

A CRITIQUE OF A CRITIC OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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IND cannot transcend the mundane. The finite cannot know the infinite. And thus Agnosticism justifies itself for throwing up its hands in despair when confronted with the problem of God. Even those few who will admit the existence of a Supreme Being will stop short at any further inquiry into the nature of this "postulate." Either God is God, and therefore so ineffably superior to all our notions of reality that we are unable to know more concerning Him than that He must be, or there is no God; for anything less than such a Being can be shown to be absurd. A vague *Something* hovering over the universe like an undefinable mist into which the human mind cannot penetrate is the apex of their rational inquiry.

The tenets of Agnosticism are partially correct; they are half-truths, and as such, are often more dangerous than downright error. For the truth of half-truths entices the mind to assent to the falsity coupled with it. God is indeed beyond all comprehension; and He must be that or our concepts of a lesser deity will cancel themselves out in mutual contradiction. There is no need to stop with this conclusion, however. Though in this life we shall never know God as He is in Himself, we can learn something about His nature; and that knowledge will be true knowledge even though it will be incomplete. It will be sufficient knowledge for our present purposes, for the living of our mortal lives. The fullness of heavenly vision will be our reward.

A practical example of inglorious defeat in the face of the intellectual approach to God is to be found in Dr. Robert Leet Patterson's estimation of St. Thomas' synthesis of the problem.¹ Perhaps Patterson would deny being agnostic. Certainly he discredits the very fundamental rational prerequisites to positive conclusions about God's nature. He finds that God's simplicity contradicts His knowledge and will. He denies the validity of the rational distinction, and of the distinction between our knowing *that* God is and *what* God is.

¹ Patterson, R. L., *The Conception of God in the Philosophy of Aquinas*. (London, 1933).

Analogy is considered a futile attempt to justify self-contradictions. The God of philosophy cannot be harmonized with the God of Christianity. Patterson's house of God resembles the Thomistic temple as the dynamited Parthenon of today but hints the pride of ancient Athens. A pillar stands, scarred by the blast. Its mighty neighbor is prone. The roof is gone. The goddess no longer dwells within!

This present paper will discuss the distinction denied by Dr. Patterson between our knowing that God is and our knowing what God is; between our knowledge of God's existence, which is the seed of the science of God, and our knowledge of the existence of God as identified with His nature, which is the core of that science. This distinction² is the point of departure for Agnostics and common-sense Realists. The Realists, who admit the distinction, can continue their search for knowledge of God; the Agnostics, denying it, condemn themselves to nescience.

Dr. Patterson objects to this distinction between our knowledge that God is and what God is because of two difficulties. How can we prove something to exist unless we know just what that something is? And if God is absolutely simple, allowing no distinction of essence and existence, how do we know that He exists without knowing His essence or nature?

Patterson gives us a lead in our efforts to trace these difficulties to the source when he writes: "Is it possible that the mind should distinguish what is not distinct? And the answer must surely be in the negative. Any such activity on the part of mind would result in nothing else than a falsification of reality. A process of this character could not be called knowledge at all and would possess absolutely no validity whatever."³ Are we then to give up all attempts to know God in this life? Shall we deny mercy and love, freedom and wisdom, existence and nature to God because, while we insist that God is simple, our various concepts of His perfections must remain distinct in our knowledge? Dr. Patterson, the Agnostic, answers in the affirmative. The legitimacy of the rational distinction will become apparent as we proceed with the point at issue.

It is not an absolute knowledge of God that we are considering; it is our knowledge of God, possible or actual. It is a relative knowledge, relative to our manner of knowing. In the Divine Being, God's existence is identified with His nature; that by which He is, and that by which He is what He is, are one and the same. The blessed in heaven, "face to face" with God, know by one and the same

² St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 297.

intuition the fact and the mode of God's existence. They see Him essentially and completely (not, however, comprehensively). But our knowledge, originating in the senses, is limited to abstractions from sensible phenomena. We can form no adequate concept of God, for knowledge is modified both by the knowability of the object and the nature of the knowing subject. On the part of God there is no difficulty. He is infinitely knowable. The problem is to what extent can rational nature in man grasp the divine.

