

THE END OF PHILOSOPHY

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In this article the author analyzes the different ways in which one can speak of an end of philosophy. He (she) shows the way in which the key to the continuation of philosophy in our days is only attainable through the overcoming of sophistry and skepticism.

Half a century ago, when I was young, it was fashionable in Anglo-American circles to say that a criterion for meaningfulness had been found which rendered metaphysics as well as ethics meaningless¹. When that effort went down in flames, we were next told that a Linguistic Turn had been taken and real philosophizing could at last begin. Of course, by then it had become a tradition of sorts to announce that all previous philosophy was meaningless or based on some mistake which could now at last be corrected. This might be called the mark of the modern, beginning with Descartes. So many such revolutions followed one upon the other that our discipline was in a constant vertiginous spin. It was not only on the Continent that one heard of the death of metaphysics or the end of philosophy. By common consent, it seemed, there is no longer any way to do philosophy well, so it is best not to do it all. Of course, it is philosophers who tell us this, repeatedly, from their amply endowed chairs, making a career of putting themselves out

¹ A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, remains a good read for those interested in the archeology of the modern and the diminishing life span of revisionist proposals.

of business while retaining their positions. In this paper I wish to discuss the end of philosophy.

To say this is to utter an amphibolous sentence, not wholly unlike "Last night I shot an intruder in my pajamas". When the Greeks spoke of the end of philosophy, "end" had the sense of *telos* or goal, the desired outcome. Nowadays, talk about the end of philosophy takes "end" in its meaning of stop, cessation, terminus. Actually, the two senses have always gone hand in hand. One who wishes to espouse the end of philosophy in one sense of 'end' is committed to rejecting it in the other sense. Thus, Plato opposed Protagoras the Father of the Sophists who claimed that what is true for me is true for me and what is true for you is true for you even if you are holding A and I am holding -A. As Plato saw, this position is the end of truth; accordingly he spent what might seem an inordinate amount of time discussing the sophistic principle. And so did Aristotle. The painstaking analyses of Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* —subjected to equally painstaking analyses by Ferdinand Inciarte— are a testimony to the seriousness with which the undermining of philosophy was taken².

It might be said of the sophist position that, if it is true, it is false. That is, it is self-refuting. One who wishes to say that contradictories are simultaneously true can formulate this in speech only by assuming that both sides of a contradiction cannot be simultaneously true. If nothing else, as Aristotle ultimately observed, the words used must mean what they mean and not the opposite in order to convey the thought that they mean both. Why did Plato and Aristotle spend so much time showing that nonsense is nonsense?

The sophist was in some ways the first pragmatist. Truth was not a matter of a match between a judgment and the things that are so much as it was effectiveness, that is, a statement's truth was gauged in terms of its bringing about a desired effect.

² See R. McInerny, *Characters in Search of Their Author. The Gifford Lectures, Glasgow 1999-2000*. Notre Dame, 2001.

From its very beginning, philosophy has been accompanied by its dark twin, sophistry. The quest for wisdom, the pursuit of truth has always been seen by some as impossible of realization. A history of anti-philosophy could be written. If it were, it would doubtless reveal that in our own times anti-philosophy has all but driven philosophy from the scene. We are all sophists now.

Once metaphysics was rejected because it was thought to be false, then it was rejected because it was said to be meaningless, to be speaking of things of which we cannot speak, a sort of linguistic Kantianism. Such criticisms had the merit of supposing that the contradictory position was true. If one rejected some philosophical thinking as false, this was because it collided with the truth. Such a critique presupposed that there are judgments which are rendered true by the way things are. In these latter days, the full implications of the epistemological turn that philosophy took with Descartes have been recognized. When this is put into a linguistic key, we are told that such a conception of truth is an effort to escape the net of language, to match language with something beyond itself³.

