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DISOWNING THE MYSTERY: STUMP'S NON-APOPHATIC AQUINAS

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On the face of it Aquinas stands in the mainstream of Western mystical theology, and in particular is a noteworthy proponent of negative theology. Consider, for example, the preamble to the third question of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*. Already at this early point in the *Summa* Aquinas takes himself to have established that God exists. In the usual course of things, he remarks, having demonstrated that some entity exists, we go on to enquire into what that entity is. But, thinks Aquinas, we cannot know *of God* what God is (*quid sit*) but rather what God is not.[1] And he goes on, in his exposition of the doctrine of divine simplicity, to explicate several things that must be denied of God if God is to be properly understood as the creator, rather than illicitly contained within some creaturely category.[2] Nor does this apparent disavowal of knowledge concerning the divine nature abate when Thomas considers the economy of salvation. Arguing that we can, in this life, have knowledge of God by grace which exceeds that possible through natural reason alone, he considers an objection stated in terms of pseudo-Dionysisus' *Mystical Theology* 'whoever is the more united to God in this life, is united to Him as to one entirely unknown'.[3] In replying Thomas concurs with pseudo-Dionysius, and simply goes on to insist that the shared apophaticism is compatible with belief in divine revelation,

> Although by the revelation of grace in this life we cannot know of God 'what He is,' and thus are united to Him as to one unknown; still we know Him more fully according as many and more excellent of His effects are demonstrated to us, and according as we attribute to Him some things known by divine revelation, to which natural reason cannot reach, as, for instance, that God is Three and One.[4]

Here, then, we seem to have a textbook example of key claims made in the Western mystical tradition. The divine nature is unknown, yet we, by grace, are united to God 'as to one unknown'. It makes sense, on this reading, that Aquinas cites pseudo-Dionysius frequently and approvingly,[5] just as it makes sense that his fellow Dominican Eckhart will in his turn cite Thomas.

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[1] STh Ia, q3, pr

[2] STh Ia, q3

[3] STh Ia, q13, a12, ob. 2.

[4] STh Ia, q13, a12, ad. 2.

[5] That he quotes him *as an authority* is explained by his identification of this author with the Dionysius of Acts 17:34.

The way of reading Aquinas I've sketched thus far has a number of prominent supporters: Denys Turner and Brian Davies are the best known in anglophone philosophical theology.[6] However it is striking how far from apophaticism Aquinas as read by the mainstream of contemporary anglophone philosophical theology turns out to be. Aquinas is brought to bear in debates which seem alien to the world of medieval mystical theology, and which make assumptions (about divine personhood, for instance)[7] which a natural reading of the preamble to SThIa, q3 would have him denying.[8] Very often it seems to be simply assumed that Aquinas *must* have thought about God in the same way as do present-day North American Christians. It is to be welcomed then that Elenore Stump, in her widely read *Aquinas*, lays out reasons for downplaying the extent to which Aquinas was an apophatic theologian.

In what follows I will lay out Stump's understanding of Aquinas on the salient points and go on to argue against her reading.

1. Stump's Aquinas

Stump rightly views the doctrine of divine simplicity as a cornerstone of Aquinas' account of God, playing a foundational role for and acting as a constraint upon, the rest of his thought. Her understanding of Aquinas on simplicity is, however, very different from the one outlined above. In particular she is keen to downplay Aquinas' apophaticism.[9] Commenting on the preamble to SThIa, q3 she writes,

> This passage and others like it have sometimes been pressed into service as evidence for agnosticism on Aquinas' part with regard to the nature of God. But caution is warranted here. It is true that Aquinas explains divine simplicity only in terms of what God is not – not a body, not composed of matter and form, and so on. But in the course of showing what God is not, Aquinas relies heavily on positive claims about God. So, for example, he argues that God is not a body on the basis of these claims amongst others: God is the first mover; God is pure actuality; God is the first being; God is the most noble of beings. [16, 94]

That Aquinas, a Christian theologian, makes positive claims about God and takes these to be true is not to be doubted. He devotes an article of question 13 of the *Prima Pars* to arguing that affirmative predications may be made of God, insisting that,

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[6]See [18] and [5]. An influence on both, and an important champion of Aquinas as a negative theologian is Herbert McCabe [11]; see my [7].

