

Aquinas—"Darkness of Ignorance" in the Most Refined Notion of God

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I

Ever since the time of Parmenides, Western philosophical thought has been conscious of difficulties in the notion of being. Parmenides had shown that the stable way of being is the way required by thought itself. He emphasized that outside being there is only not-being, a way that can yield no knowledge at all. A mixture of the two ways was forbidden him, since this results in unstable and deceptive appearance, not truth. In following the sole way permissible for philosophic thinking, Parmenides claimed that he had left the dwellings of night and had been guided to light.¹ There he could contemplate being as a luminous object. He could deduce conclusions from its nature just as from any object open to penetration by human thought. The conclusions, irrefutable in the Eleatic context, made impossible any genuine differentiation or plurality or change.

In their extreme form, these conclusions were unacceptable to subsequent philosophers. By some, being was retained as indestructible, yet as differentiated in elements or atoms. By Plato, its true nature was placed in differentiated Ideas outside perceptible things. By Aristotle, being was regarded as multesignificant and consequently as a plurality. It was given secondary status after a primal one by Plotinus. It was denied by Gorgias as nonexistent and unknowable and inexpressible. In numerous currents of modern thought it has been set aside as an empty or meaningless concept, a surd or a blank. On the other hand, being in its own nature was identified with God in patristic and Scholastic tradition. In fact, the formula "God is the being of all things" was, with appropriate qualifications, defended in medieval times.²

1. *Fr.* 1.9-10 (DK, 28 B). *Cf. Frs.* 6 and 9.

2. See Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 2 (ed. Mandonnet, I, 197-198); *cf. SCG*, I, 26. Besides Dionysius and Bernard, as cited by Aquinas, the Boethian tradition likewise gave expression to this tenet. See Gilbert of Poitiers, *In I de Trin.*, 52, ed. Nikolaus Häring (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1966), p. 89.5-6, Thierry of Chartres, *In Boeth. de Trin.*, II, 56, ed. Häring (Toronto: PIMS,

In the thirteenth century this problem of being was faced by Thomas Aquinas against a proximate background of patristic speculation and a remote background of Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, and Parmenidean thought. In solidarity with the patristic understanding of a verse in *Exodus* (III, 14), the first and characteristic name of God was for Aquinas "he who is."³ For him, in spite of a reservation drawn from a comment by John Damascene, "being" was regarded in the context as signifying what God is, namely God's quiddity or nature.⁴ Yet for Aquinas, being did not confront the mind in Parmenidean fashion as a luminous object. Rather, in accord with the background in *Exodus* (XIX, 9; XX, 21), it was enshrined in dense darkness (*caligo*). The notion, in its application to God, could be best attained through the gradual removal of all ordinarily understood aspects, even of the "is":

The reply to the fourth is that all other names mean being under some other determinate aspect. For instance, "wise" means being something. But this name "he who is" means being that is absolute, i.e., not made determinate by anything added. Therefore Damascene says that it does not signify what God is—rather, it signifies an infinite (as though not determinate) ocean of substance. Hence when we proceed to God by "the way of removal," we first deny to him corporeal aspects; and secondly, also intellectual aspects such as goodness and wisdom, in the way they are found in creatures. Just "that (he) is" remains then in our understanding, and nothing more—hence it is, as it were, in a state of confusion. Lastly we remove from him even this very being itself, as present in creatures—and then it remains in a darkness of ignorance. In that ignorance, as far as the wayfaring state is concerned, we are best joined to God; and this is a dense darkness, in which God is said to dwell.⁵

1971), p. 173-44, and *In De Hebd.*, ed. Häring (Toronto: PIMS, 1971), 24, p. 409-48-49. A discussion of the metaphysical issues involved in the tenet may be found in Gerald B. Phelan, "The Being of Creatures," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 31 (1957), pp. 118-25.

3. *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, aa. 1 and 3; I, 194-95; 199-201.

4. "But in God his very being is his quiddity; and therefore the name that is taken from being properly denominates him, and is his proper name, just as the proper name of man is that which is taken from his quiddity." *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, Solut.; I, 195. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine. In Aquinas, no distinction is made between essential being and existential being. Accordingly, in a context like the present, *esse* and *est* may be translated in terms either of being or of existence, in the way English idiom requires; cf. "Unde per suum esse absolutum non tantum est, sed aliquid est" ("Hence by his own absolute being he not only exists, but is something")—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, ad 2m; I, 220.

5. "Ad quartam dicendum, quod alia omnia nomina dicunt esse secundum aliam

In this passage two overall considerations stand out. The first is that on the metaphysical level God is reached in terms of being. The second is that here the notion of being is not luminous, but rather is in a kind of darkness, a darkness resulting from ignorance. The passage is found in the earliest major writing of Aquinas, the *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*. It is meant to answer an argument taken from John Damascene.⁶ Damascene, in accord with patristic tradition,⁷ listed the first name of God as "he who is," in the sense of "an infinite ocean of being." As what is infinite is incomprehensible