However eager you and I are to show the inadequacy of such positions, there is little doubt that they are widely accepted, and because they are widely accepted, the notion of truth as the conformity of judgment and reality is called into question. But if there is no reality to verify what we think or say, there is no reality to falsify either. So we rejoin Protagoras: contradictories have an equal claim to being true because neither has any basis for its supposed truth. If "truth" is retained, it is only in a pragmatic sense, or what works, or what is effect, and not in the sense of what accurately expresses what is.

More important even than confronting attacks on reason is the attempt to recall how reason attains its desired end. In what follows I will recall in its mainlines Thomas Aquinas's approach to

³ Of interest on all this are L. Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, Chicago, 2001; H. Redner, *Malign Masters*, New York, 1997 and S. Rosen, *Nihilism*, South Bend, 2000. See too D. Edmonds and J. Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker, The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers*, New York, 2001.

metaphysics, from time to time alluding to attacks on metaphysics. Others have taken the opposite tack, allowing the Heideggerian critique to define the discussion⁴.

1. The love of wisdom

As the etymology of the term indicates, wisdom is the *telos* of philosophy, and wisdom is preeminently that knowledge of the divine that is attainable by human knowers. Philosophy reaches its goal in theology. This is the ideal that Aristotle puts before us in the magnificent opening chapters of his *Metaphysics* where the initial generalization —All men by nature desire to know— is traced through sense perception, the internal senses, memory, experience, to *techne* and *episteme* as knowledge of the “why” or cause. The distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge was adumbrated already in speaking of the external senses, with sight seen as desirable “even when we have no further end in view”. *Techne* gives way to *episteme* both of which is accomplished through knowledge of causes. One who has knowledge of causes is considered wiser than one who does not because it is the mark of the wise man that he can teach what he knows by explaining why. But if wisdom is knowledge of principles and causes, we must ask what kind of causes wisdom knows. Chapter 2 of Book One develops the idea of wisdom carefully. It is know-

⁴ *Saint Thomas et l'onto-théologie. Actes du colloque tenu à l'Institut catholique du Toulouse les 3 et 4 Juin 1994*. Published as a special issue of the *Revue Thomiste*, Janvier-Mars, 1995. “Dieu gagne-t-il à être? L’alliance séculaire entre l’être et Dieu, don’t saint Thomas passe (à juste titre?) Pour le chantre, a-t-elle été et est-elle encore pour la pensée chrétienne un piège ou une chance?... Plusieurs auteurs se sont essentiellement attachés à l’exégèse de la pensée thomassienne elle-même pour déterminer dans quelle mesure elle tombait sous le coup du procès intenté à l’onto-théologue par Heidegger, ce que ne va évidemment pas sans quelque réflexion sur la signification et la pertinence de cette critique elle-même”. From the Présentation, 5.

ledge of all things in their ultimate causes and for that reason can be called a divine science in two senses.

For the science which it would be most meet for God to have is a divine science, and so is any science that deals with divine objects, and this science alone has both these qualities, for God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle, and such a science either God alone can have, or God above all others [983a6-10].

That the philosophical quest should end in a science that can be called divine is the authentic achievement of Greek philosophy. "Philosophy" is an umbrella term which covers a plurality of sciences, but this is an ordered plurality, with all other science seen as necessary or useful for the acquisition of that science which is called wisdom. Of course the science has other names as well: it is "the science that we are seeking", it is "first philosophy"; it is wisdom and it is theology. How can one science fulfill so many different tasks?

I need not commend to this audience the magnificent proemium that Thomas Aquinas wrote to his commentary on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle⁵. What Thomas has to say presupposes what is discussed in the book he is introducing, which doubtless is why reflection on this proemium is more and more fruitful the more we understand the *Metaphysics*.

