Abstract

My paper focuses on five current topics in Thomistic philosophical theology and metaphysical epistemology. I first explore the subject and method of Thomistic philosophical theology (1), giving particular attention to the method of \textit{resolutio secundum rem} which incorporates Dionysius’ \textit{triplex via}. Based on this, I then consider the relationship between the \textit{via causalitatis} and the Five Ways (2); the relationship between the \textit{via remotionis} and the five principal divine attributes: simplicity, perfection, infiniteness, immutability, unity (3); and the role of the \textit{triplex via} (especially the \textit{via eminentiae}) in explaining divine action (intelligence and will) and divine power (4). I conclude with a consideration of the doctrine of creation according to the three extrinsic causalities (5): efficient causality and participation in \textit{esse}; exemplary causality and the role of the divine ideas in creation; final causality and divine governance through divine providence.

Metaphysical epistemology concerns the scientific foundations of metaphysics and deals with topics like its method, its starting-point, its structure and the constitution or discovery of its \textit{subiectum}. Throughout the twentieth century, Thomists dedicated a number of books and articles to such topics. In this paper I would like to contribute to that discussion and develop the connection between the metaphysical method of \textit{resolutio secundum rem} and the Dionysian \textit{triplex via} in Thomistic philosophical theology\textsuperscript{1}.

1. Subject and Method of Thomistic Philosophical Theology

For Thomas Aquinas, the \textit{subiectum} of philosophical theology is identical to that of

\textsuperscript{1} In this paper I will not be considering the \textit{triplex via} with regard to its use in the predication of the divine names, but rather its use as method of philosophical theology.
metaphysics: \textit{ens qua ens}$^2$. It is erroneous, on the basis of a pedagogical distinction, to posit two separate philosophical disciplines and propose God as the \textit{subiectum} of philosophical theology. One and the same philosophical science seeks the intrinsic and extrinsic causes of \textit{ens qua ens}: the part called “metaphysics” seeks to know the ultimate, \textit{intrinsic} causes and transcendental properties of \textit{ens qua ens}; while “philosophical theology” seeks to know the ultimate, \textit{extrinsic} causes of \textit{ens qua ens} and its properties.

The metaphysical method that adequately corresponds to this twofold causal search is called “\textit{resolutio}” (Latin for the Greek “\textit{analysis}”). In metaphysics, the \textit{via resolutionis} refers principally to “the path of reasoning which resolves things into their principles”$^3$. It is a movement from \textit{ratio} (reasoning) to \textit{intellectus} (understanding). According to Aquinas, this \textit{resolutio} is twofold: \textit{resolutio secundum rationem} progresses by means of \textit{intrinsic} causes to the \textit{consideratio entis} and to the transcendentals; \textit{resolutio secundum rem} progresses by means of \textit{extrinsic} causes to knowledge of the ultimate, supreme cause of created being$^4$.

The first \textit{resolutio} is labeled “\textit{secundum rationem}” since its progress does not involve the passage from one substance to another, but rather, by means of rational discourse, one mentally “separates” that which is really distinct \textit{in re}$^5$. For example, to solve the problem of accidental change and multiplicity, one mentally separates accidents (what changes) from substance (what remains) and affirms a real distinction – a negation of identity – between the two, according to the notions of act and potency. The problem of substantial change is solved in a similar way by distinguishing substantial form from prime matter. At the \textit{meta}-physical level, the problem of the diversity of beings and their varying degrees of perfection is partially solved by a common resolution of all things into that-which-is (\textit{id quod est}) and \textit{esse}, namely by distinguishing essence from \textit{actus essendi} in created \textit{ens}$^6$. In \textit{resolutio secundum rationem}, “one proceeds from the composite to the constitutive principles and, therefore, from the more particular forms to the universal forms. […] The ultimate resolutive terminus \textit{secundum rationem} are those constitutive principles which are common – analogically the same – to all beings,

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$^2$ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, \textit{In Boethii De Trinitate}, q. 5, a. 4.


$^6$ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, \textit{De substantiis separatis}, ch. 9: “Oportet igitur communem quamdam resolutionem in omnibus humiliismodi fieri, secundum quod unumquodque eorum intellectu resoluitur in id quod est, et in suum esse”.
and that which pertains to being as being”7. In metaphysics, then, *resolutio secundum rationem* is an intrinsic analysis which comes to the ultimate formal principle, the act of being (*esse*), whereby a thing is a being (*ens*)8.

