Classical Theism
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Thomist Classical Theism: Divine Simplicity within Aquinas' *Triplex Via Theology*

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6.1 Some Problems for Classical Theism

A central challenge for *CT* is explaining how we can arrive at positive knowledge of God's existence and nature—including discerning which attributes belong to God and how to conceptualize them. Call this the *guidance problem*. Solutions to it must address a related but more specific issue, the *ordering-attributes problem*; it asks which divine attributes, if any, are given priority in our understanding of the divine nature such that all other divine attributes are conceptualized, and perhaps even derived, through our understanding of the divine nature? Said otherwise, what rationale explains and justifies the specific ordering in our conceptualization of other divine attributes, such that some attributes are understood in light of others? Recent critiques have demonstrated the failures of *PBT* and truthmaker approaches to *DDS* to address these problems. In this first part I present a digest of the major difficulties these two problems pose for these two approaches to *CT*. These problems motivate the exigency of adopting an alternative form of *CT*, like Thomist *TVT*, which, despite requiring more contentious presumptions, can resolve these major difficulties.

6.1.1 Problems for Truthmaker Divine Simplicity

DDS is one of the more controversial commitments of *CT*. According to Aquinas, *DDS* is among the basic conclusions of the *triplex via*: that God is uncaused, uncomposed, and exceedingly perfect. Because God is simple, all attributes ascribed to God (e.g., goodness, omniscience, and omnipotence) are identical with God and each other—albeit without being synonymous concepts for us (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I.13.4).[1] Even though Aquinas's presentation of *DDS* has received significant attention from contemporary critics and defenders, two major obstacles have stood in the way of properly understanding and assessing Aquinas's *DDS* and his contributions to contemporary *CT*.

The first obstacle arose from saddling *DDS* with a Platonic conception of properties. During the revitalization of *CT* in the last century, attempts were made to rehabilitate *DDS* by availing the resources of Platonic theories of properties as *abstracta* instantiated or exemplified by concrete particulars. There are two fundamental difficulties with this *Platonic property defense of divine simplicity* (=PPDDS). First, *PPDDS* undermines divine aseity and simplicity by making God dependent on properties that God instantiates. Just as Plato and Socrates are good because they instantiate the property of goodness, so too God is good because God exemplifies the abstract property of goodness. Second, *PPDDS* entails some absurd and contradictory results, which Alvin Plantinga makes pellucid in his well-known critique of *PPDDS*. "[I]f God is identical with each of his properties, then since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property. ... If God is a property, then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life. So taken, the simplicity doctrine seems to be an utter mistake." (Plantinga 1980, 47).

Despite several ingenious efforts to salvage some version of *PPDDS*, many regard such objections to provide decisive reasons for rejecting *DDS*. This assessment is partially correct, for these objections do confute *PPDDS*, but more percipient exponents of *CT* have queried why Platonic theories of properties were ever paired with *DDS* in the first place. Michael Bergmann and Jeffery Brower have established that analytic philosophy approaches to *DDS* took a wrong turn from the outset by combining Platonic properties with *DDS*. Indeed, *DDS* is incompatible with any form of Platonic realism, and divine simplicity's "denial of Platonism seems to lead in the direction of a unified theory of predication, one that does *not* appeal to exemplifiables." (Bergmann and Brower 2006, 385; See also Brower 2008; Brower 2009).

In place of *PPDDS*, Brower and others propose *divine truthmaker simplicity* (=DTS), which articulates a unified theory of predication that rests on truthmakers, where truthmakers explain the truth of predications. The only "entities required for the truth of predications and for the referents of their corresponding abstract expressions are truthmakers." (Brower 2008, 23–24) *DTS* precludes understanding divine perfections as properties that God exemplifies, and so avoids the major difficulties Plantinga and others raised against *PPDDS*. Furthermore, *DTS* is certainly closer to the views of classical theists, like Augustine, Anselm, Avicenna, and Aquinas. *DTS* requires nothing more than:

> If an intrinsic essential predication of the form "God is *F*" is true, then (i) *God's F-ness* exists, (ii) *God's F-ness* is the truthmaker of 'God is *F*,' and (iii) *God's F-ness* is identical with God.
>
> (Beebe 2018, 474. See also Brower 2008, 17–24)

This means that if predications like "God is good" or "God is omnipotent" are true intrinsic predications of God, then *God's goodness* and *God's omnipotence* exist and are identical with God.

> The doctrine entails that God is identical with each of the *truthmakers* for the true (intrinsic) predications that can be made about him—indeed, that God himself is the truthmaker for each of these predications. But unlike the claim that God is a property, these claims seem perfectly coherent (at least on the assumption that truthmaker theory is itself coherent).
>
> (Brower 2008, 4)

Alex Pruss argues *DTS* also explains how a multitude of attributes can be truly predicated of God without entailing any complexity in God.

> If we understand divine simplicity as the claim that the minimal truthmaker of any claim solely about God and his parts is God himself, then it appears we can make coherent sense of the idea that divine attributes all collapse without endangering language. They collapse not in the language-endangering sense that one is *saying* the same thing by claiming that God is merciful as by claiming that God is just, but in the sense that the very same thing makes both claims true. Understanding how this works in practice almost surely requires a robust theory of analogical predication.
>
> (Pruss 2008, 166)

DTS doesn't offer a systematic answer to *CT*'s guidance problem, but it does rule out certain mistaken ways of conceptualizing the divine attributes and thereby provides some negative guidance. For example, one challenge facing *CT* is reconciling divine attributes that seem to be incompatible, like omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Critics argue that maximal conceptions of omnipotence are either inconsistent in themselves (e.g., God cannot create a stone too large to lift) or incompatible with maximal conceptions of other attributes like omniscience and omnibenevolence. Many defenders of *CT* respond by conceding God cannot be omnipotent and ascribe "almightiness" or another scaled-down version of "omnipotence" to God that is consistent with divine simplicity and the other independently conceived omni-attributes. These responses maintain God is almighty or very knowledgeable, but God fails to instantiate the omni-attributes of omnipotence or omniscience.[2]

