

AQUINAS ON ‘THE GOOD’ AS THE PRINCIPAL NAME OF GOD: AN ARISTOTELIAN READING OF DIONYSIUS

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On a number of occasions, when considering the names that can properly be said of God, Aquinas notably holds that the most proper name is ‘He Who Is’. In this way, Aquinas’s account of divine naming could be seen to stand in contrast to the Platonic tradition of favoring the name of ‘Good’ for the first principle since, in that tradition, the Good is beyond *being*. With that said, it is important to note that Aquinas himself at times speaks in terms similar to the Platonists, observing both that God is beyond *being* (*supra ens*) and that the name of ‘Good’ should, in a respect, be seen as the ‘principal name of God’ (*principale nomen dei*), namely, inasmuch as he is a cause. This paper offers clarification on how Aquinas reconciles this claim about ‘Good’ as the principal name of God with his position that ‘He Who Is’ is the most proper name of God. Fundamental to this investigation is a consideration of Aquinas’s treatment of as he presents them in his commentary *The Divine Names* of Ps.-Dionysius.

Introduction

On a number of occasions, when considering the names that can properly be said of God, Aquinas notably holds that the most proper name is ‘He Who Is’.¹ In this way, Aquinas’s account of divine naming could be seen

¹ See, e.g., *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis* I (hereafter *Super Sententiis* I), ed. P. Mandonnet, vol. 1 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929), d. 8, q. 1, a. 1 (Mandonnet 1.194–97); *Super Sententiis* I, d. 8, q. 1, a. 3 (Mandonnet 1.199–201); *Liber de veritate catholicae Fidei contra errores infidelium seu Summa contra Gentiles* (hereafter *SCG*), ed. C. Pera and P. Caramello, vols. 2–3 (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1961), I, c. 22 (Marietti 2.33:211); *Contra errores Graecorum ad Urbanum papam* (hereafter *Contra errores Graecorum*), vol. 40 A in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1967), c. 1 (Leon. 40A.72:55–67); *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio* (hereafter *In De div. nom.*), ed. C. Pera, P. Caramello, and C. Mazzantini (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1950), c. 5, lect. 1 (Marietti 236:635); *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* (hereafter *De potentia*), in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P.M.

to stand in contrast to the Platonic tradition of favoring the name of 'Good' for the first principle since, in that tradition, the Good is beyond *being*.² With that said, it is important to note that Aquinas himself at times speaks in terms similar to the Platonists, observing both that God is beyond *being* (*supra ens*) and that the name of 'Good' should, in a respect, be seen as the 'principal name of God' (*principale nomen dei*).³ Both of these observations reflect the clear Neoplatonic influences on Aquinas's thought; nevertheless, each is conditioned by his distinctive metaphysical views of *esse* as the act of existence. For as he makes clear, the reason that God is beyond *being* is not that he transcends some Platonic separate Form of *Being* (*ipsum ens separatum*); rather, God transcends it inasmuch as he is, in himself, Infinite *Esse*: the unlimited act of existing (*ipsum esse infinitum*). By contrast, Aquinas tells us, the name 'being' (*ens*) is said of 'that which finitely participates *esse*'.⁴ It is for this reason, in part, that Aquinas sees the name 'He Who Is' to be the most proper name of God. Thus, in response to an objector who cites the authority of Dionysius for identifying 'Good' as God's most proper name, Aquinas clarifies that this is indeed God's principal name—but not absolutely speaking. Instead, 'Good' is the principal name of God inasmuch as he is considered as a cause.⁵

Pession, 8th rev. ed., vol. 2 (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1949), q. 7, a. 5 co. (Marietti 2.199); Thomas Aquinas, *Pars prima Summae theologiae* (hereafter ST I), vol. 4–5 in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1888, 1889), q. 13, a. 11 (Leon. 4.162).

For an excellent overview of Aquinas's treatment of the divine name *Qui est*, see Brian T. Carl, "The Kataphatic and Apophatic Propriety of "Qui Est" in *Summa Metaphysicae ad Mentem Sancti Thomae: Essays in Honor of John F. Wippel*, The Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming.

² Here, and in what follows, I will follow the convention of italicizing words when they refer to notions, concepts, natures, or forms.

³ On the former point regarding God as beyond *being*, see *Super librum De Causis expositio* (hereafter *In De causis*) (Fribourg-Louvain, 1954), prop. 6 (Saffrey 47:8–47). (For the Latin, see n. 4 below). On the latter point regarding 'Good' as the principal name of God, see n. ST I, q. 13, a. 11, ad 2 (Leon. 4.162). (For the Latin, see n. 5 below).

⁴ *In De causis*, prop. 6 (Saffrey 47:8–47): 'Causa autem prima, secundum Platonicos quidem, est supra ens in quantum essentia bonitatis et unitatis, quae est causa prima, excedit etiam ipsum ens separatum, sicut supra dictum est. Sed secundum rei veritatem causa prima est supra ens in quantum est ipsum esse infinitum, ens autem dicitur id quod finite participat esse, et hoc est proportionatum intellectui nostro cuius obiectum est quod quid est ut dicitur in III^o De anima, unde illud solum est capabile ab intellectu nostro quod habet quidditatem participantem esse; sed Dei quidditas est ipsum esse, unde est supra intellectum. Et per hunc modum inducit hanc rationem Dionysius I^o capitulo De divinis nominibus, sic dicens: Si cognitiones omnes existentium sunt, et si existentia finem habent, in quantum scilicet finite participant esse, qui est supra omnem substantiam ab omni cognitione est segregatus'. Italics in original.

⁵ In what follows, I will refer to the Pseudo-Dionysius by the name 'Dionysius'. For the aforementioned objection, see ST I, q. 13, a. 11, obj. 2 (Leon. 4.162): 'Praeterea, Dionysius dicit,

In this paper, I will offer some clarification of Aquinas's brief distinction by turning to his *Commentary on the Divine Names*. As I will show, his reading of Dionysius on the divine name of 'Good' is informed both by the terminist theory of semantics that Aquinas employs as well as his Aristotelian analysis of Dionysius regarding God's causality. To this end, my consideration of this topic will have four parts. (1) First, I will outline some of the major elements of Aquinas's terminist semantics. (2) Having done so, I will illustrate how that semantic theory factors into his use of the *triplex via* for naming God, a methodology that he finds in Dionysius. This consideration will reveal how Aquinas thinks we can predicate absolute affirmative names of God's very substance even though we do not know his essence, including the names of 'being' and 'good'. (3) I will then show why Aquinas considers the name 'He Who Is' to be the most proper name of God, while still acknowledging Dionysius's view of the name 'Good' as the principal divine *causal* name. (4) In the concluding section, I will address Aquinas's justification for this view of 'Good' as the principal causal name by looking at his Aristotelian-inspired interpretation of God as the cause of the goodness of things. Clarifying this point will help to reveal why, for Aquinas, from the perspective of God's causality, the divine name of 'Good' is prior even to that of 'He Who Is'.

Aquinas's Terminist Semantics

To begin to see how Aquinas thinks the names 'Good' and 'Being' can be predicated of God, we first need to consider, in general, his semantic theory of naming, which is informed both by Aristotle as well as the terminist logic of his day.⁶ Like other terminists, Aquinas adopts Aristotle's semantic triangle, which holds that our spoken words signify conceptions of the intellect and that these concepts are, in turn, the

iii cap. *de Div. Nom.*, quod *boni nominatio est manifestativa omnium Dei processionum*. Sed hoc maxime Deo convenit, quod sit universale rerum principium. Ergo hoc nomen *bonum* est maxime proprium Dei, et non hoc nomen *Qui est*." Italics in original. For Aquinas's reply, see ST I, q. 13, a. 11, ad 2 (Leon. 4.162): "Ad secundum dicendum quod hoc nomen *bonum* est principale nomen Dei inquantum est causa, non tamen simpliciter: nam esse absolute praeintelligitur causae."