[7]Here there is no relief to be had for the non-apophaticist in STh 1a, q29, a3 : here Aquinas defends the applicability of *persona* to each of the trinitarian hypostases, but does so having explicitly rejected the suggestion that God is a persona, in the same sense as us (which, for Aquinas following Boethius, is that of an individual substance of a rational nature.)

[8]Thus Swinburne of God: 'a person without a body (i.e. a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship' [17, 2]. As an indicator of how distant the current mainstream is from apophaticism, both constructively and interpretatively, see Ryan Mullins' stark claim that no historic Christian thinker believes in divine ineffability [12, 7]; I respond to the kind of inconsistency charge made there in [8, Ch. 2].

[9]Although used by Stump, I think 'agnosticism' is an unhelpful usage here – to the modern reader it suggests a claim about belief in the existence of God, namely that there isn't justification either way. Aquinas, on the contrary, is sure that God exists; he thinks that we don't know what it is the existence of which we assert when we say 'God exists'.

> What is of faith cannot be false. But some affirmative propositions are of faith; as that God is Three and One; and that He is omnipotent.[10] Therefore true affirmative propositions can be formed about God. (*STh Ia, q13, a12, sc*)

Not only is this compatible with believing that we cannot know the divine nature, however, what follows in that very article ought to give us pause about whether Thomas' cataphatic theology represents a retreat from apophaticism, or rather – in line with the apophatic tradition – he views our necessary ignorance of God's nature as the prism through which these truths are reflected. Appealing to the doctrine of divine simplicity, Aquinas underscores how different our predications of ordinary objects, complex and instantiating typically many forms, are from our analogical application of our conceptions to the simple divine reality. In this case, 'our intellect knows him by many conceptions *because it cannot see Him as He is in Himself.*'[11] And yet,

> although it understands Him under different conceptions, [the intellect] knows that one and the same simple object corresponds to its conceptions. Therefore the plurality of predicate and subject represents the plurality of idea; and the intellect represents the unity by composition.

Whatever it is that God is, and we cannot know that, is one and the same reality that we describe as good, as wise, and so on. This seems the natural reading of Aquinas at this crucial point in the *Summa* and entirely consistent with the apophatic reading proposed at the outset of this paper. Why does Stump differ?

There are four considerations towards the non-apophatic conclusion present in *Aquinas*. I'll consider each in turn.

2. 'A huge metaphysical claim'

According to Stump Aquinas, in advancing a central constituent thesis of the doctrine of divine simplicity – that in God there is no composition of form and matter – makes a 'huge, substantial, positive metaphysical claim about the nature of God' [16, 94]. She quotes him as saying,

> [A] form which is not able to be received in matter but is subsistent by itself is individuated in virtue of the fact that it cannot be received in something else. And God is a form of this sort.[12]

It is notoriously difficult, and language sensitive, in general to know how to distinguish positive from negative claims: I can simply prefix an apparently positive claim with a double negation to get an apparently negative claim which is true only if the initial positive claim is true; isn't there some pressure towards thinking that there is a relevant sense in which the two are the same claim?[13] But in the special case of apophaticism there is some cause for being more optimistic about our capacity to distinguish between positive and negative claims, and for making the case that the passage quoted above does not make a positive claim about God's nature and is not therefore evidence against Aquinas' apophaticism.

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[10] *omnipotens*, Almighty - we ought to be cautious of understanding this as what a contemporary philosopher would understand by omnipotence. See *STh Ia, q25, a4*.

[11] STh Ia, q13, a12, co. emphasis mine.

