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## ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND THE PROBLEMS OF SPEAKING ABOUT GOD

Religious language is cognitive or non-cognitive, that is, it comprizes propositions in the indicative mood which purport to express reality and to impart knowledge, and propositions which are invocations, prayers, blessings etc. St. Thomas explains this distinction as follows: the human mind is concerned with truth, but it must also direct things and establish relations with others, e.g. by calling them to attention, asking them something, etc. <sup>(1)</sup>.

In this paper we shall deal with cognitive religious language. In recent years the question has been raised whether this language is meaningful. Some have even denied its very possibility. In Ayer's view, for instance, all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical. There are authors who feel that qualifying religious propositions as non-sense need not be anti-religious or who think that we still remain in a Christian context even if we no longer speak about God or consider all statements about him irrelevant <sup>(2)</sup>. Others try to « save » religious language by seeking ways to introduce some verification or by resorting to Popper's falsification principle. However, A. Flew feels that religious language is not falsifiable, because it has no empirical content <sup>(3)</sup>.

In a somewhat similar line of thinking R. M. Hare argues that religious propositions do not assert anything, but express a *bliss*, that is an attitude toward the world. Some who declare religion not to be a cognitive enterprise, advocate a retreat into silence about God <sup>(4)</sup>. Talk

<sup>(1)</sup> In *I Peri herm*, lectio 7, n. 5.

<sup>(2)</sup> PAUL VAN BUREN, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, New York 1966; J. ALTIZER, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Philadelphia 1966.

<sup>(3)</sup> In A. FLEW and A. MACINTYRE (Edit.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London 1955, p. 99.

<sup>(4)</sup> See W. T. BLACKSTONE, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*, Englewood 1963, pp. 134 ff.

about God should be dropped in favour of talk to God<sup>(8)</sup>. Others again like R. B. Braithwaite admit that religious statements are not empirical and not testable, and assign an ethical use to them<sup>(9)</sup>. J. Wisdom suggests to consider the esthetical impact of propositions about religion.

There are, however, scholars who have a more positive view of the cognitive value of religious language. Ian T. Ramsey points to the fact that man knows that he is more than his body alone to show the possibility of real, though unclear language about God<sup>(7)</sup>.

In this paper we intend to discuss only a few of the many questions raised by analytical philosophers, viz. the meaning of propositions like « God exists » and the difficulties concerning the theory of the analogy of names.

## I.

A problem often brought up in connection with the Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas is: how does he know that the being, which in each demonstration is shown to exist, is God? Do we not need some previous knowledge of God before we can even set out to prove his existence? As a matter of fact, classical Thomism would probably answer that indeed a nominal definition of God is presupposed, a concept so vague that it only distinguishes God from other things but does not say anything about his nature. St. Thomas' true intention might however be explained in a different way. Let us first notice that the *Summa theologiae* is a theological work and that therefore God's existence is admitted independently of philosophical questioning. The metaphysical arguments serve the purpose — in this theological setting — of making natural reason share, in its own way, in what is known by faith, and of explaining and defending what faith holds. But as St. Thomas indicates in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics* of Aristotle, it is nevertheless possible to detach these arguments from their theological context. Now if we place ourselves at the level of natural reason there are two cases to be envisaged concerning a previous knowledge of God: the metaphysician thus far did not hear about God and did not yet have any

idea of the divine, but now reaches, in following the lines of thought of the Five Ways, for the first time the insight that there is a First Mover, a First Efficient Cause, a Being which has the source of its necessity in itself, etc. He then still has to go on with his analyses and deductions, arguing along the lines of the following questions of the *Summa theologiae*, to reach the concept of God as the only omnipotent, incomposite, infinite and immutable being. But ordinarily the philosopher will have some inkling of who God is, both because the conception of the divine present in his culture and because of his own insight, based upon a sort of reasoning which remains largely subconscious and which lies at the root of the widespread conviction of mankind that the divine exists. St. Thomas explicitly refers to such an idea of the divine, for instance in the following text: « Natural reason tells man that he is subject to someone higher because of the defects which he notices in himself, in which he has to be helped by someone higher and guided, and, whatever this is, this is what among all is called God »<sup>(8)</sup>. It would follow, then, that the explicit metaphysical arguments are not necessary to give some idea of the divine.