⁶ Espoused by such authors as Peter of Spain, William of Sherwood, and Lambert of Auxerre (Rosa E. Vargas Della Casa, 'Thomas Aquinas on the Apprehension of Being: The Role of Judgement in Light of Thirteenth-Century Semantics' [Dissertation, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Marquette University, 2013], 25–26).

likenesses of things. For example, in English the term ‘dog’ is employed to signify *barking animal* (for want of a more precise definition).⁷ This spoken and written word, of course, is a mere convention, since in other languages different spoken and written words are employed, such as ‘Hund’, ‘chien’, and ‘canis’. Nevertheless, what these words in different languages are intended to signify is the same conception formed naturally regardless of the language of the speaker. And in Aquinas’s view, that conception is itself the likeness of the extramental thing that the spoken and written word is intended to signify. Thus, in a mediated way, our words signify things.⁸

Here, we need to be careful to note that for the medievals, signification is not the same as meaning. Instead, signification entails what has been termed a ‘psychologico-causal’ property of terms.⁹ Thus, the common account of signification for Aquinas along with other terminist contemporaries of his is that “to signify is to establish an understanding” (“significare est intellectum constituere”).¹⁰ In a mediated way, then, language is seen as connecting both speaker and listener to reality through its psychologico-causal role. Aquinas sums up this role when he observes that ‘The *ratio* [account, analysis, *logos*] that a name signifies is a conception of the intellect of the “thing” (*res*) signified by the name.’¹¹ What Aquinas calls a name’s *significatum* (that

⁷ This definition (or description) of *dog* (viz. *animal latrabile*) is employed by no less than Aquinas himself. See, e.g. *Commentaria in octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis* (hereafter *In Physicam*), vol. 2 in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1884, 1884), VII, lect. 8 (Leon. 2.354:8).

⁸ *Expositio libri Peryermeneias* (hereafter *In Peri herm.*), 2nd ed., vol. 1*/1 in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia* (Rome-Paris: Commissio Leonina-J. Vrin, 1989), I, lect. 2 (Leon. 1*1.9–13). To be precise, it is spoken words that immediately signify our concepts and through them extramental things; written words, in turn, are immediately signs of spoken words and through them signify extramental things through both spoken words and the concepts they signify.

⁹ See Paul Vincent Spade, ‘The Semantics of Terms’, in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 188. ‘The psychological overtones of “to signify” are similar to those of the modern “to mean”. Nevertheless, signification is not meaning. A term signifies that of which it makes a person think, so that, unlike meaning, signification is a species of the causal relation’. To say that the medieval account of signification is not the same as meaning is not to suggest that there is no understanding of the notion of meaning. Rather, ‘meaning’ is indicated by words like *sensus*, *sententia*, or *definitio*. See Umberto Eco, ‘Denotation’, in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, ed. Umberto Eco and Constantino Marmo (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1989), 53.

¹⁰ E.J. Ashworth, ‘Signification and Modes of Signifying in Thirteenth-Century Logic: A Preface to Aquinas on Analogy’, *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1991): 44. This formulation is from Aristotle’s *Peri hermeneias*, 16b19–21.

¹¹ ST I, q. 13, a. 3 co. (Leon. 4.144): ‘Ratio enim quam significat nomen, est conceptio intellectus de re significata per nomen’ (Emphasis added in translation). Cf. ST I, q. 5, a. 2 (Leon. 4.58). ‘Analysis’ is Ashworth’s preferred translation of *ratio* in these contexts (see Ashworth,

which is signified) is a *ratio* as it is conceptualized within the mind, but we should not take him to mean that the names that we speak are naming our concepts. Rather, given the semantic triangle, this conceptualization of the *ratio* is itself the likeness of some ‘signified thing’ (*res significata*), which is beyond the concept.¹² Paradigmatically, this *res significata* is something outside of the mind (*extra animam*), in reality (*in rerum natura*).¹³

Here, we need to be careful not to confuse the medieval account of signification with that of supposition, or reference. The extramental ‘thing’ (*res*) that a name signifies is typically not the same as what the name supposits for, or references.¹⁴ If I say to you that ‘A human is reading this article’, the so-called ‘thing signified’ (*res significata*) of the term ‘human’ is not you, the reader. Instead, the term ‘human’ supposits for, or references, you in the context of my example proposition. But for Aquinas, what the term ‘human’ signifies is *human nature*.¹⁵ In sum,

‘Signification and Modes of Signifying’, 50–52.).

A conception can be either simple or complex. A conception signified by a term (noun or verb) such as ‘human’ is simple; a conception signified by a proposition such as ‘A human is an animal’ is complex. In what follows, I will principally be concerned with simple conceptions. On the distinction between simple and complex conceptions, see In *Peri*. I.5 (Leon. 1*/1.29:277–86); *ibid.*, I.6 (Leon. 1*/1.32:20–23); Vargas Della Casa, ‘Apprehension of Being’, 63–67.

¹² On the distinction between *significatum* and *res significata*, see Ashworth, ‘Signification and Modes of Signifying’, 50–53.

¹³ I say ‘paradigmatically’ because we can have meaningful language, for example, also about privations such as blindness and about fictional beasts such as the chimera. Still, as Ashworth observes, although there is debate among the medievals on aspects of signification theory, one point of agreement is that ‘spoken words, with the obvious exception of syncategorematic terms such as “not” and of words picking out fictional or mental entities such as “chimera” and “concept”, typically refer to things in the external world’ (Ashworth, ‘Signification and Modes of Signifying’, 45.). Regarding how there is meaningful signification not only in the cases of names for *entia rationis* such as privations and second intentions but also for names of fictions, see Gyula Klima, ‘The Changing Role of *Entia Rationis* in Mediaeval Semantics and Ontology: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction’, *Synthese* 96, no. 1 (1993): 25–58; Gyula Klima, ‘The Semantic Principles Underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Being’, *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996): esp. 91–97; Gyula Klima, ‘Aquinas’ Theory of the Copula and the Analogy of Being’, *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 5 (2002): 159–76.

¹⁴ See Ashworth, ‘Signification and Modes of Signifying’, 52–53. There are occasions where the two—referent (*suppositum*) and *res significata*—coincide, such as when the name ‘Socrates’ is said of Socrates. In the context of such a proposition, the name signifies that to which it also refers.

¹⁵ *Scriptum super Sententiis magistri Petri Lombardi* III (hereafter *Super Sententiis* III), ed. Maria Fabianus Moos, vol. 3 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1933), d. 6, q. 1, a. 2 ad 4 (Moos 3.231): ‘Homo significat humanam naturam, et supponit pro subsistente in natura illa’. As noted above, I am following the convention of italicizing words when they reference a notion, concept, form, or *res significata*.

Note that whereas a term signifies in its own right, it supposits for (or references) something only in the context of a proposition. On the doctrine of supposition and its relation to signification, see Spade, ‘The Semantics of Terms’, 192–96; Henk J. M. Schoot, ‘Aquinas and Supposition: The Possibilities and Limitations of Logic In *Divinis*’, *Vivarium* 30 (1993): 193–225.

the so-called ‘thing’ that is signified by a name is neither an individual, nor a collection of individuals, but rather some form (nature, property, perfection). And, in fact, sometimes Aquinas will use as a synonym for *res significata* the expression *forma significata*.¹⁶

With the foregoing in mind, we see that Aquinas would consider the *res significata* of the term ‘human’ to be the form *humanity* (i.e. *humanness*). With that said, it is important to note that this form is also the *res significata* of the very term ‘humanity’. In other words, both of these words—‘human’ and ‘humanity’—signify the same *res*, although each does so in a different way, or mode. Here, we find another aspect of terminist semantics: words always signify their *res* according to some *modus significandi*: mode of signifying. Some of these modes are grammatical, identifying parts of speech inasmuch as they are parts of speech. For example, the terms ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’ both signify the formality of *whiteness*, but the former does so according to the grammatical mode of an adjective whereas the latter does so substantively according to the grammatical mode of a noun. By contrast, other *modi significandi* are logical modes, accounting for distinctions in signification between how terms sharing the same root signify the same *res*. Thus, if we consider again the terms ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’, the former signifies the formality of *whiteness* concretely whereas the latter signifies it abstractly. In a similar way, the term ‘human’ signifies the form *humanity* concretely whereas the term ‘humanity’ does so abstractly. For our own investigation of Aquinas on divine naming, we will need to consider the logical modes entailed in this distinction between concrete and abstract signification.¹⁷

Regarding these *modi significandi*, Aquinas indicates that there is a semantic triangle parallel to Aristotle’s triangle concerning signification.

