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Being as Iconic: Aquinas on ‘He Who Is’ as Name for God

James Dominic Rooney

Abstract:

Aquinas claims that ‘He Who Is’ is the most proper of the names we have for God. But this attempt to ‘describe’ God with a philosophical concept like ‘being’ can seem dangerously close to creating a false conception based on our limited understanding – an idol. A dominant criticism of Aquinas’ use of this term is that any attempt to use ‘being’ to describe God will inevitably make Him merely some object in our ontology alongside other beings, unacceptably mitigating God's radical transcendence and otherness. I will argue that Aquinas has a very creative response to this charge: ‘being’ stands in a unique relationship as the only concept that can ensure we do not draw God under some particular creaturely limit and thus use divine names to create an ‘idol.’ In other words, ‘being’ is a special paradigm concept/term which ensures we preserve humility in our attempts to name God.

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There is a common misunderstanding of the position Thomas Aquinas takes in regard to his doctrine of divine names, or how we predicate terms of God. Aquinas claims that ‘He Who Is’ is the most proper of the names we have for God.¹ But this attempt to ‘describe’ God with a philosophical concept like ‘being’ can seem dangerously close to creating a false conception based on our limited understanding – an idol. When we consider that all of our concepts are derived from what we know of created things, we could be deceiving ourselves with our own ideas rather than allowing God to be known as He really is. This is broadly how Jean-Luc Marion, for instance, has read the metaphysical tradition; he has argued that the attempt of metaphysicians to describe God as ‘being itself’ has been an exercise in intellectual *hubris*.²

The criticism (Heideggerian in origin) that Aquinas is engaging in illicit ‘onto-theology’ is in the background of Marion's claims that this is a form of idolatry. The dominant idea is that any attempt to use ‘being’ to describe God will inevitably make Him merely some object in our ontology alongside other beings – and this in serves to unacceptably mitigate God's radical transcendence and otherness.³ While it seems plausible to me that a careful reading of Aquinas exempts him from the charge of ‘onto-theology’, I will focus on a more fundamental response. Aquinas has a very creative response to this charge: ‘being’ stands in a unique relationship as the *only* concept that can ensure we do not draw God under some particular creaturely limit and thus use divine names to create an ‘idol.’ This is true even if, as Aquinas notes, any positive ‘pure perfection’ may be termed *proprie* of God (e.g., God is literally and really ‘wise’).⁴ As I will argue, ‘being’ may be thought of as the logical term by which all other positive perfections are related appropriately to the divine nature. It is in the overarching context of appropriate metaphysical distinctions between God and creation (supplied by a divine name like *esse ipsum subsistens*) that any more creaturely ‘positive perfection’, such as ‘power’ or ‘wisdom’, does not overreach into becoming a ‘comprehensive’ concept/term that attempts to describe fully how God is without respecting our epistemic limits. Thus, we can make a compelling case that ‘being’ is a special paradigm concept/term which ensures we preserve humility in our attempts to name God.

My account as to the discovery and the content of the concept of ‘being’ that Aquinas thinks we ordinarily employ will be significantly curtailed. I will follow primarily the view of John Wippel,

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, q. 13, a. 11. [All citations taken from the Leonine ed., 1888-1906]

2 Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. T. Carlson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); esp. pp. xix-52. After this initial work, Marion has rescinded some of his criticisms of Aquinas in particular;

3 This kind of criticism has been made by John Zizioulas; *Lectures on Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Knight (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2008), pp. 16-22.