[12] STh Ia, q3, a3, ad. 3.

[13] There are counter-pressures also. The philosophy of logic known as intuitionism will deny the equivalence, and therefore the identity, of the claims. See [14, Ch. 8] for details.

Aquinas denies that we can know of God *quid est*; we'll discuss the significance of this below. For now, it would count against understanding this aquinean denial in a robust fashion if it turned out that God could be categorised, situated somewhere within an overarching metaphysical scheme or contained under some shared kind with other entities. But isn't this precisely what is happening in q3, a3, ad.; isn't it being said that God is a *form*?

It is natural for readers trained in contemporary philosophy to draw this conclusion? We are familiar with broad-brust metaphysical assays, which sort out the entities into exclusive and exhaustive categories. Writing about the distinction between universals and particulars, Fraser MacBride describes this kind of position,

> There are two basic kinds of entity with which metaphysics is concerned, the Xsand Ys. So profound are the differences between the Xs and the Ys that nothing can be an X and a Y. So fundamental is the distinction between Xs and Ys that there is no (non-empty) possible world where Xs and Ys fail to be the basic kinds of entity there are.[9, 565]

Now surely we can substitue 'form' for X and something else, 'matter' perhaps, or at least 'non-form', for Y and get a faithfully aquinean metaphysic? And if that is right, then it looks like God falls under a definite category in our metaphysic, and not one of which God is the sole occupant. Stump's charge is sustained.

To understand why this seductive line of reasoning doesn't work, we need to understand what talk of *forms* is doing for Thomas. He was certainly aware of a line of thinking according to which the forms constituted a discrete part of reality, logically independent of any other part; this was platonism. Aquinas is implacably opposed to platonism: he thinks that Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* 'destroys' Plato's case for independent forms.[14] The metaphysics we find in Thomas is not of the sort which attempts to come up with a deep, explanatory theory even at the expense of common sense. Rather, following Aristotle (in both the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*), Aquinas is a descriptive metaphysician.[15] He assumes that we can talk and think truthfully about the world, and on that basis can articulate the scheme we use to to this (which, because of Aquinas' realism, corresponds to the structure of reality itself).[16] Within this framework, a form is something that can be 'said of' a substance (a substance being an entity that exists independently of other creatures.)[17] Forms qualify substances; think of a form as that which provides an answer a certain kind of question. Substantial forms answer *what* questions: what is Aristotle? A man. (The substantial form of Aristotle just is his humanity, his rational animality – otherwise, his rational *soul*). Accidental forms answer *how* questions. How is the rose outside my window? Red. (There is an accidental form which is the redness of the rose). The forms of material substances have a derivative existence, depending for their existence their inherence in a substance and being able to persist once separated from any substance, as Aquinas believes the accidental forms of the eucharistic species do,[18] only by special divine action.

[14]InMet. 225.

[15]The expression, and its application to Aristotle is Strawson's [15].

[16]On Thomas' realism see e.g. [13].

[17]Aquinas, of course, qualifies Aristotle's understanding of substance as independent. Creaturely substances depend on God as their creating cause.

[18]STh III, q77, a1.

Now, more than one material substance can have the same kind of substantial form - Plato and Socrates are both human (so there are two substantial forms, the humanities of each of Plato and Socrates). The distinctness of the substances in this kind of case is secured by *matter*. Plato and Socrates are constituted by distinct matter and so are distinct humans. But now there is an apparent problem. Aquinas holds that there are immaterial substances, angels and God.[19] Not possessing matter these entities are distinct from other entities simply by virtue of their natures, which must therefore be unique (whilst there can be many humans – Hypatia, Socrates, Lystria – Thomas holds that each angel is a unique species.)[20] In this context talk of form seems on shakier ground than when discussing the metaphysics of the material world. Substantial forms are held by Thomas to inhere in matter, but there is no matter in immaterial substances. Nor are those substances the kind of hylomorphic compounds in which accidental forms are usually taken to inhere. In fact, as evidenced by the passage quoted by Stump, Aquinas doesn't speak of God (or angels)[21] as *possessing* forms, but rather of *being* forms.

