

The Mystery of God: Aquinas and McCabe

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I

Herbert McCabe was the first Dominican I ever met. He answered my ring on the front door of Blackfriars, Oxford, when I came there in 1977 to see what Dominicans were like and whether I might be interested in joining them.¹ I came to learn that Dominicans are not quite like anything. They are not easily typecast. But Herbert, as I also came to learn, is someone who holds that they have something which unites them in spite of their differences. His thoughts on this subject emerge in a sermon he preached to most of the members of the English Dominican province at their Provincial Chapter in 1982.²

The sermon begins in a spirited fashion: "We are the 'Friars Preachers', the preaching brethren, a community which specialises in talk."³ It then goes on to suggest that Dominican talkers are part of a mystery in which what they preach is also a mystery. The mystery of which Dominicans are part, says Herbert, is nothing other than the work of God in Christ. The mystery they preach, he adds, is nothing other than God. And God, Herbert insists, is indeed a mystery. God is "the unknown beyond and behind the whole universe" who "does not come within the scope of our interpretation of the world or our language".⁴

But what do we know if we know that God is a mystery? In what sense is God a mystery? And why might it matter to insist on the mystery of God? Is there, for example, something especially interesting or exciting about the mystery of God, something that sets it apart from other mysteries? Herbert would say that the mystery of God is something quite unique. He would also say that his thinking on this subject owes most of its worth from what he has learned from his brother Thomas Aquinas. So let us here look at what Aquinas has to say on the mystery of God. This will help us to get a sense of Herbert. It might also lead us to see how Aquinas and Herbert have something important to say to all of us.⁵

II

Aquinas is often thought of as someone who believed that he knew a lot about God. And it is not surprising that people should think of him in this way. For he wrote an enormous amount on the subject of divinity. And his writings contain an enormous number of statements to the effect that this, that, or the other can be truly and literally affirmed of God. In Aquinas's view, God, for example, is omniscient, omnipotent, living, good, eternal, and loving. Aquinas also taught that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and that God became human and is ever present with us as one who wishes to share himself with us.

Yet a presiding thesis of Aquinas is that, though we can know *that* God exists (*an est*), we cannot know *what* God is (*quid est*). In his *Summa Theologiae* he says: "We cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does". In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* he writes: "The divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is". In other words, there is a sense in which Aquinas can certainly be called an agnostic.

Why does Aquinas say that we cannot know what God is? There can be no doubt that the Bible was a serious influence on his thinking here, for there is much in that which could be readily summed up in the words "We do not know what God is". Biblical authors often speak of God as hidden or elusive, and Aquinas was much aware of the fact. Indeed, he cites the Bible when defending his claim that we cannot know what God is.⁶ He also cites post-biblical authors as pointing to the notion that God is somehow unknowable—authors like Dionysius (or Denys) the Areopagite. He was actually a fifth or early sixth century Christian, probably writing in Syria. But in Aquinas's day he was taken to be the convert of St Paul referred to in the *Acts of the Apostles* (17:34). So his standing was virtually that of an apostolic authority. And he was very much struck by our ignorance of God. He distinguished between cataphatic theology and apophatic theology (i.e. talk about God in which we affirm things of him, and talk which denies things of him). He also stressed that, however cataphatic our talk of God is, it must also be strongly apophatic. And Aquinas was definitely much indebted to him. He wrote a commentary on a text of Denys. And he frequently quotes Denys as an authority.

But Aquinas has reasons for saying that we cannot know what God is apart from the fact that he venerates the teaching of Scripture and the teaching of people like Denys. One of them lies in what he takes to be the range of human knowledge. Or, to put it another way, it lies in the

fact that God, for him, is not an object of experience.

Some, of course, have held that God is indeed an object of experience, an object known for what it is on the basis of human experience of it. And Aquinas does not reject the idea that God, as we may put it, is somehow directly present to the human mind. He thinks, for example, that everyone naturally desires happiness and, in this sense, is aware of it. He also thinks that perfect happiness is only to be found in God. And, with these points in mind, he is happy to agree that there is in human beings some kind of awareness of God.

