

**St. Thomas Aquinas:
The Via Negativa and Theological Discourse**

I. Way of Negation (*Via Negationis*): Essential in Our Thinking about God

A. From the Five Ways to the *Via Negationis*

The Five Ways purport to prove the existence of some first term Existent as the ultimate explanatory principle of the Universe, pure unlimited act of existence – *esse subsistens*. Having established that there is a First Existent (*an est*), Thomas turns to the question of the way in which the First Existent exists so that an understanding may be gained of what the First Existent is (*quid est*). Here Thomas follows the common Aristotelian method of scientific treatment, first *an est* then *quid est*. However, the *minimal* positive determination (sanctioned solely by the principle of causality) reached by the five ways immediately sets logical constraints on any further discourse or knowledge about this being that will govern our attempt to say anything about what it is.

"Having recognized that a certain thing exists, we still have to investigate the way in which it exists, that we may come to understand what it is that exists. Now we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does (*De deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit*)." (Aquinas, ST, Ia. 2)

The primary constraint governing knowledge of God, then, is the *via negationis*, way of negation (also called the *via remotionis*, way of remotion). This refers to the knowledge of God derived from removing the "imperfections" of the creature for our understanding of God. Consequently, the task of the theologian will be first to consider the *ways* in which God does *not* exist.

In claiming that we cannot know what God is, we must not misread Aquinas. He does not mean to say that we can make no positive true assertions about the First Existent, but only that we cannot have any defining or comprehensive knowledge of him on the scientific model of genus and species - no "quidditative" (essence) knowledge. There are two reasons for this. First, all our knowledge is derived from and limited to sensory experience, but God is not an object of sensory experience. Secondly, as the immutable and uniquely necessary sustaining cause of the world, it will not be appropriate (or intelligible) to place the First Existent in a category, as the First Existent transcends all human conceptual schemes. This is evident from the idea that God is a wholly simple being.

B. Divine Simplicity: The Formal Development of the *Via Negationis*

The core of the *via negationis* is the doctrine of divine simplicity, for the fundamental imperfection in created things is their being a composition of some sort. This must be denied of God. The being to whom the conclusion of the Five Ways refers is not a composition of any sort. Hence, rather than being a positive teaching about God it is

simply a formal, shorthand way of referring to the removal of imperfections from our thought with reference to God.

- No composition of physical or extended parts, for this would conflict with being pure actuality. That which is composed of extended parts is potentially divisible.
- No composition of form and matter, for matter is a principle of potentiality. Moreover since matter is the principle of individuation, it follows that God cannot be an individual thing.
- No composition of nature and *suppositum* (individuality). Finite things can be distinct individuals and yet share a common nature. Not so with God. What God is and who God is are the same.
- No composition of essence and existence. All finite things are distinct from their act of existence. *What* a person is does not entail *that* a person is. For this reason, all finite things are capable of not existing. A purely actual being, though, lacks all potency, and this includes the potentiality of not existing. So a purely actual being will be identical with its act of existing.

For further details on the Aristotelian metaphysics Aquinas is assuming, see [Sudduth, Aquinas on Simplicity](#).

II. Positive Knowledge of God

It will follow from God's simplicity that God is an immaterial, eternal, immutable, necessary being. Unlike Maimonides, though, Aquinas believed that we can make true positive statements about God. We can have positive knowledge of God. Aquinas does not limit our knowledge of God to negative knowledge. Whereas Maimonides used the way of negation to deny that we can have any positive knowledge of God, Aquinas uses the way of negation as a constraint on our positive knowledge of God. The *via negationis* does not limit us to negative knowledge of God, but it does limit our positive knowledge of God.

A. The Way of Causality (*via causalitatis*): there is a positive knowledge of God derived from the creature as the effect of God as first cause: (i) We know that God exists and (ii) we know that God has all the perfections present in the created order. The ground for (i) and (ii) is the metaphysical principle that effects resemble their causes.

B. Way of Negation sets a constraint on how God has all the perfections in the created order, so *via negationis* limits (ii) above. God must possess *in a wholly simple manner* all the perfections found in created things.

C. The Way of Eminence (*via eminentiae*): there is a knowledge of God derived from predicating the creature's perfections of God in the most perfection and supreme fashion.

Since the creature is an effect of God and therefore resembles the Creator by containing some of his perfections, we may come to understand something of the nature of God by predicating of Him those perfections first discovered to be in the creature. God's transcendent perfection is recognized by affirming of him all the perfections of the creature in a super-eminent way. We do not come to know God as he is *in himself*, but we are not wholly ignorant about him either. As the creator he must transcend all creatures, but since we are his effects whatever perfections are found in us (howbeit imperfectly) must be in him in the highest degree, for the effects resemble their causes as an out flowing from them.

III. The Doctrine of Analogical Predication

A. The Relationship between Knowledge and Talk about God.

The ways of causality, negation, and eminence are all operational in talk about God.

According to Aquinas all our talk about God is analogical, since when we talk about God we predicate things of him in a manner similar to the way in which we predicate them of creatures. A consequence of the *via negationis* is that talk about God is not univocal-- words used of God will not have the same meaning as they do when used of creatures. But the way of causality (and the principle that effects resemble their causes) entails that talk about God will not be equivocal. Words used of God will not have a different meaning than the meaning they have when used of creatures. Therefore, Aquinas makes several positive statements about God after the way of analogy: God is cause, eternal, perfect, good, everywhere present, etc.

Consider: "God is good"

- (1) Causality: God is the ultimate cause of goodness in his creatures.
- (2) Negation: God is not evil and not good in a limited fashion as are we.
- (3) Eminence: God is good in a surpassing way.

Although all 3 are involved in every statement about God, some statements are grounded in one more than the others.

- (a) God is creator - (1)
- (b) God is immaterial - (2)
- (c) God is good - (3)

In (3) things are predicated of God substantially (though analogically), either proper predication or metaphorical predication.

B. The Doctrine of Analogy Explicated

1. The univocal use of a term involves a convergence of the *modus significandi* (the mode of signification) and *res significata* (the thing signified); e.g., the grass is green - the house is green. Here "greenness" is the same predicated of two different things in the same sense.

2. The equivocal use of a term involves a divergence of the *modus significandi* and the *res significata*; e.g., John is boiling - the water is boiling. Here what is signified by "boiling" in the two sentences is different as is the mode in which it is true of each subject.

3. The analogical use of a term involves a divergence of the *modus significandi* and a convergence of the *res significata*; i.e., God is good - John is good. Here the same thing "goodness" holds true of two subjects, though the manner in which it is true of each is different. Another example: faithfulness. "The dog is faithful to his master" and "the man is faithful to his wife". Faithfulness in each case is exemplified in different ways. The faithfulness of a dog is one thing, the faithfulness of a husband is another--both are instances of faithfulness. Faithfulness will be exhibited in different ways depending on whom it is that is faithful.

Thomas writes "We have to consider two things...in the words we use to attribute perfections to God, firstly the perfections themselves that are signified--goodness, life, and the like--and secondly the way in which they are signified." (1a. 13. 3).

Divine simplicity precludes univocal predication of God, since all univocal predication entails that the subject can be differentiated by genus and species (scientific classification), but this is not true of God as the First Existent.