



Reason, Metaphysics, and their Relationship in the Theologies of Jenson and Aquinas

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Throughout recent theological history, reason and metaphysics have had a volatile relationship. Contemporary theologians often contend that the latter, as it is concerned primarily with the first principles of things,¹ is inaccessible to the former inasmuch as it is unaided. This understanding of their relationship, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, it is no difficult endeavor to find pre-modern theologians who believed that metaphysical claims could be formulated on account of reason alone. And yet, despite this seemingly stark distinction and the materially distinct claims that often follow therefrom, the theological methodologies of these two groups are not wholly incommensurable. This may be ascertained by examining the work of Thomas Aquinas and Robert Jenson, two eminent theologians who embody each of these respective views. In doing so, it will become evident that, amidst their diametric opposition regarding the ability of reason to fashion metaphysical claims, Aquinas and Jenson's methodologies are conducive to rich dialogue as their objects of inquiry and theological authorities are nearly identical. In order to examine this, it will first be profitable to articulate both theologians' understandings of the relationship between reason and metaphysics and then to analyze how there is a large degree of commensurability amidst the stark differences of their methodologies.

Reason and Naming God: An Exposition of *ST I*, q.13

We may begin chronologically by delineating this relationship in the work of Aquinas. As this aspect of the Angelic Doctor's theology is articulated most lucidly and perspicaciously in his seminal examination of the *nomina divina* wherein he describes in what ways names can be given to God, it will be profitable to follow the logic

¹ Other problems considered within the category termed "metaphysics" include the nature of free will, time, *etc.* The aspect of metaphysics with which this paper is principally concerned, however, is the nature of the first principle of things.

of the text and exposit it accordingly. It is here, after all, where his understanding of reason's function in theology is represented most fully.

Two Foundational Claims of *ST* I, q.13, a.1

As the *Summa Theologiae* is deliberately structured on all levels according to the *ordo disciplinae*,² the full intelligibility of an article often hinges upon antecedent ones. This notion is especially pertinent to *ST* I, q.13, as the first article lays the linguistic and theological foundation upon which the subsequent ones build by answering whether a name can be given to God. For this reason, despite its brevity and predictable positive answer, his response is of great import for the remaining articles of question 13. What is central to this article – more so even than its affirmation that a name can be given to God – is the dual claims used to substantiate it. Though brief, these two assertions, namely the articulation of (1) the relationship between words and things and (2) the nature of humanity's knowledge of God, are employed and supplemented throughout the subsequent articles. A detailed examination of both is thus requisite in order to apprehend Aquinas' subtle claims both here and in the proceeding sections.

Because the act of naming is inherently linguistic, it will be profitable to follow in Thomas' footsteps and delineate the nature of language before examining the character of our theological knowledge. While the overall affirmation of this article is grounded in a Scriptural citation,³ he roots his linguistic propositions in the work of Aristotle. Specifically, he utilizes the Philosopher's *Perihermeneias* in order to contend that "words are signs of ideas, and ideas the similitudes of things."⁴ We may thus characterize Aquinas' philosophy of language as a semantic triangle consisting of reality (*res*), knowledge (*ratio*), and language (*nomen*). Aquinas presents the logic of this tripartite linguistic system as "words function[ing] in the signification of things through the conception of the intellect."⁵ What this eliminates is a dyadic notion of an unmediated relationship between word and thing. Instead, Thomas acknowledges the mediatory role of the

² *ST*, prologue. All citations of the *Summa Theologiae* are from Thomas Aquinas, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton Pegis (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1945).

³ Aquinas cites Exodus 15:3 as an authoritative instance wherein God was rightly named in *ST* I, q.13, a.1, *sed*.

⁴ In this quote in *ST* I, q.13, a.1, *resp.*, Aquinas cites Aristotle's philosophy of language as it is found specifically in *Perih*, i.

⁵ *Ibid*.

speaker and concludes that “we can give a name to anything in as far as we can understand it.”⁶

As Aquinas includes the aspect of one’s *ratio* as an essential component of speech, he does not do so at the expense of the *res* itself by contending that reality is veiled behind an obfuscatory shroud of language.⁷ Instead, he is asserting that all forms of speech necessarily involve *every* aspect of the tripartite interplay of the semantic triangle. For this reason, Aquinas affirms the notion that words do indeed signify things; he simply believes that they do so as they are mediated by concepts.⁸ Specifically, as a *nomen* directly signifies a *ratio*, this *ratio* cannot be divorced from its corresponding *res*, since the *ratio* signified by the name functions as our knowledge of what precisely the *res significata* is.⁹ Moreover, the thing signified by a name itself is not a particular manifestation of a *res*; rather, as Rudi Te Velde aptly demonstrates,¹⁰ it denotes what the *nomen* says it is, that is, as a general concept that can be further specified through the use of modifiers.

Indeed, this is evident in our everyday speech patterns. For example, if I were to say, “I want to adopt a cat,” the *res significata* by the name “cat” would not be a particular cat. Instead, the *ratio* signified by the word “cat” would be a general conception of a (typically) four-legged, domesticated mammal that purrs and has whiskers. If I were to refer to a specific cat by saying, “My cat is gray,” through the possessive pronoun “my” and the adjective “gray,” the general concept of the word “cat” is specified as my particular gray domesticated mammal that purrs, has four legs, eats my food, and scratches my couch. For this reason, we are capable – often seamlessly – of distinguishing between our particular experience of a thing and the thing itself we are attempting to signify in a certain manner.¹¹ This remains true even when one’s conception of a thing’s essence is minimal. Indeed, this was present in my brief statements about cats. Although my *ratio* of what a cat is is imperfect on account of my scant knowledge of taxonomy and limited exposure to cats – *i.e.*, my ability to conceptually formulate a clean definition of the word “cat” as distinct from, say, “rat,” “dog,” and “weasel” is wanting – I am still able to employ the term “cat” intelligibly despite my meager experience and comprehension of them. In order to name something correctly, one therefore need not possess exhaustive knowledge of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 98.

