Making Motions in a Language we do not Understand: The Apophaticism of Thomas Aquinas and Victor Preller

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Abstract

Victor Preller's *Divine Science and the Science of God* makes an unjustly neglected contribution to understanding the apophaticism of Thomas Aquinas and, by extension, the possibilities and constraints of theological discourse. Preller contends that, according to Thomas, God-talk can be *meaningful* though not *intelligible*. That is, by faith one can know *that* one's propositions refer to God; one cannot, however, know *how* they do so. The first part of the article explains the main inferences leading up to these conclusions. The second part attends to some key passages in Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* in order to substantiate Preller's interpretation. Spelling out these passages requires coming to grips with Aquinas' distinction between the 'thing signified' (*res significata*) and 'mode of signification' (*modus significandi*). Armed with this second stock of concepts, the argument doubles back on the conclusions already set out: building on Preller, I argue that Thomas distinguishes between meaning and intelligibility for semantic reasons, judgements about the practice of language which are bound up with certain other ontological judgements. Throughout the article, the virtues of this line of interpretation are compared and contrasted with the position laid out in Kevin Hector's article, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas: A Reformulation and Recommendation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/4 (2007), pp. 377–93.

Introduction

Consider for a moment the philosophical distance between Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and Wilfrid Sellars' *Science, Perception and Reality* – the idiomatic sweeps, conceptual crags and lexical hollows which separate them. Now imagine trying to bridge that monstrous gulf. Those struggling to imagine such a project may prefer a real-life example: see Victor Preller's *Divine Science and the Science of God*, a 'reconstruction' and 'translation' of Thomas' theological epistemology and philosophy of language into a more contemporary

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(though perhaps no more familiar) mode of discourse – Sellars' analytic philosophy.[1]

For all the various stripes of Thomism on the current theological scene, the 'Prellerians' are nowhere to be found. That, however, is not due to Preller's lack of importance. Quite the contrary, so little has been written about Preller thus far because he was, and in many ways still is, ahead of his time. 'Preller', writes Bruce Marshall, 'is a kind of Melchizedek among Thomists', a forerunner 'without father or mother or genealogy'.[2] And yet, he is not without heirs; rather, marks and tokens of *Divine Science* are turning up with increasing frequency in the work of Preller's former students and sympathisers.[3] They are a growing cast of characters, Preller's progeny, a diverse company of scholars whose influence suggests that the full legacy of *Divine Science* remains to be seen.

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[1] Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulatin of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967). Cited hereafter as *Divine Science*.

[2] Bruce Marshall, 'In Search of an Analytic Aquinas', in Jeffrey Stout and Robert MacSwain (eds), *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein* (London: SCM, 2004), p. 56. Preller's *Divine Science* predates what John Haldane and others have styled 'Analytical Thomism', a scholarly movement whose aims and ends have been cause for recent debate. See Craig Paterson and Matthew S. Pugh (eds), *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

[3] Preller's adherents and allies include John Bowlin, David Burrell, Stanley Hauerwas, Jennifer Herdt, George Lindbeck, Bruce Marshall, Eugene Rogers and the late William Placher, just to name a few. The broad contours of *Divine Science* appear in Eugene Rogers Jr, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) and William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). However, neither of these works focuses primarily on *Divine Science*, nor do they treat *Divine Science* with the depth of attention that I do here. Stanley Hauerwas' Gifford Lectures (publ. as *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001)) owe an even greater deal of inspiration to Preller. Hauerwas has noted that *With the Grain of the Universe* is, in many ways, a reformulation of the lessons he learned from *Divine Science*. 'Preller', writes Hauerwas, 'thought and said better in 1967 what I was trying to say in 2001' (Stanley Hauerwas, 'Aquinas, Preller, Wittgenstein, and Hopkins', in Stout and McSwain, *Grammar and Grace*, p. 77). This just noted collection of essays, *Grammar and Grace*, of which Preller is the dedicatee, is the most recent and pronounced sign of Preller's unassuming influence. Many of the essays found there, especially those by John Bowlin and David Burrell, pay their respects to Preller's influence on their respective readings of Thomas. See also in the same volume Fergus Kerr's '"Real Knowledge" or "Enlightened Ignorance": Eric Mascall on the Apophatic Thomisms of Victor Preller and Victor White' (pp. 103–23), which goes some way towards explaining some of the reasons for the late-blooming reception of *Divine Science*.

That said, the upshot of *Divine Science* is by no means a settled matter. Admittedly, it is not hard to see why: Preller's blend of disparate vocabularies and concepts makes *Divine Science* an odd if not exceptionally difficult interpretation of Thomas' thought. Another reason for its difficulty is of course the subject matter itself: in the first thirteen questions of the *Summa* alone, Thomas introduces qualifications and distinctions so subtle that even the most able reader is liable to lose her footing now and again.