¹⁶ Ashworth, ‘Signification and Modes of Signifying’, 52–53; Klima, ‘Semantic Principles’, 103–106; Vargas Della Casa, ‘Apprehension of Being’, 53–54. Note, therefore, that in this semantic context the term ‘*res*’ is not indicating the sense of *res* that is transcendental and convertible with *ens*. Moreover, it should also be noted that to say that the *res significata* of a word is some form is not to say that it is always some *metaphysical* form. For example, there is no extramental metaphysical form with terms for second intentions (like ‘genus’ and ‘species’), privations (like ‘blindness’), and fictions (like ‘chimera’;). On this point, see *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* (hereafter *De potentia*), 7.10 ad 8 in vol. 2, *Quaestiones disputatae*, 8th rev. ed., ed. M. Pession (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1949), 65; *Super Sententiis* I.19.5.1 (Mandonnet 1.486); Klima, “Semantic Principles,” 107, n. 37; Vargas Della Casa, “Apprehension of Being,” 59.

For Aquinas’s use of the term *forma significata* as a synonym for *res significata*, see, e.g., *Super Sententiis* III, d. 7, q. 1, a. 1, ad 5 (Moos 3.259–64).

¹⁷ See Vargas Della Casa, ‘Apprehension of Being’, 40–41.

Just as words signify an extramental *res* in a mediated way via concepts, so too modes of signification follow upon extramental modes of existing (*modi essendi*) in a mediated way—namely, through modes of understanding (*modi intelligendi*).¹⁸ In affirming this connection between this triad of modes—*significandi*, *intelligendi*, *essendi*—Aquinas shares something in common with the later speculative grammarians known as the *modistae*. But unlike the Modists, Aquinas does not, however, see a simple one-to-one isomorphism between *modi significandi* and *modi essendi*, even though modes of signification do have a foundation in reality.¹⁹ For example, in reality, outside of the mind, human nature exists according to an individuated mode of existing, but according to our mode of understanding, that nature is understood in a universalised way. Hence, in the human intellect human nature takes on a universal *modus intelligendi*—a mode that in turn is reflected in the universal mode of signification belonging to the word ‘human’. In Aquinas’s estimation, Plato made the mistake of treating the *modus essendi* of forms as though in reality they had the same universal mode that they have in both intellect and in speech. What he misunderstood, in short, is that the mind not only reflects reality but also refracts it, giving those forms a mode in understanding and speech that they do not have in reality.

This is not to say, however, that Aquinas thinks that there is no connection whatsoever between modes of signification and modes of existing. On this point he is clear: words that signify their *res*, or formality, according to a concrete *modus significandi* paradigmatically do so because

¹⁸ *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio* (hereafter *In Metaphysicam*), ed. M.-R. Cathala and R.M. Spiazzi (1950; repr., Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1964), VII, lect. 1 (Marietti 317:1253). ‘Licet modus significandi vocum non consequatur immediate modum essendi rerum, sed mediante modo intelligendi; quia intellectus sunt similitudines rerum, voces autem intellectuum, ut dicitur in primo *Perihermenias*’.

As Vargas Della Casa makes clear, for Aquinas modes of signification are not directly tied to grammatical properties of terms. Rather, ‘The *modi significandi* of terms are for Aquinas first and foremost a function of our *modi intelligendi*’. See Vargas Della Casa, ‘Apprehension of Being’, 81.

¹⁹ A clear example offered by Aquinas that there is not always a connection between a *modus significandi* and a corresponding *modus essendi* concerns abstract terms for an accident such as ‘whiteness’ (*albedo*). This term signifies *per modum substantiae*, because according to our *modus intelligendi* the intellect treats whiteness as if it were something subsistent. Nevertheless, its *modus essendi* is not that of a substance but of an accident. See *In Metaphysicam*, V, lect. 9 (Marietti 239:894).

On the tendency of the *Modistae* to treat speculative grammar as entailing an isomorphism between *modi significandi* and *modi essendi*, see Keith A. Buersmeyer, ‘Aquinas on the “*Modi Significandi*”’, *The Modern Schoolman* 64 (1987): 75–79.

of some extramental composition. We find this view exemplified with the term ‘human’: although it signifies the form *humanity*, it does so according to a concrete mode of signification. Thus, the complete *significatum* of the term ‘human’ is *a-haver-of-humanity* (*habens humanitatem*). Similarly, the concrete term ‘white’ (*album*) signifies *a-haver-of-whiteness* (*habens albedinem*).²⁰ In both cases, the formality that is signified (*humanity*, *whiteness*) is signified as *in* a haver—which is to say that, following from its mode of signification, the concrete term signifies a composition. To be more precise, Aquinas indicates that composition is not said to be signified by such terms but to be *consignified*.

In terminist semantics, consignification is a secondary, or additional, signification that is, as it were, an ‘accidental property’ of the term, which follows as a necessary consequence (*ex consequenti*) from a term’s *modus significandi*.²¹ Aquinas commonly speaks of consignification when discussing the nature of verbs: whereas verbs *principally* signify an action or a passion, by means of their tense they also *consignify* time.²² In our examples of the concrete terms ‘human’ and ‘white’, which signify respectively the forms of *humanity* and *whiteness*, they do so according to a concrete mode of signification in such a way that what they principally signify, respectively, the simple whole that is *a-haver-of-humanity* or *a-haver-of-whiteness*. So, although these terms do not principally signify composition, given their concrete mode of signification, *ex consequenti* they *consignify* a composition between haver and had, i.e. between a subject and its form.

With the foregoing distinctions in mind concerning the notions of *res significata*, *modus significandi*, and consignification, we are now in a position to begin to consider how Aquinas synthesizes aspects of terminist semantics with Dionysian principles of divine naming. As we

²⁰ *Expositio Libri Boetii De Ebdomadibus*, vol. 50, Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1992), c. 2 (Leon. 50.272:129–31): ‘Aliter autem se habet in hiis que significantur in concreto, nam homo significatur ut qui habet humanitatem, et album ut quod habet albedinem.’

²¹ I am focusing in this paper on consignification as it occurs with categorematic terms. For a consideration of the consignification of syncategorematic terms (such as prepositions) along with an overview of consignification in general in Aquinas, see Vargas Della Casa, ‘Apprehension of Being’, 38–43, 103–109.

²² In *Peri herm.*, I, lect. 5 (Leon. 1*/1.25–31). Thus, the word ‘runs’ (*currit*) in the proposition ‘Socrates runs’ (*Socrates currit*) signifies the action of *running* (*currere*) and, inasmuch as it does so according to the present tense, the term ‘runs’ secondarily signifies that this action occurs in the present time.

will see, the semantic features that he identifies for categorial terms such as ‘human’ and ‘white’ are just as much features of the names of transcendental and pure perfections such as ‘good’, ‘being’, and ‘wise’ that Aquinas agrees with Dionysius can be predicated of God. Such divine naming thus raises the question of what and how they signify by means of their *res* and *modus*. Answering these questions will provide us with better insight into Aquinas’s conclusions regarding the most proper name for God.