Brower comments on this usage,

> Aquinas sometimes speaks of immaterial substances, including God as *forms* or even *substantial forms*... This is because he associates form with actuality, and thinks of all substances as having actuality. But... this way of speaking must be understood to involve an extended or analogical use of the term 'form'. For in the context of Aquinas's hylomorphism, a form is an inherent being. But, of course, no substance can be said to inhere. [4, 13]

It would not make sense for Aquinas to identify God with a form, in the sense of 'form' according to which Aquinas would be ascribing to God a determinate place in a general metaphysical categorisation. Forms are dependent on substance and inhere in material beings. Rather, in saying that God is a form, Aquinas is engaged in a piece of negative theology: God is not material, there is no mere potentiality (as distinct from actuality) in God. Not only does this not cause a problem for an apophatic reading of Thomas, it is highly congruous with it.

3. Theistic proofs and apophaticism

If someone claims to have shown that something exists, the Higgs Boson say, but then professes not to be able to say anything about the discovered entity we would usually greet them with incomprehension. How, we might wonder, could they come to a conclusion about the existence of something when they do not so much as know what the entity in question is? Stump articulates this line of thinking as providing reasons to think that Aquinas cannot have been as apophatic as is sometimes claimed,

> [I]f there were really *nothing* we could know about God's nature, then it is difficult to see how Aquinas could suppose he had proved

[19]To say that an entity is a substance, in Thomas' framework, is to say that it has existence *of itself*, that it does not have the kind of radical dependence on another entity exhibited, say, by the dependence of Plato's qualities on Plato. Preparedness to say that God is a substance is therefore perfectly in order as purely negative theology: whatever God might be, God is not like the qualities of Plato!

[20]STh Ia, q50, a4.

[21]Although Thomas denies that angels are simple in the same strong sense as God, he denies that they instance any composition of matter and form, STh Ia, q50, a2.

> that God exists. It is not possible to prove the existence of something with regard to which one knows *only* what it is not and nothing at all about what it is. [16, 94]

This in itself will not serve Stump's purpose, even in its own terms. Aquinas might, for all that is said here, simply have made a mistake, denying that God's nature could be known in one place, whilst relying on knowledge of God's nature in another. It is, however, reasonable to try to interpret the *Summa* as consistent, and in fact Aquinas himself addresses the worry Stump raises. Writing in terms of the Aristotelian logic of demonstration,[22] Aquinas considers the following objection to the demonstrability of God's existence,

> Further, the essence is the middle term of demonstration. But we cannot know in what God's essence consists, but solely in what it does not consist; as Damascene says. Therefore we cannot demonstrate that God exists.[23]

Responding, Aquinas does not do what a reading of Stump might cause one to expect, namely deny that we can know of God's nature 'solely in what it does not consist', but rather denies that we need always possess a knowledge of essence in order to be in possession of a valid demonstrative syllogism with an existential conclusion,

> When the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in proof of the cause's existence. This is especially the case in regard to God, because, in order to prove the existence of anything, it is necessary to accept as a middle term the meaning of the word, and not its essence, for the question of its essence follows on the question of its existence. Now the names given to God are derived from His effects; consequently, in demonstrating the existence of God from His effects, we may take for the middle term the meaning of the word 'God'. (STh Ia, q2, a2, ad. 2)

Although we do not know what God is, we know his effects,[24] and so we can argue from those effects to their cause. And we can do so consistently with a radical apophaticism about the nature of that cause. There is something rather than nothing at all, and we can ask why this is. Whatever it is that answers that question we use the word 'God' to designate, but what God is we cannot know. On this last point Aquinas is in full agreement with Damascene, cited in the objection.

