

On Talking About God in the Academy: Thomas Aquinas and the Tetragrammaton

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I

Writing and speaking about God is a tricky business, especially for academicians who are sensitive to grammatical conventions. Grammatical conventions are rules or commands: “Capitalize proper names!” “Pronouns must agree in gender with the nouns they represent!” “Always capitalize the noun ‘god’.” These rules can transform questions. The question “is it possible to move from a consideration of the divine in its relation to nature to a consideration of the divine in itself?” becomes the question “is it possible to move from a consideration of God in His relation to nature to a consideration of God as He is in Himself?”

In the latter question, God has a gender. He is male; and He is a person. A traditional theist who reads this question might hardly take notice of the subtle implications that grammar requires, but the non-traditional theist will. He might accuse the person posing the question in this way of having stacked the deck against a more imminent and feminine understanding of the divine and of having presupposed that ‘the divine’ is some one thing among other things in the universe. He might insist that the word ‘God’ is really a verb and not a noun, and that we would better understand Her if we used terms that denote events and processes rather than words that denote things.

Using the more abstract noun ‘divinity’ avoids objections raised by non-traditional theists, but its use also has problematic implications. “Divinity” is a property that may be possessed and shared by many things, as in the sentence “Heed thou the divinity of the fruit tree.” But abstract properties are not the sorts of things that can be objects of direct address. That is, one cannot pray to properties abstractly conceived. Since many among those who are apt to read a philosophical texts on God relate to God in other ways (prayer, meditation, etc.), the use of the abstract ‘divinity’ is suspiciously vague.

Given the ambiguity surrounding the G-word, I have asked myself three questions: Is it possible to find some middle ground in which to begin speaking about God? Second, who precisely is tarrying about the circumference of that middle ground wanting to join the

conversation? Finally, once the middle ground has been surveyed, is it a good place to start?

I use the image of a circular middle ground rather than that of a clean-slate free of all presuppositions because it is impossible for human beings to begin speaking to one another after having so thoroughly scrubbed their slates. The history of modern philosophy has taught us at least this much. I use the image of a circle because the middle ground that I seek is not a mean between two extremes, between feminine and masculine conceptions, or transcendent and imminent, conceptions of deity. I am more interested in determining where the discussion can take place than in the positions or theses to be advanced during discussion. But to draw a circle one must define a line, which terminates in the circle's center at one extreme, and at a point on its circumference at the other. Those who lie beyond the circumference will not be participants in the dialogue, unless they cross over the circumference or the circle expands.

To draw this line (from center to circumference) I want to take advantage of the fact that our grammatical use of the noun 'god' is ambiguous, both in the English and in many other languages. . Without contextual clues it is often quite difficult to tell whether someone uses the noun to refer to "something or other characterized by a certain quality or function (creator, provider, revealer, lawgiver, etc.)" or to someone whose name is "God".

Philosophical arguments for the existence of God usually use the term 'god' in the first way. In *Summa Theologiae Prima Pars*, for example, Thomas Aquinas proves that a first mover (the cause of all motion that is not itself moved) exists; and then he adds that this prime mover is that to which we give the name 'God'. That is, he begins by proving that a certain something or other that bears a certain relationship to the universe exists, and then he calls this thing by a more familiar name, 'God.' But Thomas denies that 'god' is a proper name. Following John Damascene, he says that the noun 'god' (*theos*) is derived from the Greek verb *thuein*, 'to care for'. Thus, when one calls the first mover 'god,' one is denominating it in keeping with one of its functions or operations in the universe, namely, its "universal providence over all things."¹ One is not referring to it by its proper name. Calling the prime mover 'god' is like calling one's plumber "husband" in those cases in which one individual fits both descriptions.

In prayer, the term 'God' functions as a proper name, that is, as the name of the person to whom the prayer is addressed. Of course, not all prayer is a form of direct address. "May God bless this meal," is a prayer; but it is not a form of direct address. Technically, it

¹ *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, 13, 8, *resp.*

is a statement about what the petitioner wants God to do. Uttered in the form of a direct address, the prayer becomes “May you, Oh God, bless this meal.” In English, the presence of the second person pronoun ‘you’ indicates that the term ‘God’ is functioning as a proper name. In Latin, one can make the distinction much more efficiently since nouns have a vocative case, a case used when the noun in question is meant to address that to which the noun refers. “*Sanctus dominus*” is a statement: “The Lord is holy.” “*Sanctus, domine*” is an address: “Holy are you, Oh Lord.”

