

BURRELL'S CRITICAL THOMISM: AQUINAS AND KANT REVISITED

JACK E. V. NORMAN 

Abstract

David Burrell's version of Aquinas was written with Kantian parallels in mind. This is the accusation of John Milbank that was questioned by Nicholas Lash and Paul DeHart in a series of articles. 'Burrell's Critical Thomism' shows beyond doubt that Milbank's claim is correct: Burrell cites Kant throughout his oeuvre and finds parallels between Aquinas and Kant's philosophies. However, this article also shows that the form of Kantianism promulgated by Burrell is not as dogmatic as Milbank argues, especially in Burrell's later writings. If Milbank's critique holds, it follows that a properly negative theology must be denied. Finally, the relationship between Milbank's participatory theology and Burrell's emphasis on divine simpleness is examined in order to critically evaluate the status of participation in God, arguing that, for Aquinas, it does not make sense to say we participate in the divine essence, only in its likeness. Direct participation in God's essence is rendered incoherent by divine simpleness.

"It is not as though Aquinas worked a revolution to which all subsequent philosophers had to acquiesce—in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, and to a lesser extent, Kant."

—David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God*, 36.

Introduction

David Burrell's contrast between Aquinas and the revolutionaries is hardly revolutionary, but it brings with it a normative claim that penetrates Burrell's Thomism. Kant's 'lesser' revolution refers to the 'critical' awareness that 'things as we know them bear traces of the manner in which we know them.'¹ The claim that our knowledge shapes the known itself shapes all subsequent philosophies.

This has two consequences. Strictly speaking, to be taken seriously as a philosopher one must account for Kant's critical philosophy.² Less strictly, this grants Kant's thought

Jack E. V. Norman
Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry, Australian Catholic University
Email: jackevnorman@gmail.com

¹ David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, third edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 59.

² For recent (continental) philosophical narratives that centralise Kant as the starting point for the 'modern' debate around realism/idealism, see Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007); Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda, *The Rise of Realism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

a symbolic status. Insofar as modern philosophy comes after the Kantian revolution, the way in which a theologian appropriates Kant can symbolise the way in which their theology marks itself as relating to modernity. (Though this is not to suggest that Kant is *merely* a symbol.) Thus, Burrell characterises his *Aquinas: God and Action* as 'a welcome alternative to the neo-Thomist attempt to separate "philosophy" from "theology" ... So [this] non-foundational reading of Aquinas was to prove amenable to current philosophers.'³ The way that Burrell appropriates Kant marks his *Aquinas* as open to modern philosophy, albeit hybridised with theology. Yet this hybridisation already intimates that Burrell does not endeavour to press religion into the bounds of reason *alone*, and that the similarity between Aquinas and Kant has its own limit.

An alternative archetype is John Milbank's theological genealogy of modernity, which does not straightforwardly acquiesce to the Kantian revolution. Milbank both centralizes Kant and simultaneously deflates his importance in contrast to the actual roots of modernity in Scotus' theology.⁴ For Milbank, Kant's symbolism, crudely, is of modernity gone wrong.

My contrast of Burrell's use of Kant with Milbank's is not a coincidence. Although they express admiration for each other's works, Milbank's critique of Burrell sparked a series of articles in *Modern Theology* debating Burrell's Kantianism.⁵ This article looks to cut through much of that debate by ceding that Burrell's reading of Aquinas has strong links with Kant. There is no other way to make sense of Burrell's identification of his work—or at least some of it—as 'an interpretation of Aquinas that is inspired by Kant.'⁶

However, while I will cede that Milbank is right in arguing that Burrell's Aquinas is Kantian, I will argue that this is not a fundamental flaw in Burrell's thought. The kind of Kantianism that Burrell finds in Aquinas is little more than the standard claims of negative theology, whereby a distance is posited between God in Godself and our understanding of God.⁷ God transcends all our epistemic categories. This will be described as a 'soft' Kantianism insofar as Burrell acknowledges the gap between our knowledge of God and God in Godself. Such a categorical transcendence is demanded by divine simpleness.⁸ God's mode of being is diametrically opposed to our mode of knowing. However, since our language has an extendibility into radically new contexts, we can understand that these terms could function meaningfully in a context we do not know.

³ 'Foreword to Second Edition' in Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, xv. For a history that focuses on the relationship between Kantian thought and Thomism, see Gerald McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989).

⁴ See, for instance, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 63–64, and 280.