4 *ST* I, q. 13, a. 3 & 5. And, e.g., ‘Quaedam vero nomina significant ipsas perfectiones absolute, absque hoc quod aliquis modus participandi claudatur in eorum significatione, ut ens, bonum vivens, et huiusmodi, et talia proprie dicuntur de Deo’ (*ST* I, q. 13, a. 3, ad. 1).

which I take to be a mainstream interpretation of Aquinas, although not uncontroversial.⁵ Instead, rather than focus on the discovery of ‘being-as-being’, I want to highlight a peculiar *role* or *function* that the concept ‘being’ plays within Aquinas’ doctrine of the ‘names of God.’ The role played by the concept ‘being’ is that it serves as a paradigmatic ‘non-descriptive’ term; it signifies all possible perfections that could possibly be predicated of God in the highest possible mode (insofar as God is ‘being itself subsisting’) but no determinate one of these. Consequently for Aquinas, ‘being’ is the most proper means for human beings to name God, because only this term remains within the scope of our cognitive limits and indicates God’s transcendence of any term we might otherwise use.

John Wippel understands Thomas Aquinas to hold that there is a special kind of mental operation, *separatio*, by which human beings discover ‘being-as-being’, the unique subject of the science of metaphysics. This mental operation is opposed to that of ‘abstraction.’ In Thomas’ famous questions on the *De Trinitate*, he opposes these two operations and categorizes methodology in different scientific disciplines according to whether they work by abstraction or *separatio*. Abstraction is a process of considering some object of consideration ‘formally’, in separation from the concrete circumstances in which it might exist and considering some universalizable aspect in isolation from other (both physics and mathematics, for Aquinas, operate primarily by abstraction).⁶ By contrast, metaphysics requires *separation*, because it cannot consider any particular formal aspect – it considers the real existence of things, their *esse*, and not merely their formal properties. Wippel understands the operation of *separatio* to refer to the operation of the intellect in judging (it is specifically an act of *negative* judgment) that allows us to consider beings insofar as they exist, without considering the particular modes of how they exist; this follows Aquinas’ own use of it in the aforementioned article of the *De Trinitate*.⁷ It allows one to conceive of ‘existence’ or ‘being’ (*esse*) as a concept that, instead of being a merely abstract and empty notion, can support the way Aquinas understands ‘being’ to be the richest concept of all human concepts (encompassing actuality, goodness, and so forth).^{8 9} But *separatio*, as Wippel conceives of it, attains to *esse* by noting that to be a substance or a being (*ens*) does not mean exemplifying some particular mode of existence, such as material instantiation (while

5 Alternate accounts, for example, are presented in Benedict Ashley, *The Way Toward Wisdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), esp. pp. 92-171; Lawrence Dewan, *Form and Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 1-46.

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Super De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3, resp; c.f., Jacques Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 39-40.

7 John Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2000), pp. 44-45.

8 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, pp. 48.

9 This notion of the act of being – *esse* – is the primary content of the name we will use to describe the divine nature (‘Qui Est’), but it also seems to me that our language must always straddle the distinction between the two poles of considering God both as pure *esse* and as a concrete subject of that act, or as an *ens*. This is what I will argue for later in this paper which, following Eleonore Stump, I am calling a version of ‘quantum theology.’

this is a contentious thesis, we might here note we need not think of this as subsistent immaterial existence; instead, all we mean is that there is some sense in which existence judgments are made across domains like numbers and material objects).¹⁰ Positive judgments of existence are directed toward the *esse* of the things they judge, but it is by the process of *separatio*-negative judgments that we explicitly consider *esse* in itself by considering that, for something to exist, it need not exist ‘in this way or that’, such as materially or no.

This is connected to why Aquinas conceives of ‘being’ as an analogically-predicated term. Aquinas holds that ‘being’ (*ens*) is not a widest kind of categorization, or a ‘genus’ that would encompass all things. Following Aristotle, he thinks that the genus ‘being’ would be unacceptably implicated in its own differentiae.¹¹ Instead, Aquinas holds that we use the term ‘being’ according to a set of related meanings; this is what Wippel has called ‘horizontal’ or ‘predicamental’ analogy.¹² Analogy is involved in discussing what unites different uses of the term ‘being’ or ‘is’ or ‘exists.’ Aquinas does not think that we mean the same thing when we say ‘the apple is red’, and ‘Santa Claus really exists’ and ‘the dog is under the rug.’ In each of the cases above, a different relationship is indicated in our use of ‘being’-related terms. All of the meanings are referred to a primary instance in which being primarily occurs: substances, or those which do not have their being through another.¹³ It is the case, then, that ‘being’ does not *mean* or signify the same thing in each of these varied contexts; it is neither univocal or equivocal, but analogical in meaning. For Aquinas, then, ‘being’ can become the proper subject of metaphysics as a study of *ens in commune* (‘being in general’) according as we can study the principles that might govern the existence of anything at all (e.g., act and potency).¹⁴

