

BEING AND THE MYSTIC: THE METAPHYSICAL
FOUNDATIONS OF THOMAS AQUINAS'
MYSTICAL THOUGHT

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Various mystical traditions and much of modern scholarship sever the connection between mysticism and metaphysical claims. For Aquinas, differing ontological claims both generate and correlate logically to diverse mystical claims, under the aegis of one analogous notion of truth. In this way, Aquinas' mystical theology offers a metaphysics of mystical union, according to which a thing's nobility of being corresponds to its degree of union with God. Aquinas' metaphysical positions both define and circumscribe his interpretation of religious experience. This examines the points of contact between metaphysics and mysticism. Second, it takes the metaphysical issue of monism versus pluralism as a locus for intersecting truth claims in metaphysics and mysticism. Third, examines the context, formulation and solution to the problem of the "one and the many" within Aquinas' metaphysics, including its relevance for his mystical theology. Fourth, it examines a metaphysical paradox taken from the domain of the intellect, and show how it stands at the threshold of mystical experience for Aquinas.

I. INTRODUCTION

Yahweh's words to Moses in the Book of *Exodus* chapter 3 verse 14 surely provided Aquinas with fruit for both metaphysical and mystical reflection, since the Absolute proclaiming Himself to be "I am Who Am" involves at least two interpretations.¹ As an abstract definition of the infinite and eternal Supreme Being, it is a name, says Thomas, more rightly His than the name of God itself.² On the other hand, the

¹ The metaphysical interpretation: *S.T.* I 13.11; cf. A. Maurer, 'St. Thomas on the Sacred Name *Tetragrammaton*', *Medieval Studies* 34, 1972, pp. 275–286.

² *S.T.* I 13.11 ad 1. Cf. E. Gilson, *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, 2nd ed. (Vrin: 1944), p. 50 #1 (Tr. A.H.C. Downes, Scribners, New York, 1936, pp. 433ff); cf. H. de Lubac, *The discovery of God*, Darton, Longman & Todd, New York, 1960, p. 137.

phrase can suggest a concrete individual, or, as some have described it, the “Supreme Someone”,³ connoting “personality” as the core sense of the mystery of being. Henri de Lubac has noted correctly that while Thomas’ mystical theology is not an extension or prolongation of his metaphysical contemplation, because it springs from a different root, it is stimulated by metaphysical inquiry, animates it, and exhibits the same natural desire to see God.⁴ Unlike natural contemplation, however, infused contemplation occurs through the supernatural gift of *wisdom*, which is produced in the intellect through charity and as such, belongs to the virtue of love.⁵

While the metaphysician discerns traces of a reality beyond the mind’s measure, the mystic speaks of a reality reverberating in the center of his soul, of intuitions, of extraordinary awareness and identity with the divine substance. The spectrum of views on the relation between mystical experience and metaphysical contemplation exhibits great diversity — there are philosophers who contain metaphysics within the expression of mystical insight, effectively linking the cognitive and affective orders in their descriptions of contact with ultimate reality; there are others who view mystical experience as a type of “evidence” for ontological claims, and still others who *sever* the link between mystical and metaphysical claims, distinguishing the mystical experience of bliss as practical, not epistemic, in aim. Traditionally, scholars have studied the ways in which mystical experience can provide insight both into the philosophy of mind and personal identity,⁶ and into the perennial and central metaphysical controversy over the existence of an ultimate reality or transcendent being underlying worldly multiplicity.⁷

³ P. Teilhard de Chardin, *La phenomene humaine*, 1955, p. 332, as quoted in de Lubac (1960: 139).

⁴ De Lubac (1960: 146).

⁵ *S.T.* II-II 45. Cf. my article ‘*Pati Divina*: Mystical union in Aquinas’, in A. Ramos & M. Georgeeds (eds.), *Faith, scholarship and culture in the 21st century*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 2002, pp. 73–96.

⁶ On this point, see L. Angel, *Enlightenment East and West*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1994, pp. 98–103. Some of the scholars exploring the connection between mysticism and the philosophy of mind and personal identity are Russell, Stace, Zaehner, Smart, Staal, Katz, Proudfoot, and Wainwright.

⁷ There is also the question of the status of mystical claims as evidence for metaphysical entities, specifically, for the existence of transcendent being, whether that be the One, the Void, or a transcendent God or Godhead. Here, the issue of the noetic status of mystical claims is involved.

Aquinas views the metaphysics/mysticism nexus from yet another perspective. Since Aquinas' mystical thought flows from his moral theology, and since both theology and metaphysics examine "being", albeit under different aspects, much of the conceptual content of his mystical thought rests on a metaphysical scaffolding. Although he interprets the line of evidence to run *from* metaphysical claims *to* mystical claims about the mode of union with God, Aquinas, in fidelity to his Dionysian and Augustinian heritage, acknowledges the paradoxical use of language and the role of the will in mystical union, and clearly distinguishes the objects of natural and supernatural contemplation. What distinguishes his account from many medieval mystics as well as from most modern accounts is his commitment to the priority of ontological claims within his theory of mystical ascent, instead of viewing the latter as immune from or transcending metaphysical assessment.

To sum up, whereas various mystical traditions and much of modern scholarship *sever* the connection between mysticism and metaphysical claims in the effort to accommodate religious pluralism (somewhat reminiscent of the "double-truth" theory), for Aquinas, differing ontological claims both *generate* and *correlate logically* to diverse mystical claims,⁸ under the aegis of one analogous notion of truth.⁹ In this way, Aquinas' mystical theology transcends the phenomenalist interpretation of subjective experience through the practical and expressive functions of religious language, and offers instead a *metaphysics* of mystical union, according to which a thing's nobility of being corresponds to its degree of union with God.¹⁰ In this way, Aquinas interprets metaphysical doctrine to *ground* both the mystical experience and its interpretation, such that we could produce a set of parallel propositions

⁸ The assumptions of objectively existing foundations for truth and the possibility of consensus regarding it are not examined in this paper, but have been critiqued recently by postmodern philosophers. See, e.g., N. Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the demand for consensus*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

⁹ Aquinas, *De Ver.* I.4. Here, Aquinas says that if truth is taken in its proper, or primary sense, there is one truth by which all things are true, and that truth is the divine intellect itself.

¹⁰ On the relation of instances in a category to the first instance within it, see Aquinas, *In 1 Sent.* d.8, q.4, a.2 ad 3. As applied to God, this means that God is the "measure of all beings", and that things are measured in their "quantity of being" in relation to His infinite perfection. As Aquinas says, "how much of the 'nobility of being' (*nobilitas essendi*) each thing possesses can be known by its distance from or nearness to God." (*In de div. Nom.* c.4 lect. 3 (#310): "Est enim mensura existentium, quia ex hoc potest sciri quantum unumquodque existentium habeat de nobilitate essendi, quod appropinquant Ei vel distat ab Eo.")

which are internally and mutually coherent and exclusive of other rival propositions.

It is my thesis that in contrast to the modern focus on the psychology and epistemology of mysticism, Aquinas' properly *metaphysical* positions both define and circumscribe his interpretation of religious experience, such that there can be no "core" mystical experience common to all mystics any more than there exists a unified metaphysics between philosophies. Aquinas' view will be seen to contrast to the approach to mysticism which minimizes the impact of metaphysical claims on mysticism, and which views the function of metaphysics as purely practical or preparatory for enlightenment, thus downplaying the contradictory features of those metaphysical claims concerning the nature of ultimate reality.