⁵ Nicholas Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank's Aquinas', *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (October 1999): 433–44; John Milbank, 'Intensities', *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (October 1999): 445–97; Paul DeHart, 'On Being Heard But Not Seen: Milbank and Lash on Aquinas, Analogy, and Agnosticism', *Modern Theology* 26, no. 2 (April 2010): 243–77.

⁶ David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 134. This does not mean that *all* of Burrell's reading of Aquinas is inspired by Kant, but makes clear that at least *some* of his reading is.

⁷ Negative theology claims that 'if God transcends the world (as its creator), the categories of human thought do not properly apply to God.' David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 40.

⁸ 'Simplicity' is the normal term as a translation of Aquinas' Latin and in scholarly discourse, but since I am here interpreting Burrell, who argued for simpleness as a better (if stranger) translation, I retain Burrell's own language.

The alternative to this 'soft' Kantianism is a denial of all fundamentally negative theology. This is essentially the outcome of Milbank's reading of Aquinas in which our understanding of created perfections always already implies some intimation of the divine essence. For Milbank, a more direct knowledge of God goes hand in hand with creation's participation in the divine essence, yet such a narrative of participation is in tension with Burrell's emphasis on divine simpleness. There is no way that created existence or goodness can participate in divine existence or goodness respectively, since, properly speaking, there is *no* divine goodness apart from divine existence.

There is, however, a 'hard' Kantianism that Burrell brings out at a key point in his *Aquinas*. While negative theology is portrayed as an attempt to live within the limits of our language, Burrell pushes against these limits to intimate an awareness of the beyond that essentially unravels his strictly grammatical account. A 'hard' Kantianism leads to an incoherent notion of the unknown that is in fact known very specifically, as Milbank claims. Overcoming the boundary between known and unknown undoes the negativity of Burrell's *Aquinas* by insinuating the presence of God in the mysterious beyond. Though he presents this awareness of the beyond as a 'second' option to his grammatical account, Burrell's *Aquinas* does fall into this Kantian predilection for breaching the sublime, as Milbank might phrase it. However, a close reading of Burrell's subsequent writings will show the absence of any attempt to intimate into the beyond when he comes to the same point regarding divine unknowability. This will reveal that not only does this 'hard' Kantianism swim against the tide of Burrell's grammatical Thomism, but that it can also be easily removed from his broader reading of Aquinas.

I begin my argument with Milbank's critique of readings of Aquinas that blend his thought with Kantian philosophy. I will then turn to articles by Paul DeHart and Nicholas Lash that respond to Milbank in order to defend Burrell's reading of Aquinas. Both DeHart and Lash claim that Milbank's claim that grammatical readings of Aquinas are Kantian involves a 'portentous juxtaposition' of these figures that are not present in Burrell's theology.⁹ I will contend that both DeHart and Lash are mistaken.

After reviewing DeHart and Lash's defences of Burrell, I will go on the offensive by showing various comparisons Burrell makes between Aquinas and Kant. DeHart's claim that Burrell does not 'appeal to Kant, or [show] much interest in drawing parallels between Kant's limits to cognition and those of Aquinas' is untenable.¹⁰ A detailed reading of Burrell's *Aquinas* will show this to be the case, which will bring me to two possible versions of Kantianism: the 'soft' claim that God transcends our epistemic categories and therefore cannot be properly spoken of, and the 'hard' Kantianism in which we come to the boundary between the known and the unknown and can intimate into the unknown beyond. Milbank is right to find Kantianism in Burrell, but he is wrong to locate it in the *res/modus* distinction. Burrell is far more culpably Kantian in what he terms his "second" account of *esse* as discovered in the critical awareness of the way our knowledge shapes what we know, an awareness that approaches the boundary between known and unknown in a way that elicits an awareness of the mystery that lies beyond.

⁹ Paul DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2012), 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

The *res/modus* distinction amounts to a bland Kantianism that is little more than negative theology.

However, Burrell removes the 'hard' Kantianism from his subsequent readings of Aquinas in *Knowing the Unknowable God* and *Faith and Freedom*, while still finding a parallel between Aquinas and Kant. This I take as key evidence that one can hold to the 'soft' Kantianism that shows the awareness of how we shape the ways by which we know a transcendent God such that our knowledge involves an unknowing that is mysterious and dialectical rather than simply confirmatory. 'Soft' Kantianism is content to remain 'transcategorical' rather than 'transcendental'.

Finally, I turn to a fundamental difference between Burrell's emphasis on divine simpleness and Milbank's stress on a theological ontology of participation. I will tentatively suggest that Milbank's characterisation of creation's direct participation in the divine essence is a poor rendering of Aquinas' position that upends divine simpleness. Instead, I will show how simpleness provides an important grammatical rule for a better articulation of participation.