But it is not, so he adds, an explicit awareness—as when we know by experience that some particular object is there. One may know that someone is approaching, but one might not know who the person is. By the same token, so Aquinas argues, having some knowledge of what perfect human happiness consists in is not the same as knowing that God exists, even if it is true that perfect human happiness lies in God.⁷ And, quite generally, Aquinas denies that there is anything to be called an experience and knowledge of God which is strictly analogous to human experience and knowledge of objects.

As knowers, says Aquinas, we depend on what we acquire through sensory experience. But God, so he thinks, is not an object of sensory experience—which is one reason for thinking of God as something unknown. We can, Aquinas holds, know that God exists, for objects of sensory experience raise questions to which God is the answer. But knowing that a question has an answer is not, for Aquinas, the same as knowing what the answer to the question is. Or, as he puts it: “The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence ... In the present life our intellect has a natural relation to the natures of material things; thus it understands nothing except by turning to sense images ... In this sense it is obvious that we cannot, primarily and essentially, in the mode of knowing that we experience, understand immaterial substances since they are not subject to the senses and imagination ... What is understood first by us in the present life is the whatness of material things ... [hence] ... we arrive at a knowledge of God by way of creatures”.⁸

But how can we arrive at a knowledge of God by way of creatures? Aquinas’s answer to this question is a further source of his teaching that we cannot know what God is. Or, to be more precise, a further source of Aquinas’s teaching that we cannot know what God is lies in his teaching that God is the source of the fact that things have being or, as Aquinas puts it in Latin, that God is the source of the *esse* of things. This teaching of Aquinas is absolutely central to his whole way of thinking about God.⁹

III

The Latin word *esse* is the present infinitive of the verb “to be”. But, as Aquinas often uses it, it is best translated as if it were a kind of noun. And that is how translators of Aquinas often render it when they come across it in his writings. As Aquinas often uses the word, it can literally be rendered as “the to be”. Normally, though, when Aquinas uses *esse* in this sense, translators report him as talking about “being”, which is a perfectly respectable way of translating him.

But we should not suppose that Aquinas thinks of *esse* as if it were an individual of some kind (as Mary is an individual woman, or Paul an individual man). Nor does Aquinas think that *esse* is a distinguishing property or quality of anything—like redness or being short-sighted. *Esse* for Aquinas, is no independently existing thing. Nor is it anything that can enter into a description of what a thing is (in the language of Aquinas, it is not the name of a “form”). Yet it is, so he thinks, something very much to be reckoned with.

To try to understand what Aquinas is driving at here, we can start by noting that there is a difference between knowing what something is and knowing whether or not the thing actually exists. By this I mean that we can know what something is if we know the meaning of a word—the word “cat”, say. But understanding the meaning of “cat” is different from knowing that there are any cats. You can see this if we change the example and talk, instead, about knowing what a unicorn is. We will not be puzzled if we read a story which features unicorns. We will not say “But the word ‘unicorn’ does not mean anything; ‘unicorn’ is a piece of gibberish”. On the other hand, however, we will not suppose that there are any unicorns.

Now suppose that something actually turns up in the world which fits with what we mean when we use the word “unicorn”. In that case, we can study it. And as a result of doing this, we might come to a deeper sense of what a unicorn is. We might develop a science of unicorns, just as we have developed a science of cats. We might come to know what a unicorn is in a way that goes beyond being able to make sense of stories with the word “unicorn” in them. We might come to know what a unicorn is in a way that goes beyond knowing the meaning of a word.