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[22]It is worth noting that Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, dealing with demonstration, was written whilst Aquinas was working on the *Prima Pars*. It is instructive, for example, to compare Aquinas' very clear, and thoroughly Aristotelian, understanding of what *demonstration* consists in with the attempts of some modern theologians to deny that q2 of the *Summa* purports to supply rationally suasive, and deductively valid, arguments for the existence of God.

[23]STh Ia, q2, a2, ob. 2

[24]Compare here Augustine, 'And what is He? I asked the earth; and it answered, 'I am not He.' And everything on earth made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, 'We are not your God. Seek higher than we.' I asked the breezy air; and the universal atmosphere with its inhabitants answered, 'I am not God.' I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: 'Neither,' they said, 'are we the God whom you seek.' And I answered all these things which crowd about the door of my flesh, 'You have told me concerning my God that you are not He. Tell me something positive about Him!' And with a loud voice they exclaimed: 'He made us." [].

4. Aquinas' disagreement with Maimonides

A more difficult challenge for an apophatic reading of Thomas comes from the undoubted fact that he is careful to distinguish his position concerning language about God from that of an uncontroversially apophatic thinker, Maimonides. Stump takes the disagreement between the two to be decisive for her reading of Aquinas. Of decisive importance here is SThIa, q13, a2, where Aquinas argues that names can be used of God 'substantially', that is as signifying the divine reality.[25] A principal opponent is Maimonides. Aquinas writes,

> Some have said that all such names, although they are applied to God affirmatively, nevertheless have been brought into use more to express some remotion from God, rather than to express anything that exists positively in Him. Hence they assert that when we say that God lives, we mean that God is not like an inanimate thing; and the same in like manner applies to other names; and this was taught by Rabbi Moses. Others say that these names applied to God signify His relationship towards creatures: thus in the words, 'God is good', we mean, God is the cause of goodness in things; and the same rule applies to other names.[26]

For Thomas, meanwhile, when I say that God is good I am saying something non-relational about God. For sure there remains much that is atypical about theological language: when I say 'God is good' the predicate and the subject signify the same reality, God - divine simplicity allows there to be no distinction between God and God's attributes, hence God and the divine goodness are one and the same reality. Similarly predicates applied to God in order to make true statements function analogically relative to their creaturely use.[27] When I say 'God is good' what I am saying of God is different from, although related to, what I say of Socrates when I say 'Socrates is good'.

So there is undoubtedly a difference between Aquinas and Maimonides concerning our capacity to speak about God. For Aquinas, but not Maimonides, we can make true intrinsic predications of God, and when we do so our predicates signify the divine reality. The question is whether this is incompatible with Aquinas himself being an apophatic theologian. Stump takes this to be the case, concluding from SThIa, q13 that 'it is a mistake to read the prologue to STh Ia, q3 as implying agnosticism about God's nature' [16, 95]. But this does not follow. According to my favoured reading, Aquinas is committed to two claims:

(1) We do not know what God is.
(2) We make true non-relational statements about God.

There would only be an obvious inconsistency here if in order to make true non-relational claims about some entity we needed to be able to classify that entity. This is not in general true ('look at those marks on the ground, whatever made them must be enormous') and is not, in particular, true when theological language is at issue. Confusion is likely to reign here unless we make a clear distinction between what an expression *signifies* and what the expression *means*, in the sense of meaning according to which the meaning of an expression is what a language-user

[25]Following pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas uses *nomen* in a broader sense than the modern English 'name'. Anything said of God is a name of God, so for example 'almighty' is a name of God (see the appeal to Exodus 15:3 at STh Ia, q13, a1 sc.).

[26]STh Ia, q13, a2, co. For Maimonides see GP I.