Milbank's Critique

The literature generated in response to Milbank's articles 'A Critique of Theology of the Right' and 'Intensities' vastly outstrips the texts themselves.¹¹ Since the appearance of these two articles, much has been written to discredit Milbank's Aquinas, both textually and theologically.¹² Interrogating the way Milbank co-opts the thirteenth-century Dominican is beyond the scope of this article. The issue at hand, rather, is how good a reader Milbank is of Burrell.

Milbank's presentation moves quickly and relies on scant citation but nevertheless shows an acute grasp of Burrell's thought. His two deconstructions of grammatical readings of analogy can be hard to follow as a single narrative, since 'A Critique of Theology of Right' takes direct aim at Burrell whereas 'Intensities' focuses on Lash. This is notable since the reading of Aquinas in Lash's essay, 'Ideology, Metaphor, and Analogy' is based on Burrell's *Aquinas*.¹³ Such a re-direction should be seen as geo-political, rather than as a comment on the genealogy of Thomism. This is explained by the explicit critique—though given 'within a much vaster context of agreement and respect'¹⁴—Milbank received from

¹¹ 'Intensities' was later published as the chapter 'Truth and Vision' in John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001). I refer to 'Intensities' because this article contains Milbank's explicit critique of Lash, and thus Burrell, while the direct references to Lash were removed in *Truth in Aquinas*.

¹² See, for instance, DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*; Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?'; John Marenborn, 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. Wayne Hankey and Douglas Hedley (London: Routledge, 2005); Laurence Hemming, 'Quod Impossibile Est! Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy', in *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Daniel Whistler, 'Post-Established Harmony: Kant and Analogy Reconsidered', *Sophia* 52, no. 2 (2013): 235-58.

¹³ As is seen in the many references to *Aquinas* in Lash's article, and also acknowledged by Burrell in his 2008 Foreword to *Aquinas*.

¹⁴ Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?', 433.

Lash, first orally then later literarily,¹⁵ and the very sympathetic account of Milbank's work given by Burrell in the early 1990s.¹⁶ While Lash might offer a more spatio-temporally immediate target for Milbank, Burrell's *Aquinas* represents the original hunting ground for the form of Thomism and is my present focus.

Kant features as a prominent thinker, lurking throughout Milbank's genealogy of modernity. While Milbank criticises Kant's philosophy in various guises, it is the way in which Kantian thought promotes a negative agnosticism concerning both things-in-themselves and God-in-himself, that is self-defeating and parallels certain moves made by Burrell in his *Aquinas* and followed by other Thomists.¹⁷ Kant's strictures on the limits of human knowledge, and especially his rejection of the idea that categories can 'be applied outside the range of their possible schematisation', is not the same as the Thomist account of our *modus significandi*. There is a dogmatism in Kant's refusal to allow us to extrapolate our categories beyond their finite application in this world. Such a claim is a sleight of hand, for this requires a direct knowledge of the immaterial and atemporal to which we know negatively that our categories do not apply.¹⁸

For Milbank, such Kantian agnosticism parallels the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. To know that there is such an unknown noumena that lies beyond our understanding requires some sort of knowledge or intuition of the unknown: 'one can only define, once for all, the limits of human understanding, and so "exclude metaphysics", if one is standing, as it were, on the boundary, with one eye on the other side, giving a glimpse of the sublime.'¹⁹ Thus, there is a paradox at the heart of (Kant's explication of) the distinction between the known phenomenal world and the unknown noumenal that lurks beyond it. To deny that we can extend our knowledge of the phenomenal into the noumenal is implicitly to know something about the noumenal. To know there is an unknown is to encounter in some way and to know the unknown. 'Wittgenstein put it very well: "in so far as people think they can see 'the limits of human understanding', they believe of course that they can see beyond these".'²⁰

Milbank finds kinship with a Kantian position as well as Burrell's claim that grammar offers a range of possible meanings from which we can discern by virtue of our finitude and on whose grounds we can continue to talk about an infinite and unknown God.²¹ Exploiting Aquinas' distinction between the mode in which our words signify

¹⁵ For a, perhaps slightly dramatized, account of the disagreement between Milbank and Lash see 'On Being Seen But Not Heard' in DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*. DeHart thinks that the critique of Burrell is in fact aimed at Lash (41), and this is based on the parallel between Lash giving his paper 'Analogy, Metaphor, and Ideology' in a conference honouring Donald McKinnon, and Milbank giving his critique of Burrell (and thus Lash) in a later conference also honouring McKinnon (40).