This paper contains four parts. First, I will examine the points of contact between metaphysics and mysticism, listing their similarities and differences in the context of Aquinas' thought. Second, I will take the metaphysical issue of monism versus pluralism as a locus for intersecting truth claims in metaphysics and mysticism. Third, I will examine the context, formulation and solution to the problem of the "one and the many" within Aquinas' metaphysics, including its relevance for his mystical theology. Fourth, I will examine a metaphysical paradox taken from the domain of the intellect, and show how it stands at the threshold of mystical experience for Aquinas.

2. *POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN METAPHYSICS AND MYSTICISM*

The intersection of mystical experience and metaphysical inquiry arises naturally from at least four similarities of subject matter and aim. *First*, both the metaphysician and the mystic seek a *unifying vision of reality* amidst the multiplicity of objects of experience; in both cases, the synthetic movement of the mind is directed towards an *all-embracing unity* which eludes sense perception; this very direction of the mind stemming, in both cases, from our ability to stand outside the world of phenomena as "ecstatic beings"¹¹ who are by nature open to the transcendent. For Aquinas, even the intellect is endowed with a desire or drive towards the infinite, as truth and goodness, which no finite thing

¹¹ On this point, see F. Copleston, *Religion and the One*, Crossroad, New York, 1982, p. 191.

can satisfy.¹² *Second*, both the metaphysician and the mystic examine *immaterial reality*, the Thomist attaining being as either “neutrally” immaterial (that is, to being as found both in matter, as in the study of categorical being, or, as in “first philosophy”, attaining being as “positively” immaterial, as in the case of beings *never* found in matter (angels and God)).¹³ Many mystics also describe their experiences of the universality or commonality of being, as well as its presence as the unconditioned Absolute in the human soul,¹⁴ but mystics, unlike metaphysicians, limit their focus to the “positive” interpretation of immateriality, with the exception of nature mystics. *Third*, most metaphysicians and mystics view *consciousness* as the most increased, noble and enriched mode of existing¹⁵ yet also saturate their descriptions of divine attributes or contract with ultimate reality with the language of paradox, evoking both the inexhaustible wealth of being and the poverty of our way of conceiving God or ultimate reality. *Fourth* and finally, both the metaphysician and the mystic view the *human soul* as an isomorphic image or microcosm of all reality: for Aquinas the philosopher, man habits the horizon between spiritual and bodily reality, partaking the goodness of both worlds,¹⁶ and spiritually containing the perfection

¹² *CG* III 50: “Nihil finitum desiderium intellectus quietare potest.” Cf. *C.G.* I 43: “Intellectus noster ad infinitum in intelligendo extenditur.” An interesting reflection on the connection between the infinity of knowing and the “infinity” of the human spirit is found in: J. Robb, *Man as infinite spirit*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1974.

¹³ Aquinas, *In De Trin.* V.1. John F. Wippel treats this issue extensively in his discussion on the relation between the existence of God and the real distinction. An initial treatment of the types of immateriality can be found in his book, *Metaphysical themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1984, pp. 29f.

¹⁴ Meister Eckhart and Buddhists would be good examples here.

¹⁵ See Aquinas' commentary on the *Liber de Causis* 18: “Considerandum est quod omnes gradus rerum ad tria videtur reducere, quae sunt: esse, vivere, et intelligere.” The Neoplatonic triad of being, life and intelligence is taken from Proclus, Dionysius and the author of the *Liber de causis*. On this triad, see, for example: F. O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, Brill, Leiden, 1992, pp. 179–180.

¹⁶ See *In 2 Sent.* 1.2.3 Sed Contra; *In 3 Sent.* Prol.: “Homo enim est quasi horizon et confinium spiritualis et corporalis naturae, ut quasi medium inter utrasque, utrasque bonitates participet et corporales et spirituales.” Cf. *C.G.* II 81, *In de causis* IX, 220: “Anima est in horizonte aeternitatis et temporis existens infra aeternitatem et supra tempus.” Cf. the article by G. Verbeke, ‘Man as ‘Frontier’ according to Aquinas’, in G. Verbeke & D. Verhelsted (eds.), *Aquinas and the problems of his time*, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 1976, pp. 195–223.

of the entire universe¹⁷ not only cognitively but also at an ontological level, since all levels of created perfection—material, biological, animal and spiritual, are existentially present within his nature.¹⁸ For a certain variety of mystics, the Absolute is discovered within the soul, which is discovered to be basically identical with ultimate reality, resulting in the dissolution of the finite soul's individuality and in the disappearance of the subject/object distinction into "pure consciousness."¹⁹

Despite the similarities noted between the reflective experience of the mystic and of the metaphysician, namely, the mind's tendency towards *synthetic unity*, the data of *immateriality*, the priority given to *consciousness* and the *isomorphism* of the soul and being in general, significant differences separate the two approaches. The mystic's contact with ultimate reality is direct and experiential, and often more volitional than cognitive, whereas the metaphysician's reflection on being is inferential and demonstrative. As well, the metaphysician's study of being embraces not only the "positive" variety but also the "neutral" variety of immateriality. With respect to *consciousness*, the apophatic summit of first philosophy differs from the intentional and poetic use of paradox by mystics—the former is intended to reveal a set of truths about God, whereas the latter serves to highlight the inherent limitations of man's mind and ultimately to reduce discursive reason to silence. With respect to the *soul*, metaphysicians generally *deny* an *ontological* or *substantial* union with ultimate reality, asserting the possibility of only a *cognitive* and *affective* presence of the Absolute to the soul,²⁰ reasoning

¹⁷ *De Ver.* 2.2: "Dicitur animam esse quodammodo omnia, quia nata est omnia cognoscere. Et secundum hunc modum possibile est ut in una re totius universi perfectio existat. . . ." Aristotle's text is *De Anima* III.8 (431b21).

¹⁸ In *In 3 Sent.* Prol., Aquinas notes that whereas in other creatures, the streams of perfection are distinct, in man they are joined together, so that he is a microcosm and similitude (*minor mundus*) of the entire order of the universe: "Ista flumina in aliis creaturis inveniuntur distincta; sed in homine quodammodo omnia congregantur."

¹⁹ Varieties of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and various monistic philosophies (Spinoza, e.g.) are representative examples.

²⁰ Although Aquinas accepts the Aristotelian doctrine of the identity of the known object with the subject knower in the act of knowing ("the knower in act is the object known in act": *cognoscens in actu est ipsum cognitum in actu*, *In 2 de An.* l.12 [#377]), he makes clear that this is not an ontological but an epistemic identity, in his discussions of God's omnipresence (e.g., *S.T.* I 8.4). The perceiver does not really exist *in* the object perceived (*S.T.* I 8.4 ad 6). Mystical union is a sort of experiential knowledge of God through Love, where the person receives a "mission" of the Trinity, and through the infused gifts, the Holy Spirit is said to enter the mind invisibly through love, as the Son enters by the gift of wisdom (*In 1 Sent.* 15.4.1 sol.). On the notion of "presence", specifically, of God's presence in creation and to the human mind and heart,

that the distinction between subject and object is a necessary condition of consciousness or the presence of being to the mind.

Having listed both the similarities and differences between metaphysics and mysticism, we now turn to our earlier claim that in contrast to modern approaches, which either derive ontology from mystical experience or sever the connection altogether, Aquinas superimposes his mystical thought onto his metaphysics. One could say, with some conditions, that he reverses the line of causality *from* metaphysics *to* mysticism in terms of the ontological foundations of the mystical life. This grafting of mystical speculation onto a metaphysical framework, moreover, is perfectly natural for a thinker who envisions metaphysics as a necessary condition for theology, and for whom the existence of God is conceived as an end or goal of metaphysics.²¹

To this extent, his mystical theology is circumscribed *by* the metaphysical framework, with the consequence that there can be no “core” or common, identical mystical experience which escapes or contradicts philosophical context, for Aquinas. In short, differing metaphysical claims about the nature of being, the soul and ultimate reality generate diverse possibilities for mystical experience and define the parameters of valid mystical truth claims. To see how Aquinas’ thought differs from other mystical thinkers in this regard, we must *first* illustrate the correlation between certain metaphysical claims and their mystical counterparts, and *second*, examine a selection of metaphysical concepts that Aquinas employs in his theory of mystical ascent.

