

KNOWING GOD'S ESSENCE: A CONTEMPORARY THOMISTIC DEBATE

FRANCO MANNI *

SUMMARY: I. *Setting the question.* II. *An early 20th Century Debate.* III. *A Late 20th Century Non-Debating Thomist.* IV. *An Early 21st Century Debate.* V. *A Legacy to Contemporary Theology: Essentialism vs. Anti-essentialism.*

I. SETTING THE QUESTION

Here I want to tell the story of a contemporary Thomistic debate that deals with an important theological question, i.e. whether or not our knowledge of God is related to his nature/essence, and its legacy to theology of our time.

I call it 'Thomistic' because it has been undertaken by scholars of Aquinas and 'contemporary' in the sense that it does not go farther back than the aftermath of the Second World War.

This theological question in turn brings us to the philosophical problem of what essence and nature are. From Latin translations of Aristotle produced by Cicero and Boethius, Aquinas borrows a bundle of Latin words which he often (albeit not always) uses as synonyms: 'essentia', 'natura', 'substantia', to which he adds another word (taken from other medieval Schoolmen), 'quidditas'. These four words mean those characteristics which tell us what a being is in itself, as distinct from all other beings: for instance, 'rational animal', in the case of human beings. 'Essence' has to be distinguished from 'incidental attributes', which do not have to exist/apply (e. g. 'having white skin' in the case of human beings), and from 'natural characteristics', which, on the other hand, always pertain to a being, but are superficial and do not make it clear to us why a given being is itself and nothing else (e.g. two natural characteristics present in human beings allow us to use the facetious terms 'laughing animal' and 'feather-less biped').

Aquinas repeatedly denies that in this life we can know the essence/nature of God. For instance, he argues that from God's simplicity we know that in him there is not any composition of essence and existence, and, therefore, in him, essence and existence are identical. However—so his argument continues—the verb 'esse'

* PhD in Philosophical Theology at King's College, London.

(to be) has two meanings: ‘actus essendi’ (the act of being), and the ‘copula’ which links the subject of a sentence to its predicate. According to Aquinas, in this latter sense we do know what the ‘esse’ of God is, because we know that the sentence ‘God is’ is true, and we know it from his effects (e.g. there is a first cause, and ‘the first cause *is* God’). However we do not know the first meaning of God’s ‘esse’, i.e. in what way he can exist; therefore, we do not know his essence (because his essence is identical with his act of being).¹ Moreover, in some passages, Aquinas adds the reinforcing adverbs ‘penitus’ and ‘omnino’, which mean ‘entirely’: we do not know *at all* God’s essence.

However, in some other texts it seems that Aquinas concedes that an imperfect knowledge of that essence is possible.²

II. AN EARLY 20TH CENTURY DEBATE

From this variety of texts a debate stems among Thomists: is it possible or not to know at least in part God’s essence? In other words: is it possible to know at least in part what God is in himself without relying exclusively on what stems from his effects? We can recall Herbert McCabe’s metaphor (slightly modified by Denys Turner): is it possible to know at least in part what a computer is in itself (what logical, mathematical and engineering characteristics it has)—i.e. the characteristics that allow us to define it as an electronic computer—and not just its effects for us users who can, for instance, copy and paste texts?³

In 1949 Garrigou Lagrange—whose books were influential in world Catholic schools for nearly half a century—held that it was possible: we can have ‘some idea of his essence’, and as for this point, in Lagrange’s opinion, Duns Scotus is more right than Aquinas; in other words, we can know God’s essential predicates, albeit in a generic way.⁴ He maintains that “most theologians consider self-subsisting being as formally constituting the divine nature, that is ultimately distinguishing it from everything created”, and spends several pages trying to demonstrate that the divine nature is indeed the ‘ipsum esse subsistens’.⁵

¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2.

² Cfr. IDEM, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 5; *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 2.

³ Cfr. D. TURNER, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, 173-174.

⁴ Cfr. R. GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, *God, His Existence and Nature: A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies* (1914), B. Herder Book Co., Saint Louis - London 1949, I, 228-232.