rationem determinatam; sicut sapiens dicit aliquid esse; sed hoc nomen, 'qui est' dicit esse absolutum et non determinatum per aliquid additum; et ideo dicit Damascenus, quod non significat quid est Deus, sed significat quoddam pelagus substantiae infinitum, quasi non determinatum. Unde quando in Deum procedimus per viam remotionis, primo negamus ab eo corporalia; et secundo etiam intellectualia, secundum quod inveniuntur in creaturis, ut bonitas et sapientia; et tunc remanet tantum in intellectu nostro, quia est, et nihil amplius: unde est sicut in quadam confusione. Ad ultimum autem etiam hoc ipsum esse, secundum quod est in creaturis, ab ipso removemus; et tunc remanet in quadam tenebra ignorantiae, secundum quam ignorantiam, quantum ad statum viae pertinet, optime Deo coniungimur, ut dicit Dionysius, et haec est quaedam caligo, in qua Deus habitare dicitur"—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4m; I, 196-97. Although "aliquam" might be expected for the "aliam" in the opening sentence, the "aliam" gives an acceptable sense, for being has a determination proper to itself, e.g.: "Ita etiam divinum esse est determinatum in se et ab omnibus aliis divisum"—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, ad 1m; I, 219. "Intellectus" is used regularly in the context in the objective sense of "notion"; see *ibid.* (p. 219) and "non est de intellectu ipsius quidditatis," Exp. lae partis textus, p. 209. The "wayfaring state" was a customary theological designation for man's life on earth. On this metaphor and its history through medieval times, see Gerhart B. Ladner, "Homo Vistor: Medieval Ideas on Alienation and Order," *Speculum*, XLII (1967), pp. 233-59.

With the passage as a whole, one may compare Radhakrishnan's presentation of Buddha's teaching: "The primary reality is an unconditional existence beyond all potentiality of adequate expression by thought or description by symbol, in which the word 'existence' itself loses its meaning and the symbol of nirvāna alone seems to be justified." Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1932), p. 100.

6. *De Fid. Orth.*, I, 9, 1-2 (PG, 94, 836); Burgundio trans., ed. Eligius M. Buytaert (Louvain: E. Nauwelaerts, 1955), p. 48. On the medieval translations of Damascene, see Buytaert's Preface, p. v., and Introduction, pp. ix-xx.

7. A survey of the patristic tradition may be found in C. J. De Vogel, "Ego sum qui sum" et sa signification pour une philosophie chrétienne, *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 35 (1961), pp. 346-53. The description, "an infinite and indeterminate ocean of being," has its source in Gregory Nazianzenus, *Orat.* 38, 7, and 45, 3 (PG, 36, 317B and 625C). On the meanings of "infinite" and "indeterminate" in this phrase, see L. Sweeney, "John Damascene's 'Infinite Sea of Essence,'" *Studia Patristica* VI, ed. F. L. Cross, in *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, 81 (1962), pp. 248-63.

and therefore unknowable—so the argument is made to run—“he who is” cannot stand as a name for God. In replying to this argument, Aquinas claims that, for Damascene, “he who is” did not express God’s nature but only an indeterminate ocean of substance. Even though all determination by corporeal and intelligible aspects had been removed, the residue still is not immediately capable of signifying the divine nature. The notion of being that remains in it, even though freed from quidditative limitations, manifests only the imperfect being that is known in creatures. Yet, with the removal of this final restriction, the last glimmer of light seems to die. The first and most characteristic name of God has been attained, but what it signifies is englobed in some sort of darkness.

What is the situation here? Damascene had meant that the dominantly significant and first name of God is “he who is.” In this context the name “God” holds only second place. Damascene does not say in so many words that “he who is” does not signify what God is, but rather an ocean of substance. Yet Aquinas seems justified in interpreting the meaning of his statement just that way, since Damascene had made the general assertion that all designations of God fail to signify what God is in substance and then had listed “he who is” as the first of these designations. But what background does Aquinas use for the inference? Damascene had commenced his discussion by emphasizing the simplicity of the divine nature and the lack of any composition in it, in contrast to whatever consists of multiple and differing components. No characterization of God, accordingly, implies substantial differences in him, and from that viewpoint does not express anything in the order of substance.⁸ For Aquinas this was sufficient to allow the conclusion that anything implying composition could not signify what God is. The reason had just been given in the reply to the immediately preceding argument: “. . . since the being of a creature imperfectly represents the divine being, also the name ‘he who is’ signifies it imperfectly, because it signifies in the manner of a concrete union and synthesis.” Concrete being, in fact, in itself expresses imperfection, “as in this name ‘he who is.’”⁹ The being immediately known to the human mind is in that way regarded by Aquinas as involving composition and therefore imper-

8. “Oportet igitur singulum eorum, quae in Deo dicuntur, non quid secundum substantiam est significare estimare”—Damascene, *De Fid. Orth.*, I, 9, 1; Burgundio trans., p. 48.8-10. Cf. “. . . non ipsam substantiam comprehendimus, sed ea quae circa substantiam”—*ibid.*, I, 10, 2; p. 51.10-11.

9. “. . . cum esse creaturae imperfecte representet divinum esse, et hoc nomen ‘qui est’ imperfecte significat ipsum, quia significat per modum cuiusdam concretionis et compositionis; . . . sicut in hoc nomine ‘qui est’”—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3m; I, 196.

fection. It is apparently considered by him as still luminous for the human intellect, since there is as yet no mention of darkness. But it is not sufficient to signify the divine nature.

