

Deconstruction, Onto-theology and Thomas's Via Negativa

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In this paper I wish to consider the following question: Can Thomist theology satisfy the postmodern demand for a non-metaphysical theology; that is, can Thomist theology ever be other than mere onto-theology? Postmodernists such as Kevin Hart¹ would claim that it cannot, for the following reasons. First, Thomist theology is inextricably linked to Thomas's metaphysics; the former is inconceivable without the latter. Second, Thomist theology contains no means by which to overcome or to circumscribe that metaphysics, for Thomas uses negation as a way to simply correct his positive theology; Thomas's negative theology leaves his positive theology fundamentally intact. Third, a truly non-metaphysical theology must begin and end with negation. But Thomas's does not, and so begins with the wrong starting point. Finally, non-metaphysical theology uses the tool of deconstruction to guarantee that starting point by tracing and circumscribing the metaphysics within theology. Yet Thomas's theology has no place for deconstruction, since, again, negation functions in his theology as nothing more than a moment in analogical predication. It leaves in place a God understood as cause or ground of being. Therefore, Thomism has nothing to contribute to the postmodern demand for a non-metaphysical theology.

Postmodern theologians, of course, demand a non-metaphysical theology because they accept the Heideggerian/Derridean critique of metaphysics. All metaphysical theologies, they contend, are guilty of having participated in what Heidegger has called the oblivion of Being. All of these theologies, including Thomas's, fail to think the Ereignis, or Event of Appropriation—that which gives Being in each historical epoch. They fail, in other words, to think the Austrag (the difference) between Being and beings, the differing in the

¹ Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chapters 1-3.

difference between Being and beings that makes the true ontological difference possible. Thomas's metaphysical difference, the difference between *esse* and *ens*, they say, does not capture this true difference, since Thomas understands *esse* as act, *actualitas*, or cause, as that which makes a thing actual, or real in the sense of hardened presence. Consequently, Aquinas's ontology can only conceive Being after the manner of beings, e.g., ontically. In effect, instead of thinking Being in terms of the primordial process of absencing/presencing, in terms of unconcealing concealment, as unveiling, Being is thought in terms of making, of maker and thing made. For Thomas, Being is the subject of ontology, rather than a-leitheology. As such, there is nothing fundamentally hidden about *esse* (*esse*, of course, being synonymous with intelligibility). Students of a-leitheology, on the other hand, understand that in every process of presencing, there is a corresponding absencing of Being. Being can never be captured by a concept patterned after beings, or any property of beings, such as act.

But the postmodern theologians also accept Derrida's critique of Heidegger's attempt to overcome the oblivion of Being through the leap out of metaphysics. For Derrida, any attempt to overcome metaphysics is itself hopelessly metaphysical, since traditional metaphysics will inevitably determine the nature of that discourse. In other words, the attempt to overcome metaphysics is defeated from the start because of its unavoidable use of metaphysical language. As a result, the negation involved in any such attempt functions as a mere corrective to the metaphysics to be overcome; it is in effect negatively negative, rather than positively negative. Hence a genuinely non-metaphysical theology must be negative *from the start*, i.e., it must be negative in a positive way, a true *via negativa*.

Now all of this should be of the utmost concern to Thomists, since no one who has made a real effort to read and to understand Heidegger, for instance, can fail to appreciate that philosopher's critique of the history of metaphysics as the oblivion of Being. Heidegger must be taken seriously, and he must be answered. Thomists must also understand that those theologies which go farther and embrace Derrida's critique of Heidegger by formulating genuinely negative theologies are likewise not without merit. And, though some of the transcendental Thomists have tried to come to terms with the early Heidegger of *Being and Time*, none have answered the challenge of the late Heidegger, let alone the challenge of Derrida.