⁸ Ibid, 99.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 100.

¹¹ Ibid.

the thing itself. Instead, even with limited exposure to a *res* and therefore merely a partially correct *ratio* of it, one can rightly name it. In order to understand this concept more fully and apprehend its theological ramifications, it will be necessary to press forward and delineate the second foundational claim of the article as it pertains to our knowledge of God.

Continuing his argument that we can rightly give a name to God, Aquinas alludes to a claim made in the previous question. He does so because, after demonstrating that a minimal understanding of something is all that is requisite to name it, he needs to make intelligible Scripture's naming of God and to examine how our present mode of theological knowledge meets this bare requirement.¹² In so doing, he reiterates his claims made in *ST I*, q.12, a.11-12 and states that although "in this life we cannot see the essence of God . . . we know God from creatures as their cause, and also by way of excellence and remotion."¹³ As humans are rational creatures capable of examining creation as an effect of God, all people as such have the potential to attain at least a minimal understanding of God through reason alone.¹⁴ The force and nuances of this claim, however, do not reside in *ST I*, q.13, a.1 itself. Instead, Aquinas expects his readers to recall the logic of *ST I*, qq.2-12.

Prior to examining the attributes of God in *ST I*, qq.3-11, the Angelic Doctor offers a brief, often misconstrued remark on apophatic theology: "[B]ecause we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not."¹⁵ Although this notion is present and consistently affirmed throughout the *Summa*, it is important to note that Aquinas is not rejecting the possibility of humanity possessing true knowledge of God. What he *is* doing is removing God from the realm of creatures as the transcendent One and subverting any idea of continuity between God and creation.¹⁶ Indeed, even this apophatic claim itself rests upon a prior theological affirmation. Namely, it is coherent solely in light of the previous question wherein he contends that, though humanity's knowledge begins from the senses, the existence of the observable physical effects of creation is intelligible only by positing the metaphysical existence of a transcendent Creator.¹⁷

¹² It is evident that Scripture's naming of God is, to some degree, driving his argument of God's nameability as his citation in *ST I*, q.13, *sed.* functions as the launching pad from which his inquiry proceeds: "It is written (*Exod. xv. 3*): *The Lord is a man of war, Almighty is his name.*"

¹³ *ST I*, q.13, a.1, *resp.*

¹⁴ *ST I*, q.12, a.12.

¹⁵ *ST I*, q.3, prologue.

¹⁶ Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 74.

¹⁷ *ST I*, q.2, a. 3.

How, after all, could one make negative claims about God without presupposing that God exists? This coupling of the positive with the negative and – more tacitly – the physical with the metaphysical is, moreover, neither an accident nor an anomaly in the thought of Aquinas. Instead, he elsewhere affirms this principle explicitly:

The idea of negation is always based on an affirmation: as evidenced by the fact that every negative proposition is proved by an affirmative: wherefore unless the human mind knew something positively about God, it would be unable to deny anything about him. And it would know nothing if nothing that it affirmed about God were positively verified about him.¹⁸

Because it is evident that *ST* I, q.2 functions as the affirmative foundation on which apophatic theological reasoning builds, it will be necessary to proceed further and examine how negative claims themselves constitute real theological knowledge for Aquinas.

Negative theology, as it is legitimated on account of the affirmation that God is the transcendent first cause, must too be tailored in accordance with this positive claim. Aquinas makes this transition from knowledge of *whether* God exists to *what* must necessarily belong to God by examining the particularities of this first cause:

[B]ecause they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God whether He exists, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him.

Hence, we know His relationship with creatures, that is, that he is the *cause* of all things; also that creatures *differ* from Him, inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him; and that His effects are removed from Him, not by reason of any defect on His part, but because He *superexceeds* them all.¹⁹

Thomas' logic, in short, is this: natural human knowledge derives from our physical senses.²⁰ By observing creation as a physical effect, we are able to logically deduce that there must be a transcendent first cause, who is none other than God.²¹ As God is the primary cause of all effects, it is possible to take what we empirically understand as the relationship between a cause and effect and employ what we know of the latter through our senses in order to infer what is necessarily proper to the former.²² For this reason, Aquinas

¹⁸ *De Pot.* q.7, a.5. Accessed from Thomas Aquinas, "Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei," *Dominican House of Studies: Priory of the Immaculate Conception*, <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/english/QDdePotentia.htm>.

¹⁹ *ST* I, q.12, a.12. Italics added.

²⁰ *ST* I, q.12, a.12, *resp.*

²¹ *ST* I, q.2, a.3.

²² *ST* I, q.12, a.12, *resp.*

grounds all human knowledge of God in a threefold formula, reflecting the relationship between cause and effect. Namely, we can know that God is (1) the cause of all things, (2) removed from all effects insofar as God is not in any way a part of them, and (3) the excelling source from which all effects derive. While the first category is the cornerstone upon which the latter two are founded, the ideas of remotion and excellence are equally necessary to Aquinas' theological enterprise. Specifically, by possessing two without their accompanying third category, one inevitably falls into error. By evading this through the maintenance of the *triplex via*, Aquinas is able to suggest that we are indeed capable of attaining real knowledge of God, however, in a manner that is insufficient for expressing the divine essence itself.²³ As this distinction is subtle, concise, and thus far unsubstantiated, we must again trek forward and allow Aquinas, as our guide, to illuminate all present obscurities. In so doing, he will bolster our present understanding of the necessity of the *triplex via* and delineate the way in which this path, as it leads one to the attainment of indirect knowledge of God, renders individuals capable of rightly naming him.