If we now consider the assertion « God exists », — which results from the process of thought engaged in the Five Ways, we stumble on a difficulty. Russel noted that according to the philosophy of logical analysis existence is not something we can observe in things and that the term existence is only significant when applied to a description as opposed to a name. One may say « my present percept exists », but one should not say « this exists », because the word "exists" is only significant when applied to a description as opposed to a name. This disposes, Russell writes, of existence as one of the things the mind is aware of in objects<sup>(9)</sup>.

In a similar vein R. Carnap thinks that it is a defect of our European languages that the same verb has the function of the copula and is also used to signify existence, the more so because the latter use is meaningless<sup>(10)</sup>. G. Frege also criticises the absolute use of « to be »: it is a sort of divinisation of the copula<sup>(11)</sup>. Closer to us A. Kenny argues that it is meaningless to say that God is subsistent being, for to be signifies to be this or that, but not existence without qualification.

<sup>(8)</sup> S. Th. II-II, 85, 1. Cf. *Ibid.*, I, 13, 10 (the third objection, which St. Thomas seems to approve of).

<sup>(9)</sup> *A History of Western Philosophy*, New York 1945, p. 831.

<sup>(10)</sup> *Ueberwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache*, in *Erkenntnis* 2 (1931), 219-421, p. 233 f.

<sup>(11)</sup> *Nachgelassene Schriften*, edit. by H. Hermes et alii, Hamburg 1969, p. 71.

<sup>(8)</sup> R. F. HOLAND, *Religious Discourse and Theological Discourse*, in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 34 (1956), p. 148.

<sup>(9)</sup> R. B. BRAITHWAITE, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*, Cambridge 1955, p. 10.

<sup>(7)</sup> See his *Religious Language*, London 1957.

tion<sup>(12)</sup>. It is not surprising that in view of these criticisms some feel that the sentence « God exists » is not a cognitive sentence or reduce it to a statement which says that one has had an experience of a particular kind.

St. Thomas' answer to Russell, Carnap and Kenny is the following: he first points out that the fact itself that in our languages we do use « to be » not only for the copula but also to signify the existence of things is meaningful. He explains it in this way: in our first concept, that of being, we signify the reality of something (that which is) and this concept this reality is primarily stressed, rather than the subject which is<sup>(13)</sup>. With the aid of the first concepts our mind makes a first enunciation: « this is not that », that is, in the reality of this thing is enclosed that it is not some other thing. On the occasion of this first judgement we first form the concept of « being real », which we later apply to essential or accidental composition<sup>(14)</sup>. It is paramount to notice that this being real (*actualitas*) is the fundamental meaning of the verb 'to be' and that the latter's use as a copula is derived from this, or may be called the particularisation of a primary insight<sup>(15)</sup>.

Now St. Thomas makes a distinction between the copula as used in sentences in which the predicate does not enounce a positive quality and its use in propositions in which essential or accidental predicates are attributed to a subject. « There is blindness » is a true statement, but it does not bear on a positive reality. Precisely this example is used to suggest that when we say « God is » we do not really know what this 'is' means and contains, because we have no access to God's being<sup>(16)</sup>. While St. Thomas upholds that the use of 'to be' as a main verb, signifying existence, is fundamental and precedes its use as the copula, he concedes, we might say, to contemporary analytical philosophy that there is something peculiar about the statement « God is » in so far as we do not really grasp God's being, — this in opposition to what happens in statements about the physical world.

A further distinction is necessary here. One might think that the assertion « God exists » could be compared to propositionse like « East-

(12) *The Five Ways*, London 1969, p. 82.

(13) *De verit.* 1 ad 3; In *IV Metaph.*, lectio 2, n. 553.

(14) In *I Peri herm.*, lectio 5, n. 73.

(15) Actually St. Thomas' view on the paramount place of the act the being should be placed in the context of his doctrine of the distinction between being and essence in created things.

