (Routledge, 2002), p.127.

² A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 61:

“ As far as we are concerned, the distinction between the kind of metaphysics that is produced by a philosopher who has been duped by grammar, and the kind that is produced by a mystic who is trying to express the inexpressible, is of no great importance: what is important to us is to realize that even the utterances of the metaphysician who is attempting to expound a vision are literally senseless; so that henceforth we may pursue our philosophical research with as little regard for them as for the more inglorious kind of metaphysics which comes from a failure to understand the workings of our language.”

³ Antony Flew, 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Alasdair MacIntyre and Anthony Flew (SCM Press, 1955)

⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius was pivotal in the transmission of Christian mysticism in the West,⁴ especially in the 12th to the 16th centuries through translations of his works into Latin by John Scotus Eriugena (9th century). Indeed 'Denys' as he was popularly known, is the third most quoted author in the Thomistic corpus (after Augustine and Aristotle), named over 2000 times, of which 542 in the *Summa Theologiae* alone, showing his incontestable importance (Roberto Busa SJ *et al*, *Index Thomisticus*, web edition by Eduardo Bernot *et al*)

Without Being’, the accusation from Derrida that negative theology really affirms God as a *Superbeing* and the transformation of Dionysian *hyperousios* in Aquinas as ‘Unlimited Being’ with some analysis of the implication of these respective views for epistemology.

1. *Hyperousios* as ‘God Without Being’. (Jean-Luc Marion)

In pursuing his radical project of negative theology, Pseudo-Dionysius appears to stretch the principle of *apophasis* to the limit of orthodoxy by applying it even to the very existence of God! The supreme Cause of all, he says, ‘falls neither within the predicate of non-being nor of being,’⁵ but rather ‘transcends all being.’⁶ Furthermore, ‘It is the Universal Cause of existence while itself existing not.’⁷ ‘..He doth not even exist...’⁸ This may sound rather odd, if not ridiculous to a modern hearer! What is the meaning of a God ‘beyond being’ or ‘beyond existence’ itself? Indeed were the early logical positivists correct in identifying such language as literally *meaningless*? However, within the postmodern context, French theologian and phenomenologist, Jean-Luc Marion has embraced the Areopagite and interpreted him to affirm a ‘God *without being*’ (an English translation of the French, *Dieu sans l'etre* in his 1982 work)⁹. What does this strange title mean? Is Marion affirming atheism? Marion’s primary concern, as with his previous work, *The Idol and the Distance*¹⁰, is to rid theology of conceptual idols and he thinks that Dionysius offers such a non-conceptual or ‘postmetaphysical’ theology.¹¹ God ‘without being’ means on its simplest understanding, God ‘without the *concept* of being.’ Concepts instead should be replaced with *icons* – non-conceptual, non-determinate images. But Marion is not

⁵ *MT*, ch 5. 1048A Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, tr. Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987) and cited by Derrida in *How to avoid speaking: Denials* tr. Kamuf and Rottenberg (eds.) *Psyche:Inventions of the Other*, Vol 2 (Stanford University Press, 2008), p.141.

⁶ *DN* 4. 3. 697A, Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, tr. Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987) and cited by Derrida in *How to avoid speaking: Denials* tr. Kamuf and Rottenberg (eds.) *Psyche:Inventions of the Other*, Vol 2, (Stanford University Press, 2008), p.73

⁷ *DN* 1.1, tr. C.E.Rolt, *Dionysius the Aeropagite, The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (SPCK, 1972), p.53

⁸ *DN* 5.4, tr. C.E.Rolt, *Dionysius the Aeropagite, The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (SPCK, 1972), p.135.

⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (The University of Chicago Press, 1991)

¹⁰ See also Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and the Distance*, tr. Thomas Carlson (Fordham, 2001).

¹¹ Jean-Luc Marion, ‘Is the argument ontological?’ in *Cartesian Questions: method and metaphysics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially pp.157-158. See also Thomas A. Carlson, ‘Postmetaphysical theology’ in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.58-76.

drawing his conclusions from Dionysius alone, but also from the ‘question of being’ in Heidegger who had criticised theology for ‘forgetting being’ and substituting it with a self-caused Supreme Being.’¹² Marion takes as his point of departure a response to Heidegger’s question from phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas who explored the horizon of an ‘*Otherwise than Being*’,¹³ a radical view of God’s transcendence in which ‘the *event* of being passes over to what is other than being.’¹⁴ Similarly, Marion presents a particular postmodern, postmetaphysical reception of Neoplatonism which privileges a (non-conceptual) ‘Good’ over ‘Being’ as a way of overcoming Heidegger’s critique of ‘ontotheology’.¹⁵

But is their replacement an heretical distortion even of Neoplatonism? Do Levinas and Marion trespass beyond even *The Good* into the (non)territory of nihilism? Is ‘Good’ a vacuous term? This is a conclusion which might plausibly be drawn from Marion’s later 2001 work *In Excess*, in which he speaks of replacing a ‘metaphysics of presence’ with a ‘pragmatic theology of absence.’¹⁶ That is to say, in Marion’s opinion, theology does not *refer* to God at all, it does not tell us anything *about* God¹⁷, but is constituted entirely by its non-predicative liturgical *use*, an anti-realist discourse merely *addressed to* ‘God’.¹⁸ Indeed Conor Cunningham questions whether Marion, in spite of his ostensive commitment to the Catholic faith, in fact

¹² See Martin Heidegger, ‘The Ontotheo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics’ tr. Joan Stambaugh in *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998).

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998), p. 3.

¹⁵ See Jean-Luc Marion, ‘The Idea of God’ in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1998). Marion is followed in this quest by popular writer Peter Rollins, *How (not) to speak of God* (SPCK, 2006).

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess, Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, tr. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (Fordham University Press, New York, 2002), pp. 156-158; Jean-Luc Marion, ‘In the Name’ tr. Jeffrey L. Kosky in Caputo and Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.37.

¹⁷ Again, Marion follows Heidegger. See Martin Heidegger, *Forward to the German Edition of Phenomenology and Theology* In James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (ed. and tr.), *The Piety of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1976), p.12, 15 Theology is not a science of God but of faith or of ‘the mode of existence of the believer (p.14).’

¹⁸ See also Jean-Luc Marion, ‘In the Name’ tr. Jeffrey L. Kosky in Caputo and Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Johannes Hoff seems to be moving in the same direction in his reduction of ‘*sacra doctrina*’ in Aquinas to doxology, citing the Wittgensteinian Thomist, David Burrell as an influence on his reading: ‘Following Dionysius the Areopagite, Thomas of Aquinas had already called this doxological mode of speaking the highest form of science (*Scientia dei et beatorum*).’ See Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, 2013), p.18 and footnote.

falls into a subtle nihilism,¹⁹ by suggesting that in some sense the *Without Being* (i.e. the Nothing) 'is.' Cunningham coins the terms *meontological*, *meontotheological* or *oukontotheological* to describe Marion's position.²⁰ Nihilism could be literally translated as the identification of being with nothingness. Although Marion believes he has a predecessor for his 'God without being' in Anselm's 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'²¹, Anselm clearly rejects a nihilistic interpretation of his theology in the *Monologion*: '

'So then, to assert that this nature (without which no nature could exist) is nothing is as false as the claim that 'whatever is, is nothing' is absurd. Is it through nothing? No, it is not, since it is completely unintelligible for something to exist through nothing.'²²

He could have more plausibly traced a genealogy of his position to Basilides, the Gnostic, who posited that a 'non-existent' God, who is synonymous with 'Nothing,' made the world out of 'non-existents.'²³ Deirdre Carabine categorises the system of Basilides as 'perhaps the first example of religious atheism.'²⁴

Furthermore, if it is true that being and intelligibility are coterminous, a presupposition central to Western philosophy from Parmenides²⁵ onwards²⁶, then nihilism must be its opposite, the rupture of being and intelligibility.²⁷

¹⁹ Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of nihilism* (Routledge, 2001), p. 245.

²⁰ Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of nihilism* (Routledge, 2001), p. 249, 250. The Greek negatives μη or ουκ are determined by whether a question anticipates a positive or negative response in Greek grammar.
²¹ Jean-Luc Marion, 'Is the argument ontological?' in *Cartesian Questions: method and metaphysics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²² Anselm, *Monologion* 4, tr.Simon Harrison in Brian Davies and G.R.Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p.17.

²³ From Hippolytus, *Refutation of all heresies*, VII, 22: 2; 21:4 cited in J.Stevenson (ed.), *A New Eusebius: documents illustrative of the history of the Church to A.D. 337* (London, SPCK, 1977), pp.75-76.

²⁴ See Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God, Negative Theology in the Platonic tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (WIPF and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 1995), p.92.

²⁵ το γαρ αυτο νοειν εστιν τε και ειναι Parmenides' *Poem*, Fragment 3, cited in Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a 'repetition' of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12, (Louvain University Press, 1996), p.35

²⁶ E.g. Aquinas, 'Now everything, in as far as it has being, so far is it knowable.' *ST* 1a, q. 16, a. 3, resp

²⁷ 'The alternative to the principle that to be is to be intelligible, is the nihilism which afflicts so much contemporary thought and culture. For if being is not what is comprehended by thought, then thought does not apprehend being. This in effect means that there is no being, since whatever we call "being" is not being, but a projection, interpretation, illusion – in short, nothing. If reality is not as thought must apprehend it, then there is no such thing as reality. Conversely, if thought is not the apprehension of being, then all thought, in that it apprehends being, is illusory. Nihilism may indeed be said to consist most fundamentally in the denial of the

The 'speculative theology' which Marion advocates is unashamedly 'opposed to the identification of being with thought'²⁸ – not merely, it should be noted, the identification of being with *human* thought, which would be the hallmark of rationalism, but the rejection of the identification of being with thought *per se* rendering reality literally Mindless and ultimately unknowable in itself.

The seeds are already there in Heidegger and Levinas. Heidegger's rejection of both the law of non-contradiction and the correspondence account of truth is directly based on his presupposition that the intellect is 'dependent on the nothing'.²⁹ Rejection of the law of non-contradiction is a hallmark of nihilism since if the law of non-contradiction does not obtain then it would make it possible for something to both 'be' and 'not be' at the same time and in the same way. The essential nihilism of Heidegger's position becomes clear when he approves the proposition of Hegel: 'Pure Being and Pure Nothing are therefore the same.'³⁰ The 'meaning' of human existence (*Dasein*) is to be 'held out into the nothing.'³¹ Cunningham discerns that *Dasein* as a 'being unto death' not only trivially describes its final destination but a *fortiori* that *Dasein* is *constituted* by death, that is by the nothing.³²

For Levinas, being 'appears like a game'. 'Being is play or *détente*, without responsibility, where everything is possible or permitted.'³³ In positing an *absolutely Other*, Levinas allows also the possibility of the absolutely unknowable, since the totally alien must be unrecognisable, having no similarity with anything we know. It is therefore indistinguishable from the nothing.³⁴ This conclusion however is a *reductio ad absurdum* which defeats the very objective of Levinas' theology, which is to encounter the mystery of the Other in the face of one's neighbour. But if the mystery

intelligibility of being.' Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Dionysius the Aeropagite*. (SUNY Press, 2007), pp.111-112.

²⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, 'Is the argument ontological?' in *Cartesian Questions: method and metaphysics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially p. 158.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'What is metaphysics?' in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings*, (Routledge, 1994), p.98.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, 'What is metaphysics?' in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings*, (Routledge, 1994), p.108.

³¹ Martin Heidegger, 'What is metaphysics?' in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings*, (Routledge, 1994), p.103.

³² Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of nihilism* (Routledge, 2001), pp.137-139.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duchesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998), p. 6.

³⁴ Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a 'repetition' of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Louvain University Press, 1996), pp. 13-22.

is 'wholly' Other there can be no 'face' nor 'neighbour', except by equivocation. Levinas is not (wholly) unaware of the tension in his position: ' To conceive this otherwise than being requires, perhaps, as much audacity as scepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realise* this impossibility by the very statement of the impossibility.'³⁵ This antinomy can only be overcome by allowing at least a 'trace' of the invisible.³⁶

Marion inherits the internal difficulties apparent in both Levinas' thought and Heidegger's and amplifies them. In a revealing footnote of *In Excess*, we find Marion interpreting the *hyperousios* of Pseudo-Dionysius in wholly negative terms as a rejection of supereminence. Marion cites Francis Bertin, the French translator of Eriugena's *De Divisione Naturae* in a section treating the discussion of the superlative names of God in Dionysius to back up his own view that *hyperousios* is a radical denial of the *etre* of God:

'...the prefixes *super* or *more than* in no way imply a way of eminence which surreptitiously reintroduces affirmations at the heart of the negations. When one says that God is Superessence, one does not at all suggest that God is an essence situated at the apex of the hierarchy of essences, *but rather that God is essentially void.*(my italics).'³⁷

In seeking to preserve the transcendence of God, in this passage at least, Marion instead appears to reduce him to nothing. This would be consistent with Marion's debt to Heidegger, since a close comparison of the two writers suggests that Marion has simply substituted the placeholder 'God Without Being' for Heidegger's 'Nothing'.³⁸ It is not surprising then that since God is a Void for Marion, the 'withdrawal' of God is 'the ultimate figure of revelation.'³⁹ The Void is silent and must

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998), p. 7.

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998), p. 12.

³⁷ *De la division de la nature*, tr. Francis Bertin, Vol. 1 (Paris Press, Universitaires de France, 1995), p.216 cited in Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess, Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, tr. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, (Fordham University Press, New York, 2002), p. 141, footnote 28.

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, 'What is metaphysics?' in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings*, (Routledge, 1994), pp.89-110.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *L'Idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset), 1977, p.114.

be honoured with silence, a silence which ‘exposes itself to an infinite equivocation of meaning.’⁴⁰ We have already traced a connection with Gnosticism in Marion’s God without being, now a silent deity also recollects the followers of Simon Magus who taught that the universe arose from Unfathomable Silence.⁴¹

But it is not at all clear that this is the correct way even to understand Eriugena⁴², let alone the Dionysius he allegedly speaks for, since in the context to which Bertin refers, Eriugena has been saying that no predication can be made of God for which there is an opposite. But on this logic ‘Void’ does have an opposite (i.e. ‘Being’) and therefore it follows that the appellation *God is essentially void* must also be denied!⁴³ In other words ‘Void’ cannot be an *affirmation* of what God *is*. Although it is true for Eriugena (as for Dionysius) that God is *no thing* (‘nothing’ in that sense), a rejection of ontotheology, it does not follow from this that God is a *Void*, or an empty blank. Eriugena explains in Book 2 of the *Periphyseon*:

‘How, therefore, can the Divine Nature understand of itself what it is, seeing that it is nothing? For it surpasses everything that is, since it is not even being but all being derives from it, and by virtue of its eminence it is supereminent over all essence and

⁴⁰Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.54. Marion earlier seizes on the words of Dionysius in *DN* 1.3. ‘With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible,’ (p.54), probably because it seems to resonate with Wittgenstein and Heidegger, yet he misses out the context of the Inexpressible expressing itself ‘in the holy words of Scripture’ *DN* 1.3. 539B. See also a possible background in Basil, *De Spiritu*, 28.44 ‘Either let the ineffable be honoured by silence; or let holy things be counted consistently with true religion.’ An emphasis on silence is welcomed by Diarmaid MacCulloch who sees it as a ground for interfaith ecumenism. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (Penguin, 2014), pp.228-231. Contrast Marion’s position with the importance verbal revelation in Augustine and Aquinas, *ST* 1a, q.1, a.8.

⁴¹ ‘I am a Voice [speaking softly]. Exist [from the first. I dwell] within the Silence [that surrounds every one of them. And [it is] the [hidden Voice] that [dwells within] me , [within the] incomprehensible, immeasurable [Thought, within the] immeasurable Silence.’ *Trimorphic Protennoia*, XIII, 35-36, tr. John D. Turner in James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco, Harper, 3rd. edition, 1988/1990), p.513. *The Apocryphon of John* begins: ‘The teaching [of the saviour], and [the revelation] of the mysteries, [and the] things hidden in silence.’ *Apocryphon of John*, II,I, tr. Frederik Wisse in James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco, Harper, 3rd. edition, 1988/1990), p.105. See also Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, II, 2, 52.

⁴² Even though Eriugena does in one passage declare: Qui enim dicit: Superessentialis est, aperte negat quia essentialis est John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, Book 1, tr.. I.P. Sheldon-Williams ed. with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968, 462B, p. 82 this is later qualified Non est ousia quia plus est quam ousia, et tamen dicitur ousia quia omnium ousion id est essentiarum creatrix est. 464B, p.86.

⁴³ Johannes Scottus, *Peryphysisieon (De Divisione Naturae)*, Vol 1, 459C-459D tr. I.P. Sheldon-Williams, ed. (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced studies), p. 75-79 ‘Thus, (God) is called Essence, but strictly speaking He is not essence: for being is not opposed to not-being. Therefore He is υπερουσιος , that is superssential (superessentialis).’ (459D).

every substance. Or how can the infinite be defined by itself in anything or be understood in anything when it knows itself (to be) above every finite (thing) and every infinite (thing) and beyond finitude and infinity? So God does not know of himself what He is because He is not a 'what', being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect....No one of the men of pious learning or of the adepts in the Divine Mysteries, hearing of God that He cannot understand of Himself what He is, ought to think anything else than that God Himself, Who is not a 'what', does not know at all in Himself that which He Himself is not..⁴⁴

So, although Eriugena departs from orthodoxy in ascribing ignorance of Himself to God due to his not being a 'what', nevertheless Eriugena still differs from Marion in ascribing supereminence to the Nothing, which makes it more than a privative state.

Critique.

Dionysius does not, it seems to us, speak of God *without* being (as Derrida is also quick to point out). To the contrary, he informs his readers in one passage of the *Divine Names*: 'We might say that He is not lacking in being,⁴⁵ (though the qualifier 'we might say' is reminiscent of the apophatic move earlier made by Plotinus). He explains quite explicitly that the *via negativa* is 'contrary to the usual sense of deprivation.'⁴⁶ Whereas Marion implies that *hyperousios* is equivalent to non-being, Dionysius says the exact opposite, that 'non-being is really an excess of being.'⁴⁷ How, for instance, could a God who is void of being, i.e. having a privation of being, exercise power over the heavenly bodies by miracle which Dionysius affirms, against Apollonphanes⁴⁸, and which is later cited by Aquinas in his defence of miracles?⁴⁹ It must also be recognised that unlike Marion, Dionysius is not rejecting metaphysics *per se* as is clear from his intricate hierarchy of being, but only a naïve form of

⁴⁴ Eriugena, John Scotus, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, Book 2, ed. I.P. Sheldon-Williams with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), 589B.

⁴⁵ *DN* 8.6, tr. C.E.Rolt, *Dionysius the Aeropagite, The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (SPCK, 1972), p.138

⁴⁶ *DN* 7, (865B), Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, tr. Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987), p.105.

⁴⁷ *DN* 4.3 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, tr. Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987) and cited by Derrida in *How to avoid speaking: Denials* tr. Kamuf and Rottenberg (eds.) *Psyche:Inventions of the Other, Vol 2* (Stanford University Press, 2008), p.175.

⁴⁸ *Epistle* 7. 1080C.

⁴⁹ *ST* 3, q. 44, a.2, resp and ad 2.

metaphysics which imagines God to be a finite object within the universe. The dependence of Dionysius on Proclus has been well known in modern scholarship since the time of Koch and Stiglmayr⁵⁰ and *hyperousios* was a term used in Neoplatonism to refer to those henads/gods/unities which transcend the beings which participate them and *a fortiori* of the First Principle (πρωτον).⁵¹ As Fran O'Rourke notes, even Plato's philosophy, in spite of the priority given to the Good, 'is in intention, I suggest, first and foremost a philosophy of being,' (i.e. some sense of 'Realness,'⁵² while lacking the conceptual tools to fully articulate it.⁵³ Indeed Plato can even on occasions refer to the Good as 'the brightest'⁵⁴ and 'the most blessed part of being.' The *επεκειωα της ουσιας* is therefore in the Platonic tradition not something non-existent, but the Truly Real.⁵⁵ If God, for Dionysius, is 'without being' (Marion) it can only be in the sense of negating the negation, that is to say, denying the binary opposition between being and non-being. In 'repelling being, it struggles to find rest' not in the Void but in the Good 'which transcends all being.'⁵⁶

2. *Hyperousios* as 'Superbeing' (Jacques Derrida)

Jacques Derrida in his critique of negative theology goes to the opposite end of the spectrum in his reading of Dionysius than that of Marion, arguing that the term 'υπερουσιος,' cannot avoid smuggling in a kind of Superbeing hidden behind beings.⁵⁷ On this reading God must inevitably remain on the same ontological level as those celestial beings which are similarly described by the prefix *υπερ*, in the term *υπερουνιος* ('supercelestial') in *Divine Names* 1.4, which are beings not by privation,

⁵⁰ H. Koch, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen* (Forschungen zur christlichen Litteratur – uind- Dogmengeschichte, hrsg. V.A.Erhard und J.P.Kirsch, Bd.I, 1900); J.Stoglmayr, *Aszese und Mystik des sog. Dionysius Areopagita* (Scholastik, III. Jahrg., 1927), pp.161-207.

⁵¹ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, tr. E.R.Dodds (Clarendon, 2004), Prop. 115, pp.100-101.

⁵² E.g. *Republic* 479D 480A; 505E, 521C

⁵³ Fran O'Rourke, 'Aquinas and Platonism', p. 256 citing *Phaedrus* 247C in support.