3. THE INTERSECTION OF METAPHYSICAL AND MYSTICAL TRUTH CLAIMS: MONISM VS. PLURALISM

Turning to the first task, we can distinguish ontological pluralism from the different varieties of monism. *Ontological pluralism* is a metaphysical doctrine stating that there are many things, or kinds of things in

see A. Maurer, ‘Reflections on Thomas Aquinas’ notion of Presence’, in R.J. Long (ed.), *Philosophy and the God of Abraham: Essays in Memory of James A. Weisbeipl, OP (Papers in Medieval Studies 12)*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto: 1991, pp. 113–127.

²¹ As John F. Wippel has frequently noted, contemporary interpreters (especially the debate between Wippel and J. Owens and the entire Gilsonian school) are deeply divided over the relative priority of metaphysics to natural (and revealed) theology in the order of discovery—see e.g., the references in J.F. Wippel, ‘Metaphysics’ in N. Kretzmann & E. Stump (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Aquinas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 89 #15. Cf. Wippel (1984: 29 #80).

the world, standing in relation to each other and often in relation to a causal source. Ontological pluralism can recognize either “family resemblances” or “common essences” among things, but at other times admits only semiotic and logical entities into discourse,²² refraining from ontological commitment to extramental entities of any sort. In its ancient and medieval variety, pluralism proposes a doctrine of analogical participation or order within being as a solution to the problem of how being can be both one and many. In its various guises, pluralism is the most persistent approach to being, historically claiming adherents across the philosophical spectrum. The *mystical* truth claims corresponding to metaphysical pluralism include a variety of views, many of which posit a transcendent or a grounding “ultimate reality” beyond the world of phenomena, conditioning our ordinary awareness of multiplicity and the levels of mystical ascent. While “nature mystics” are world-affirming, and display a profound gratitude for sense experience, and “apophatic mystics” are often world-denying, both posit a “differentiated unity” between the soul and ultimate reality in mystical union, rejecting the substantial identity of the personal self with a divine infinity immanent in the world, for this would violate both the requirements of consciousness (the subject/object distinction) and the data of experience (multiplicity perceived through sensation).

Unlike pluralism, ontological monism is the view that there is *one* object or reality, and that our experience of essential differences and relations between things, that is, our perception of change causality, of individuals and community, is illusory. *Strict* or *universal monism* does not express a unity of the *source*, but rather a unity of *substance* or existence, such that what we identify as finite entities exist in the same way a conditioned being, whether this be conceived of as material (materialist monism)²³ or as spiritual (idealist monism).²⁴ In its affirmation of the essential oneness of the infinite impersonal Absolute and the world, *pantheistic monism* states that the apparent multiplicity of entities is really a manifestation of a single substance, either according to different points of view or according to different states, such that the divine is not the independent being on which all else hinges ontologic-

²² One calls to mind medieval nominalists and Bertrand Russell’s “logical atomism” here, which he himself described as “absolute pluralism”: see the entry ‘Monism’ in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vols. 5–6, MacMillan, New York, 1967, p. 364.

²³ Parmenides was, paradoxically, a materialist monist, in that he viewed the One to be a finite material entity.

²⁴ Some examples of idealist/spiritual monists are: Spinoza, Hegel, and the Hindu thinker Samkara.

ally.²⁵ Parmenides' hegemonic One and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism's Brahman both assume the view that the separate self is illusory are good examples of strict monism which resists the reality of plurality, time and change.

Where the Many are viewed as transient forms assumed by the One in its unfolding self-development, we find *qualified* or *partial monism*, which does not reject the Many as unreal or illusory, but unlike *theistic pluralism*, does not suppose view the One as a personal transcendent being either. Plotinus' emanating hypostases²⁶ and his metaphoric descriptions of the One's relationship to its products are apt examples of partial monism,²⁷ although there have been many interpretations of it.²⁸

Metaphysically, what binds monists together is the *henological principle* or the primacy of unity over multiplicity and the assertion of substantial union of the soul with ultimate reality. For metaphysical theism, however, the soul is transformed into God only on the cognitive and appetitive levels.²⁹ Indeed, unity is the most basic of the transcendentals besides being, and a thing has existence to the degree it partakes

²⁵ Cf. Spinoza's "God-Nature" or Bradley's "Absolute."

²⁶ Viz., Nous and Soul emanating from the One.

²⁷ The One is said to emanate its effects in the way that the sun radiates light, fire emanates heat, snow its coldness, flowers diffuse their perfume, or in the manner of concentric circles superimposed on each other (Plotinus, *Enneads* V.1). These metaphors of emanation reveal the unified One to communicate its perfection through a series of descending agents/hypostases without being diminished in any way. Plotinus' ontology dovetails harmoniously into his natural mysticism in that the progress of souls towards their transcendent source also marks the unfolding cosmic return of all being to its ground. The "flight of the alone to the Alone" (*Enneads* VI.9.11) is a stripping away both of individuality and of the "will to isolation" found in the lower emanations. Personal identity is absorbed into the All in the highest stage of consciousness, and while the ordinary ego is surpassed, lower psychic activities still persist through lower forms of attention. On this topic, see Plato Mamo, 'Is Plotinian Mysticism Monistic?', in R. Baine Harris, *The significance of NeoPlatonism*, International Society for NeoPlatonic Studies, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, 1976, pp. 199–215.

²⁸ There has been considerable disagreement in the interpretation of Plotinus. While Mamo (1976) and the traditional interpretation attribute pantheist monism to him, John Rist (*Plotinus: the road to reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1967) attributes theism to him, and Sweeney (*Christian philosophy: Greek, Medieval, contemporary reflections*, Peter Lang, New York, 1997, pp. 383–398) denies both positions.

²⁹ On the intentional unity in knowledge, which implies an intentional otherness, see, e.g., *S.T.* I 84–85; *C.G.* I 44; *De Ver.* 2.2; *Comp. Theol.* 83. If the subject knower became the known object entitatively, then both would be destroyed, he argues. Thus, the intimacy involved in actual intentional union is balanced with the otherness of subject and object.

in unity.³⁰ *Mystically* what unites monists is first, the assertion of an original unity of the personal self with all of being, and the becoming aware, through enlightenment, of what one really is, or has been, all along. Eastern thinkers speak of reaching the knowledge that *atman is Brahman* or Absolute Spirit, and Plotinus speaks of the soul finding its “true self”, which has been united with God from the beginning.³¹ Second, strict monists (excluding Plotinus) place little practical value on *desire* or the *will* in mystical ascent, since volition involves final causality and a distinction of subject and object, moving the rational agent through knowledge of an end.³² In monism, there can be no “weighting of a tendency by a good”, to use Aquinas’ description of love,³³ since mystical ascent does not concern the movement of a rational appetite towards a transcendent term, but merely a shifting of one’s level of awareness to the Absolute within the self.³⁴

³⁰ Aquinas, *De Ver.* I.1.

³¹ Plotinus, *En.* VI.9.11; VI, 5.7.1.