*Resolutio secundum rationem* is also employed in the establishment of the “transcendental properties” of *ens qua ens*, since one does not move from one thing to another to affirm that all being is good, but rather one finds that all being is good to some degree and that a being’s goodness is proportional to its degree of being (*esse*). In this *resolutio*, one reduces *bonum* to the *ratio* of appetibility, appetibility to perfection, perfection to act, and act to *esse*. Furthermore, the *resolutio* involved is called “*secundum rationem*” since transcendentals such as *bonum* are identical to *ens* according to the thing (*secundum rem*) but differ according to the notion (*secundum rationem*)9.

The *resolutio* proper to philosophical theology is called “*secundum rem*” since its progress involves the passage from one thing to another insofar as the latter is the extrinsic cause of the former10. Accordingly, the goal of philosophical theology is knowledge of the efficient, exemplary and final cause of *ens qua ens* and of its transcendental properties. Because this *via resolutionis* passes from *id quod finite participat esse* to knowledge of God as Ipsum Esse Subsistens, it involves Aquinas’ Dionysian *triplex via*.

Aquinas expands Dionysius’ twofold path (the way of negation based on God as transcendent and the way of affirmation based on God as Cause of all things)11 into a threefold path (*via causalitatis, remotionis et eminentiae*) by distinguishing between the remotive and transcendent moments of the negative way. For Aquinas, the *triplex via* is basically “a threefold variation on the dominant and underlying theme of causality: the variants reveal how we may approach a knowledge of God by three paths which merely reflect differing moments of the causal relation between God and creatures”12.

In the paragraphs that follow, I show that in Thomistic philosophical theology the demonstrations of God’s existence principally follow the *via causalitatis*, the determination of the principal “attributes” of God’s nature principally follows the *via remotionis*, while the *via eminentiae* is particularly helpful in the determination of God’s omnipotent action. The demonstration and explanation of creation follows the *via causalitatis*.

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9 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 1: “*Bonum et ens sint idem secundum rem, quia tamen differunt secundum rationem*”.
10 Since it is not an intrinsic analysis, Aquinas qualifies it as a “*quasi resolutio*”.
2. *Via causalitatis* and the Five Ways

St. Thomas explicitly states that the *via causalitatis* is the rational means (*modus*) by which we know that God is (*quia Deum esse*)\(^{13}\). Due to the sensitive-rational nature of our understanding and to the fact that there is a disproportion between the power of the cause (God) and the effect (creatures), we do not and cannot in this life have direct knowledge of the divine essence. The non-evidence of God’s existence *quoad nos* means that the proposition “God is” must be demonstrated. In fact, in his exemplification of “*resolutio secundum rem*”, St. Thomas explicitly mentions “demonstration”\(^{14}\). The demonstration involved is a *quia* demonstration – as opposed to a *propter quid* demonstration – since this *resolutio* is a passage from effects to an analogical cause whose power is superior to the effects. As M. Tavuzzi affirms: “The one or more arguments which constitute metaphysical resolution *secundum rem* have thus the logical status of demonstrations *quia*”\(^{15}\).

The paths of intrinsic causality do not bring us to God, but rather to a composition of principles which require an ulterior foundation in God: the diversity of the created essences and accidents ultimately require a foundation in God’s divine ideas and exemplars; participated *actus essendi* ultimately requires a foundation in *Esse per essentiam*. The causal paths that lead to God are those of extrinsic causality: efficient, exemplary and final. Based on this extrinsic causal perspective, the Five Ways may be organized as follows.

The demonstration proper to the first three ways of St. Thomas is based primarily on efficient causality. The *prima via* is a passage from something that is moved to a first unmoved mover. Movement is explained in terms of act and potency, while the efficient causality in play is configured as that which reduces a potency to act\(^{16}\). The *secunda via* is a passage from secondary causes to the first cause according to the notion and order of efficient causality. Like the causes in the *prima via*, the causes in this ordered series are *per se* ordered causes (and not *per accidens* causes)\(^{17}\). The *tertia via* consists in a passage from things subject to generation and corruption to the existence of necessary things and a passage from caused necessary things to the uncaused efficient cause of

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\(^{14}\) Cf. Id., *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1.


their necessity. The latter passage explicitly invokes the series of per se ordered efficient causes (secunda via) and the impossibility of proceeding to infinity in this series.