(16) *De potentia* 7, ad 1. - See our « La connaissance de l'être et l'entrée en métaphysique », in *Revue thomiste* 80 (1980), 533 ff.

er Island exists » or « The Alps came into being some 40,000,000 years ago », facts we did not observe ourselves or for which no observation is available. There is, indeed, some similarity, in so far as in the latter cases we also have to do with deductions based upon facts which we have experienced. Yet St. Thomas would maintain the unique character of the assertion « God exists » in that the terms refer to a being which infinitely transcends the force of what our verb 'to be' can express.

With regard to the argument of those who say that no experience of God is possible and that, therefore, all our talking about God is senseless, it should be noticed that this way of arguing equates experience with sensitive knowledge and verification with observation. It excludes gratuitously the possibility of a spiritual experience of God. In looking for factual proofs of God's existence, however, St. Thomas goes part of the road with the empiricists. The importance of sensitive experience is paramount all through his treatise of natural theology. Observation constitutes the point of departure of each of the Five Ways. I briefly evoke the well-known texts: « It is certain and is verified by observation that there is movement in this universe »; « We notice that in the sensible world there is an order of efficient causes, but we do not find that something is the efficient cause of itself »; « We find that certain things have the possibility to be and not to be, because we observe that some come into being and pass away... »; « We find in things that there is something more and less good and true and noble, and likewise with regard to similar perfections »; « We see that certain things, which lack knowledge, viz. the natural bodies, work for a purpose ». Each of the Five Ways is worked out on the basis of a particular experience and it even unfolds *within* this experience since we reach God in so far as he works and is present in the process of created causality we examine.

Now this appeal to experience also prevails in the following questions of natural theology. In as far as possible St. Thomas bases his account each time on the immediately given, rather than only deducing the divine attributes from an already gained insight into God's being. In his arguments St. Thomas likewise employs principles which are immediately derived from experience.

The difference between the positions of St. Thomas and of the positivist philosophers obviously is that St. Thomas feels that he is allowed to argue on the basis of observed facts with the help of some general principles to reach certain conclusions about the existence and the properties of God. Let us explain this in detail.

St. Thomas does not think that in this way he betrays experience or loses contact with reality. For he holds that intellectual activity

when it proceeds with care and follows a scientific method, does not imagine things or work in complete separation from the senses. Rather the intellect penetrates deeper into that which sensation presents to it remaining nevertheless with the same reality. Thus the intellect does not add something of its own to the sense data when it distinguishes the concepts of cause and effect, of substance and accidents, but it distinguishes what is already present in the sense data, although the senses cannot perceive it as such.

Now the deduction of God's existence from sense data is not so much intended to give us an object in isolation of sensation. Rather our knowledge of God remains within the compass of the observed, in so far as we only know God in his effects. St. Thomas repeatedly points out that a cause must be present in his effects: each worker is united with what it works immediately; it touches it through its power<sup>(17)</sup>. He compares the causality of God with regard to creation with that of the sun: only when the sun is shining things can be recognised and seen. Likewise only through the action of God beings exist and are knowable<sup>(18)</sup>.

It is here that we encounter the term *repraesentatio*: each effect represents — also in the sense of making present — its cause; it shows that the cause must exist and it shows something of the form of the cause<sup>(19)</sup>. Of course, no creature perfectly represents God's being<sup>(20)</sup>, but nevertheless something can be known about God. In the Thomistic view God is present in, is touched upon by man in his knowledge of the world. In all his doings, even when he is far from realising it, man approaches God and fulfils the purpose God set him<sup>(21)</sup>. In this way St. Thomas can write: «Every knower knows God implicitly in whatever thing known»<sup>(22)</sup>. But this experience of God, rather this touching God, should not be called a direct experience, because it needs the mediation of the creatures<sup>(23)</sup>.

In order to bring out even better the role St. Thomas assigns to experience in our knowledge of God we may compare the result of our account with the impact of Ayer's distinction between analytical and synthetic statements. Ayer uses this Kantian distinction to argue that

(17) *S. Th.* I, 8, 1.

(18) *Expos. in libr. de causis*, lectio 6, n. 168.

(19) *S. Th.* I, 45, 7.

(20) *O. c.*, 12, 2; 42, 5 ad 1; 56, 3 ad 2; II-II, 175, 4.