³² Desire, will and intellect all involve duality, which is seen to breed isolation and unhappiness — the “second noble truth” of Buddhism, called *trishna*, or the truth of clinging, expresses this well:

“Clinging is never kept within bounds,
It is sure to go the wrong way;
Quit it, and things follow their own courses,
While the essence neither departs nor abides.”

This is a stanza from a mystical poem ‘On Trust in the Heart’, composed by the third patriarch of Zen, containing the essence of Mahayana mystical insight (found in F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: a study and anthology*, Penguin Books, London, 1963, p. 166).

³³ *S.T.* I–II 26.1–2. Cf. G. Smith, *Natural Theology*, Macmillan, New York, 1951, p. 214.

³⁴ It ought to be noted here that Buddhist ethics do promote goodwill, or benevolence, as well as a vast compassion for suffering humanity and for all creation (the word *metta* signifies “loving kindness”): “All beings, whether weak or strong — omitting none [. . .] born to be born [. . .] may all beings be happy and at their ease! [. . .] Even as a mother watches over and protects her child, her only child, so with a boundless mind should one cherish all living beings, radiating friendliness over the entire world.” (from ‘The Metta Sutra’, quoted in F.C. Happold 1963 : 172).

4. AQUINAS' ARGUMENTS AGAINST MONISM³⁵

The problem of monism for Aquinas according to his treatment of the issue as found in Parmenides and inherited through Aristotle, was two-fold: first, *how* is being a “unity” without denying divine transcendence, and second, *how* can creatures be “outside” of God without adding any being to Him, Who is self-subsistent existence? Since the issue of metaphysical monism is so central to theories of mystical union, I will briefly analyze Aquinas' discussions of it from the viewpoint of three sets of questions. First, how and in what context does Aquinas formulate the Parmenidean problem of the one and the many? Here we can also ask, why is being not univocal as a concept for Aquinas, or, in other words, why is being not a genus? Second, why does Aquinas insist that the being of God and of creaturely *esse commune* are distinct, while also maintaining a theory of analogy which apparently unites the two? Finally, and third, what is the ultimate reason for Aquinas' preference for analogy over the univocity of monism, and how does this affect his mystical thought?

Issue #1: Aquinas' formulation of the problem of the “One and the Many”

Aquinas' treatment of the Parmenidean problem can be found in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book 1, lectio 9, and on the

³⁵ In its denial of all distinctions between entities, metaphysical monism annihilates the individual human soul in mystical union, thus failing to preserve both God's transcendence and the reality of a mystical union effected by divine grace and charity. For Aquinas, it is through divine sanctifying grace alone that the soul is, in Maritain's words, “connaturalized” with God. This union, as Maritain has noted, is one according to intention, and not according to existence or being, which would assimilate the knower into the known. The soul is appetitively transformed into God in what Maritain calls “an intentional being of love”, which retains the infinite distance between creature and Creator. (Maritain, *Degrees of knowledge* (pp. 368–375) as found in C. Hancock, ‘Maritain on mystical contemplation’, in D. Hudson & M. Mancini (eds.), *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and friend*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 1987, pp. 265, 269.) Aquinas also distinguishes between “quidditative” and “comprehensive” knowledge of God, claiming that even the blessed in heaven do not enjoy a comprehensive knowledge of God, while they do enjoy a quidditative and direct knowledge of His essence by virtue of the strengthening power of the *lumen gloriae*. (*S.T.* I 12.2, and ad 3. Both angelic and human minds need the *lumen gloriae* in order to see God. On this, see J.F. Wippel, *The metaphysical thought of Thomas Aquinas: From finite being to uncreated being* (*Monographs of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* 1), Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 2000, pp. 533–535.

Physics, Book 1, lectio 2.³⁶ If the cause of plurality cannot arise *within* being, and cannot originate from *outside* of being, then, Parmenides argues, there *are* no distinctions or change in the world, and being is one. Parmenides' argument is, simply, that since being is one, and since whatever is outside of being is *nothing*, then all divisions and distinctions (including change and motion) are in fact *nothing*, as introducing an impossible differentiation into the unity of being.³⁷

Besides the Parmenidean context, there was the more immediate issue of the *pantheistic monism* present in the school of Amauric of Bene influential in the 13th century, as well as in the Stoics', and, much later, in David of Dinant's materialistic monism, all known to Aquinas. With these opponents in mind, he argues against the varieties of pantheistic monism in the context of his proof that "God does not enter into composition with other things" in both *Summas*.³⁸ He first proves that God is not present in the world as the fully immanent "world soul", as the Stoics and early Gnostics would have it in their proclamation of the unity of God and man's spirit. Rather, God transcends the material world He creates and is present through efficient, not material causality.³⁹ Second, he proves that God is not the *formal esse* of creatures, as the school of Amauric of Bene proposed, for this would entail several impossible consequences: ⁴⁰ First, Aquinas reasons that since being (and thus, also divine being) is not a genus, things are differentiated because they have diverse natures within the community of being. Divine *esse* does not accrue to the divine *nature* as something "outside" of it, for the two are identical;⁴¹ but the monists go on to *identify* the essence of God with the being of creatures, deducing their conclusion from the denial of being as a genus in both instances (*esse commune* and *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). Second, since "common being" exists only in the intellect (and not as a third entity beyond the being of creatures), if God is *common* being, then nothing will exist outside the intellect, which is absurd. Third, God would no longer be *eternal* but would exist only as the terminus of generation, and as such, would be deprived of His

³⁶ See Wippel's treatment on this (2000: 66–73).

³⁷ Aquinas presents his argument in *In 1 Meta.* l. 9 #138.

³⁸ *S.T.* I 3.8 and *C.G.* I 26. For a treatment of this issue, it is useful to consult L. Elders, *The philosophical theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Brill, Leiden, 1990, pp. 157–160, as well as E. Gilson, *History of Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1955, pp. 240–243.

³⁹ *S.T.* I 3.8c.

⁴⁰ This *reductio ad absurdum* argument is found in *C.G.* I 26.

⁴¹ Aquinas proves this latter point in *C.G.* I 22.

necessary transcendence. After having proven that God is neither the immanent "world soul" nor is He the formal being of things, He rejects David of Dinant's error that made prime matter the element common to God, souls and material things.⁴² As the first efficient cause, God is distinguished numerically from His effects⁴³ and acts independently of them. As well, as pure act, God is not a part of a composite whole, for as such His action would be proper to the whole, not to Himself, and parts depend on the whole for their being and action. In conclusion, in opposition to pantheistic monism, Aquinas affirms both God's transcendent aseity *and* His immanence in the world by way of causality, in his discussion of God's immanence by way of "essence, presence and power."⁴⁴

Having discussed the context and formulation of the problem of the community in being, or the issue of the "one and the many" in Aquinas' texts, what is his solution to the problem? In his treatment of Boethius' claim that "diversity or otherness is the cause of plurality"⁴⁵ Aquinas argues that it is not *being* taken simply, nor is it absolute *nonbeing*, but rather "*relative nonbeing*" that accounts for the primary division among principles of being, among beings, and for change in general, so that one need not invoke monism to guarantee the unity of being. Ultimately, the foundation for plurality among beings and principles of beings lies in God's intellect, which, in cooperation with the divine will, creates a plurality of creatures to properly mirror His superabundant perfection. Departing from the Parmenidean and Platonic tradition which equate plurality and distinction with imperfection and nonbeing, Aquinas sees plurality as a *means* to God's proper end, namely, His own being, in that it is fitting for divine goodness that others partake in it.⁴⁶

In his detailed responses to Parmenides' monism, Aquinas argues first, that Parmenides conceives of being as a genus,⁴⁷ for its differentiation falls outside of it, and second, that he destroys the meaning of

⁴² *S.T.* I 3.9.