Proper and Substantial Names

Thus far, Aquinas has affirmed *that* the threefold *via* of negative theology enables humans, given their natural faculties, to understand and therefore name God. The question we now face is *how*. Specifically, how can language, as it is principally used to describe temporal reality, simultaneously name one who transcends this creaturely sphere? The Angelic Doctor's final answer to this dilemma is his instrumental doctrine of analogy (*ST* I, q.13, a.5). Getting there, however, mandates prior knowledge of two antecedent articles: *ST* I, q.13, a.2-3. Within them, Aquinas employs his *triplex via* in order to demonstrate the necessity of its integrity and to distinguish two ways in which our language can be applied to God.

First, Aquinas is concerned with answering whether a name can be applied to God substantially.²⁴ While his answer is ultimately affirmative, Aquinas formulates this conclusion while concurrently maintaining his previous proposition that we cannot name God in such a way that it expresses the divine essence itself.²⁵ The distinction is this: although we cannot possess defining knowledge of God's essence wherein a name encapsulates who God is, we can

²³ This conclusion, though its argument is scattered throughout *ST* I, qq.2-12, is located in *ST* I, q.13, a.1.

²⁴ *ST* I, q.13, a.2.

²⁵ *ST* I, q.13, a.1, *resp.*

nevertheless say something true about God.²⁶ He demonstrates this by employing the *triplex via* in order to describe what linguistically occurs when one makes an ordinary theological locution. In so doing, he describes a particular category of error incurred by fracturing the tripartite system. Specifically, Aquinas lists three problems that arise from Alain of Lille's notion²⁷ that an affirmative statement such as "God is good" solely signifies that God is the cause of goodness in things and that, by implication, God is not to be identified with what he causes.²⁸ The problems engendered by this methodology are that it cannot (1) demarcate between attributes that can and cannot be applied to God, (2) name him in any primary sense, and therefore (3) reflect the intention of ordinary speakers who mean to attribute more than mere causality of goodness to God.²⁹ Though distinct, these three are manifestations of the same issue, namely, that Lille's methodology places the divine essence behind an obfuscatory veil of sheer apophaticism.

As Aquinas wants to uphold that we can possess real knowledge of God, he must consequently undermine Lille's notion of divine unknowability. He does so by returning to the *triplex via* in order to examine how it both takes into account Lille's utterly apophatic method and transforms it into one that generates affirmative and substantial claims about God.³⁰ Aquinas does this by examining the pivotal role played by the principle of excellence in the *triplex via*. In doing so, he grounds this doctrine of excellence in dual notions: "all perfections of all things are in God,"³¹ and "every creature represents Him, and is like Him, so far as it possesses some perfection."³² Because individuals observe and understand the nature

²⁶ See Brian Shanley's gloss on the nature of the question of *ST I*, q.13, a.2 in Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature*, ed. Brian Shanley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 328.

²⁷ See Alain of Lille, *Regulae Theologicae*, XXI, XXVI.

²⁸ *ST I*, q.13, a.2.

²⁹ While the latter two points of Aquinas' argument in *ibid* are straightforward, the nature of Aquinas' first claim merits further commentary. What he is doing here is suggesting is that Alain of Lille's methodology does not account for the idea that God is the cause of all things and that all things cannot rightly be applied to describe God substantially. His example is this: God is both the cause of goodness in the same way that he is the cause of bodies. While Alain of Lille's notion that affirmative names solely represent causality rightly ascribes goodness to God, the same method must also affirm the notion that God is a body. As God possessing a body would imply that there is potentiality in God – a characteristic not attributable to the divine essence – Alain of Lille's understanding of affirmative names must consequently be erroneous.

³⁰ It must be noted that Aquinas' *triplex via* is still apophatic in nature inasmuch as it is primarily grounded upon claims about what God is not. The utter apophaticism from which I am distinguishing the *triplex via* is a methodology that cannot produce any positive claims about God's substance.

³¹ *ST I*, q.4, a.2, *resp.*

³² *ST I*, q.13, a.2, *resp.*

of these perfections (though imperfectly) in creation, it follows that they concomitantly possess partial knowledge of God, as God is the excelling source of all perfections.³³ Therefore, the phrase “God is good” cannot simply mean “God is the cause of goodness” or “God is unlike the goodness of creation.” Instead, Aquinas, as he interprets this locution through the *triplex via*, renders its meaning as “Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God, and in a higher way.”³⁴ By using this tripartite method, Aquinas is able to couple negative claims with positive ones and thereby render us capable of naming God substantially – though not exhaustively – by pointing us towards what is true of the divine essence.

As Aquinas demonstrates that names given to God need not be purely apophatic, some may suggest that he has veered too far towards the opposite side of the spectrum, between the knowability and unknowability of God. That is, because Thomas suggests that the names we apply to God can likewise be applied to creation, some may contend that he erroneously falls into the (anachronistically termed) category of ontotheology, wherein God – though eminently – is spoken of as if he were in the realm of creation. It is indeed this very concern that drives his objectors’ responses to the question posed in the next article: can any name be applied to God properly?³⁵ One suggests, for example that because our *ratio* of all names we apply to God is bound up in corporeal conditions, we can only apply them metaphorically to him as he transcends all corporeality.³⁶

In order to answer this question, there are two errors Aquinas attempts to evade. On the one hand, there is the aforementioned issue of ontotheology. On the other hand, by suggesting that all names given to God are metaphorical, the divine names would lose their metaphysical foundation and consequently become vacuous and unintelligible.³⁷ Aquinas bypasses both of these mistakes by making a crucial distinction between the *modus significandi*³⁸ and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ In *ST I*, q.13, a.3.

³⁶ *ST I*, q.13, a.3, *obj.* 3.

³⁷ This does not negate the fact that Aquinas does affirm that some divine names are metaphorical. In fact, he posits this in *ST I*, q.13, a.3, *ad.* 1. The intelligibility of metaphors, however, hinges upon non-metaphorical names. This is so because metaphorical names applied to God figuratively refer to perfections of God. For example, by saying, “God is a rock,” one, in other words, is affirming the locution, “God is powerful.” Because the perfection signified by the metaphorical name is intended to be applied to God, it must be able to do so properly. For if it did not, the names given to God would simply be rendered a vacuous, unintelligible web of mutual reference, each referring to one another, but none actually signifying what is proper to God.