⁵⁴ του οντος το φανοταντον *Republic* 518C, ευδαιμονεστατον του οωτος *Republic* 526E cited in Fran O'Rourke, 'Aquinas and Platonism', p 273

⁵⁵ Fran O'Rourke, 'Aquinas and Platonism', p. 272

⁵⁶ *DN* 4.3

⁵⁷ Derrida, Jacques, *How to avoid speaking: Denials* translated in Kamuf and Rottenberg (eds.) *Psyche:Inventions of the Other, Vol 2* (Stanford University Press, 2008). A transcript of Derrida's debate with Marion is recorded in Caputo and Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift and Posmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

but by excess.⁵⁸ But Derrida's criticism overlooks textual evidence such as the previously cited passage in which the Supreme Cause 'falls neither within the predicate of non-being nor of being.'⁵⁹ Ronald Hathaway agrees with the same conclusion in his study of the Dionysian corpus, arguing that for the Pseudo-Areopagite οὐσιᾶ always refers to 'individual beings' in contrast with ὑπερουσιῶς which by strong implication does not and is instead used 114 times of the first and highest principle.⁶⁰ This conclusion is inescapable in view of the remote roots of Dionysian thought in Plotinus for whom the One is 'all things,'⁶¹ while at the same time 'not a single one of them.'⁶² Any suggestion of ontotheology is vigorously denied at the commencement of the treatise on *The Divine Names* where the Cause of everything is described as 'not a thing (αὐτο δε ουδεν)⁶³ since it transcends all things in a manner beyond being.'⁶⁴ Dionysius could find agreement with a striking image deployed by Levinas: 'The infinite then cannot be tracked down like game by a hunter.'⁶⁵ Furthermore we are probably correct to locate Dionysian theology within the parameters of an Origenistic theology⁶⁶ and in an interesting commentary on the Lord's Prayer, Origen interprets ἐπιουσιῶς as 'higher than *ousia*, supersubstantial.'⁶⁷ While Derrida's charge of a hidden 'superbeing' might count against some forms of negative theology, they seem wide of the mark in respect of Dionysius himself.

3. Hyperousios as Unlimited Being: Aquinas' reading (and transformation) of Pseudo-Dionysius

In turning to Aquinas' reception of Dionysius we see that he is far more in touch with this Neoplatonic mindset than either Marion or Derrida and therefore more

⁵⁸ DN 1.4

⁵⁹ MT, 5. 1048A

⁶⁰ Ronald F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the definition of order in the letters of Pseudo-Dionysius: A study in the Form and meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1969), pp. xxii-xxiii.

⁶¹ *Enneads* V.2.11

⁶² *Enneads* VI. 7. 32

⁶³ Sarracen reading 'ipsum autem nihil.'

⁶⁴ DN 1.5. 593C tr. Colm Luibheid, Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names, The Complete Works* (Paulist Press, 1987). Cf Proclus, *In Parmenides* 68k.

⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1998), p. 12.

⁶⁶ Istvan Perczel, 'The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius' in Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (eds.), *Rethinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp.27-41.

⁶⁷ See Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (Ashgate, 2004), p.58.

faithful than either to the author's original intent, while at the same time subtly transforming him in line with Catholic orthodoxy. In *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q.12, a.1 for example, Aquinas comments on the previously discussed passage in *Divine Names* 1.4 and agrees with the Areopagite that God does not exist in the same way that creatures exist::

'God is not something existing; but he is rather super-existence, as Dionysius says (*Div Nom* iv). Therefore God is not intelligible; but above all intellect.'⁶⁸

However, Thomas' reading of Dionysius differs from that of both Derrida and Marion. His position is neither ontotheology nor *meontotheology*. God is neither a *SuperBeing* nor *Without Being*. Although God is not a 'subject' in the sense of a being who is subject to another as potency is to act, or substance to accident⁶⁹, nevertheless, *sed contra* (!), in Thomas' opening section of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*, he explicitly replies affirmatively to the question 'Whether God is the subject of divine science.'

'*Respondeo dicendum quod Deus est subiectum huius scientiae.*'⁷⁰

Furthermore, for Thomas, God may still be legitimately named an 'individual' *analogically* by virtue of his *incommunicability*, in order to avoid the danger of monism or of any confusion between creature and Creator⁷¹, as Thomas explains in greater depth in his *Commentary on the Book of Causes*.⁷² Similarly He may be

⁶⁸ *ST* 1a, q. 12, a.1, obj 3, quoting *DN* 4.3.697A; 716D; 720B.

⁶⁹ Following Boethius (*De Trinitate*, II, *Patrologia Latina*, 64 (1250D)), since a simple form cannot be a subject, 'If there is any form which is exclusively an act, such as the divine essence, it cannot in any sense be a subject.' Aquinas, *On Spiritual Substances: De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a.1 ad 1 tr. Mary C. FitzPatrick and John J. Wellmuth (Marquette University Press, 1949), p.24. God is pure Form and not subject to accidents. Boethius, *De Trinitate*, II, lines 85-95, tr. Eric. C. Kenyon, <http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/BoethiusDeTrin.pdf> accessed 19/04/17.

⁷⁰ 'Respondeo dicendum quod Deus est subiectum huius scientiae.' *ST* 1a, 1, 7 *resp.*

⁷¹ *SCG* Bk 1, ch 26, esp par 3. See also *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 3, ad 4.

⁷² 'But the first cause is something individual, distinct from all others (*aliquid individualiter ens ab aliis distinctum*). Otherwise it would not have any activity. For it does not belong to universals either to act or to be acted upon. Therefore, it seems that it is *necessary* to say that the first cause has *yliatum*, i.e. something that receives being. But to this he responds that the *infinity* of divine being, inasmuch as it is not limited through some recipient, takes in the first cause the place of the *yliatum* that is in other things. This is so because, just as in other things the individuation of a commonly received thing comes about through what the recipient is, so divine *goodness*, as well as being, is individuated by its very purity through the fact that it is not received in anything. Due to the fact that it is thus individuated by its own purity, it has the ability to *infuse the intelligence*

named 'substance' (or as Dionysius would prefer υπερουσια) by virtue of his *self subsistence* and 'Person'⁷³ by virtue of the *incommunicable existence of the divine nature*. Even though we may not know his definition, still God's effects of nature and grace can function as a working substitute for a definition in the *sacra divina* of which God is the Subject.⁷⁴

Aquinas recognises in Dionysian theology a real ontological difference between Creator and creatures which prohibits any talk of a 'Superbeing' by univocal predication. The objection, that God is 'not something existing' is understood to distinguish God from *existing things* and therefore to mean that He exists above all things.⁷⁵ God is 'non-existing' not by a lack of something possessed by creatures, but by excess,⁷⁶ He has a different mode of being altogether on account of Divine simplicity. On Thomas' understanding God uniquely *is* his own existence, which can never be true of creatures, since it is impossible for there to be more than one self-subsisting existence.⁷⁷

Thomas agrees with Denys on the rather obvious point that God is beyond human concepts.⁷⁸ However, Aquinas denies that this is so because God is 'beyond being' (*esse*) itself. 'The *Platonici*' had allowed the predicate 'being' (Latin *ens* or Greek *το ον*) only to describe creatures and not the Good or the One.⁷⁹ Part of the reason for this was that they regarded prime matter under the category of 'non-being,' that is to say, a potentiality that could not be called 'existing', yet remained in relationship to the Good as its completed actuality. 'All things desire the Good', Aristotle had concluded. Therefore the Good (and the One) was conceived as a more universal

and other things with goodness. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, tr. Vincent A. Guagliardo, OP; Charles R.Hess, OP; and Richard C. Taylor (Catholic University of America Press, 1996), Proposition 9;64 p.72.

⁷³ *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 3, ad. 4. Interestingly Dionysius nowhere uses the word 'person' in the Greek form of *προσωπα* of the distinctions in the Godhead, unlike his Cappodocean predecessors and unlike Aquinas' use of the Latin translation, *persona*. See Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Ashgate, 2007), p. 44.

⁷⁴ *ST* 1a, 29, 3, ad. 4

⁷⁵ *ST* 1a, q.12, a.1, ad 2

⁷⁶ *ST* 1a, q. 12, a. 1 ad 3.

⁷⁷ Aquinas, *On Spiritual Substances: De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a.1, *resp.* tr. Mary C. FitzPatrick and John J. Wellmuth (Marquette University Press, 1949), p.23, 26.

⁷⁸ *ST* 1a, q.12, a.4, *resp.*.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *In liber de Causis*, prop 4. 28 tr. Guagliardo (Catholic University of America, 1996), p.31. See Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 138, tr. E.R.Dodds in *Proclus; The Elements of Theology* (Clarendon, 2004), pp.122-123.

(and therefore a more Divine term) than 'Being.'⁸⁰ Aquinas significantly departs from this Procline orthodoxy and instead sides with a revision made by the unknown author of the *Book of Causes* (on which Aquinas wrote an important commentary), that God is 'Pure Being' (*esse*).⁸¹ This means that God is *literally* Being, the Pure Act of Existence itself (*esse ipsum*),⁸² a description of the Divine previously deployed by Boethius.⁸³ We can ultimately trace this insight from the *Book of Causes* back to Porphyry's revision of Plotinian Neoplatonism. Porphyry too had equated the One with *esse*.⁸⁴ A key passage is Thomas' *Commentary on the Divine Names Book 5*. In the passage he is commenting on *The Divine Names 5*, in which Dionysius had been praising God:

'He is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him. He is not contained in being, but being is contained in him. He does not possess being, but being possesses him. He is the eternity of being, the source and the measure of being.' (824A tr. Luibheid).

First let us note that this passage again does not support Marion's reading that God is *without being* in terms of a *Void*. In this chapter Dionysius treats 'Being' as one of the names by which God can be appropriately praised. He shows that God is the Measure of all things, including being. God is identified with being, while at the same time transcending it, since being processes from him into all beings. In creatures existence is always received in something, but for the Creator existence is unparticipated.⁸⁵ The phrase translated 'being possesses him'⁸⁶ in the text quoted above is confusing, since it could imply that being precedes God and God participates in him which would be the precise opposite of the context. Therefore S. Lilla reverses the order and translates: 'Being does not possess him, but He

⁸⁰ *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*.3.1; See Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 138, tr. E.R.Dodds in *Proclus; The Elements of Theology* (Clarendon, 2004), pp.122-123. But see the caveat above (note 53).

⁸¹ *In liber de Causis*, prop 4. 28 tr. Guagliardo (Catholic University of America, 1996), p.32.

⁸² *ST* 1a, q.13, a. 11.

⁸³ Boethius, *De Trinitate*, line 70, <http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/BoethiusDeTrin.pdf> accessed 19/04/17.

⁸⁴ See Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Ashgate, 2007), p.47.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *On Spiritual Substances: De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a.1, *resp.* tr. Mary C. FitzPatrick and John J. Wellmuth (Marquette University Press, 1949), p.23.