Against that background the steps outlined for progress in knowledge of God may be examined, as they are sketched in the passage in question. The first step is to reject corporeal attributes from the notion "he who is." This is fully in accord with the basic Aristotelian tenet that only sensible things are immediately apparent to human cognition. They are the only starting point for philosophical procedure to God. From them the human mind has to reason to their primary cause and has to show that the primary cause cannot be a body. The procedure required had already been sketched in an earlier article in the Commentary on the *Sentences*: "But from the seeing of perceptible things, we reach God only through a reasoning process, insofar as those things are caused and everything caused is from an agent cause and the primary agent cannot be a body."¹⁰

What is the process by which corporeal attributes are removed from the original conception? The basic human conception of anything that is, is that of a perceptible existent. Such was the pre-Socratic notion of things,¹¹ and such is the notion of reality that is most readily acceptable in ordinary human discourse. In fact, to express anything other than the corporeal, one has to use negative notions. Incorporeal, immaterial, inextended, nonquantitative, are the notions employed. They presuppose what is corporeal and quantitative, and then negate the characteristically corporeal aspects. How is this possible? It cannot be achieved by a simple process of abstraction, in the way the notion "man" is abstracted from John and Dick and Harry and the other observable individuals. The abstraction merely leaves out of consideration the individual characteristics observed in each man and focuses upon what is common in them all, the notion "man." "Man" is an object already seen in each and now focused on in isolation from the individual traits. The same holds as in ascending scale the generic natures of animal, living thing, and body are isolated. These specific and generic natures are objects that confront the intellect in the individuals observed.

But can one go further and see within the notion "body" a still wider notion that would have "corporeal" and "incorporeal" as its differentiae? The schematizing in the traditional Porphyrian tree would seem to give that impression. From individuals, "man" is abstracted, from

10. "Sed visis sensibilibus, non devenimus in Deum nisi procedendo, secundum quod ista causata sunt et quod omne causatum est ab aliqua causa agente et quod primum agens non potest esse corpus"—*In I Sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, Solut.; I, 94.

11. See Zeno, *Fr.* 1 (DK, 29 B); Aristotle, *Metaph.*, Gamma 5, 1010a2-3.

man and brute, "animal," from animals and plants, "living thing," from animate and inanimate, "body," and allegedly from bodies and spirits, "substance." But is that what has actually happened at the last step? In all the other steps the different instances were observable before one's intellectual gaze. But were the instances "bodies and spirits" equally observable? No. There were no instances of spirits before one's direct gaze from which one could abstract a notion common also to bodies, as "man" was seen in Dick and Harry and "animal" in man and brute. Even the word "spirit" betrays its corporeal origin. Etymologically it means "breath," and as denoting something invisible it has lent itself to signifying an incorporeal substance. But it does not present any simple concept beyond the corporeal order, nor does it offer positively a new differentia comparable to life, sensation, or rationality.

Yet, the human mind is able to distinguish between the corporeal and the substantial in the instances of body that it immediately encounters. Body is originally conceived as able to have the three dimensions of length, breadth, and thickness. But the same thing can also be conceived as capable of existing or ceasing to exist. A table is made and destroyed, a tree grows and decays, an animal is born and dies. The two ways of conceiving the same thing can readily be distinguished. Conceived in relation to its being or to its existence, a body is known as a substance. In fact, the original designation of the Aristotelian category was in terms of being. It was *ousia* and meant a being in the primary sense of the notion. To say that a body is a substance was merely to say that it was a being in the basic sense of the term "being."

With Aquinas, already at the time of the first book of his Commentary on the *Sentences*, the quiddity or nature of a thing and the being of the thing were regarded as known through two different, although always concomitant, activities of the intellect.¹² As regards its nature,

12. "... since there is a double operation of the intellect, of which one ... consists in the apprehension of simple quiddity, ... the other ... in the composition or division of a proposition, the first operation regards the quiddity of the thing, the second regards its being"—*In I Sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7m; I, 489. Cf. d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, Solut.; I, 903. The Latin infinitive *esse* that signifies the actuality originally grasped in the second operation of the mind, may be translated in this context by either "being" or "existence," without any change in the meaning of the term (*see supra*, n. 4). The reason why being as encountered in sensible things is known through a synthesizing type of cognition, is that this being *consists* in a synthesis of form with matter or of accident with subject: "... consistit in quadam compositione formae ad materiam, vel accidentis ad subjectum"—d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, Solut.; I, 903. This immediate knowledge of being is intuition, in a contrast to inference and to conceptualization. It is in the form of a judgment, as in the ordinary intuition that something is so, or in the philosophic sense that something is true. A recent use of 'intuition' to describe the grasp of being through judgment may be seen in

the thing was known through simple conceptualization that could be expressed in language by a single word, such as gold, mountain, man, or phoenix. As regards its being, it was known through a synthesizing act of judgment that required a proposition and a sentence for its expression. In relation to what was known about it in the latter way, the thing was regarded as a being. Accordingly, the ground for the distinction between body and substance in the same thing is clear-cut. As a result of the highest type of simple conceptualization and abstraction in the first traditional category, the object is known as a body. As a result of reference to the actuality grasped through judgment, it is known as a substance.