(21) Cf. *S.C.G.* III, 49.

(22) *De ver.* 22, 2 ad 1.

(23) Cf. C. M. MARTIN, in *A Flew and A. MacIntyre*, o. c.

propositions about God fall outside this division and are meaningless. For Ayer analytic propositions are statements in which the predicate brings out what is already contained in the subject (e.g., «my sister is a female»). Synthetic propositions state a fact of experience, which can be verified. In Thomism this division can be maintained, provided its limited scope is kept in mind<sup>(24)</sup> and some corrections are added: (a) the analysis of the subject sometimes gives valid *new* knowledge about it, viz. when we stringently deduce its properties. Examples are the properties of knowledge like its immateriality which are deduced from the analysis of the phenomenon of knowledge, and the immortality of the human soul which is deduced from its nature as we know it through its proper activity. (b) synthetic propositions also comprise deductions from observed facts, — with the help of principles, — even if the conclusions are not subject to verification by observation. I have already mentioned statements on the far geological past of our planet. If one insists that the result of reasoning must always be subject to verification (in the sense of observation) one does apply a certain *apriori* which, in fact, makes knowledge of the supra-sensitive world impossible. But the very generality of this claim already exceeds the concrete existence of material things. On countless occasions in life we resort in all tranquillity to this sort of arguing. Therefore, an *apriori* exclusion of it is not warranted.

St. Thomas would also observe that philosophical theology is not a wholly independent sector of thought, but that it presupposes serious study of the material universe and of man. Now in natural philosophy as well as in science time and again valid conclusions are drawn, for which there is not yet any observation available or verification of which by observation is impossible for us. We may refer to the discovery of cosmological data, e.g. new moons of the planets, on the basis of calculations, or to inferences about the geological past. The difference with statements about God of philosophical theology is that no observation can confirm, in the latter case, our deductions. But this does not mean that there is no verification. In this case verification implies checking the point of departure, the principles used, the reasoning itself. One might even say that the falsification test can be applied in so far as we must examine the precise meaning of our deductions about God. To this effect we must deal with the problem of analogy and examine the criticism raised by logical analysis against the theory of analogy.

(24) *The division only concerns the origin of propositions.*

## II.

We have already seen that for St. Thomas the statement « God exists » does not express the essence of God's being in other words, that our concept of being is insufficient to signify God's reality. The same applies to assertions like « God is good », « God is a person and so on. Terms like good, perfect, intelligent, wise, etc. when used of God, are employed in an analogous way. For St. Thomas the above and similar propositions are cognitive and do have a meaning, but they do not impair God's transcendence.

Now this view of St. Thomas has come under criticism. R. Swinburne argues that once we give analogical senses to words, proofs of coherence or incoherence become very difficult<sup>(25)</sup>. Furthermore, as the number of words used analogically increases, less information is conveyed<sup>(26)</sup>. Swinburne thinks that analogy concerns the *modus significandi* of the terms, but that the *res significata* is the same, when terms are applied to God and to creatures. He himself feels closer to Scotus and Ockham than to St. Thomas, because the former claimed that predicates applied to God and man are used univocally. In this connection it must be noted, however, that for St. Thomas in this kind of analogy also the *res significata* is different, because the *ratio*, that is the essential contents, of the perfections in God is entirely different from what it is in the created universe. We shall come back to this below.

Ramsey<sup>(27)</sup> proposes to resort to a rather loose use of analogy: we employ various words and models to get across a message on God, but we cannot apply these models too literally.

W. T. Blackstone argues that it is hardly enlightening to ascribe analogically goodness to God when we know nothing about his being. He feels that if we are to know something analogically about God, we must first know something literally<sup>(28)</sup>. He furthermore asserts that when God possesses the qualities of infinite goodness and infinite knowledge, the difference between human goodness and knowledge is not one of degree but of kind. « These 'infinite' qualities do not have the experiential grounding required for meaningful comprehension »<sup>(29)</sup>. Finally he feels that if something literal about God is not known, one analogy is invoked to explain another analogy « When St. Thomas says

(25) *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford 1977, p. 61.