The ‘analogy of being’ in this horizontal sense is of utmost importance in understanding the way the concept of *esse* (the act of being) functions in Aquinas’ thought, as it is metaphysically significant that there is no *definition* of ‘being’ (*ens*) that would apply to all instances (as an implication from the fact that ‘being’ is not a univocal term), as each individual exemplifies different meanings of what it is for it to exist (to have *esse*). As Robert Sokolowski has remarked, ‘being’ is an especially ‘presentative’ kind of concept which unites a whole series of meanings and usages into an ordered whole of predicative possibilities.¹⁵ This is opposed to what we might call a ‘determinative’ concept

10 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 47.

11 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.25.6.

12 The terms originate with Cornelio Fabro; c.f., *The Metaphysical Notion of Participation according to St. Thomas Aquinas*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane (Turin, 1939).

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Metaphysicae*, bk. V, lec. 9, n. 891.

14 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 54. cf., Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Metaphysicae*, bk. 4, lec. 1, n. 533.

15 Sokolowski is commenting from a phenomenological perspective on Wippel’s distinctions, so the distinction is directly relevant; Robert Sokolowski ‘The Science of Being as Being in Aristotle, Aquinas, and Wippel’, in *Science of Being as Being*, ed., Doolan (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2012), pp. 14-16.

that offers something like a definition. While ‘being’ has a primary meaning – which Thomas, following Aristotle, associates with substance¹⁶ – it also has a whole host of other meanings that acquire significance in relation to that primary meaning (e.g., the categories of accidental being and logical being).¹⁷ These are united insofar as we might say individual beings (*ens*) exist in different ways, but insofar as each of these different things *exist*, are all exemplifying ways to exist (*esse*).

‘Being’ must have, then, an interestingly dual character. While its extension is universal (i.e., everything that exists or could exist falls under it), the sense or intension has a peculiar character as it is not identical across all instances of entities. This has important implications for the subject matter of metaphysics as the science of ‘being.’ The closest thing to a categorical ‘universal’ concept of ‘being’ is what Aquinas calls *esse commune* (we might translate as, ‘what it is to be, generally considered’); it is the common notion of what it is for any given thing to exist. This is what we conceive of when we consider the whole of being; we consider what actually exists and come up with some unified notion of ‘existence’ which applies to the whole scope. *Esse commune* is not conceived of as a subsistent thing separate from real existents. It is more a universal which, in the individual kinds of existence enjoyed by entities, is exemplified in different ways.¹⁸ *Esse commune* then seems to signify what it would mean ‘to exist’ without restricting that meaning to any particular mode – we could give a set of ontological categories, for example.¹⁹ While God might be said to exist, it by no means follows that He must fit ‘within’ *esse commune* as falling under a common notion of existence shared with creatures (in fact, as we will see, God transcends *esse commune* as its cause²⁰).

Having given this overview of how the concept of ‘being’ functions in Aquinas' metaphysics, we can turn to how it functions in Aquinas' theory of the divine names. Aquinas conceives of our description of God as functioning by a similar kind of ‘analogical’ predication – we predicate terms which are creaturely in origin (terms like ‘wisdom’ or ‘power’) to God.²¹ This happens either negatively, where we deny some term could apply to God (e.g., ‘God is not a body’), or positively, where we affirm that God must possess some kind of property ‘super-eminently.’²² The negative movement is called *remotio* or ‘remotion.’ We ‘remove’ the improper parts of the concept and deny them when it comes to God. The positive movement is *excellencia*, where we purify a concept and deny

16 *Sententia Libri Metaphysicae*, bk. V, lec. 9, n. 891. cf., Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 222.