Aquinas would put all this by saying that we might come to distinguish between *what* a thing is and *whether or not it is*. He would also say that, if a thing is, it has *esse* (or being). Once again, I stress that Aquinas does not think of *esse* as a property or quality of anything. On his account, if a unicorn turned up so that we could produce a science of unicorns (an account of what unicorns are), we would not end up saying that as well as being like horses, say, they have *in addition* the

characteristic of *esse*. But Aquinas does want to insist that genuine, breathing unicorns (genuine subjects of scientific investigation) would be different from what we might call “the meanings of words”—as when we observe that we can understand what “unicorn” means without believing that there are any unicorns. Or, as Aquinas would say, genuine, breathing unicorns would have *esse*—just as cats do.

But now suppose we ask how it comes about that there are cats. There are such things as cats. But how come that there are cats?

When we ask “How come?”, the objects of our concern are fairly specifiable for the most part. We may, for example, wonder how it comes to be that some local phenomenon obtains. Why are there mountains to the east of Seattle? Why is there a cat called Thor, who belongs to a professor of philosophy at Fordham University in New York (as there is) and who is called Thor since, according to his owner, he is “simply divine”?

Sometimes, however, the range of our inquiry may be wider. Someone might explain why there are mountains to the east of Seattle. But we might then wonder why there should be *any mountains*, whether east of Seattle or anywhere else. And we might wonder how there come to be *any cats*, whether at Fordham or anywhere else.

And if these questions are answered we might deepen the range of our inquiry. Mountains and cats are there for reasons to be documented and explored by physicists, geologists, chemists, astronomers, and so on. They will tell us how it comes to be, not that this and that individual is there, but why things of certain kinds are there. And in telling us this they will be invoking levels of explanation which run deeper and deeper.

In doing so, however, they will always presume a background of things, a world or universe in the light of which explanation is possible. Mountains east of Seattle are explicable on geological and other grounds. Cats are explicable in genetic and other terms. And, if we ask why geology is possible and why genetics is possible, we shall again be looking for things of a kind behaving in certain ways.

But we might further deepen the level of our inquiry. For we might ask, not “What in the world accounts for this, that, or the other?”, but “Why any world at all?”. How come the whole familiar business of asking and answering “How come?”.

The point I need to stress now is that this, for Aquinas, is a crucial question. For him, the question “How come any universe?” is a serious one to which there must be an answer. And he gives the name “God” to whatever the answer is. God, for Aquinas, is the reason why there is any universe at all. God, he says, is the source of the *esse* of things—the fact that they are more than the meanings of words.

IV

Now, as I said earlier, Aquinas's views on *esse* lead him to his conclusion that we cannot know what God is. But how so? The answer Aquinas gives is that in speaking of whatever accounts for the fact that things have *esse* we must be careful not to attribute to it anything which cannot be true of whatever it is that accounts for there being any universe at all.

For example, says Aquinas, we cannot suppose that God is part of the world of space and time. Nor can we suppose that God is subject to the limitations and changes which affect things spatial and temporal. So it will be nonsense to speak of God as literally being *here* as opposed to *there*, or as literally being *now* as opposed to *then*. And it will be nonsense to speak of God as literally being first *like this* and then *like that*. It will be nonsense to say that divinity is something passing through successive states. And it will be even more nonsense to think of God as changing because other things have an effect on him. So it will be wrong to say that things in the world can modify God somehow. It will be wrong to say that they can, for instance, cause God to know things or cause God to undergo emotions.

It will also, says Aquinas, be wrong to say that God has a character in any sense we can understand. Or, to put it another way, it will be wrong to assert that God is an individual—in the familiar sense of “individual” where to call something an individual is to think of it as a member of a class of which there could be more than one member, as something with a nature shared by others but different from that of things sharing natures of another kind, things with different ways of working, things with different characteristic activities and effects. According to Aquinas, to conceive of God as the reason why there is any universe at all is to conceive of God as the source of diversity and therefore as the source of there being classes with different members, classes containing things with characteristic activities and effects. In Aquinas's view, therefore, God cannot be thought of as something with a character which is shown by what it typically produces (as, say, arsenic can be thought of as a substance with a character which is shown by what it typically produces—at least in certain circumstances). If God is what accounts for there being any universe, then God accounts for there being anything we can single out as having a nature distinct from other things: God accounts for everything we can understand. Yet, so Aquinas thinks, something which accounts for everything we can understand cannot be thought of as having a character which is indicated by what it typically produces. Arsenic has a character shown by what it typically produces. But to see that this is

so is also to be aware that arsenic produces *these* effects and not *those*. Given his views about God as source of *esse*, however, Aquinas wants to say that God does not produce *these* effects and not *those*. God produces *esse*—the condition of us being able to describe things as truly being like *this* or like *that*.