Signification and the Triplex Via

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas considers the topic of the divine names in Question 13 of the Prima Pars. To be clear, the names with which Aquinas is primarily concerned in that *quaestio* are affirmative ones that are absolute rather than relative, which is to say that his focus there is not primarily on what he describes as God’s causal names. In a way, causal names for God are treated in Question 2, Article 3 of the Prima Pars when Aquinas considers whether God exists and concludes at the end of each of his Five Ways that there must be some being who is a first cause and, hence, can be named as such, with names such as ‘Prime Mover’ (*primum movens*) or ‘First Efficient Cause’ (*prima causa efficiens*).²³ Immediately following this article, Aquinas proceeds in Question 3 to show all of the ways in which such a being must be uncomposed, or simple, thereby providing the basis for negative names for God such as ‘immaterial’, ‘immutable’, ‘eternal’, and ‘one’ that he addresses in the ensuing questions and articles of the Prima Pars.²⁴ It is in Question 6 that Aquinas considers the affirmative name of ‘Good’ as said of God, presenting it—not as a causal name—but as an attribute of God’s very essence.²⁵ Thus, we are told that *goodness* is ‘in him in

²³ ST I, q. 2, a. 3 co. (Leon. 4.31–32).

²⁴ In q. 3 on God’s simplicity, Aquinas first shows that God is not a body (a. 1). He proceeds in the remaining articles to show that the following compositions are absent from God: matter and form (a. 2), subject and quiddity (a. 3), essence and *esse* (a. 4), genus and difference (a. 5), as well as subject and accident (a. 6). Aquinas concludes the *quaestio* by showing that God must thus be entirely simple (a. 7) and that he does not enter into composition with his effects (a. 8). Having established God’s simplicity, Aquinas proceeds to follow the *via negativa* to show that God is infinite (q. 7), immutable (q. 9), eternal (q. 10), and one (q. 11).

²⁵ ST I, q. 6, a. 3 co. (Leon. 4.68).

the most excellent way'²⁶ and that he is compared to all other goods 'by excess'.²⁷

In the very presentation, then, of the first several Questions of the *Prima Pars*, we see Aquinas implicitly following the so-called *triplex via* for knowing and naming God, which consists of the ways of causality, negation, and eminence. From the times of his earliest writings, he attributes this threefold way of divine naming to Dionysius. Still, scholars debate about whether the way of eminence as he presents it in fact goes beyond the Areopagite's causal account of naming, for Aquinas asserts that following it we can, in a certain respect, predicate names of God's very substance.²⁸ This position raises the question of how such divine naming is possible given Aquinas's position that, in this lifetime, we cannot know God's essence. It is this question that Aquinas begins to address at the outset of Question 13.

In Article 1 of that *quaestio*, Aquinas considers how God is namable by us at all. To frame the problem, he reminds us of Aristotle's semantic triangle: our words are signs of our concepts, which in turn are the likenesses of things. Thus, our words signify through the mediation of our concepts. For example, he explains, we can know the nature, or essence, of a human, and that essence is expressed through the signification of the name 'human'. The reason this name can express human nature in this way, Aquinas explains, is that the name 'human' signifies the definition of this nature, thereby making it known (*declarentem*) to the listener. In support of this semantic point, he cites the Aristotelian position that the *ratio* that a name signifies is the definition.²⁹

²⁶ ST I, q. 6, a. 2 co. (Leon. 4.67): 'Sic ergo oportet quod, cum bonum sit in Deo sicut in prima causa omnium non univoca, quod sit in eo excellentissimo modo. Et propter hoc dicitur summum bonum.'

²⁷ ST I, q. 6, a. 2, ad 3. (Leon. 4.67): 'Et sic comparatur ad alia per excessum. Et huiusmodi comparationem importat summum bonum.'

²⁸ For an overview of Dionysius on divine naming and Aquinas's adoption of his methodology, see Gregory P. Rocca, O.P., *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004). As Rocca notes, 'Aquinas will often interpret the Dionysian maxim about God's absolute unknowability to mean something quite different from what Dionysius originally intended. Aquinas will also elicit a threefold path from the statements of Dionysius, and he will tend to emphasize a domesticated version of the Dionysian *via negativa*, inasmuch as in his hands it becomes a "way" comfortably at ease within the contours of his positive theology' (*Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 25). On Aquinas's adoption and adaptation of the *triplex via* that he finds in Dionysius, see also Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1992), esp. 31–41.

²⁹ ST I, q. 13, a. 1 co. (Leon. 4.139–40). See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* III, c. 7 (1012a20–24).

But, as Aquinas reminds us, he has just shown in the prior *quaestio* that we cannot know God's essence in this lifetime.³⁰ Does this mean that we cannot speak of him at all? On the contrary. Although naming presupposes and is mediated by knowledge, naming does not require knowledge of a thing's very essence. Rather, something can be named by us to the *degree (secundum quod)* that it is known by us. Aquinas notes that even though we cannot know God as he is in himself, we nevertheless can know him from creatures (i.e. his effects), namely, by knowing their relation to him as their causal source (*habitudinem principii*), and also by way of acknowledging the excellence of that source as well as how it is not like these effects—in other words, by means of the *triplex via*. Aquinas concludes that in this way, we can name God from our knowledge of his creatures, although not such that these names taken from these effects, in signifying God, express his essence as it is in itself.³¹ When we turn to the objections offered in this article, we find the first of them quoting Dionysius to the effect that there can be no name of God. Aquinas indicates, however, that this observation should not be taken too strictly: the reason that God is said not to have a name or is said to be above naming is that his essence is above everything that we understand about God and signify about him by means of words.³² In other words, it is not to say that God is entirely unnameable in any respect.

This fact is brought out in the reply to the next objection; there, Aquinas reaffirms that we can, to a degree, know and name God, namely, from our knowledge of and language about material creatures. He points out, however, that these sorts of beings are not subsistent forms; hence, they are perfect (complete) and subsistent only as composites. For this reason, in them form is not *what* exists (*quod*); rather, it is that *by which* something exists (*quo*). Aquinas indicates that this metaphysical characteristic of the forms of composite beings is reflected in our very language. Whenever we use a word to signify something as a complete and subsisting entity, we use a concrete name that pertains to the composite (think of our earlier example of 'white' as pertaining to *a-haver-of-whiteness*). By contrast, when we employ a

³⁰ ST I, q. 12, aa. 11–12 (Leon. 4.134–37).

³¹ ST I, q. 13, a. 1 co. (Leon. 4.139–40).

³² ST I, q. 13, a. 11, obj. 1 & ad 1 (Leon. 4.162). See *De divinis nominibus*, c. 1.

name to signify a simple form, it does not signify that form as subsisting but as that *by which* something is. As an example, he gives the name ‘whiteness’, which indeed signifies a form but, to be precise, signifies it as that *by which* something is white.³³

Herein lies the semantic problem for us in naming God. Like the created composite beings that we know and name, God subsists; but *unlike* them, he is a simple form. To express this simplicity, therefore, we need to use abstract names. Still, unlike the simple forms that we customarily name, which are not subsistent (such as *whiteness*), God is subsistent. To express this subsistence and perfection, we need to use concrete names. Aquinas clearly thinks both sorts of names signify something about God. But he also makes clear that ‘both [sorts of names] fall short of his mode [of existing], just as in this life, our intellect does not know him.’³⁴

Here, we return to the terminist semantics implicitly employed by Aquinas, namely with the distinction between concrete and abstract naming. It is a distinction that he brings out more explicitly in the earlier *Summa contra gentiles*. There, in Book I, c. 30, we again find him considering the topic of divine naming. He begins by reminding us that every perfection found in creatures is found in God, albeit in a more eminent way. So, the names that designate those perfections can be predicated of God. Some of these names, however, express a perfection that is properly said of creatures, such as names designating a species (e.g. ‘stone’ of *stone*), or those designating a property caused by the principles of the species (e.g. ‘hardness’ said of the *hardness* of a stone). Such names can be said of God only metaphorically, just as ‘hardness’ can be said metaphorically of a human. The implication is that included in these sorts of names is the imperfection of composition. But other names, Aquinas explains, designate a perfection without the defect of composition that can be said of God non-metaphorically, or literally. These are said of him supereminently in such a way that they are said of God alone, e.g. ‘Highest Good’ (*summum bonum*), ‘First Being’ (*primum ens*), and so forth.³⁵

³³ ST I, q. 13, a. 1, ad 2 (Leon. 4.139–40).