17 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 76.

18 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, pp. 115-116.

19 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, pp. 120-121.

20 Wippel provides a good discussion of how subsistent *esse* (God) does not fall under either *esse commune* or the slightly different *ens commune*; Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 123.

21 For an extended discussion, see Thomas Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2009), pp. 90-94.

22 *ST I* q. 13, a. 2, resp.

what is unfitting to divine perfection – we re-conceptualize a perfection as existing without limitation, as we might use ‘power’ or ‘knowledge’ in concepts of omnipotence or omniscience. From separation and purification of concepts, we draw them back into an affirmative unity by composition of concepts.²³ On this picture, our names for God begins in causal inferences, where we conclude to God as cause (e.g., of the universe). Then, we take a concept of perfection from a created thing (an effect of God's causal power) and deny, by means of *remotio*, whatever is unfitting and imperfect in that concept. Finally, we proceed to name God by way of *excellentia* – that He instantiates that perfection perfectly.

Contrary to some modern attempts to read Aquinas' theory through the lens of a radical apophaticism,²⁴ Aquinas himself points out that each negative claim about God is founded upon a positive concept of perfections and does not hesitate to claim that we have real knowledge of God despite it not being *essential* knowledge.²⁵ This leads him to reject the apophatic position held by Moses Maimonides, which would make all divine names end only in saying what we cannot predicate of God.²⁶ The names of God involve a direct proportionality because of a real relation between the created perfection to God; God is thus the more excellent and primary instantiator of the perfection than the creature.²⁷ It is this move that allows Aquinas to avoid Maimonides' implications; the perfection, while drawn from creatures, is substantially present in God and properly said of Him, and creatures only secondarily.²⁸ We need not end merely either in causal statements of a relation of a perfection to God or in negative statements of the deficiency of the perfection. Rather, some names are more significative than others because of the nature of the perfection signified and the way we can signify in language.

Thus, the divine names function in a conceptual hierarchy. Some are ‘properly’ (*proprie*) or ‘literally’ predicated of the divine essence whereas others are only said ‘metaphorically’.²⁹ Divine names have an order that ascends from the purely metaphorical to a more conceptual or ‘intellectual’

23 See *ST I* q. 13, a. 12, resp.

24 See, for example, John Milbank ‘Truth and Vision’, in *Truth in Aquinas*, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, eds., (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 19–59; Jean-Luc Marion is probably the most explicit advocate of this reading, *God Without Being*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), esp. pp. 199-235. One finds a similar apophaticism (not as an interpretation of Aquinas but as derived from a probably Thomistic account of analogical predication) in David Tracy, ‘Approaching the Christian Understanding of God’, in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Francis Schuessler-Fiorenza and John Galvin, eds., 2nd edn (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 109-127; but more clearly in Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2007), esp. pp. 7-48.

25 Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones De Potentia Dei*, 7.5. cf., Thomas Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*, pp. 270-274; Gregory Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2004), p. 66.

26 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 527.

27 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, pp. 571-572.

28 *ST I*, q. 13, a. 2, resp.

29 *ST I*, q. 13, a. 3, resp.

sense. We don't say God is a body, despite Him being the cause of all bodies, for instance.³⁰ The basis for this distinction is that Aquinas differentiates metaphorical names from conceptual ones³¹ because metaphorical names signify directly the creaturely *mode* of perfection (they entail both a creaturely *res* and *modus significandi*), whereas the conceptual terms signify the *perfection* itself (the *modus significandi* is creaturely, but the *res significandi* is a 'pure' perfection).³² While it is true that even conceptual names remain creaturely in extraction and in the *modus significandi*, Aquinas thinks that the latter can be purified and made unlimited in conceptual signification.