It is my contention, however, that Thomism can satisfy the postmodern demand for a non-metaphysical theology, for as I hope to show, Thomas's theology does contain the means by which to overcome its metaphysical base, but a base necessitated by non-metaphysical theology as the condition for the very possibility of the latter. Metaphysics, in other words, is the necessary starting

point for any non-metaphysical theology. It is my further contention that though negation indeed functions as a moment in analogical predication, for Thomas it is also much more than this, ultimately placing the whole of his positive theology under erasure, and thereby shifting the emphasis from God thought as cause of being, to God as He is in Himself, i.e., the Unnamable.

I

The first notion which must be dispelled, then, is that negative theology functions in Thomas's system as a mere corrective to his positive theology, even though that might appear to be the case. For instance, ST Ia Q 13 arts. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 12 certainly seem to lend support to that interpretation. In those articles Thomas tells us that names can be substantially as well as literally applied to God; that they are predicated primarily of God and not of creatures; that the name 'God' is the name of God's nature (although applied analogically) and that affirmative propositions can be formed about God.

In Q 13 art. 3, for example, though St. Thomas agrees that there are negative names which when applied to God do not signify His substance but only His relation to creatures, there are other names which can be applied to God substantially, such as that He is good and wise. Since these names are predicated of God substantially, they cannot be appropriated by negative theology. As St. Thomas says, "So when we say God is good, the meaning is not God is the cause of goodness (which merely expresses God's relation to creatures), or God is 'not-evil,' but the meaning is, Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way."² Aquinas adds, however, that though the affirmative names of God do apply to God substantially, they nevertheless signify Him in an imperfect manner; that is, they imperfectly represent Him, precisely because i) these names are taken from creatures, and ii) man's intellect cannot know God's essence in this life.

Art. 3, "Whether Any Name Can Be Applied to God In Its Literal Sense,"³ lends even stronger support to the idea that the affirmative names of God are given first priority in Thomas's theology, for there St. Thomas tells us that when we apply affirmative names to God, we must distinguish the *perfections* signified by the positive names from the *mode* by which these names signify the perfections. The perfections signified by the positive names apply properly and primarily to God, but their mode of signification does not apply properly to

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia Q 13, art. 2, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. I, (Westminster: Benziger Brothers Inc., 1981), p. 61.

³ *Ibid.*, Q 13, art. 3, 62.

God; their mode of signification applies properly to creatures.⁴ Names such as Being, Good, Living, can be literally predicated of God. When names are withheld from God, they are withheld not because these perfections are not found in God, but simply because they are found there in a more eminent way than in creatures. What the names signify, in other words, are not predicated of God with their ordinary sense of signification.

It seems, then, that St. Thomas is claiming that negative theology exists in a kind of dialectic with positive theology; with regard to the proper predicates or the affirmative names of God, negation applies *only to the mode of signification*, not to *what* is signified. Given that God's perfections belong to God in a far more eminent way than they do to creatures, the negative names have not the function of denying anything of God, except in the *way that they signify*; they simply signify that the perfections which belong to God belong to Him in a far higher way than to creatures.

Now though it is true that Thomas raises the negative way only *after* he has proven the existence of God in ST Ia Q 2 art.3, by way of His effects, he also says that we determine how God exists through pure remotion, which tells us how God is not.⁵ Thus, although Aquinas *here* seems to be pointing toward a role for negation going beyond its function in analogy, this is clearly not the case, for Thomas says that we show how God is not, by denying whatever is opposed to the idea of Him.⁶ Negation, then, presupposes and is only made possible by way of knowing God through His effects. The idea of God includes, of course, that He is the First, or Unmoved Mover; that He is First Efficient Cause; and that He is that intelligent being by whom all things are directed to their ends. Thus, while it may be true to say that we affirm simplicity of God by

⁴ *Ibid.* Aquinas says: "I answer that, according to the preceding article our knowledge of God is derived from the perfections which flow from Him to creatures, which perfections are in God in a more eminent way than in creatures. Now our intellect apprehends them as they are in creatures, and as it apprehends them it signifies them by names. Therefore, as to the names applied to God, there are two things to be considered — viz, the perfections they signify, such as goodness, life, and the like, and their mode of signification. As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures."