³⁸ Within the semantic triangle itself, the *modus significandi* denotes the way in which a *nomen* signifies a *ratio*. For this reason, if one’s *ratio* does not comprehend the *res significata*, the *modus significandi* does not fully correspond with the *res significata*.

the *res significata*. If one answers his question by solely examining the former, then Thomas' interlocutors would appear correct. In fact, Aquinas affirms their logic himself as he states, "[A]s regards [the divine names'] mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification befits creatures."³⁹ This argument, however, cannot be conclusive, as it has yet to take fully into account the nature of language. Although a *nomen* is always mediated through one's *ratio*, it signifies the *res* so long as the speaker possesses some understanding of it. For this reason, although the *modus significandi* of a divine name may be befit creatures, it nevertheless does signify God, despite the dissimilarity between the *ratio* and the *res significata*. Aquinas thus argues, "As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him."⁴⁰ What Thomas is distinguishing here is the order of reality from the order of knowing.⁴¹ According to the latter, the divine names are primarily creaturely because humanity understands and formulates them through corporeal and temporal conditions. The effects utilized to apprehend and name God, however, derive from him as their excelling source. Consequently, in the order of reality, the divine names, though known through creation, signify what is proper to God. By making this distinction, Aquinas therefore evades the two aforementioned errors. Indeed, the divine names can be neither universally metaphorical nor ontotheological, for they apply properly to God, but do so in a way that distinguishes him from the creaturely mode of humanity's theological knowledge.

The Doctrine of Analogy

As the prior articles have laid out the foundational structures of Aquinas' understanding of theological language, it will be profitable to proceed one step further and examine the capstone he places upon them. This is nothing other than his doctrine of analogy. Although at first glance this article⁴² may appear superfluous due to its reiteration of previous arguments, a closer examination reveals the subtle yet crucial move made by Aquinas. Truly, without it, his investigation of the divine names would be incomplete.

What then is Thomas attempting to achieve in this section? In the first place, he wants to reject two views of theological language

³⁹ *ST I*, q.13, a.3, *resp.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Brian Shanley makes this distinction in his commentary on *ST I*, q.13, a.3, *resp.* in Aquinas, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature*, 331.

⁴² *ST I*, q.13, a.5.

he finds erroneous: univocality and equivocality. Although framed differently, these two ideas resemble the aforementioned errors of ontotheology and sheer apophaticism. Univocal language, on the one hand, is used when a name is applied to different things and signifies the same meaning (*ratio*). For example, “blue” is used univocally in the sentences, “My shirt is blue” and “The sky is blue.” This form of language, however, does not aptly describe the way in which perfection names (*e.g.*, goodness and wisdom) can be applied to both God and creatures. Aquinas explains this with reasoning similar to that used to reject ontotheology: “[W]hen this term *wise* is applied to man, in some degree it circumscribes and comprehends the thing signified; whereas this is not the case when it is applied to God, but it leaves the thing signified as uncomprehended and as exceeding the signification of the name.”⁴³ For language to apply univocally to God and creatures, Aquinas contends that the result would inevitably be pernicious. It would either lead to the disparagement of God by describing the divine essence through finite categories or the misguided exaltation of creatures by endowing them with names signifying transcendence. Equivocal language, on the other hand, is used when the same name is applied to different things and signifies utterly distinct meanings. Here, “blue” is used equivocally in the following statements: “My eyes are blue” and “I am feeling blue.” This type of naming, for Aquinas, is again fallacious when used to describe God and creatures. If theological language functioned this way, the result would be sheer apophaticism, wherein “from creatures nothing at all could be known or demonstrated about God.”⁴⁴ As a result of the shortcomings of univocality and equivocality, Thomas employs a third understanding of language – *i.e.*, his doctrine of analogy – in which he navigates between the perils of these two poles.

In order to understand fully Aquinas’ next move in article 5, it will be profitable to recall his previous examination on the likeness between creatures and the perfection of God.⁴⁵ In it, he delineates three types of likeness and suggests that in this particular “way some things are said to be alike which communicate in the same form,

⁴³ *ST* I, q.13, a.5, *resp.*

⁴⁴ Here, in *ibid.*, Aquinas’ logic is built upon his previous articles. Specifically, he has already concluded that our theological knowledge derives from the examination of God’s effects because they possess some likeness to God. For this reason, the names used to describe creation can (in a way which will soon be articulated) simultaneously be applied to God. If there were no likeness between God and creation, all similar names between them would be equivocal. As a result, humans would have no knowledge of God because they would not possess the likeness and therefore the names requisite for apprehending divine matters.

⁴⁵ *ST* I, q.4, a.3.

but not according to the same formality; as we see in non-univocal relationships.”⁴⁶ Within this category:

If there is an agent not contained in any genus, its effects will still more distantly reproduce the form of the agent, not, that is, so as to participate in the likeness of the agent’s form according to the same specific or generic formality, but only according to some sort of analogy; as being itself is common to all. In this way all created things, so far as they are beings, are like God as the first and universal principle of all being.⁴⁷

The likeness between God and creatures is thus transgeneric in a supra-hierarchical fashion. This becomes particularly evident by examining what Aquinas describes as that which is common to all: being (*esse*). Indeed, all things, to the extent that they exist, have being. For this reason, because both God and creatures exist, there is a likeness between them. This, however, cannot be understood univocally since God is not contained in any genus. Unlike creatures who exist because they participate in being, God “must contain within Himself the whole perfection of being.”⁴⁸ Indeed, for God, essence and being are identical.⁴⁹ Because God is the root of and is being itself, all creatures, as they participate in being, possess a likeness to God. For this reason, although it is an attribute shared by God and creatures, being cannot be applied to God and creatures in a univocal fashion given the distinct ways in which it relates to the divine and creaturely essences. This is where analogy comes to the fore.