¹⁶ For Burrell's general sympathy to Milbank's project at the time of the Milbank/Lash controversy, see David Burrell, 'An Introduction to Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason', *Modern Theology* 8, no. 4 (October 1992): 319-29; also see Burrell's chapter 'Radical Orthodoxy in a North American Context' in Laurence Hemming, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry* (Aldershot: Aldgate, 2000).

¹⁷ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 280: 'Before Kant, as Foucault well explains, the classical era still understood finite limitation in terms of its relationship to the infinite. Our knowledge of the infinite was considered to be imperfect, but, by the same token, our knowledge of the finite to be limited also'.

¹⁸ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 11.

¹⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 105; See also, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right' in Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 9ff.

²⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 105.

²¹ Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 13.

(*modus significandi*) things and the thing that we are trying to signify (*res significata*), Burrell presents a grammatical Thomas who knows which words he can use to theologise, but does not know what we mean when we use them to speak of God. Burrell's Aquinas must have straddled 'the boundary of the sublime in a way different from, but not wholly dissimilar to, that of Kant.'²² It is impossible, 'as transcendentalists claim to have surmounted finitude, to be able to catalogue its categorical conditions, delimit their relevance and pronounce upon the foundationally formal conditions of the realm beyond finitude.'²³ We can, according to Burrell's Aquinas, talk of God using words we do not understand (the God that is spoken could be anything) *and yet* there are still words that we can and cannot use of this empty God, thereby revealing that this God is not so empty as first seems. There is a tension, however, between this purely negative stream in Burrell's *Aquinas* towards 'the unknown beyond the known,' and Burrell's attempt to give 'the specific "grammar" of creation *ex nihilo* in which the "unknown" and the "known" are specified together according to a particular religious assumption about ultimate reality.'²⁴

Milbank's discussion of the technicalities in differentiating between thing signified and mode of signification can be found in a very long endnote in which Aquinas' use naturally contrasts with that of Scotus. The distinction between *res* and *modus* is an attempt to say how we can direct our intention towards an object while our *modus* remains non-homologous with that object. The contrast is 'between a mode of being and comprehension of the knower not fully commensurate with the mode of being and sense of the thing known, which, none the less, in the case of God, constitutes the existence of, and meaning available to, the knowing subject.'²⁵

For Milbank, Burrell's position is both incoherent and alien to Aquinas' own emphatically disclosive language. For our words follow our ideas in reflecting reality, and thus speaking analogically of God presupposes a prior metaphysics. 'It is things themselves which declare to us their relationship to God.'²⁶ According to Milbank, the metaphysics that Aquinas' theory of analogy requires is as follows:

The limits or unlimits of grammar only reflect the limits or unlimits of the created order. But things can only be signs of God if the divine perfections are remotely visible in created perfections—or rather, if to see a created thing as possessing any perfection is to grasp its faint conveying of a plenitude of perfection beyond its scope.²⁷

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33 n. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁷ Milbank, 'Intensities', 473. Notably, Milbank does not ground the key point here—that to see a created perfection conveys something beyond the perfection itself and is thus to see the divine—in any text of Aquinas. It is, in fact, quite a big jump to say that the *only* way things can signify God (even imperfectly) is to show us what can only be taken as a vision of God especially when Aquinas denies this throughout his oeuvre. This can be seen in *ST* Ia q. 12 a. 11: 'the Divine essence cannot be known through the nature of material things.' Milbank's leap here excludes—without justification—the possibility of Burrell's more 'promissory' account of theological language in which words can mean more than we understand. This will be outlined later in this article.

Analogy requires a grounding in ontology. Indeed, it requires a particular ontology of participated perfections in which the excess implied in all created things surround them with a 'halo'.²⁸ Without this grounding, the possible range our words can be extended to might be a form of equivocity, and we would be left with 'a radically unknown Kantian sublime horizon, or a good entirely absconded.'²⁹ Thomas refuses a purely linguistic form of analogy in which words are predicated of God and creation because they are 'preeminently precontained in God in an exemplary and more "excellent" fashion.'³⁰ When we think and reflect about creation, we remotely anticipate the vision of God.³¹ The form of agnosticism espoused by Burrell and repeated by Lash misses the fact that the divine good can be seen despite the origins of our knowledge in creation. Crudely, this all makes complete sense as part of Milbank's grander narrative. If Scotus marks the shift that brings about secularism, and this secular was not latent in earlier thought, one would not expect Aquinas to resemble the central Kantian distinction between phenomenal and noumenal.