By contrast, *DTS* provides a straightforward explanation for why no *true* divine attributes can be incompossible. First, given its rejection of Platonic properties, the only truthmaker for any divine attribute is God. There cannot be any *true* divine or omni-attributes that God fails to be

the truthmaker for; God is the only truthmaker for true divine attributes. If omnipotence exists as a true divine attribute, then God possesses it. Second, given *DDS*, all true divine attributes must be compatible with each other for they are all identical to God. Our true conception of "omnipotence" must be compatible with *DDS* and God's other omni-attributes. This means that *DTS* rejects the common practice of conceptualizing omni-attributes independently of God and each other. The true conception of omnipotence cannot merely mean, say, "the ability to do anything that is not contradictory," but must be conceptualized attributively to mean, say, "God's ability to do anything that it is not contradictory for an absolutely simple God to do, given the true divine attributes of a simple God." Consequently, intuitions about conceivability, maximizing attributes, and logical possibility cannot provide the primary criteria for *true* omni-attributes. There might be any number of whimsical or fictitious conceptions of "omniscience" that are incompatible with equally ungrounded conceptions of "omnipotence" and "omnibenevolence," but none of them could be true conceptions of God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. One implication of *DTS* for the guidance problem is that all divine attributes must be conceptualized interdependently and derived from the divine nature of a simple God.

DTS excludes certain errors in our thinking about God, but it doesn't provide positive guidance for how to derive these interdependently conceptualized divine attributes. As Brower notes, positive guidance requires looking beyond *DTS*.

> Traditional theists standardly derive the intrinsic divine attributes (or better, the truth of predications involving them) from their understanding of the divine nature. That is to say, they take God to be not only good, powerful, wise, and just, but to be all these things in virtue of being divine.
>
> (Brower 2009, 117)

Recognizing that "traditional theists differ among themselves about how exactly the divine nature is to be conceived," Brower suggests a resolution to the *ordering-attributes problem* in his claim that Aquinas conceives the "divine nature in terms of aseity" which is established by the five ways.

> For theists of this sort, the predication [God is divine] will be shorthand for something like the claim that God is an absolutely independent being, and the derivation of particular divine attributes will be more indirect (e.g., Aquinas himself derives complete actuality from independence, and derives the other attributes from this, arguing that a being who is completely actual will

have all perfections, without limit, and hence be all good, power-
ful, wise, and just).

(Brower 2009, 126, n. 31)

While aseity is central to Aquinas's conception of the divine nature,
Brower's suggestion is imprecise insofar as it overlooks the *triplex via*'s
governing role in Aquinas's arguments for divine existence, aseity, sim-
plicity, and the derivation of other divine attributes. It is the *triplex via*,
not aseity on its own, that provides Aquinas's solution to the guidance
and ordering-attributes problems. In brief: Aquinas employs the *way of
causation* (*via causalitatis*) to establish God's existence and absolute
independence, and it is the *way of negation* (*via negationis*) that eluci-
dates why divine existence and aseity require divine simplicity since
God cannot be mixed up with the contingencies of composite creatures.
Finally, it's by the *way of super-eminence* (*via eminentiae*) that all
perfections—established and purified by causality and negation—are
ascribed to God. (Aquinas, *ST* I.13.8ad2)

Brower's account of *DTS* has faced objections concerning another
aspect of the ordering-attributes problem. Noël Saenz rightly contends
"No view of God should be unable to explain the pattern of dependency
exemplified between certain predications about God." He argues that
DTS is "unable to explain the pattern of dependency exemplified be-
tween certain predications about God." (Saenz 2014, 474) He also
charges that the patterns of dependency among predications of divine
attributes cannot be only conceptual; they require a real complexity in
God and this is incompatible with *DDS*.

Tim Pawl and James Beebe have cogently responded to Saenz's un-
sound and implausible arguments against *DTS*. (Pawl 2019; Beebe
2018). Beebe demonstrates that Saenz misunderstands traditional
DDS, which holds "whatever distinctions there are between divine
essential attributes are merely conceptual and concern the sense rather
than the reference of these terms. … [W]hatever priority or dependence
there is between predications regarding these attributes is also purely
conceptual rather than real." (Beebe 2018, 483) He also shows that
Saenz's arguments fail to justify why *DTS* needs more than conceptual
distinctions among divine attributes. I believe Pawl and Beebe vindicate
DTS's conceptual solution to the ordering-attributes problem, but they
do not suggest any guidance on how this conceptual solution functions.
In the second part I will argue the *triplex via* provides *CT* with answers
to this aspect of the ordering-attributes problem as well.

Divine truthmaker simplicity enables *CT* to sidestep the imbroglio
that came from wedding *DDS* with Platonic conceptions of properties.
DTS on its own provides little guidance for how to arrive at a con-
structive and truthful understanding of God's nature, aseity, simplicity,
and other attributes. Yet *DTS* was never introduced to solve the

guidance and ordering-attributes problems without drawing on other heuristics and resources of *CT*. Many *CT*s have looked to *PBT*'s heuristic to deliver such guidance. This brings us to the second obstacle standing in the way of understanding Aquinas's *DDS*, namely, that Thomistic *CT* has been insufficiently distinguished from Anselmian *PBT*.