⁵ ST Ia Q 3, Proem. "When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now because we cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how he is not."

⁶ *Ibid.* "Now it can be shown how God is not by denying of Him whatever is opposed to the idea of Him."

denying composition in Him,⁷ that simplicity presupposes the very idea of God discovered in the five ways.

At the very least, Thomas does not simply intend to say what God is not; he intends, rather, to say that God is simple; that God is good; that God is wise; that God is being, though all of these perfections are found in God in a way not found in creatures. In effect, he intends to give us real knowledge, for Aquinas rightly understood that saying what God is not does not tell us what God is. This is why he elsewhere says that to say that God is good does not mean merely that God is 'not-evil', for the obvious logical reason that saying that God is 'not evil' does not entail that God is good. For if saying that God is good means that God is 'not-evil', then it follows that God's being 'not-evil' entails that God is good, which is clearly false.⁸ Negation, then, signifies only what something is not; it says nothing about what it is. Yet the way of negation presupposes the positive way.⁹

⁷ ST Ia Q3, art. 7.

⁸ ST Ia Q 13, art. 2, 61.

⁹ It is important at this point to note that Aquinas makes an important distinction in SCG I 14, 3, in which he claims that knowing how a thing is *distinct* from other things presupposes knowing, in some sense how God is *distinguished* from other things. He says: "Now we arrive at the proper knowledge of a thing not only by affirmation, but also by negation. For just as it is proper to man to be a rational animal, so it is proper to him not to be inanimate or irrational. Yet there is this difference between these two modes of proper knowledge, that when we have proper knowledge of a thing by affirmation, we know what a thing is, and how it is distinguished from others, whereas when we have proper knowledge of a thing by negations, we know that it is distinct from others, but remain ignorant of what it is. Such is the proper knowledge of God that can be obtained by demonstration."

What I believe Aquinas is here suggesting is that given that affirmation precedes negation, we only know what God is not if we first have some idea as to what God is; just as it is only by knowing what man is that we are able to say what man is not. If, for example, we simply know that some X exists, this by itself gives us no means by which to know what X is not. In order to establish what X is not, we must first have some idea as to what X is. And indeed, we do have some idea as to what X is, for if we did not, we could not even begin to establish that X exists. Saying, for instance, that "I don't know what X is, but I do know that it's not A," is not the same as saying, "I don't know what X is because X's perfection, say its goodness, infinitely exceeds A's goodness."

Now this knowledge is possible in the case of God precisely because His essence is His existence, and because His existence is discovered in the 'five ways.' In other words, God is not merely some simple unknown X, but something characterized in the five ways. If this not the case, then knowing God by way of analogical predication becomes impossible. And even though the following passage from SCG I, 14, 2, might seem to contradict this when he says, "Now in considering the divine substance, we should especially make use of the method of remotion. For by its immensity the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable apprehend it by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not . . ."

A second, and at first glance promising counterclaim to the idea that negation functions as simply a dialectical moment in analogical predication seems to be raised by the introduction to ST Ia Q3, where Thomas states that we consider God's perfections only after we consider His simplicity, but that we understand His simplicity to mean 'not-composite.'¹⁰ Since the affirmative names of God are taken from God's perfections as found in creatures,¹¹ knowing God's perfections would seem to be contingent on first knowing what God is not, namely, that He is not composite. But such a view is immediately dispelled by the text itself, which says that denying composition in God is based on a prior recognition of the imperfect simplicity found in material things.¹² In other words, composition is denied of God and His simplicity affirmed because of the imperfect simplicity found in things. Saying that God is simple is not merely to say that God is 'not-composite;' it is rather to say that God's simplicity far exceeds that which is found in creatures, for whatever is simple in them is a part of something else. Once again, then, negation is based on the affirmation of a perfection known from God's effects.