Patterson gives his appraisal of the Thomistic solution: "When St. Thomas asserts, in contradistinction to Maimonides, that we are justified in affirming that God is good because goodness exists in God in some higher mode than it does in us, and then refuses to admit, upon precisely the same grounds, that our knowledge that this statement is true constitutes knowledge of the divine essence, it is clear that he is trying to occupy two diametrical opposite positions at the same time. Had he maintained that our knowledge of the divine essence, though genuine, is imperfect, because while we can understand what is meant by the proposition, God is good, we cannot realize how good God is, for the reason that we have no direct perception of God, his position would not have been self-contradictory. But self-contradictory it is."⁴

St. Thomas anticipated this erroneous position and made the appropriate distinctions almost seven hundred years before Dr. Patterson confused the issue. Even the terminology of St. Thomas is the same as that demanded by Patterson, and in direct contradiction to the quoted passage. "Whence the complete excellence of God cannot be known from a consideration of sensible things. But as effects dependent on His causality, sensible things can lead us to this, that we know God to be; and that we know certain necessary qualities which are His as First and Universal Cause."⁵

When we add to this a further quotation, we demonstrate Dr. Patterson to occupy the position of which he accuses St. Thomas. "These names do not signify the essence of God, because none of these names expresses perfectly what God is; but each imperfectly signifies Him just as creatures imperfectly represent Him."⁶

To know the essence or nature of a thing in Thomistic thought is to know its constituent elements down to the last and most special distinguishing characteristic. Cajetan, greatest of Thomists, explains the implications of essential knowledge which is complete as against

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 12, a. 12.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, Ia, q. 13, a. 2, ad 1.

essential knowledge which is incomplete.⁷ Dr. Patterson admits with us that we cannot know God completely. And yet as far as our knowledge concerning God goes, that knowledge is of His nature. It is evident that Patterson and St. Thomas are using the term in different senses. We have defined our acceptance of the terms; they were defined for Patterson, who mentions in his preface that he used the Leonine edition of St. Thomas' works, and frequently in the book itself brings to the fore Cajetan's commentary included there.

The formal object of human reason is knowledge of material things according to their natures or essences. And knowledge is of the causes of things. Philosophy delves deeper than to merely proximate causes, which satisfy the natural scientist, and reaches the ultimate causes of things. Pushing our inquiry of causes to the limit we arrive at the First Cause.⁸ Such a cause must exist, otherwise material beings would not exist, and we know that they do. Continuing, we can learn from material beings something of the mode or nature of that First Cause, for effects participate to some degree in the perfection of their cause. This participation of material beings in the perfection of the First Cause is not according to a strict similarity or identity. And so our knowledge of the nature of the First Cause, based on familiarity with the effects of that cause, will not be univocal knowledge but analogical.⁹ There will be some resemblance along with far greater and more important differences. This knowledge will be true knowledge of the First Cause, albeit incomplete. It will be knowledge of the essence of that Cause even if it must fall short of full and perfect knowledge.

This knowledge of God is designated as analogical, and since analogy is the key to the problem of rendering our finite concepts applicable to the infinite nature of God, a brief treatment of analogy is in order.

Analogy among the Greek philosophers signifies a "proportion" or "comparison," though the term was generally reserved for proportionality, a proportion of proportions. The word analogy still retains its original meaning even if it is often loosely applied in non-scientific discourse. The dictionary defines analogy as "the resemblance of properties or relations; similarity without identity;" and specifically in a philosophical context as "reasoning in which from certain observed and known relations or resemblances others are inferred." Analogues, therefore, are things designated by a common name be-

⁷ *Comment. in Summa Theol.*, Ia, q. 12, a. 1, No. I.

⁸ St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, Ia, q. 2, a. 3.

⁹ St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, Ia, q. 12, a. 1.

cause of a quality which is the same under certain aspects but which differs according to others.

Analogy is threefold: analogy of inequality, analogy of attribution, and analogy of proportionality. Analogy of inequality may be dismissed here with its definition and an example. It is that mode of predication in which a common name and sameness of signification is applied to beings participating unequally in the perfection—as corporeity is predicated of minerals and living things.

The next species in the order of increasing importance is analogy of attribution (or proportion). It is the use of a term signifying a common perfection which is applied to two or more beings according to a diversity of relationship (or proportion). The time-honored example is the term health which is affirmed of man, medicine, and air. All have a relationship to health which properly is in man. Analogy of attribution is of four kinds according as the predication refers the prime analogue to the four genera of causality: final, efficient, material, and formal or exemplary.

The third and most important type of analogy in the science of God is analogy of proportionality. Here a common term is applied to a perfection found essentially in its subjects according to a similarity of proportions, as vision is said of the eye and of the intellect. This, the principle species of analogy and the only one found worthy of the name analogy in the writing of the ancients, excels the other species by reason of the intrinsic knowledge it affords. We use it mathematically to solve for “ x ”: e.g. $6 : 4 :: x : 100$. Psychologists use proportionality to demonstrate the activity of mind; theologians, to study the Trinity. We shall use it here to help us obtain knowledge of the nature of God, knowledge that otherwise would be denied man.