And God, for Aquinas, is not a thing of a kind for another reason. For, as we may put it, he wants to say that *who* God is cannot be something different from *what* God is.

Mary and John are both human beings. But Mary is not John and John is not Mary. They are individual people. And, though they are human, they do not, as individuals, constitute human nature. Along with many others, they exemplify it. Suppose we express this by saying that they are not, as individuals, the same as their common nature, that who they are and what they are can be distinguished. Then, so Aquinas is arguing, who God is and what God is are not distinguishable. We cannot get a purchase on the notion of a class of Gods or on the notion of God in a class. Why not? Because, says Aquinas, members of a class can only be understood by us as so many individuals because we can distinguish between them. Yet we cannot, so Aquinas thinks, distinguish between individuals in a class members of which are not material. Yet God, so he thinks, must be non-material—for God accounts for there being anything material and cannot, therefore, be something material.¹⁰

In short, Aquinas thinks that we cannot know what God is because we cannot have a science of whatever it is that accounts for there being any universe at all. “How come any universe at all?” is clearly not a scientific question. For it is effectively asking how come that science itself is possible. And its answer cannot be anything which a scientist could investigate or analyze. Scientific questions concern objects or events which are part of the material universe. And answers to these questions refer us to other things of the same kind, to more objects or events which are part of the material universe. But the universe is not an object or event within itself. And whatever accounts for there being a universe cannot be this either. And that is what Aquinas wants to say. In asking how there comes to be any universe, we are raising what he would call the question of creation (because the notion that the universe is created is the notion that it is made to be). And, so he insists, to say that something is created is not to locate it in historical terms or in terms of things having effects within the universe (in terms, so we might say, of *transformers*).

According to Aquinas, to call something created is to speak of it as derived, not because it has come from something equally derived, and not because it has come to be because something has been transformed.

For Aquinas, to call something created is to speak of it as derived because its existence as such is derived.¹¹ To view the universe as created, he thinks, is not to place it in a context of scientific causes. It is to see that there is a question to ask when science has done any work it can possibly do. According to Aquinas, there is a puzzle concerning the fact that there is anything there to be identified and spoken about and explained in terms of scientific or transforming causes.

It is for this reason that Aquinas may be called an agnostic. He is not, of course, an agnostic in the usual, modern sense of “agnostic”. We normally think of an agnostic as someone who typically says something like “We do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle”. And that is not quite what Aquinas wants to say. Yet he certainly wants to say something with a highly agnostic ring to it. As Herbert’s teacher Victor White OP once put it, what Aquinas wants to say is: “We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know. And if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call *God*. And if there were no *God*, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified.”¹² In this respect, Aquinas’s thinking may be compared with what we find at the end of the book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, by the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹³ Here we read: “Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is”.¹⁴ For Wittgenstein, *how the world is* is a scientific matter with scientific answers. But, so he insists, even when the scientific answers are in, we are still left with the *thatness* of the world, the fact “*that* it is”. As Wittgenstein himself puts it: “We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all”.¹⁵ And that is what Aquinas thinks when he speaks of *esse* and creation.

There is a sense in which Aquinas thinks that we can, indeed, say what *God* is. For, unlike Wittgenstein, he is quite convinced that we have reason to assent to propositions of the form “*God* is **A**”, “*God* is **B**”, “*God* is **C**”, and so on. As I have said, he holds that *God* is, for example, omniscient, omnipotent, living, good, eternal, and loving. And he thinks that we have reason for speaking of *God* in these terms—reason which is not just a matter of citing Scripture and the teachings of the Church. A casual reader of Aquinas might suppose that when he says that we cannot know what *God* is he means that we cannot know any truths about *God*. But that is not at all what he thinks.