[27]STh Ia, q13, aa3-5

comes to understand when she learns how to use the expression.[28]

Taking the preface to STh Ia, q3 seriously involves affirming (1) and so denying that we are able to define or otherwise pick out the reality signified by our theological language. That there is such a reality follows from (2). Now there might seem to be a problem here if it were thought that, in order to use an expression meaningfully one needed to have a conceptual grasp of the reality signified by that expression. Aquinas' view is that this is not the case, and that we can learn to use words *about* God *through* our contact with creatures. Clarity is important here. Against Maimonides Aquinas has denied that when we say 'God is good' we are really talking about the relationship between God and creaturely goodness. On the contrary, it is God *in se* who is both being talked about and is the signification of the predicate. It is, however, perfectly compatible with this to say that we are warranted in saying that God is good because of our encounter with created goodness. And indeed this is Aquinas' explicit position,

> In the significance of names, that from which the name is derived is different sometimes from what it is intended to signify, as for instance, this name "stone" [lapis] is imposed from the fact that it hurts the foot [loedit pedem], but it is not imposed to signify that which hurts the foot, but rather to signify a certain kind of body; otherwise everything that hurts the foot would be a stone [This refers to the Latin etymology of the word "lapis" which has no place in English]. So we must say that these kinds of divine names are imposed from the divine processions; for as according to the diverse processions of their perfections, creatures are the representations of God, although in an imperfect manner; so likewise our intellect knows and names God according to each kind of procession; but nevertheless these names are not imposed to signify the procession themselves, as if when we say "God lives," the sense were, "life proceeds from Him"; but to signify the principle itself of things, in so far as life pre-exists in Him, although it pre-exists in Him in a more eminent way than can be understood or signified.[29]

He concludes the article by replying to an objection to the nameability of the divine substance on the basis that we do not understand that substance in this life. As a succinct statement of Aquinas' commitment to both apophaticism and our capacity to signify God it cannot be bettered,

> We cannot know the essence of God in this life, as He really is in Himself; but we know Him accordingly as He is represented in the perfections of creatures; and thus the names imposed by us signify Him in that manner only.[30]

5. 'Quid est' as a term of art

There are no good reasons, then, to follow Stump in minimising Aquinas' apophaticism. In fact there are good reasons not to follow her. It is instructive, though, to look at how she reads Aquinas' denial that we cannot know of God *quid sit*.[31] If this

[28]Readers familiar with Frege will recognise the sense-reference distinction. Following Geach in [6] I'm saying here that Aquinas anticipated that distinction.

[29]SThIa, q13, a2, ad. 2.

[30]SThIa, q13, a2, ad. 3.

[31]The preface to q3 uses the subjunctive '*sit*', Stump's discussion (which is addressing medieval usage more generally) the indicative '*est*'. Nothing important turns on this distinction of mood.

is not the profession of a significant apophaticism, what is it? Stump's response deserves quoting at length:

> The expression *quid est* ('what it is') is a technical term of medieval logic. Peter of Spain, for example, gives the standard medieval formula for a genus as 'that which is predicated of many things differing in species in respect of what they are (*in eo quod quid est*)'; a differentia, on the other hand, is defined as 'that which is predicated of many things differing in species in respect of what they are like (*in eo quod quale*)'. Now the essence of anything is composed of both genus and differentia, and genus differs from differentia only in virtue of the fact that genus, unlike differentia is predicated *in eo quod quid est*. It is therefore possible , in the terms of medieval logic, for someone who does not know the *quid est* of a thing nevertheless to know a great deal about the essence of that thing in virtue of knowing the differentia of it, which is not predicated *in eo quod quid est*. So whatever exactly '*quid est*' means in Aquinas's thought, in the terms of medieval logic, Aquinas's claim that we cannot know with regard to God *quid est* does not by itself imply that we can know nothing positive about God. [16, 96]

Aquinas, of course, denies that 'we can know nothing about God', and we saw above how he thinks we can come to make true intrinsic judgements about God on the basis of our encounter with God's creatures. Crucially, however, this ability does not for Thomas depend on our knowledge of what God is. Nor can our knowledge of God be of *differentia* since the divine simplicity means that the genus/ differentia distinction is inapplicable in the case of God.[32]