⁸⁶ which also follows the earlier translation by C.R.Rolt, *Dionysius the Aeropagite, The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (SPCK, 1972), p.139

possesses being.’⁸⁷ Jean Luc Marion (mediated through his own translator Thomas A. Carlson!) makes a similar move: ‘ he maintains Being, but Being does not maintain him.’⁸⁸ O’Rourke renders the phrase: ‘being *receives* him’⁸⁹ The Greek term is simply εχει , literally ‘has’ which is how Aquinas translates it. Aquinas thus comments:

‘ common esse is in Godself as contained in a container and conversely God is not in that which is esse. Third in that all other existents participate that which is esse, but not God; rather created esse itself is a certain participation of God and God’s similitude; and this is what he says, that common esse has God, namely God as participating God’s similitude, but God does not have esse as if participating esse itself. And from this it is clear that Godself is the eternity of created esse itself, i.e. it’s duration, (this is the notion of duration), and God is also its principle and measure.’⁹⁰

According to Aquinas, God exceeds common being (*ens*) and common being participates him. Since common being proceeds from God as its Cause it is proper to name God ‘Being’ (esse) itself. Nor can esse be a void, since it is productive of all things, their final cause and the cause of all form and all life. Aquinas cites the eleventh chapter of *The Divine Names* saying,

“For we do not say that a certain divine or angelic substance is through itself the esse which is the cause that all things are; for only the super-substantial being itself (namely of the highest God) is the principle and substance and cause that all things are by nature” — a principle which is indeed productive, a substance in the manner of an exemplary form and a cause which is final. And he adds: “Nor do we say that there is any other deity that generates life besides the super-divine life which is the

⁸⁷ Salvatore Lilla, ‘Osservazione sul testo del *De Divinis Nominibus* dello Ps.Dionigi l’Areopagita’ in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Clase di Letter e Filosofia*. Serie III, Vol X, 1 (Pisa, 1980), p, 116 # 234 cited in Colm Luibheid and Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names, The Complete Works* (Paulist Press, 1987), p. 101 n. 183.

⁸⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 75

⁸⁹ Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 341.

⁹⁰ Aquinas, *Exposition In De Divinis Nominibus*, tr. Harry C. Marsh, ‘*Cosmic Structure and the knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas’ In librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, Phd Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1994, section 5.5, 54-71.

cause of all things whatsoever that live, and of life itself in its essence, that life, namely which formally inheres in living things..’⁹¹

What is the primary name of God?

Pseudo-Dionysius had insisted that God in himself is beyond every name,⁹² whilst preferring to use the name ‘One’ or the name ‘Good,’ (which is honoured as ‘the highest name’ in his work *The Divine Names*.)⁹³ The ‘Good’ signifies for Dionysius the transcendent Cause of being, beauty and love (agape),⁹⁴ while remaining ‘Other’ from all these perfections. It forms a bridge between the neo-Platonic ‘Form of the Good,’ as mediated through Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, and the God of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. By contrast Aquinas, following Saint Augustine, boldly affirmed the Biblical name *Qui est* (He Who Is)⁹⁵ as ‘the supremely appropriate name for God.’ (*maxime proprium nomen Dei*).⁹⁶ Aware of the apparent discrepancy with Dionysius, Aquinas still seeks to accommodate the Aeropagite by explaining that the name ‘good’ can correctly be called the primary name in relation to *causation*.⁹⁷ For example in his commentary on the Divine Names, Aquinas writes:

‘the nomination (i.e. of the Good - ed) is perfect in so far as it comprehends all things and is manifestive of all divine processions.’⁹⁸

Being Without Limit (Aquinas)

Speaking in an absolute sense, *Qui est* is the more appropriate primary Name because it is the most universal and indeterminate. In Augustine’s words: ‘*non*

⁹¹ Aquinas, St. Thomas. Treatise on Separate Substances: *De Substantiis Separatis*, c. 18, 93, tr. Francis J. Lescoe, ed. Joseph Kenny O.P. (Kindle edition, West Hartford CN: Saint Joseph College, 1959) Kindle Locations 1113-1120.

⁹² *DN* 13.3.981B

⁹³ *DN* 3.1 boni nomination est manifestativa omnium Dei processionum *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*.3.1

⁹⁴ Umberto Eco’s translation of *DN* 4.7.701C in : *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Radius, 1988), p.27.

⁹⁵ From *Exodus* 3:14

⁹⁶ *ST* 1^a, q. 13, a. 11

⁹⁷ *ST* 1^a, q. 13, a. 11 ad 2

⁹⁸ *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*.3.1 tr. Harry C. Marsh Jr. in *Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas’ In librum beati dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio* Phd Dissertation, (Vanderbilt University, May 1994, Nashville Tennessee), p.329.

*aliquot modo est, sed est, est.*⁹⁹ In other words, we cannot get beyond the basic 'isness' of the 'Is!' Being signifies, not a specific form but, in the words of John of Damascus, 'the Infinite Ocean of Substance.'¹⁰⁰ As infinite act, God has within himself the entire fullness of being since he is not contracted to a specific or generic nature.¹⁰¹ God, then, is not 'without being' nor is he 'beyond being' but He is '*Being Without Limit*'. God's transcendence is, as O'Rourke puts it, 'identical with, rather than beyond Being itself'¹⁰² This is because the infinite Act of Existence (*esse*) is in Thomas' understanding convertible with the 'Good that all things desire.'¹⁰³ For Aquinas, goodness is not a name above being but because of God's simplicity, is convertible with being. This is therefore how he understands Dionysius:

'And this truth, Dionysius most expressly teaches in the fifth chapter of On the Divine Names, when he says that Sacred Scripture "... does not say that to be good is one thing and to be a being is another and that life or wisdom is something else, nor that there are many causes and lesser productive deities of whom some extended to some things and others to others." In this statement he removes the opinion of the Platonists who posited that the very essence of goodness was the highest God, under Whom there was another god who is being itself.'¹⁰⁴

To sum up the difference with Marion, for Aquinas God is without *ens*, but He is not without *esse* (French *etre*).

Being and analogy

In contrast to what we have seen is Marion's hermeneutic, Aquinas' God-talk is therefore neither anti-realist nor is it nominalist. Creatures in a sense 'borrow' their

⁹⁹ Cited in Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (Sheed and Ward, 1936), p.53.

¹⁰⁰ *pelagus substantiae infinitum* ST 1^a, q. 13, a. 11 resp, citing John of Damascus; *De Potentia* q.7, a.5 resp. Fran O'Rourke notes a parallel in Plato where he refers to the Good as το πολυ πελαγος...του καλου, 'the great ocean of beauty' in *Symposium* 210d, Fran O'Rourke, 'Aquinas and Platonism', p. 272

¹⁰¹ Aquinas, On Spiritual Substances: *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a.1, resp. tr. Mary C. FitzPatrick and John J. Wellmuth (Marquette University Press, 1949), p.23.

¹⁰² O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) p.206

¹⁰³ *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*. 4.1, tr. Harry C. Marsh Jr. in *Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas' In librum beati dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio* Phd Dissertation (Vanderbilt University, May 1994, Nashville Tennessee), p.338; See also ST 1a, q. 16, a.3

¹⁰⁴ Aquinas, St. Thomas. Treatise on Separate Substances: *De Substantiis Separatis*, c. 18, 93, tr. Francis J. Lescoe, ed. Joseph Kenny O.P. (Kindle edition, West Hartford CN: Saint Joseph College, 1959), Kindle Locations 1108.

‘being’ from participation in the uncreated Being of God. As the apostle Paul puts it ‘In Him we live and move and have our being.’ (*Acts* 17:28). In terms of those primary Divine names, (sometimes called ‘perfection’ terms), ‘being’ is for Aquinas the primary name and the fundamental perfection on which all other perfections depend. It is therefore the primary basis of analogy.¹⁰⁵ Hence analogical language about God can be true not merely in a logical or nominalist way within the grammar of Catholic theology, (as for example in McInerney’s¹⁰⁶ or Burrell’s¹⁰⁷ neo-Wittgensteinian account), but with real metaphysical grounding.¹⁰⁸

“‘Being,’ (*ens*) however, is called that which finitely participates “to be” (*esse*). And it is this which is proportioned to our intellect, whose object is some ‘that which is’...’¹⁰⁹

To make this distinction explicit, Thomas uses the term ‘common being’ to refer to created being and ‘Self-Subsistent Being’ to refer to Uncreated being. Therefore Aquinas transposes the Dionysian language of God as ‘beyond all being’ into the mode of ‘beyond all *existing things*.’¹¹⁰ In the same chapter of his *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, Aquinas agrees with the unknown author who argued that unparticipated being (*amethectum*) cannot be directly known since there is nothing higher to which it can be referred and understood by (Aquinas reads *amethectum* as literally ‘not existing after’ i.e. there is nothing before it in the chain of being). It can however be indirectly known through those beings which participate it. Therefore the intellect can know beings (*ens*) but it cannot know Being itself (*esse*) except indirectly through beings.¹¹¹ Aquinas claims to be getting to the heart of what Dionysius really means, but is his hermeneutic a plausible one or is it or is it a significant departure, albeit in a different direction to Marion’s postmodern hermeneutic?

¹⁰⁵ *ST* 1a, q.13, a. 5, ad 1.

¹⁰⁶ Ralph McInerney, *The Logic of Analogy* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961)

¹⁰⁷ David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Routledge & Kegan, 1979)

¹⁰⁸ “Language is opened to being from the very outset.” Rudi Te Velde., *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Ashgate, 2006), p.99; “unless things themselves can be read as signs of God, names cannot be used analogically of God. The limits or unlimits of grammar reflect the limits or unlimits of the created order.” John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (Routledge, 2002), p.103.

¹⁰⁹ *In liber de Causis*, prop. 6.47, tr. Guagliardo (Catholic University of America, 1996), p.51.

¹¹⁰ *In Divinus Nominibus*, Book 4, cap. 13 quoted in Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p.95

¹¹¹ *In liber de Causis*, prop. 6, tr. Guagliardo (Catholic University of America, 1996), p.48.

Can Aquinas and Dionysius be reconciled?

Is it possible that there could be a convergence between Aquinas and Dionysius on the issue of God *Beyond Being* or *Being Itself*? Catherine Pickstock thinks that there could, arguing that Dionysius and Aquinas are agreed in all but terminology.¹¹² The Dionysian God 'beyond being', she insists, corresponds with Aquinas' *ipsum esse subsistens* beyond 'common being'. Indeed, even Dionysius, it seems cannot avoid describing Goodness 'under the form of Good-Being'¹¹³ (ὡς συσιωδες αγαθον), which Aquinas takes as his cue that Dionysius must mean that 'Goodness itself is the divine essence.'¹¹⁴ Further evidence for this view is found in chapter 5 of *The Divine Names*, frequently referenced by Aquinas,¹¹⁵ concerning the name of '*Being*.' In his commentary on this chapter, Aquinas introduces the term *esse commune* to clarify the *esse autem ipsum* (το ειναι αυτο)¹¹⁶ of Dionysius. Fran O'Rourke concludes that Plato's Form of the Good 'as the transcendent and infinite plenitude' is 'an adumbration of Aquinas' *ipsum esse subsistens*.¹¹⁷ This is supported by the fact that, in sharp contrast to those *Platonici* criticised by Aquinas¹¹⁸, Dionysius explicitly does deploy the name, 'ο ων', 'The God Who Is,' taken from Exodus 3.14, that is, the One who 'is Being for whatever is,'¹¹⁹ Theology is right, insists Denys, in ascribing this name of Being 'to him who truly is,'¹²⁰ as long as this is not understood in an anthropomorphic or ontotheological way: 'God is not some kind of being'; rather He is the One who 'gives being to everything else'

¹¹² E.g. Catherine Pickstock, 'Duns Scotus', in Milbank and Oliver (eds.), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (Routledge, 2009).