All the arts and sciences are desired as conducive to man's perfection or beatitude. But then, given this common aim, one of them must be regulative of the others and direct them to it, and it will be called wisdom. It is the mark of the wise man to order, not

⁵ O. Boulnois points out that Martin Heidegger commented on this text in a course given in 1929-1930, translated as *Les concepts fondamentaux de la métaphysique*, Paris, 1992. See "Quand Commence l'Ontothéologie?", 94-95 in the special issue of the *Revue Thomiste* already mentioned. Boulnois's account indicates that Heidegger's failed to understand the text. That failure led to the views on metaphysics which have elicited so much undeserved comment. An understanding of the *proemium* is the best inoculation against Heidegger's increasingly incantatory thinking.

to be ordered. Among me, those who are defective in intellect are governed by those of keen intellect. Wisdom is concerned with the most intelligible things, for this is the basis for its hegemony over the others arts and sciences. But what does it mean to say that some things are more intelligible than others? What does it mean to speak of the most intelligible things? We can arrive at an understanding of this in three ways.

First, when we consider what makes us intellectually certain, namely, a grasp of causes. That is, causes are the source of understanding. But then, the first causes will be the concern of wisdom which rules the others⁶.

Second, when we compare sense and intellect, we note that the senses bear on the singular and intellect on the universal. But then the most intellectual science will bear on the most universal principles. And what are they? Being and what follows on being, such as the one and many, potency and act. These are presupposed to knowledge of this sort of thing or that and ought not to be left unexamined. Nor should each particular science have to treat of them. The common science that treats of them can be called most intellectual and directive of the others⁷.

⁶ "Maxime autem intelligibilia *tripliciter* accipere possumus.

Primo quidem *ex ordine intelligendi*. Nam ex quibus intellectus certitudinem accipit, videntur esse intelligibilia magis. Unde, cum certitudo scientiae per intellectum acquiratur ex causis, causarum cognitio maxime intellectualis esse videtur. Unde et illa scientia, quae primas causas considerat, videtur esse maxime aliarum regulatrix.

⁷ *Secundo ex comparatione intellectus ad sensum*. Nam, cum sensus sit cognitio particularium, intellectus per hoc ab ipso differe videtur, quod universalia comprehendit. Unde et illa scientia maxime est intellectualis quae circa principia maxime universalia versatur. Quae quidem sunt ens, et ea quae consequuntur ens, et unum et multa, potentia et actus. Huiusmodi autem non debent omnino indeterminata remanere, cum sine his completa cognitio de his, quae sunt propria alicui generi vel speciei, haberi non possit. Nec iterum in una aliqua particulari scientia tractari debent: quia cum his unumquodque genus entium ad sui cognitionem indigeat, pari ratione in qualibet particulari scientia tractarentur. Unde restat quod

Third, by considering the nature of intellectual knowledge. To the degree that something is immune to matter it has the intellectual power. On that basis, things most separate from matter are most intelligible. Why? Because intellect and what it understands are proportionate to one another and of the same kind since intellect and the actually understood are one. What is abstracted from singular matter is not most intelligible (such are natural forms universally understood as treated by natural science), nor are those which leave aside all sensible matter only insofar as they are understood, such as mathematical. Rather it is things abstracted from all sensible matter both as understood and as they exist that are the most intelligible, such as God and the angels⁸.

Having given these three ways of understanding “the most intelligible”, Thomas concludes by saying that the science that deals with these three is the most intellectual and master of the rest⁹. And then, addressing our surprise that the three different senses of most intelligible are the concern of one and the same science, he proceeds to show why this is the case. Here is his argument: (1) The separated substances mentioned are the first and universal causes of being. (2) It falls to the same science to consider a subject matter and its proper causes. (3) That is why the same science considers universal being (*ens commune*) and

in una communi scientia huiusmodi tractentur; quae cum maxime intellectualis sit, est aliarum regulatrix”.

