

# The Idea of God: On the Divine Names

*Peter Harris*

## Preview

In this paper I intend to look at a debate arising in the early Middle Ages which focused on the divine names. The topic was so formulated in the 6th century by the writer who came to be known as the “pseudo-Dionysius” who was in fact a theological writer in the neo-Platonic tradition in the early 6th century whose theological/mystical writings were very influential in the 13th century theological debates. I will refer to him simply as Dionysius. Among his writings is a work titled *On the divine Names*—St Thomas Aquinas wrote a detailed commentary on this book and came to differ from him not in the commentary but in his own writing in the *Summa Theologiae*. I am assuming consequently that this discussion should cast some light on the question as to how we should both think and speak about God.

## **The Idea of God: On the Divine Names**

*Peter Harris*

*Keywords: idea; names; Neo-platonic; the good; word; love; mental word; self-diffusive*

### **In What Sense Can There Be an “Idea” of God?**

Clearly such an idea is unlike any other since it has no determinations—at least not in the normal defining sense. But I suggest that what is being asked is at once how we should think of God and consequently, how we should speak of God.

In this paper I intend to look at a debate arising in the early Middle Ages which focused on the divine names. The topic was so formulated in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by the writer who came to be known as the “pseudo-Dionysius” who was in fact a theological writer in the neo-Platonic tradition in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century whose theological/mystical writings were very influential in the 13<sup>th</sup> century theological debates. I will refer to him simply as Dionysius. Among his writings is a work titled *On the divine Names*—St Thomas Aquinas wrote a detailed commentary on this book and came to differ from him not in the commentary but in his own writing in the *Summa Theologiae*. I am assuming consequently that this discussion should cast some light on the question as to how we should both think and speak about God.

Assuming that how we name God should be a good indication of how we should think of God, I will look at four texts which might provide an answer to this question; three from the scriptures and one from Plato:

1. *Republic* book 6, 509b 8-10 and the discussion in which it occurs;
2. *Exodus* 3,14: Say to the people of Israel: “I am has sent me to you”;
3. *John 1*, the Prologue: “and the Word was God”;
4. *First letter of John* 4, 8, & 16: “God is love”;

*Plato: Republic, Bk 6, 509b 8-10.* It has to be said at once that the relevant passage occurs not in a discussion about God but in one about the nature of *Good*:

In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but *their very being*

*and essence are derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence (ousia) but still transcends essence in dignity and power.*

The phrase in question is EPEKEINA TES OUSIAS. In other words, the Good is not of any determinable nature but is rather the source of all determination.

This passage of Plato, though not endorsed by Aristotle, became the subject of endless speculation in the neo-Platonic tradition stemming from Plotinus and heavily influencing Christian writers such as Dionysius.

*Exodus 3, 14-15.* “God said to Moses “I am who (I) am.” And he said, “Say to the people of Israel: “I am has sent me to you.”” It was this passage which led Aquinas to propose that the most proper name for God was “He who is.” It has to be admitted that the saying “I am who am” has been subject to a number of interpretations.

*John 1, 1ff.* “In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God...” It is true that throughout the OT, from creation on, the intercourse between God and human beings was primarily characterized by *speech* as in Isaiah: 55, 11. This passage underlies Aquinas’s interpretation of the first divine procession as by way of intellect after the manner of the mental word.

*1 John, 4, 8 and 16.* “God is love...” This summarizing of the whole Gospel message underlies and supports the “Franciscan” view that the first divine name is Good in the sense of infinitely self-giving love (agape) relying on the consecrated phrase “*bonum est diffusivum sui*” which may be interpreted as that “good is of its nature self giving.”

In one way or another these key texts focus a vast amount of the discussion as to how we should think of God and consequently how we should name Him/Her.

Each of these chosen texts deserves a closer analysis before proceeding further, but time constraints dictate that we should now move on to the 13th century discussion in which two differing views are put forward by two schools of thought concerning the priority of “good,” or “Being” (*esse*) as the first and identifying name of God.

The disagreement is seen clearly in Aquinas when he discusses two questions: one relating to the nature of Good (ST, 1, 5, arts 1 & 2) and shortly after directly on the most appropriate name of God (ST, I, 13, 11).