But this recognized distinction allows for the play of further judgments in regard to the notions involved. The notion of something able to exist or to be is open to separation from the notion that originally accompanied it, the notion of body. Through a judgment one can negate the notion of body and retain the notion of existent. There is no question of leaving out the corporeal aspect as would be the case in simple abstraction. It is not left out by abstraction but it is negated by judgment. The object still appears corporeal but is judged to be incorporeal. The judgment is one of separation.¹³

Two instances in which this judgment is made in the metaphysics of Aquinas are the subsistent existence that is reached as the primary efficient cause of all perceptible things and the human soul that functions as the substantial principle of intellectual activity.¹⁴ These are shown to be existents through reasoning processes in which the conclusion is drawn that they transcend the corporeal order. They are accordingly judged to be spiritual substances. To the extent the corporeal has been negated in them by judgment, the formation of a composite concept "incorporeal existent" follows. There is no simple abstraction from the corporeal, but its deliberate negation by judgment and the formation of the subsequent negatively expressed composite concept.

Maritain's posthumous work *Approches sans entraves* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), pp. 264-68.

13. Discussion of this topic may be found in my articles, "The Universality of the Sensible in the Aristotelian Noetic," in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. John P. Anton with George L. Kostas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), pp. 462-77, and "Metaphysical Separation in Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies*, 34 (1972), pp. 287-306.

14. "But the most perfect of forms, that is, the human soul, . . . has an operation entirely rising above matter . . . Insofar therefore as it exceeds the being of corporeal matter, being able to subsist and operate by itself, the human soul is a spiritual substance"—*De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 2, c. Cf. *De Pot.*, III, 11, c; *ST*, I, 75, 2; *Q. de An.*, aa. 1 and 14.

The basic notion of an existent is retained from perceptible objects, and the negation of corporeality is joined to it.

Is this what has been taking place in the passage under consideration? Its wording is: "Hence when we proceed to God by 'the way of removal,' we first deny to him corporeal aspects."¹⁵ "He who is" had been proposed as the first name for God. The object brought before the mind by the expression "he who is," is *prima facie* a perceptible existent, a man. This object has to be purified if it is to stand for the divine nature. The way designated is a way already dealt with in the Commentary. It consists in taking something that is imperfect and then removing the imperfections in order to reach something perfect.¹⁶ In the present case the corporeal attributes are removed from the object "he who is," and the process is that of negation—"negamus ab eo corporalia." This is quite obviously the judgment of separation.

The first step in "the way of removal," accordingly, frees the notion "he who is" from the imperfections involved in corporeality. Basically, the object still appears as corporeal. But the corporeal characteristics in it have been explicitly negated by judgment and in this way removed from the conception. In this whole process no mention is made of any darkness. What is retained in the object is still treated of as luminous. In it the notions of "substance" and "existence" keep their full meaning. Although all sensible characteristics are deliberately set aside, the specifically intelligible traits seem to preserve their luminosity in entirely undiminished fashion. The conception, by and large, is now that of ordinary instructed Christians, who believe that God has no body while still regarding him as good and wise in the manner familiar to them, although raised to an infinite degree.

II

The second step in the procedure to God rejects from the notion "he who is" even intellectual attributes as they are found in creatures. The designation "intellectual" means obviously enough the kind that cannot be distinguished by the senses but only by the intelligence. The examples given are goodness and wisdom. The two seem rather disparate, but together they may illustrate an important facet of the reasoning in this passage. For Aquinas, goodness is a transcendental

15. See text *supra*, n. 5.

16. "Secunda ratio sumitur per viam remotionis, et est talis. Ultra omne imperfectum oportet esse aliquod perfectum, cui nulla imperfectio admisceatur." *In I Sent.*, d. 3, div. lae partis textus; I, 88.

property of being.¹⁷ It follows upon being and is present wherever being is found. Since no creature is identified with its being, still less can it be identified with its goodness. Accordingly, goodness as different from the thing's nature is removed from the notion "he who is."

Since goodness is meant to serve as an example, it would indicate that the other transcendental properties of being, such as truth and beauty, are being negated in the sense in which they are different from the subject that possesses them. But in the context the intelligible attributes negated have to be restricted to transcendentals that are properties. The basic notion from which they are being removed has to remain. It is that of something existent, "he who is." The transcendental subject of being, namely "thing," and its first actuation as "a being," are transcendentals that remain for the third step in the procedure. In a word, only the intelligible attributes that follow upon an existent nature are in question in the second step.

The other example given is wisdom. This is a different kind of attribute, not common to all creatures, and following upon a definite type of nature rather than upon existence. It had just been used to illustrate the way being can be determined under a definite aspect, for it "means to be something,"¹⁸ namely, to be wise. It had also been given as an example of a divine name that in its meaning designated the source of God's activity in the created world and as an instance of a notion that in creatures implied imperfection.¹⁹ In creatures, of course, wisdom belongs to the category of quality and has the imperfection of an accident.²⁰ What it is meant to illustrate in the context is a determination or limitation of being. All natures other than being itself come under

17. On the transcendentals in this context, see *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 3, Solut.; I, 199-200. On the medieval background, see H. Pouillon, "Le premier traité des propriétés transcendentales," *Revue neoscholastique de philosophie*, 42 (1939), pp. 40-77. A recent coverage of the transcendentals is given by Karl Bärthlein, *Die Transzendentalienlehre der alten Ontologie*, I. Teil (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972), but, unlike Aquinas, it does not accept goodness and truth as properties of being.