This has been characterized by Eleonore Stump as 'quantum theology', in that it requires the recognition of the deficient character not in the *res significandi*, or what we are signifying, but in the *modus significandi*, or manner in which the concept signifies.³³ We never gain epistemic access in this life to what God is in Himself. The names or terms we use are concepts drawn from these creaturely effects that, while signifying the correct referent, fall short in terms of adequate sense.³⁴ Our names for God are necessarily multiple because of our human cognitive limits. As in the case of describing something as both exhibiting behavior of a particle and wave at the same time, we cannot conceive of what it is for God to exemplify elements of being both universal and particular (e.g., to be 'Goodness itself' and 'a good'), because our concepts, while logically compatible in predication and rigidly indicative, cannot mutually predicate both at the same time.³⁵ While Gaven Kerr has pointed out that Stump's theory underappreciates the role of analogy in predication of positive divine names, because we are not really attributing incompatible properties of the same thing (as he understands Stump to portray 'abstract' and 'concrete')³⁶, I am only availing myself of Stump's language to make the general point that the *modus significandi* of these terms must be applied analogously to avoid contradiction. Even while, for Aquinas, revelation brings human beings into a different relationship to God, this does

30 *ST I*, q. 13, a. 2, resp.

31 Here I am following a distinction from Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius: 'Dicit autem *intelligibiles* ad differentiam eorum quae symbolice vel metaphorice dicuntur de Deo, quorum significationes sunt sensibiles' (Thomas Aquinas, *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio* [hereafter *De divinis nominibus*], XIII:4). This is what the distinction between conceptual terms and sensible metaphors I have been making is supposed to track, even as Aquinas' own term is 'intelligible' opposed to 'symbolice vel metaphorice'. The idea is that intellect predicates more appropriately of God than metaphors or symbols which originate in sense, so that more proper names are more intellectual.

32 *ST I*, q. 13, a. 3, ad. 1 & ad. 2.

33 Eleonore Stump, 'The Nature of a Simple God', in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 87 (2014): pp 36-38.

34 While Rocca has a very distinct perspective than that of Stump on the divine names, it seems to me that they agree on this point that, given that our concepts of perfections originate in creaturely perfections, this conceptual origin is the source of the deficient *modus significandi*; Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, p. 332.

35 Stump, 'The Nature of a Simple God', p. 39.

36 Gaven Kerr, 'Aquinas, Stump, and the Nature of a Simple God', in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 9, is. 3 (Summer 2016): pp. 441-454.

not surpass the epistemological limits of analogical language.³⁷ All our concepts remain inherently limited by our own mode of cognition.³⁸

When we turn to the article in the *Summa Theologiae* where Aquinas explicitly considers our central question, ‘whether ‘He Who Is’ [*qui est*] is the most proper [*maxime proprium*] name of God’, he makes three claims as to why ‘being’ is the most appropriate term to describe God.³⁹ Using the resources we have laid out above, we can reconstruct more clearly the points Aquinas is making.

The first claim is that ‘He Who Is’ does not signify any determinate property or nature, but identifies God only as ‘existing’ in a way that would be utterly unique; ‘it does not signify any form but existing itself [Non enim significat formam aliquam, sed ipsum esse].’ ‘He Who Is’ is thus uniquely fitted to be used as a name for God, as it specially indicates transcendence which no other being could have, because He could *not* be a ‘being alongside other beings’ in the ordinary sense. What it means for Him to ‘exist’ is different, given that ‘His essence is His existence [*esse Dei sit ipsa eius essentia*]’, and nothing else can exemplify this kind of existence. In fact, then, the name ‘He Who Is’ denominates God *precisely* insofar as He transcends the created order – it names Him by reference to His most proper characteristic (at least insofar as our epistemic faculties are able to apprehend Him, given that we do not know His essence, properly speaking), which is to designate Him as that whose very existence is unique and unlimited, just as ‘everything is named according to its form [*unumquodque enim denominator a sua forma*]’. We might say that, as opposed to other terms, the very *modus significandi* of the term used (‘being’) is such that, when we imply that God’s essence is His existence in the name ‘He Who Is’, we are indicating how our use of terms is limited – namely, that we can specify no determinate mode of being for God at all. It is for that reason the intension of the term ‘being’ is uniquely fitted for designating God as existing ‘beyond our epistemic limits.’