³⁴ ST I, q. 13, a. 1, ad 2 (Leon. 4.139–40): “quamvis utraque nomina deficient a modo ipsius, sicut intellectus noster non cognoscit eum ut est, secundum hanc vitam.”

³⁵ SCG, I, c. 30 (Marietti 2.42–43:275–276).

How, we might ask, can these names signify a perfection without indicating defect? Aquinas tells us: as regards *what* the name is used to signify—in other words, as regards the *res significata*. Nevertheless, even names said supereminently of God fall short of fully expressing him because of their *mode* of signification (*modus significandi*). And he reminds us that the mode by which a name expresses its *res significata* follows the mode according to which the form is conceived by the intellect: the *modus intelligendi*. Offering further clarification, Aquinas notes that the starting point of all human knowledge is sensation; for this reason, our intellect can never transcend the mode of existing found in sensible things. ‘[I]n them,’ he explains, ‘there is a distinction between form and the *haver* of the form.’³⁶ Their form is indeed simple, but it is imperfect because it is not subsisting, instead having ‘concretion’ (*concretio*). It is for this reason that, as we saw him explain in the *Summa theologiae*, whatever our intellect signifies as subsisting, it does according to a concrete mode of signification, which is to say as composed. By contrast, what it signifies as simple, it signifies as that *by which* something is (*quo est*) rather than as *that which is* (*quod est*).

In sum, the mode of signification of our words necessarily follows our mode of understanding. Consequently, there is imperfection found in every supereminent name said of God due to the *modus significandi* of the name. Aquinas is clear, however, that there is *no* imperfection found in its *res significata*, since *that* belongs to God in an eminent way. By way of example, he gives the names of ‘good’ (*bonum*) and ‘goodness’ (*bonitas*). Both signify the *res significata* of the formality that is *goodness*. Granting that the name ‘goodness’ signifies its *res significata* as a simple form, Aquinas makes clear that it nevertheless necessarily does so following our mode of understanding, which is to say that the abstract mode of the signification of this name does not signify *goodness* as something that subsists. By contrast, the concrete name ‘good,’ does signify God’s goodness as subsistent, but it does so by concretion as *consignifying* composition rather than simplicity.³⁷

Having presented the foregoing semantic analysis, Aquinas concludes as follows:

³⁶SCG, I, c. 30 (Marietti 2.43:277): “[I]n quibus aliud est forma et habens formam, propter formae et materiae compositionem.”

³⁷ SCG, I, c. 30 (Marietti 2.43:277).

[I]n this respect, no name is fittingly applied to God, but only with respect to that to which the name was applied to signify. Therefore, as Dionysius teaches, such names can be affirmed *and* denied of God. They can be *affirmed* on account of the *ratio* of the name, but they can be *denied* on account of [their] mode of signification.³⁸

Aquinas ends this chapter of the *Contra gentiles* by noting that the only way we can apply names to signify the mode of supereminence of the perfection as found in God is either by negation or by (causal) relation. We should recall here Aquinas's position that modes of signification *follow upon* modes of existence (*modi essendi*) but as mediated by modes of understanding. It is because we cannot know God's supereminent *modus essendi* that our words have no mode of signification that correspond to that divine mode of existence. Or, as Aquinas puts it here, 'For we cannot grasp *what* God is, but [only] what he is not and how other [things] are related to him [...]'.³⁹

If we return to the Prima Pars of the *Summa theologiae*, we find Aquinas offering similar words shortly after having offered his famous Five Ways. Having shown *that* God is, Aquinas next tells us in his prologue to Question 3 that we cannot follow the usual Aristotelian scientific methodology that would entail investigating *how* he is and *what* he is "rather, because we cannot know *what* he is, but [only] what he is *not*, we cannot consider *how* God is, but rather how he is *not*."⁴⁰ On the face of it, this final statement would seem to be an endorsement of a thoroughgoing apophatic theology on Aquinas's part. If we recall Article 1 of Questions 13, Aquinas had said there that no name that we give to God can express the divine essence as it is in itself. With that in mind, we might then be surprised to find him telling us in Article 2 that absolute affirmative names for God, such as 'good' and 'wise',

³⁸ SCG, I, c. 30 (Marietti 2.43:277): 'Et quantum ad hoc nullum nomen Deo convenienter aptatur, sed solum quantum ad id ad quod significandum nomen imponitur. Possunt igitur, ut Dionysius docet, huiusmodi nomina et affirmari de Deo et negari: affirmari quidem, propter nominis rationem; negari vero, propter significandi modum.' See Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* I, 5; *De caelesti hierarchia* II, 3.

³⁹ SCG, I, c. 30 (Marietti 2.43:278): 'Non enim de Deo capere possumus quid est, sed quid non est, et qualiter alia se habeant ad ipsum [...].'

⁴⁰ ST I, q. 3, prologus (Leon. 4.35): 'Cognito de aliquo an sit, inquirendum restat quomodo sit, ut sciatur de eo quid sit. Sed quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit.'

signify the divine substance and are predicated of God *substantially*, even though they fall short of fully representing him.

There, he critiques the view of Moses Maimonides and of others who hold that such names are merely disguised negative or causal names. Aquinas insists that to say that 'God is good' is not simply to say that 'God is not bad' or that 'He causes good things'. (God causes bodies, but for all that, we do not call him 'a body'). Instead, these absolute affirmative names signify God's very substance; still, they do so only inasmuch as our intellect knows him from creatures and to the degree that they represent him. They are able to do so because God precontains in himself all creaturely perfections. This is a point that he has already shown earlier in Question 4 when considering God's perfection; there, Aquinas enunciates a key axiomatic principle in his metaphysical thought: every agent makes something like itself (*omne agens agit sibi simile*).⁴¹ God's effects must therefore be like God, and since those effects represent God, a knowledge of them reveals something about him. Nevertheless, they do not represent him as though belonging to the same genus or species 'but rather as an excelling principle, from the form of which effects fall short, and yet from which a certain likeness follows'. Thus, although these absolute affirmative names, like 'good', do signify the divine substance, they do so imperfectly.⁴²

In this way, we see, Aquinas both adheres to and seemingly goes beyond Dionysius: absolute affirmative names said eminently of God, such as 'good' and 'being', are not causal names, even though they presuppose the way of causality. As Aquinas explains, 'it does not follow that it belongs to God to be good inasmuch as he causes goodness, but rather the converse: because he is good, he pours forth goodness into things [...]'.⁴³ As regards Dionysius's position that God is named from his processions, Aquinas agrees, but he makes clear that to say that

⁴¹ ST I, q. 4, a. 2 co. (Leon. 4.51–52). For a consideration of Aquinas's use of this axiom regarding the naming of God, see John F. Wippel, 'Thomas Aquinas on Our Knowledge of God and the Axiom That Every Agent Produces Something Like Itself', in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 152–71.

⁴² ST I, q. 13, a. 2 co. (Leon. 4.142): 'non tamen ita quod repraesentet eum sicut aliquid eiusdem speciei vel generis, sed sicut excellens principium, a cuius forma effectus deficiunt, cuius tamen aliqualem similitudinem effectus consequuntur'.