The difference between analogy of attribution and proportionality is apparent from the fact that analogy of attribution requires two subjects of comparison in relation to the analogue (man and medicine in relation to health), while analogy of proportionality requires four terms with respect to the analogue (eye, body, intellect, and soul in relation to vision). These terms may be merely implied, but were either analogy fully expressed, the full number of terms would be found.¹⁰

Applying these two more perfect types of analogy to our problem, we find that they manifest the distinction between our knowing that God is and our knowing what God is; for our knowledge of the

¹⁰ Cajetan, *De Nominum Analogia*: Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature*, (St. Louis, 1936), II, 207.

fact of God's existence is according to analogy of attribution, our knowledge that God's existence is of His nature is according to analogy of proportionality. We hold that these two concepts of God's existence are distinct not only by reason of content, but more by origin and the mode of predication.

I

The difference in content between our knowledge that God exists and our knowledge that God is subsistent-existence readily appears. In the statement, God exists, the term God embraces those notions of the Godhead which are employed as the medium in the demonstrations which lead to the conclusion, God exists. These notions of the Deity describe rather than define the nature of the Being we are striving to establish as certainly existing. As Cajetan explains¹¹ the proofs do not presuppose a knowledge of God precisely known as God, but only a knowledge of God according to generally accepted and common ideas. To presume a more perfect knowledge of the nature of God would be to presume the very thing we are striving to prove.

The existence which answers our query: "Is there a God?" is unqualified. "God exists" is a statement of fact and not an explanation of the divine nature. Its content is limited to the notions of God's reality. He is, and not merely possible or imaginary.

On the other hand, the content of our knowledge of God's nature is not the copulation of the term God with the term existence; it is the identification of the two. Our knowledge of the essence of God comprises all those concepts of perfections found in Him formally and eminently. Of these, there is one which ultimately distinguishes God from everything else and which may be considered as the source from which can be deduced all other divine perfections. It is Self-Existence. God is the sole and adequate reason of His own existence; He is perfectly independent, for He exists by His nature, whereas all other beings owe their existence to another (and ultimately, all to Him). This concept of God is the core of our knowledge concerning Him, and as such is the answer to our question: "What is God?"

Here we realize that our use of the term existence is modified; it is now not just existence; it is that most special existence peculiar to God. It is existence implying infinite depths of meaning. Applied to God; it does not merely signify His reality; it epitomizes Reality Itself. God is He Who Is.

¹¹ *Comment. in Summa Theol.*, Ia, q. 2, a. 3, No. III.

II

A second confirmation of the distinction between our two concepts of God's existence is found in the analysis of the origin of the two concepts. When we prove that there is a God, we ascend directly from creatures. We are familiar with motion, causality, contingency, etc. These realities postulate a further reality; they have not within themselves, nor is there within the entire realm of the material universe, a sufficient reason for their being. They are effects and, as effects, demand a cause in the real order; for, if an effect exists, its proper cause exists. This is only true for proper causes; a man can exist after the decease of his parents, but thought can last only as long as there is a thinker. Proper causality is equivocal and, the effect existing, necessary. So we conclude from material essences that God must be and that He must be different from these effects of His, as thought is different from the thinker. He is mover-unmoved, cause-uncaused, etc. The implications of such predication become apparent only upon further study; but we already know that God, such as He must be, exists.

When we come to consider this nature of God we turn back to creatures for clues, "for the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; His external power also, and divinity."¹² As has been previously stated, the formal object of our knowledge is the natures of material things; suprasensible realities can be known only through the sensible. Induction was the method employed to obtain the knowledge that God exists; deduction will be our method of analysing His nature. This method is threefold: by way of causality, by way of negation, and by way of excellence. The way of establishing God's existence was by way of causality, but this process will not reveal the full nature of God. Causes differ from their effects, as we have seen. By the method of negation, we return to material essences, inquire into the perfections of these natures, and compare these perfections to the rigorous demands of the divine nature. We find that some of them fit only by removing all traces of imperfection connected with the perfection as found in the created order; simplicity is one of these. God is utterly simple. There is no room in Him for any trace of composition. And so the existence we have shown Him to enjoy as cause is identified with His nature. They are not two realities, as in all other beings; they are one and the same thing; God is Existence.

¹² *Romans*, I, 20.

Even when we exhaust the negative way we know what God is like only by knowing what He is not. The way of excellence professes positive knowledge; but of this we will treat in the next point.