6.1.2 *Problems for Perfect Being Theology*

PBT contends God is the most perfect being and that this can be established and conceptualized via the basic regulative principle of *PBT*, namely, Anselm's insight that God is the greatest possible being that than which nothing greater than can be conceived. (Leftow 2012, 9–10) The task of *PBT* is to employ intuitions, conceivability, possibility, max-imalization, and consistency to formulate the roster of great-making properties (=*GMP*) ascribed to God. Anselmian *PBT* has dominated contemporary discussions to such an extent that it's widely assumed *PBT* provides the major rationale for *CT*'s commitment to *DDS*. If *CT* can show that simplicity is a *GMP*, then *PBT* delivers a straightforward way to establish that God is simple. So many contemporary defenders of *DDS* look to the regulative principle of *PBT* to motivate *DDS* and to get some bearing on how to conceptualize and defend what divine simplicity means, especially in connection with the other *GMPs* ascribed to the greatest possible being.

Jeff Speaks has leveled some fundamental criticisms of *PBT*'s Anselmian heuristic. (Speaks 2014; Speaks 2018). One major problem is whether *GMPs* are kind-relative. If kind-relative, then *GMPs* cannot come from non-deity kinds, for these are not relevant to God; *GMPs* must be those relative to the kind *deity*. But if *GMPs* are restricted to deity-kind properties, then we "seem to presuppose a knowledge of the divine nature that we might have wanted perfect being theology to provide rather than presuppose." (Speaks 2014, 258) If *GMPs* are not kind -relative, then we no longer have a way of determining which *GMPs* belong to God and which don't. The properties of blue mold might make Stilton, Roquefort, Danish Blue, and Gorgonzola great, but such properties aren't the great-making properties that make humans, let alone God, great. "[A]gain it looks like some classes of objects will yield the wrong results, whereas others (e.g., the choice of the singleton set containing God) will assume the sort of knowledge of God's properties that we want our method to deliver." (Speaks 2014, 258) Speaks concludes these problems "cast some doubt on the idea that perfect being theology is a recipe for discerning the divine attributes." (Speaks 2014, 266) Since *PBT* fails to deliver the very conception of the divine nature required for answering the guidance problem concerning which *GMPs* belong to God, *PBT* needs to

say something more specific about what God is like, something more than the bare claim that God is the best thing in some space of worlds. ... [I]n so doing, it will go beyond anything which could credibly be claimed to be a simple unpacking of the concept of God. Where should we get these assumptions? My suggestion has been that we return to the reason why questions about the nature and existence of God are of such fundamental importance.

<div align="right">(Speaks 2018, 167)</div>

Thus far I have summarized the case for why neither *DTS* nor *PBT* supplies the constructive understanding of the existence and nature of God required to answer the guidance and ordering-attributes problems. In the next part I will argue that Aquinas's *triplex via* provides *CT* with a heuristic that delivers on these desiderata.

6.2 Thomist *Triplex Via* Theology

6.2.1 The Triplex Via in Thomas Aquinas

Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and many other scholastics drew on pseudo-Dionysius's *On the Divine Names* to develop their own accounts of the *triplex via* or threefold way of understanding God. The *triplex via* provides *CT* with a principled heuristic for understanding God by way of causality, negation, and super-eminence that keeps philosophical theology from being either wholly negative and agnostic or too optimistic and falling into ontotheological idolatry. While there is a lively exegetical debate concerning Aquinas's ordering within this threefold way,[3] I shall designate this integrated ordering of causality, negation, and supereminence as Thomist *triplex via theology* (=*TVT*). I'll address the philosophical justification for this ordering later. Its primary exegetical justification is twofold. First, it's the order Aquinas gives in his explanation for how natural reason can know truths about God in *Summa theologiae* I.12.12.

> Our natural cognition takes its origin from the senses, and so our natural cognition can extend only as far as it can be led by sensible things. But from sensible things our intellect cannot reach the vision of God's essence, since sensible creatures are effects of God's that are not equal to the power of their cause. Therefore, on the basis of the cognition of sensible things we cannot know the whole power of God nor, as a result, see His essence. However, since His effects are dependent upon their cause, we can be led by those effects to know of Him whether He exists, and to know of Him what must belong to Him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all the things He causes.

> Hence, we know His relationship to creatures, viz., [1] that He is a cause of all of them; [2] and we know how creatures differ from Him, viz., that He is *not* any of the things that are caused by Him; [3] and we know that these things are denied of Him not because of any defect on His part, but rather because He exceeds the things He causes.
>
> (Aquinas, *ST* I.12.12; Freddoso mod. trans.;
> see also Aquinas, *De Pot.* 7.5ad2)

Second, the *triplex via* heuristic is constructively operationalized by Aquinas in the same order in the opening questions of the *Prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae* (=ST) and in the first book of his earlier *Summa contra gentiles* (=SCG). In his *Summae* Aquinas starts with God's existence known by causality (*ST* I.2; *SCG* I.13), then treats God's simplicity known by negation (*ST* I.3; *SCG* I.14-27), and then God's perfection known by super-eminence (*ST* I.4ff; *SCG* I.28ff). This integrated threefold heuristic establishes the existence, simplicity, and perfection of God, and this latter trio provides the basis for deriving the other divine attributes by Aquinas's recursive application of the *triplex via*. In this second part, I explain how the Thomistic *triplex via* provides a unified solution to the guidance and ordering-attributes problems of *CT*. I start with the guidance problem since its resolution frames an answer to the ordering-attributes problem.