Yet he does think that *God* cannot be seriously thought of as an instance of a kind of which we can have anything like a scientific knowledge. According to him we know what something is when we can define it. More precisely, we know what something is when we can

locate it in terms of genus and species.¹⁶ But we cannot, he thinks, do this with God. In Aquinas's view, our knowledge of God is not and cannot be comparable to that which a scientist has of things since God, for him, is the reason why science is possible. People often say that God is mysterious, and Aquinas would agree. But the mystery of God is more radical for him than it is for many who proclaim it. In his view, "when we speak of God, although we know how to use our words, there is an important sense in which we do not know what they mean ... We know how to talk about God, not because of any understanding of God, but because of what we know about his creatures".¹⁷

Aquinas thinks that we can distinguish between understanding a proposition and understanding what makes the proposition true.¹⁸ This, of course, is a fair distinction to make. Take, for example, "John has a brain tumour". None of us would say that this is a piece of gibberish. None of us would say that we do not understand what is being said by it. But it is true because of something inside John's head, and few of us would claim to understand what that is precisely. I mean: few of us would claim to know what a brain tumour actually is—though brain surgeons presumably know quite a bit about this. Well, so Aquinas thinks, something like this distinction needs to be made when we think about the way we talk of God. We say, for example, "God is good". And that, for Aquinas, is not a piece of gibberish. So at one level we know what we are saying. And we may say it, so Aquinas thinks, because of what we know about creatures. But what makes it true that God is good? The answer, for Aquinas, is nothing less than God himself. And this is something we do not understand.

God, for Aquinas, transcends our attempts to picture or describe him. So he thinks, for example, that it is equally appropriate to talk of God both in concrete terms and in abstract terms. In Aquinas's view, we cannot think of God as something with a nature shared by others. We cannot think of God as one of a class in a world of things. We can distinguish between who someone is and what someone is, but we cannot, says Aquinas, make a similar distinction in the case of God. From this, says Aquinas, it follows that God and God's nature are not, for us, distinguishable. And hence, so he argues, while it makes sense to say such things as that "God is good" or "God is wise", it makes equal sense to say "God is goodness" or "God is wisdom".

In effect, what Aquinas is saying here is that the very logic of our language cannot capture God. We normally talk about, and understand, things by singling them out as subjects of propositions and by saying what properties they have. Thus, for example, we say that Mary is tall and thin or that the dog in the kitchen is black and weighs twenty pounds or whatever. For Aquinas, however, though we are forced to

talk of God in a similar way because of the way our language works—though we are forced to say things like “God is good” or “God is wise”—that manner of putting things is also misleading. For, as Aquinas sees it, God is not something to be distinguished from what is ascribed to him. Mary might be good and Mary might be wise. But Mary is not goodness and nor is she wisdom. But, says Aquinas, having said that God is good or that God is wise we must also allow that God cannot be distinguished from what is ascribable to him. So God is goodness and God is wisdom.

Aquinas does not mean, as some have thought, that propositions like “God is good” and “God is wise” are synonymous. But, so he thinks, what makes them true is the reality of God (i.e. God), which, so he says, is not to be thought of as something distinct from what can be affirmed of it—as is the case with objects of scientific inquiry. According to Aquinas, we can distinguish between what a word like “goodness” means and what is actually there in something that we call “good”. So there is a sense in which he thinks that we know what we are saying when we say, for example, that God is good. But Aquinas does not think that God is something we can single out and understand so as seriously to be able to say that we know what it is—even though he thinks that we can say, for example “God is good”.