Take the case of Kevin Hector's article, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas: A Reformulation and Recommendation'.[4] Aimed at supplanting what Hector styles a voguish (mis)reading of Thomas' apophaticism – an interpretation which he finds most convincingly expressed by Preller – Hector's article suggests that *Divine Science* writes a cheque it cannot cash: 'according to Preller', writes Hector, 'no passage in the *Summa* can be rightly understood apart from Thomas's "apophatic rule", that "[i]n this life God is radically *unintelligible*"'.[5] Not so, says Hector; Thomas' apophaticism is less like a law than it is a ladder – i.e. it is not a 'rule' but rather a conceptual tool which Thomas provisionally employs to ascend new conceptual heights – and then kicks away.[6] *Pace* Preller, Hector argues that apophaticism is 'simply one of the tools Thomas uses to establish his overall argument, namely that we can make meaningful statements about God'.[7] In Hector's view, Thomas applies 'ordinary concepts of [creaturely] goods, with their usual meanings to God'. Hector of course grants that there are crucial differences too: when applying a term to God, for example, we must remember the disparity between divine and creaturely being. That is, '[t]he difference in applying a term to God and to creatures is ontological, not semantic'.[8]

Much of Hector's argument unfolds with extraordinary precision. For just that reason, it is also a pretty good example of how easy it is to get Thomas wrong.[9] For these reasons, I want to take Hector's article as a point of departure for coming to grips with Thomas' apophaticism. In what follows I argue that Hector misreads the thirteenth question of the *Summa*'s *prima pars*. This tack, I hope, will help throw into relief Preller's point in *Divine Science* – namely that Thomas thinks we *can* make meaningful statements about God,

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[4] Kevin Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas: A Re-Formulation and Recommendation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/4 (2007), pp. 377–93.

[5] 'Apophatic rule' is Hector's phrase, not Preller's.

[6] Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 388.

[7] Ibid., p. 380.

[8] Ibid., p. 390.

[9] The virtues of Hector's article far outweigh its defects. Indeed, in my judgement, it is one of the best expositions of Thomas' account of positive predication that we have. See esp. Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', pp. 381–8.

even though on this side of glory we *cannot* know the meaning of such statements. As we shall see, Preller's distinction between meaning and intelligibility helps make explicit some of the finer, albeit central, features of Thomas' apophaticism. To sustain these claims, I need to begin with a brief look at Thomas' epistemology.

Thomas' epistemology

Every act of cognition, says Thomas, is a composite operation of the sensory system and the intellect (I.77.5).[10] So to render any object intelligible, I must first have a sense-impression (e.g. a visual image) of the object. For 'it is natural to man to attain intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all of our knowledge originates from sense' (I.1.9). Consider the matter this way. While walking through the woods I spy my first red-bellied woodpecker; in this moment, I apprehend the woodpecker as a 'mental image' (*phantasmate*) – an immaterial 'intention' which is not formally identical with or reducible to the bird itself.[11] Here we may note that Thomas' epistemology opposes the late modern 'Myth of the Given'.[12] For Thomas, knowing 'involves a real creation of a *new form* by the conceptual powers of the mind itself, so that the concept of "what the object is" (its true nature) is never merely "given" in sense experience'.[13] The 'real form' of the external object, to quote Preller, 'does not inform the intellect – the intellect *informs itself*, on the basis of sense experience, of that which sense experience does not actually contain – the nature of the external object'.[14] Thomas holds that,

[10] With two exceptions, all parenthetic citations refer to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Domincan Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948). The remaining two instances (which I mark by footnote) also refer to the *Summa*, though I have used the English trans. provided in the Blackfriars edn, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Herbert McCabe, vol. 3 (New York: CUP, 1964). In all cases, Roman numerals indicate the part, followed by Arabic numerals, which indicate the question and article. Objections 'obj'. and replies to objections 'ad' are likewise indicated by Arabic numeral. A *sed contra* takes an 's.c'. and introduction takes an 'int'. Quotations from the body of Thomas' response are cited without further specification.

[11] See ST I.12.3; I.78.3, 8; I.84–5. For the sake of continuity with Hector and Preller, when translating Thomas' *phantasmate* I substitute 'mental image' for 'phantasm'.

[12] Cf. Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality*, International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method (New York: Humanities Press, 1963). In other circumstances, I might need to consider objections to this perhaps proto-Kantian, proto-Sellarsian formulation of Thomas' epistemology. But since my aim here is to set forth Preller's reading of Thomas, and since Hector also endorses this part of Preller's reading, I leave such considerations aside. See Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 382, n. 15.