(26) *O. c.*, p. 70.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 81

(28) *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*, Englewood Cliffs 1963, p. 66.

(29) *O. c.*, pp. 66-67.

that an effect resembles God solely according to analogy, not only goodness but also resemblance is viewed analogically »<sup>(30)</sup>.

In view of the above criticisms it is necessary to make a distinction between propositions which convey truth accessible to natural reason and credal statements at the level of supernatural faith, like the dogma of Holy Trinity or of God's saving love.

Let us first consider the assertions of philosophical theology. From the outset it should be noted that St. Thomas does not *begin* his treatise on God by claiming that our language about God is analogical. He first establishes that God is, that he is perfect, good, impossible, etc. to ask next which is the precise meaning of these terms when applied to God. He then keeps hammering at the ontological basis of analogy: once it has been established that God is the *Pris Efficient Cause*, the *Necessary Being*, etc. it becomes apparent that finite creatures cannot possess the fullness of God's perfection: in so far as they are the effect of God they must show a certain resemblance with him (for every worker works what resembles him), but they cannot adequate God's power<sup>(31)</sup>.

In particular, since God is the highest simplicity, the various perfections he bestows upon his creatures, must, in his own being, coincide and be identical. This means that in him a perfection like wisdom is carried to such a degree of intensity and eminence that it is also love. We therefore say that in God the contents of the various perfections are other than what they are in creation, but that nevertheless a resemblance remains in so far as there must be a community between cause and effect.

If we pay attention to this, it appears that only then our names of God become analogous after we have realised that God, the cause of the world, is so great and different that creatures can only bear a deficient similitude to him. Thus analogy presupposes insight, and this holds true not only for what we say about God, but also in other fields. At the outset of our intellectual life our concept of being is not yet analogous, but it becomes so, after we have learned to distinguish between substantial and accidental being<sup>(32)</sup>.

In this connection it must however be pointed out that many of the attributes we assign to God are negative, like infinite, impossible, immutable. In these cases we need not speak of analogous terms,

(30) *Ibid.*, p. 67.

(31) *De pot.*, 7, 7.

(32) See THOMAS A. FAY, *The Problem of God Language in Thomas Aquinas, what can and cannot be said*, in *Rivista di filosofia neoscholastica* 69 (1977), 385-391.

because in their full meaning these terms only apply to God and set God apart from other things.

It would seem that this explanation sufficiently answers Swinburne's difficulty. With regard to Blackstone's criticisms we must observe that our knowledge of God is indeed not very enlightening. St. Thomas is the first to admit this. Time and again he draws attention to the negative aspect of our knowledge of God. The deduction of the entitative attributes in the *Summa theologiae* stands in the sign of « we must now consider how God is, or, rather, how he is not »<sup>(33)</sup>. St. Thomas repeats that God's being remains unknown to us and that we best know him when we realize that we do not know him. St. Thomas holds, in fact, that there is an extreme inequality between God and creatures<sup>(34)</sup>. Indeed, in this life, God remains hidden for us in *quadam tenebra ignorantiae*, by which we are best united to him<sup>(35)</sup>.

This does, however, not mean, that we know absolutely nothing about him or that our statements about God are pure equivocation. Despite the infinite distance between God and creation St. Thomas upholds that our religious language does have meaning and that our intellect which studies reality can know God in so far as the First Cause is represented by his effects. This « representation », however, is not that of a picture but only of a trace.

Here St. Thomas introduces yet another distinction: with regard to the way in which this perfection exists, divine wisdom differs more from created wisdom than man's smile differs from that of a flower adorned meadow, — that is, calling God wise is less than a metaphor<sup>(36)</sup>. The reason is that in God wisdom is his very being and not an accidental qualification. Nevertheless, says Thomas, if we consider the formal content of wisdom there is some analogous community, but even here the difference is infinitely greater than the similarity<sup>(37)</sup>. — Thus when Blackstone argues that we must know something in the literal sense about God, if our analogous predication is to have some meaning, we answer that our assertions in natural theology are not metaphors but literal statements, even if analogous.

In his second objection against analogy Blackstone argues that the

<sup>(33)</sup> S. Th. I, prologue.