⁴³ ST I, q. 13, a. 2 co. (Leon. 4.142): 'Unde ex hoc non sequitur quod Deo competat esse bonum inquantum causat bonitatem, sed potius e converso, quia est bonus, bonitatem rebus diffundit, secundum illud Augustini, *de Doct. Christ., inquantum bonus est, sumus*'. Italics in original.

these names are taken from (*imponuntur a*) those processions is not to say that they are used (*imponuntur ad*) to signify those processions. For example, he notes, when we say ‘God lives’, we do not mean that ‘life proceeds from him’. Instead, we mean to signify God as the very principle of things *insofar as life preexists in him*, although in a more eminent way than we can understand or signify.⁴⁴

How then can names such as ‘good’ and ‘life’ be predicated of God substantially? In asserting that the *res significata* of these terms as said of God does not imply defect, is Aquinas tacitly sneaking essential predication back into the way of eminence despite explicitly rejecting such predication? Not if we consider his position about the role of modes of signification in the signification of our words. They are not merely tacked on to the *res significata* as an addendum but rather express the very way we know the formalities expressed through the *res significata*. As human knowers, we cannot help but think and speak according to either an abstract or concrete mode of understanding and signification. Going beyond the text of Aquinas, we might consider as a comparative analogy the visible behavior of light. As physicists have shown, light can be observed as behaving either as a particle or as a wave. But imagine being told that there is also a transcending form of visible light, of which the observable behaviors of both particle and wave must be denied. Presumably, if such light were visible, it would not be visible to us.

I take it that in a parallel way, for Aquinas, both concrete and abstract modes of signification must be denied when predicating affirmative absolute names said of God. Thus, in saying that names such as ‘good’ and ‘life’ can be said of God’s substance, Aquinas is not saying that they signify his essence in such a way that they adequately express it: the denial of both concrete and abstract modes of signification when naming God leaves our expressions incomplete, reflecting our inadequate mode of understanding him. Saying that these names name God’s substance is merely to acknowledge the fact of the matter: God is called ‘good’ in his very essence, and not merely as the cause of good things, but the *modus essendi* of his goodness cannot be adequately expressed because it cannot adequately be known.

⁴⁴ ST I, q. 13, a. 2, ad 2 (Leon. 4.142).

Thus far I have been focusing on Aquinas's example of the name 'good'. But as I noted at the outset, he does not consider this to be the most proper name of God. That he instead identifies as *Qui est*: 'He Who Is'. Aquinas sees this name, as with the name 'Good', as naming the diving substance. And yet, following Dionysius, Aquinas considers both names in another respect to be causal names as well. It is from that perspective, we will find, that he sees considers the divine name of 'Good' to be the principal name of God, prior even to the name 'He Who Is'.

'He Who Is' as the Most Proper Name of God

It is in the eleventh article of Question 13 in the Prima Pars that Aquinas asks which of the divine names is the 'most proper name of God' (*maxime proprium nomen dei*). We should note that in asking this question, Aquinas is not asking what the most *appropriate* name is for God. In this semantic context, a name described as 'proper' is instead the name of a particular individual, as with the name 'Socrates'.⁴⁵ Such names stand in contrast to appellative names (common nouns), such as 'human' or 'animal'. Why then speak of a '*most* proper name'? The reason is that, when it comes to God, we can have no name for him as a singular since we do not know him in his essence. As Aquinas makes clear in Article 8, even the name 'God' is the name of a nature (viz. *divinity*), and following the concrete *modus significandi* names him as a haver, or subject, of that nature (*habens divinitatem*).⁴⁶ In Article 11, he indicates that the closest thing to a proper name of God, which would be entirely incommunicable and designate him as a singular, might be the Tetragrammaton of the Hebrews. As with Maimonides, whose account of this name he read, Aquinas is unaware of its connection to God's pronouncement to Moses in *Exodus* that his name is 'I am who am'. Both thinkers instead see the Tetragrammaton as a distinctive name. (And one, moreover, that is presumably unpronounceable).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Which, if, said of another individual is said equivocally.

⁴⁶ ST I, q. 13, a. 8 (Leon. 4.157–58). Again, we find signification according to a concrete mode, reflecting the limitations of our knowledge and language. The concrete term '*deus*', or 'God', signifies him as something subsistent, but according to the concrete mode of composition, which is a mode that must be denied of him.

⁴⁷ ST I, q. 13, a. 11, ad 1 (Leon. 4.162). Aquinas also briefly mentions the incommunicability of the Tetragrammaton as a name for God in a. 9 of q. 13 (Leon. 4.159). Regarding Aquinas's

It is in light of these limitations on our language that Aquinas identifies 'He Who Is' as the *most* proper name: i.e. the closest approximation to a proper name. This is the case, he tells us, for three reasons: given (1) the name's signification, (2) its universality, and (3) its consignification. As regards its signification, Aquinas reminds us that everything is named from (*denominatur*) its form. This name 'He Who Is', however, does not signify any form but, instead, signifies *esse* itself. Now, God's *esse* is his very essence, which is unique to God. Thus, among all other names, this one most properly names God. The second reason Aquinas gives is the universality of this name. All other names are either less universal or add on another notion (*ratio*) to that of *being*. Since any determinate mode according to which we understand God falls short of him, Aquinas explains that the less determinate a name is, the more universal and absolute it is, and the more it is properly said of God. The name 'He Who Is', however, does not name any determinate mode of existing but is related to all of them, so from this perspective, it is again recognized as the most proper name for God. Finally, the third reason Aquinas gives follows from the consignification of this name. Recall that the consignification of a word is like a secondary signification (implied, as it were), following necessarily from the principal signification of the word. Thus, verbs principally signify either action or passion, but given their tense they also consignify time. As regards the name 'He Who Is', Aquinas explains, it principally signifies existence, but it does so with a verb in the present tense, and in that way it *consignifies* according to the mode of *present* existence, and this mode of existence, again, is most properly said of God because his existence knows no past or future.⁴⁸

Going beyond the text, it is worth noting that the name 'He Who Is' is clearly not as such a causal name because its signification does not indicate any relation of God to creatures as his effects. If we analyze the name semantically, we find that its *res significata*, is *esse*: the act of existing. And it signifies this *res* according to a concrete mode, consignifying a *haver*, or subject, of existence. In this way, the name signifies the subsistence of its referent. This absolute (i.e. non-relative) character of the name is a point of concern raised in one Dionysian

use and understanding of the Tetragrammaton, see Armand Maurer C.S.B., 'St. Thomas on the Sacred Name "Tetragrammaton"', *Mediaeval Studies* 34 (1972): 275–86.

⁴⁸ ST I, q. 13, a. 11 co. (Leon. 4.162).

inspired objection in this article, which observes that since God is known to us only through creatures (i.e. his effects), every divine name, it would seem, should signify (*importare*) a relation to effects. But, the objection continues, this is not the case with the name ‘He Who Is’, so it does not seem to be the most proper name of God.⁴⁹ In reply, Aquinas clarifies with a Dionysian inspired response that not every divine name needs to signify a relation to creatures. All that is required is that these names be taken from (*imponantur ab*) perfections proceeding from God into creatures. And among them the first procession is *esse*, existence, from which the name ‘He Who Is’ is taken.⁵⁰

We find Dionysius’s authority explicitly cited in the second objection of this article. There, we are reminded of Dionysius’s words from Book III of the *Divine Names* ‘The name of “Good” is manifestive of all of God’s processions.’⁵¹ Therefore, it is argued, the most proper name for God should, in fact, be the name ‘Good’. And it is in response to this objection that we find Aquinas telling us that ‘the name “good” is the principal name of God inasmuch as he is a cause; nevertheless, not absolutely (*simpliciter*), since *existence* (*esse*) is understood prior to [the understanding] of *cause*’.⁵² As is often the case in the *Summa theologiae*, his response is brief. As such, it raises a number of questions: Why is it that ‘good’ is the principal name of God causally considered? Does this mean that, in this respect, this name is prior even to the name ‘He Who Is’? Moreover, if Aquinas views the name ‘good’ as said of God to be among his absolute and affirmative names, how can it also be a relative causal name? To answer these questions, we need to go beyond this text to look at what Aquinas says elsewhere on this topic, notably, in his Commentary on Dionysius’s *Divine Names*.⁵³

⁴⁹ ST I, q. 13, a. 11, obj. 3 (Leon. 4.162).

⁵⁰ ST I, q. 13, a. 11, ad 3 (Leon. 4.162).