The procedure of the quarta via is based on a combination of exemplary and efficient causality. The existence of gradation of perfection, of a magis et minus points us to the existence of a maximum ens; the maximum ens, in turn, is the cause of all being. This initial passage from the gradation of perfection to the maximum is principally accomplished according to the demands of exemplary-efficient causality. The maximum in a genus is both the measure and the cause of that which is in the genus. Proper to all formal causality – both intrinsic and extrinsic – is the notion of “measure”. Measure, though, has its foundation in similitude. Thus, as an extrinsic formal cause, the exemplar idea measures the effect the agent produces by way of imitation.

The quinta via is based on final causality, moving from the fact that agents desire their end to the affirmation that God is the one who directs all as intelligent agens.

3. Via Remotionis and the Principal Divine Attributes

The via remotionis depends on the prior affirmation of God as cause and, according to Aquinas, is the principal method for the study of the divine substance. G. Rocca has recently argued that there are three types of theological negation proper to Aquinas’ via remotionis: qualitative, objective modal and subjective modal. In the first, we negate something absolutely of God; in the second, we negate the creaturely way (modus) of the perfection that is found in God; and in the third we negate our creaturely way of understanding that perfection. With regard to our knowledge of God’s nature, Aquinas makes an analogous connection to the determination of the genus and species of something: the via remotionis takes the place of the determination of the genus, while the via causalitatis and via eminentiae take the place of the determination of the “accidents” and therefore of the “species”. The via remotionis has the task of distancing the preeminent cause from the effect.

In St. Thomas’s writings, the via remotionis establishes five principal “attributes” of the...
divine nature: 1) God is *simple* since he is free from all *composition*; 2) God is *perfect* since he does not *lack* anything; 3) God is *infinite* since he is free from all *limits*; 4) God is *immutable* since he is not subject to *change* in any way; 5) God is *one* since he is *undivided*.

St. Thomas argues for God’s simplicity by: 1) denying six compositions to God: quantitative parts, matter-form, *suppositum*-essence, essence-*esse*, subject-accidents, species-genus; 2) denying that God is the material or formal cause of a created being (that he enters into composition with other beings); 3) denying that our predication of many divine names thwarts his simplicity; and 4) denying that the multiplicity of divine ideas in the divine intellect infringes upon divine simplicity.

Although some have argued that the divine attribute of perfection corresponds to the *via eminentiae*, I find that the meaning of “perfection” as “a negation of lacking something”23 more properly places it along the *via remotionis*. God lacks nothing that he should have by nature, lacks nothing to achieve his end and lacks nothing in degree24.

### 4. *Via eminentiae* and Divine Action

While the *via causalitatis* stresses the creature’s dependence and the *via remotionis* stresses God’s separation, the *via eminentiae* stresses the creature’s *likeness* to God and God’s eminence25. Likeness or similitude is a necessary mode of presence of causal action – since effects proceed from their *per se* and principal causes through a process of similitude or assimilation – and thus a cause may be known and named by virtue of this exemplarity26. The *via eminentiae* consists above all in removing from God the perfections of the creatures, not because of any defect of God, but because he surpasses every perfection of created being. These perfections are denied only in their creaturely mode in order to be attributed to him in a pre-eminent manner27. The *via eminentiae* is based on the *via causalitatis*, yet differs from it since God is called good or wise not because he is the cause of wisdom or goodness, but because these pre-exist in him more eminently28.

To prove that God is intelligent and volent, St. Thomas uses an array of arguments. The

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23 Cf. Id., *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 4, a. 1: “Perfectum dicitur, cui nihil deest secundum modum suae perfectionis”.
25 Cf. Id., *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 2.
via causalitatis argument moves from the existence of intelligent and volent creatures to a cause who must itself be intelligent and volent in order to be able to cause such creatures. The via eminentiae argument is slightly different and is as follows: “All perfections of all beings whatsoever pre-exist in [God] superabundantly. Among all the perfections of beings (entium), intelligere itself is deemed to excel, for intellectual things are more powerful than all others. Therefore God must be intelligent”29. The pre-eminence of God’s intelligence demands an absolute identity between God’s being, his intellect, the act of his intellect and the object of the intellect. Likewise, there is an absolute identity between God’s being, his will, the act of his will and the object of his will.