[13] Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 42.

[14] Ibid., p. 42.

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from the very first moment of cognition, sensible objects do not show up as so many *mere givens* of sense experience. Rather, they are produced by the soul itself and ordered to the operations of the intellect (I.78.1).[15]

Notice though what this does *not* mean: for Thomas, my 'mental image' of a woodpecker is not yet a 'conscious state' or that of which my 'mind' is conscious.[16] 'For vision [of an object] is made actual only when the thing seen is in a certain way in the seer' (I.12.3). To be seen 'in a certain way' – i.e. to be understood as a *woodpecker*, a second 'moment' of cognition is required: my agent intellect must correlate the mental image of the sensible object with its concept (*conceptio intellectus*) (I.78.1; 84.6).[17] Also note that Thomas would not construe the concept 'woodpecker' – or any concept for that matter – in terms of an innate form or species of the mind (I.84.3). Following Aristotle, he holds that the intellect derives its concepts from repeated interaction with sensible reality. Call this process 'composition and division' – the finer points of which I shall return to shortly (I.84.4; 85.5).

Now since all of our knowledge is derived from (1) the apprehension of sensible objects and (2) the conceptualisation of those objects, it follows that 'in the present state of life . . . immaterial substances cannot be known by human investigation' (I.88.1, s.c.). And since God is immaterial, it would seem that we cannot know God (I.3.2). An apparent lesson, then, of Thomas' epistemology is that we cannot know the divine essence in this life.[18] So Thomas: 'It is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power' (I.12.4). 'For knowledge', he continues:

> is regulated according as the thing known is in the knower. But the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. Hence the knowledge of every knower is ruled according to its own nature. If therefore the mode of anything's being exceeds the mode of the knower, it must result that the knowledge of that object is above the nature of the knower. Therefore the created intellect cannot see the essence of God. (I.12.4)[19]

Knowledge of God and the language of faith

I take it that the foregoing represents an uncontroversial reading of Thomas' epistemology. It is one with which Hector, at any rate, registers no

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[15] Ibid., p. 39.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Cf. I.78.3 and 8.
[18] Cf. Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 379.
[19] Hector's summary of the inferences leading up to this point is especially instructive. See Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 382.

complaints. His disagreement 'lies in the conclusion which Preller draws from this reading'.[20] How Thomas' epistemology redounds on the question of meaning and God-talk – that is where the road begins to fork. According to Hector, Thomas judges that we can make meaningful statements about God.[21] To be sure, that is not a conclusion I wish to dispute. The point where Hector runs foul of Thomas' position – a point which Preller, on the other hand, maps out so clearly – is that, according to Thomas, God-talk is also *unintelligible*. This simultaneous affirmation of meaning and denial of intelligibility may strike us as a paradox. It need not, however. For, as we shall see, the *intelligibility* and *meaning* of God-talk are two separate matters. A further look at some of the crucial moves in Preller's reading helps make sense of this distinction.

For Thomas, to have a science 'of' something – be it woodpeckers, politics, God or otherwise – the subject of inquiry must be expressible in words. And in order to talk about something, we must be able to refer to it in a meaningful way (I.1.7).[22] Our overt linguistic acts (verbal and written utterances) are able to signify because they express 'intellectual concepts' (*conceptiones intellectus*) which, as we have seen, are themselves *about* things.[23] 'To have a significant concept of an object is', as Preller puts it, 'to possess an *intention* of that object'. So when a significant concept is used to *refer*, the agent *intends* the object to which it refers.[24] Hence, to intend an object one must at least know what *kind* of thing it is. Any significant reference to an object must therefore 'imply that at some level of analysis it is a *sort* of thing' – that it belongs to at least one general class of possible referents.[25]

Here a difficulty arises: Thomas considers theology (*theologia*) – or more colloquially, 'talk about God' (*sermo de Deo*) – 'the science of God' (*scientia Dei*) (I.1.7 s.c.).[26] But in order to refer to God, it seems that we must be able to 'intend him' – to have a concept of God 'in mind'. To have a concept of something is at least to have some vague notion of *what it is*. And as we have seen, Aquinas thinks that we cannot know 'what God is' (*Deo quid sit*)

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[20] Ibid., p. 382, n. 15.
[21] Ibid., p. 380.
[22] Cf. Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 4.
[23] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia super Peri hermenias*, I.2, trans. Jean T. Oesterle as *Aristotle: On Interpretation*, Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation, 11 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1962).
[24] Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 5.
[25] Ibid., p. 10.
[26] I am concerned here only with the sort of theology that Thomas considers *sacra doctrina*, which proceeds from God's self-revelation in holy scripture, and so is distinguished from the philosophers' claims about divinity. cf. *ST* I.1, ad. 2.