⁵¹ ST I, q. 13, a. 11, obj. 2 (Leon. 4.162). For the Latin, see n. 5 above.

⁵² ST I, q. 13, a. 11, ad 2 (Leon. 4.162). For the Latin, see n. 5 above.

⁵³ At long last a much needed English translation of Aquinas’s Commentary has appeared in print, translated and edited by Michael A. Augros, which includes as well a translation of John the Saracen’s Latin translation of the *De divinis nominibus* employed by Aquinas; in addition, this volume includes the Latin for both Aquinas’s and the Saracen texts: Thomas Aquinas, *An Exposition of “The Divine Names,” The Book of Blessed Dionysius*, trans. Michael A. Augros (Merrimack, NH: Thomas More College Press, 2021).

'Good' as the Principal Causal Name of God

In his preface to this Commentary, Aquinas observes that the reader encounters certain difficulties in reading this work, one of which is that Dionysius 'frequently employs the style and manner of speaking used by the Platonists, to which moderns are unaccustomed'.⁵⁴ In saying this, Aquinas is by no means indicating that he himself considers Dionysius to be a Platonist. Rather, as he tells us later in the Commentary, in a way Dionysius agrees with the Platonists and in another disagrees with them. He agrees with them, for example, in positing a separately existing perfections such as Life Itself (*vita separata per se existens*), Wisdom (*sapientia*), *Esse*, and other such perfections. But he disagrees with the Platonists that these separate principles are distinct from each other. Instead, Dionysius holds that they are all in reality one principle, which is God.⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Aquinas strikingly tells us that 'Dionysius almost everywhere follows Aristotle, as is clear from a careful inspection of his books'.⁵⁶ How strictly we should take this claim as Aquinas's considered view is debatable, particularly since this observation appears in a youthful work; suffice it to say that he at least attributes to Dionysius certain Aristotelian viewpoints, as Aquinas does on the topic of the causality of God as the Good.

In our consideration of Aquinas's reading of Dionysius on the divine name of 'good', it is important that we start by acknowledging what Aquinas acknowledges: as regards Dionysius's treatment of any of the divine names in this work, 'it is not his intention to manifest the ineffable essence of God as it is in itself [...]'.⁵⁷ Instead, Aquinas explains, Dionysius's intention is 'to praise God with the name "good" inasmuch as he is the cause of *all goods*; and with the name of "existence" inasmuch as *he makes every substance*; and with the name of "life" inasmuch as *he gives life* to everything; and the name of "wisdom" inasmuch as he gives

⁵⁴ *In De div. nom.*, Proemium (Marietti 1.II.a): "*Primo*, quidem, quia plerumque utitur stilo et modo loquendi quo utebantur platonici, qui apud modernos est inconsuetus."

⁵⁵ *In De div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 1 (Marietti 235:634).

⁵⁶ *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis II* (hereafter *Super Sententiis II*), ed. P. Mandonnet, vol. 2 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929), d. 14, q. 1, a. 2 co. (Mandonnet 2.350): 'Basilius enim et Augustinus et plures sanctorum sequuntur in philosophicis quae ad fidem non spectant, opiniones Platonis: et ideo ponunt caelum de natura quatuor elementorum. Dionysius autem fere ubique sequitur Aristotelem, ut patet diligenter inspicienti libros ejus: unde ipse separat corpora caelestia ab aliis corporibus.'

⁵⁷ *In De div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 1 (Marietti 233:618): 'Et quia, sicut iam dixit non est suae intentionis ineffabilem Dei essentiam manifestare secundum quod in se est [...].'

wisdom'.⁵⁸ In short, whereas Aquinas himself in the Question 13 of the *Prima Pars* treats these very names as absolute affirmative names that signify the divine substance itself, he acknowledges here that in this text Dionysius is himself treating them, if not as causal names, at least from the *perspective of their causality*.⁵⁹

Looking at the Saraccenus Latin translation of the *Divine Names*, Aquinas finds Dionysius in Chapter I addressing how God can be named and telling us that '[s]ince, as the essence of goodness, through [its] very being (*esse*), he is the cause of all existing [things], it is fitting to praise the providence of the Thearchy, principle of the good, from all caused things'.⁶⁰ Aquinas sees Dionysius here as presenting God as the very essence of goodness. It is precisely as such, Aquinas explains, that God is a cause of all things by his very being rather than by a created disposition. Thus, in himself, God prepossess the likeness of all of his effects. And every cause, Aquinas explains, can be named by the name of its effect to the degree that it is has in itself the likeness of its effects.⁶¹ Here, we begin to find Aquinas applying Aristotelian notions of causality in his reading of Dionysius regarding the name 'good' as said of God. Taken causally, any good as such has the nature (*ratio*) of an end, he explains, because the good is what everything desires. And since the end is first among the (four) causes, it is the cause to which the nature (*ratio*) of causation belongs first.⁶²

Dionysius himself turns his attention to the divine name of 'good' in Chapter 3 of his work. There, he tells us, 'And first, if it seems [right], we will first looks at the name of "good", perfect and manifestive of all of the processions of God, invoking the Trinity, principle of the good and the Supergood, which is manifestive of all of the providences generously

⁵⁸ *In De div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 1 (Marietti 232:611): 'Intentio ergo praesentis sermonis est laudare Deum nomine boni, secundum quod est causa *omnium bonorum*; et nomine existentis, secundum quod *facit* omnem *substantiam*; et nomine vitae, secundum quod *vificat* omnia; et nomine sapientiae, secundum quod dat sapientiam'. Italics in original and in my translation indicate Aquinas's quotation of Dionysius.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., *Divinis Nominibus*, c. 1 where Dionysius speaks of God as 'essentia bonitas' *Div. nom.* c. 1 in *In De div. nom.*, (Marietti 25:24).

⁶⁰ *Div. nom.* c. 1 in *In De div. nom.*, (Marietti 25:24): 'Quoniam autem, sicut bonitatis essential, per ipsum esse, omnium est existentium causa, boni principem Thearchiae providentiam, ex omnibus causatis laudare convenit'.

⁶¹ *In De div. nom.*, c. 1, lect. 3 (Marietti 28–29:88).

⁶² *In De div. nom.*, c. 1, lect. 3 (Marietti 28:87).

bestowed from it'.⁶³ Aquinas is well aware that among the Platonists, the name 'good' is the principal name for the first cause, or God. For this reason, he indicates that if we are to understand Dionysius's ordering of the name 'good' as the first of the divine names, we should first consider why the Platonists viewed the Good as the first cause. Referencing Aristotle's *Physics*, Aquinas notes that the Platonists did not distinguish matter from privation. As a result, they viewed matter as nonbeing.⁶⁴ Thus, when they considered the causality of the separate form of Being, the Platonists held that its causality extended only to beings and, thus, did not extend to prime matter, to which the causality of the Good, by contrast, did extend. A sign of this causal extension, he explains, is that matter most of all desires the Good. We are then told that it is the property of an effect that through desire it should turn back toward its cause. So, since for the Platonists the causality of the Good extended to more things than did the causality of Being, they considered it to be a more universal and higher cause than the form of Being.⁶⁵

Aquinas then explains that Dionysius himself seems to touch on this Platonic point in a following chapter (which we will turn to momentarily), but he indicates that Dionysius in fact had a different rationale for viewing the name 'good' as first among God's names. Aquinas reminds us again: 'In this book, [Dionysius] intends to treat the divine names manifesting the processions of creatures from God inasmuch as he is the cause of things'.⁶⁶ Aquinas adds, moreover, that what has the nature (*ratio*) of a cause first and universally is *that which is good (bonum)*. And he gives two reasons for this claim. The first reason is that a good as such has the nature of an end and, thus, the nature of a cause. Explaining this position in more detail, Aquinas adds that form is a cause insofar as it makes matter to be in act and matter is made to be in act first when, by some agent, it begins to be. The second reason Aquinas offers is that an agent makes something like itself—not inasmuch as the agent is a being in any respect whatsoever—but rather

⁶³ *Div. nom.* c. 3 in *In De div. nom.*, (Marietti 71:78): 'Et primam, si videtur, perfectam et totarum Dei processionum manifestativum, boni nominationem inspiciemus, boni principem et superbiam invocantes Trinitatem, quae est manifestativa totarum providentiarum, benigne ab ipsa donatarum'.