For Milbank, grammatical versions of Aquinas might attempt to maintain the 'insight' of the linguistic turn, but a purely linguistic philosophy undoes the good that comes from attention to language. A non-disclosive linguistic turn 'pre-constrains language within an *a priori* framework itself independent of linguistic contingencies.'³² In contrast, 'if we take it on trust that language does disclose, we can remain within radical linguisticity, since if language (or any pattern of symbolic mediation) discloses as well as articulates, we do not require in addition another disclosure.'³³ Hence, according to Milbank, a grammatical Thomas is exposed as a charlatan whose words are empty, a preacher whose God fades away into nothing, no matter how much he talks.

Burrell's Defenders

Milbank's anti-grammatical Thomism has elicited a wide response. The first critique is found in a paper given by Nicholas Lash to the Cambridge D-Society in 1997, and later published in *Modern Theology*, which in turn was given a riposte by Milbank in 'Intensities'.³⁴ Since then, others have intervened, notably Paul DeHart in 'On Being Seen But not Heard'. I start with this intervention since it offers a sustained defence of Burrell and Lash. I will later turn to Lash's more impressionistic interpretation.

²⁸ Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 10.

²⁹ Milbank, 'Intensities', 474.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 474. Milbank's grounding of analogy in ontology is in turn grounded in the reference to analogical causation in *ST* Ia q. 4 a. 3. To claim that Aquinas might here speak of analogy in a more ontological voice, but to accord primacy to the causal meaning of analogy over the linguistic, would be to swim against the tide of Aquinas' use, given that the term is relatively rarely used with regard to causality, but very consistently used to describe the way predications can relate. It does not follow that using a term to speak ontologically means that its use in all other contexts is primarily or necessarily ontological, for the term could be used analogically between the two. A far more reasonable reading would say that analogy applies primarily to the way words relate to one another, and only, by extension, to the way causes can relate to effects. This distinction is not decisive in the way Milbank implies.

³¹ Milbank, 'Intensities', 478.

³² Milbank, 'Intensities', 474-75.

³³ *Ibid.*, 475.

³⁴ Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?'; Milbank, 'Intensities'.

DeHart's essay interrogates Milbank's critique and finds no warrant for the claim that a linguistic analogy makes Aquinas and Kant bedfellows. This is both a fact of history—there is no explicit parallel made by grammatical readings of analogy and the divine unknowability to Kantian metaphysics—and a fact of analysis, for the similarities Milbank sees between Burrell's, Lash's, and McCabe's Aquinas and Kant are not reflective of their thought but are forced. Vitaly, DeHart makes the following claim:

In their interpretations of Aquinas on analogy, neither McCabe nor Burrell nor Lash makes appeal to Kant, or shows much interest in drawing parallels between Kant's limits to cognition and those of Aquinas.³⁵

This could not be clearer. Kant is brought into bed with Thomas not by Burrell, but by Milbank. Why this might be problematic DeHart does not explicitly say. Later, he analyses the grammatical agnosticisms and finds Milbank's critique wanting. For Aquinas rejects the equivocal position of Maimonides, and instead claims that our names 'do indeed signify God's very essence, even as they fail to represent him.'³⁶ The price we must pay to make sense of our signification is to accept that we only have a limited creaturely understanding of perfection terms, since God is always more eminent than we can understand.³⁷

According to DeHart, while Kant and Aquinas might be uncomfortable bedfellows, analogy and participation are happy campers in grammatical readings of Aquinas. McCabe, Lash, and Burrell 'all readily affirm that analogical reference to God in Aquinas only works because of just this creaturely participation.'³⁸ DeHart interestingly does not cite a text to support this claim, and I struggle to find a reference to participation as underlying analogical predication in *any* of their works that predate Milbank's critique (Burrell does address the matter in papers published in 1999 and 2000, and even then participation is minimised as a 'metaphor').³⁹ It is striking that, in a book that is so invested in showing the paucity of textual grounding of Milbank's Aquinas, DeHart is not more careful to find references for all his counter claims.

DeHart finds various justifications for Burrell's *Aquinas* and the orientation this work shows towards language in Aquinas' own writings. He finds ample examples of Aquinas explicating our (lack of) knowledge of God's essence in this life and distinguishing between God in Godself and God as we know him. Likewise, the distinction between the thing signified and the mode of signification was a way of talking literally and truly about a reality 'where adequate knowledge of that reality is lacking.'⁴⁰ Since some words are not tied to particular contexts, there is the possibility of

³⁵ DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*, 42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁹ David Burrell, 'From Analogy of "Being" to the Analogy of Being', in *Recovering Nature: Essays in Natural Philosophy, Ethics and Metaphysics in Honor of Ralph McInerney*, edited by Thomas Hibbs and John O'Callaghan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); David Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000): 35-52. There are references to participation in *Aquinas* (33 and 154) but these have no relation to analogical predication.