The proofs for the existence of God ascend, as it were, from the world of experience to God. The search for a knowledge of His nature begins with God, descends to the world of experience, expanding the knowledge of created perfection until it approaches the divine. It is a reflexive knowledge, while the former is direct; it starts with God, while the former terminates at the threshold of His essence. Our knowledge that God is furnishes the subject of our inquiry, and the further study of His nature requires conceptual imagery which can only be gleaned from nature; for without finite experience and knowledge our idea of the divine nature other than that He is would remain sterile. To sum up: the knowledge that God exists results immediately from our inquiry into the causes of things; the knowledge of God as self-sufficient Existence results though the mediation of concepts which we refer to God according to a purity which is His alone.

III

The third and foremost reason for maintaining the distinction between our knowing that God is and what God is is based on the modes of predication. Existence is predicated of God in the first member of the distinction by analogy of attribution; in the second by analogy of proportionality.

A fundamental device of philosophy and common enough in all literature, analogy with reference to God is denied as invalid by Dr. Patterson. "Ingenious as this theory is, it nevertheless creates serious difficulties of its own. It relies upon the possibility of establishing a ratio between two mutually incommensurable orders, the temporal and the eternal. . . . We have assumed that there is a differentiation in the infinite corresponding to the relation of substance to quality of which we are aware in the finite; but our assumption is false, for such a differentiation is incompatible with divine simplicity."¹³

It must be noted that analogy is formally a mode of predication and naming and not formally a mode and way of knowing. It is true, of course, that we name things as we know them and that our predication corresponds finally to reality, otherwise we would become unintelligible.¹⁴ Because our knowledge of the ineffable nature of God

¹³ Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

¹⁴ St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, Ia, q. 13, a. 1.

is composed of many, many concepts derived ultimately from the creature, still we do not thereby lose sight of the infinite simplicity of that nature in Itself. Perfections, which, as we know them, exclude one another in a formal consideration (we cannot practice justice and mercy in the one act precisely under the same aspect), in God we identify with His nature; and we maintain that the cumulus of these perfections does not militate against His divine simplicity. Reason forces our assent to these truths individually known. We know that truth cannot contradict truth, for the same Author, who is Truth Itself, is Author of all truth. There is an explanation; but a perfect understanding of it would necessitate a higher intellectual perfection than we enjoy as men. A hint of the solution is given when we study these absolute perfections. Instead of being mutually destructive in becoming identified in the eminence of the Deity, they necessarily tend toward this identification (as in a less perfect manner all the virtues fuse into charity as they become more and more perfect, although their acts retain their proper specifications).¹⁵

Contrary, then, to the assertion of Dr. Patterson, we do deny any assumption "that there is a differentiation in the infinite corresponding to the relation of substance to quality of which we are aware in the finite." There are no "qualities" in God. Whatever we assert of God (under the specialized nomenclature as "attributes") we assert as His essence, identifying all in that essence which is simplicity Itself. Imperfect as this knowledge and predication is, it is our best—a best known to be true and known to fall short of the divine reality. Furthermore, it is not a ratio we establish between the finite and the infinite, but between the finite and the finite and between the infinite and the infinite. This ratio is according to a proportion which is based upon the nature of realities. Things act according to their natures. (In scholastic terminology the axiom is expressed: *agere sequitur esse.*) Men act as men; animals as animals; angels as angels, etc. Even God must act as God. So God is good, not as we know goodness, but according to God's own goodness. Likewise God exists, not as we know existence, but as necessitated by an infinitely simple nature.

Our idea of existence originates from the perception of things about us. We know things that are which were not at a previous time; which were, and which are no longer. We define existence as that perfection of a being by which it is realized from its causes. It is the actuality of potentiality; that by which things that can be are. In the proof of God's existence, this is the analogue; and this notion of ex-

¹⁵ Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, II, 225.

istence is proper to created things just as health is proper to man. And as health is predicated of medicine, the cause of health, so existence is predicated of God, the Cause of created existence. There is a relation between creatures and God, the relation of ultimate dependence; He is the Cause of creatures. In the light of our later deductions we know that existence, such as we have defined it, cannot be applied univocally to God. As First Cause He is uncaused; pure act unsullied by the breath of potentiality; eternal and immutable. Yet God can be said to exist extrinsically and relatively to the existence of the creature of which He is the cause, for analogy of attribution never implies intrinsic denomination in the various analogates (save the first or prime analogate), but does not necessarily exclude it.¹⁶

This may seem fanciful. Existence is predicated of God by extrinsic denomination when, as we know, God is Existence. This apparent contradiction is resolved by calling attention to the created nature of that existence used in the establishment of God's extra-mental reality as known to us. In the proofs, our object is to show that God exists. Were we to conclude both that God exists and that He exists by nature, we would invalidate the argument by embracing in the conclusion more than was contained in the premises, for we would have four terms. The three that we do have limit the mode of predication in the conclusion to that of attribution. Because creatures exist, God exists.