Many contemporary exponents of *CT*, including *PBT*, all too often treat *DDS* and other divine attributes as independent topics to be investigated on their own and either give little consideration to systematic metaphysics or envision metaphysical neutrality as a theoretical virtue. The criticisms of Speaks however revealed that *PBT*'s minimalist strategy leaves it without the substantive assumptions required for resolving the guidance problem. This conclusion helps defuse the likely accusation that Thomist *TVT* requires too many presumptions. As we will see, the strength and contentiousness of Aquinas's *DDS* presupposes the *triplex via*, and his *TVT* presupposes the conclusions of a systematic ontology. Recognizing the dependence of theology on metaphysics corrects a common reading of Aquinas's *Summae*, which treats his philosophical theology as standing on its own independent from Aquinas's metaphysical positions. But this is a mistaken interpretation, for Aquinas follows Avicenna in maintaining that philosophical theology is the ultimate goal and conclusion of systematic metaphysical enquiry; philosophical theology without substantive metaphysical conclusions is empty.[4] We cannot understand Aquinas's use of the *triplex via* in his two *Summae* without appreciating the major metaphysical principles, arguments, and conclusions that are presupposed in his arguments for God's existence and essence. Thomist *CT* therefore presupposes more contentious commitments than is demanded by rival forms of *CT*. While this might seem

like a burden of Thomist *CT*, we must keep in mind the conclusion of Speaks' criticisms of *PBT* that the absence of substantive assumptions is what led to the vacuity of its way to God.

Before explaining why the *triplex via* presupposes major metaphysical commitments, I want to point out that *TVT* is a heuristic that could be appropriated by non-Thomistic classical theists. The view propounded here is unabashedly Thomist, but it can also be read as *illustrative* of how *TVT* provides *CT* with an alternative heuristic to *PBT*. Just as Anselmians don't have any proprietary claims on *PBT*, so also Thomists don't have any exclusive claims to the regulative principles of *TVT*. There were many historical versions of *triplex via* theology that weren't Thomistic, and contemporary *CTs* attracted to *TVT* could substitute Thomist metaphysical and theological theses for their own.

6.2.2 Triplex Via and the Guidance Problem

Let us first consider why the *triplex via* presumes substantive conclusions from metaphysics. Thomistic *CT* maintains that in this life God isn't experienced in ways accessible to pure philosophical inquiry, and since we don't directly know God's nature, we also don't experience or directly know the true omni-attributes that are equivalent to the divine attributes of the divine nature. This predicament raises the basic questions of the guidance problem for Thomistic *CT*. How can we know that God exists? And, since we don't experience entities in the world that have *omni-attributes*—only entities with *attributes*—how can we arrive at a true understanding of God's omni-attributes?

6.2.2.1 Via Causalitatis

As we saw from *ST* I.12.12, Aquinas maintains that we can achieve some limited knowledge of God through a philosophical investigation of the existing composite and contingent entities that are more known to us. Metaphysics, for Aquinas, establishes that the beings we encounter in the world are substances with attributes that are composed of act and potency, form and matter, existence (*esse*), and essence. He argues such diverse modes of ontological composition disclose distinct kinds of causal dependencies and contingencies; in short, composite beings are contingent and caused beings (See Aquinas, *ST* I.2-3; *De Pot.* 7.1). The extended ontological inquiries of metaphysics conclude with the basic aitiological question: Are there any first ultimate cause(s) or fundamental ground(s) for all the composite, contingent, and caused beings investigated within metaphysics?

It's at this point that Aquinas's metaphysics shifts from the investigations of ontology to those of philosophical theology, starting with the threefold way's *via causalitatis* and God's existence. In other

words, metaphysical inquiry into composite and caused beings leads to ultimate metaphysical questions concerning what causes caused beings. The *via causalitatis* contentiously concludes these ultimate causal investigations guide us to the existence of an uncaused first cause. Drawing on his metaphysical arguments that a composite being is a contingent being dependent on its causes, Aquinas argues in the five ways and elsewhere that it's impossible for an essentially ordered series of dependent beings to exist—that is, it's impossible for there to be an infinite *per se* ordered series of *caused causes* bestowing on their effects what they have ultimately never received *qua* caused—without the existence of a cause that is itself an absolutely independent and non-contingent first uncaused cause.[5] Aquinas identifies this uncaused cause with God.

6.2.2.2 Via Negationis

The first step in the *triplex via*'s solution to the guidance problem explains how the *via causalitatis* leads us to knowledge of God's existence based on metaphysical knowledge of composite and continent entities, which turn out to be the effects of God as their uncaused cause. Aquinas employs the *via causalitatis* to establish many of God's other attributes as well, but it's crucial to notice straight away that establishing God's *existence* as the uncaused cause by the *via causalitatis* directly delivers divine simplicity and initiates the *via negationis*. Indeed, the first affirmation of the *via causalitatis* is at once the first negation of the *via negationis*. For to demonstrate the existence of a first cause that is *un*caused is to affirm the existence of a cause that is *not like* any other causes and concerning which must be negated any resemblance to causes insofar as they are caused.

   The next negations in line are those inextricably tied to "caused beings," namely, contingency and composition, and these denials inform Aquinas's understanding of God's simplicity and aseity. We can only affirm the truth that "God exists and is an *uncaused* cause" if God is *not* another composite and contingent being. For, as noted before, ontological composition is Aquinas's basic metaphysical criterion for being caused and contingent. God's simplicity is therefore to be understood and explicated in light of all the ways creatures are composed and God is *not*. Given Aquinas's ontology, this means at the very least that God *is not* corporeal but is incorporeal; *is not* composed of matter and form but is an immaterial and unlimited form; *is not* composed of act and potency but is pure actuality; *is neither* composed as a substance with attributes *nor* as an individual with its nature. Most fundamentally God *is not* composed of actual existence (*esse*) and essence but is subsisting existence in itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*) and thereby radically transcends all creatures which are contingent composites of *esse* and essence (see

Aquinas, *ST* I.3.1-8; *De Pot.* 7.1–11). This last negation (that God is not composed of *esse* and essence), which presupposes the causal affirmation (that God exists), is also the primary super-eminent affirmation (that God is pure act of existence in itself). These interconnected truths concerning God's being simple existence in itself disclose why the *triplex via* isn't comprised of three autonomous ways but is best understood as a single integrated *threefold way*. As a rough and ready rule, whenever we affirm some truth of God via causality, we are nearly always thereby also disclosing some divine attribute requiring both negation and super-eminent affirmation.