⁴⁰ DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*, 44.

using them without understanding their context. Likewise, DeHart is convincing in his rejection of the idea that Aquinas thinks we can have some kind of vision of God in this life.

While Lash's 'Where does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?' is more an interrogation of Milbank's Aquinas than a defence of himself and Burrell's readings of Aquinas, it does offer some glimpses into reasons why one might trust Burrell's Aquinas over Milbank's. In general, it finds Milbank's critique of the grammatical Thomas wanting. Yet Lash passes over in near silence the specific claim that Burrell's Aquinas colludes with Kant, merely describing Milbank as a 'bent detective' but offering no evidence for this charge.⁴¹ Instead, Lash asserts that Burrell's grammatical alertness is not an attempt to straddle the boundary that separates us from the sublime but is simply 'a matter of scrutinizing our use of certain concepts.'⁴²

Burrell's Kantian Aquinas

Passing over in silence where one cannot speak is a tradition for which Burrell might have sympathy, but Lash's and DeHart's (supposedly textually based) refutations of Milbank keep in the dark a swath of Burrell's writings that integrate Kantian commitments to the limits of knowledge with Aquinas' (lack of a) theory of analogy. With the Lash of the 1980s, Burrell was not covertly or unwittingly Kantian, but openly colluded with his critical philosophy—McCabe *was*, as far as I can tell, unperturbed with comparing Aquinas and Kant. Milbank's detective work is not bent, and the evidence is not fabricated. One can see Burrell drawing parallels between Kant and Aquinas in various works:

We shall sample what he [Kant] has to say about the knowledge man can have of God, and discover how close his remarks about and use of analogy brings him ... to the actual teaching of Aquinas.⁴³

It seems possible to do justice to both aspects of the intellectual movement involved here if we are permitted an interpretation of Aquinas that is inspired by Kant.⁴⁴

So it will simply not do to identify the former conception of philosophy with a 'classical' outlook and refuse to see instances of the latter until after Kant. The thesis of this book is that Aquinas deserves to be placed among the 'critical' philosophers if we scrutinize how he employs philosophical grammar to circumscribe discourse about God.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?', 436. The closest Lash comes to dealing with Milbank's claim that Burrell's Aquinas is Kantian is the following passage: 'It is not the malign influence of Kant, but the excellence of twentieth-century medieval scholarship, that has enabled us to discover the gulf which separates Aquinas from (for example) Suarez or Cajetan.' *Ibid.*, 435.

⁴² Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?', 435.

⁴³ David Burrell, 'Kant and Philosophical Knowledge', *New Scholasticism* 38, no. 2 (1964): 191.

⁴⁴ Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 134.

⁴⁵ Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, 89. See also 59.

If modern readers find anticipations of Kant in this treatment, they will be correct, but they should note that Aquinas also finds a way through the ceiling which Kant puts on transcendent use: one which ... turns on Aquinas' explicit avowal of a creator.⁴⁶

It is relatively unequivocal that, *pace* DeHart, Burrell details similarities between Aquinas and Kant on our knowledge of God, and on analogical predication. It is striking that Lash also saw this parallel in his earlier essay 'Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy':

If Burrell is justified in thus interpreting Aquinas' insistence that he is concerned, by reflecting grammatically on the limits of language, to elucidate what cannot be said of God, then the gulf between Aquinas and Kant is perhaps not so wide, at this point, as has usually been supposed.⁴⁷

That a grammatical approach to religious language is not far removed from Kantian philosophy has been consistently stated throughout Burrell's oeuvre, and was supported by Lash in the 1980s, even if he disowned—without clear justification—such a position by the late 1990s. It is ironic that, on this matter, Milbank's critique represents a more accurate reading of Burrell than his defenders, at least with regard to the charge of Kantianism, since these same writers are so critical of the lack of textual support evident in Milbank's Aquinas.⁴⁸

Knowing and Unknowing in Burrell's Aquinas

In his most recent writing on the topic, Burrell confirms Milbank's suspicion that the *res/modus* distinction in analogy anticipates Kant, even if Aquinas 'finds a way through the ceiling which Kant puts on transcendent use.'⁴⁹ A close reading of Burrell's *Aquinas* will show two 'versions' of Kantianism that Burrell adopts. The 'hard' Kantianism explicitly invokes imagery of seeing the boundary between the known and the unknown in order to point beyond to an unknown that we can recognise as a mysterious, yet simple, presence.⁵⁰ The 'soft' Kantianism, on the other hand, is essentially a form of negative theology whereby we accept the limitations of our mode of knowing when applied to God, and distinguishes between God in Godself and our knowledge of God. That this position is described as Kantian is in many ways a comment on Burrell's

⁴⁶ David Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 83. It is notable that this section of the article was substantially rewritten to include the reference to Kant, and a few other points, from the version published in 2000 in the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 109.