For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the two ways in which the term ‘god’ is used as the non-vocative and vocative uses of the term. They are not mutually exclusive. Anyone using the term vocatively (“Listen to my prayer, oh God”) implies that God is something that bears a certain relationship to or has a function within the world, even if that function is as minimal as ‘the one who listens to prayers’. Non-vocative uses of the term ‘god’, however, do not, necessarily imply that using it vocatively is reasonable. One who states that God is neither knowledgeable of nor concerned with the particular details of the universe uses the term ‘god’ non-vocatively, and the content of his claim implies that any attempt seriously to address God directly is foolish – unless the address is a purely political or symbolic gesture.

I want to use the distinction between vocative and non-vocative uses of ‘God’ to draw my line. The distinction may remind some readers of the traditional distinction between theism and deism. To collapse the two sets of distinctions into one, however, is a category mistake. ‘Vocative’ and ‘non-vocative’ distinguish the ways in which one uses the term ‘god’. The terms ‘deism’ and ‘theism’, on the other hand, categorize one’s beliefs about God. It is true that both atheists and deists hold that addressing God is unreasonable (the first because there is no God to be addressed, the second because God is not the sort of thing that can be addressed). However the distinction between vocative and non-vocative uses of the term ‘god’ cuts across the spectrum of the other traditional ‘isms’ used to classify beliefs about God. Theists can use the term in both ways. So can polytheists, but not all polytheists. Epicureans, for example, believed that many gods might exist, but did not consider them to be cognizant of or concerned with human affairs. Henotheists address one god among others. Both Aquinas and Aristotle were monotheists in the sense that each held that the Prime Mover exists; but only Aquinas, I think, would consider it reasonable to address the Prime Mover directly. Given certain conceptions of the universe, pantheists might reasonably utter ‘God’ vocatively; given other conceptions, they could not. Even agnostics can use the term ‘God’ in vocative as well as non-vocative fashion provided, that is, their expectation of a response is appropriately tentative.

The vocative/non-vocative distinction cuts across denominational religious differences as well. Muslims, Christians and Jews have profound differences in belief; yet the generic nouns ‘allah’, ‘el’, and ‘god’ refer to the same reality and are used to address it. (Arabic speaking Christians, for example, call upon God as Allah, but in doing so they do not imply that they are adherents to the Muslim faith. Rather, they use the generic noun ‘allah’ as a proper name in the same way in which English speaking Christians use the noun ‘god’ as a proper name.)

So, to construct a circle, I draw a line: At one end of the line (the circles’ center) is the vocative use of the G-word, at the other (a point on the circle’s circumference) is its non-vocative use. Inside the circle are those who think it reasonable (or perhaps only possible) to address the divinity directly; outside the circle are those who don’t. Porphyry is on the inside, not so much because of his metaphysical monotheism but because he recognized the importance of prayer. In a letter to his wife Marcella, he advises that “it is necessary to pray to God for things worthy of God.”² Aristotle is out, at least on my reading of *Metaphysics Twelve*, which seems to me to be fundamentally deistic.

There is a problem with my line, however. Although ‘god’ can be used as a proper name, it is not a proper name; and it is here that I turn to Aquinas for help.

II

Thomas Aquinas says that ‘god’ is not a proper name; he classifies it instead as an appellation. An appellation is a term that signifies a certain nature (or kind) as possessed by one or many individuals, even when there is only one individual that possesses that nature. For example, in Aquinas’ cosmology, the Sun (*Sol*) is one of a kind; it possesses a nature distinct from the natures of the other heavenly bodies (planets, moon, and stars). Thomas believed that no other individuals shared the Sun’s nature. The noun ‘*Sol*’ thus referred to or picked out a unique individual for Aquinas. But Aquinas also believed that logically, if not in reality, there could be two or more suns. It was not impossible that two individuals should possess the same sunny nature. So, although the noun ‘*Sol*’ picked out a unique individual for Aquinas, he did not consider it a proper name because ‘*Sol*’ was communicable to other individuals in thought,