Given the shortcomings of univocal and equivocal language as they relate to the perfections shared by God and creation, Aquinas delineates analogy as a third type of language. Regarding theological language specifically, analogy is necessary:

as many things are proportioned to one . . . or according as one thing is proportioned to another . . . Hence, whatever is said of God and creatures is said according as there is some relation of the creature to

⁴⁶ *ST I*, q.4, a.3, *resp.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Aquinas’ claim here, in *ST I*, q.4, a.2, *resp.*, hinges upon a prior argument made in *ST I*, q.3, a.4. Within this article, Thomas contends that God’s essence (*essentia*) and existence (*esse*) are identical. Although he substantiates this through three different arguments, one is particularly cogent. In it, he first contends that “whatever a thing has besides its essence must be caused either by the constituent principles of that essence . . . or by some exterior agent.” For this reason, if a thing’s existence and essence are not identical, its existence must be caused by one of the two forces listed above. Aquinas notes, however, that a thing’s constituent principles cannot cause its essence because nothing can be the sufficient cause of its own being. Moreover, because of Thomas’ previous argument in *ST I*, q.2, a.3 wherein he proves that God is creation’s first efficient cause, it follows that he also could not have been caused by an external agent. For this reason, Aquinas concludes that it is logically necessary to conclude that God’s essence and existence are identical.

⁴⁹ *ST I*, q.3, a.4.

God as to its principle and cause, wherein all the perfections of things pre-exist excellently.⁵⁰

While much of this statement reiterates previous arguments made by Thomas, what is distinctive here is the coupling of these with his acknowledgement of the unity and multiplicity of perfections.⁵¹ Like a single ray of light polychromatically diverging as it refracts through a prism, so are all perfections of God identical to the divine essence, yet diverse as they are manifest in creation. Thus, as humans experience, say, goodness and wisdom as distinct perfections, they rightly apply these heterogeneous terms to God. Yet, despite the diversity of their creaturely *modus significandi*, these perfections are indistinguishable from one another as they relate to the divine essence *in se*. Indeed, as being and essence are the same for God, so too are being and perfections identical within the divine essence, for “all perfections of all things pertain to the perfection of being; for things are perfect precisely so far as they have being after some fashion.”⁵² Because God’s essence and being are identical, so are all perfections united and selfsame therein. For this reason, although humans can rightly understand God to a limited extent through the diversity of his effects in creation, the *modus significandi* of names attributed to God, given their diversity, renders them incapable of exhaustively describing the utterly simple divine essence from the perspective of a human’s *ratio*. This, however, is not the case for the order of reality. In it, the *res significata* of these perfection names *does* encapsulate the divine essence given God’s simplicity. Although the shortcomings of humanity’s *ratio* renders the *modus significandi* of the divine names veracious merely to the extent that they apply to God analogously, because the *res significata* by each of these perfection names is identical to the divine essence, these names rightly direct our minds towards (but do not arrive at exhaustively comprehending) the utterly simple nature of God.

Metaphysics as Hermeneutics in the Theology of Jenson

After having delineated Aquinas’ understanding of the relationship between reason and metaphysics, it will be necessary to continue to press forward as his position has not been universally embraced by the church. In order to do so, it will be profitable to examine the theology of Robert Jenson, whose work, despite being sympathetic and

⁵⁰ *ST* I, q.13, a.5, *resp.*

⁵¹ Aquinas examines the tension between the multiplicity of perfections in creation and their unity in the divine essence more thoroughly in *ST* I, q.13, a.4.

⁵² *ST* I, q.4, a.2, *resp.*

(at times) indebted to the thought of Thomas, eminently embodies a shift away from this prominent aspect of classical theology. While this relationship was principally delineated in Aquinas' question on the divine names, it will be profitable to follow the logic of the prolegomena of Jenson's *Systematic Theology* in order to ascertain his understanding of it. Indeed, in it, he is not making pre-theological claims requisite for enabling his enterprise; rather, Jenson, contending that "theology has its own task and is enabled within it," sets forth material theological propositions that function to characterize the nature and role of theology.⁵³ While these theologoumena are numerous, they can be distilled down into two tasks.

In order to delineate the first characterization of theology, Jenson begins by identifying the church as the community whose task theology is.⁵⁴ What distinguishes and constitutes this community is the maintenance of a particular message of universal import called "the gospel."⁵⁵ This message is, in short, both historical and theological, given that its claims about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth are linked to the identity of the God of Israel and thereby lead to further metaphysical propositions, such as "he is Lord of all" and "he is seated at the right hand of the Father."⁵⁶ As the gospel is what determines the nature of the church, it is equally necessary that the church maintain the message of the gospel, for if the latter were to become distorted, the former would cease to exist. It is the preservation of this existentially determinative message wherein Jenson locates the first task of theology. From this, the second characterization of this enterprise follows. However, before examining this, it will first be profitable to attend to two notable implications of theology's first task.

The first corollary of the claim that all theology is rooted in the maintenance of an historical message is the necessity of locating the gospel in concrete and normative manifestations. Recognizing this, Jenson traces the history of these fixed portrayals of the gospel back

⁵³ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ In *ibid.*, Jenson's fuller description of the gospel is this: "It happened during the reign of Tiberius at Rome that certain Jews believed themselves to have encountered the prophet and rabbi they had followed, Jesus of Nazareth, alive after his execution, endured somehow 'for their sake,' and to have encountered him so situated over against his own death as to preclude his dying again. Given Israel's grasp of death and life, they could report such events only by saying, 'The God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead.' And given Israel's interpretation of God and the meaning that 'raised' must have within her linguistic world, such a risen one must merely thereby be established as somehow Lord of all; the creeds' direct progression from 'rose' to 'is seated at the right hand of God' to 'will judge the living and the dead' traces a straightforward conceptual nexus."

to their origins. There, he contends that the church established theological authorities in order to safeguard the integrity of this message as the era of the apostles was waning.⁵⁷ Indeed, without these structures tailored for preserving the church's historical continuity, we could neither be certain that the church today is still the church of the apostles⁵⁸ nor confidently root theological claims in a concrete narrative. As these commitments are unassailable for Jenson, he grounds them in a necessary and prior theological claim. He thus contends that, because theological authorities (*e.g.*, Scripture, creeds, and rites as such) possess no inherent ability to preserve the integrity of the gospel, the Spirit was working through the church in the establishment of these normative sources.⁵⁹ It is therefore on account of his faith in the Spirit's involvement in the church that Jenson believes that theological knowledge, as it is rooted in history, is epistemically grounded in secure sources.