Negation thus appears to play a limited role in Aquinas's theology. For Thomas, certainly, positive theology and the affirmative names of God take priority over the negative names of negative theology. Hence those postmodern theologians, such as Kevin Hart, who find Thomism incapable of responding to the postmodern critique, would appear to be correct. I assert, however, that they are not correct, and that negation plays a more important, though hitherto hidden, role in Thomas's natural theology; a role which can satisfy the postmodern

We see that this is not the case if we place it within the context of SCG I as a whole, and trace back Thomas's chain of reasoning, starting with the notion that God is not a body. For we know God is not a body, because we know God is not composite. And we know that God is not composite because there is no potency in God. And we know there is no potency in God because God is eternal. But God is eternal because we know that God is not mutable, and God is immutable because He is not moved, or is unmoved. But we say He is unmoved because He is the First Mover, that is, He moves, though He Himself is unmoved. (Obviously, it does not follow that if X is unmoved, X necessarily moves others. In other words, knowing that X is unmoved tells us that X is unmoved, but it doesn't tell us anything else, that X is an unmoved mover. The only way to establish this is to see some perfection of God through His effects in creatures.)

¹⁰ ST Ia Q 3, Proem.

¹¹ ST Ia Q 4, art. 2, 21.

¹² ST Ia Q 3, Proem. After saying that we show what God is not by showing what is opposed to Him, he says: "Therefore, (1) we must discuss His simplicity, whereby we deny composition in Him; and because whatever is simple in material things is imperfect and a part of something else, we shall discuss (2) His perfections; (3) His infinity, (4) His immutability; (5) His unity."

demand for a non-metaphysical theology. As I hope to show, negation need not appropriate positive theology from the very beginning. Its appropriation must, and does, occur at a much later stage, through a full flowering of the positive itself. Yet this appropriation is not to be confused with the mere denial of the mode of signification of the names properly applied to God, as happens in analogy.

II

Now a question immediately comes to mind at this point: If Aquinas's natural theology begins with and then builds upon a being that is First Mover, First Efficient Cause, and the source or ground of all being, how can it avoid the label of onto-theology? Since God is the highest being in Whom all created perfections exist, and Who contains within Himself the whole perfection of being, He is surely rightfully called the ground of being. Aquinas's theological discourse is obviously thoroughly metaphysical. As such it would thus seem to provide no possible framework for a non-metaphysical theology. But though Thomas does indeed conceive God as First Cause, and hence ground of all being, his understanding of the relation between beings or being, and the ground of being, is rather complex. It is this understanding, however, which points the way toward a negative theology that is truly non-metaphysical and hence immune to the postmodern critique.

Of course there can be no doubt that God is the origin and source of all being. In SCG II, 6, 2, Thomas says that God is the first efficient cause, and because an efficient cause brings effects into being, God is the cause of being to other things. In SCG II, 6, 4, he makes the following argument in support of the notion of God as ground of being:

- i) The order of causes necessarily follows the order of effects, since effects are commensurate with their causes;
- ii) Because effects are referred to their appropriate causes, what is common in such effects must be reduced to a common cause;
- iii) But being is common to everything that is. Therefore, above all causes there must be a cause whose proper action is to give being. And that first cause, of course, is God. So God is the cause, or ground of all being.

Therefore, insofar as Aquinas thinks of God's being in terms of cause, he thinks of it in terms of ground; that which grounds what is grounded. This is simply to say that insofar as Aquinas thinks of God's being as cause, he thinks of it relationally. We know that something can be said of God relatively with

regard to His effects.¹³ We also know that just as creatures may be spoken of in relation to God, so God may be spoken of in relation to creatures. It is inconceivable, says Thomas, that one thing be said in relation to another unless the latter be said in relation to it.¹⁴ We see, then, that Thomas understands how God stands to creatures, and vice versa, in relational terms, or as ground to what is grounded. It would thus seem that Aquinas's understanding of God is one which falls squarely within the postmodern critique.