¹¹³ DN 4.1 tr. C.E.Rolt, *Dionysius the Aeropagite, The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (SPCK, 1972), p.86. This is omitted from the translation by Colm Luibheid, Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names, The Complete Works* (Paulist Press, 1987), p.71.

¹¹⁴ *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*. 4.1, tr. Harry C. Marsh Jr. in *Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas' In librum beati dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio* Phd Dissertation (Vanderbilt University, May 1994, Nashville Tennessee), p.338.

¹¹⁵ Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) pp.131-132, 140, 159, 174, 198.

¹¹⁶ DN 5.8.823; Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p.140.

¹¹⁷ Fran O'Rourke, *Aquinas and Platonism*, p.257.

¹¹⁸ E.g. *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*.3.1

¹¹⁹ DN 5.4

¹²⁰ DN 5.1

(ουσιαχια).¹²¹ ‘So therefore God as originator of everything through the first of all his gifts is praised as “*He who is.*” ‘¹²²

But what is the relationship between the donation and the donor? Is the name ‘being’ given only extrinsically to the effect or does it also apply intrinsically to the Cause? Unlike Aquinas, Dionysius appears to have no concept of names which are true of God properly or intrinsically.¹²³ God is not identical to Being *in se*; Being is rather the first of God’s *created perfections*, (albeit the primary perfection in which all others participate) which is then named equivocally of its transcendent Cause who is in Himself ‘Beyond Being’ on the mystical ascent back to God. This is why he writes in *The Divine Names*:

‘But I must point out that the purpose of what I have to say is not to reveal that being in its transcendence, for this is something beyond words, something unknown, something above unity itself. What I wish to do is to sing a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the absolute divine Source of being into the total domain of being.’¹²⁴

Against Pickstock’s harmonisation of Aquinas and Dionysius then we might follow the logic of Greek Orthodox theologians, Christos Yannaras¹²⁵ and Vladimir

¹²¹ *DN* 5.4

¹²² *DN* 5.5. 820B

¹²³ David B. Burrell in fact follows Dionysius more than Aquinas when he concludes: “..properly speaking, nothing can be said of God.” *Aquinas: God and Action* (Routledge & Kegan, 1979), p.25

¹²⁴ *DN* 5.1.816B. Cf. Plotinus: “this ‘He is’ does not truly apply: the Supreme has no need of Being even ‘He is good’ does not apply since it indicates Being: the ‘is’ should not suggest something predicated of another thing; it is to state identity..” *The Enneads*, op cit, VI, 7, 38

¹²⁵ Christos Yannaras, *On the absence and unknowability of God* (T & T Clark International, 2005), ch 4. But as with Marion, Yannaras goes beyond Eastern Orthodoxy to give an anachronistic, Heideggerian account of Pseudo-Dionysius in which Knowledge exists only for *Dasein*. – that is for human ‘*being – theres.*’ *Dasein* is the way into an examination of Being. *Dasein* is distinguished from other beings because “in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Macquarrie and Robinson (Blackwell 2008), p.32). ‘The essence of Being may be inaccessible, but the *Existenz* of *Dasein* is our immediate experience. That is why Yannaras prefers to speak of ‘the personal otherness of the divine creative word.’ *On the absence and unknowability of God* (T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 64.

But this claim invites the question, if God is Wholly Other how is it possible even to know that he is personal? Yannaras replies that *in our experience*, or *mode of existence* God’s activity is personal. There is no ‘objective’ assurance of this truth, but there is a relationship, an experience of an ‘event’. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Macquarrie and Robinson (Blackwell 2008), p.33). Yannaras discovers in Heidegger an insight for identifying how God’s personality ‘corresponds’ to ours. Christos Yannaras, *On the absence and unknowability of God* (T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 85. This use of ‘corresponds’ however is problematic in that there cannot be on this account any real correspondence with God *In Himself*, but only with his *manifestation*. Thus

Lossky¹²⁶ in reading such technical terms as ‘differentiations,’ ‘projections,’ ‘powers’ (δυναμεις) and ‘ray’ in Dionysius as corresponding to the ‘energies’ (ενεργειαι) in the Byzantine distinction between ‘essence’ (ουσια) and energies (ενεργειαι) which began with St. Basil¹²⁷ and reached its full development under Gregory Palamas and the councils of the fourteenth centuries.¹²⁸ Lossky explains that the energies should not be misunderstood as created lights, but rather as God in the mode of his revelatory nature *ad extra*.¹²⁹ On this account of divine predication, only the *energies* of God are known, while the *essence* remains entirely unknown and unknowable.

This is not an altogether satisfying account of theological language, however, since it both compromises divine simplicity (since it is traditionally maintained that God is his own attributes¹³⁰) and at the same time appears to destroy any real *analogia entis*. If the revealed names of the energies do not correspond even analogically to the essence, i.e. *God In Himself*, then isn’t the ‘revelation’ in reality an obscuring rather than a manifestation of God? This problem finds a modern parallel, possibly even even a modern offspring in Kant’s noumenal and phenomenal distinction which leads to agnosticism. God does not reveal *Himself*, but only reveals his *revelation*, which cancels out the definition of revelation and leads to infinite regress. The Word as the revelation of God becomes divorced from its identity with God Himself. In its extreme form, this division leads to Arianism.

Augustine, by contrast, makes the profound point in *De Trinitate*, that when God uttered his Word he could not have fully expressed who He was if that Word was either less than or more than Himself. That Word is utterly equal to Himself.¹³¹ It is

there is a mysterious x behind the personality and behind the Trinity of relations. But can this position be truly Trinitarian?

¹²⁶ Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, tr. Ashleigh Moorhouse (The Faith Press, American Orthodox Press, Clayton, Wisconsin, 1963, pp. 101-102. See also R. Williams, ‘Via Negativa and the Foundations of Theology’ in *Wrestling with Angels: conversations in modern theology*’ ed. Mike Higon (SCM Press, 2007), p. 5.

¹²⁷ Basil, *Epistle 234 to Amphilocus*. Cited in Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, tr. Ashleigh Moorhouse (The Faith Press, American Orthodox Press, Clayton, Wisconsin, 1963, p. 65.

¹²⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, tr. Ashleigh Moorhouse (The Faith Press, American Orthodox Press, Clayton, Wisconsin, 1963), ch. 9.

¹²⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, tr. Ashleigh Moorhouse (The Faith Press, American Orthodox Press, Clayton, Wisconsin, 1963, p.127.

¹³⁰ Aquinas, *ST 1a*, 1, 3.

¹³¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, tr. Edmund Hill (New City Press, 2005), Bk. IX, ch.2, par. 16.

only on this basis that God's 'Yes' means 'Yes' and His 'No' means 'No'.¹³² He does not utter an equivocal synthesis of Yes and No. Likewise for Karl Barth, God's triunity is to be found not only in His revelation but, "because in His revelation, in God Himself too, so that the Trinity is to be understood as "immanent" and not just "economic." "God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect."¹³³ Hence:

"Revelation in the Bible is not a minus; it is not another over against God. It is the same, the repetition of God. Revelation is indeed God's predicate, but in such a way that this predicate is in every way identical with God Himself."¹³⁴

The Byzantine understanding is weakened if we take into account a greater continuity between Pseudo-Dionysius and the neo-Platonic heritage from Plotinus/Proclus in the principle that *omne agens agit sibi simile*. This principle is explicit in Aquinas' mature work, *De Substantiis Separatis*.

'Furthermore, just as the cause is in a manner present in its effect through a participated likeness of itself, so, every effect is in its cause in a more excellent way according to the power of the cause. Therefore all things must exist more eminently in their First Cause, which is God, than in themselves.'¹³⁵

On the basis of this neoplatonic principle we can agree then with Eric Perl and regard these 'processions,' not as lacking real revelation but as theophanies of the One as it appears in its multiplicity.¹³⁶ Rosemann is also helpful on this point: 'Although all that is actually accessible to us in the present world are the effects of agent forces (and of the Agent Force), and *not* the agent forces themselves, the law of similarity guarantees that these effects are possessed of a real revelatory quality.'¹³⁷

¹³² 2 Cor. 1:20-21; Matt. 5:37; James 5:12.

¹³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1:1 (T&T Clark International, 2004), p.296.

¹³⁴ Ibid p.299

¹³⁵ Aquinas, St. Thomas. Treatise on Separate Substances: *De Substantiis Separatis*, c 14.72 tr. Francis J. Lescoe, ed. Joseph Kenny O.P. (Kindle edition, West Hartford CN: Saint Joseph College, 1959), Kindle edition (Kindle Locations 877)

¹³⁶ Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Dionysius the Aeropagite* (SUNY Press, 2007),

¹³⁷ Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a 'repetition' of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Louvain University Press, 1996), p. 341.

Aquinas' critique of Maimonides – a critique of agnosticism.

While Aquinas does not directly address the essence/energies debate, he does address a related issue in Maimonides which might shed some light on the problem. Maimonides too had argued that divine predication can only be made either negatively or in reference to God's *effects* in the world, for example his 'anger' experienced as natural disaster (This corresponds to the 'energies' of Eastern Orthodoxy). For Aquinas, by contrast, if language about God *only* related to effects or negations then all positive terms would be purely equivocal. This would raise the insuperable problem of how God could know creatures through his own essence,¹³⁸ since there would be no likeness in creatures. It would be a retreat into the paganism of Aristotle who denied omniscience of the Nous who could only think perfect thoughts about himself and not of the world. This is why in a key passage from *De Potentia* Aquinas rejects the view of Maimonides, that perfection terms such as 'goodness' are only predicated extrinsically rather than intrinsically.¹³⁹ He gives three further objections in his *respondeo*¹⁴⁰:

Firstly, Aquinas points out that on Maimonides' account *all* divine predication would be equally metaphorical: God is wise in the same way that he is angry or in the same way that he is 'fire' since all of these only describe God's effects rather than God Himself. However, this is not how the saints and fathers have described God within the tradition, since they have denied that God is a body subject to passions, but they have affirmed perfection terms like 'life', 'wisdom' and 'being.' If we were to follow Maimonides consistently then all expressions drawn from creatures would be equally true or false. In fact, Aquinas argues, God is named Goodness and Life, not merely as cause of creaturely goodness and life but intrinsically by the way of supereminence.