⁸ “*Tertio ex ipsa cognitione intellectus*. Nam cum unaquaeque res ex hoc ipso vim intellectivam habeat, quod est a materia immunis, oportet illa esse maxime intelligibilia, quae sunt maxime a materia separata. Intelligibile et intellectum oportet proportionata esse, et unius generis, cum intellectus et intelligibile in actu sint unum. Ea vero sunt maxime a materia separate, quae non tantum a signata materia abstrahunt, sicut formae naturales in universali acceptae, de quibus tractat scientia naturalis, sed omnino a materia sensibili. Et non solum secundum rationem, sicut mathematica, sed etiam secundum esse, sicut Deus et intelligentiae”.

⁹ “Unde scientia, quae de istis rebus considerat, maxime videtur esse intellectualis, et aliarum princeps domina”.

separate substances: being in general is the subject of which those substances are the common and universal causes.

Being is the predicably most universal term and thus is common to all. A science that has being for its subject will be looking not for the causes of this sort of being or that but of the universal causes of whatever is. Obviously such principles are *universalia in causando* and not *in praedicando*. But if this science considers the most intelligible in all three senses of that phrase, it does not have three subjects in the sense of *genus subiectum*, knowledge of which is sought and which appears as the subject of the conclusive of a demonstrative syllogism whose predicate is its property and whose middle term is what it is, its *ratio* or definition. The subject of wisdom is *ipsum solum ens commune*, only being universally understood. It is the causes of being in common which are sought and knowledge of them is the end (*finis*) toward which the considerations of the science tend.

How can a science whose subject is being in general be said to be concerned as a whole with the most intelligible things in the third sense? Although its subject is whatever is, being taken universally, nonetheless the whole science is said to be about things separate from matter both as defined and as they exist. This is so because “separate from matter as defined and as they exist” applies both to things which are never found in matter, such as God and intellectual substances, but also to things which *can* exist apart from matter, such as being taken universally. If to be and to be material were identical this would not be the case.

The three senses of “most intelligible” ground the different names given this science. It is called divine science or theology insofar as it considers separated substance. It is called metaphysics because, as the consideration of being and what follows on it, it is taken up after natural science and thus is *meta ta physika*, as the more universal comes after the less universal. It is called First Philosophy insofar as it considers the first causes of things.

Thomas concludes his proemium by saying that now it is clear what the subject of this science is and how it relates to others sciences and why it has a variety of names. What is also crystal

clear is that what drives this science, the end it seeks, is knowledge of the divine. It has the subject it has in order to achieve such knowledge. One might object that it is in natural science that one becomes aware of the Prime Mover and that we do not need another science in order to arrive at knowledge of divine substance as causal. And in fact Thomas insists that it is just because such a proof occurs in natural science that the possibility of a science beyond natural science and mathematics emerges¹⁰. The metaphysician asks what is true of natural things, not insofar as they are natural or physical, but just insofar as they are, and this provides a subject matter whose causes will be proportionate to it: that is, they will be the causes of being as being, and not just of a kind of being. From the point of view of natural things, knowing them through more or most universal predicates is not to have proper knowledge of them. To know a tree as a being or as a substance is to know it less perfectly than to know it as the kind of substance it is, namely, a tree. The formation of a predicably more universal subject matter, justified because one has learned by proof that to be and to be material are not identical, is for the sake of arriving at knowledge of the first causes of being.

Throughout much of the 20th century, Aristotelian studies were defined by the supposed tension between understanding metaphysics as a general science, ontology, or as a particular science concerned with separate substances, theology. But separate substances could never function as the subject of a science, as Aristotle makes clear¹¹. That knowledge of them is the point of the science is, of course, clear, but they are known only obliquely as causes of being as being. Eventually, Aristotelian studies abandoned the path assigned it by Werner Jaeger, the decisive turn

¹⁰ Hence the reiterated remark that if there were only natural sciences, natural philosophy would be First Philosophy. See e.g. *In XI Metaphysic.*, lectio 7, n. 2267; *In VI Metaphysic.*, lectio 1, n. 1170.