² Kathleen O’Brien Wicker tr., *Porphyry the Philosopher – To Marcella: Text and Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 57, ll. 209–210.

if not in reality. Proper names, on the other hand, are absolutely incommunicable.³

Aquinas argues that the noun “God” functions in the same way as the noun “Sol”. In ordinary discourse, we usually use the noun “God” to refer to an individual whom we consider to be unique. Nevertheless, the noun signifies this individual as some one thing possessing a certain nature that can be shared by other individuals of the same kind. Otherwise, it would be impossible to entertain or express the opinion that there are many gods. Many have held the opinion that many gods exist. Aquinas thinks that their opinion is false, but he does not think it is grammatically impossible. It is false, argues Aquinas, because God’s mode of existing transcends the duality of essence and existence. So for just the same reason God is not one thing among many, there cannot be many gods. But Aquinas’ hard-won metaphysical insights into God’s mode of existence, however true, do not change the fact that when we use the term ‘god’, we think about God as if He were an individual instance of a nature which is capable of being shared by other individuals.

That ‘god’ falls short of being a proper name has nothing to do with God’s unique metaphysical status. All generic nouns similarly fail as proper names, e.g., “man,” “cat,” and “dog.” Each is communicable to many individuals. Two individuals can, of course, share a proper name “Bob”; but their having the same name does not depend upon their sharing a communicable nature. The one could be a man, and the other a parrot – or even a pet rock. Proper names, unlike generic nouns, are conceptually opaque.

Proper names refer to individuals as such, i.e., in their very totality as individuals. Sometimes, of course, proper names are used simply as labels, as in the sentence “Would all the Bob’s in the room please stand up.” But in these cases ‘Bob’ means a person to whom the name ‘Bob’ has been given. When used precisely as proper names, as in the sentence “I, Bob, take you, Brenda, to be my wife,” proper names point to the totality of the person so named. Understanding that to which the name refers is not a matter of definition or labeling. It involves a more intimate sort of knowledge, a connatural knowledge.⁴

³ See *ST* I, 13, 9; see esp. *ad* 2: “nomen deus est nomen appellativum, et non proprium, quia significat naturam divinam ut in habente.”

⁴ As Henri Bergson has observed in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*: “I get a different point of view regarding the person with every added detail I am given. All the traits which describe it to me, yet can enable me to know it by comparison with other persons or things I already know, are signs by which it is symbolically expressed. Symbols and points of view then place me outside it; they give me only what it has in common with others. But what is properly itself cannot . . . be expressed by symbols, being incommensurable with everything else.” Bergson, H, *An Introduction to Metaphysics: The Creative Mind* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), tr. Mabelle L. Andison; p. 160.

The conceptual opacity of proper names is therefore proportionate or appropriate to the incommensurability of the singular realities to which they refer. ‘God’ is not conceptually opaque. But because it signifies a certain nature or sort as existing in an individual, it can be used to point to an individual and, therefore, substitute for a proper name in direct address.

Aquinas considers another phrase that might possibly be God’s proper name. He turns to the third chapter of Exodus. In verse 14, God says to Moses “I am who am You are to say to the sons of Israel: YHVH, has sent me to you.” In verse 15, God adds “This is my name for all time; by this name I shall be invoked for generations to come.”

In the Latin text of the Old Testament with which Aquinas was familiar the Hebrew word “YHVH” (or “I am”) of verse fourteen is translated “qui est”.⁵ Standing alone, the Latin phrase (qui est) is a subordinate clause with no clear antecedent. It may be variously translated into English as “which is,” “who is,” “that which is,” or “he who is.” Aquinas’s question is whether or not this phrase “qui est” might serve as God’s proper name.

Aquinas argues that “qui est” better serves as God’s proper name because it signifies no nature whatsoever. Were one to announce to one’s neighbor, “‘something which is’ is in this bush,” her neighbor would be reasonable were she to ask *what* it was. No answer to her question is contained in the “qui est” itself. Thus, “qui est” is even more conceptually opaque than “God”, since the latter signifies some sort of divine nature or function. Compare her reaction were her neighbor to announce, “God is in this bush!” However vague, ‘God’ carries more content than “qui est”.