It is worth noting that in his extensive commentary on Dionysius’s treatise *On the Divine Names* Aquinas contents himself with simply elucidating the text of Dionysius without interjecting any of his own views. In this text Dionysius claims that the idea of Good is prior to that of Being among the divine names. It is only in his own treatment of the question that Aquinas takes issue with the view of Dionysius. The fine detail of this disagreement need not concern us for the moment, though we shall return to it in the later part of the paper; but in Aquinas’s view the sense of “good” includes relation to an end—and here we have echoes of the Aristotelian “unmoved mover” who draws the rest of the world by way of attraction. In addition, Aristotle had described the good as “that at which all things aim.” Aquinas of course has to modify this since he believes,

unlike Aristotle, in divine creation; yet he continues to hold that “good” includes the nature of “end” and so is primary in questions of divine causality but not of simple reference to divine “essence.”

In the elaboration as a result of revelation of the divine *esse* by way of the Trinitarian processions, Aquinas insists on the priority of procession by way of intellect of the divine Word, and secondly the procession of the Holy Spirit by way of love.

In terms of our original four texts, although Aquinas chooses the revelation to Moses as primary he then favors the Johannine procession of the Word to give a fuller account in the light of the New Testament. Aquinas understands the act of “knowing” as the begetting of an inner word which then is uttered, and this conception underlies his further enquiry into the nature of the first divine procession.<sup>1</sup>

### **Bonaventure**

Otherwise known as the “seraphic doctor,” yet in the modern revival of Thomistic thought rather neglected, Bonaventure places the primacy among divine names on the Good. Though this is not true without qualification.

Bonaventure was a Franciscan and indeed became head of the order. His reflections on the divine name occur in two important works: the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, *The Journey of the mind unto God* and in the *Collationes in Hexameron*, *Collection of studies of the Hexameron* as well as in his commentary on the *Sentences of Peter Lombard*.

It was an accepted interpretation in the medieval thinking that it is of the nature of the Good to be self-diffusive (*bonum est diffusivum sui*). This becomes the foundation of Bonaventure’s understanding of the Trinitarian processions and so of the divine nature. A very good recovery of the main lines of Bonaventure’s thought here can be found in a superb article by Norman Kretzman in an essay entitled “A general problem of creation.”<sup>2</sup> He brings to our attention another main, yet often neglected tradition of thought in medieval theology which might be termed the *Franciscan* tradition, with perhaps greater allegiance to Francis of Assisi than to Aristotle, at least as to inspiration, while nonetheless accepting the importance of the recovery of Aristotle. For Bonaventure the Good is indeed the foundation of the divine nature and of the divine processions which are in themselves the prime expression of the divine goodness. In other words, the attribution of Good to God does not follow from the constitutive divine relations but indeed is the source of which the divine processions are the expression.

Bonaventure does not dispute the primacy of “He who is” as the proper divine name. Only he elides being and goodness and deploys this identity in his

---

<sup>1</sup> For a classic study of this, see Bernard Lonergan: *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Notre Dame, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Norman Kretzman, “A General Problem of Creation,” in *Being and Goodness*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Cornell, 1991), 208-228.

account of the Trinity. Kretzmann quotes a superb passage from Bonaventure's celebrated *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (The mind's journey unto God):

Good is said to be self-diffusive; therefore the highest good is that which diffuses itself the most. Now, diffusion cannot stand as the highest unless it is intrinsic yet active, substantial yet personal, essential yet voluntary, necessary yet free, perfect, yet unceasing. Thus in the supreme good, there must be from all eternity an actual and consubstantial producing, the production of a hypostasis as noble as the One who produces by way of both generation and spiration.<sup>3</sup>

Kretzmann refers to Bonaventure's treatment as the primary instance of the self-diffusiveness of good in the Trinity which eventually proceeds into creation.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that Bonaventure's treatment of the good in the life of the Trinity is superior to that of Aquinas who confines the causality of the good to that of purpose or end and most importantly as the end of creation. He concludes that Bonaventure's treatment of the good as *both* source and end gives a more satisfactory account both of Trinitarian life as expression of the self-diffusive good in itself and as the end of creation. On the other hand, the good as in Aristotle as "that which all seek" takes precedence in Aquinas over the good as "self-diffusive in the very heart of the Trinity. The Trinitarian life – identical with the processions and relations- is itself the supreme realization of the Good. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this divergence of views on the understanding of divine life as primarily infinite *esse* (which it surely is) or primarily an infinite abundance of the Good. I hope to return to this question in the final section of the essay relating to James Bradley's discussion of "infinity."

It has been customary to see Aquinas's Trinitarian theology as a vindication of the priority among our four texts of the Johannine: "and the Word was God," and much has been written about the richness of this conception of the Word as proceeding from, and the expression of the being of the Father.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas embraces the "*qui est*" as the most proper name of God over "*bonum*" on the grounds that "being is that which first falls upon the mind," a principle traceable back to the Arabic philosopher Avicenna. Critics claim that in this regard Aquinas is dominated by the "intellectualist" understanding of God in Aristotle and the Avicennian definition of metaphysics.