¹¹ See *In VII Metaphysic*, lectio 17 where Thomas is explaining Chapter 17 of Book Zeta.

being taken by Giovanni Reale¹². The influence of another German thinker has obscured Thomas's teaching on the nature of metaphysics—even among Thomists.

A metaphysics which seeks knowledge of God received the name ontotheology from Martin Heidegger and provided a false issue to which many have devoted their scholarly energies. I do not propose to review those considerations here, but what I have to say should suggest the irrelevance of the Heideggerian problem¹³.

When Thomas speaks of *ens commune* as the *genus* studied by Metaphysics, he is of course taking the term in the sense that it has when one means the subject of a science, *to genos to hypokeimenon*, the *genus subiectum*. There is no suggestion that this is a predicable genus said univocally of all things. This is clarified when Aristotle discusses the subject of the science he is seeking in Book Gamma and compares it to the subjects of natural philosophy and mathematics, the very discussion Thomas anticipated in his proemium. The term "being" is common or universal to those things whose causes as being are sought in a way which is exemplified by "healthy" and "medical", a way Aristotle describes with the phrase *pollakos legomena*, things said in many ways and not univocally or equivocally. Since the term "being" is said in many ways of the subject of the science but with reference to one, substance, the primary meaning of 'being' emerges as the primary subject of the science. As is well known, Thomas Aquinas

¹² G. Reale, *Il Concetto de Filosofia Prima e l'Unita della Metaphysica di Aristotele*, Milano, 1961 (Fifth edition, 1993). And see the remarkable study by E. Berti, "La Metafisica di Aristotele: Ontologia o Filosofia Prima?", in AA.VV., *Aristotele Perché la metafisica?*, A cura di A. Bausola e G. Reale, Milano, 1994, 117-143.

¹³ See M. E. Sacchi, *El apocalipsis del ser: La gnosis esotérica de Martin Heidegger*, Buenos Aires, 1999. A special issue of *Revue Thomiste* appeared in 1995 containing the papers given at a colloquium sponsored by the journal in Toulouse in June, 1994. The issue was called *Saint Thomas et l'onto-théologie*. Most of the contributors accepted the Heideggerian accusation against metaphysics as a given.

introduced the term analogy in discussing this text —Aristotle does not use the Greek term in this way— so that he can say that “being” is said analogously of the things which make up the subject of metaphysics¹⁴ The way in which “being” is common to the subject of metaphysics is sometimes called a horizontal application of analogous naming. Important as it is, it cannot compete with what is called the vertical application of analogous naming, that is, the way in which terms are common to the subject and to the cause of the subject of metaphysics.

One who reads the *Metaphysics* with Thomas Aquinas will see the unhurried and careful way in which Aristotle fashions a vocabulary to speak of the cause of being, extrapolating from an analysis of the subject of the science. The analysis of natural substance aims at the isolation of what the term can mean when extended beyond natural substances. The *ratio substantiae* that emerges is not univocally common to natural and separated substance. The meaning of the term is purified so that it can without equivocation be applied to separated substance. In like manner, God is seen to be Pure Act and Goodness, the final cause of the universe. But the divine name of choice in the *Metaphysics* is “thought thinking itself”, which involves extending thinking beyond the instance most obvious to us to speak of God¹⁵.

¹⁴ Cfr. *In IV Metaphysic.*, lectio 1, n. 534: “Quaecumque communiter unius recipiunt praedicationem, licet non univoce, sed analogice de his predicetur, pertinent ad unius scientiae considerationem...”. See my *Aquinas and Analogy*, Washington, 1996, 30-47.

