Aquinas, the Trinity, and the Limits of Understanding

In this paper I will offer a reading of certain aspects of the thought of Thomas Aquinas on the doctrine of the Trinity—in particular, a reading of some of the more technical elements of Thomas's treatment, of things he has to say about processions, relations, and about the persons of the Trinity in relation to the divine essence. I will propose that at least some of what Thomas lays out here is best understood (or at the very least that it *can* be understood) in terms of theology reaching its limits, in terms, to put it very bluntly, of the dead-ends of theology. At various stages Thomas proposes things, I shall argue, that we cannot possibly grasp or make sense of, and if we suppose Thomas to be someone from whom we can learn, we should perhaps neither skip lightly past these elements in his thought, nor try to persuade ourselves that if we strain and squint hard enough we can *just about* see what he means. We should at least consider the possibility that one of the things to learn from Thomas can be learned precisely from the way in which he is content to present us, at times, with proposals which neither he nor we can grasp. My aim, then, is to look to Thomas to explore something about the limits of theology, and about the way we ought to conduct ourselves in the presence of that which we cannot grasp. 1

To begin with, however, a little about the context in which this reading of Thomas takes place. Much has been written in the last few years on the Trinity in Aquinas, and much of this has been written with the aim of rehabilitating Thomas and so rediscovering the value of his Trinitarian thought. The need for this rehabilitation stems from the fact that, in the broader revival of Trinitarian theology over the last 40 years or so, Aquinas has often been presented as a classic example of thinking about the Trinity gone wrong, Trinitarian theology done in such a way as to make the doctrine seem sterile, confusing and irrelevant. To provide a context for my own proposal, then, I need first to lay out what have become common criticisms of Aquinas, and then to say a little about the various renewed readings of Thomas which have called these criticisms into question.

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1 The usual way to approach such a question would of course be to turn to such texts as *Summa Theologiae,* I, Q12 and 13. Here I am deliberately beginning *not* from Thomas's general statements about the limits of knowledge of and language about God, but rather with particular examples of Thomas' theological practice. I will say a little below about how I think the two are related.

One of the most influential articulations of the view that Thomas represents Trinitarian theology gone wrong comes from the pen of Karl Rahner. [2] The problem begins, according to Rahner, with the fact that Aquinas divides what he has to say about God in the *Summa Theologiae* into two parts, the first of which discusses the one God, and the second the question of the three persons and their interrelations. The impression this leaves, according to Rahner and many who have taken up his complaint, is that one can first say a great deal about God—about God's simplicity, perfection and eternity, about God's love, justice and mercy, about God 's providence and power-- before ever one comes to reflect on God as Trinity. The Trinity becomes a kind of afterthought, which one struggles valiantly but not very successfully to make sense of in the context of an already drawn picture of God.

A closely related objection takes issues with Thomas' focus on the so-called immanent Trinity, on the Trinity *in se*, God in God's self, as distinct from what is usually called the economic Trinity, the Trinity as it is known to us through the Incarnation and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Aquinas is not infrequently reproached for discussing the Trinity in a way that is abstract and irrelevant, detached from salvation history or from anything that could matter to us.

Thomas is rarely censured in isolation: most often the context is a criticism of the whole Western tradition of Trinitarian reflection. The pattern was set by Augustine, and it is his influence, and the influence of what is a little clumsily referred to as his psychological analogy, that is the root of the problem, a problem which, according to many, is seen today in the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity so easily appears to be an intellectual puzzle with no relevance to the faith of most Christians.

If the criticism of Aquinas is typically to be found within a sweeping rejection of a Western approach to the Trinity, this in turn is often, though not always, linked to a broader condemnation of a too philosophical conception of God. When one begins, as Augustine and all who follow him are said to, with God's substance, with a God conceived as one, one is beginning with something that is, or may seem to be, open to general philosophical reflection in a way that the three persons of God are not—or perhaps one begins in this way because one is already captured by a philosophical pre-conception of what God is like. This is a criticism which does not always remain

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[2] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, (New York: Crossroad, 1997), esp. 15-21.

at a merely abstract and methodological level: often the same theologians who reject the Augustinian approach to the Trinity want to jettison central elements of the classical patristic and medieval conception of the divine nature—elements which are seen as merely the product of philosophical influence, such as, for instance, simplicity, aseity, eternity, immutability and impassibility. 3 'The Christian God', a genuinely trinitarian God, is presented in partial or complete contrast with the too philosophical God which had a grip over so much of the Christian tradition.