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because we have no means for considering 'how God is' (*Deo quomodo sit*) (I.3, int.).[27] Just so, God cannot be located within a general class (I.3.5). Since the world of sense-experience is what 'anchors' the concepts we use to refer, all existential references – if they are to be significant *for us* – must be formed with recourse to sense-experience. But God transcends the world of sense-experience and so is unrelated to our concepts and the conceptual frameworks in which they occur (I.13.1). Thus, it seems that there can be no conceptually significant intention of what God is, how he is or of how he relates to things.[28] 'It is not clear, then', writes Preller, that 'we can intend [God] or (intelligibly) intend to refer to him'.[29]

At this stage, Preller's reading runs the risk of sounding strange if not patently false. After all, Thomas goes on to say quite a lot about God. In point of fact, Preller insists that Thomas is never interested in anything less than *theological* truth, that even when interpreting Aristotle he writes not as a philosopher but as *catholicae veritatis doctor*.[30] But how can Preller square these claims? On the one hand, he seems to suggest that Thomas thinks it impossible to talk meaningfully about God. But on the other hand, Preller says that proper theological discourse is Thomas' sole motivating concern. The puzzle dissolves with a distinction, a grammatical reminder of sorts: Thomas thinks God-talk is *unintelligible* – not *meaningless*. Overlook the difference here and you miss Thomas' point, says Preller. Making sense of Preller's distinction calls for a closer look at Thomas' account of concept formation.

Recall Thomas' view that we render sensible objects intelligible by pairing their mental images with concepts, which are derived from repeated interaction with sensible objects. This process, what Thomas calls 'composition and division', is a comparative affair: 'the human intellect . . . necessarily compares one thing with another by composition or division; and from one composition and division it proceeds to another, which is the process of reasoning' (I.85.5). In other words, we specify a concept by grasping a collection of syntactic rules for relating it to various other concepts. Take the case of a circle. I come to grasp the conceptual content of the concept 'circle' by understanding a collection of rules for relating it to a larger conceptual framework, a stock of concepts including those which name four-sided shapes, figures whose interior angles add up to 180 degrees and so forth. Preller's shorthand way of putting the matter is that we

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[27] Cf. Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 10.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 5.
[30] Ibid., p. 22. cf. Victor Preller, 'Water into Wine', in Stout and McSwain, *Grammar and Grace*, p. 262.

find ourselves using a 'conceptual system' – a constellation of 'syntactical interrelations' which describes a 'logical space'.[31]

To this we may add a corollary claim: the marks and sounds of our overt linguistic acts (*scriptura* and *vox*) are significant insofar as they express concepts within the logical space of our conceptual system.[32] A word or family of words signifies a concept just if it holds a specifiable syntactical status, if it can occur in some statements (or families of statements) but not others.[33] The *intelligibility* of language is in other words a formal or syntactical matter. If we did not use language to refer to things, then the *meaning* of a word would also be a point of mere syntax. Of course, we use words to refer to things all the time; the meaning of a word or family of words is therefore determined both by its status in the conceptual system and

> its use in referring to 'that which is'.[34] The *meaning* of the word 'exist', for example, is *intelligible* within our conceptual system when used in connection with sensible objects, ideas, literary characters, etc. Novas, quasars, Captain Ahab, and woodpeckers – in each case we can determine the kind of claim being made by 'x exists'. It would not be clear, on the other hand, what 'exists' could mean *in vacuo* – what it could mean apart from the severally related conceptual frameworks generated by our conceptual system.[35]

Earlier I said that, according to Thomas, God cannot be intelligibly defined in terms of our conceptual system. Hopefully, the above remarks have lifted some of the fog surrounding this claim: it just means we do not have access to the syntactical rules by means of which something significant could be said of 'God'. That is, within the context of our conceptual structure we simply do not know what it could mean to say something like 'God exists'.

However, just because *our* conceptual system cannot intelligibly refer to God does not mean that *none* could do so. For Thomas, nothing tells against the possibility of modes of experience and 'inner states' radically unlike our own. Nor is there any reason why these modes of experience could not form the basis for an alternate conceptual system which might enable descriptions of various objects which radically differ from our current descriptions. More, such a conceptual system could engender an 'ideal language' in terms of which one might more adequately know and experience said objects. Further

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[31] Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 10.
[32] Cf. *Sententia super Peri hermenias*, I.2.
[33] Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 45.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. 150.