His conclusion, therefore, is that, though we can understand the meaning of the word “good” when saying that God is good, we cannot understand what God is. And he wants to say the same when it comes to anything which we might wish to affirm of the divine nature. We can, he thinks, know that there must be goodness in God. But we cannot, he thinks, know what goodness in God is like. Nor can we know what any perfection ascribable to God is like as it exists in him. We can know what it is like for something to be a good human being or a good computer or a good meal. But God, says Aquinas, is not a good such and such. He cannot be thought of as any kind of such and such. And he cannot, therefore, be thought of as a perfect such and such regardless of the perfection in question.

V

But do any of these teachings of Aquinas make sense? Are they at all believable? Much here turns on whether we can follow Aquinas on what he says about God as accounting for the *esse* of things. And you may say that his teaching here is just wrong. Aquinas wants to ask “How come any universe at all?”. But, so you might say, this is a question which should never be asked. You might, for example, side with Bertrand Russell in a famous radio debate which he had with the

English Jesuit priest Fr Frederick Copleston. Copleston asked Russell if he would say that the universe is something "gratuitous". Russell replied "I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all".¹⁹ But this seems to me as unreasonable a position as it is possible to maintain. Had Russell found a ton of mud in his office, he would never have said: "The mud is there. This raises no questions". He would have said that we can always ask why something is there unless it is intrinsically absurd to do so. And, so it seems to me, there is nothing intrinsically absurd in asking how it comes to be that there is a universe in which we can ask "How come?". To ask the question is simply to carry on doing what we naturally do.

Or, rather, it is in one sense to carry on doing what we usually do. For the question is certainly an unusual one. As I have said, to ask "How come?" is normally to wonder what *within the universe* accounts for something which strikes us as puzzling. And "How come any universe?" is not a question which expresses that kind of puzzlement. Or, so you might say, it is not a question the answer to which can be something with respect to which we can have anything like a scientific knowledge.

But that, of course, is just what Aquinas says. And it seems to me that he is right to do so. When Aquinas asks "How come any universe?" he is asking "How come anything we can single out, analyze, describe ... and so on?". And, of course it is true, that the answer to this question cannot be something we can single out, analyze, describe, and so on.

In one tone of voice we might want to speak of it as if it were just such a thing. And we might have various good reasons for doing so. But we shall also have to acquire a different tone of voice in which we deny that it is such a thing. God is what accounts for there being any universe at all. So God is the source of there being things with *esse*. God is why dogs and cats are more than the meanings of words. So God exists. And, if God exists, why not say that God is a being? But then what is a being? A being is something which is more than the meaning of a word. Dogs and cats are beings. And whatever accounts for this being so cannot be a being—not as dogs and cats are beings. So God is not a being, it seems. And yet, of course, he must be to account for there being things like dogs and cats. As I say, in one tone of voice we need to speak of God as if he were intelligible as something in the world—something we could in principle understand. But in another tone of voice we need to say something which pulls in a different direction. We need to say that God is the source of everything we know and understand.

That, at any rate, is what Aquinas thought. And it is what Herbert

thinks too. As the reader will see, I am in sympathy with both of them. Many, however, are not. For even among those who profess to believe in God we frequently find it said that God is basically comprehensible in a way which Aquinas would have denied. It is, for example, often said that God is a person. What do people mean when they say this? It is dangerous to generalise, but many of them are clearly saying that God is something like an invisible human being, albeit one with more knowledge and power than most of us. Sometimes it is said that God thinks, has beliefs, and makes decisions. And it is often said that God is an agent who acts on things by existing alongside them, albeit invisibly, and changing them somehow. Sometimes it is suggested that much that happens in the world is something to which God stands as a kind of onlooker.²⁰

If Aquinas is right, however, and if my brief defence of him has any merit, then talk such as this should definitely be resisted. The gods of Mount Olympus might be accurately described as invisible human beings of great knowledge and power. And they might be said to think, to have beliefs, and to make decisions as things which live alongside the rest of us and as things which can tinker with or modify other things as I may try to tinker with and modify the pasta in the kitchen which I am trying to turn into a decent meal. The gods of Mount Olympus might also be thought of as having the knowledge of onlookers whose knowledge is produced in them by something which acts on them—just as my knowledge that you are sitting in front of me is produced by something which acts on me. Yet if we are concerned with the Maker of all things, if we are concerned with what, as St Paul says, “calls into existence the things which do not exist”,²¹ then we cannot be thinking in terms of anything like the gods of Mount Olympus.