Yet the relation which Aquinas has in mind is a rather peculiar one, which requires further examination, for he says in SCG II, 12, that the relations predicated of God in reference to creatures do not really exist in Him.¹⁵ What, exactly, does this mean? First, these relations do not exist as accidents in a subject, since there are no accidents in God. But neither are they a part of God's substance. In support of this he cites Aristotle's *Categories*, in which Aristotle says that relative terms are those "which in their very being refer to something else."¹⁶ If these relations were really part of God's substance, then God's substance would necessarily refer to something else. The notion of God's extrinsic effects would be implicitly contained in the notion of God as cause. In that case God's being would depend on that to which it is essentially referred; God's substance would depend both for its being and its being known on something extrinsic to it, and God would no longer be the necessary being.¹⁷

The implications of this passage are rather startling. If cause is inconceivable apart from that which it causes, either potentially or actually, and if cause is a relational term (which it is), such that that which causes another is, as Aquinas admits, referred *in its very being* to something else, then it would seem as if

¹³ SCG II, trans. James Anderson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 42. "Now since power is proper to God in relation to His effects, and since power as was said has the character of a principle, and since principle expresses relationship to that which proceeds from it, it is evident that something can be said of God relatively with regard to His effects."

¹⁴ SCG II, 11, 2, 42. "It is moreover inconceivable that one thing be said in relation to another unless, conversely, the latter be said in relation to it. But other things are spoken of in relation to God; for instance as regards their being, which they possess from God, they are dependent upon Him, as has been shown. Conversely, therefore God may be spoken of in relation to creatures."

¹⁵ SCG II, 12, 2, 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ SCG II, 12, 2, 43, where he says that if these relations really exist in God, "... God's substance would then have to be referred to something else. But that which is essentially referred to another depends upon it in a certain way, since it can neither be nor be understood without it. Hence, it would follow that God's substance would depend on something else extrinsic to it, so that He would not be of Himself, the necessary being, as He was shown to be in Book I. Therefore, such relations do not really exist in God."

God (at least as He is in Himself) cannot truly be called cause, for the reason that His substance would then be dependent on something else. Of course, if God as He is in Himself cannot be called ground, or ultimate reason for the being of things, then Aquinas's theology need not be tagged an onto-theology.

But surely Aquinas does not intend to eliminate God's causality from his theology. In what sense, then, is God called cause? 'Cause' is attributed to God solely in accord with our manner of knowing Him, for these relations exist neither really in God nor outside Him.¹⁸ In SCG II, 13-14, 5, for example, he tells us that relations are not predicated of God in the way that other things are predicated of God, because the latter *express God's essence, while the former do not*.

Now we might well be able to understand how God as cause depends *in thought* on His effects, but how are we to understand the notion that He does not depend really on His effects, if relative terms refer *in their very being* to something else? How can God really be cause without really being related to His effects? St. Thomas says, "In understanding one thing to be referred to another, our intellect simultaneously grasps the relation of the latter to it; although sometimes that thing is not really related."¹⁹

The answer lies in the nature of the relation itself, which Aquinas discusses primarily in two places: ST Ia Q 13, art.7,²⁰ and SCG II, 12, 3.²¹ In the latter he claims:

It was shown in Book I, moreover, that God is the first measure of all things. Hence He stands in relation to other beings as the knowable to our knowledge which is measured by the knowable; for "opinion or speech is true or false according as a thing is or is not," as Aristotle says in the *Categories*. But although a thing is said to be knowable in relation to knowledge, *the relation is not really in the knowable*, but only in knowledge. Thus, as Aristotle observes in *Met. V.*, the knowable is so-called relatively, "not because it is itself related, but because something else is related to it." *Therefore the relations in question have no real being in God.*²²

This passage stresses that God as cause is not really related to creatures, though creatures are really related to God. Indeed, in ST Ia Q 13, art.7, he says, "it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God

¹⁸ SCG II, 13-14, 1-4, 44-45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ ST Ia Q 13, art. 7, 65-67.

²¹ SCG II, 12, 3, 46.