¹⁵ Of course God as Prime Mover is at the center of the discussion in Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*. Whether or not being has been forgotten, it may perhaps be said that we have forgotten how to read with fitting astonishment such passages as this: “On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And it is a life such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And for this reason are waking, perception and thinking most pleasant, and hopes and memories are so on account of these). And thinking in itself deal with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks on itself because it

2. Metaphysics as Theology

The opening of the second chapter of Boethius's *De trinitate* provided the commentator with an occasion to discuss the three kinds of speculative science, natural, mathematical and theological and the basis in abstraction from matter for their distinction¹⁶. St. Thomas did not get much beyond this point in his commentary, but he does provide us with a remarkable exposition of these remarks at the outset of chapter 2. And what he has to say of divine science or theology complements what he has had to say in the proemium to his commentary on the *Metaphysics*.

Having in the first article of q. 5 discussed the criteria for distinguishing speculative science, showing that it is to be found in degrees of involvement in matter, he takes up the sciences seriatim. Thus it is that in article 4 he asks whether divine science is concerned with what exists apart from matter and motion. The difficulties he poses for an affirmative answer to that question may be summed up in one: if divine science is metaphysics and meta-

shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is *capable* of receiving the object of thought. I.e. the essence, is thought. But it is *active* when it *possesses* this object. Therefore the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God *is* in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God, for this *is* God". *Metaphysics*, Lambda 7, 1072b13-30; cfr. St. Thomas, Lectio 8. All the elements of a treatise on the divine names are present here.

¹⁶ Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classics, Cambridge, Mass, 1978, 8.

physics is concerned with all being and some beings are material, metaphysics must be concerned with material as well as immaterial being.

Any science has a subject matter and seeks knowledge of the principles of that subject matter. A solution to the problem before us depends on recognizing two kinds of principle. Some things which are causes and principles of other things are things in their own right; thus they are not only considered in the science of whose subject matter they are causes but can themselves be the subject matter of a different science. Other principles have no independent existence and thus are treated only in the science of which subject matter they are principles.

All the things that share common principles in virtue of the fact that they are but, as the distinction just made suggests, some of them are predicably common (*communia per praedicationem*) whereas others are shared or common causes (*communia per causalitatem*). To say that form is common to all forms is to note that 'form' is predicably common or universal to them all. But to say that the sun is a common cause of occurrences on earth is to refer to some numerically one thing, the sun, and to recognize that its causality extends to many things. All things have common principles, not only in the first way (*principia secundum analogiam*), but also in the second way, such that there are existent things which are the principles of all things. Thomas illustrates the latter in this way: the principles of accidents are found in substance, and the principles of corruptible substances in incorruptible substances, and thus by degree and order all things can be reduced to certain principles.

That which is the principle of existing in all beings must itself be in a maximal way, and thus be most complete and perfect, and most actual. They are accordingly immaterial and, in Aristotle's phrase, if the divine is anywhere it is with these. Such divine things which are complete in themselves and yet the causes of all other beings can be treated in two ways, either as the principle of a science whose subject is being in general, or as subject of their own sciences.

The distinction of kinds of principles —those which exist independently and can have a science of which they are the subject— provides Thomas with a way of contrasting the theology of the philosophers from the theology based on Sacred Scripture. Given the disproportion between our intellect and the most intelligible in the sense of the divine, there is no way there could be a human science of which God were the subject. Philosophically, our knowledge of God is dependent upon and derivative from our knowledge of the things which are proportionate to our intellect, sensible things. “Hence divine things of this kind are not treated by philosophers save insofar as they are the principles of all things and that is why they are treated in that doctrine in which are studied what is common to all beings whose subject is being as being. This is the science called divine by the philosophers”¹⁷.

3. The Divine Names



Under the influence of Heidegger’s conception of ontotheology, some have suggested that any names common to God and creature, even being, involve a denial of the infinite distance between these two terms. Even more notoriously, he suggests that the God of philosophy is necessarily a kind of deistic first cause¹⁸. That these

¹⁷ *In Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4, ed. Wyser, Fribourg, 1948, 48; ed. Bruno Decker, Leiden, 1959, 194.