Or as Herbert has observed: “We will understand what God is only when we have been taken even beyond language and thinking, and God brings us to share in his own self-understanding. Thomas was not making a new discovery when, at the end of his life, he said that all his writings seemed like straw. He had lived with this understanding all the time he was writing”.²² Herbert, too, has lived with this understanding.²³ It is fitting that we should know something about it as we celebrate his seventieth birthday and the straw he has written while seeking to point to a God worth believing in.

- 1 Divine providence was clearly operating on this occasion. For in my many years at Blackfriars I have never observed Herbert answering a ring on the bell of the front door there.
- 2 “On Being Dominican”, published in Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London, 1987).
- 3 *God Matters*, p.238.

- 4 *God Matters*, p.241.
- 5 For the record, I should note that Aquinas virtually never speaks of God *de deo uno* as a mystery. A check on his language will show that “mystery” and “God” mostly come together in Aquinas’s writings when he is speaking of the Incarnation and the Trinity. “Incomprehensible” and “unknown” are terms more commonly used by Aquinas when talking of God without special reference to Christian revelation.
- 6 For example, in question 12 of the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae* he cites Jeremiah 32:18–19 and Exodus 32:20.
- 7 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,2,1.
- 8 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,12,12;88,1;88,3.
- 9 Herbert has written about Aquinas on *esse* in “The Logic of Mysticism — I” in Martin Warner (ed.), *Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1992).
- 10 Aquinas thinks it possible to distinguish between the persons of the Trinity, none of whom are essentially material. But the persons of the Trinity are not, for him, three members of a class. Nor does Aquinas think that we have anything like a comprehensive knowledge of what they are.
- 11 This is not to say that there is some property called “existence” which needs to be explained, though some have thought that there is such a property. Cf. my “Does God Create Existence?”, *International Philosophical Quarterly* (June 1990). Also see C.J.F. Williams, *Being, Identity and Truth* (Oxford, 1992). For good accounts of Aquinas on *esse* see Stephen Theron, “Esse”, *The New Scholasticism* **LIII** (1979) and Herbert’s “The Logic of Mysticism — I”.
- 12 Victor White, *God the Unknown* (London, 1956), pp.18 f. Victor White, as Herbert will tell you, was a profound influence on him. For a recent study of White, one which contains a White bibliography, see Ann Conrad Lammers, *In God’s Shadow: The Collaboration of Victor White and C.G. Jung* (New York, 1994).
- 13 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London, 1933); ‘Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics’, *The Philosophical Review* **LXXIV** (1965). In “The Logic of Mysticism” Herbert attempts to relate what Aquinas says about God to what Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus*.
- 14 *Tractatus* 6.44.
- 15 *Tractatus* 6.52.
- 16 Cf. *Sent.*, I d.37. q.3, a.3; *Sent.*, I, d. 43, q.1, a.1; *Sent.*, IV, d.7, q.1. a.3.
- 17 Herbert McCabe O.P., Appendix 3 to Volume 3 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae*.
- 18 He understands what Frege would have called the distinction between “sense” and “reference”. Cf. Gottlob Frege, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Oxford, 1984), pp.157 ff.
- 19 “A Debate on the Existence of God”, reprinted in John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (London and New York, 1964).
- 20 Cf., for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford, 1994).
- 21 *Romans* 4:17.
- 22 *God Matters*, p.237.
- 23 Those of his works which indicate this best, and which defend Aquinas on the unknowability of God better than I can, are: (1) the appendices to Volume 3 (*Knowing and Naming God*) of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (London, 1964); (2) Chapters 1,2,3,4,20 and 21 of *God Matters*; (3) “The Logic of Mysticism — I”.