Aquinas's *via negationis* employs three types of negations (see *SCG* I.30).[6] "Absolute negations" concern attributes like corporeality and materiality which must be wholly denied of God insofar as they're inextricably bound up with modes of being incompatible with God's uncaused aseity and simplicity.

"*Res Significata* negations" recognize that some creaturely attributes exhibit real perfections that aren't inherently finite or contingent, like "truth," "goodness," "life," and "wisdom." "Truth" and "goodness" are examples of *transcendental perfections* that can be ascribed to *all beings*. "Life" and "wisdom" are *categorical perfections* that belong to distinct *kinds of beings*—living and intelligent beings. Both kinds of attributes or perfective modes of being can be distilled and truthfully ascribed to God insofar as we make the necessary conceptual modifications by negating any modes of composition or contingency from our understanding of the relevant divine attribute or thing signified (*res significata*).

"*Modus significandi* negations" scrutinize the inherent limitations of our human capacities for conceptualizing and predicating attributes of God. These negations purify our understanding of the true judgments we make about God from, for instance, our concrete or abstract modes of signification (e.g., "God is a free agent" or "God is goodness itself"), which we inescapably employ in thinking and talking about God. We can assent to these true statements, but the concrete and abstract modes of signification used to formulate such propositions cannot be attributed to God.

Striping away all these modes of ontological composition and conceptual limitation delivers Aquinas's negative understanding of the truth that "God is simple." We have seen that divine simplicity and aseity are necessitated first and foremost by the conclusion of the *via causalitatis* that an uncaused cause exists. Given Aquinas's metaphysical commitments, it follows from this conclusion, that God cannot be composed and so can be neither contingent nor dependent on any being. In short, the truths of divine aseity and simplicity elucidated by the *via negationis* fundamentally depend and follow upon the true

conclusion of the *via causalitatis*, "there exists an uncaused cause," which Aquinas calls God.

6.2.2.3 Via Eminentiae

The ways of causality and negation are indispensable to Aquinas's philosophical theology, but they only guide us to the truths that God exists and is utterly unlike creatures. This is where certain excessively apophatic interpretations of Aquinas go awry; they fail to situate the *via negationis* within Aquinas's *TVT*. Aquinas recognizes that causality and negation fail on their own to address the guidance problem of explaining why some names can be said of God and others cannot. For example, while God is the cause of both bodies and goods, "God is good" cannot simply mean "God is the cause of goods," for then we'd hold by parity that "God is a body" since he is the cause of bodies. But God isn't a body, since God is incorporeal (Aquinas, *ST* I.13.2). Enriching the conclusions obtained via causality and negation, the *via eminentiae* answers this difficulty by explaining how we can affirm true intrinsic and essential predications of God.[7] I start with Aquinas's distinctive approach to the *via eminentiae*'s affirmations that God is *ipsum esse subsistens* and perfection-in-itself who exceeds all other beings.

Aquinas defends two peculiar metaphysical theses that underpin his conception of divine existence and perfection. First, all composite beings are constituted from an act of existence (*actus essendi*) and essence (*essentia*) which are two distinct first-order explanatory factors or principles. Second, that existence (*esse*) is the most fundamental *act* of all acts and the *perfection* of all perfections in each composite being.[8] These metaphysical commitments combined with the *triplex via* disclose what Aquinas calls this sublime truth (*haec sublimis veritatis*) that God is perfect existence in itself (Aquinas, *SCG* I. 22; *ST* I.13.11; Gilson 2002, ch.3). As we have seen, the *via causalitatis* affirms the truth that God exists, but this merely tells us that creatures exist and causally depend on what must exist as an independent uncaused first cause. Because Aquinas regards existence as a positive perfection, ascribing existence to God requires more than an extrinsic predication based on a causal affirmation.[9] Furthermore, unlike the contingent extrinsic predication of "being a cause," existence must be positively, intrinsically, and essentially affirmed of God, since God cannot fail to be essentially and intrinsically existing and be that which is uncaused, simple, and independent-in-itself. The positive meaning of existence ascribed to God must also be purified by the *via negationis*, which denies of God's actual existence any composition with essence, form, individuality, limitation, potency, accidents, and so forth. The *via eminentiae* presses our inquiries further still beyond these indispensable negations. Since we cannot affirm "God's existence" with a

meaning that is consistent with "God's nonexistence," there remains—according to Aquinas's metaphysical theology—a sense of the perfection of existence that survives the *via negationis*. Reaching beyond our creaturely conceptualization, the *via eminentiae* requires we judicatively affirm as true that there is a sense of existence that is positively ascribed to God and which cannot be wholly denied by negations; a sense of existence that transcends and exceeds the limits, compositions, contingencies, and imperfections of the actual existence of composite beings and our finite modes of conceptual understanding. While conceptually derived from the sense of *esse* ascribed to composite entities, the unique meaning of existence Aquinas attributes to God is neither equivocal (since that is ruled out by the *via causalitatis*) nor univocal (which is excluded by the *via negationis*). The *via eminentiae* reconciles the truths of causation and negation by elaborating and justifying a true affirmation of divine existence which must be understood similarly-dissimilarly, that is, analogically.[10] In short, the *triplex via* necessitates an analogical understanding of divine predications that amplifies and complements Pruss's point concerning the indispensability of analogy for divine truthmaker simplicity.

Finally, given Aquinas's metaphysical identification of actual existence with perfection, the affirmation that God is subsisting existence-in-itself thereby entails God is perfection-in-itself. Since all perfections for Aquinas are measured according to the completeness of their actuality, and God is pure unlimited actuality of existence not lacking or incomplete in any way, God is unlimited pure perfection (Aquinas, *De Pot.* 7.2ad9; Owens 1985, ch. 3). While this identification of divine perfection with the divine nature as pure simple existence is fundamental for Aquinas's derivation of other omni-attributes, this initial super-eminent affirmation of divine perfection does little to amplify our positive knowledge of God's perfection. It affirms God is perfection-in-itself because God is existence-in-itself. What is still required is Aquinas's less proprietary and more basic approach to the *via eminentiae* and the guidance it provides for understanding God's *omni-perfection* (Wippel 2000, 573–574).