²² *Ibid.*, 43.

there is no real relation to creatures, but only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.”²³ Is St. Thomas saying, then, that there can be a cause whose effects are really related to it, but which is itself unrelated to its effects? The context of the article makes it clear that in fact he is not saying this, though we have to understand in what *sense* this is so. In order to do this we must first understand that the names which import relations to creatures are applied to God temporally, not from eternity. Secondly, we must understand that some things are called relative, *not forasmuch as they are related to other things, but as others are related to them*. This happens in the case of a relation in which the two extremes of the relation are of an entirely different order. For example, sense and science refer to sensible things and intelligible things respectively. Yet the latter are outside the order of sensible and intelligible existence. Thus, because science and sense are ordered to knowledge and sense perception, there is a real relation among them. But because the sensible and intelligible things themselves lie outside the order of sense perception and knowledge, the former have no real relation to the latter. The relation exists in idea only, inasmuch as the intellect apprehends them as the relational terms of science and sense. Consequently, since God lies outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, God’s effects are related to God, though God is not really related to creatures. Thus, there is nothing to prevent a name like ‘cause’ being applied to God temporally.²⁴

Nevertheless, the idea of cause implicitly contains the idea of effect, and *vice versa*. Hence cause and effect are said to be simultaneous in nature. For it is only in relative things which are *not* simultaneous by nature that one can exist independently of the other, as in the above example of the knowable and knowledge. But these fail to be simultaneous by nature only so long as the potentially knowable is not actually knowable, that is, not known *as such*. When the potentially knowable becomes actually knowable, that is, becomes known, then the knowable and knowledge become simultaneous in nature. The knowable exists prior to being known, but not as knowable, “. . . for the object known is nothing as such unless it is known Thus, though God is prior to the creatures, still, because the signification of ‘Lord’ includes the idea of servant and *vice versa*, these two relative terms, Lord and servant, are simultaneous by nature. Hence God was not Lord until He had a creature subject to Himself.”²⁵

Thus, God exists prior to creation. Prior to creation, He cannot be called cause. He can only be called ‘cause’ relatively to creatures, precisely because

²³ ST Ia Q 13 art. 7, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, res. 6, 67.

creatures are referred to God as the latter's effects. At that point, God as cause, and creature as effect, are simultaneous by nature — the one cannot be thought apart from the other. Yet the relation is a one-way relation: creatures are really related to God, though God is not really related to creatures, because i) God exists prior to creation, and because ii) becoming cause does not change God's being, just as becoming known does not change the knowable in its being.

The consequence of this, of course, is that God cannot be called cause as He is in Himself. He is called cause only relatively to His effects, and in accord with our manner of knowing.

In sum, we know that some names are predicated of God only in relation to creatures, and that one of these is 'cause.' But we also know that this relation is not a real relation, since God stands in relation to other beings as the knowable to our knowledge, and although a thing is said to be knowable in relation to our knowledge, the relation is not really in the knowable, but only in the knowledge. The key here is that the knowable can only be called knowable by virtue of the relation which it bears to knowledge. Thus though it can be said that the knowable is related to knowledge, what is called knowable cannot be so called as it is in itself, since this is not a real relation. Again, then, God cannot be called 'cause' as He is in Himself; that is, as He exists prior to creation. *God* has no real relation to creatures; *God as cause*, however, is simultaneous by nature with creation. In other words, the idea of God as cause is dependent on creation. As He is in Himself, He is not dependent on creation. Just as a thing is not knowable as such until it is known, even though it exists prior to being known, so God is not cause *qua* cause until He creates. Hence 'cause' is predicated both temporally and relatively of God.

III

Now the whole of Thomas's theology rests on *a posteriori* proofs for the existence of God. Foremost among these are the proofs from motion and efficient causality. His positive theology rests on the idea of God established by these proofs, while his negative theology has hitherto functioned as a corrective to that theology, as a mere dialectical moment in analogy. But with the understanding that the reality of the relation of God to the world must be denied, comes a recognition of the stronger role that negation plays in Thomas's theology. The ladder of analogy which enables us to climb toward God culminates in an erasure of the ladder itself. For understanding that God has no real relation to the world not only denies of God the name 'cause' (at least in regard to God as He is in Himself), it also denies of God the name 'being,' insofar as being is thought as cause or ground. And it is this move which points the way out of

onto-theology, not by transcending metaphysics but by deconstructing, or erasing it from within.