The second reason Aquinas gives is the ‘universality’ of the term. ‘Being’ is the most universal term, so that every other predicated term would either be restricted in extension (‘minus communia’) or, if ‘convertible’ with ‘being’ (as Aquinas understands terms like ‘goodness’ or ‘truth’) the term indicates some more restricted aspect of ‘being’ (‘addunt aliqua supra ipsum secundum rationem’; as, for example, goodness adds to being the note of desirability⁴⁰). These other terms thus designate

37 This point is readily attested to by commentators. C.f., Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 251-252, 299. See also Gilles Emery, *Trinity, Church, Human Person* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sapientia Press, 2007), p. 52; John Mortensen, *Understanding St. Thomas on Analogy* (PhD. diss., Rome, 2006; reprinted by Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine), pp. 181-182.

38 *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.30.4 [Non enim de Deo capere possumus quid est, sed quid non est, et qualiter alia se habeant ad ipsum]. C.f., *Divinis Nominibus*, XIII-3, nn. 88-108.

39 *ST I*, q. 13, a. 11, resp.

40 *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1.

something determinate ('unde quodammodo informant et determinant ipsum') because they supply some distinct conception of *what* the thing they are predicated of is. But, following from our epistemic limits in not being able to know God's essence (in this life), all our human concepts of any determinate 'property' are defective when applied to what God is in Himself ('deficit a modo quo Deus in se est'). Consequently, the epistemic limit implies a rule for predicating names of God: the more proper names for God are those less determinate and more common and absolute ('minus determinata, et magis communia et absoluta'). Following the poetic phrase of St. John Damascene, 'He Who Is' is the most proper name for God because it is the least determinate term we have but also the most common and absolute, so that by designating God in this way we are saying He is an 'infinite ocean of substance [pelagus substantiae infinitum].' Because 'being' is an entirely 'indeterminate' term in a way that no other term can be, given that 'being' can be applied to anything that exists, it signifies *no* distinct mode of being by only indeterminately signifying being in general ('nullum modum essendi determinat, sed se habet indeterminate ad omnes'). It hence functions simultaneously as a term that can signify both the 'most real' or 'most perfect' (by indicating that there is *some way* God is) and that whatever this might be exceeds the limits of our cognitive grasp. The term functions rather interestingly like post-modern attempts at 'erasure', where one writes a term with strike marks to indicate how the term somehow falls short of what it should signify or is being denied in some way. By intentionally not specifying any essential property, using 'He Who Is' does not signify any creaturely kind of being of God and consequently does not put God in any genus.

The third reason for this name is that it signifies 'present existence' – God is outside of time ('[He] whose existence does not know past or future [cuius esse non novit praeteritum vel futurum]'). While the other two reasons focused more on the intension and extension of 'being', this third reason has to do with the temporal modality of the name. It seems, however, that other terms could be predicated in present tense, and so that this third consideration is less unique to the term 'being' than the first two reasons.

The reply to the first two objections, however, expands the scope of how the name 'He Who Is' functions in helping delineate other divine names; it has a special role because of its conceptual priority. In the reply to the first objection, we see Aquinas noting that the name 'God' or even more so the Tetragrammaton (the Hebrew acronym indicating God's proper name in the Old Testament) might be more proper than 'He Who Is' insofar as the two aforementioned are proper names and not properly applied to another (proper names aren't shared by multiple people, generally). God is thus named as a singular, concrete entity ('ipsam Dei substantiam incommunicabilem, et, ut sic liceat loqui,