Secondly Aquinas argues that if the world is not eternal in the past (which is the Catholic faith) then these effects are not eternal and therefore before the world

¹³⁸ *De Veritate* 2.11.122-34 cited in Gregory P Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p.179.

¹³⁹ *De Potentia*, q.7, a.5; see also *ST* 1a, q.13, a.5;

¹⁴⁰ *De Potentia* q.7, a.5, resp <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/QDdePotentia7.htm#7:5>

began it would not be proper to name God as Word, Life, Being, Goodness etc.. He only became these when he started to act temporally (a *reductio ad absurdum*).

Thirdly, it is insufficient to speak of God only negatively since all negatives assume a positive in order to make the judgment that certain properties are excluded from him. It would be impossible even to deny anything of God unless we could also affirm something of him. On this point Aquinas appeals to Dionysius in *Divine Names* chapter 13 which he reads as saying that names are given *truly* of God albeit imperfectly.

‘.(N)umber has its own share of being. But the transcendent unity defines the one itself and every number. For it is the source, and the cause, the number and the order of the one, of number, and of all being. And the fact that the transcendent Godhead is one and triune must not be understood in any of our typical senses. No. There is the transcendent unity of God and the fruitfulness of God, and as we prepare to sing this truth we use the names Trinity and Unity for that which is in fact beyond every name, calling it the transcendent being above every being. But no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being.’¹⁴¹

On Aquinas’ reading, then, Dionysius can be acquitted from being charged as a non-trinitarian,¹⁴² since although God is beyond the imperfect language of Father, Son and Spirit which are drawn from creatures, this must at the same time mean that he is beyond the creaturely understanding of a distinctionless One! Rowan Williams concurs:

¹⁴¹ *DN* 13.3. 980C-981A

¹⁴² This accusation was made by F.C. Copleston in *A History of Philosophy* that the Dionysian teaching that all concepts including number, divinity, goodness, wisdom, eternity or time, sonship and fatherhood must be denied of God, implies a hidden ‘One’ (albeit a non-numerical One!) lying *behind* the differentiation of Persons in the Trinity, which suggests a form of Sabellianism. In this theology. There is no *immanent* trinity but only a distinctionless God behind a wholly *economic* trinity which seems to be the direction developed by Eckhart (1260-1327).

‘ The God of the Areopagite, exalted above $\tau\omicron\ \epsilon\nu$, is clearly and unmistakably the triune God of revelation; Dionysian apophysis never leads to a level of divine existence superior to the three persons.’¹⁴³

This would suggest that Dionysius is not, then, as sometimes caricatured, merely a Procline neo-Platonist masquerading as an orthodox Christian¹⁴⁴. He sings hymns to the immanent Trinity, yet the Trinity remains an *apophatic* immanence, beyond all human concepts.¹⁴⁵ John N. Jones further convincingly puts the case that Dionysius does not posit an undifferentiated monism behind the economic trinity amongst other reasons because his whole treatise on the *Mystical Theology* is addressed as a prayer to the hidden Trinity, higher than ‘being’, ‘divinity’ and ‘goodness.’¹⁴⁶ It is not clear whether this position is coherent, but it is strikingly familiar to language used by the Cappodocean fathers who were the classic formulators of Trinitarian theology in the east!¹⁴⁷ It also concurs with the way Dionysius was understood by his 9th century translator John Scotus Eriugena:

‘..the theologian St. Dionysius the Areopagite expounds for us with utmost truth and by the surest arguments the mysteries of the Divine Unity and Trinity. For he says: “There is no way of signifying by verb or noun or any other part of articulated speech how the supreme and causal Essence of all things can be signified.” For it is not unity or trinity of such kind as can be conceived by any human intellect however pure, or by any angelic intellect however serene; but in order that the religious

¹⁴³ Rowan Williams, ‘Via negative and the foundations of theology’, in *Wrestling with angels: Conversations in modern theology*, ed. Mike Higton (SCM Press, 2007), p.8.

¹⁴⁴ For example by Ronald F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the definition of order in the letters of Pseudo-Dionysius: A study in the Form and meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1969).

¹⁴⁵ John N. Jones, ‘The Status of the Trinity in Dionysian Thought’ in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 80, No. 4. (University of Chicago Press, Oct 2001), pp. 645-657.

¹⁴⁶ *MT* 1.1, 997A

¹⁴⁷ ‘We believe that the divine nature is indeterminate and uncircumscribed, so we do not think of its comprehension, but we define that the nature be thought of in every way as infinity. The infinite usually is not defined by anything or by anyone, but according to every argument infinity escapes limits. Therefore that which is beyond limit is not at all defined by a name. Thus in reference to the divine nature, in order that the intent of the indeterminate might remain, we say that the divine is above every name, and one of the names is deity. Therefore the same thing is not able to be a name and to be thought to be above every name.’ Gregory of Nyssa: ‘Concerning we should think of saying there are not three Gods, to Ablabius’

inclinations of pious minds may have something to say concerning that which is ineffable and incomprehensible..¹⁴⁸

Implications for epistemology

The debate on whether God is *without being*, *beyond being* or rather is *Unlimited being* has crucial implications for epistemology which we will seek to address in this final section. If being and truth are convertible, as Aquinas argues in *Summa Theologiae* question 16, then everything is knowable only in so far as it has being.¹⁴⁹ But, if, as Pseudo-Dionysius claims, God is ‘beyond being,’ it seems to follow that he cannot be known.

‘If all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent, then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge.’¹⁵⁰

Therefore God must be ‘the Super-unknowable,’¹⁵¹ who can be reached only through a paradoxical ascent of ‘unknowing’ (αγνωσία).¹⁵²

But Aquinas does not follow this reasoning to total agnosticism which is the *prima facie* Dionysian conclusion:

‘God exists above all that exists; inasmuch as he is his own existence. *Hence it does not follow that He cannot be known at all, but that He exceeds every kind of knowledge...*’ (italics mine)¹⁵³

Starting with the alternative premise that God is Pure Act of Being,¹⁵⁴ it follows that He is rather ‘supremely’¹⁵⁵ or ‘infinitely’ knowable and that this infinity is only limited

¹⁴⁸ John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, Book 1, 456A, tr. I.P. Sheldon-Williams (ed.) with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), pp. 68-69.

¹⁴⁹ *ST* 1a, q. 16, a. 3, resp

¹⁵⁰ *DN* 1, 593A, p. 53

¹⁵¹ *DN* 1, 593B

¹⁵² *DN* 1.1, 588A and later taken up by other authors such as Nicholas de Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* and the unknown 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Or Meister Eckhart, who calls it ‘nescience’ in ‘Sermon 1’ of *Sermons and Treatises*, Vol. 1, tr. M.O.C. Walshe ed. (Element Books, 1979), p. 11.

¹⁵³ *ST* 1a, q.12, a 1. ad 3.

¹⁵⁴ *ST* 1a, q. 12, a.1 resp

¹⁵⁵ *ST* 1a, q 12, a 1, resp

by the capacity of the creature to receive it,¹⁵⁶ just as the dazzling light of the sun is limited by the vision of the bat.¹⁵⁷ Rosemann explains that: ‘The object proportionate to the human intellect is being (*ens*), which participates in a finite manner in Being (*esse*), mediating it in and through the world of essences or ‘quiddities’.¹⁵⁸ From this perspective, God as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* is both a hindrance *to*, but also the basis *for* knowledge of God. God is ‘Supremely Knowable’ precisely because He *is* Being, analogically speaking. He is therefore supremely knowable to himself above intellect and known imperfectly to the human intellect through his effect in participated beings¹⁵⁹ *omne agens agit sibi simile*.

Being and Logic

This is consistent with Aristotle’s principle that logic itself is based on being.¹⁶⁰ It is on the foundation of ‘being’ that the first operation of the intellect is a knowledge of quiddities and the second operation is a forming of judgements.¹⁶¹ Commenting on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Aquinas writes:

‘..the first indemonstrable principle is that ‘the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,’ which is based on the notion of ‘being’ and ‘not-being’: and on this principle all others are based, as is stated in *Metaph. iv, text. 9*.¹⁶²

Lest we misunderstand him, in referring to the Law of non-contradiction as ‘most certain’, Aristotle did not intend to cast any doubt on the principle, as if to say it is the ‘most certain’ of a class of relatively doubtful principles. To the contrary, Aristotle goes on to assert that the Law of non-contradiction is a ‘necessary’ truth, whose denial is ‘impossible’. Though of course it is possible for people to ‘say’ that the

¹⁵⁶ *ST* 1a, q.12, a.7.

¹⁵⁷ *ST* 1a, q. 12, a.1 resp

¹⁵⁸ Philipp W. Rosemann, *Omne agens agit sibi simile: a ‘repetition’ of scholastic metaphysics* (Leuven University Press, 1996), p. 341 following Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, Proposition 6, tr. Vincent A. Guagliardo, OP, Charles R.Hess and Richard C. Taylor (Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p.51.

¹⁵⁹ This is the logic of Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, Proposition 6, tr. Vincent A. Guagliardo, OP, Charles R.Hess and Richard C. Taylor (Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

¹⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book 4, part 3 in Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, tr. John P.Rowan (Dumb Ox Books, 1995).

¹⁶¹ Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, tr John P.Rowan (Dumb Ox Books, 1995), Book 4, lesson 6, chapter 4, 605, p.221.

¹⁶² *ST* 1^a 2ae, q 94, a 2 resp.

same thing both 'is' and 'is not', it is impossible for people to actually believe this since it cannot be said *truly*.¹⁶³ Following Kant¹⁶⁴, the status of this 'most certain' of all first principles has been fiercely contested,¹⁶⁵ especially in regards to whether or not it is a metaphysical principle (applying to 'things in themselves') or simply a linguistic one.¹⁶⁶ For Aristotle, the answer is clear:

'Our present question is not whether it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be in regard to the locution, but whether it is possible in regard to the object.'¹⁶⁷

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss this question in depth, except in relation to Thomas' position. Lest we be misled into the view that Aquinas is only describing Aristotle's thought about first principles and bracketting out his own position in the commentaries on the Aristotelian texts¹⁶⁸, we can be left in no doubt from the bold language used in the unambiguously 'Neoplatonic' commentary, *In de divinis nominibus*, contained in a passage which treats the nature of discursive knowledge. Here, Aquinas argues that even though the soul is engaged in a circular process of knowledge from sense evidence back to itself, where it is 'rolled up' according to its intellectual powers, this circularity does not result in scepticism, since:

'all that ratiocination is judged through resolution to first principles in which error does not occur and by which the soul is defended against error.'¹⁶⁹

This position that the first principles of knowledge are infallible and thus the foundation of true knowledge is confirmed in two parallel readings. The first is from the Aristotelian commentary *In Peri Hermeneais*:

¹⁶³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Gamma 3, tr. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Penguin, 2004), p.88.

¹⁶⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange addresses the Kant's agnostic antinomies in *God, His Existence and His Nature*, Vol. 2 (B. Herder Book Co., 1936).