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still, all this could engender the knowledge and description of certain objects which exist in reality but which we do not now experience.[36] By Thomas' lights, it is actuality which implies these possibilities. That is, Thomas knows of a bona fide alternate conceptual and linguistic system, namely the one possessed by the blessed (*beati*). Unlike the believer *in via* who cannot see God, by the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) the blessed 'see Him as He is' (1 John 2:2) (I.12.1 *s.c.* and ad. 1). They know God not by 'mental images' but rather 'through the Divine essence alone [which is] present to the intellect, by which also God himself is seen' (I.12.9). The blessed, then, possess a mode of experience and intellection radically unlike our own. Seeing God 'as He is', they have an adequate intention of the very nature of God by which they can conceptualise what we cannot – the 'whatness' or form of God.[37]

But precisely what does this have to do with those who are still *in via*? Quite a lot, actually. Thomas understands *scientia dei* as primarily and radically 'God's own eternal act of knowing, both as possessed immanently of God, and as directly and intrinsically participated by the *beati* through the *visio dei*'.[38] Though the *visio dei* is an exclusively eschatological reality, there is a sense in which humans *in via* can already participate in such knowledge. This possibility is, however, strictly a divine possibility. Only by faith, which God moves in us 'inwardly by grace' (II-II.61.1), may we 'believe God' (*credere in Deum*) (II-II.2.9). Only thus may the believer assent to the 'matters of faith' (II-II.2.3, ad. 2) revealed by God in the sacred doctrine of holy scripture, which itself participates in the *scientia dei*.[39] Even so, the *lumen fidei* of the believer *in via* is not yet the *lumen gloriae* of the blessed. Bereft of this latter light, the believer cannot yet grasp intellectually or conceptually what she asserts 'in the light of faith'. No, she only possesses non-intelligible 'articles' of faith, which she believes to be 'created analogues' of the *scientia dei* shared by God and the blessed.[40]

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[36] Ibid., p. 74.
[37] Ibid., p. 233.
[38] Ibid.
[39] To this point, see also Bruce D. Marshall, '*Quod Scit Una Uetula*: Aquinas on the Nature of Theology', in Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (eds), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 1–35. It is worth noting here, if only to assuage (what I consider to be valid) Barthian anxieties that Thomas understands the holy scriptures as a divinely inspired witness to Jesus Christ, God's self-revelation 'upon which sacred scripture is founded' (ST I.1.2, *ad 2 in fin*). See also Eugene F. Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 19.
[40] Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 234.

'Created analogue' is Preller's term of art. What he intends by the concept, however, is vintage Thomas. That the language of faith consists of created analogues means that the conceptual system of the blessed contains words and expressions whose roles are 'syntactically isomorphic' – somehow similar in form and relation – with ours.[41] It does not imply, however, that the believer *understands* this isomorphism. For to understand how the language of faith makes real claims, she must understand how *scientia dei* 'works' – i.e. the believer must understand the syntactical rules which govern 'blessed language'. But this she cannot do. To say then that the believer 'understands' is to 'claim *that* there corresponds to his faith-propositions a reality in God, but it is *not* to say that the believer understands *how* his faith propositions make a real claim about the nature of God'.[42]

To be clear, Preller does not suggest that Thomas denies the possibility of meaningful God-talk. Rather, Preller argues that, by the gift of faith, the believer possesses a supernatural 'intention' by which her affirmations of the language of faith are meaningful – i.e. have 'real referential and descriptive power'. The meaning of such statements, however, is only intelligible to God and the blessed.[43] The intelligibility of God-talk for those *in via* is thus a matter of eschatological hope.

Thus far Preller's reading of Thomas. In what follows, I want to shore up the textual plausibility of this reading by paying close attention to some key passages in the *Summa*. Here too Hector remains an instructive conversation partner – not because I agree with everything he writes, but rather because precisely at the point where Hector's reading lacks textual support, Preller's emerges as all the more convincing.

Signifying God's essence

Hector correctly notes that Thomas thinks we can properly signify God's essence, even though only certain terms suffice for doing so. Thomas argues that 'negative names', for example, 'do not at all signify [God's] substance, but rather express the distance of the creature from him or his relation to something else' (I.13.2). In other words, to say what God *is not* is not yet to say what God *is*.[44] Terms of perfection, for example, '*good, wise*, and the like', on the other hand, do 'signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full

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[41] Cf. ibid., p. 153.
[42] Ibid., p. 262.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Cf. Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', pp. 388–9.

representation of him' (I.13.2). Setting aside for a moment the question of why they 'fall short of a full representation', we may note that terms of perfection substantially signify God because 'God prepossesses in himself all the perfections of creatures, being himself simply and universally perfect. 'Hence', Thomas continues, 'every creature represents him, and is like him so far as it possesses some perfection; yet it represents him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto' (I.13.2). As Hector explains, this means that the significance of a positive, 'substantial' predication about God is grounded in the 'fact that all creatures tend toward God as the *telos* of their being'. To say, then, that 'God is wise' is to suggest that 'insofar as any creature is wise, that wisdom depends upon and tends toward that wisdom which is proper to God'.[45] And so it goes for other terms of perfection: '[a]s 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' (I.13.3).