⁵ Cfr. *ibidem*, II, 11 and from 16 onwards. Whereas Aquinas left room for knowledge in part, but not for knowledge in part of the essence: the essence is completely unknown; what is God in himself is completely unknown. For Aquinas we can say something true of God only while considering the events of the world: without God we cannot explain the movement, the order, the existence itself of the world; therefore, because of that, God is not composed, is non changeable etc.

On the other hand, in 1948 Etienne Gilson, even though he maintains that God is his essence and his essence is the act itself of being (*Summa contra Gentes*, 1, 22), nonetheless asserts subsequently that when we consider what this “act of being” means, we realise ‘we cannot know what God’s being is, any more than we can know his essence’. In other words, *what God is* (e.g. the nature of his being), whether described as an ‘uncaused cause’, ‘good’, ‘wise’, ‘omnipotent’, is unknown to us, and since the notions of uncaused cause, wise, good, omnipotent *are* the essence of God, we do not thus know what the essence of God is. This does not mean we are reduced to silence: although we do not grasp God’s essence, we can say what he is not, piling up many observations which more and more determine what he is not. Does this process provide us with real knowledge? Yes—Gilson maintains—we can attain imperfect knowledge, which is altogether preferable to complete ignorance:

What is more it eliminates a kind of positive pseudo-knowledge which pretends to say what the essence of God is but presents it as it cannot possibly be [...] but when we posit an unknown essence and distinguish it from an ever larger number of other essences, each negative difference determines with increasing precision the preceding difference and thus encircles ever more closely the outline of the central object.

Therefore, unless we think Aquinas openly contradicts himself, we should hold that the ‘imperfect’ knowledge of God he acknowledges ‘is not of his essence’. What do we know of God, then? That the sentence ‘God exists’ is true, but we do not know what God’s act of being is, because “God’s existence is the same as his substance and as his substance is unknown, so also is his existence” (*De Potentia* 7, 2 ad 1), and the same is for the other attributes: “after we have shown what they are, we still do not know what God is”. We suffer from the illusion that it is otherwise, because, when we demonstrate the existence of God, we can pretend to know also what that existence means (‘modus significandi’), and thus, even more so, what God’s wisdom and justice are.⁶ In other words, here Gilson says that we *know* that God exists but we do *not* know ‘how’ he exists (the way in which he exists, the ‘modus significandi’ of the very word ‘exists’).

III. A LATE 20TH CENTURY NON-DEBATING THOMIST

Although Herbert McCabe did not participate in this Thomistic debate on the ‘imperfect’ knowledge of God’s essence, and did not venture to comment on Aquinas’s texts with regard to the truth of the *propositions* which give names to

⁶ Cfr. E. GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1948), Victor Gollancz Ltd., London 1957, 92, 95, 96-97, 108, 109.

God and on the incapacity to understand the *concepts* which should describe these names, nonetheless, while writing a few decades after Garrigou-Lagrange and Gilson, he clearly took sides: God's nature/essence is utterly unknown to us.

In fact, the first hindrance met by the human mind is that the concept itself of 'nature' (or 'essence') in God means something different from when applied to everything else: to be divine is *not* to be a kind of being ('nature') different from others, whereas to be a man *is* to be a kind of being different, say, from being a stone.⁷ Therefore, if for everything else, as we have already seen, 'essence/nature' means 'the fundamental characteristics that allow us to distinguish it from anything else', in the case of God—whose essence is identical with his existence—things work in a different way, even though not in an entirely different way.

According to McCabe, Aquinas follows the fundamental philosophical principle of Augustine: 'everything that is in God, is God' (in an Aristotelian way we could say that in God the concepts of genus, distinguishing characteristics and incidental attributes are in no sense distinct from his essence). Although we are unable to understand this notion, we are forced to affirm it because God does not have potentialities and, thus, "there is nothing in God which might have not been in him".⁸

Therefore, for instance, God's wisdom is God himself, i.e. his own essence/nature; it is not as it is in us human beings where wisdom, just like power and goodness, is just an attribute. Moreover, we do not understand what his wisdom is, we do not have any concept of it and, since it is God himself, we do not have any concept of God.⁹