Goodness and wisdom were used together by Peter Lombard as examples of the attributes of God in the text upon which Aquinas (*In I Sent.*, d. 8, I, 190) was commenting.

18. "... sicut sapiens dicit aliquid esse"—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4m; I, 196.

19. *Ibid.*, ad 2m; I, 196. Cf. *In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, aa. 2-3 (I, 61-72), where goodness and wisdom are likewise the examples used.

20. "... sicut quod hoc nomen 'sapientia' imponitur cuidam qualitati, et hoc nomen 'essentia' cuidam rei quae non subsistit: et haec longe a Deo sunt"—*In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, Solut.; I, 69.

this designation—"all other names mean being under some other determinate aspect."²¹ The attribute "male," implied by the Greek masculine article and participle and by the masculine relative pronoun in Latin, is no exception.

The general situation, as it is at this stage, seems described clearly enough in the text. The notion from which the start had been made found expression in the words "he who is." To have this notion stand for the divine nature, bodily aspects are first negated in it. Second, transcendental properties and definite natures, as these are known in creatures, are removed from it. What remains now in the original notion? Its content is described as only "that [he] is (*quia est*) . . . and nothing more."

How should the *quia est* be translated? It is reminiscent of the Parmenidean route of being, namely *hoti estin*, and presents the same barrier to exact translation. No subject is expressed, yet English requires the insertion of a subject term. The translation will read "that it is." In Parmenides this would imply a subject other than being, although there cannot be anything other than being for the Eleatic when traveling the way of truth. Further, in the thirteenth-century background, "that a thing is" was an expression that stood in contrast to "what a thing is." It designated the existence of the thing in contrast to the thing's nature, and it was for Aquinas what the act of judgment attained.²² Here it is meant to signify "being itself, as present in creatures"—"ipsium esse, secundum quod est in creaturis." It is the existential actuality that confronts the mind whenever something is known to exist.

But what is this "being itself, as present in creatures," when taken just alone? It is the synthesizing actuality known through judgment, and expressed in proposition and sentence. However, all quidditative determinations have been removed from it in this second stage. From that standpoint it is entirely indeterminate. "Existing" is all that can be left in the object. That is, of course, wide enough to extend to everything. Yet, as known to the human intellect, it remains an actuality making something else exist. It has to imply, besides itself, an indefinite "something" that does the existing. The notion accordingly is "that which is" in the all-embracing universality to which existing can extend.

21. ". . . alia omnia nomina dicunt esse secundum aliam rationem determinatam" —*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4m; I, 196. Cf.: "Praeterea, quidquid est in genere, habet esse suum determinatum ad illud genus. Sed esse divinum nullo modo determinatum est ad aliquod genus; quinimo comprehendit in se nobilitates omnium generum, . . ." —*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 2, Contra; I, 221.

22. See *supra*, n. 12.

It means something that exists without limits—quite in accord with the simile of a boundless ocean.

There need be little wonder, then, that the description of this second stage concludes with the assertion, "Hence it is, as it were, in a state of confusion." There is no reference to a Greek source for that notion. Elsewhere the term *confusio* is found used by Aquinas in its various ordinary senses. It is directly opposed to *distinctio*, and in the concrete may signify a mingling in which each component keeps its own identity and yet is known in a way that does not distinguish it from the others.²³ In the present context it bears on the patristic description of God as "an infinite ocean of being." Aquinas is facing the interpretation that this does not signify what God is, in the sense that it does not express the divine nature. Yet, it does name God in terms of being only, and being is the nature of God. Why, then, does not "he who is," in the meaning of an infinite ocean of being, signify the divine nature? What is meant by saying that the notion is in a state of confusion that does not as yet permit it to signify what it intends?

Since no Greek source is indicated, the answer has to be sought in Aquinas' understanding of being. For him, being is the primary actuality of anything whatsoever.²⁴ Its range is accordingly unlimited. Where

23. Cf. "Distinctioni autem opponitur confusio"—*ST*, I, 66, 1, contra 2. There, and in the reply to the argument, *confusio* was used for the *chaos* of the ancients. See also *In IV Phys.*, lect. 1, Angeli-Pirotta no. 800. In the *Summa of Theology*, "sub quadam confusione" describes the instances under the universal as well as the parts in an integral whole: "... scientia imperfecta, per quam sciuntur res indistincte sub quadam confusione . . . Manifestum est autem quod cognoscere aliquid in quo plura continentur, sine hoc quod habeatur propria notitia uniuscuiusque eorum quae continentur in illo, est cognoscere aliquid sub confusione quadam. Sic autem potest cognosci tam totum universale, in quo partes continentur in potentia, quam etiam totum integrale; utrumque enim totum potest cognosci in quadam confusione, sine hoc quod partes distincte cognoscantur"—*ST*, I, 85, 3, c. Cf. "... in quadam communitate et confusione"—89, 1, c. See also 117, 1, ad 4m. In the Commentary on the *Sentences*, the opposition was described through contrast to arrangement of parts in place: "... confusio opponitur ordini partium qui pertinet ad rationem situs"—*In IV Sent.*, d. 10, a. 3, q. 3, ad 2m; ed. Moos, IV, 418 (no. 87). The overall meaning is that the components of something are not distinguished from one another. The adjective "indeterminate" in the text of Damascene seems to have been what suggested Aquinas' use of the term "confusion" in his explanation of the passage. So the ocean metaphor is explained at *De Pot.*, VIII, 5, c: "significat esse indeterminate."