Caution is needed at this point, here where the interpretative thorns thicken. Thomas is *not* suggesting that a term of perfection can be applied to God *tout court*. Lest we think so, Hector rightly insists on a major qualification: whereas perfections exist severally in creatures, according to Thomas 'they preexist in God unitedly'. Just so, 'when any term expressing perfection is applied to a creature, it signifies that perfection distinct in idea from other perfections' (I.13.5). That is, when applied to God a term of perfection 'leaves the thing signified as incomprehended and as exceeding the signification of the name' (I.13.5). One can by now imagine how Preller might interpret this last quotation. Contrast this with Hector, who takes it in a nearly opposite direction: according to Hector, Thomas thinks the difference in applying a term to God is precisely *not* semantic but rather ontological – and only merely that.

> With this ontological, not semantic difference in mind, however, Thomas appears to suggest that *concepts themselves* mean the same thing when predicated of God and creatures. . . . Thomas's account . . . is not intended as a way of saying that our concepts only 'sort of' mean the same thing when applied to God and creatures, but that a single concept – with a consistent meaning – is applied to two very different sorts of things, and that we must keep these differences in mind. When we say, therefore, that 'God is wise', the term 'wise' means the same thing it always does – but since it is applied to God, we must remember that God's wisdom is not

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45 Ibid., p. 389.

distinct from God's love, God's mercy, God's justice, etc. The difference in applying a term to God and to creatures is ontological, not semantic.[46]

Evidence of Thomas' 'ontological, not semantic' distinction is supposedly borne out in his treatment of divine love:

> since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists. Yet not as we love. Because since our will is not the cause of the goodness of things, but is moved by it as by its object, our love, whereby we will good to anything, is not the cause of its goodness; but conversely its goodness, whether real or imaginary, calls forth our love ... whereas the love of God infuses and creates goodness. (I.20.2)[47]

For both God and creatures, to love means to will good to the object of one's love. There is of course a major difference between divine and creaturely love: whereas our love is called forth by the things we deem good, God's love creates a thing's goodness. The difference here, Hector insists, is grounded solely in the ontological difference between creator and creature.

In sum, Hector attributes to Thomas the following claims: (a) we can make positive predications about God's essence by affirming the pre-existence in God of some creaturely good. In doing so, we may (b) apply ordinary concepts of these goods with their usual meanings to God, though (c) we must recognise the ontological, not semantic difference between talk about the creaturely and the divine. And now I want to say: doubtless, Thomas holds to some version of (a). Claims (b) and (c), however, nearly get things backwards. In fact, Thomas teaches that we can apply ordinary concepts to God so long as we *do not* use their usual meanings. More, he holds this position precisely for *semantic* reasons, which, as we shall see, are not unrelated to ontological concerns. A brief tour of Thomas' distinction between the 'thing signified' (*res significata*) and the 'mode of signification' (*modus significandi*) sheds light on these matters.[48]

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[46] Ibid., p. 390.

[47] Ibid., p. 391.

[48] The following explanation of the relations between the *modus essendi, modus intelligendi* and *modus significandi* is further explicated in Gregory P. Rocca OP, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004) and id., 'The Distinction between *Res Significata* and *Modus Significandi* in Aquinas's Theological Epistemology', *The Thomist* 55/2 (1991), pp. 173–99. Thomas was not the first to employ these concepts theologically; for a detailed explanation of their provenance in medieval theological literature, see Irène Rosier, '*Res significata* et *modus significandi*: Les implications d'une distinction médiévale',

Res significata *and* modus significandi

Thomas' distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi* finds its feet in a more complex web of distinctions between the 'mode of being' (*modus essendi*) and 'mode of understanding' (*modus intelligendi*).[49] In Thomas' day, the latter three notions constituted a conceptual triad, a series of theoretical links between ontology, epistemology and philosophy of language. In broad contours, the triad suggests that, for any given object, the *modus essendi* pertains to the 'thing itself' (*res significata*), which is intended by an intellectual concept (*conceptus*) as determined by the agent's *modus intelligendi*. An intellectual concept, when verbalised by an overt linguistic sound (*vox*) is called a word (*dictio*) insofar as its use in linguistic practice confers on it a determinate mode of signification (*modus significandi*). In other words, it is only in connection with its use in judgement and action that a concept has the conceptual content it does have. Notice also that, for Thomas, the *way* a word signifies is directly related to the concepts of the intellect, which are intentions of reality. It follows that the *modus significandi* of a word is contingent upon our *modus intelligendi*, by which we apprehend an object's *modus essendi* – not as 'a given' but rather by way of intention.