⁴³ Since every efficient cause is distinct, if not specifically, at least numerically, from the effects it produces.

⁴⁴ As found in *S.T.* I.8.

⁴⁵ In his commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate* q. 4 a. 1.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *S.T.* I 19.2. On the various arguments of Aquinas for plurality, and their relation to their Platonic, Dionysian and Boethian heritage, see my article: 'Arguments for Plurality in Aquinas', in Heather Senn (ed.), *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference*, Villanova University Press, Villanova, 1996, pp. 205–216.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., *In 1 Meta.* l. 9 #138.

a “principle” which presupposes multiplicity and causality.⁴⁸ Even as a concept, being cannot be a genus, however, due to its various significations — being is said in different ways of different things⁴⁹ and is predicated analogously of the various categories.⁵⁰ “Being” cannot be predicated univocally simply because univocal predication, he says, requires that the thing predicated remain the same in both name and concept or definition among its subjects. In his thinking here, Aquinas’ position stands midway between the strict metaphysical monism of Parmenides, which makes reality one in both being *and* concept, and the “modified univocity” of Scotus, which claims a univocal *concept* of being but an *analogical reality* among its subjects.⁵¹ For Thomas, being is analogical in both concept *and* reality, according to various entities’ relationship to their causal source,⁵² as is seen in his various discussions of different types of analogy and in his final preference for unity “by reference to a first.”⁵³ Aquinas’ responses to Parmenides in his Aristotelian and Boethian commentaries, read beside his responses to medieval varieties of pantheistic monism in his *Summas* both reflect a formidable arsenal of arguments against the different varieties of monism and his ability to preserve both divine transcendence and immanence, and the unity and plurality of being, in dynamic tension.

Issue #2: The distinction between God and “esse commune”

In *C.G.* I 26, Aquinas cites the confusion of *esse divinum* and *esse commune*, the being of creatures, as one of the steps involved in the path towards adopting pantheistic monism. Elsewhere,⁵⁴ he notes the similarity lies in a certain “indeterminacy” in each, yet of opposed types:

⁴⁸ See, e.g., *In 1 Phys.* l. 2 #15.

⁴⁹ *In 9 Meta.* l. 9 #139.

⁵⁰ Cf. *In 1 Phys.* l. 3 #20–#21.

⁵¹ As is well known, Scotus’ theory of the univocal concept of being was proposed as a necessary first step in the human mind’s ascent to God. If being were not common at least on the conceptual level between God and creature, there would be ability of the mind to rise to a knowledge of God’s existence, according to Scotus.

⁵² Whether that be substance, in the case of predicamental being, or in relation to infinite Being, in the case of beings taken individually and as a whole.

⁵³ Aristotle’s *pros hen* equivocation, as opposed to the analogy of proportionality, or among sets of relations. On this topic, see, e.g., B. Montagnes, *La doctrine de l’analogie de l’être d’après saint Thomas d’Aquin*, Louvain, Paris, 1963, and Wippel (2000: 73–93).

⁵⁴ *S.T.* I 13.11.

Esse commune as an abstraction⁵⁵ can be viewed as the indeterminate logical substrate of the categorical determinations, but *Esse Subsistens* has the indeterminacy of infinite and perfect actuality,⁵⁶ and Aquinas takes it as axiomatic that *esse* as such is not self-limiting.⁵⁷ It is precisely because God's description as "*Qui est*" names "the infinite sea of substance itself" and designates no particular form, that it is the name most proper to God.⁵⁸ Yet subsistent *Esse* which is the source of all things' being differs from *esse commune* which does not subsist but exists alone only in the human intellect.⁵⁹ The fact that being cannot exist without its modes mitigates against the possibility of identifying the two forms of *esse*. The determination of being into both its special/categorical and its general/transcendental modes is internal to being, and immediate, not accruing onto some prior indeterminate state.⁶⁰ "Right from the beginning" (*statim a principio*)⁶¹ being is either substance, quality, or quantity, or one of its transcendental modes. If being can be understood but can never *exist* without its modes, there is still the question of the origin of the confusion of creaturely and divine *esse*, especially if both are said to be "without any addition." In both *S.T.* I 3.4 and *C.G.* I 26, Aquinas notes the double meaning of this phrase—first, something can *preclude* any possible addition by its very definition, or, second, it can merely *prescind* from any addition (that is, it is merely *being considered* to be without reference to any addition: in being considered universally, being *neither includes nor excludes* an addition). *God's being* is of the first sort, while *esse commune* is of the second sort, in that Subsistent *Esse* cannot be determined by anything outside of it, whereas "common" or universal *esse* is open to many determinations and indicates that in each of its particular instances, being is related to an essence in which it is received. It is the particular essence which accounts for the addition made to being in each case.

⁵⁵ And here we must distinguish *esse commune* from *esse ut actus essendi*, which *De pot.* 7.2 ad 9 describes as the completion and fulfilment of each form. Here, *esse* is said to be the most perfect and most formal element in a thing.

⁵⁶ For the indeterminate actuality of pure *esse*, see *De pot.* 7.2. ad 9.

⁵⁷ For references to this principle in Aquinas and for a detailed study of its self-evident character for him, see Wippel (2000: 172–174).

⁵⁸ Cf. *De pot.* 7.5c. Cf. J. Reichmann, 'Immanently transcendent and subsistent *Esse*: a comparison', *Thomist* 38, 1974, 332–369, p. 345.

⁵⁹ *C.G.* I 26.

⁶⁰ See *De Veritate* I.1.

⁶¹ *In 8 Meta.* l. 5 #1763.

Issue #3: Aquinas' preference for analogy over the univocity of monism, and the impact of analogy on his mystical thought

Without detailing the various types of analogy throughout Thomas' writings,⁶² it can be said that analogy provides Thomas with an explanation of the simultaneous community and diversity within finite being by reference to the unity of their causal source, namely, infinite being. As Aertsen puts it, "the model of analogy is intended to bring the categorial diversity to unity at the transcendental level."⁶³ Because there is some likeness of the effect and its cause, and because there is an order of priority and posteriority with respect to names for God and creatures, being is predicated in the case of natural theology according to an analogy of relation or proportion to a first, namely, God. Unlike the metaphysical analogy of being among substance and accidents, the predication of being between God and creatures in natural theology involves a dissonance between the order of nature and the order of discovery. Here, being is predicated of *God* first in the order of *nature/existence*, but is predicated of *creatures* first in the order of *knowledge/discovery*. This is what Thomas means by saying that in the case of the divine names, the "thing signified" is correctly predicated, but the "way of signifying" is imperfect as drawn from a finite intellect.⁶⁴ Over and against monism, Aquinas acknowledges a hierarchy within being from which, he says, the various modes of being are derived, as well as the categories.⁶⁵ At the basis of his theory of analogical predication of being lies his metaphysical theory of participation in *esse*, which states, in a nutshell, the insight that the entity possessing the maximum in a certain order *causes* that same perfection to exist in its various instances or inferiors.⁶⁶ While pantheistic monism would have creatures *directly*

⁶² The evolution in Thomas' description of types of analogy and their uses in his metaphysics is presented well by Montagnes (1963) and is summarised in J. Aertsen, *Medieval philosophy and the transcendentals: the case of Thomas Aquinas*, Brill, Leiden, 1996, pp. 386f.

⁶³ The language of "predicamental" or "categorial" versus "transcendental" being is that of Fabro, and has been adopted by several scholars, especially Aertsen (1996).

⁶⁴ See, e.g., *C.G.* I 34; *S.T.* I 13.6, for the *res significata/modus significandi* distinction.