¹⁸ “The deity enters into philosophy through the perdurance of which we think at first as the approach to the active nature of the difference between Being and beings. The difference constitutes the ground plan in the structure of the essence of metaphysics. The perdurance results in and gives Being as the generative ground. This ground itself needs to be properly accounted for by that for which it accounts, that is, by the causation through the supremely original matter —and that is as *causa sui*. This is the right name for the god of philosophy”. *Identity and Difference*, tr. J. Stambaugh, New York, 1969, 72.

names are analogously common is thought not to escape the impiety of suggesting that God is a being among beings.

God comes to be known from knowledge of the things around us and the names of these things are applied to their first cause. We name things as we know them; what is first and commensurately knowable by the human mind is the natures of sensible things; therefore it is the names of such things which are attributed to God whether it is a matter of the philosopher extrapolating or God revealing Himself to us in Sacred Scripture. The problem is always the same: how can terms which are appropriately used to speak of material things be used to speak of God? That is, how are names common to God and creature? How are we to understand “wise” as it occurs in “Socrates is wise” and “God is wise”? Thomas sees here an instance of what he calls analogous naming, something he regularly exemplifies with “healthy”. One who understands the behavior of “healthy” in “Food is healthy”, “98.6 is a healthy temperature” and “Edward is healthy” will be in a position to understand how “wise” is common to God and creatures. Thomas’s employment of the *via affirmationis*, *via negationis* and *via eminentiae* is explained in terms of the complexity of the *ratio nominis*, the perfection signified, the *res significata* and the way it is signified *modus significandi*. When God is said to be wise, it is the perfection wisdom, the *res significata* that justifies the affirmation. But, because all our names involve a mode of signifying that is appropriate to creatures —*omne nomen cum defectu est quantum ad modum significandi*¹⁹— the denial of the mode is justified. It is the recognition that the perfection is found in God in a way that wholly transcends the creaturely mode that underlies the *via eminentiae*. Here, famously, St. Thomas says that we end by knowing rather what God is not rather than what He is. Of course, this does not mean that we do not know something of what God is. Certain names signify him *substantialiter*²⁰. We name things as we know them, we come to knowledge of God from knowledge of

¹⁹ *I Summa contra gentes*, cap. 30.

²⁰ *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 13, a. 2.

creatures and thus extend the names of creatures to God and “they imperfectly signify Him because creatures imperfectly represent Him”²¹. Another sign of the imperfection of the divine names is that we need many of them, no one of which expresses what He is comprehensively. Finally, by seeing God as the fullness of being, *ipsum esse subsistens*, we say that the perfections which are scattered and separate among creatures are unified in Him in all their fullness.

The reminder that our minds can never achieve comprehensive knowledge of God should not be taken to mean that we know nothing of God²².

Man’s ultimate end consists of knowledge of God, imperfectly in philosophy, perfectly through faith and ultimately the beatific vision. In these remarks, I have tried to recall what for this audience are commonplaces about philosophy classically considered and metaphysics as the locus of the theology of the philosophers. As Aristotle said at the outset of the *Metaphysics*, our knowledge of the most noble and knowable things may be imperfect but it is far and away preferable to any other knowledge. But recognition of its imperfection should not lead to its effective denial. Some versions of negative theology are indistinguishable from agnosticism. One is reminded of a passage in Kierkegaard.

“Heraclitus the obscure said, ‘One cannot pass twice through the same stream’. Heraclitus the obscure had a disciple who did not stop with that, he went further and added, ‘One cannot do it even once’. Poor Heraclitus, to have such a disciple! By this amendment the thesis of Heraclitus was so improved that it became an Eleatic thesis which denies movement, and yet the

²¹ *Ibid.*, ad 1m.

²² See J. Wippel, “Quidditative Knowledge of God,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, 1984, 215-241.

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disciple desired only to be a disciple of Heraclitus... and to go further —not back to the position Heraclitus had abandoned”²³.

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²³ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, New York, 1954, 132.