In essence, denying the reality of the relation of God to creatures removes from theology the burden of having to think God as ground, cause, or ultimate reason for the being of things. At the very least, it enables us to meet the challenge of the Heideggerian limb of the postmodern critique of all theology as onto-theology.

According to Heidegger, of course, the mistake that metaphysicians have been making for over two thousand years is to think Being as the ground of beings. Basing his claim, for the most part, on his understanding of the role which the principle of sufficient reason plays in metaphysics [which can be traced back by two steps to an even more basic principle, i.e., from iii) Nothing is unless a sufficient ground can be rendered for it, to ii) Nothing is unless a ground can be rendered for it, to i) Nothing is without ground], he tells us that in metaphysics a being is thus understood as that which is grounded, while that which grounds is understood to be Being itself.²⁶ Unfortunately, this way of understanding Being leads to a misunderstanding of Being, for in thinking Being as the ground for beings, we inadvertently think Being as the Being of beings, and hence in terms of beings, or as Heidegger would say, ontically. But Being is not a being; neither, however, is it a universal, nor a genus, or a transcendental taken from analogy. Thus, if true, then the grounding principle of metaphysics is a statement about beings, not about Being. The meaning of Being is thereby shifted away from Being toward an understanding of Being as the being of beings; as the mere ground of beings. This is certainly true of Aquinas's metaphysics, as long as God is cause or ultimate reason for the Being of things.

For Heidegger, then, Being is not a ground for beings, nor does it precede reason; it is, as he says, its own reason. Being, in other words, is grounded in itself. Thus in regard to the principle of sufficient reason, the tonal emphasis must be shifted from i) *No-thing is without ground*, to ii) *Nothing is without ground*. Here 'is' and 'ground' go together so that Being is ground in and for itself, not grounded in, or grounded for, anything else. Being itself is groundless.

I take this to be exactly the relation which Aquinas claims holds for God and the world. If we say that Being is the ground for beings, we are saying that Being is grounded in beings; that it is the being of beings, and as such can only be conceived relationally. Yet if Being is thought of not as ground for beings, but grounded in itself, that is, as that which is prior to Being when being is

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 11-34; *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary E. Aylesworth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), Part I.

thought of as the mere ground of beings, then beings are really related to Being, though Being is not really related to beings. Expressed in Thomistic terms, God is that which precedes the ontico-ontological distinction, i.e., the distinction between beings, and Being thought of as mere ground for beings.

Thomas, then, has satisfied the Heideggerian condition for a non-metaphysical theology, but has he satisfied the Derridean limb of the postmodern critique? For Derrida, as we know, turns his critique not only against onto-theology, but also against Heidegger, who still stands, he says, squarely within the metaphysical tradition by virtue of the fact that any attempt to overcome metaphysics is itself metaphysical, since it invariably uses the discourse of metaphysics to do so.

The above question may be answered, however, with a confident yes, for the very strength of Thomas's system lies in the fact that it contains the means, through negating the reality of God's relation to the world, not of going beyond metaphysics, but of erasing it from within. Thomas' negative theology, in effect, places the whole of his positive theology under erasure. But (and this is crucially important), the negative way is only made possible by the positive way; it is the condition for the very possibility of that culminating negation which erases all that has gone before it. The apophatic way flowers from its kataphatic stem; Thomas does not, nor need he, give priority to negation from the start in order to overcome onto-theology, as some have suggested. Nor is negative theology a mere corrective to positive theology — it is that, but it is also more than that, for it is the only means by which the intellect can be brought, short of revelation, to the Unnamable Itself. And this, contrary to what some might think, is surely no defeat for the Thomist, but a great victory.