⁶⁵ *De Veritate* I.1.

⁶⁶ *S.T.* I 44.1: "If something is found to be present in something by participation, it must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially [...] It follows therefore that all things other than God are not identical with their *esse*, but participate in *esse*. It is necessary therefore that all things which are distinguished by reason of diverse participation in *esse* so as to exist more or less perfectly be caused by one first being, which exists most perfectly."

participating in God's essence, however, Aquinas uses the language of "participating by *likeness* or *similitude*"⁶⁷ to the divine essence.

Aquinas' preference for analogy over univocity is central to his mystical thought in that it provides the foundation for accepting a "differentiated unity" of God and the soul by providing compelling arguments *against* a *substantial* union between the two. Aquinas' occasional language of the soul's "dissolution" into God⁶⁸ is to be understood at the intentional level only, and as an expression of the union among wills. As Maritain explains Thomas' text, mystical union involves God's presence as an *esse intentionale* for the will, and "the divine object of love is called *intentional* by analogy with the intentional being, the intentional object, of knowledge."⁶⁹

The interesting similarity between Aquinas' mysticism and his metaphysics lies in the fact that neither the summit of metaphysical knowledge nor the peak of mystical experience delivers any conceptual content. For the metaphysician, the way of removal in our judgments about being advances through a series of negations — of corporeal, then of intellectual creaturely aspects, and finally, of creaturely *esse*, in relation to the first efficient cause. It is in a "darkness of ignorance" that we are best joined to God, he states,⁷⁰ which signifies, as Father Owens has aptly demonstrated,⁷¹ the infinite character of undetermined *esse*, or the all-embracing universality to which existence can extend, grasped only through a process of resolution and judgment. The highest metaphysical notion of being is confused or indistinct, in that it is illumined only in the synthesis of judgment, and not bathed in the clarity found in our knowledge of natures.⁷²

Similar to the summit of metaphysical knowledge is the situation of mystical union, which also involves an evacuation of the intellect, and is nonconceptual and incomplete. Unlike the metaphysician's knowledge of God's nature, which is in no way intuited, but, as Owens

⁶⁷ *De divinis nominibus* 2.3.1#158. The issue of participation in Aquinas is summarised well by Wippel (1993: 93–99).

⁶⁸ See *S.T.* II-II 24.9 and see Erb (2002: 90).

⁶⁹ Maritain, *Degrees of knowledge*, pp. 369 #5 (as quoted in Hancock 1987: 266 #12).

⁷⁰ *In 1 Sent.* 8.1.1 ad 4.

⁷¹ In his article 'Aquinas — 'Darkness of Ignorance' in the most refined notion of God', in R. Shahan & F. Kovach (eds.), *Bonaventure and Aquinas*, Oklahoma, 1976, pp. 69–86.

⁷² *In 1 Sent.* 8.1.1 ad 3: "[...] cum esse creaturae imperfecte repraesentet divinum esse, et hoc nomen 'qui est' imperfecte significat ipsum, quia significat per modum cuiusdam concretionis et compositionis; [...] sicut in hoc nomine 'qui est'."

affirms, is “concluded to, and only in darkness”,⁷³ Thomas the mystic *experiences* God’s presence or “suffers divine things”⁷⁴ through an experimental wisdom wrought by charity and the supernatural gifts. In initiating mystical union, God wills to us His very Self, and comes to dwell in the soul in a relationship of love.⁷⁵ The mystic’s affective union is consonant with its metaphysical moorings but is more noble, more mysterious and more intimate, since the union caused by love is closer than that which is caused by knowledge.⁷⁶

5. METAPHYSICAL PARADOX AND THE THRESHOLD OF MYSTICISM

As Maritain has noted, in *Degrees of knowledge*,⁷⁷ for Thomas, mystical and metaphysical wisdoms diverge not only in their starting points and inspirations, but also in the scope of their conclusions. Maritain argues that mysticism is the natural culmination of metaphysics,⁷⁸ however, since both are driven by the natural desire to know the First Cause. Moreover, the human soul can ultimately be satisfied only by knowing the infinite source and plenitude of all being, namely, God.⁷⁹ Bringing the two approaches together, we can say that Thomas’ metaphysics of creation signals a meditation on the mystery of being that touches on the mystical, in that both the metaphysician and the mystic stand in

⁷³ Owens (1976: 85f).

⁷⁴ The text is *S.T.* II–II 45.2. See Erb (2002: 78f).

⁷⁵ See, for example, *In 2 Sent.* 26.1.1 ad 2, and Erb (2002: 83).

⁷⁶ *S.T.* I–II 28.1 ad 3.

⁷⁷ Maritain, *Degrees of knowledge*, as found in C. Hancock, ‘Maritain on mystical contemplation’, in D. Hudson & M. Mancini (eds.), *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and friend*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 1987.

⁷⁸ Maritain, *Degrees of knowledge*, pp. 266f; cf. pp. 283–290.

⁷⁹ Maritain, *Degrees of knowledge*, p. 284: “[...] metaphysics, like every human science, leaves us dissatisfied. Being oriented towards the First Cause and naturally desiring to know it perfectly, it is natural for it to make us desire... to contemplate God’s essence [...]” Although the human spirit is not infinite *simpliciter* because its form is determined by matter, and therefore, by the imperfect, nonetheless, the human mind *does* extend, in a way, to an infinite number of things, and thus, is infinite in a qualified or secondary way: *S.T.* I 7.2 ad 2: “Dicendum quod hoc ipsum quod virtus intellectus extendit se quodammodo ad infinita, procedit ex hoc quod intellectus est forma non in materia [...]” For a defense of the relative “infinity” of the human spirit, see J. Robb, *Man as infinite spirit (Marquette Aquinas Lecture, 1974)*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1974. Cf. W.N. Clarke, *Person and being (Marquette Aquinas Lecture, 1993)*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1993, pp. 36ff.

relation to, and are surrounded, as it were, by the divine mystery that surpasses our understanding and sustains all things in being.

One paradox that illumines the commonality of experience between Thomas' metaphysics and his mystical thought stems from the arena of the intellect, namely, the simultaneous immanent and transcendent meanings of *esse* in relation to creation.⁸⁰ Regarding this, we can note that both the metaphysician and the mystic know the *fragility of creatureliness* in relation to the fullness of its source, and both also know the *intimacy* of the supreme Cause existing in creatures through His "essence, presence and power."⁸¹ God is said to exist in His creatures by *essence* not formally or inherently, for this would deny His transcendence, but by acting on them; moreover, He is present most immediately and intimately in things by giving them existence, which, as the most interior and conditioning aspect of a thing, is the source of the many perfections in it.⁸² God also exists in things according to His *power* or providential governance by enabling things' operations, and according to His *presence* or knowledge, and in this last sense, it is more proper to say that "creatures exist in *God*", rather than saying that "God exists in His *creatures*", for what is known exists in the knower and through His knowledge God causes things to be.⁸³ Moreover, the Christian mystic enjoys a still more intimate mode of divine immanence through grace⁸⁴ and in a special way through the gifts of the Spirit, by which he is blessed with an experiential knowledge of God through love.⁸⁵ Thus, there are two modes of *divine immanence* for Thomas: In an *ordinary* way, God is related as a cause to His effects, which are partici-

⁸⁰ There is an additional paradox that reveals the connection between his metaphysics and his mystical thought which is taken from the order of the appetite: it is Thomas' conviction that in order to seek out its end or fulfillment, the human will already in fact possesses that end, for it is created, directed and sustained as the image and likeness of that infinite good by which it is attracted. On this point, see E. Gilson, *The Christian philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Random House, New York, 1956, pp. 272ff.