It has, then, in large parts of contemporary theology, become common, first, to be dismissive of Thomas on the Trinity; secondly, to see the whole Western tradition of reflection on the Trinity as inadequate; and thirdly, to seek to arrive at a more authentically Christian and Trinitarian conception of God by rejecting some of the tradition's supposedly philosophical ideas about God. It is against such a background that the rehabilitation and retrieval of Thomas' Trinitarian thought is currently taking place. A particularly systematic and sustained retrieval is to be found in a stream of work coming from French Dominicans such as Gilles Emery 4 and Jean-Pierre Torrell 5, and in English speaking writers, such as Matthew Levering 6, who have taken up their thought. 7 But the protest against a maligned Thomas is not limited to these circles. A.N. Williams, in the course of a discussion of deification in Thomas, lays out a very elegant and persuasive account of Aquinas on God, which, at least in passing, seriously undermines many aspects of the popular reading of him 8, and Rowan

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3 Here one should think not of Rahner, but of Jürgen Moltmann and those who have followed him.

4 C.f. especially Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003).

5 C.f. *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume 2 Spiritual Master* (Washington, D.C.:Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

6 C.f. Levering's use of Emery and Torrell in *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

7 Nicholas Healy's marvelously lucid treatment of Aquinas as theologian in ---*Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) also pays tribute to the work of Emery and especially Torrell, though Healy clearly modifies and goes beyond their approach in important ways.

8 A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 34-64.

Williams in his --2001 Aquinas lecture takes up the defense of Thomas against Catherine Mowry LaCugna. 9

The Thomas who emerges from these various retrievals bears only a slight resemblance to the Thomas so frequently dismissed in contemporary Trinitarian theology. True, he discusses God as one before he comes to the three persons, and true, he is influenced by Augustine's analogy, but beyond this, there is little in what one might call the standard portrait and the standard critique of Aquinas, as set out by the likes of Rahner and Moltmann, that turns out to have any purchase on the actual Thomas.

Thus, for instance, recent commentators have been at pains to insist that Thomas' trinitarian theology is in fact thoroughly Scriptural: it is from Scripture, it is in the service of Scripture, it aims to deepen and protect our understanding of Scripture. Gilles Emery writes of the 'deep Biblical and Patristic foundations of [Thomas's] trinitarian doctrine'; its aim is 'to manifest the deep sense of the Gospel'; it 'starts from Scripture in order to return to Scripture' 10. Matthew Levering takes up these themes with particular emphasis in his *Scripture and Metaphysics*.

A number of these works of retrieval are particularly persuasive in pointing to a thorough integration of Thomas' treatment of God as one and God as three 11. The *De Deo Uno* in subtle ways anticipates and prepares for the subsequent treatment of God as three—not least in the discussion of God's knowing and willing; the treatise on the Trinity (as it is often called) draws repeatedly on the understanding of theological language, and on the notion of divine simplicity, which were pivots of the first part of his treatment of God. Thomas does not, then, present the Trinity as a datum of revelation which is awkwardly appended to a philosophical presentation of God, but deliberately and progressively develops a single treatment of God, albeit a treatment in which a distinction between different ways of talking about God must be maintained; throughout the whole of the treatment of God, furthermore, Thomas is using metaphysics in service of what is, throughout, a treatment drawing on and oriented towards the reading of Scripture.

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9 'What Does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity', *New Blackfriars* 2001 (82).

10 *Trinity in Aquinas*, pp. 319,317.

11 This is done in a particularly elegant and effective manner by Anna Williams in the second chapter of her *The Ground of Union*.