⁴⁸ The result of my fascinated exploration of Aquinas in conversation with Milbank was, however, a growing perplexity. The more I compared Milbank's claims about Aquinas with my own readings of the texts, at first guided especially by Milbank's own citations, the more I began to balk. Why could I not get these texts to say to me what they seemed to say to him? DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*, x; Likewise, Lash refers to Milbank's 'cavalier disdain for evidence' in 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?', 436.

⁴⁹ Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', 2010, 83.

⁵⁰ Burrell uses the terminology of 'limits' in the same way Milbank (and Kant, in translation) uses the term 'boundary'. For clarity's sake, I have adopted Milbank's use, since Burrell does not distinguish between limits, limitations, and boundaries in the way that contemporary receptions of Kant tend to.

history, since many of those who influenced him were in some ways Kantian (Sellars, Lonergan, and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, at least in some readings).⁵¹ Yet it is also called Kantian because Burrell consistently claims that it was Kant who made us aware of these limitations in our knowing. They were operative in Aquinas, but a reader after Kant can realise a proper awareness of the limits of our knowledge, and readers after Wittgenstein are aware of the synonymy of the limits of our knowledge with the limits of our language. The 'hard' Kantianism is manifest *only* in *Aquinas* and comes at a lacuna that is at odds with the rest of the work, whereas the 'soft' Kantianism can be found throughout Burrell's oeuvre.

Before delving into the unknown, Burrell gives a foretaste of his use of the distinction between the thing signified and our manner of signification—an analysis Milbank saw as culpably Kantian. This distinction 'reminds us that we can consider something from many different angles,' each functioning within our manner of signifying.⁵² The diverse ways by which things can be signified *show* us something about the thing signified. Burrell is especially concerned with how this governs perfection terms, which are fundamentally dependent on what they are 'perfecting'. The meaning of 'good' depends on what we are describing as good. The form of expression does not change in different contexts, and it functions meaningfully even though there is a radically different implication dependent on contexts. There is thus a scope latent within perfection terms that transcends any context, since there is no one meaning that does not depend on context.⁵³

Burrell's examination of the 'Unknown' in his *Aquinas* begins with the designation of God as the beginning and end of all things. As the beginning and end of all things, God is not counted as anything. There was nothing prior to God, no 'parts' of God to pre-exist divinity, so God must be utterly simple. Divine simpleness goes hand in hand with divine unknowability since all our modes of knowing involve composites—as is evident in any act of predication—and our categories cannot describe something simple, thus 'even appropriate discourse must fail by misleading.'⁵⁴

Divine simpleness is the driving force that makes sense of Aquinas' statement that we do not know *what* God is. This negative theology is not just lip service.⁵⁵ While Aquinas' account might look like an Aristotelian and scientific investigation into the essence of its object, the grammar of divinity consistently subverts this kind of inquiry. For all statements attach subjects and predicate, yet this form 'will falsify the reality which God is. ... So, properly speaking, nothing can be said of God.'⁵⁶

⁵¹ There are various takes in the literature on the relationship between the *Tractatus* and Kant. For a sample see: A. W. Moore, 'Was the Author of the *Tractatus* a Transcendental Idealist?', in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: History and Interpretation*, edited by Peter Sullivan and Michael Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Sullivan, 'Idealism in Wittgenstein: A Further Reply to Moore', in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: History and Interpretation*, edited by Peter Sullivan and Michael Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Anscombe, 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism', in *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G.H. Von Wright*, ed. Jaakko Hintikka (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976), 112-33; Stephen Mulhall, "'Hopelessly Strange": Bernard Williams' Portrait of Wittgenstein as a Transcendental Idealist', *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2008): 386-404; David Bloor, 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism Revisited', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, edited by Hans Sluga and David Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 332-60.