24. Being (*esse*) is presented in this sense as "the actuality of essence" (*actus essentiae*)—*In I Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1m; I, 766. In later works the universal range is made explicit: "... the actuality of all acts, and on this account it is the perfection of all perfections"—*De Pot.* VII, 2, ad 9m; "... being is the actuality of every form or nature"—*ST*, I, 3, 4, c. Cf. *In I Periherm.*, lect. 5, Leonine no. 22.

it subsists, it will actualize every aspect of reality. In this way it may be regarded as an indeterminate ocean of being, containing the totality of being in a way that leaves each aspect indistinct from every other. But is the notion so formed as facile as it appears at immediate encounter? Why should any problem at all arise about distinction within it, if it satisfactorily subsumes everything under the one characteristic of being?

First, there is the question of how being is originally grasped by the human intellect. For Aquinas, being is originally known through the synthesizing act of judgment. It is known as an actuality that itself consists in a synthesis, a synthesis that joins matter, form, and accidents into a single existent and thereby determines and individuates. It should not allow indistinctness.²⁵ On the other hand, what is actuated by existence may be considered in indefinite fashion, extending to everything that may possibly exist. In this way, every aspect of being may be included under the notion "he who is," when all quidditative determinations have been separated from it in "the way of removal." The content of the notion may be expressed metaphorically as an indeterminate ocean of being, including as it does drop after drop of water in indefinite sequence, each spatially apart from the others but without any definite limits appearing between them.

Why is this concept unable to signify the divine nature, the nature of being? Quidditative knowledge, in the noetic already at work in Aquinas at the time of writing the Commentary on the *Sentences*, is knowledge through conceptualization, knowledge through the first operation of the intellect. Through this type of knowledge the being of the thing is not grasped. Yet, in the notion of "he who is" as an indeterminate ocean of being, the representation is that of something conceived as existing in indefinite fashion. It is basically the notion of an existent nature, even though all quidditative limitations have been separated from it by deliberative thought. In Heideggerian terminology it would still be regarded as an ontic conception. It is the notion of something that has being, a common notion that is now applied to a single subject by the removal of all quidditative limits. It does not represent properly the subsistent existence reached when the existence of perceptible things is traced to the primary efficient cause.

Why does this anomaly arise? Being, in the noetic of Aquinas, is no-

25. Where being is a nature, namely in God, it determines and distinguishes just by itself. Cf.: "Ita etiam divinum esse est determinatum in se et ab omnibus aliis divisum, per hoc quod sibi nulla additio fieri potest"—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, ad 1m; I, 219. "Deus enim per essentiam suam est aliquid in se indivisum, et ab omnibus quae non sunt Deus, distinctum"—*De Pot.*, VIII, 3, c. On sensible being as a synthesis of matter, form, and accident, see text *supra*, n. 12.

where immediately attained by the human intellect as a nature. It is a facet that remains outside the natures of things. It is not known as a quiddity or nature, but as another actuality that synthesizes all the components of a thing. In the designation "he who is," this actuality is still regarded as present in what is designated, but it is not the nature that is thereby represented. It has the status of an actuality outside the nature envisaged, on account of the way in which it was originally known by the intellect. The nature thereby designated is not the nature of being, but rather the common nature of anything that can be, taken now without limitation. It is a melding of all possible natures, that is, all natures other than the nature of being, into a something that is regarded as existing. The one nature that is not included is the nature of being. But that is the nature it would have to express if it were to designate the nature of God. There need be little wonder, then, that "he who is" may be characterized as signifying not what God is, but rather an indeterminate ocean of substance. The nature represented is still other than the nature of being and does not include being in any quidditative way. It is the notion of an existent substance that has no quidditative limitations, containing in indistinctive fashion every possible quidditative perfection.

The situation is the same as in the case of the Anselmian argument, already discussed by Aquinas in a preceding article in the Commentary on the *Sentences*.²⁶ The concept of a being greater than which nothing can be thought does not tell whether or not it exists. It can be thought not to exist. The meaning is that quidditative perfection, even though extended indefinitely, does not include existence. Existence has to be known through judgment. The sum total of all conceivable perfections does not result in the nature of existence, in the nature of God. Just as there is no necessary sequence from the greatest conceivable perfection to the existence of God, so the indeterminate ocean of substance does not express what God is or what the nature of being is.

