

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Topic: The Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology in Aquinas
 Convener: James Le Grys, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
 Moderator: Robert Masson, Marquette University
 Presenter: Gregory Rocca, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
 Respondent: Terrance Klein, St. John's University, New York

This session offered a discussion of the relationship between kataphatic and apophatic discourse about God. In his paper, Gregory Rocca described how Aquinas argues for an intricate interplay of positive and negative theology within theological discourse, for a “dark knowledge” of God. Aquinas argues for a “dark” knowledge of God in various ways. God is thoroughly incomprehensible, even in the beatific vision of heaven, and in this life our ultimate knowledge of God occurs when we recognize God as one whose essence remains totally unknown to us. Aquinas also describes a tripartite *via negativa*: the qualitative negation, which denies of God an entire realm of discourse incompatible with the divine perfection (God is immaterial); the objective modal negation, which denies any creaturely modality to one of God's positive perfections (God is not wise as humans are wise, but supereminently so); and the subjective modal negation, which removes from God any connotations bound up with our human subjective modes of understanding and signifying (the *modus significandi*).

Nevertheless, under this looming cloud of unknowing, and subject to its corrections and limitations, Aquinas also proposes a dark “knowledge” of God, by affirming a positive, analogous, and substantial predication of God's names. Theological analogy, based on judgment rather than concept, is the core of his positive theology of the divine names: analogy is the only alternative that remains after a process of elimination has disallowed equivocal or univocal names for God. Disagreeing with Maimonides and others who take a minimalist position on God's positive names, Aquinas teaches that they truly bespeak God's very being in a positive fashion, though they never permit insight into God's being. Paradoxically, he claims to know truthful judgments *about* God while admitting conceptual ignorance *of* God. His theological epistemology of the divine names is a rich and balanced blend of positive and negative theology which advances a tensioned truth about God, where all the elements of the blend must be acknowledged in order for any theological assertion to be considered true. Moreover, Aquinas' interplay of positive and negative theology shows how the church's language about God and its worship of God can be truthfully iconic without becoming blasphemously idolatrous.

In his response, Terrance Klein compared Aquinas's conception of positive and negative theology with that of Wittgenstein. Klein argued that Wittgenstein's thought on “God-talk” can be divided into three unforced movements. Wittgenstein first found himself negating all talk of God, then seemingly sanctioning every sort of divine discourse, before finally coming to rest beside the flowing waters of analogy. Language is inherently analogical, because language is forever dynami-

cally birthing. Words constantly create new meanings, and vice versa, because they delineate themselves from one field of reference in the act of creating a second. The new field of meaning, which the newly utilized word wields, cannot exist without either its tether of similarity or the expanse of dissimilarity to the previous field. Wittgenstein came to realize what Aquinas had always taught, that what truly counts, in all language, but especially in words about God, is not the concept with which one begins, and certainly not the one at the end, which is dark and not yet given. What counts is the ceaseless striving that presses forward.

An engaging discussion followed.

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