Second, because the gospel is *the* historical event in which theology is properly rooted, Jenson makes a controversial claim regarding the relationship between God and temporality. Specifically, he bridges the chasm of between the works of God *ad extra* and God's identity *ad intra* by contending that "God is so identified *by* the risen Jesus and his community as to be identified *with* them."⁶⁰ If this were not so and God is other than the way he appears in history, Jenson's entire theological enterprise would disintegrate as God's involvement in history is the epistemic foundation from which all theological claims derive. It is thus central to Jenson that theologians are to attend to the particularity of God's historical actions.⁶¹ What this entails is reading Scripture's temporal narrative as real events within the life

⁵⁷ Ibid, 25.

⁵⁸ Here, the use of the term "church" demands qualification. While Jenson suggests that the church today, in its fractured, multid denominational state, is still the church, the contemporary church is not the primary audience to whom he writing. Instead, on *ibid*, viii, Jenson writes, "The present work is deliberately done in such anticipation of the one church, and this will be throughout apparent, in its use of authorities and its modes of argument." As his argument progresses, it will be profitable to note that some aspects of Jenson's theology (*e.g.*, the establishment of structures of historical continuity) solely pertain to the unified church.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 25-26.

⁶⁰ Quotation from *ibid*, 13. It should also be noted that by rooting God's identity by Jesus' resurrection and with the church, Jenson is not doing so at the expense of identifying God with his actions in the history of Israel. Rather, he implicitly links God's actions in Israel with the resurrection of Jesus by contending that it was the God of Israel who raised Jesus from the dead. This connection is made more explicitly in *ibid*, 47-48 as Jenson asserts, "It is the metaphysically fundamental fact of Israel's and the church's faith that its God is freely but, just so, truly self-identified by, and so with, contingent created temporal events."

⁶¹ Ibid, 47-50.

of God. While this may, at first, seem to cohere with, say, Aquinas' theology given the authority he also attributes to Scripture,⁶² Jenson's methodology leads to materially distinct claims. For example, when analyzing Jesus' cry of dereliction, Jenson, while affirming the veracity of the creeds, simultaneously transposes this event onto the life of God *ad intra*, suggesting "Jesus' abandonment and death do not interrupt the relation to the Father by which he is the Son but, rather, belong to that relation."⁶³ This first task of theology thus undermines any attempt to evade or demythologize the conceptual difficulties of God's historical actions and, instead, suggests that theologians ought to adopt the Anselmian posture of *fides quaerens intellectum* by faithfully accepting their truthfulness and subsequently examining their intelligibility.⁶⁴

After having identified the medium in which knowledge of God is located (*i.e.*, the history of the gospel) and the authoritative sources by which this information is preserved, it will be necessary to delineate the second essential task of theology. In addition to the maintenance of this message, theology secondarily entails the hermeneutical process characterized as "the thinking internal to the task of speaking the gospel."⁶⁵ What this involves is the theologian's reception of the gospel's first-order discourse (*i.e.*, the prayer, praise, and proclamation involved in speaking the gospel) and her or his subsequent formulation of second-order claims used to regulate what can and cannot be said about this message.⁶⁶ Although this aspect of theology has not been universally embraced by the church,⁶⁷ Jenson contends that it is a mandatory task for two reasons.

In the first place, Jenson acknowledges that the gospel is always communicated in specific cultural-religious contexts.⁶⁸ As it is the task of the theologian to receive and maintain this message in constantly changing environments, this process is twofold. Theology thus involves (1) extracting the nature of the gospel from the culturally specific sources wherein it is normatively preserved and (2) subsequently retransmitting it into a mode that is intelligible to hearers

⁶² *ST I*, q.1, a.9-10.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 49-50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 18-20.

⁶⁷ For example, the rejection of this secondary task is clearly manifest in academic structure of many conservative Bible colleges in the U.S. Specifically, by possessing biblical studies departments without complementary theological studies departments, such institutions tacitly affirm Jenson's first task of theology (*i.e.*, the maintenance of the gospel), but simultaneously reject the notion that "the thinking internal to the task of speaking the gospel" is another essential component of it.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

who have been antecedently inculcated by their cultures with philosophical and religious presuppositions.⁶⁹

Moreover, because the church's sources bearing witness to the gospel (namely Scripture) are epistemically heterogeneous, replete with inner differentiations, and thus lacking straightforward coherence,⁷⁰ the task of formulating theologoumena is both necessary and arduous. Given the conceptual difficulty involved in this, Jenson describes this hermeneutical endeavor as a cyclical process. Specifically, it involves the continuous formulation of theological claims and the subsequent adjudication of their accuracy by determining whether or not they lead to success in exegeting the copious and diverse first-order claims of theological authorities.⁷¹ The quality of a theologoumenon is thus determined by its ability to function aptly as a hermeneutical lens and consequently lead to interpretive success.