Aquinas’ second for reason for thinking that “qui est” might serve as God’s proper name has to do with its universality. “By any other name,” he says, “some mode of substantial being is determined, whereas “qui est” determines no mode of being but is indeterminately related to all.”⁶

At first glance, Aquinas’ reasoning here is something of a paradox. He has previously argued that a noun like “Sun” (Sol) cannot be a proper name because, although we use it to refer to a unique individual, it is communicable in thought, if not in reality, to many individuals. Communicability excludes any noun from being a proper name. Now, however, he argues that “qui est” is a good candidate for God’s proper name precisely because it can be said of all things, i.e., because it is communicable to all.

⁵ “dixit Deus ad Mosen ego sum qui sum ait sic dices filiis Israhel qui est [YHVH] misit me ad vos”

⁶ *ST* I, 13, 11, resp.

Clarification of this paradox depends on recognizing what ordinary proper names (like “Bob”) and “qui est” have in common. Both are conceptually opaque and indeterminate. If someone says that Bob is in the bush, one does not know from the name alone whether a human being, a dog, a rock, or whatever is in the bush. (Any presumption that it refers to a human being derives not from the meaning of the term “Bob,” but from inferences drawn from the conventional use of the term within one’s linguistic community. Humans are called ‘Bob’ more commonly than dogs; rocks are seldom given the name ‘Bob’.) To know that “qui est” – that which is – is in the bush is to know very little. Is it a human, a dog, a rock, a color, a place, an insurance policy? One cannot tell from “qui est” alone since “qui est” can be said of anything that is in any way at all. Since “qui est” (like ‘Bob’) is conceptually indeterminate or opaque – even more indeterminate than the term ‘god’ that signifies a nature that might be shared by many things – “qui est” is a better candidate for God’s proper name. (Thomas admits that in some respects ‘God’ is a better choice. ‘God’ at least picks out some individual that is divine, whereas “qui est” picks out anything which can be said to be in any way at all.)

At this point in his argument, Aquinas adds an interesting comment. Still more proper than either name (God or *qui est*), he says, “is the Tetragrammaton⁷, which is imposed to signify the substance of God itself, which is incommunicable and, should it be permitted to speak in such fashion, singular (*singularem*).”⁸ What is behind this qualification?

Aquinas was undoubtedly familiar with Moses Maimonides’ treatment of the Tetragrammaton in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (I, 61–64), though in that text the four-letter name is called the *shemhaphorash*, the articulated or exalted name.⁹

⁷ In the first half of Exodus, 3.14 God refers to Himself with the phrase “I am who am.” “Tetragrammaton” is a Greek term that describes the four-letter name (Yod He Vav He) that God gives Himself in the latter half of the same verse. See note 5 above. Thus, Aquinas makes a distinction between the Tetragrammaton and “qui est” even though “qui est” is the Latin translation of the Hebrew word to which Tetragrammaton refers. The Greek term occurs only four times in the writings of Aquinas. He mentions it twice during his treatment of the names of God in *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 13. It occurs again in a quotation from pseudo-Jerome in Aquinas’ commentary on the Gospel of Mark, 1.7. He uses the term only once while arguing against the Arians in *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, 7. The source of Aquinas’ familiarity with the term is uncertain. He most likely came across it while reading Jerome’s correspondence with Marcella. It is the ninth name of God mentioned by Jerome in Epistle XXV. (See *Patrologia Latina* XXII, p. 429: “Nonum tetragrammon . . . id est ineffabile putaverunt, quod his litteris scribitur, jod, he, vav, he.” Aquinas never cites this letter, but he does cite Letter LIX, also to Marcella, in *De Malo*, Q. 14, Art. 6, obj. 1 (which indicates that Aquinas was familiar with Jerome’s correspondences with Marcella.)

⁸ *ST*-I, 13, 11, ad 1.

⁹ “Tetragrammaton” does occur in M. Friedlander’s translation of the *Guide* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 90. Its appearance there is apparently an addition by the

Aquinas' familiarity with Maimonides is reflected in Aquinas' treatment of the "qui est". He follows Maimonides in considering the phrase to denote God's absolute or necessary existence. Maimonides comes to this conclusion in an interesting way. He begins by proposing what might be considered the rabbinic version of the debater's paradox found in Plato's *Meno*.