When 'naming God', Thomas employs these concepts to claim that every positive, proper term which we apply to God must be considered from three perspectives: (1) the thing it signifies (*res significata*) – which in the case of God is the divine essence, (2) the meaning of the term (*ratio nominis*) as it is ordinarily determined within a particular language, which is grounded in our *modus intelligendi*, and (3) its mode of signification (*modus significandi*), the way it signifies, which is determined by its application in linguistic practice. A clearer picture of how Thomas uses these concepts emerges in two key passages which directly bear down on the larger matter at hand. First this:

> [O]ur 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 which they signify (*perfectiones ipsas significatas*), such as goodness, life and the like, and their mode of signification (*modum significandi*). As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and

in Sten Ebbesen (ed.), *Sprachtheorien in Spätantike und Mittelalter* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1995), pp. 135–68.

[49] I retain the Latin terminology in this section in order to underscore their technical status in Thomas' oeuvre.

are applied properly to him. But as regards their mode of signification (*modum significandi*), they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures. (I.13.3)[50]

In the above *respondeo*, Thomas leads off with a typical distinction between the *modus essendi, modus intelligendi* and *modus significandi*. Having already established God's eminent perfections (I.4), here he sets in relief the way we may know and speak of them. It seems plain to Thomas 'that in this life we cannot see the essence of God' – that, in other words, in this life we do not have immediate access to the divine *modus essendi* (1.13.1).[51] No, our knowledge is determined by our human *modus intelligendi* and so we can only apprehend God's perfections 'as they are in creatures'. Neither then may we transcend our creaturely *modus significandi*. Since 'words are signs of ideas, and ideas the similitude of things', it follows that words relate to the meaning of things signified through the medium of the intellectual conception (I.13.1). We must bear in mind, says Thomas, that a term of perfection stands for a concept whose meaning (*ratio nominis*) is determined by the intellect's intention of sensible reality. So for any putative *res significata* we must not forget that the way – to be sure, the *only* way – we can refer to it is with the determinate meanings of the concepts at our disposal. 'Therefore as to the names applied to God, there are two things to be considered – *viz.* the perfections which they signify (*perfectiones ipsas significatas*) . . . and their mode of signification (*modum significandi*)' (I.13.3). As regards 'what is signified by these names', we know that perfections 'belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures' (I.13.3). In other words, considered from the perspective of God's *modus essendi*, God just is eminent perfection. Insofar as the ordinary meanings of our concepts and terms of perfection could refer to God's essence, they could be 'applied properly to him'. But *that* is precisely what Thomas says the ordinary meanings of our words and concepts *cannot* do: 'as regards their mode of signification (*modum significandi*), they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures' (I.13.3). And again: 'affirmations about God are vague . . . or "incongruous" inasmuch as no name can be applied to God according to its mode of signification' (I.13.12, ad. 1).[52]

What, then, is Thomas up to? If the ordinary meanings of our words do not apply to God, then exactly what is Thomas doing when he says 'God is wise'? He insists that such propositions are true (I.13.12). But how does he know this? Might he be suggesting that we do not know *how* such

[50] Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 389.
[51] Cf. I.12.11, 12.
[52] Cf. I.33.2, ad. 4, I.39.2.

propositions are true, that our words refer to God in ways beyond what we now understand? The answer, I think, is clear enough when considering passages like this one:

> Thus also this term wise applied to man in some degree circumscribes and comprehends the thing signified (*rem significandi*); whereas this is not the case when it is applied to God; but it leaves the thing signified as incomprehended, and as exceeding the signification of the name. Hence it is evident that this term 'wise' is not applied in the same way to God and to man. The same rule applies to other terms. (I.13.5)[53]

Thomas could hardly put a finer point on the matter. *Pace* Hector, Thomas clearly states that our concepts *do not* mean the same thing when applied to God and creatures. Ordinarily, what we mean by 'wise' is the concept formed by repeated interaction with sensible objects (I.13.4). Grandfathers, red foxes, and discerning spouses – we call these things wise and, if pressed, we can give an account of how the term is being used. Things go differently with God. One must use 'wise' and suchlike terms 'without any indication of *how* these perfections are possessed' (I.13.3, ad.1).[54] For what these terms 'signify does not belong to God in the way they signify it, but in a higher way' (I.13.3, ad. 2).[55] This is because, for Thomas, it is the use of the concept 'wise' in judgement and action which confers its conceptual content. Given the constraints on human knowledge of God which Thomas assumes, it seems that applying the concept 'wise' to God loads it with content which we cannot grasp. We may use the concept in this way, with respect to God, but in doing so its conceptual content is transformed in ways which render it unintelligible to us – even though by faith we consider such uses thoroughly appropriate.