At this point, if a theologian is able to produce claims that are true to the church's first-order discourse and intelligible to hearers of different cultural-religious contexts, Jenson contends that she or he has properly done metaphysics.⁷² This is so for two reasons. First, even though the second-order claims produced by theologians are both regulatory and derivative of prior discourse, they are nonetheless materially homogeneous with first-order claims, as both types attend to the same extralinguistic reality.⁷³ Second, the aspects of reality with which second-order theological claims are concerned cohere with Jenson's definition of metaphysics. Namely, they attend to elements of reality not directly available to the empirical sciences and "must be known – if only subliminally – if such lower-level cognitive enterprises are to flourish."⁷⁴ Because knowledge of God transcends the investigative capacity of these "lower" disciplines and is the decisive fact about all things, theological discourse must be considered metaphysics.⁷⁵ Indeed, although Jenson's metaphysics take on

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ In *ibid.*, 29-33, Jenson delineates the nature of Scripture's inner differentiations and how its various internal "canons" (*e.g.*, the Tanakh, the Gospels, apostolic documents) relate to one another. Additionally, with regard to the interpretation of Scripture specifically, it should be noted that the theologian's task is not to simply read it in isolation and then retransmit its message. Instead, Jenson contends that the theologian's task of attending to Scripture is inextricable from the diachronic ecclesial context in which she or he does so. For this reason that Jenson states, "the slogan *sola scriptura*, if by that is meant 'apart from creed, teaching office, or authoritative liturgy,' is an oxymoron" in *ibid.*, 28.

⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

⁷² Ibid., 20.

⁷³ Ibid., 19-20.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

a hermeneutical form, it is precisely because such hermeneutics are universally pertinent that they become metaphysics.⁷⁶

Reason: A Prescriber or Describer of Metaphysics?

After having adumbrated particular elements of the theologies of Aquinas and Jenson which aptly embody their understandings of the relationship between reason and metaphysics, it will be profitable to analyze them alongside one another. In so doing, we will be able to not only recognize their similarities and differences, but also pinpoint what elements of their theologies engender radically different material claims.

We may begin by analyzing the way in which they employ philosophy – a discipline that attempts to discern the nature of reality purely through rational inquiry – in their respective theologies. For Aquinas, this relationship between philosophy and theology can be summed up in his axiomatic claim, “faith does not destroy reason, but goes beyond it and perfects it.”⁷⁷ Although the claims of faith possess noetic primacy to those of reason, Aquinas consistently utilizes the work of Aristotle to demonstrate the intelligibility of claims already known by faith. For example, in *ST I*, q.13, a.1, Thomas first accepts the notion that a name can be given to God on account of Scripture’s witness and subsequently begins to exhibit this claim’s rational coherence by adopting Aristotle’s semantic triangle. It is, indeed, in ways such as this that Aquinas employs philosophy as one of theology’s handmaidens.⁷⁸

Although Jenson also utilizes philosophy and recognizes its indispensability, he recognizes the historical particularity and unfounded presuppositions of this rational enterprise.⁷⁹ On account of this, he rejects Aquinas’ notion that the reason he employs is inherent to human nature and instead demonstrates how many of his philosophical claims derive from particular cultural-religious context and are solely

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Quotation from Thomas Aquinas, “*Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*,” *Dominican House of Studies: Priory of the Immaculate Conception*, <http://dhsPriory.org/thomas/english/QDdeVer.htm>, q.14, a.10, *ad*.9. For a more thorough understanding of how this proposition coheres with Aquinas’ theology, see *ST I*, q.1. Here, Aquinas classifies *sacra doctrina* as a higher science, whose truths are infallible (*ST I*, q.1, a.8, *resp.*). Because the subject matter of sacred doctrine overlaps with that of philosophy and the former possesses a higher degree of certitude than the latter, it is the task of theology to adjudicate the veracity of philosophy’s claims (*ST I*, q.1, a.6, *ad*. 2). Moreover, as will soon be exhibited, Aquinas employs philosophy as a tool for making theologoumena intelligible.

⁷⁸ *ST I*, q.1, a.5, *sed*.

⁷⁹ Jenson, “Systematic Theology,” 7.

intelligible therein.⁸⁰ Because the claims of these environments do not arise from reason alone and often contradict those proper to Christian theology, Jenson contends that the “philosophy” employed by Aquinas can and should be classified as theology, as its claims belong distinctively to “the historically particular Olympian-Parmenidean religion, later shared with the wider Mediterranean cultic world.”⁸¹ Although this critique forcefully resonates when applied to the Aristotelian philosophy appropriated by Aquinas, Jenson notes that it also pertains to all other types of philosophy so long as they are not reduced to the pure study of logic.⁸² Indeed, after indicting Thomas for occasionally misappropriating religious concepts endemic and proper to the Mediterranean cultic world, he does the same for himself as he acknowledges that there are “other, perhaps more sinister, delusions we may fall prey to.”⁸³

Because Jenson emphatically recognizes the subtle and pernicious influence philosophy can have upon theology, it will be necessary to reiterate a prior claim; Jenson utilizes philosophy and recognizes it as an indispensable tool. How then does he do this? Or, more pertinently and specifically, how does his use of philosophy relate to the formulation of metaphysical claims? In order to understand this, we must recall the two tasks Jenson ascribes to theology and situate his use of philosophy therein. In short, theology entails the (1) maintenance of the gospel and (2) the thinking internal to it, enabling it to be intelligibly retransmitted across space and time. It is the latter task wherein philosophy ought to be primarily utilized according to Jenson. Because, here, “past hearing turns to new speaking,”⁸⁴ the theological claims deriving from the gospel must be apprehensible to hearers of diverse contexts.⁸⁵ As these hearers think and understand concepts through preconceived religious and philosophical categories they inherited from their cultures, Jenson contends that it is the task of the theologian to portray the gospel and its regulatory theological assertions in categories familiar to them. Metaphysical claims are thus to derive from theological authorities and *subsequently* to be appropriated into the philosophical categories proper to specific cultural-religious contexts. Indeed, for Jenson, it is always the gospel that

⁸⁰ For Jenson’s explicit rejection that the philosophy utilized by Aquinas resides in human nature, see *ibid.*, 6-7. For an example of one of Jenson’s critiques delineating how Aquinas’ philosophical claims pertaining to the relationship between ontology and God’s perfection attributes (*ST I*, q.4) are byproducts of Ancient Greek mythology and solely intelligible therein, see Robert Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1969), 92-94.