Although the object "he who is" is now found to be in a confused state, it is not said to be in darkness. It is still luminous. All concepts of definite natures have been removed from it, but the concept of "nature" or "something" in general remains. It is luminous in the way of a universal notion. It is represented as actuated by being, the actuality known through judgment. "He who is" is conceived as something that exists. The notion of "something" is an ordinary notion accessible to conceptualization, and the notion "is" continues to be that of the

26. "... potest enim cogitare nihil hujusmodi esse quo majus cogitari non possit; et ideo ratio sua procedit ex hac suppositione, quod supponatur aliquid esse quo majus cogitari non potest"—*In 1 Sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4m; I, 95.

actuality expressed ordinarily in the synthesis of a proposition. Both elements in the notion "he who is" are still accessible at this stage to ordinary human cognition and in that way remain luminous, even though through metaphysical separation the ordinary quidditative determinations have been removed from the notion. The notion contains the whole of being (*Totum . . . esse*—Burgundio trans.) in the confused way in which a universal contains all that comes under it. "Sicut in quadam confusione" describes well enough the knowledge thereby given.

The luminosity in the notion "he who is" does not, accordingly, yield knowledge about the nature of being. It makes manifest only the synthesizing being that is found in creatures, being that is not present as a nature. Aquinas has no hesitation in making the statement: "And similarly this name 'he who is' names God through the being found in creatures."²⁷ If the distinction between the two original ways of knowing, namely conceptualization and judgment, is not kept in mind, the cognition of being may be looked upon as an intuition of its nature, and accordingly, the Parmenidean consequences may be drawn. Being is then regarded as entirely luminous in the way it was viewed by the Eleatic. But in the noetic of Aquinas, the being that is known in the act of judgment does not manifest the nature of being. The being of creatures is, of course, derived from subsistent being not only by way of efficient causality but also by way of exemplar causality. Yet, it reflects its exemplar too imperfectly to represent it in the way in which any nature is known. The light that "he who is" provides is that of a synthesis, not that of a nature.²⁸

The knowledge reached at this stage is no longer that of the ordinary instructed Christian, but rather that of the metaphysician. The ordinary Christian does not remove from his notion of God the intelligible attributes as found in creatures, such as wisdom and goodness. He thinks of God as being good and wise quite as he sees these attributes in creatures, although on an infinite scale. He does not attempt to regard them as rendered indistinct in the one concept of being. He does not push his thought that far. This second stage is one for a metaphysician. There need be no surprise at finding it neglected by mystical writers. The mystic does, of course, reject intellectual as well as perceptual demarcations in God. But unless he is a metaphysician he has not understood the other perfections as subsumed in a confused way under

27. "Et similiter hoc nomen 'qui est' nominat Deum per esse inventum in creaturis, quod exemplariter deductum est ab ipso"—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2m; I, 196.

28. Text, *supra*, n. 9.

the one notion "being," and accordingly he has no call to pass through the confused state on his way to the dark cloud.

III

In the third and final step, even the synthesizing type of being is removed from the notion "he who is." Immediately, the object is in darkness. The light thrown by the being that is known through judgment, even though it is but a very imperfect reflection, was sufficient to represent the totality of being in indistinct fashion. But when it disappears in the process of removal, it takes with it all that it actuates. There is nothing luminous left in the object "he who is." Yet, according to the text, it is in this situation that cognitional union with God best takes place.

Dionysius, there seems no doubt, was referring to mystical union.²⁹ With the symbolism of perceptual cognition removed and the limiting force of concepts out of the way, the obstacles to mystical knowledge would be set aside. There is nothing in the text to indicate that Aquinas was not understanding Dionysius in this way. Yet, the text occurs in a theological school treatise, in which communicable knowledge is being passed from master to students. The immediately preceding stage was one of metaphysical reasoning. Does the present one remain open also to interpretation on the metaphysical level? Does it proceed in metaphysical sequence from what has already been established? No matter how well Aquinas appreciates the setting in which Dionysius speaks, is he here applying these considerations to a situation present also on the philosophical plane? Specifically, what will the "darkness of ignorance" mean, if it is interpreted in a metaphysical context?

First, it will inevitably mean the lack of conceptual knowledge. The subsistent being reached by "the way of causality" was not known in quidditative fashion. It was attained by the route of existence. The sensible thing's existence, grasped through judgment and not through conceptualization, was the basis for reasoning to its primary efficient cause, subsistent existence. No quidditative knowledge of the existence

29. On this topic, see Charles Journet, *The Dark Knowledge of God*, trans. James F. Anderson (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), pp. 70-81. Dionysius uses the description "the darkness of true mystical nescience"—Dionysius, *Myst. Theol.*, I, 3, 85; PG, 3, 1001A (Journet, p. 78). The union (*henosis*) that takes place with God in this darkness is regarded by Dionysius (*De Div. Nom.*, VII, 3; PG, 3, 872) as a knowledge (*gnosis*) that surpasses understanding. For Aquinas, any knowledge is a union of knower and known. Accordingly, the metaphysical knowledge of God likewise achieves a union on its own level, in darkness but with richest philosophical content. On 'homo conjungitur Deo' in this sense, see Aquinas, *ST I-II*, 3, 2, ad 4m.