Finally, the accusation that Thomas's treatment, beginning as it does with the so-called immanent Trinity, is dry, abstract, and technical, and that it inevitably seems irrelevant, has elicited responses on at least two levels. First, though it is certainly true that Thomas starts with the immanent Trinity, he does so in order to move on to questions of God's relation to the world. Just as the second, Trinitarian part of his treatment of God is prepared for and subtly anticipated in the first 26 questions of the *Summa Theologiae,* so too the treatment of God's relations *ad extra* are prepared and anticipated in the discussion of the internal relations of God. 12 The more one can appreciate the larger movement of the *Summa*, in other words, and understand the way the treatment of the Trinity fits into and contributes to this plan, the less one will see it as isolated, abstract and cut-off from what might be really significant. A first line of defence, then, is to better situate Thomas's treatment of the Trinity in its context. But it is also sometimes suggested that it is a mistake to look for Trinitarian theology to have too practical a payoff, socio-politically or otherwise: it is wrong to insist that the doctrine of the Trinity must be justified in some sort of *functional* way. If our end, our salvation is, as Thomas supposes, to know God's essence in the beatific vision, then it is in the very nature of faith to wish for and to strive after, even in this life, whatever dim anticipation of this vision we can achieve. And so it is in the very nature of theology to be contemplative, to strive after ' insight into the inner nature of God' 13. And so it is quite right that a discussion of the immanent Trinity should take pride of place in a theology oriented towards contemplation.

There is, then, something of a ressourcement going on in connection with Thomas on the Trinity. On the whole this is a much needed and valuable rereading of Aquinas, and one which ought to make the kind of broad and rapid dismissal of Thomas together with the whole Augustinian tradition, which *has* come so easily to many contemporary theologians, considerably more difficult. But there may also be a certain danger to such retrievals, or to some of them. The instinct of some of Thomas's defenders is so strongly to say that his writing on the Trinity *is* after all

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12 This is a point that, once again, Anna Williams brings out particularly effectively.

13 This is a phrase which Levering quotes from an earlier article of mine ('Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity', *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000)). He uses it to affirm what I had there denied.

genuinely meaningful, that it is not dry and empty but rather rich and theologically important, that it coheres and contributes to a contemplative theology, that they may run the risk of wanting to make sense of more than Thomas thought he could make sense of, of glossing over and giving scant attention to those elements in his thought that resist any real explanation— and therefore, as I have suggested, they may fail to learn from him something that should be learned.

My aim in suggesting that there are theological dead ends to be found in Aquinas' treatment of the Trinity, then, is not to revert to a stereotypical dismissal of Thomas, but rather to attempt to read him positively but differently, to retrieve something from Aquinas which is at some points different, at least in emphasis, from that which others have been finding.

In what follows I shall look at three points in the development of Thomas's treatment of the Trinity in the *Summa Theologiae*—his introduction of the idea of processions in God, his presentation of the persons of God as subsisting relations, and his discussion of these relations in relation to the divine essence—and argue that at each of these points Thomas serenely presents us with something that we can make nothing of, and that he does not expect us to—or at least that this is a way of reading what he is doing which ought to be considered.

There is a difficulty to the kind of case I am attempting, the difficulty of showing that something does *not* make sense, that it can*not* be grasped or imagined or understood, especially in the absence of any general theory of meaning or understanding. I know of no neat way to sidestep this problem, but I shall make my case as best I can on two levels. The first will be from the text of Aquinas, trying to show the radical if understated way in which he alters the functioning of words we think we know in using them in a Trinitarian context, and how serenely unconcerned he seems to be about offering explanations for things which appear to cry out for explanation. The second level on which I will argue is a more general one: I want to show that the principle of charity in interpretation need *not* require us to suppose that Thomas was himself able to make sense of everything he said about the Trinity, because it might in fact be a virtue rather than a weakness of Trinitarian theology to leave certain things radically, and very clearly, unexplained.

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas starts his treatment of the three persons of God with a discussion of the notion of *procession* in God. This is the overarching category which will include both the generation of the Son from the Father and the way in which the Holy Spirit comes forth from both Father and Son. And in the very first article where he treats this 14, Thomas already puts procession beyond what we can imagine or make sense of—or this is one way of reading what he does. 15

Thomas distinguishes between a material procession, a procession which is in some way bodily, and an intelligible procession. His examples of material processions are local movement (as when one processes up an aisle, for instance) and a procession from cause to effect, as, for instance, the procession of heat 'from the agent to the thing made hot'—so I put the poker into the fire and the heat from the fire processes into the poker. Intellectual procession is different in that the procession is not external to the agent: when I understand an object, I form a conception of it, and this, Thomas says, is a procession in me—the concept processes from my understanding—but it remains within me. If I speak of the object, the word that I use signifies the conception, and this word is something external to me. But even if I do not give voice to it, there is still the conception I have formed, called the 'word of the heart', which proceeds from but remains internal to me.