⁶⁴ *In De div. nom.*, c. 3, lect. 1 (Marietti 75:226).

⁶⁵ *In De div. nom.*, c. 3, lect. 1 (Marietti 75:226).

⁶⁶ *In De div. nom.*, c. 3, lect. 1 (Marietti 75:227): 'Intendit enim in hoc libro agere de divinis Nominibus manifestantibus processiones creaturarum a Deo, secundum quod est Causa rerum'.

inasmuch as the agent is *perfect*. And here he cites Aristotle to the effect that whatever is perfect can make something like itself. Therefore, the perfect has the nature (*ratio*) of that which is good.⁶⁷

With the foregoing reasons in mind, Aquinas tells us that whatever God causes in creatures—whether it is existing (*esse*), living (*vivere*), or anything else—the whole of it proceeds from the divine goodness and the whole of it pertains to the goodness of creatures. Thus, he concludes that Dionysius ‘says that naming is perfect inasmuch as it comprehends everything and is manifestive of all of the divine processions’.⁶⁸ In sum, we are told that it is for the two reasons mentioned, drawn from an Aristotelian account of causality, that Dionysius places the name of ‘good’ as first in the order of divine names.

Dionysius himself addresses the name of ‘good’ in greater detail in Chapter 4, followed in Chapter 5 with a consideration of the name ‘being’ (*existens* in the Sarracenus edition: *that which exists*). At the outset of commenting on the latter chapter, Aquinas now attributes something of the Platonic position that he had mentioned earlier to Dionysius’s ordering of the divine names. He tells us that the Areopagite treats the name ‘good’ as prior to that of ‘being’ (*ens*) because, as the Platonists said, *good* extends to more than *being*. Here, the reason Aquinas gives is that even that which is not existing in act, namely a being in potency, is good from the fact that it has an order to good and, thus, has the nature (*ratio*) of something good. This is to say, he explains, that it participates in the causality of the *good*; by contrast, the same being in potency participates in the causality of *being* (only) when it comes to be in act.⁶⁹ A few paragraphs later, Aquinas presents this greater universality of *good* as follows:

The name of ‘good’ manifests all processions of the universal essence of things and extends itself both to “beings” (*existentia*) and to ‘nonbeings’, (*non existentia*) insofar as nonbeings have something of the good, inasmuch as they are in potency to existence (*esse*). But the name of ‘being’ (*nomen entis*) manifests

⁶⁷ *In De div. nom.*, c. 3, lect. 1 (Marietti 75:227).

⁶⁸ *In De div. nom.*, c. 3, lect. 1 (Marietti 75:228): ‘Et ideo dicit quod nomination est perfecta, inquantum omnia comprehendit et est manifestative omnium divinarum *processionum*.’ Italics in original.

⁶⁹ *In De div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 1 (Marietti 231:606).

the procession of existence from God into ‘all’ beings, but inasmuch as it is said of God, ‘it is above’ all ‘existing things’.⁷⁰

Although there is no explicit mention of matter in this text, the reference is clear. And this reading is confirmed if we return to the Prima Pars of the *Summa theologiae*. There, when considering goodness in general in Question 5, Aquinas tells us in Article 2 that the notion (*ratio*) of *being* (*ens*) is prior to that of *good* (*bonum*). The first objection in this article cites the authority of Dionysius, noting that he tells us in Book 3 of the *Divine Names* that *good* is prior to *being*. In response, Aquinas as before notes that Dionysius considers the order of the divine names according to a relation to God as cause, since we name God from his effects. Since *good* has the nature (*ratio*) of the desirable, the name signifies the relation of a final cause, whose causality is first among causes and is the cause of causes. Thus, the causality of *good* is prior to that of *being*, just as the causality of an end is prior to that of a form. Thus, Aquinas says, ‘for this reason among the names signifying the divine causality, “good” is placed prior to “being”’.

In the course of his reply, he again references the Platonists, noting that they did not distinguish matter from privation. Thus, they said that matter is nonbeing and that the participation of the Good extended to more than did the participation of Being. At this point, Aquinas makes a subtle unspoken shift to an Aristotelian reading of prime matter as pure potency, noting: ‘For prime matter participates in the *good* because it desires it [...]: but it does not participate in *being* since it is posited as nonbeing’. Aquinas tells us that this is why Dionysius says that ‘the good extends to beings and to nonbeings’.⁷¹ In short, he presents Dionysius as accounting for the greater universality of the name ‘good’ as a divine name due to the extension of God’s goodness to the sort of nonbeing

⁷⁰ *In De div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 1 (Marietti 232:610): ‘[N]omen *boni* manifestat omnes processus universalis essentiae rerum et extendit se tam *ad existentia*, quam *ad non existentia*, inquantum non existentia habent aliquid boni, prout sunt in potentia ad esse. Nomen vero entis designat processum essendi a Deo in *omnia* entia et secundum quod de Deo dicitur, *est super omnia existentia*’. Italics in original, indicating quotation of Dionysius.

⁷¹ ST I, q. 5, a. 2 ad 1 (Leon. 4.58): ‘Nam materia prima participat bonum, cum appetat ipsum (nihil autem appetit nisi simile sibi): non autem participat ens, cum ponatur non ens. Et ideo dicit Dionysius [*De div. nom.*, c. 5] quod *bonum extenditur ad non existentia*’. It is in reply to the second objection that Aquinas explicitly brings out the role of prime matter as pure potency in this consideration.

that is the pure potency of prime matter, and this causality is greater in extension than that of *being*.

With that said, we should be aware that even though Aquinas expresses agreement with Dionysius on this distinction in the context of the order and hierarchy of God's names taken causally, he does not mean to suggest that the causality of God's very being is somehow subordinate to that of his goodness since, absolutely considered, God's goodness is in reality identical with his very being inasmuch as he is *esse subsistens*. Thus, for God to cause through his goodness is to cause through his being.

Conclusion

From what we have seen, Aquinas subordinates 'Being' as the name of God to that of 'Good' insofar as both are considered to follow the Way of Causality. Since God's exemplar causality of creatures extends only to beings that exist in actuality, prime matter as pure potency is not a causal procession of God considered as *being*. But since prime matter *is* ordered to the good, Aquinas agrees with Dionysius that it is a procession of God's *goodness*. Hence, the name 'Good' as said of God acknowledges that this causality extends to the procession both of actual being and of the sort of nonbeing that is being in potency. It is from the perspective of this greater universal causality of the divine goodness that Aquinas considers the divine name of 'Good' to be the principal name of God, rather than 'He Who Is'.

If, however, we consider Aquinas's adoption and adaptation of the Dionysian *triplex via*, we see in his treatment of these two names for God an analysis not only according to the way of causality but also according to the way of eminence. Thus, if we consider what these names signify absolutely in themselves—i.e. in light of their respective *res significatae*—we find that even though they are first taken from their effects, these names nevertheless signify for Aquinas God's very substance rather than him as cause. For God exists and is good by his very essence, which is to say that he *is* and is good absolutely and not merely in relation to his effects. Thus, unlike other causal names such as 'Prime Mover' and 'First Efficient Cause', the names of 'Being' and 'Good' can also be said of God—and, indeed, are primarily said

of him—according to the way of eminence. It is because these two names can be considered from these two perspectives, therefore, that Aquinas can without contradiction follow in the Platonic tradition of acknowledging the name of ‘Good’ as God’s principal name while simultaneously affirming his most proper name, absolutely considered, to be ‘He Who is.’⁷²

⁷² I would like to thank my research assistant, Jane Spencer, for her assistance in researching this paper.