¹⁶⁵ For a survey of views see Graham Priest, J.C. Beall and Bradley Armour-Garb (eds.), *The Law of non-contradiction: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁶⁶ For a robust defence of the metaphysical view see Tuomas E. Tahko, 'The Law of non-contradiction as a Metaphysical Principle' in *The Australasian Journal of Logic* (2009), Vol. 7, pp. 32-47.

¹⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Gamma 3, tr. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Penguin, 2004), p.91.

¹⁶⁸ For a recent defence of the continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas see Giles Emery OP and Matthew Levering (eds.), *Aristotle in Aquinas' Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Emery cites Marta Borgo in a footnote (p. ix, footnote 19) that Aquinas makes use of four different translations of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in his commentary on Lombard's first book of the *Sentences*.

¹⁶⁹ Aquinas, *Expositio In De Divinis Nominibus*, tr. Harry C. Marsh, Appendix to 'Cosmic Structure and the knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas' In *librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, Phd Dissertation (Vanderbilt University, 1994), section 4, lines 43-56, pp. 367-368.

‘Perfect knowledge requires certitude, and this is why we cannot be said to know unless we know what cannot be otherwise.’¹⁷⁰

The second is from Aquinas’ mature work *On Separate Substances* where in a discussion on deception in intellectual creatures he declares:

‘accordingly, concerning those things which we grasp properly by our intellect as well as concerning the first principles, no one can be deceived.’¹⁷¹

It might be countered that since being is named from the first object (ens) conceived by the intellect,¹⁷² it can never be adequately applied to God in Himself¹⁷³: If God is ‘beyond being’ then it seems the law of non-contradiction would not apply to Him.¹⁷⁴

‘the divine unity is beyond being...the indivisible Trinity holds within a shared undifferentiated unity.....the assertion of all things, the denial of all things, that which is beyond every assertion and denial.’¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ *In Peri Hermeneais*, I, lect. 8 cited in Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Baker, 1991), p.71.

¹⁷¹ Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Treatise on Separate Substances: De Substantiis Separatis*, c. 20, 112, tr. Francis J. Lescoe, ed. Joseph Kenny O.P. (Kindle edition, West Hartford CN: Saint Joseph College, 1959), kindle location 1368.

¹⁷² *ST* 1-2, q. 94, a.2, resp.

¹⁷³ As Jean-Luc Marion argues in, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁷⁴ Proclus may allow for an interpretation of a Divine realm beyond the law of non-contradiction. For example, Proposition 2 of *The Elements of Theology* asserts: ‘Everything which participates of The One, is both one and not one.’ Catherine Pickstock picks up this train of thought. See Catherine Pickstock, ‘*Duns Scotus*’, in Milbank and Oliver (ed.), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (Routledge, 2009), p.130, where she contends that if created being participates in the infinite this must mean that it enters into both identity and non-identity and thus the finite becomes simultaneously finite and infinite. This she argues is resolved in ‘a higher harmony beyond logical opposition.’ If this is what Proclus meant then it is an unsound argument because it does not follow from creaturely participation in the infinite that the creature enters into finite and infinite *at the same time and in the same respect*, and in fact the passage in Proclus is certainly ambiguous in this respect. Aquinas deals with this question in his commentary on proposition 4 of the neo-Platonic *Book of Causes* where the author makes a similar claim that being is ‘composed of the finite and the infinite.’ *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, tr. Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor (Catholic University of America Press, 1996), text p.29. Aquinas makes it clear that only Uncreated Being is *actually* infinite. Created being is *limited by its form*, that is *by its capacity to receive infinity*. We could say at best that it is *potentially* infinite. Hence ‘the very being that it receives is finite’ *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, tr. Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor (Catholic University of America Press, 1996, Section 30, p.33. See also *ST*1a, q.14, a.1, resp.. Consequently participation of the creature in the Creator does not threaten the law of non-contradiction. *ST* 1a, q.16, a.2 resp; *DV* 1.

¹⁷⁵ *DN*, ch. 2, par 641A. p. 61. See also *MT* ch5, 1048B ; *MT* 1, par 1000B, p.136; and note 6 in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, tr. Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987), p.131.

On the face of it, this conflicts with Aristotle's logic that 'Affirmation and denial cannot be simultaneously true,'¹⁷⁶ (the law of non-contradiction) or that 'Contradiction is an opposition which by its very nature allows no middle ground (the law of excluded middle).'¹⁷⁷

Nevertheless, Aquinas remains committed to Aristotle's formulation of the law of non-contradiction as is clear from his *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia* where he discusses the question of what is possible for God. He agrees that in every contradiction is included a simultaneous affirmation and negation, which is impossible, since it cannot apply to the nature of a being that it both 'is' and 'is not'. Even God cannot cause what is impossible in this sense since:

'he is the greatest actuality and the chief being. And so his action can only be terminated chiefly in being, and in non-being consequentially. And so he cannot cause affirmation and negation to be simultaneously true, or any things in which this kind of impossibility is included.'¹⁷⁸

In summary, Aquinas is emphatic that 'it is in my opinion false'¹⁷⁹ to say that God can do the self-contradictory.

But Aquinas at the same time acquits the Areopagite of teaching the existence of true contradictions by distinguishing the *res significata*, from the *modus significandi*.¹⁸⁰ He reads Denys as saying, not that God is beyond assertions and denials, but that both assertions and denials can be made *in different respects*.¹⁸¹ That is why Thomas deliberately chooses Eriugena's translation of *Celestial Hierarchy* 2.3 over Sarracen's. Affirmations about God are 'incongruous' (Eriugena:

¹⁷⁶ *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics*, tr Richard Berquist, preface by Ralph McInerny, (Dumb Ox Books, 2007), Book 1, lesson 5, b, p.25; see also Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, tr. E. M. Edghill. Par. 9-14. <http://philosophy.eserver.org/aristotle/on-interpretation.txt>

¹⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 2.72a7, text on p.25 of Richard Berquist's tr of Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* (Dumb Ox Books, 2007).

¹⁷⁸ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia*, q.1, a.3, tr. Richard J. Regan, *The Power of God* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p.10.

¹⁷⁹ Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World*, tr. Ralph McInerny, *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1998), p.712.

¹⁸⁰ *ST*, 1a, q. 13, a 3 *sed contra, resp.*

¹⁸¹ *SCG* Bk 1, ch. 30, par 3.

incompactae) but not ‘inappropriate’ (Sarracen: *inconvenientes*).¹⁸² God is affirmed as literally Being as far as the Subject signified is concerned but the way of expressing it (*modus significandi*) is necessarily defective (or ‘incongruous’), and therefore must be ‘denied.’

A related distinction made by Aquinas is that between the *a quo* and the *ad quod* of language.¹⁸³ The *a quo* of language is the *modus significandi*; we speak by means of God’s created effects. Therefore our language is not directly *ad quod*. We saw how at the beginning of this paper, Marion has drawn attention to the negative aspect of the *ad quod* but neglected the positive value of the *a quo*.¹⁸⁴ But for Aquinas this is not only true of God’s essence but of all essences. Nothing, not even a fly, is known in its full quiddity.¹⁸⁵ This concealedness of revelation is an insight which has been more recently confirmed through the method of phenomenology¹⁸⁶ – we do not see the ‘thing in itself’, however this does not lead to scepticism since we still truly see the ‘thing in itself’ *via* its effects. The *a quo* signification is ‘some sensible impression which the thing to be named has made upon the naming subject.’¹⁸⁷ Aquinas gives the (false) etymology of *lapis* (stone) as that which hurts the foot (*pedem*) when it is kicked.¹⁸⁸ Here the *ad quod* of the stone is not fully revealed in the *a quo* of its origin of predication. This then would be how Aquinas would receive the Dionysian ‘processions:’

‘So we must say that these kinds of divine names are imposed from the divine processions; for as according to the diverse processions of their perfections,

¹⁸² *In liber de Causis*, prop. 6, tr. Guagliardo (Catholic University of America, 1996), p.47, n.14.

¹⁸³ I have drawn these insights largely from Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a’ repetition’ of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Louvain University Press, 1996), pp. 315-316.

¹⁸⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess, Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, tr. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2002), pp. 156-158.

¹⁸⁵ *In symbolum Apostolorum, scilicet ‘Credo in Deum’ exposition, prol* par 864.

¹⁸⁶ “Logos is *in itself and at the same time* a revealing and a concealing. It is *aletheia*. Unconcealment needs concealment, *lethe*, as a reservoir upon which disclosure can, as it were, draw.” Martin Heidegger, ‘Logos’ and ‘Aletheia’ in *Early Greek Thinking*, tr. David Farrell Krell and Frank Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), cited in Raymond Tallis, *The Enduring Significance of Parmenides Unthinkable thought* (Continuum, 2007). For every presentation there is what Husserl calls an ‘appresentation.’ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: an introduction to Phenomenology*, tr. Dorion Cairns (Nijhoff/The Hague 1977), p.122; 56; See also Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* p.4.

¹⁸⁷ Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a’ repetition’ of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Louvain University Press, 1996), p. 315.

¹⁸⁸ *ST 1a, q. 13, a. 2, ad 2*; See Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a’ repetition’ of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Louvain University Press, 1996), p. 315.

creatures are the representations of God, although in an imperfect manner. so likewise our intellect knows and names God according to each kind of procession; but nevertheless these names are not imposed to signify the procession themselves, as if when we say "God lives," the sense were, "life proceeds from Him"; but to signify the principle itself of things, in so far as life pre-exists in Him, although it pre-exists in Him in a more eminent way than can be understood or signified.¹⁸⁹

As *ipsum esse subsistens*, God is not 'beyond Being,' in respect of the *ad quod* or *res significata* because God does not lack any perfection. He is rather *Being Unlimited* and pre-eminently. In this Thomistic account of theological predication, 'Being' becomes a term which has priority (*per prius*) for God in Himself yet can be applied analogically but with sufficient unity to creatures (*contra* Scotus who believed this was only possible of univocal predication).¹⁹⁰ This solution plausibly maintains the validity of the law of non-contradiction and thus preserves meaningful predication about God. 'Truth' itself is analogical in that its primary sense (*ratio propria*)¹⁹¹ refers to God who *is* truth; but secondarily refers to the human intellect which participates in Truth.¹⁹² 'Truth is the equation (*adaequatio*) of thought and thing.'¹⁹³ In this respect then we can see clear blue water between Thomas and those post Hegelians and post-Heideggerians¹⁹⁴ such as Marion, Yannaras or Caputo who regard truth about God as coherence of language conforming only with human life but not corresponding to God Himself.¹⁹⁵ To the contrary, as Rosemann puts it ..' human language is not condemned to utter vanity. It aims at something which it

¹⁸⁹ *ST 1a, q. 13, a. 2, ad 2*

¹⁹⁰ Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, tr Allan Wolter (Hackett, 1987), p.20.

¹⁹¹ In the order of knowing, truth begins first in the human intellect as an abstraction and is applied analogically to other things and to the Divine intellect.