Furthermore, McCabe observes, there is another conundrum: not everything we say of God is a characteristic which we think present within him. In fact, there are affirmations about God which are just 'relational'. If my great-niece gives birth to a child, I become great-uncle, but to say 'Herbert became great-uncle' is different from saying 'Herbert became wise': in the first case I do not acquire any new personal characteristic, in the second one I do. The same is for God: if at a certain moment Margaret Thatcher is born, we can say a new true statement about God, i.e. 'God created Margaret Thatcher', but it does not imply any change in God. Therefore, there is a striking difference between the two statements 'God is wise' and 'God is creator': by the former we attribute a real characteristic to God and it is part of his essence (since in him there are no chance factors), by the latter we say just a new true wording about him. Thus, according

⁷ Cfr. H. McCABE, *God Matters*, Continuum, London, 1987, 70-71.

⁸ IDEM, *God Still Matters*, Continuum, London 2002, 40.

⁹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 42.

to McCabe, “being creator of the world is not part of what it is to be God”¹⁰—a statement which sounds paradoxical indeed.

Thus, the Augustinian principle ‘whatever is in God is God’ does not apply to his being creator, whereas it does apply to his being wise, good or merciful, since the latter attributes belong to God’s essence, even though there is not any real distinction between them. When we speak of the attributes which are really present in God, we are speaking of a single simple essence and not of a series of distinct characteristics or incidental attributes; in God these attributes are not a plurality because they lack any real distinction; whereas when we speak of the relationships between the creator and his creatures (e.g. I was created by God and Margaret Thatcher was too), the distinctions are real in us but not in God.¹¹

Apart from the complication of the relational attributes, if we come back to the problem of God’s nature, we see that, according to McCabe, we can make true positive statements about God, even though we do not grasp their exact meaning/significance, “They do not convey to us any information as to what God is like”. We can speak about God correctly or incorrectly, but the criterion of correctness is not anything that can inform us of the nature of God.¹² In fact, God is not to be classified together with other existing things, nor can he be contrasted to them in the way cats, dogs and stones can be contrasted to one another. It would be a fallacy for us to count all the items of the universe and finally add one more item called God.

However, not knowing the meaning of the word ‘God’ does not turn theology into a sort of codology. In fact, in many other cases we use words whose essential (structural) meaning is not understood by us: for instance, a business executive can use a computer at his/her office without having even the slightest idea of its internal functioning; the business executive’s use of the word ‘computer’ does not derive from his/her understanding of what a computer actually is, but merely from the ‘effects’ it has for his/her business. The same happens with the word ‘God’, albeit more radically:

the businessman is better off because knowing what a computer is for is a very large part of knowing what it is. Whereas God does not exist in order to make creatures. So the meaning of ‘God’ is not the same as the meaning of ‘the existence of things instead of there not being anything’; we have the word ‘God’ because the existence of things instead of there not being anything is mysterious to us [...] and ought to be mysterious to us.¹³

¹⁰ Cfr. *ibidem*.

¹¹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 44.

¹² H. MCCABE, *God and Creation*, «New Blackfriars» 94 (2013) 386.

¹³ MCCABE, *God Matters*, 37-38.

By way of summary, we can say that, according to McCabe: 1) all God's attributes, apart from the relational ones, relate to his essence, but we do not know what they signify; 2) we simply know that they are not incompatible one another, because the 'via causalitatis' and the 'via eminentiae' tell us that any perfection present in the effects must pre-exist 'more highly' in its cause; 3) we do not understand at all how these perfections pre-exist ('more highly').

Finally, it should be observed that, unlike other Thomists such as Garrigou-Lagrange and Gilson, McCabe neither devoted himself to providing a thorough philological analysis of Aquinas's texts on God's essence nor debated with other scholars about their interpretations.¹⁴

IV. AN EARLY 21ST CENTURY DEBATE

A few years after these writings of McCabe, differences between Thomist scholars recur. In 2002 Fergus Kerr acknowledges that the most proper name for God is 'he who is', the 'ipsum esse subsistens'; however this name does not give us any knowledge of his essence, because in this life we cannot know what God is in himself, and so all our attempts are a sort of failure. Therefore, according to Kerr, "the less determinate, the more general and simple our way of speaking of Him, the better".¹⁵