⁸¹ *In 1 Sent.* 37.1.2 Sol; *Comp. Theol.* 135; *S.T.* I 8.3.

⁸² *In 1 Sent.* d.37 q. 1 a. 1: "Deus est unicuique intimus, sicut esse proprium rei est intimum ipsi rei."

⁸³ What is known exists in the knower: through its likeness (*S.T.* I 8.3 ad 3). What is willed exists in the will as an inclination towards the thing willed (cf. *S.T.* I 27.4).

⁸⁴ *S.T.* I 43.3.

⁸⁵ *S.T.* I 93.7; 43.5 ad 2.

ations in His perfection; and in a *higher* way, God exists in the hearts of those who know and love Him through the sending of His Spirit.⁸⁶

As we have noted, on the metaphysical level, God works intimately in all things precisely as the cause of their “universal *esse*” (*causa ipsius esse universalis*)⁸⁷ yet the fact that the limitations of created perfection do not *derive* from *esse*, for “to be caused by another” is not an inherent characteristic of *esse* as such,⁸⁸ leads the mind to infer the subsistent, undetermined and infinite nature⁸⁹ of an existence that is *transcendent*.⁹⁰ *Esse* thus signifies both the immanent presence *and* the transcendent subsistence of God, without confusing *esse commune* with *esse subsistens*, such that there is still an ontological community between them based on real participation. Since each thing receives its perfection by participating in existence, *esse* is the perfection of every form,⁹¹ and things in this way participate in the first and “pure act” (God) in some way. This is true because anything that exists in a diminished way must be caused by something to which the perfection of existence belongs essentially.⁹² Finite beings do not partake of the divine essence either “partially” or “wholly” as pantheistic monism would have it, however, since He communicates His perfection through a similitude or likeness.⁹³

⁸⁶ *S.T.* I 43.3. Cf. *In 1 Sent.* d. 15 q. 4 a. 1 sol.: “[...] Unde sicut Spiritus sanctus invisibiliter procedit in mentem per donum amoris, ita Filius per donum sapientiae; in quo est manifestation ipsius Patris, qui est ultimum ad quod recurrimus.” For the sending or mission of the divine persons, see *S.T.* I 43.1–5.

⁸⁷ *S.T.* I 105.5c: “Et quia forma rei est intra rem, et tanto magis quanto consideratur ut prior et universalior; et ipse Deus est proprie causa ipsius esse universalis in rebus omnibus, quod inter omnia est magis intimum rebus; sequitur quod Deus in omnibus intime operatur.”

⁸⁸ *C.G.* II 52.

⁸⁹ *De ente* 4 [6–7].

⁹⁰ “Qui est” is God’s most “proper” name, firstly, because of its indefiniteness, for it does not signify a determinate form: *S.T.* I 13.11; *De pot.* 7.5.

⁹¹ *Quaest. Disp.* 12.5.1.

⁹² *S.T.* I 44.1. Wippel (1993: 98) correctly notes that Aquinas speaks sometimes of participation in the finite act of being, and at other times of participation in subsistent being.

⁹³ On this point, see R. te Velde, *Participation and substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, Brill, Leiden, 1995, p. 99; *In de div. nom.* c.3 l. 2 #158. te Velde (*ibid.*: 95) notes that multiplied similitude in creatures rests on the fact of their composition: the negation of the identity of essence and *esse* in all else but God. In this he agrees with the view of Fabro over and against Geiger, who gives participation by similitude a priority to that of composition.

Aquinas' "analogy of light" states that just as the sun is naturally luminous, while the air is illumined by sharing in the sun's light while remaining distinct from the source of light, so also God alone is essentially being (*ens per essentiam suam*), while creatures are beings through participation, since their existence is limited by a specific essence.⁹⁴ Thomas follows Dionysius' view that through the various modalities of *esse*, namely, being, life and wisdom, God is participated by His effects in the manner of His likeness or mode of imitability⁹⁵—and the mystery of being, we could say, lies in the gratuitousness of God's creative act—Self-diffusive divine goodness manifesting itself as "theophany", to use Dionysius' term, without departing from its own transcendent unity⁹⁶ in the establishment of things' being.

What is *mystical* in Thomas account of being is first, the *coincidence of opposites* of divine transcendence and immanence; second, the recognition that despite certain positive knowledge wrought by argument, the divine remains *ineffable*; and third, and most important, the his insight into the *gratuitous nature of God's creative act*. Regarding the coincidence of divine immanence and transcendence, Thomas differs from later mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, in balancing his apophatic statements about the lack of quidditative knowledge of God for the *viator*⁹⁷ with an assertion of our limited, though positive knowledge of God as First Cause.⁹⁸ Even God's *transcendence* is often described in terms of the "virtual containment" of all creaturely perfections, and far from using religious paradoxes to confound and release the soul from the labors of reason,⁹⁹ Aquinas' natural theology strains but does not break the creative powers of philosophical language. It is true that for Thomas, what is most ultimate in the human know-

⁹⁴ *S.T. I* 104.1. The virtual containment of effects in their cause is not as a multiplicity, but *secundum unam virtitem*, just as all radii are present within the centre of the circle (*In de Div. Nom.* XIII, ii, 971).

⁹⁵ See *In de Div. Nom.* II ii; 160.

⁹⁶ Dionysius calls this divine Self-manifestation a "theophany" of divine goodness, which indicates that divine similitude is not just a gift bestowed on beings, but is their very being itself. On this, see O'Rourke (1992 : 258).

⁹⁷ Cf. John F. Wippel, 'Quidditative knowledge of God' in Wippel (1984 : 215–241).

⁹⁸ In *S.T. I* qq. 4–11, he derives several positive attributes of God from His simplicity as Pure Act.

⁹⁹ The performative function of philosophical paradoxes in the description of God and creation is detailed in 'Introduction', in *Meister Eckhart (Classics of Western Spirituality Series)*, tr. E. Colledge & B. McGinn, Paulist Press, New York, 1981.

ledge of God is “to know that we do not know Him”,¹⁰⁰ and although we reach a knowledge of His existence from the effects bearing some resemblance to Him, this is only by negation and transcendence.¹⁰¹ Because we can deduce many positive qualities from the simplicity of the First Cause, the *res significata* corresponding to the divine attributes is accurate; but because we lack quidditative knowledge of God, the way of signifying (*modus significandi*) is inadequate, and God is known by analogy alone.

As well, the *ineffable* nature of God is taken seriously by Thomas the metaphysician in his preference for a *quia* proof. Whereas in a *propter quid* demonstration, we show how some effect or attribute necessarily flows from a nature whose definition we already know, in a *quia* proof rises from our knowledge of effects to that of causes, where the effect substitutes for the definition of the cause,¹⁰² which remains essentially unknown. Although bearing some similarity to its cause (for *every agent produces something similar to itself: “omne agens agit sibi simile”*),¹⁰³ the effects represent it inadequately,¹⁰⁴ exhibiting in a partial and divided way what is contained perfectly and unitedly in the cause. As one scholar puts it, Thomas’ Five Ways “take us from what we do understand, that is, observable features of the natural world, to what we do not understand — to an unknown God.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ In commenting on the three types of knowledge of God, according to causality, transcendence and negation, (*In de Trin.* I,2, e.g.), Josef Pieper says “[...] there are three degrees in our knowledge of God: the lowest, the knowledge of God as He is active in creation; the second, the recognition of God as mirrored in spiritual beings; the third and loftiest, the recognition of God as the Unknown, *tamquam ignotum*. Or consider this sentence from the *Quaestiones Disputatae*: ‘This is what is ultimate in the human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know God’, *quod (homo) sciat se Deum nescire*’ (J. Pieper, *The silence of St. Thomas*, tr. J. Murray & D. O’Connor, Henry Regnery, Chicago, 1965, p. 69).