Now, I think we already struggle a bit to make sense of conceiving in terms of intellectual emanation or procession.. But if we can think of a word going out from us, then perhaps we can also think of the conception to which the word points as going forth in some way from us, though remaining within us. Or, to put it a little differently, perhaps we can see that it makes sense to distinguish the conception the mind forms from the mind itself, and so to see the former as something which proceeds from the latter.

Thomas is clear that it is to our understanding of intelligible procession rather than bodily procession that we should look to think about processions in God. The problem is that the very thing which just about allows us to make sense of the idea of

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14 *ST* 1.27,1

15 For an alternative and interesting construal of the significance of Thomas' treatment of pocessions (and indeed of subsistent relation), c.f. Rowan Williams' 'What does love know?' Whether Williams' reading, which on the face of it seems to present Thomas's discussion as insight-bearing at these points, is decisively at odds with mine, is an interesting question, especially in light of his references to conceptual Möbius strips (263) and the risk of the collapse of the discourse on itself (266).

a procession in the intellect must now be taken away. Thomas tells us that 'the more perfectly [something] proceeds, the more closely it is one with the source whence it proceeds', and so in the case of God, 'the divine Word is of necessity perfectly one with the source whence He proceeds, without any kind of diversity'. [16] If I am right to think that we had to begin with only a very tenuous grasp on the idea of intellectual procession, but that, by thinking of a conception as distinct from the mind which does the conceiving, we could just about see the meaning of speaking of an emanation or procession, then here Thomas has cut the ground from under us. In God we precisely *cannot* think of difference between that which proceeds and that from which it proceeds: divine simplicity requires the denial of this. Thomas is presenting us with a procession that is so perfect that we in fact have no idea why it could not also be called 'not a procession'.

This is not intended as a criticism. Thomas is committed to the language of procession for Scriptural reasons. He offers a neat diagnosis of the common flaw uniting the apparently opposite heresies of Arianism and Sabellianism—they both take this Biblical language of procession to mean an outward act. So we must, because of Scripture, speak of procession in God, and we must, to avoid heresy, think of this as an inward procession. For a combination of Scriptural reasons, traditional precedent, and considerations deriving from Thomas's own theological system, the primary created model for thinking of inward processions chosen is the procession of the word, or the conception, in the human intellect. What I am suggesting, however, is that by the time the language deriving from this model has been suitably reshaped to make it appropriate for speaking of God—reshaped, in particular, to bring it into conformity with the principle of divine simplicity—it cannot serve as a carrier of any *insight* into God. We do not, from the created analogue, get a glimpse into the nature of God: rather, we so modify the language drawn from this analogue that when we arrive at a langauge to talk about God, it is a language we quite clearly *cannot* understand. What is a procession which does not occur in time, nor involve change,nor allow of any diversity between the one who processes and the one from whom the procession takes place? I have no reason to affirm that there is no such thing, but also no way of grasping or imagining what it might be. Every element in the

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[16] *ST* 1.27, 1 ad 2

idea of intellectual procession that I might, imaginitively, get a grasp of, has had to be denied.

The second point to consider is Thomas's treatment of the persons of the Trinity as subsisting relations. Thomas follows Augustine, who in turn follows Gregory of Nazianzus, in suggesting that the persons of the Trinity be thought of as relations—not as *having* relations, but as *being* relations. This, it should be noted, is a considerably more radical proposal than that made by some contemporary proponents of a social theory of the Trinity, who suggest that the three persons of God are so intensely related in love and mutual self-giving that they are one. It is not that first there are three somethings, who then are very very closely related to each other-- the persons simply *are* relations.

A first, and as we will see too simple, way to express what is odd and difficult here is this: how can one have relations without the things which are to be related, relations without *relata*? We tend to think of relations as existing between two somethings—there are two objects, or two people, and the relation between them. Can we understand what it means to speak of a relation without, to put it very crudely, the endpoints which are joined by it?