Also notice – again *pace* Hector – why this is so: precisely for *semantic* reasons! A word's syntactic relation to other words determines the way it ordinarily signifies. But in the context of God-talk, the ordinary syntactical meaning of a word is 'exceeded'. Granted, this semantic distinction comes packaged with important ontological and epistemological distinctions as well. The disparity between the *modus essendi* of the *res significata* – the divine essence – and our creaturely life engenders two very different sorts of *modi intelligendi* and therefore also two very different sorts of *modi significandi*. Our words are verbal signs of intellectual concepts, formed exclusively by repeated interaction with sensible reality – which the being of God transcends. The

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[53] Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 390.
[54] Emphasis added. I have used the Blackfriars English trans. here.
[55] I have used the Blackfriars English trans. here.

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difference then in applying a term to God and creatures *is* semantic precisely *because* of the ontological distinction between these referents.

An example helps to illustrate these points. Take the case of the concept 'love'. According to Hector, Thomas holds that 'love' when applied to God means 'just what it means when predicated of creatures . . . To love means to will good to the thing loved – and this holds true whether we predicate love of God or of creatures.'[56] Supposedly, the only difference is that 'when I love something', writes Hector, 'my love is a response to that thing's goodness, but when God loves something, that love generates the thing's goodness. I love, and God loves, and "love" means the same thing when predicated of either – but my love responds, whereas God's love creates'.[57] This difference aside, 'the conceptual content is just the same. When we apply the concept to God, the concept itself does not change.'[58] But of course it does! It is doubtful that we could even 'sort of' know what it means to love as God does, in a way which actually creates the goodness of things. Again, words express concepts – i.e. intentions of sensible reality. We can formulate the concept 'love', followed by the concepts 'create', 'thing' and 'goodness' according to our creaturely modes of being, knowing and signifying. But we cannot conceive of how to use these concepts in such a way as to render 'love creates a thing's goodness' intelligible. Granted, the gracious love of one human being for another may indeed create good in that other. Likewise, we mark the absence of love by noting the negation of its creative effects. The point here, however, is that God's love creates good *out of nothing* and, perhaps no less mysteriously, extends to those whom we cannot imagine loving – those whose wickedness has reduced them to nearly nothing. We just do not know *what it would be like* to love something and so create its goodness *ex nihilo*. We have simply never had the occasion to use 'love' in that way. Still less could we explain those propositions which would render this use of the term intelligible.

Thus, Hector's reading misses the mark. Thomas knows that the propositions 'God is wise' and 'God is love' are true. He does not, however, know *how* they are true because one of our concepts when applied to God *cannot* mean 'the same thing it always does'.[59] Contrary to Hector's reading, Thomas teaches that we can apply ordinary concepts to God so long as we *do not* use their usual meanings. And this *is* for semantic reasons, judgements

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[56] Hector, 'Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas', p. 391.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., p. 390.

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about language which are of course bound up with ontological judgements as well.

Conclusion

Preller's *Divine Science* does not interpret Thomas' apophaticism as a denial of the possibility of meaningful God-talk – far from it. Rather, as I have argued, Preller suggests that we can say quite a lot about God and that, by faith, we can know *that* our propositions about God are true – just not *how*. We have also seen how *Divine Science*, when set vis-à-vis a reading like Hector's, emerges as the more textually plausible of the two readings of the *Summa*. Thus, just as the foregoing tracks the main lines of Thomas' position in the *Summa*, so also does it underscore the enduring promise of *Divine Science* – not only as a plausible interpretation of Thomas' thought, but as a theological work in its own right. Preller did not live, move and have his being in precisely the same philosophical idioms, vocabularies and conceptual distinctions as did Thomas; nor must we wholly adopt Preller's terms of art in order to take his and Thomas' point – namely, the intelligibility of God-talk follows from grasping the material content of the concepts it employs. If one cannot grasp that content, then one cannot use those concepts *intelligibly*. Still, we may know by faith that those concepts have material content and can be employed meaningfully once the rules of meaningful predication (what Thomas develops in I.2–12) are known. But knowing the rules of the language of faith and grasping the material content of its concepts are different matters. Just so, one might be able to speak meaningfully of God, use various concepts to predicate various things of God, without being able to render those utterances intelligible. The lesson here is one of gratitude and humility. For it is by grace that we may now participate in the *scientia dei*. And yet, our mode of participation in such knowledge is for now but a 'making of motions in a language we do not yet understand'.[60]

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[60] Preller, *Divine Science*, p. 268. My thanks go to John Bowlin, Kevin Hector and Robert Jenson for their help with an earlier version of this article.