<sup>(34)</sup> S. Th. I-II, 114, 1.

<sup>(35)</sup> In I Sent., d. 8, q. 1, a. 1 ad 4.

<sup>(36)</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 22, q. 1, a. 2 ad 3.

<sup>(37)</sup> On this point my explanation differs somewhat from Fay's who admits some change but not a total difference in the *ratio*.

difference between God's goodness and created goodness is one of kind and that no meaningful comprehension is possible of God's infinite qualities. This is quite correct, but for St. Thomas this is exactly the reason why our assertions about God must be analogous, — once it has been established that the created world must show some similarity with God.

Finally Blackstone observed that one analogy is invoked to explain another. This is correct in so far as the whole of our knowledge about God, to begin with the assertion that he exists, is analogous. It is also true that certain attributes are deduced from others, like immutability from omnipotence and eternity from immutability. But this does not affect the validity of the deduction. We first establish that these attributes must be said of God, to understand later that they are predicated of God in an entirely different way from the manner in which they are said of creatures. We remind, however, of the fact that St. Thomas, whenever possible, attempts to deduce the attributes of God directly, taking concrete experience as his starting point.

As we intimated at the beginning, the treatise on analogy fulfils the role of a certain verification in the sense that it is an appraisal of the value of our speaking about God. We feel that analytical philosophers who hold that philosophy is criticism of language or has the task to replace misleading statements by others which are less so, should appreciate the care with which St. Thomas and others elaborated the doctrine of analogy. One might even say that analogy is in a sense an application of the principle of falsification, in so far as it tells us what propositions about God do not mean. A. Flew, however, is wrong when he thinks that Thomas tries to escape the refutation of propositions like « God is love » by adding ever new restrictions to their sense, so that God would die the death of a thousand qualifications<sup>(38)</sup>. Analogy brings us to the insight of God's utter otherness and transcendence. Once this insight is reached, no new qualifications are needed.

I observed that we should make a distinction between the language of natural theology and the dogmatic statements of faith. Some of the dogmata concern facts or events that are not wholly substracted from experience like, « born from the Virgin Mary », « crucified under Pontius Pilate », « risen from among the dead ». But in these and similar instances the fact that the Son of God as such was born, died, etc. is not accessible to experience.

<sup>(38)</sup> A. FLEW, *o. c.*, pp. 96-99.

But we should now consider statements about God's innermost being, about which philosophical theology knows nothing, and the credal language about God's saving love. In these cases we use names like Father, Son, Holy Spirit without having a decisive reason in favour, and without knowing why these words are apt to signify God's innermost life and his supernatural love for man. Here we have to do with a revealed analogy: God himself selects certain names of our human language and gives them to us guaranteeing that they are fit to convey some secret of his Being.

The reality which is the object of this knowledge lies above our reason and above our concepts, although the act of faith does use concepts. St. Thomas explains this as follows: « Although we are elevated by divine revelation to know something which else would have remained unknown for us, we are not elevated to the point that we would know in another way than by sensible things. Hence Dionysius says in *I De cael. hier.* that it is impossible that God's beam lights for us in another way than covered by a variety of sacred veils »<sup>(40)</sup>.

On account of their very nature dogmatic propositions require our submission and hence they become functional: they imply an act of the will and become a recognition of God's revelation. Thus they also become adorative. To those who do not have the faith dogmatic language is purely mythical, but for those who have the gift of faith it is eminently true.

St. Thomas reminds us that faith is never against reason and that reason, assisted by grace, will often see a certain convenience of what is proposed for belief. But the certitude of faith is not dependent on the arguments of reason, which are external to it, but on man's adherence to God. As to their contents the propositions of the faith go back to the original message Jesus and who received God's revelation.

Summing up we may say that the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas shows a surprising concern for a basis in experience of philosophical language about God and shares with analytic philosophy the preoccupation to verify the linguistic expression of what we say about God.

<sup>(39)</sup> *S. Th.* I, 3, 1.

<sup>(40)</sup> *Expos. in Boetii de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 3. On the above see J. MARRAIN, *Les degrés du savoir*<sup>4</sup>, Paris 1946, pp. 478-484.