The reason this is too simple an approach is that Aquinas does not think of relations in quite the way we usually do. For him a relation is normally an accident of some substance—it inheres in something, but is distinctive in that it is always 'towards another', towards something outside the substance. So if Robert and Andrew are friends, then the relation of being Andrew's friend is an accident which inheres in Robert, but which has to do with Robert's being referred to something beyond himself, namely to Andrew. Similarly, of course, there would be a relation of being Robert's friend which inheres in Andrew, but which refers to another, namely to Robert.

This basic pattern has to undergo a number of modifications in order for speaking about relations in God to be possible. First of all, because of, once again, the doctrine of divine simplicity, in God there are no accidents. So a relation *in* God is not an accidental modification of God, but it is God himself. The two kinds of things that can be said of a relation, then—that it is *in* something, and that it is towards another-- we have radically modified the first: it is not *in* something, it simply *is* the thing. But what about the second element, the 'towards another'? The persons of the Trinity clearly do not exist by being related to something outside God. The 'towards another'

which is central to the notion of relation must mean another in God—it is another whose otherness, then, is not immediately easy to grasp. But it is perfectly clear, one might respond—the other is of course another divine person. If we remember once again, however, that what a person is is a subsisting relation, then it is not necessarily so clear-- we have a subsisting relation, a relation in God which is God, which is a relation to what is itself a subsisting relation. What has happened here is not so much that the idea of relation has been used to clarify the way we must think of God, but rather the exigencies of what must be said of God have been used to confuse what is meant by relation.

At this point some might suppose that Aquinas is doing something ontologically very important—he is pointing us towards a radically non-substantialist metaphysics where primacy is accorded to relationship. Even if a general ontology along these lines would be a good thing to be able to develop, however, I think there is little evidence of Aquinas aiming to do this. We do not find Aquinas championing a wholesale revolution along these lines in Aristotelian metaphysics, nor do we find him pointing to the conceptuality of divine relations as something which, considered abstractly, will illuminate or transform our conceptions of relationship or being in general. God is precisely *contrasted* with us on this point, since we have relations accidentally. 17 What Thomas does is simply to begin with the category of relation as he takes it to be normally understood, and then introduce as many modifications as are necessary to make use of it in speaking of something internal to God—without taking any particular pains to explain how we are to try to grasp or picture this stretched and strained notion of relation—without taking any pains, that is to say, to explain what it *means*.

The final example of St Thomas calmly presenting us with statements about God which he does not expect us to understand is in my opinion the clearest. The persons of God, we have said, are subsistent relations. How are the persons related to God's essence? We have seen that simplicity requires us to say that the subsistent relation is identical to the essence. Relation and essence in God do not differ really, Aquinas tells us, but only in their 'mode of intelligibility'. We understand something different by these two things, but the difference we must affirm to be *only* in our way

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17 Fergus Kerr makes this point in *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, p. 198.

of understanding, not in God himself. 18 Precisely the opposite, however, must be affirmed about the relations in relation to *each other*. Thomas is at great pains to insist that relations in God are *real* relations. He does also have a conception of merely notional relations, but to speak this way of relations in God would be to fall into Sabellianism. And if relations in God are real, they are also really distinct. Thomas insists on this point in article 3 of question 28: relations in God our distinginshed not only in our understanding, but really in God. So to recap, we have one kind of distinction—between a subsisting relation and the essence—which exists only in 'the mode of intelligibility' , not really in God—and another kind of distinction—between one subsisting relation and another—which Thomas insists exists not only in our understanding but in reality, in God. The subsisting relations are each really identical to the essence, and only differ from it in our understanding, but they *really*, and not only in our understanding, differ from each other. The interesting thing here is the serenity with which Thomas seems to pass the question this raises by. 19 He has laid things out in such a way as to make a problem more or less leap off the page at us -- how can two things be absolutely identical with a third, and yet not identical with each other?--but he seems hardly to think it worth commenting on.

There is of course nothing really distinctive in Thomas's laying alongside of each other statements whose relationship eludes us, at this point in particular. What has just been described is nothing but a technical version of the Trinitarian pattern of speech that the Father is God, and the Son is God, but the Father is not the Son. This fundamentally puzzling element of Trinitarian orthodoxy—two things identical to a third not being identical to each other—is something that is faithfully repeated in Thomas's technical discussions of subsisting relations and essence. The thing to notice here is that Aquinas's technical language does not serve to resolve this difficulty—it does not get rid of or explain or make clear to us how it could be possible that a=b and a=c but b does not equal c. And there is no indication that

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18 *ST* 1. 28, 2

19 Timothy Smith, in *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003) writes that 'Thomas shies away from an answer as to exactly how the divine essence can be truly one and the Persons identical to it but distinct among themselves' (p.150). More broadly, his very detailed treatment seems to be pointing in the same direction as my much more cursory one: Smith writes, for instance, that 'Thomas is not so much probing the mystery as protecting it' (157).