The *via eminentiae*'s basic explanatory contribution to the *triplex via* is to guide and elaborate our positive understanding of God's omni-perfection. The positive content of our analogical understanding of God's omni-perfection is derived from *triplex via* theology's recursive ruminations on what *divine perfection* must be for God to be the cause of the manifold effects or created perfections that populate creation (Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, I, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3; *ST* I.4.2). To this end, the *via eminentiae* presumes two substantive metaphysical theses. First is that the positive attributes of entities are modes of perfection. Second is that causal agents must either exhibit or be sufficiently powerful to cause the perfections that exist in their effects.[11] On this

basis Aquinas can argue that even though God is *not like* caused and composite beings, nevertheless all such beings are *like* God insofar as they exhibit modes of being or perfection that finitely and imperfectly resemble their ultimate cause. In order for God to be the first uncaused cause of the multitude of effects exhibited by creatures, God must in some more preeminent and analogical way *be* what God creates— including what God is able to create but does not (Aquinas, *ST* I.4.3; 15.1-3; *SCG* I.28-29). In a metaphysics like Aquinas's, where all positive attributes of creatures are created perfections that resemble or imitate the divine perfection, the ground for these created perfections must pre-exist in God in a simple and super-eminent way as God's divine omni-perfection which isn't lacking any perfection of being. So the connection between created attributes and God's omni-perfection is rooted in the identification of all *positive created attributes* with *caused* or *dependent perfections* that are caused by and imitate the divine first uncaused cause that is omni-perfection-in-itself.

The *via eminentiae* branch of the *triplex via* leads us to two kinds of conclusions about God. It establishes that God is perfection-in-itself, and it amplifies our understanding of God's omni-perfection by providing a path for establishing and conceptualizing all other divine attributes understood as divine perfections. But it doesn't do this apart from causation and negation; all further attributes ascribed to God must be reconciled with the *triplex via's* fundamental conclusions that God is perfect, simple, existence-in-itself. The *triplex via* is an integrated unity of ways that together guide the conceptual modifications of creaturely perfections required to truthfully ascribe any perfection to God, starting with the most fundamental perfection of existence. We have seen that *TVT* takes a different route to the guidance problem from that of *PBT*. Rather than assuming a conception of God at the outset, the *triplex via* guides and establishes an analogical understanding of God that is rooted in the ways all of God's creatures are caused, composite, and imperfect reflections of their Creator. While much more needs to be said by way of defense and explanation, this cursory tour should be sufficient to illustrate how Aquinas employs the *triplex via* to answer the guidance problem and deliver philosophical conclusions concerning God's existence and a basic understanding of the divine nature. In the last section I will conclude with some points about how Aquinas's *triplex via* speaks to the ordering-attributes problem as well.

6.2.3 Triplex via Theology and the Ordering-Attributes Problem

Given the variety of created perfections to choose from among the effects of God, critics might query why Thomist *TVT* gives pride of place to existence, simplicity, and perfection in its analogical understanding of the divine

nature. This brings us to the *ordering-attributes problem*, which raises two difficulties for Thomist *TVT*. First, why should these divine attributes be prioritized and fundamental in our basic understanding of God? Second, what explains the order among the many other divine perfections we ascribe to God's nature? Why must we conceptualize, for instance, God's will and omnipotence in light of God's goodness, and not vice-versa?

Unlike *PBT*, *TVT* provides a straightforward answer to the first of these two difficulties, for the very integrated way by which the *triplex via* establishes God's existence, simplicity, and perfection also explains why they must be prioritized. For starters, since the *triplex via* commences with metaphysical conclusions and not theological assumptions, it's through an inquiry concerning ultimate causes or grounds that we first hit upon the existence of God. Furthermore, among divine attributes, we must begin with divine existence for the probative justification that we can say nothing true about the divine nature as simple, perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, and so forth, if we don't first know God exists. God can only be a truthmaker for all true intrinsic predications about God if God *exists* as the truthmaker for all true intrinsic predications. Clearly then, divine existence must be the first attribute affirmed of God, for it is presupposed by all the other divine attributes. Next, since our knowledge of God's existence depends on the causal conclusion that God is an uncaused cause, we can only maintain God is *un*caused by negating every composition or contingency that would undermine this conclusion. This is why divine simplicity and aseity follow immediately from any cogent contingency and causal proofs for God's existence. Third, divine perfection follows from God's simple existence, because all true perfective attributes of creatures are modes of existence caused by God; and since God is pure, simple, existence, not lacking in any perfection, God must be pure perfection and the creative source of all created perfections. Given this primacy of existence, simplicity, and perfection delivered by the *TVT*'s understanding of the divine nature, all other attributes ascribed to God by the *triplex via* must be conceptualized in light of God's perfect simple existence. What these rough arguments aim to show is that while divine existence, simplicity, and perfection cannot be derived from omnipotence, omnibenevolence, or any other omni-attributes, these core attributes also illuminate the way the divine nature is the truthmaker for the true understanding and ascription of these other omni-perfections to God. The true meaning of omnibenevolence or omnipotence must be informed by and conceptualized via the *triplex via* in light of a true and prior understanding of the divine nature as simple perfect existence-in-itself. This brings us to the second difficulty raised by the ordering-attributes problem.

The *triplex via* also supplies principles for establishing an order among the other divine attributes. The first distinction we must observe here isn't unique to *TVT* but does follow immediately from it, namely, the basic contrast between intrinsic and extrinsic attributes of God.