On the other hand in 2007 John Wippel writes that Aquinas

applies certain other names to God which appear to be positive in content, for instance, good, intelligent, etc., even though such names can be predicated of him only analogically. So true is this that in later discussion he argues that such names can be predicated of God substantially (substantialiter).¹⁶

In the same year Miguel Pérez de Laborda wrote what is—to my knowledge—the most radical and erudite Thomist study meant to demonstrate that we do not have any sort of knowledge of the divine essence, be it perfect or imperfect.¹⁷ According to this Spanish scholar, whoever admits—as Wippel does—an imperfect knowledge of God's essence, does not take seriously what Aquinas writes in his works. According to Pérez de Laborda, Aquinas thinks that the imperfect

¹⁴ This confirms what a former student of his (Peter Hunter op) told me, that is that, as a teacher at school, McCabe was not committed in studying the medieval writers; he rather took advantage of some Aquinas's ideas to support his own theories.

¹⁵ F. KERR, *After Aquinas*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, 188.

¹⁶ GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 92, 95, 96-97, 108, 109. J. WIPPEL, *Thomas Aquinas on the Ultimate Why Question*, «The Review of Metaphysics» 60 (2007) 741.

¹⁷ Cfr. M. PÉREZ DE LABORDA, *La preesistenza delle perfezioni in Dio. L'apofatismo di San Tommaso*, «Annales Theologici» 21 (2007) 279-298.

knowledge concerns just the essences of material things: we know them 'imperfectly' because we have just general concepts of them; whereas, affirmations such as 'God is wise' do not allow us to have any sort of knowledge of his essence. It is true that the 'three ways' (negativa, causalitatis, eminentiae) provide us with an imperfect knowledge of God, but *not of his nature*, and, according to Pérez de Laborda, Wippel misunderstands those texts of Aquinas he refers to. Pérez de Laborda, instead, quotes other Aquinas texts from the *De Trinitate* and, referring to Gilson, states that what we conceptually know—i.e. the meanings of the perfections present in worldly things—are not at all 'a part' of God; however, we know that he has those perfections as pre-existing in him in a higher way which is utterly unknown to us.¹⁸

We could summarise this debate by a classification: on the one side there is Garrigou-Lagrange who admits that we have a partial knowledge of God's essence and on the other side there are Gilson, Kerr and Pérez de Laborda who deny it. In the middle there is Wippel who seems to suggest that, since the analogical predicates of God (wise, good) belong to his essence or 'substantia', and since we grasp some meaning of them, we can know something of God's essence. McCabe should be pigeonholed as the more extreme supporter of the apophatic, side because he not only denies any knowledge of God essence, but also of whatever other attributes because "everything that is in God, is God".

V. A LEGACY TO CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY: ESSENTIALISM VS. ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

These debates left a living legacy among the theologians of today, not only in the field of philosophical theology (for instance in Denys Turner, Brian Davies and Stephen Mulhall), but also in the field of revealed theology, such as Karen Kilby's apophatic Trinity¹⁹ and Ian McFarland's apophatic Christology.²⁰

Let us focus briefly on the latter. McFarland maintains that, although Chalcedon says that Jesus is fully divine, however, since the divine nature is invisible and ineffable, it cannot be shown and so treated as an observable property of Jesus; in fact, any observable property of Jesus can be exhibited also by other human beings. The divine nature in the mind of the Fathers of Chalcedon has qualities such as omnipotence, eternity and the like, but, for the very reason that they are super-human, Jesus cannot exhibit any of them in his human life. An

¹⁸ Cfr. *ibidem*, 281 - 286, 291, 292, 294 - 297.

¹⁹ K. KILBY, *Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?* «International Journal of Systematic Theology» 12 (2010) 65-77.