The main aspects of God’s transcendence and eminence are summarized by Rocca: “God’s transcendence means that God has nothing added to his essence, that his sublimity is essential and immobile, and that his glory and goodness are infinite. […] God’s eminence of perfection comprises three things: universality, because God has all perfections joined together, which are not collated in any creature; plenitude, because his perfections are without any defect, which is not the case with creatures; and unity, for those perfections that are diverse in creatures are one in God”30.

5. Via causalitatis and Creation

For Aquinas, the via causalitatis is used not only in the proof of the existence of an ultimate cause, but also to demonstrate that everything that is not God is created by God and to establish the causal habitudo between God and his creatures. In the doctrine of creation, the two Thomistic metaphysical resolutions (secundum rationem et secundum rem) come together since the terminus of the latter resolution (God) is the ultimate cause of the terminus of the former (esse). Understanding ens qua ens means ultimately understanding it as created31.

The demonstration of creation is not a propter quid argument since in this life we cannot deduce creation from an immediate vision of God’s essence. As well, God’s freedom in creating does not permit us to deduce creation by necessity. We are dealing, rather, with a quia demonstration which does not seek to demonstrate the existence of creation but rather to demonstrate that all that is not Ipsum Esse Subsistens has been created – produced ex nihilo – by this Subsistent Being. One of Aquinas’ quia demonstra-

29 Thomas Aquinas, Compendium theologiae, I, ch. 28.
30 Rocca, G., Speaking the Incomprehensible God, p. 69 (my emphasis).
tion for creation proceeds as follows: Whatever is found in anything by participation must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially. God is self-subsistent being and that subsistent being can only be one. Therefore all beings other than God are not their own being, but are being by participation. All things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being are caused by one first being, who possesses being most perfectly. When an ens is seen as imperfect, in potency or participated, it is manifest that it has received esse from another and has a cause of its being. Therefore, the demonstration of creation demonstrates that participated ens and its principles (prime matter, substantial form, esse, etc.) have one unique efficient, exemplary and final cause.

The threefold structure of extrinsic causality in the demonstration of creation is repeated in the explanation of the habitudo between Creator and creation: God’s work of creation exhibits a threefold structure of bringing something forth into existence, in an ordered way, and for the sake of some good. The efficient cause is that which produces both the act (esse) and that which receives the act (essence); the exemplar cause is the model which determines the action of the efficient cause and which the effect imitates; the final cause is the motive of the efficient cause’s action. The triadic structure of extrinsic causal analysis allows us to penetrate into creation as production in esse and relation of dependence (efficient causality), distinction and likeness (exemplary causality), conservation in good and governance to the good (final causality).

The distinction of creatures and the determination of their forms must be reduced to divine wisdom which has the exemplar ideas of all things. The mode of being of the created essence is determined by its respective divine exemplar idea, but its actuality stems from the finite being’s participating in a likeness of the divine nature.

Divine governance is primarily directed to the essential goodness of God himself and secondarily to allowing each creature to assimilate the divine goodness according to their proper proportion. This assimilation occurs insofar as a creature is good in itself and secondly insofar as a creature may cause something else to be good. To these two ways of assimilation correspond to a twofold effect: God’s governance preserves things in the good they have (conservatio in bono), and it moves things towards the good.

34 Cf. Velde, R. te, *Aquinas on God*, pp. 125-126: “[D]istinctio and conservatio/gubernatio pertain to the way the divine agent relates to the effect. In determining the nature of the relationship between agent and effect Thomas lets himself be guided by two principles. First, every agent acts through a form (*omne agens agit secundum formam*) and second, every agent acts for the sake of an end (*omne agens agit propter finem*)”.
(motio ad bonum). Ultimately, God’s free decision to create can only be motivated by God’s desire to manifest his glory and to communicate his own goodness to other beings by drawing them back to himself.

In the explanation of creation, a theological foundation for the transcendental properties of being should be sought by means of a resolutio secundum rem: for example, the foundation of verum by means of exemplary causality and of bonum by means of final causality.

Conclusion

By highlighting certain aspects of Aquinas’ triplex via in relation to the method of philosophical theology, we can come to a better understanding of the argumentive structure and epistemological principles of the same. In this brief paper I have concentrated solely on the general framework and the key points of Aquinas’ position. Further study will need to incorporate themes like analogical causality, God as Ipsum Esse Subsistens, the arguments for divine omnipotence and divine providence and the explanation of divine motion in creatures.

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36 Cf. Velde, R. te, Aquinas on God, p. 128.