¹⁹² 'Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus.' *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1; *ST 1a, Q.16, a 6, resp.*

¹⁹³ *ST 1a, q.16, a.1, resp.*;

¹⁹⁴ Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) rejects the traditional correspondence theory of truth, the understanding that the content of one element corresponds to the content of another (*adaequatio*, from *ad* – *aequare*, literally 'to make equal to') Truth must instead return to what he considers its 'primordial' meaning of 'unconcealedness' or 'disclosedness.' (Greek *aletheia*). Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Macquarrie and Robinson (Blackwell 2008), p.257, 270. For a critique of Heidegger see Mario Enrique Sacchi, *The Apocalypse of Being: The Esoteric Gnosis of Martin Heidegger* (St. Augustine's Press, 2002).

¹⁹⁵ See also Maurice Blondel: 'For, unlike the abstract science of thought which isolates ideas and proceeds by complete inclusion or exclusion, the concrete reality of life perpetually reconciles contraries.' *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, tr. Oliva Blanchette (University of Notre Dame Press, 1950), p. 429; 'the most abstract laws of understanding have their full meaning only in relation to the concrete development of life.' p. 430.

cannot reach; nonetheless it aims in the right direction.¹⁹⁶ And it is only because God is supremely knowable to Himself that all things are intrinsically knowable.¹⁹⁷ If God did not exist science would be impossible.

Intriguingly there is some evidence within the text of *The Divine Names* to suggest that even Dionysius drew back from discounting the applicability of the law of non-contradiction to God. In Chapter 8¹⁹⁸ he responds to an objection from a certain ‘Elymas’, who refers to the text that God ‘cannot deny himself’ (2 *Tim* 2:13) as a way of casting doubt on God’s omnipotent, Denys’ exegesis of this text shows that he does not believe in an unqualified omnipotence, but (like Aquinas), in an omnipotence consistent with God’s nature as Perfect. For God to deny himself would entail his falling from truth, and since, truth (following Aristotle) ‘is being,’ (*on estin*)¹⁹⁹ this would also entail falling from being, which is impossible, he says, even for God. ‘God cannot fall from being.’²⁰⁰ The Greek text adds *και το μη ειναι ουκ εστιν*²⁰¹ literally ‘and therefore is not not to be’²⁰² which implies (in its context of a discussion on omnipotence), that He cannot be and not be at the same time. Dionysius further explains that this is because of his perfect power: God cannot lack anything, including truth, knowledge or being. This is a surprising text which is difficult to square with his other assertions regarding God as ‘beyond being.’²⁰³ He must uncharacteristically mean that God cannot fall from ‘uncreated Being’ (i.e. Himself). O’Rourke concludes that it is an ‘exception’ in which Dionysius ‘appeals to an evidence to which, on his own terms, he is not entitled.’²⁰⁴ Although it

¹⁹⁶ Philip W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: a ‘repetition’ of scholastic metaphysics*, Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Louvain University Press, 1996), p. 341.

¹⁹⁷ *ST* 1a, q. 12, a.1, *sed contra*

¹⁹⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, ch. 8, par 893B, *The Complete Works*, tr, Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987), p.112.

¹⁹⁹ Terms which recall Aristotle – see endnote 1. ‘Truth hath Being; and therefore a declension from the Truth is a declension from Being.’ *Dionysius the Aeropagite, The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (SPCK, 1972)

²⁰⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, ch. 8, par. 893B, *The Complete Works*, tr, Colm Luibheid (Paulist Press, 1987), p.112.

²⁰¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*. ed. C. Pera (Marietti, Taurini, 1950), p. 287.

²⁰² ‘‘God cannot fall from Being since it is not possible for him not to be.’’ Fran O’Rourke’s translation, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 202. O’Rourke considers this passage an ‘exception’ to Dionysius’ normal discourse and accuses him of appealing to ‘an evidence to which, on his own terms, he is not entitled.’

²⁰³ Eg *DN*, ch 2, par 641A. p. 61; *MT* ch. 1, par 1000B, p.136; ch. 5. 1048A, p.141.

²⁰⁴ Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p.202.

is consistent with the theory that the real Pseudo-Dionysius was Sergius of Reshaina who wrote works commending Aristotelian logic.²⁰⁵ Dionysius affirms Aristotelian logic for example in *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 2.5:

'However, it is not possible to participate in wholly opposed things at one and the same time, nor is it possible for one who has had a certain communion with the One to lead a divided life as long as he holds on to participation in the one.'²⁰⁶

These texts could be utilised to vindicate Aquinas' apparent gloss of 'agnostic' statements in Dionysius, or they could highlight impossible tensions within the Dionysian system and its modern counterparts. Dionysius can only deny the language of being by using the language of being, which silently witnesses to the superiority of Aquinas' metaphysics of Absolute Being. Aquinas' commentary on the *Divine Names* is illuminating on this point:

'And he says that, since God is truth itself, for God to deny himself is nothing other than for God to fall away from the truth. But since the true is the same as being, it follows that to fall completely away from truth is to fall completely away from being. Therefore, what he says - that God cannot deny himself - is the same as if he were to say: God is not able to fall short of being. *But this "not to fall short of being" is the same as if he were to say that God is not non-being; by which is meant rather being itself [or that he himself is].* Just as if it should be said that God is not able to be unable, this does not show that he is powerless, but that he is supremely powerful; and similarly, if it should be said that he does not know that he does not know, and therefore that he has privation of knowledge, this is the very having of perfect knowledge [or that he has perfect knowledge]. Through this, therefore, that God cannot deny himself, nothing is detracted from his power by the impossible, but it is the same as if it were said that God cannot not be true and being and powerful.' (italics mine)²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Sami Aydin, *Sergius of Reshaina: Introduction to Aristotle and his Categories, Addressed to Philotheos* (Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus.Lam Mul: BRILL, 2016), p.9. 'Without these [Aristotle's logical writing] neither can the effect of medical writings be comprehended, nor the opinion of the philosophers be understood, nor, indeed, the true sense of the Divine Scriptures' *Commentary on the Categories*, cited in *ibid*, pp.35-36.

²⁰⁶ *EH* 2.5, tr. Thomas L.Campbell, *Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite: The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (Washington D.C., University of America Press, 1981), p.30.

²⁰⁷ I am grateful to Father Joseph Vnuk in personal correspondence for this literal translation of the

After Aquinas, however, the more agnostic reading of Pseudo-Dionysius prevailed in his reception by mystical writers such as Eriugena²⁰⁸, Eckhart²⁰⁹ and especially Nicholas de Cusa with his doctrine of ‘coincidence of opposites’ who pushed Dionysius into a more unambiguously monist direction. He interpreted the doctrine of Divine Simplicity as an undifferentiated monad in which all contradictions resolve (‘that simplicity where contradictories coincide’).²¹⁰ It is significant that Aquinas resisted this Eastern drift by insisting that all names of God are not ultimately synonymous but predicate him substantially though imperfectly.²¹¹ Aquinas was also emphatic that ‘it is in my opinion false’²¹² to say that God can do the self-contradictory. But a fully *Trinitarian* interpretation of Divine Simplicity seems somewhat weak even in Aquinas i.e. a unity *with* genuine distinction and Otherness which may have contributed to the monist drift of his successors.

The principle of non-contradiction receives surer theological moorings in Aquinas’ metaphysics of Being than in Denys primacy of the Good. It is grounded upon the Primary Name of God, *He Who Is*,²¹³ by which He cannot not Be. This applies to

Latin in *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*. ed C.Pera (Marietti, Taurini, 1950), ch. VIII, 1, 111, p.288.

²⁰⁸ ‘How, therefore, can the Divine Nature understand of itself what it is, seeing that it is nothing? For it surpasses everything that is, since it is not even being but all being derives from it, and by virtue of its eminence it is supereminent over all essence and every substance. Or how can the infinite be defined by itself in anything or be understood in anything when it knows itself (to be) above every finite (thing) and every infinite (thing) and beyond finitude and infinity? So God does not know of himself what He is because He is not a ‘what’, being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect....No one of the men of pious learning or of the adepts in the Divine Mysteries, hearing of God that He cannot understand of Himself what He is, ought to think anything else that that God Himself, Who is not a ‘what’, does not know at all in Himself that which He Himself is not.’ John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, Book 2, ed. I.P. Sheldon-Williams with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), 589B; 598a, p. 163.

²⁰⁹ Pope John XXII cites as one of Eckhart’s heresies the doctrine that: “24. Every distinction is alien to God, both in his nature and in the persons. The proof: since His nature itself is one (una) and this very One (unum), and each Person is one and this same One as the nature.” Meister Eckhart: *Sermons & Treatises Volume 1*, tr. M.O’C. Walshe, ed. (Element Books 1979), p.1.

²¹⁰ *On Learned Ignorance, Letter of the author to Lord Cardinal Julian*, 264 in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, tr. H. Lawrence Bond (Paulist Press, 1997), p. 206. See also Maurice Blondel: ‘For, unlike the abstract science of thought which isolates ideas and proceeds by complete inclusion or exclusion, the concrete reality of life perpetually reconciles contraries.’ *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, tr. Oliva Blanchette (University of Notre Dame Press, 1950), p. 429.

²¹¹ *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 13, a. 4.

²¹² Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World*, tr. Ralph McInerny, *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1998), p.712.

²¹³ *ST*, 1a, q. 13, art. 11

God properly and to creatures by participation.²¹⁴ Similarly, the law of identity, which depends on the law of non-contradiction,²¹⁵ can be seen from a theological perspective as the creaturely analogue of the Tetragrammaton, 'I AM THAT I AM.' (*Exodus 3:14*). Avoiding being pierced with either of Euthyphro's horns, Aquinas shows that the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction are identical with God's own integrity or faithfulness.²¹⁶ God cannot deny Himself and therefore it follows that the laws of logic are necessary truths within the Divine mind.²¹⁷ This preserves rational discourse about God also for Aquinas and explains why there is no final conflict between the truths of faith and the truths of reason.²¹⁸

The separation of beings from Being in the ontological difference need not entail, as with Marion, an *absence* of Being and the solution for this need not be the reversion to God as a *Superbeing*. Rather a recovery of the understanding of God as *Unlimited Being* known through his effects via the law of similarity (*omne agens agit sibi simile*) preserves the validity of logic, epistemology and meaningful language about God. To borrow O'Rourke's elegant image: 'Being is the cradle of all meaning and from it emerges the intelligibility of all subsequent objects of thought.'²¹⁹

²¹⁴ See *Acts 17:28*

²¹⁵ (At least as far as judgements are concerned). See Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Baker, 1991), p.75.

²¹⁶ C.f. *ST*, 1-2, q.93, art 4: "all that is attributed to the divine essence or nature does not fall under the eternal law, in reality they are the eternal law."

²¹⁷ *ST* 1a, q. 9, a. 3 (following Augustine).

²¹⁸ *SCG*, Bk 1, ch. 7.

²¹⁹ O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 112-113.