singularem’).⁴¹ The name ‘He Who Is’ could seem communicable in terms of its intension because ‘being’ is a universal (and so theoretically sharable by others). But Aquinas thinks this does not deny that ‘He Who Is’ better designates God, because its very significance and mode is more proper. We might extend Aquinas’ reasoning on this point and point out that ‘God’ as an English word is derived from pagan usage, as is the Latin term. What we intend to indicate by capitalizing this term and using it as a proper name is better or more absolutely indicated by the name ‘He Who Is’ because we are signifying that we intend to name ‘that singular entity which has an utterly unique way of existing.’ We are not naming merely a big pagan god of some sort. ‘He Who Is’ is thus indirectly incommunicable (as its sense signifies that there could only be one such X), even if it is not a proper name. As it were, the use of ‘He Who Is’ helps fix the (Christian) meaning of the term ‘God.’ The short reply to the second objection, we might see, follows a similar thought in rejecting ‘Good’ (‘Bonum’) as the most proper name for God. Whereas goodness might indicate how God is a cause (namely if, following Pseudo-Dionysius, we think that ‘God as the Good itself’ entails a relation to the creatures, creating out of His superabundance), existence is logically prior to acting or being in a certain way absolutely (‘esse absolute praecognoscitur causae’). Again, we might infer, Aquinas is thinking of ‘He Who Is’ as grounding the unique sense of what we mean by God’s ‘goodness.’ We intend to indicate not just any kind of goodness, or even an abstract goodness, but we intend to name the superabundant, transcendent Good that creates all things. While ‘being’ can indicate that transcendence absolutely, ‘good’ can only do that in one kind of order (i.e., the causal order).

This avoids entirely, by a deftly subtle metaphysical theory, what torments modern thinkers in regard to concepts of being applied to God. Aquinas makes it possible to see that being was *never* the sort of term that attempts to tell us *what* God is. It is an exemplary case of a term that is not a property in the same way as other properties, and so cannot function as an exhaustive description of God's essence – it names neither species nor genus. Rather, it is – to use Marion's language – an inherently *iconic* rather than an *idolic* concept; Jacques Maritain thus referred to use of *esse ipsum subsistens* as an ‘uncircumscriptive’ analogical predication.⁴² While other positive terms can be used in this uncircumscriptive way, there is a sense in which ‘being’ grounds these other uses of positive perfections. It is the *most fitting term* to be applied to God, as it is the most logically prior and uniquely ‘presentative’ rather than ‘determinative’ concept we have.⁴³ Even considering God in regard to the subject of metaphysics, God transcends the conceptual content of *esse commune*. God does not

41 *STI*, q.5, a. 1, ad. 1.

42 Maritain gives a theory of these terms that I think complements my own in *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 240; it also coheres well with the aforementioned way Sokolowski has delineated being as a ‘presentative’ concept.

43 Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 232-240.

participate in *esse commune*; it is what He *causes*.⁴⁴ We might describe the difference by saying that God is studied by metaphysics not as something we ‘comprehend’ by means of metaphysical concepts (there remain lacunae in how we use even metaphysical language; e.g., God is inadequately described as a ‘substance’⁴⁵), but rather insofar as we understand by metaphysical distinctions that He transcends the entire created order as its cause.⁴⁶ In fact, it seems hard to imagine what aside from metaphysical language could ever indicate what we could mean by *complete* transcendence of the created order.