was present at any stage of the reasoning. Having demonstrated that existence subsists in this primary instance, one has thereby shown that it is in this instance a nature. It is *what* exists. But that nature has been reached in terms of existence and not through any elaboration of quidditative concepts. The result is that one cannot *conceive* it as a nature, even though one knows that it is a nature. The lack of any conceptual content in the object now before one's mind can surely be termed a darkness. More specifically, it is a darkness resulting from ignorance, since in the notion all quidditative content remains a blank. The notion can be developed to an incomparably rich content by showing that each of the transcendental and quidditative perfections known to the human mind is included in one way or another in subsistent existence. But there each of them is identified with subsistent existence. What they are at that level is existence itself.³⁰ What the existence is remains unknown. Accordingly, one can demonstrate that each perfection is present in subsistent existence, without knowing *what* the perfection is when it is found identified with existence. The light of conceptual knowledge is utterly and completely lacking. The question is not the same as in the problem of uniting in one concept the corpuscular and the wave notions of elementary particles and light, when both aspects have been proven to be there. Rather, it is the impossibility of any concept at all in regard to the nature of being.

Second, the intuition of existence in sensible things, as had through the act of judgment, cannot focus upon subsistent existence. It cannot give knowledge of any quiddity. Here the object is a quiddity as well as existence. It therefore cannot come under the human intuition of existence, the intuition of a synthesizing actuality. True, one can show that what is uppermost in that sensible existence is actuality and not the synthesizing facet.³¹ That is enough to allow reasoning to subsistent existence. But it does not permit one to see what existential actuality is in the status of a nature instead of a non-quidditative synthesizing of something other than the existence itself. A blind person guides himself by touch and hearing; a pilot makes an instrument landing just by

30. ". . . quidquid est in simplici, est ipsum suum esse"—*In I Sent.*, d. 8, exp. lae partis textus; I, 208. Cf. "Quidquid autem est in Deo, hoc est suum proprium esse"—*De Ver.*, II, 11, c. Nevertheless, the formal meaning of the different attributes remains intact in this identity with subsistent existence, both because their meaning in creatures is derived from the divine model, and because that meaning would be there even though no creatures ever existed, as already explained at *In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2; I, 63. On God as "utterly unknown" and "entirely unknown" in the tradition back of Aquinas, see Anton Pegis, "Penitus Manet Ignotum," *Medieval Studies*, 27 (1965), pp. 212-26.

31. See *In I Periherm.*, lect. 5, Leonine no. 22.

panel readings. Neither can see where he is going, but each has the respective kind of knowledge that suffices to get him there. So a metaphysician demonstrates that the primary efficient cause is subsistent existence and that it contains all perfections in the highest degree. But he cannot conceive either its nature or any of its perfections, and he cannot intuit its existence. The ordinary light in which nature and existence are apparent to him has disappeared. Surely this merits the appellation "a darkness of ignorance." Yet, in this darkness the whole positive metaphysics about subsistent existence, in all its richness, is best developed.

IV

The passage in Aquinas about the "darkness of ignorance" in which God is best known is open, accordingly, to thoroughgoing metaphysical interpretation. It means that subsistent existence, although concluded to by demonstration from sensible things, cannot be conceptualized, and it cannot be represented through the model of the existence immediately known by the human mind. On both these counts the notion of subsistent existence remains dark. Yet, in the realization of this darkness metaphysical knowledge reaches its highest point, for then the infinitely rich attributes it predicates of subsistent being are not tarnished or diminished by the built-in deficiencies of the human cognitive processes. The "darkness" provides the way of rising above these otherwise unavoidable limitations. It blots out what is imperfect and deceptive.

At the same time, the passage illustrates how genuine metaphysics is operative in the theological reasoning of Aquinas. The setting of the passage is theological, occurring as it does in the course of a commentary on a theological text. God's name has been revealed as being, yet according to the same revelation, he is best known in a dense darkness. The theological introduction of the notion "being" prompts the metaphysical inquiry of how God, elsewhere represented as light, has to be known in darkness. Does being furnish the answer? Somewhat as the calculations of Adams and Leverrier led to the turning of a telescope on Neptune, so these theological considerations focus attention on the anomaly in the object "being." The closer metaphysical scrutiny then reveals that being was attained as a synthesis in judgment, and was not known originally by way of conceptualization. The result shows that what is intuited as "being" cannot be used in Parmenidean fashion as a nature from which the conclusions of unicity and unchangeableness may be deduced. The nature of being is in no way intuited. It is

concluded to and only in darkness. It is not immediately the being that is known in the light of intuition.

In this manner being is located as a nature in a unique and unchangeable primary instance, while the being that is intuited by the human mind remains multiple and varying. Even with the consequent tenet that God or subsistent being is the being of all else,³² the relation of subsistent being to all the other instances of being is that of exemplar and efficient, not formal, cause. The being that is luminous to human cognition remains accordingly multiple and variable, while the nature of being in its unicity and unchangeableness is eminently respected. But the condition is a "darkness of ignorance" in which the nature of being is attained only by way of a conclusion to something beyond the human intellect's power to intuit or conceive. The privation of both intuitional and conceptual light requires that the most refined notion of the primary efficient cause be enshrouded in this darkness in order to permit, on the metaphysical level, the successive predication of its infinite richness without the hindrance of finite restrictions.

32. See *supra*, n. 2.