A similar criticism of Aquinas's "intellectualist" account of God is put forward powerfully in recent writing by Jean Luc Marion in his provocative *God*

---

<sup>3</sup> Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation," 225. Bonaventure here echoes the view of Richard of St Victor, Book three *Of the Trinity*, who writes: "For this reason it is given to be understood that the consummation of true and supreme goodness cannot subsist without completion of the Trinity." <sup>4</sup> Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation," 226.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Bernard Lonergan in his superb treatment of *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*. But Lonergan rejects the "self-diffusion of the Good as explanatorist principle." Lonergan, *Verbum*, 215. Lonergan expounds the primacy of the "intellectualist" account of the first divine procession, in favor of the Aristotelian and Augustinian "scientific" theology of Aquinas.

*without Being*.<sup>6</sup> Marion rehearses the disagreement between Aquinas and Bonaventure at some length. The nub of his rejection of Aquinas's view is that Aquinas resorts to the Avicennian dictum that the first object of the human mind is being. By adopting this standpoint to decide on the primacy of the divine names, Aquinas is wittingly or unwittingly limiting the divine nature to that which can be conceived by the human mind. But, argues Marion, to limit the divine nature to that which is conceivable by the human mind is at once to construct what he refers to as an "idol"—the making of God after human likeness. This he sees as the outcome of Aquinas's unconstrained intellectualist point of view. He will go on to suggest, as I understand him, that this limitation cannot be overcome in human speculation but only in the activity of worship, particularly in the Eucharistic memorial—echoes of the old dictum: *lex orandi lex credenda*.

Although there is undoubtedly merit in Marion's argument, he does narrow his view of Aquinas by way of constantly coupling *esse* with *ens* and so subjecting Aquinas to the now well known and endlessly repeated critiques of "ontotheology." The shortcoming of this view is the failure to take seriously the investigation of *esse* or of existence as *act*.

Without at this time exploring further the interesting approach of Marion and bearing in mind a certain bias towards the tradition, I will conclude this section with an admittedly premature conclusion on the medieval debate, notably between the followers of intellectualist Aquinas and the "Franciscan" tradition represented powerfully and eloquently by Bonaventure.

It is worth noting that both allow that the "first" name of God is "He who is" as Bonaventure makes quite clear in his introduction to the classic *Journey of the mind into God*. After a survey of the attributions we can make to God from the created world and human minds Bonaventure proceeds with the following: "Speculation of divine unity through its primary name *which is being (esse)*." But there is a degree of subtlety here because he will go on to look at "The speculation of the Blessed Trinity in *its* name as the *Good*, which is the *principle foundation for a contemplation of the emanations*. Indeed we cannot properly think of God without thinking of his trinity and unity: for "The Good is said to be 'self communicating (*diffusivum*) and consequently *The highest Good is of its nature self communicating and this cannot be unless it is actual and intrinsic, substantial and hypostatic, unfailing and complete*."<sup>7</sup>

Following the thesis of Richard of St Victor, Bonaventure locates the Trinitarian movement of self-communication directly to divine goodness. There is a trinity of divine persons precisely because God is essentially self-communicating Goodness prior to any further examination of the nature of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago, 1991), 73. Marion rehearses Aquinas's differences with Bonaventure quite well. But his treatment of Aquinas suffers from the repeated elision of *ens-esse*, when this distinction is so paramount in Aquinas's treatment of God who is not an *ens* but *esse infinitum*.

<sup>7</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, chapter 6. *The Works of Bonaventure* (Paterson, New Jersey, 1970).

processions and also relating immediately to divine creation without any further question as to why God should create.

However there is certainly more to be said in relation to and vindication of Aquinas's position. This is to do directly with the importance he places upon the "nature" of transcendent *esse*. To do justice to the fruitfulness of Aquinas's understanding of *esse* we should have to trace the Trinitarian movement by way of the divine processions and the relations to which they give rise, which occupy a good deal of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*. I have tried to do this elsewhere by following the sequence of *esse, procession, creation* where the intimate relation of creation to the divine Trinitarian life is explored.<sup>8</sup>

In more recent times this has been recognized and made central to his philosophical justification of "speculative metaphysics" by James Bradley, and the concluding section of this paper will be devoted to some reflections of Bradley's work on this question of divine names.