Thomas is trying to do this. His technical treatment seems designed to very clearly delineate what we cannot know, rather than to overcome our not knowing.

As was suggested earlier, it is in the nature of the case that what is being argued here--that at some points at least Thomas is not trying to give us insight, that his proposals are instead a way of clearly articulating a lack of insight —can never be definitively established. It cannot be ruled out that another will look at the examples given and say no, I can just about grasp what Thomas is pointing to here, even though is is very difficult. In deciding which route to go down—whether we should suppose Thomas is straining to offer us glimmers of understanding, trying to help us in '[squint] in the infinite light' 20, or whether he is carefully presenting us with intellectual dead-ends—part of what is at stake is whether we can see the latter course as something that would be in any way respectable, a worthwhile thing for theology to be doing. Can one say that at various points Aquinas offers us not the least bit of understanding, without thereby maligning Thomas? If in fact he does not manage to make his account intelligible at certain points, would we not do better to pass these by quietly, given that we live in a time when theologians have already too many quick and easy reasons to dismiss Aquinas?

Much here depends on one's underlying conception of the doctrine of the Trinity and its purpose. If one presumes that the point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to provide a description of God, a picture of the divine, a deep understanding of the way God really is, then the reading of Aquinas I have given would have to be considered a reading of his failure. But I have tried to argue elsewhere that the doctrine can have an important grammatical and structural role within Christianity whether or not it carries any insight. 21 If in fact the doctrine of the Trinity is simply beyond our grasp, then it may be better, more helpful, for theology to display this quite clearly, than to skirt the issue, to bluff its way along. And this, I am suggesting, is what Thomas is doing—simultaneously displaying the grammar, the pattern of speech about the Trinity, and displaying it as beyond our comprehension.

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20 Levering, p.240.

21 C.f. 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity'.

In *The Phantom Tollbooth 22*, a classic American children's novel, the protagonist finds himself in a land where many things have gone awry ever since the two beautiful young princesses, Rhyme and Reason, were banished. The doctrine of the Trinity, one might say, is an aspect of Christian theology which has a relationship to one of these two princesses but not the other—it has rhyme but not reason. By this I do not mean precisely that it is poetic rather than logical, but that orthodox Trinitarian speech follows a pattern, a rhythm, which can be learned, but does not necessarily deliver *understanding* of God. The sense of a pattern or rhythm comes through very strongly in something like the Athanasian creed—those who read or recite the Athanasian creed do not necessarily undertand it, but they get the hang of it, they catch its rhythm. They could go on speaking in this pattern. In the first books of Augustine's *De Trinitate* one finds quite explicitly an exploration of the rules of Trinitarian discourse, an investigation into how we must speak in various contexts. Augustine, of course, goes on to ask about what all this means, to try to get some understanding of it. What I am proposing is that Aquinas, even though he makes use of some of the material from the second part of Augustine's work, is doing something which is in spirit more like the first part; in greater detail, and in a changed intellectual context, Aquinas is exploring a pattern, setting out a grammar, for the way we speak about God as three and one—he is exploring in detail the rhyme of the Trinity.

There are a number of questions that a position along the lines set out is likely to provoke, and I want to clarify it by attempting to offer answers to three of them. A first question, or perhaps objection, is this: why should we suppose that a grammatical exploration, an exploration of the patterns of Trinitarian speech, is *different* from an exploration where understanding, genuine knowledge of God, is sought? Is this not to set up a false opposition? Would we not aim to arrive at knowledge and insight precisely through and in a careful exploration of how we must speak of God? Or would the latter not lead to the former? To this what must be said I think is that in general that may perhaps be true, but whether or not it is so *in general*, there are points in a discussion of the Trinity where it is *not* true. There are times where *all* we have is a pattern, points where grammatical knowhow and an understanding of meaning diverge. But what does this mean, one might ask: how exactly would one