Cajetan points out the source of difficulty.¹⁷ God differs from all other beings by reason of His essence which is identified with His existence. Existence does not pertain to the nature of any other thing, as is evident from the definitions of these things. Thus when we inquire of the existence of creatures, the answer is in the form of a proposition. So it is when we inquire of the existence of God; we affirm the truth of the proposition. He is. We affirm nothing more, although the statement answers also to the nature of God. With regard to our knowledge, this point has yet to be established. It is only after further reasoning that we can know, in answering the question "Is there a God?," that we have unwittingly given the best answer to the question, "What is He like?"

The essential predication of existence to God no longer distinguishes between actuality and possibility, as between being and nothing, affirmation and denial, but rather distinguishes between existence which is essence, and existence which is not. Now we say of God that He is Existence rather than that He is, for we realize ex-

¹⁶ Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, II, 207.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, Ia, q. 3, a. 4, No. V.

PLICITLY that the concept of His existence is totally different from the concept of existence attributed to Him as cause of created existences. (Not that the former attribution was invalid. It was valid. It was also modally incomplete. We did not know the "how.")

Existence is formally in both God and creatures—formally according to an uncreated mode in God; formally according to a created and participated mode in all other beings. This notion of existence is one, not by a unity of relation as in attribution, but a unity of proportionality. Though the distance between creatures and God is infinite, we can speak of God's perfections according to proportionality which allows for an infinite distance between the analogates. We must carefully distinguish between "proportion," which denotes relation (e. g. causality) and proportionality, which denotes equality or similarity between two relations.

Truth is one though infinite in its manifestations. It derives from God, who is Truth. So the relation of being to existence is one though variable according to the nature of that being which enjoys existence. Proportionality, and only proportionality, allows for this identity and this difference. The act by which creatures exist is, in its own order of reality, the same as that act by which God exists; it differs in this, that in the creature the act follows its essence and is added to it while in God the act of existence is Himself who is Pure Act. On this score the divine act is infinite as is His nature. The relation between the two is constant in its own order as is the relation of created existence to created natures. Thus we may speak of existence both with regard to creatures and to God by analogy of proportionality, in which we save the divine prerogatives while maintaining the true notion of proper created existence.

That Dr. Patterson rejects on the same grounds as St. Thomas the Anselmian argument for the existence of God is significant. For convenience we recast the rejection in terms of our problem. We cannot prove the fact of God's existence from the definition (the essence or nature) of God as proposed by St. Anselm, because there is an illegitimate transition from the ideal order to the real order, from the realm of thought to the world of concrete existence. "The only sound method of proving the existence of God is the reverse of Anselm's."¹⁸ This seems to imply an admission of some distinction between our two knowledges of God's existence. The one does not lead to the other; the "how" cannot yield the "that." God's existence, identified in His nature with that nature, does not establish His

¹⁸ Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

extra-mental reality to us. Dr. Patterson cannot mean they are really distinct. He has affirmed the contrary too often and too explicitly. Yet, denying the rational distinction, as we have seen, he distinguishes somehow; but just how he neglects to make clear.

We hold for a distinction between the two concepts of the existence of God because these concepts differ in content, one including the other; they differ their origin, for one is proximate to the proper object of reason, the other is remote and requires further abstraction; and finally they differ because one is predicated improperly of God by analogy of attribution, the other properly and by analogy of proportionality.

Dr. Patterson's denial of this classic distinction, according to Father Motte,¹⁰ is the result of the opposition unduly made by him between analogy and the negative approach to God; and ultimately springs from his lack of sufficient sympathy with St. Thomas to find beneath the text the sense and unity of St. Thomas' thought.

The sincerity of Dr. Patterson is beyond serious doubt. If he fails so miserably to get beneath the surface of St. Thomas and his commentator, Cajetan, we may justly lay the fault at the present state of non-Thomistic philosophy. Split into almost as many different schools as there are philosophers, the moderns, of whom we consider Patterson one, have lost themselves in the maze of unsynthesized speculation which has grown apace since the seventeenth century. The logical outcome of such confusion is Agnosticism. The way back to common sense is to discover the unity of truth, the unity which St. Thomas so firmly grasped that, in the light of his intellectual testament, we have fruitful increase of knowledge and wisdom.

¹⁰ *Bulletin Thomiste*, Oct.-Dec., 1935, p. 596.