⁸¹ Jenson, “Systematic Theology,” 9-10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸³ Jenson, “The Knowledge of Things Hoped For,” 96.

⁸⁴ Jenson, “Systematic Theology,” 14.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

determines the material content of its retransmission, but a culture's philosophy that dictates the form on which these theologoumena take.

Thus far, some points of agreement have arisen between Jenson and Aquinas. Namely, both of these theologians recognize the priority faith ought to have in relation to reason. On account of this, they agree that theological authorities (namely Scripture) are to be the principal sources from which theology proceeds. And yet, despite attending primarily to the same sources, the material claims of Jenson and Aquinas are often contradictory. In order to understand what gives rise to these disagreements, it will be necessary to attend closely to the relationship between reason and metaphysics in the thought of Aquinas

Although Thomas gives noetic primacy to faith above reason, he nevertheless contends that the latter can autonomously be used for formulating metaphysical claims. Indeed, we need only to recall the way in which Aquinas couples his assertion, "our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things," with his formula for making the jump from physics to metaphysics, "because [sensible things] are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God *whether He exists*, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him."⁸⁶ For this reason, despite having his claims antecedently validated by theological authorities, Aquinas examines the existence and nature of God in qq.2-11 by primarily utilizing the Aristotelian philosophy latent in the methodology he later articulates in q.13. Specifically, by allegedly using reason alone, Thomas is able to delineate many of those attributes inherent to the unified divine nature such as goodness, simplicity, and perfection. However, with regard to those claims more exclusive to Christian theology (*e.g.*, those pertaining to the Trinity and Christology), Aquinas is able to use philosophy to examine their intelligibility, but not to formulate them prior to revelation. Therefore, while Thomas and Jenson both agree that philosophy can and should always be used after metaphysical propositions have been formed, only Aquinas believes that reason itself is a tool inherently capable of formulating some – but not all – metaphysical claims.

Although both theologians hold to the notion that those things known by revelation are more certain than those by reason, Aquinas' commitment to the limited theological capabilities of autonomous reason at times appears to cause his theology to diverge from Jenson's. One such instance of this resides in the relationship between God and creation. While Jenson's position has already been examined – *i.e.*, "It is the metaphysically fundamental fact of Israel's and the

⁸⁶ *ST I*, q.12, a.12, *resp.*

church's faith that its God is freely but, just so, truly self-identified by, and so with, contingent created temporal events"⁸⁷ – we still need to do the same for Thomas. We can do so by analyzing his utilization of the principles located in *ST* I, q.13, a.1-4 to examine the way in which the divine names that imply temporal relations (*e.g.*, Lord and Creator) relate to God's essence.⁸⁸ Because Aquinas has already demonstrated by way of the *triplex via* that the divine essence is immutable⁸⁹ and possesses no accidental qualities,⁹⁰ he must also maintain the notion that God cannot be identified with the order of creation.⁹¹ If this were so, it would violate Aquinas' prior commitments, for if God were indeed identified by and with creation, this relationship would be constitutive of the divine essence as it possesses no accidents. This quickly becomes problematic for Thomas because this relationship is temporal and consequently mutable on account of creation's contingent nature, thereby rendering it antithetical to God's immutable essence. Aquinas thus contends that names implying temporal relations can be given to God solely because "creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea"⁹² – a claim in direct contradiction to Jenson's commitment that God is identified *by* and *with* temporal events and created entities.

Where then does this leave us? Should we locate the point at which these theologians depart from one another in their differing understandings of the relationship between reason and metaphysics? In short, no: because both Jenson and Aquinas accept generally the same authorities⁹³ and treat them as incontrovertible theological norms, the point of departure between them must be hermeneutical. Even though they disagree about *whether* anything can be said about God prior to revelation, both theologians possess the same sources against which they ought to check *all* of their theologoumena. Therefore, it is because, as Jenson has aptly noted, theological authorities are polytonal and thus resistant to exegetical certitude that metaphysical claims deriving from them are multifarious. For this reason, it ought

⁸⁷ Jenson, "Systematic Theology," 47-48.

⁸⁸ *ST* I, q.13, a.7.

⁸⁹ *ST* I, q.9, a.1.

⁹⁰ *ST* I, q.3, a.6.

⁹¹ *ST* I, q.3, a.7, *resp.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Because Jenson is writing to a necessarily unified church, he would disagree with some of the sources that Aquinas would consider normative, particularly those dogmatic decisions made by the Roman Catholic Church after the Great Schism (*e.g.*, the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council). Nevertheless, Jenson would accept the majority of sources Aquinas held as authoritative. For this reason, this slight dissimilarity certainly should not be considered the primary factor causing the theological claims of Jenson and Aquinas to diverge.

to be no surprise that Aquinas and Jenson root their claims in the same sources but still occasionally disagree. While Thomas interprets Scripture through an Aristotelian lens and thereby makes the former more intelligible and corrects the latter when necessary, Jenson does roughly the same, though more skeptically, in conversation with the prominent voices of Western philosophy. Although Aquinas' assertion that metaphysical claims can be formulated prior to revelation plays a prominent role within the *Summa*, the interpretation of authorities is ultimately what determines the material content of his theological claims. On account of this, despite embodying a modern and postmodern shift away from Thomas' understanding of the relationship between reason and metaphysics, Robert Jenson's alternative account of the nature of theology is not as drastic a shift as some may suggest. As these two eminent theologians both agree on the object of their inquiry and the mediums in which knowledge of this is located, their theological claims, though often radically diverging, ought not be understood as incommensurable. Indeed, we may analyze the work of these two giants alongside one another and, in so doing, allow their theologoumena to argue with and sharpen one another.

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