As in use of the ‘being’, the names of God involve no *univocal* concept that applies exactly the same concept of perfection to both God and creature. Instead, while each name is extracted from some imperfectly creaturely perfection, we can utilize them of God because we have the ability in judgment to draw out of each what is appropriate and predicate them in some overarching context that indicates how God transcends each particular concept; what underlies our use of all the divine names is ‘an act of judgment claiming a truth about the holy darkness of God, which transcends anything the concept can intuitively grasp on its own.’⁴⁷ I think the idea is the following: using divine names of the lower more clearly ‘metaphorical’ kind without an overarching set of metaphysical distinctions which govern our use of metaphors would lead to being unable to distinguish a priority between predications like ‘God is stable like a rock’, and ‘God is wise.’ Each of these would be equally proper of the divine nature. But Aquinas’ insight is that ‘being’, as a unique term or conceptual designator, serves as a kind of logical limit that preserves the incomprehensibility of the divine nature. Our use of ‘He Who Is’ and naming God as ‘*esse ipsum subsistens*’ orders the sequence of divine names from less to more intellectual/conceptual names or perfections, and preserves our use of subordinate terms from idolatrous reference. In other words, *esse ipsum subsistens* is the most proper name of God because it serves as a horizon for the intellect to transcend the conceptual significance of the particular perfections that serve as analogates in lower names.⁴⁸ What is focused on in each lower metaphor is some *perfection* in the sensible thing, however imperfect, upon which that metaphorical comparison between God and creature is founded. But the very way we are conceiving of ‘perfections’ as more or less ‘pure’ (e.g., immaterial) comes in large part from the metaphysical distinctions we assume in making those comparisons.

This might seem overly theoretical, but Aquinas’ view also contains an implicitly spiritual point about our relationship to God, insofar as the term ‘being’ keeps us within our cognitive limits. Other

44 Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 115.

45 *ST I*, q. 3, a. 5, ad. 1.

46 Sokolowski, ‘The Science of Being as Being’, p. 31.

47 Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, p. 350.

48 Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, pp. 150-151, 192-193.

sciences resolve themselves back into either sense knowledge or imagination, such as natural science and mathematics, but metaphysics does not. All knowledge begins in sensation, but metaphysics terminates in pure conceptual understanding purified (ideally) of sense knowledge.⁴⁹ Even more, metaphysics moves us beyond ‘rational’ or discursive thinking, despite it having to use discursive thinking to reach its terminus. Instead of terminating in a plurality of concepts, metaphysics (or ideal cognition) seeks to unify: to understand the principles of being *qua* being and unite all knowledge in a pure intellectual grasp of reality.⁵⁰

This could seem to conflict with the tenor of Scripture, where metaphors seem to abound and ‘purely intellectual’ terms are rare. We are encouraged to relate to God in terms like ‘father.’ Here Aquinas shows how the doctrine of divine names implies a spiritual point. He follows Pseudo-Dionysius in claiming that the concrete names found in Scripture lead us immediately and easily to grasp the purely spiritual signification of the name in question, as they are more clearly unlike God. We cannot normally easily confuse the name ‘Father’ with the claim that God is a human reproductive agent, and so the name leads us more directly to His personal property. Concrete names can be significant theologically the more obviously unfitting they are, because they move us more immediately *beyond* sense metaphors to purely spiritual, intelligible senses of our predication.⁵¹ In his commentary on the *Divine Names*, Aquinas notes that our minds are to terminate not in the sensible effect we predicate of God, but in purely intellectual understanding of these perfections in their transcendence beyond creaturely instantiation.⁵² While there are obviously complications that arise when we consider the role revelation plays, the name of God revealed on Sinai, ‘He Who Is’, functions to indicate the transcendent context of our cognitive limits. ‘He Who Is’ consequently has a special role in moving us beyond images, grounding how we use our other positive names for God, so that we keep our names for God from becoming idoloc conceptions and instead use them as icons for the One who we will one day hope to see face-to-face.

49 Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 2. cf., ST II-II, q. 180, a. 5, ad. 2.

50 *Super De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, resp.

51 *Super De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 2, ad. 1. [Ad primum ergo dicendum quod sacra Scriptura non proponit nobis divina sub figuris sensibilibus, ut ibi intellectus noster remaneat, sed ut ab his ad immaterialia ascendat. Unde etiam per vilium rerum figuras divina tradit, ut minor praebeatur occasio in talibus remanendi, ut dicit Dionysius in 2 c. caelestis hierarchiae.]

52 *De Divinis Nominibus*, I-2, nn. 238-245.