The action however is elsewhere. In suggesting that *quid est* is a technical term of medieval logic, Stump seeks to suggest that the denial that we can know of God *quid est* is less monumetal than it might appear. Knowing of something *quid est* may be useful for some purposes, but there is nothing striking go on if in turns out that this knowledge is impossible. There are two reasons why this deflationary understanding of '*quid est*' cannot be faithful to Thomas. First, whilst it is certainly true that '*quid est*' is a term used in medieval logic, the labelling of it as *technical* is prone to mislead. Logic, no less than metaphysics to which it is closely related in 13th century Europe, is a descriptive enterprise, carefully delineating our language and the inferences we make in it, so that we might reflectively understand them and reason better. As Aquinas writes in the preface to his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, 'we need an art to direct the acts of reason, so that in these acts also we may proceed in an orderly way'.[33] The terms used in the art of logic many be unfamiliar (although '*quid est*' is no more esoteric in medieval Latin than its modern English translation) but they are concerned with tracking something ordinary and everyday. And indeed it is quite obvious that unless I know what *kind* of entity something is, I am severely inhibited in my capacity to reason about it. It is because I am a rational animal and not, say, a number that you can infer that if you wait long enough I will fall asleep, and that you can recognise that the question whether I am odd or even is not a good one. That God falls outside any kind, and so in particular the kinds about which we are competent reasoners, is a monumentally important recognition which cannot but inform all our attempts to

[32]STh Ia, q3, a5.
[33]InPA pr.

talk of God, whence the early and pivotal place of q3 in the *Summa*.

Secondly, Aquinas is very clear that knowing of some entity *quid est* is central to scientific investigation, following Aristotle in taking scientific enquiry to address three questions, 'that it is so, why it is so, whether it is and what it is'.[34] Much of the second book of the *Posterior Analytics* commentary addresses reasoning in some way related to what the object is. This is a question which Thomas, following Aristotle, thinks central to human knowledge-formation. It is the ordinary concern of science, not the extraordinary concern of philosophers. Now Aquinas does in fact think that that there is a science which deals with God, what he calls *sacra doctrina*,[35] but he thinks that this science is severely constrained precisely because we do not know of its object *quid est*. Returning to his preamble to the third question of the *Summa Theologiae*:

> When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now, because 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.[36]

My argument above is to the effect that we ought to take Thomas at his word.

6. Back to the Apophatic Aquinas

Our contemporaries find it difficult to take Aquinas at his word. Wasn't he a Christian theologian, and didn't he therefore claim all sorts of things about God? And didn't he think that we could be united to God, even in this life? Lurking in the background is often an anthropomorphism: if God is what Christianity claims, then must not God be a person,[37] much like ourselves, but infinite? This is not Thomas' perspective. Refusing to drive a wedge between mystical theology and the science of *sacra doctrina*, Aquinas' vision is of a God who is utterly beyond our capacity to comprehend in this life, of whom we cannot know what he is, yet whose effects we can trace (and so learn to speak of God) - both in creation and in the saving missions of the Son and the Spirit - and to whom we can be united, coming thereby to share in the divine mystery. His is a mysticism whose starting point is the world around us, reflection on which leads us to consider the God from which that world came. Victor White captured Aquinas' position beautifully, and his words contrast sharply with current mainstream philosophical takes on Thomas, the forgotten mystic,

> St Thomas's position differs from that of modern agnostics because while modern agnosticism says simply, 'We do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle', a Thomist says, 'We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call God. If there were no God, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified.[19, 230-1]

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[34] InPA II.1a
[35] STh Ia, q1, a2.
[36] STh Ia, q3, pr.
[37] Or three people, depending on how the questioner reads the doctrine of the Trinity.

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