The former are attributes that are intrinsically and essentially true of God (e.g., "God is good"), whereas extrinsic and contingent attributes (e.g., "God is a creator") are ascribed to creatures in virtue of their dependency on or causal relationship to God. All extrinsic and contingent attributes must be conceptualized in light of the intrinsic and essential attributes of God, which are also the grounds for the existence and truth of any extrinsic attributes.[12]

The more difficult ordering-attributes problem concerns the explanatory priority among intrinsic attributes. Here too the *triplex via* provides an answer which I can only sketch here. As we have seen, a host of ontological conclusions are presupposed by the inquiries of Thomist philosophical theology. Among these conclusions is a surview of the diverse modes of finite being which the *triplex via* employs as a surview of the variety of ways the finite perfections of beings are limited imitations of their ultimate causal source and ground in God who is perfection-in-itself. This metaphysical hierarchy of finite perfections provides an ordering principle for deriving and conceptualizing God's other divine perfections. How so?

We've already seen from the *via negationis* that our concepts of some creaturely perfections require more radical negating forms of conceptual modification than others to work out accurate conceptions of divine perfections—all of which must be purified of the contingency and finitude of created beings. This insight provides the basic principle for how to establish, order, and conceptualize the other divine perfections. The perfections of finite beings that are least limited in themselves take conceptual priority in our understanding of God's omni-perfection since that which is least intrinsically limited and imperfect in its finite mode of being most resembles God's unlimited perfection. The ordering among our conceptions of divine perfections must therefore aim to conceptually prioritize those perfections that resemble most the divine perfection, which will deliver a philosophical theology that more closely resembles God. Again, as Beebe and Pawl argue in response to Saenz, despite the prioritization of divine existence, simplicity, and perfection in our understanding of all other divine attributes, these conceptual distinctions and priorities don't require any real distinction within God among these divine attributes. These are simply the conceptual distinctions and patterns of conceptual priority and subordination required to conform our minds to what the *triplex via* reveals to be the inherent explanatory order for a true philosophical understanding of God.

Aquinas's metaphysics establishes a relatively straightforward hierarchy from less limited perfections to more limited perfections. The first major contrast is between the transcendentals and the categories. Categorical perfections of being like substance, quantity, quality, relation, and so forth are more limited generic modes of being than the analogical transcendental perfections of being like thing, one, another,

truth, goodness, and beauty, which are each ascribed to all categorical perfections of being (Aquinas, *On Truth*, q. 1, a. 1; 21.1). Hence, we must understand God's unity, truth, and goodness, prior to conceptualizing—through the *triplex via*—the ways diverse categorical perfections can be truthfully and intrinsically predicated of God. Similarly, among categorical perfections, substantial perfections take explanatory priority to the more limited modes of being belonging to attributes or accidents (e.g., qualities, powers, relations, etc.), which are modifications of substances. We identify God's power with God's subsistence thereby negating "accident" from our conception of divine omnipotence, rather than attempting to conceptualize divine subsistence as if it could be an aspect of some "accident" of God called divine power.[13] Furthermore, among and within the categories of accidents there are conceptual and explanatory priorities pertaining to some accidents over others, like when some accidents are limiting modifications of more basic attributes. For instance, the power of intellect is prior to the virtue of wisdom, which is a modification of the power of intellect, just as love and justice are modifications of the power of will. There are also more complicated patterns of reciprocity, as with the creaturely powers of intellect and will, which are not negated in our understanding of divine intellect and will. For Aquinas, intellect and will are inextricably confluent and co-operating powers, where the intellect specifies what the will elects to exercise or not (Aquinas, *On Evil*, q. 6). The ascription of intellect and will to God requires negating the limitations, compositions, and contingencies of created intellect and will, but we must nevertheless understand the divine will as specified by God's perfect intellectual knowledge of all truth and goodness, and the liberty of the divine will cannot be necessitated to will from eternity any limited, participated, composite, or caused good.

A great deal more is needed here to defend this sketch of how Thomist *TVT* answers the ordering-attributes problem and to spell out in more detail the proper order among these attributes and their significance in light of their mutual compatibility and coherence with divine existence, simplicity, and perfection. I hope what I have outlined provides us with sufficient resources to address a few final worries or points of clarification regarding Thomist *TVT*.

First, *TVT* needs to be distinguished from views that purport to derive all the divine attributes simply on the basis of establishing some primary attribute of God, like existence-in-itself, infinity-in-itself, or perfection-in-itself. Hence, Thomist *TVT* rejects any presentations of Aquinas which suggest all of God's attributes can be derived from the thesis that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*. The recursive application of the *triplex via* requires we continually return to the perfections of the caused and composite creatures more known to us, and ascend from

there via causality, negation, and super-eminence to conceptually generate and understand how and why some perfection is ascribed analogically to God and how it coheres with God's being perfect simple existence-in-itself.

Second, appreciating Aquinas's *TVT* reveals what is neglected in any mistaken purely apophatic or negative construal of Thomist philosophical theology. They simply overlook the nested role of the *via negationis* within Aquinas's *TVT* buttressed as it is by the affirmations of the *via causalitatis* and the *via eminentiae*. The integrated order of the *triplex via* is aimed to steer clear of the Scylla of ontotheology and the Charybdis of radical agnosticism about God's nature. Our negative knowledge of God is balanced between two positive forms of knowledge, which are themselves tempered and disciplined by the mediation of negative knowledge. Nevertheless, despite any humble advances in philosophical knowledge of God, the divine nature in itself remains a mystery to us. Our understanding *in statu viae* is, as Bernard Lonergan adroitly elaborates, "imperfect, analogical, obscure, gradually developing, synthetic, and [yet] highly fruitful." (Lonergan 2007, 19) Indeed, even though we can only achieve limited knowledge of the finite order of created perfections because God's omni-perfection is unlimited and infinite, there is no end to the array of true divine attributes. Aquinas provides a nice gloss on this point as it pertains to the plurality of attributes required for us to even begin to understand what God is.