It has to be said at once that although it has relevance to theology, Bradley takes up the question of *esse* from a strictly philosophical point of view, taking its rise from the perceived need to validate the "strong notion of existence" in the face of positivist and nominalist trends in contemporary philosophy. What Bradley has in common with, say Aquinas, is the need to validate what he refers to as the "strong" sense of existence, as opposed to the current tendency (since Kant) to reduce the meaning of "is" to mere instantiation—otherwise a purely empty conjunctive. The strong sense of existence is that of *existence as activity*. In a survey of the notion of existence from Plato through the medievals to Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Schelling, British idealism (F.H. Bradley notably), Whitehead, Bergson, and C.S. Peirce, Bradley elaborated a theory<sup>9</sup> of acts of existence as "creative events" which stresses the three existential elements of *origin, order* and *relation or communication*. These elements Bradley contends comprise the triune ontological structure of all existents. The significance and influence of Whitehead and Peirce in this theory is unmistakable. But the particular relevance to the theme of this paper lies in the painstaking analysis of triunity as perhaps an ultimate explanatory principle of existent reality: needless to say a pretty heady and daring venture which characterizes Bradley's work in the latter years of his life.

The specific point of contact with the present paper is Bradley's final conclusion with regard to transcendent agapic love as the only possible explanatory principle. For the elaboration of this principle I would direct the enquiring reader/listener to Bradley's superb but sadly final article "Philosophy and Trinity."

The careful analysis of the nature of active existence yielded the notion of a triunity which could be detected in a tradition of philosophy stretching from Plato via medieval thought through Kant (in spite of his critique), Schiller, Hegel and Schelling up to Whitehead, Collingwood and Peirce. The essential features of

---

<sup>8</sup> See my article: Peter Harris, "Esse, Procession, Creation: Reinterpreting Aquinas," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (2009): 136-167.

<sup>9</sup> James Bradley, "Philosophy and Trinity," *Symposium* 16, 1 (2012): 155-178, esp. 172ff.

this triunity were the notions of *origin*, *order* and *communication*. The consonance of these three elements with the theological notions of the Trinity of Divine Persons, were neither constricting nor reducible to purely theological notions.<sup>10</sup> An alternative title for the essay might well have been: “The Good as absolute self donation.”

A frequently missed but essential feature of the medieval theories of divine trinity was the notion that what are called the “persons” or hypostases are not substances but “subsistent relations.”

The Father gets to be Father solely and precisely by begetting the divine Word or Son. Similarly the Holy Spirit is nothing other than the relation of father and son in love. The notion of substance applies to neither divine persons nor to their relations. What is not true is that the Father was first something which he then communicated to his son. And it is precisely here that the real difficulty of expressing the divine nature becomes most apparent. It goes almost without saying that analysis of these relations of donation and communication gives rise to more than a few logical conundrums, especially when read back into speculation with regard to Trinitarian relations. (Perhaps we need to acknowledge the need for a logic of relations other than that of ordinary predication and attribution.) But what was suggested in Bonaventure’s account of the self-diffusion of the Good both in the “substance” of the Trinity as well as in creation is not unlike the account of infinite self-ablative *agape* in Bradley’s account, which, although not theological in intention, nevertheless accords beautifully in an account of both Trinity and Creation in which nothing is predetermined lest it inhibit the freedom of infinite Love.

Let me recall for a moment the grounds that Aquinas invokes for disagreeing with Dionysius. He allows that the extension of the Good, as Dionysius argues, is greater than that of Being because it includes not only the actual but also the possible or potential. But, insists Aquinas, that “conception” is prior which first “falls upon” the mind and what first falls upon the mind is Being! So the die is cast in favor of Aristotle and his Arabic interpreter Avicenna!<sup>11</sup> There is here what we may term a positivism of being over potentiality. Yet, as Bradley, following Dionysius (perhaps unwittingly) claims, the kind of infinity instantiated in the infinity of pure self-giving or donation is free and undetermined yet infinitely productive. The wobble here between divine infinite creativity and any kind of determinism whether in divine or created nature is the point at which this writer lapses into pregnant or possibly vacuous silence—but with the recommendation to read (and struggle with!) Bradley’s superb essay.

---

<sup>10</sup> A notable treatment of this particular question is found in Bradley’s analysis and critique of R.G. Collingwood’s argument with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity as the *conditio sine qua non* of modern science. See R.G. Collingwood, “Quicunque vult,” in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, (Oxford, 1940), 213-230. Bradley’s critique is to be found in “A Key to Collingwood’s Metaphysics of Absolute Presuppositions: The Trinitarian Creed,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 3 (2011).

<sup>11</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 5, art 2.