²⁰ I. MCFARLAND, *Spirit and Incarnation: Towards a Pneumatic Chalcedonianism*, «International Journal of Systematic Theology» 16 (2014) 143-158.

impressive example is the divine impassibility and how Jesus “exhibited” it on the cross.²¹

However, in a more recent past, McFarland argues, many theologians claimed to find Jesus’ divine nature in some special qualities of his: Schleiermacher (perfect God consciousness), Ritschl (Jesus’ intention to found the kingdom of God), Baillie (Jesus’ refusal to claim any goodness for himself), Pannenberg (absolute subordination to the will of the Father), etc. Despite their common focus on natural phenomena (having abandoned the old focus on miracles), these Christologies, says McFarland, have the same basic structure of the old ones: the humanity is seen in what is normal and everyday, while the divinity is seen in certain extraordinary qualities.²²

Whereas McFarland maintains that all the qualities we can see in Jesus are our qualities too. The difference between Jesus and us is just a “matter of predication”, that is to say that this concrete set of human qualities, belonging to Jesus of Galilee, are “properly named as God’s”.²³ Therefore, we should resist the temptation of identifying some aspects of Jesus as divine, because we can only point to what is created and those aspects are just human not divine. If we take the humanity of Jesus seriously then “no aspect of it can be treated as a proof or manifestation of his divinity”.²⁴

This last remark makes me go back to the debate about God’s essence. McCabe recalls Augustine’s maxim ‘everything that is in God, is God’, and, therefore, when we use the analogous attributes of knowledge, power and goodness we are not speaking of God’s qualities but of God’s essence, which is ‘utterly unknown’, according to Aquinas. On the other hand, McFarland says that every quality we see in Jesus is ‘human’, i.e. an accident pertaining to human nature (or essence) without however being this essence itself.

This should remind us what McCabe rightly pinpointed: we speak of God’s nature in an improper way, because he cannot be one of his kind (nature) instead of another kind. In scholastic philosophy the concept of essence is the epistemological side of the ontological concept of substance. If we read Aristotle’s *Categories*, we would find that ‘substance’ is what is stable, while ‘accidents’ are the changing qualities. That is, this conceptual framework was elaborated by Aristotle to deal with natural beings, which, in fact, do change.

Also, the stability of the substance, as distinguished from the transience of accidents, must be understood in the usual Aristotelian meaning of ‘what happens for the most part’. In fact, the ‘substantia prima’ Socrates remains the same

²¹ *Ibidem*, 156.

²² Cfr. *ibidem*, 149

²³ *Ibidem*, 151.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 149.

for the most part of changes; but if Socrates had been 20-foot tall (quantity), green-skinned (quality), father of Homer (relation), floating by the ceiling (place), contemporary of Julius Caesar (time), he would have not been the same substance.

Therefore, all the contemporary academic tenets that regard essentialism as a fallacy²⁵ apply only to created natures like human nature, not to God; to Jesus's humanity, not to his divinity. In fact, from Plato and Aristotle till Maimonides, Ibn Sina and Aquinas God is negatively described as non-changeable, therefore his 'stability' does not need the distinction between substance and accidents, between essence and qualities.

The consequence of all this for both contemporary philosophical and revealed theology (and therefore the live legacy of this Thomistic debate) should be a cautious distinction: while it is legitimate and profitable to apply contemporary anti-essentialist criticism to natural and social sciences and, also, to cosmology and philosophical anthropology, this should not be done in regards of God. In fact, in God, because of his non-changeability and simplicity, everything is of his essence, and this essence is unknowable.

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the story of a contemporary Thomistic debate that deals with a crucial theological question, i.e. whether or not our knowledge of God is related to his nature/essence, and its legacy to theology of our time. Throughout the last 60 years there has been an intense debate among Thomist scholars belonging to different generations: R. Garrigou Lagrange, E. Gilson, H. McCabe, F. Kerr, J. Wippel, M. Pérez de Laborda, D. Turner and I. McFarland. The legacy from this debate is that both in contemporary philosophical and revealed theology a cautious distinction is needed: while it is legitimate and profitable to apply contemporary anti-essentialist criticism to natural and social sciences and, also, to cosmology and philosophical anthropology, this should not be done in regards of God. In fact, in God, because of his non-changeability and simplicity, everything is of his essence, and this essence is unknowable.

²⁵ Cfr., as an example among many, W. BÜTTEMEYER, *Popper on Definitions: To Michael Sukale*, «Journal for General Philosophy of Science / Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie» 36 (2005) 15-28.