> The plurality of [divine] names comes from the fact that God Himself exceeds our intellect. That God exceeds our intellect is on the part of God Himself due to the plenitude of His perfection, and it is on the part of our intellect due to its deficiency to comprehend Him. Hence, it is clear that the plurality of these meanings (*rationum*) is not only due to our intellect but also due to God Himself, insofar as His perfection surpasses every conception of our intellect. And therefore the plurality of these meanings (*rationum*) reflect something in the reality which God is; not a plurality of realities, but the plenitude of perfection, from which it renders that all of these conceptions are adapted to Him.
> (Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, I, d.2, q.1, a.3, my trans.)

6.3 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have argued that Aquinas's *triplex via* theology provides classical theism with a fruitful heuristic for philosophical inquiries concerning God's existence and essence. I explained why the important insights of Thomist divine truthmaker simplicity remain incomplete if they are not situated within Aquinas's *triplex via* heuristic, which both establishes and elaborates the doctrine of divine simplicity via the ways

of causality, negation, and super-eminence. Most significantly, I have shown that Aquinas's *triplex via* theology provides illuminating answers to the guidance and ordering-attributes problems where other more well-known forms of classical theism—like perfect being theology—have failed to resolve these basic challenges to classical theism.

Notes

1 I shall use the following standard abbreviations for the works of Thomas Aquinas: Aquinas (1962) *Summa theologiae* (= *ST*); Aquinas (1952) *Disputed Questions on the Power of God* (= *De Pot.*); Aquinas (1952–1954) [*Disputed Questions*] *On Truth* (= *On Truth*); Aquinas (1929–1947) *Scriptum super libros sententiarum* (= *Commentary on the Sentences*); Aquinas (2003) *On Evil* (= *On Evil*); Aquinas (1975) *Summa Contra Gentiles* (= *SCG*); Aquinas (1986) [*Commentary on Boethius's On the Trinity*] *Questions V-VI. The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (= *In De Trin.*).
2 For a survey of these debates, see Nagasawa 2017.
3 For exegetical debates, see Rocca 2004, 49-74; te Velde 2006, 72-90; O'Rourke 1992; O'Rourke 2016; Ewbank 1990.
4 See Aquinas, *In de Trin.*, V.4; White 2009; De Haan 2013.
5 For an explanation of why Aquinas holds an essentially ordered causal series that "is asymmetric, irreflexive, and wholly derivative," cannot have an infinite regress, see Cohoe 2013.
6 I've appropriated Rocca's insightful typology but altered his terminology. See Rocca 2004, 58-62.
7 For example, if "God is infinite" means God is neither finite nor limited, then it is a mere negation that follows from *DDS*. If it means God is pure limitless formal perfection, then it requires the *via eminentiae* argumentation. Similarly, if divine eternity is a negation of temporality implied by immutability (if no change from prior to posterior, then no duration from past to present to future). But if divine eternity means the perfect simultaneous unending life, then it requires *via eminentiae*. See Aquinas, *ST* I.10.1-4.
8 Aquinas, *SCG* II. 52-54; Nevitt 2018, 321–352; Gilson 2002, chs. 3-4.
9 Aquinas holds we can affirm true intrinsic and essential predications about God, but we cannot attain any proper conceptual understanding of God's perfections-in-themselves, only an incomplete, analogical understanding based on cogent inferences and true judgments. This is because the *via causalitatis* establishes the truth of God's existence by affirming relations of dependency that only belong intrinsically to creatures. For instance, creatures are intrinsically composite so are contingent and causally dependent ultimately on that which exists as uncaused, not contingent, and not composite. "Being a cause" is only affirmed extrinsically of God, for if God were essentially and intrinsically a cause of composite beings, then God's essence would depend on them. This would render God contingent, contrary to the *via causalitatis*'s conclusion, *DDS*, and divine aseity.
10 This might seem like hand-waving, but it's directed to a theory of analogy which I cannot detail here. Briefly: first, the meaning of existence ascribed to God is radically unlike the already analogical understanding of existence (*esse*), essence, and common being (*ens commune*) that Aquinas ascribes to all composite beings. Prior to any question of God, being is thoroughly analogical for Aquinas. Second, the meaning of actual existence affirmed of

God by the *via causalitatis* must be *similar* to the meaning of existence that is positively, intrinsically, and analogically affirmed of actually existing composite beings—like the basic perfection of actually existing. Third, the *via negationis* discloses that the meaning of existence ascribed to God must be radically *dissimilar* to the meaning of existence ascribed to beings studied by ontology insofar as these beings are composite, contingent, caused beings. Fourth, the *via eminentiae* fuses this similarity among dissimilarities and points to an analogical meaning of existence as omni-actuality and omni-perfection beyond any found in composite beings which we must affirm as truly ascribed intrinsically to God. In short, our analogically or proportionally unified understanding of the actual existence of composite beings must be expanded and conceptually transformed through the *triplex via* heuristic in order to arrive at an indirect, radically limited, and analogical understanding of the true affirmation that God is pure act of existence-in-itself. See Hochschild 2010.

11 To be clear, this principle of causality doesn't require that God or humans be fiery in order to make a fire; rather, they must exhibit perfections sufficient for causing such perfective attributes to exist. See De Haan, Forthcoming; Kretzman, 1997, 140-157; Wippel 2000, 572-575; Wippel 2007.

12 While I can't address here the proper order among extrinsic attributes, priority should be given to those extrinsic attributes that are ontologically and explanatorily the most fundamental and universal. God being the providential Creator over all creatures will therefore take priority over any extrinsic attributes pertaining to some subset of creatures, like divine predestination of intellectual creatures.

13 Aquinas also prioritizes the divine names belonging to the divine substance over the principles of divine operation; see Aquinas, *ST* I.2.prol.; I.14.prol.

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