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22 Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, (New York: Epstein and Carroll, 1961).

know that we do not understand what we are saying if we do know how to say it? Is the distinction being used here predicated upon an unduly visual conception of meaning, so that I am supposing that we do not understand something unless we can somehow picture it? It is easy to use visual metaphors (insight, picture), but the point at issue is not fundamentally tied to them. The same point can be made without recourse to language of seeing: it is precisely when our speech hits dead-ends—when what we say naturally leads to further questions to which we have no answer, or when what we say seems to lead to inferences which we then have to deny-- that we can say that we have a grammar for speaking of God, but no accompanying understanding.

Secondly, how does the not-knowing I am talking about in connection with aspects of Trinitarian doctrine relate to a not-knowing of God in general?. Thomas famously affirms that we know of God not what he is, but rather what he is not. In this life we cannot know God's essence. Some of the words we use about God, such as good and wise, really do describe God, but they refer to him in a *way* which we cannot understand, since we draw our understanding of them from a created context. Some interpreters, such as Victor Preller, pursue these lines of thought to a radically negative conclusion: we are licensed to speak in certain ways about God, but we really do not know in the least what we are saying. 23 And if this is the case, then it follows rather trivially that when we speak of processions, relations and persons in God, we cannot possibly know what we are saying. Herbert McCabe in fact argued quite explicitly that although the Trinity is a mystery, it is not as though things get any *worse* for our understanding with the introduction of the doctrine of the three persons—God is entirely a mystery from the beginning. 24 Though I have a good deal of sympathy for these lines of thought, what I am arguing here is something slightly different. Whatever account one wants to give of our not knowing God in general, the situation gets worse, or at the very least more *clearly* bad, when it comes to certain kinds of statements in Trinitarian discourse. When we say God is wise or good, for instance, we at least *think* we know what we are saying, even if a reflection on issues of the *modus significandi* of our words means that we then have to acknowledge that

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[23] Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

[24] Herbert McCabe, 'Aquinas on the Trinity' in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds. *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

our conception of goodness and wisdom are not adequate to God. But when we speak of processions in God, or subsistent relations, or the Persons in relation to the esence, we are speaking in a way which we cannot make sense of, even in an inadequate way. My suggestion is, then , that there are some areas of theological speech where we run aground more dramatically and more obviously than others. 25

A final question has to do with contemplation. As was mentioned above, one of the themes of some current retrievals of Thomas' trinitarian thought is that it needs to be seen as ordered to contemplation. The point is particularly insisted upon by Matthew Levering, who thinks that we need to rediscover, in Thomas, theology as contemplative wisdom, that we need to understand that in Thomas's treatment of the Trinity what is at stake is forming the reader to 'enable the reader to experience, through contemplation, the God of salvation history' 26. Where is there space for contemplation if, as I am sugesting, at some key points Thomas is simply leading the reader into an absolute dead-end?

My answer to this question is two-fold. First, even if I am right about the function of some of the most technical discussions in Aquinas's treatment of the Trinity, this does not mean that there is nothing in the discussion as a whole which could be significant for a contemplative ascent. Attentive readers will have noticed the words 'Father,' 'Son' or 'Holy Spirit' have made only brief appearances in the preceding discussion. My argument has been focusing precisely on the most abstract dimension of Trinitarian reflection, and it is this dimension that I maintain provides no illumination. There is however much more than this technical dimension in Thomas' thought, and much of this may well have significance-- more than a negative, cautionary significance-- for contemplation.

Secondly, it is worth thinking about how exactly Trinity and contemplation are related. One can distinguish, roughly, between something like contemplation *of* the Trinity and contemplation *in* the Trinity. That is to say, on the one hand one can think of contemplation in terms of the one who contemplates standing outside of the

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25 This, I should make clear, is my distinction rather than Thomas's, and it need not correspond precisely to a reason/revelation divide.

26 *Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 36. In the conclusion to this work, Levering makes his point about the need for rediscovering theology as contemplative wisdom through an exploration of what is wrong with my own essay 'Perichoresis and projection'.

Trinity, so to speak, trying to see and comprehend the Trinity as a whole, and all the relations involved in it; on the other hand one can think of contemplation in terms of the Holy Spirit working within the one who contemplates, both enabling him and drawing him to contemplate the Father in the Son. On this second version, the whole of the Trinity is involved in the act of contemplation, but it is not as though what is being contemplated is itself the three-in-oneness.