¹⁰¹ “[T]he human mind advances in three ways in knowing God, though it does not reach a knowledge of what He is (*quid est*), but only that he is (*an est*). First, by knowing more perfectly his power in producing things. Second, by knowing him as the cause of more lofty effects, which, because they bear some resemblance to Him, give more praise to His greatness. Third, by an ever-growing knowledge of Him as distant from everything that appears in His effects. Thus, Dionysius says that we know God as the cause of all things, by transcendence and by negation.” (*In de Trin.* I.2).

¹⁰² *S.T.* I 2.2 ad 2.

¹⁰³ *C.G.* I 29; I 73; II 6; II 20

¹⁰⁴ *S.T.* I 13.5.

¹⁰⁵ H. McCabe, ‘The logic of mysticism I’, in M. Warner (ed.), *Religion and philosophy (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 31)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 48f. McCabe also rightly stresses the mystery and “gratuity” of creation:

But more mystical than the paradoxes of divine presence or even than the ineffability that culminates metaphysics is, we have said, the insight into the *gratuitous nature of God's creative act*. Maritain finds this insight within the Five Ways, which, he says,¹⁰⁶ place reason "in an attitude of natural adoration" in relation to the Creator. We can also recall Wittgenstein's much celebrated statement that "not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is."¹⁰⁷ The insight into the gratuitous nature of creation stems from what some of have called "the difference of being" or the "theological difference" that characterizes Thomas' existentialist metaphysics. In short, reflection on revelation (*Exodus* 3.14) introduces a new question, not asked by the Greeks, namely, "why is there anything at all?,"¹⁰⁸ and a new distinction, between essence and existence, that explains the radical contingency of beings. As many have noted,¹⁰⁹ the Christian distinction between the world and God signals the fact that the highest principle of existence is neither finite nor a part of the world, as were the various Greek conceptions of the divine (including Aristotle's Prime Mover),¹¹⁰ but is *beyond* the whole realm of finite beings. Whereas Aristotle's "question of being" inquired about

"For St. Thomas, then, the *esse* of things turns out to be their createdness, their gratuity [...] (p. 53). As to the "unknown God" and the Five Ways, cf. P.R. Blum, 'Gottes Plan: Von der Physikotheologie zur Theophysik', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 109, 2002, pp. 271–282.

¹⁰⁶ Maritain, *Degrees of knowledge* (cited in R. Woods p. 68 #13): Maritain says that "[...] to demonstrate the existence of God is not to subject Him to our grasp, nor to define or lay hold on Him, nor to manipulate anything other than ideas which are inadequate to such an object, nor to judge anything except our rightful and radical dependence. The process by which reason demonstrates that God exists, places reason itself in an attitude of natural adoration and intellectual admiration."

¹⁰⁷ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.44 (tr. C.K. Ogden, London, 1933).

¹⁰⁸ Although this question is not to be equated with Heidegger's question and his notion of the "ontological difference."

¹⁰⁹ In particular, R. Sokolowski, *The God of faith and reason: Foundations of Christian theology*, Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1982, pp. 12–20; cf. R. Sokolowski, 'Creation and Christian understanding', in D. Burrell & B. McGinn (eds.), *God and creation: an ecumenical symposium*, Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1990, pp. 179–196. Cf. H. Hoping, 'Understanding the difference of being: on the relationship between metaphysics and theology', *Thomist* 59, 1995, pp. 189–221.

¹¹⁰ *Metaphysics* VI 1 (1026a21–22): Divine being is said to be the "worthiest genus of being", and is thus a part of the whole of beings and is thus finite (cf. J. Owens, 'The relation of God to world in the *Metaphysics*', in P. Aubenque (ed.), *Etudes sur la Métaphysique d'Aristote. Actes du cinquième Symposium Aristotelicum*, Vrin, Paris, 1977, pp. 213; 219–221. According to Owens, the divine being of the Aristotelian metaphysics is not an infinite being as is the God of Christian belief). Cf. Hoping (1995).

ousia or substance as the first cause of being,¹¹¹ Aquinas propels human reason, by way of the real distinction (between being and essence), beyond finite being to *esse absolutum* or *esse infinitum*, which now has to be thought of over and against a world whose existence is radically unnecessary.¹¹² The gratuitous nature of creation thus lies in the conviction of the world's contingency and the hypothesis that even without creating, God's goodness and power would remain undiminished.¹¹³ As one scholar puts it, "the *existence* of the world now prompts our *gratitude*, whereas the *being* of the world prompts our *wonder*."¹¹⁴ It is interesting to note that this realisation also indicates Aquinas' commitment to *ontological pluralism*, in that to conceive of God as the reason why a universe exists at all, it to conceive of God as the source of diversity in the world.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have described 'Thomas' approach to mystical truth claims as primarily ontologically *pluralist*, and *speculative* in aim, in contrast to more pragmatically driven monist theories, which *sever* the connection between mystical claims about ultimate reality and the corresponding metaphysical theories about the nature of being. Although he is aware of the distinction between the practical, doctrinal and experiential dimensions of religious experience, Thomas is part of the tradition which regards the doctrines of being and love to be at the *centre* of reflection on the mystical life, such that the cognitive and affective validity of mystical claims is balanced with a corresponding set of claims about the nature of being, the soul and ultimate reality.

¹¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VII.17 (1041b27–28).

¹¹² "It is this gratuitousness of things that St. Thomas calls their *esse*: their existence no just over-against the possibility that they might not have been a part of the world (if natural causes had operated differently—which is why the dodos do not exist), but their existence over-against the possibility that there might not have been any world at all. In thinking of the *esse* of things we are trying to think of them not just in relation to their natural causes but in relation to their creator" (McCabe 1992 : 51).

¹¹³ "Christian theology is differentiated from pagan religious and philosophical reflection primarily by the introduction of a new distinction, the distinction between the world understood as possibly not having existed. And God understood as possibly being all that there is, with no diminution of goodness or greatness" (Sokolowski 1982 : 23).

¹¹⁴ Sokolowski (*ibid.* : 23).

Far from assuming that the mystic has recourse to metaphysics only in order to account for a primarily psychological phenomenon,¹¹⁵ which is a more *phenomenological* approach to mysticism, or from assuming that *mystical* experience provides direct evidence for *metaphysical* claims (as in the Buddhist *anatman* doctrine providing evidence for monism, for example), Aquinas' commitment to *theistic pluralism* defines the boundaries of authentic or cognitively valid mystical experience, and provides a symmetry between the realm of mystical experience and metaphysical theory. For this reason, Thomas would reject the view that there is a "common core" to mystical experience that not only transcends culture but also philosophical context. Instead, his text imply a "*contextualist*" mystical typology grounded in and conditioned by, specific metaphysical commitments.

Ultimately, for Thomas, the fulfillment of the supernatural life of charity and the completion of our surrender to God's action within the soul is nothing but the return of the self, on the cognitive and affective levels, to the Infinite plenitude of love, that transcendent good which both elicits and finalizes all human seeking. In this way, the presence of God to man through grace both completes the divine disclosure found in creation, and confirms creatures' similitude to their Source.

¹¹⁵ "The mystic approaches as an ethicist, emerges next as a psychologist, and finally appears to be driven to woolly metaphysics in order to account in a straightforward manner for the psychological phenomenon" (Angel 1994: 107).