Maimonides notes the paradoxical nature of Moses' request in Exodus 3, 13: "But if they [the sons of Israel] ask me 'what is his name', what am I to tell them?" The paradox is this: Either the sons of Israel already know the name or they do not. If they do, then Moses' uttering the name would add nothing to his credibility. If they do not already know it, then Moses – for all they knew – may have simply made it up. Again, Moses' credibility remains in doubt.¹⁰

Maimonides resolves the paradox by arguing that God's first answer "I am who am" is not in fact a name. Rather, it is a sort of metaphysical mnemonic, that is, a highly abbreviated argument for God's existence. By calling Himself "I am who am" God indicates that He (the subject) is identical with existence (the predicate). Existence must exist as surely as bachelors are unmarried. Thus, according to Maimonides, the phrase early in Exodus 3.14 ("I am who am") does not name God; rather God "has made known to Moses the proofs that would establish his existence to the sons of Israel."¹¹

If Maimonides is quick to reduce "I am who am" from the status of a proper name to that of a syncopated metaphysical argument, such is not the case in his treatment of the Tetragrammaton found in the latter half of Exodus 3.14. He points out that YHVH (possibly of form of the verb 'to be') may suggest the notion of necessary existence according to the Hebrew language, but he immediately qualifies his claim by adding that the scholars of his day know only "a very scant portion" of the Hebrew language.¹² The special status of the Tetragrammaton, as Maimonides sees it, lies not in its meaning but in the manner in which it refers to God. Only this name is "indicative of the essence of Him, may He be exalted, in such a way that none of the created things is associated with Him in this indication. As the sages, may their memory be blessed, have said of it: 'My name that is peculiar to Me'.¹³ So, like Aquinas, Maimonides argues that all other names for God derive from God's actions and therefore are really generic nouns. Also like Aquinas, he sees the Tetragrammaton

translator. The term is absent in the more recent translation, *Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). Future citations of the *Guide* are taken from the Pines translation.

¹⁰ *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 63; p. 153.

¹¹ *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 65, p. 155.

¹² *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 61, p. 148.

¹³ *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 61, p. 148.

as a proper name that refers to God in His unique singularity or, should it be permitted to speak in such fashion, His peculiarity. The Tetragrammaton is therefore the name by which God is directly addressed. Its use was principally a vocative one and was restricted by Jewish liturgical law. The name could not be pronounced “except in sanctuary by sanctified priests of the Lord and only in the benediction of the priests and by the high priest on the day of fasting.”¹⁴

We can now understand why Aquinas, with Maimonides, would consider the Tetragrammaton as God’s most proper name, for it is the name by which He is addressed in solemn ritual and prayer. It is utterly opaque, but it calls all less conceptually opaque discourse about the divine, including metaphysical discourse, back to the singular reality of the divine itself.

III

So what about my initial questions? Is it possible to find some middle ground within which to begin speaking about God? I think we can. The center of the middle ground within which academic and philosophical discussion of matters divine can best take place is, as I see it, “god” in its vocative function – even though in many academic settings it is illegal to use the term in this fashion. As one approaches the circumference of the circle, the noun “god” occurs more and more frequently as a generic noun to which properties may be attributed. Attributing one or another property to the divine places one somewhere within the circle. To the right, “God is absolutely changeless.” To the left, “God changes in response to his/her creatures.” Such assertions are often one hundred and eighty degrees apart, lines of opposition as it were, but at the center of all lines of opposition lays the center of the circle, God’s proper name uttered in direct address.

Who precisely is tarrying about the circumference of that circular ground wanting to join the conversation? Anyone for whom inquiry into matters divine is more than merely academic. That is to say, anyone for whom academic discourse about the divine is rooted in a less technical, less public, and more personal discourse with the divine.

Finally, is this middle ground a good place to start? It is certainly a very crowded and busy place. In the West, it has been occupied predominantly by Pagans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims of all varieties. One fears that the place might turn out to be just too noisy. However, as one approaches its center, conversation begins to settle down. And

¹⁴ *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 61, p. 148.

though lines of opposition may become strident, by turning towards of the center of this circle, participants will always encounter one another face to face. For these reasons, I think it a very good place to begin.

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