If one thinks primarily along the lines of a model of contemplation *in* the Trinity, then one can think of the one who contemplates as beginning to be, by grace, involved with, taken up into, the life of the Trinity. And it is not entirely unreasonable to suppose that the nature of this involvement is such that the one so involved cannot also stand outside it all in order to get a clear vision of the Trinity as a whole, and of the relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit abstractly considered. The abstract rules of Trinitarian discourse may still be necessary—to ensure that one does not fall into a heresy such as Arianism or Sabellianism, for instance, and so mistake the nature of that with which she is involved —but it is not the rules themselves that form the substance of our contemplation.

An advantage of an emphasis on contemplation *in* the Trinity rather than contemplation *of* the Trinity is that it avoids what I take to be one of the dangers of Trinitarian theology, which is to give an implausible kind of advantage to the theologian. I think it is important to presume, not precisely that the theologian has *no* advantages over other believers, but that she has no really significant advantages. The person who cleans the church benefits from certain perks, one might suppose, as regards her spiritual life—being around such things as pews, altars, crosses, candles, or indeed the reserved sacrament might perhaps provoke moments of prayer—and similarly I presume there may be certain benefits to being a theologian—coming across theological ideas might from time to time provoke one to prayer, and so on. Even if one maintains quite a rich view of theology as a discipline integrated into and directed towards the spiritual life, it seems fundamentally wrong to construct any conception of the relation between Trinitarian theology and contemplation which would mean that those who can understand really difficult, elusive, technical theology are able to get more of a foretaste of the beatific vision than those who are not. And this is what, on some accounts of Thomas on the Trinity, seems to be suggested. If however Aquinas's most technical discussions of Trinitarian themes are understood as I have been suggesting, then the only advantages accruing to the theologian, in this

area at least, are a more decisive knowledge of the limits of their understanding, and perhaps an added protection against falling into heresy. 27

The point can be made in a slightly different way. There is, one could say, a spectrum within theologies of the Trinity as regards mystery—a spectrum as regards how knowable or unknowable the doctrine is held to be. At one end of the spectrum we have many contemporary thinkers, particularly those who espouse a robust social Trinitarianism, who do not find the matter mysterious at all. They speak of the Trinity, and of the inner life of the Trinity and its qualities, with great enthusiasm; they draw all kinds of social, political and metaphysical conclusions from it; they confidently contrast the Christian understanding of God to other less satisfactory ones. In the middle of my spectrum are those who show considerably more reserve. The doctrine of the Trinity is indeed mysterious, and we cannot fully grasp it. But we can nevertheless try to gain some dim glimmer, some elusive bit of an understanding, even if we will always have to acknowlege that our minds fall short. Something like this is how many read Aquinas. My reading, by contrast, puts him at the far end of the spectrum. There are at least some aspects of what we must say about the Trinity of which we can have no grasp whatsoever.

Those who take their position at either end of the spectrum do not priviledge the theologian in any dramatic way above other believers. If the social trinitarians are right, then they really can explain the Trinity to people in a way that people really can grasp. Their approach has become influential in part precisely because it is so very preachable. And if, at the other extreme, Thomas is understood as I propose, then the theologian no more than any other believer can understand what they mean in talking about the Trinity. The position in the middle of the spectrum, however, though on the face of it very cautious, modest and moderate, is the one to give what is really a rather serious priviledge to those who have the time, inclination and ability to engage in sophisticated technical theology. Come and read theology at a top university, one could say, and if you do really very hard papers with a suitably prayerful attitude, and

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27 For a related discussion, c.f. Bruce Marshall, 'Quod Scit Una Uetula: Auinas on the Nature of Theology' in Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow eds. *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). Marshall concludes that, for Thomas, 'The theological master simply strives to make explicit, to recapture *in modo cognitionis*, what the faithful heart of any old woman already knows' (26). If this is right, then the idea that difficult technical discussions can yield an insight into the inner nature of God which is *not* available otherwise, would seem unlikely.

do really very well in them, you will be that much closer to the beatific vision. It might be good for boosting recruitment to the discipline, but it does not quite ring true.

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