⁵² Burrell, *Aquinas*, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

This 'austere' account of simpleness goes hand in hand with Burrell's use of the distinction between the thing signified and the manner by which we signify. When we speak of God, we know that we are using our own manner of signification. Yet we also know that the attributions we make of God are to One who surpasses all created things. Our manner of signification is *always* operative in our understanding of something, and we cannot know the thing signified without this manner.⁵⁷ In addition, the meaning of some words can change depending on context, while the words remain meaningful without a fixed (or univocal) meaning.⁵⁸ As such, our predications can have a higher perfection in God about which we do not know, yet we know that we can apply it. We can speak of something that transcends our knowledge without leaving behind our mode of knowing so long as we are aware that our categories do not apply properly.

Simpleness is the 'grammatical analogue' for transcendence.⁵⁹ All the claims Aquinas seems to make about God are coloured by simpleness, a 'formal feature' that dictates the way in which predications about God (do not) apply.⁶⁰ There is no progress and no new knowledge gained after the treatment of divine simpleness. Rather, Aquinas is dealing in tautologies and going in circles around an unknowable God.⁶¹ This might sound futile but is in fact 'precisely what we need to push on in the dark.'⁶²

However, there is one formally positive statement found in Aquinas' account of divine simpleness that Burrell's *Aquinas* privileges, namely, the enigmatic claim that 'to be God is to be to-be'. For Aquinas, existence and essence are one in God. The second formally positive statement Aquinas makes about God is that we can say nothing properly about God.⁶³ The statement 'to be God is to be to-be' does not, however, contradict the unknowability of God, but characterises it. Burrell is careful, at least for the most part, to maintain that *esse* (*to-be*) is not something that can be described. It is something that can be shown, rather than said. A proposition that is merely entertained and a proposition that is asserted share the same linguistic form.⁶⁴ Because existence is not a linguistic predicate properly speaking, it is not something through which we can understand God. We have no metaphysical organ that encounters *esse* itself; put another way, being is not intuited. To be sure, there are analogues and metaphors we can use to clarify what we might mean by *esse*, and Aquinas might turn to poetic idiom to describe this, yet taking this straightforwardly would be to breach the bounds of language and logic.⁶⁵ Aquinas does not deliver us beyond the impasse of unknowability.

And yet. Burrell reiterates his arguments repeatedly about why we cannot know *esse*, that it is not something we intuit, that it can only be shown in performance, not said in

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-11; see also 70-71.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁰ For an overview of formal features, see Burrell, *Aquinas*, 16-17; David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 46-47; See also, Eddy Zemach, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy of the Mystical', *Review of Metaphysics* 18 (1964): 38-57.

⁶¹ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 17 and 45.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

logic. Again and again, he is clear: *esse* is not something we can know, it is not something that we can speak of God, except ironically. To say that if we knew what it was like for something to exist, then we would know God 'can only be taken as a joke. A useful joke, no doubt ... but a joke nonetheless.'⁶⁶ Then, after all this, at the very end of his discussion of '*esse*', Burrell makes a second—and *only* second, not an alternative—suggestion concerning a kind of resemblance that might obtain between God and creation through the matrix of *esse*. But Burrell introduces it tentatively, with a stutter, yet he still finds some sense for 'resemblance' insofar as things are beings. The created categories might have a resemblance in their *esse* 'relating' to God, even if God does not resemble creatures in any straightforward sense. This is the start of Burrell looking to overcome the limits of our knowledge.

For if we think therapeutically, rather than doctrinally, we might come to some telling of the unmannered source of being. We can be aware of how we relate our language to the world and we can come to an awareness of the way our lives bear out this relation.

This awareness has come to be called (since Kant) a critical or transcendental attitude: it consists in becoming aware of how things as we know them bear traces of the manner in which we know them. ... The awareness itself can finally be exploited to acknowledge an unknown which bears no traces at all of our manner of knowing. We would then realize that we cannot conceive this unknown, yet we could state that realization by affirming the unknown to be altogether simple.⁶⁷

Note there are two claims here: the first is of our critical awareness of how our knowledge always shows our mode of knowing, and that we can exploit this awareness to intimate into the beyond. The manner of this 'affirmation' is 'highly reflective.' It 'at least fares better than postulating an intuition of what we know to be inexpressible' and does not presume 'that we know how to use this substantial form of "to be".'⁶⁸ Once we realise that we do not know what we mean when we speak of *esse*, 'we are nevertheless possessed of the capacity—the awareness and the tools—to use language as a pointer beyond that state by carefully ascertaining its limits.'⁶⁹ This exploitation of the unknown beyond is a better example than the *res/modus* distinction of how Burrell breaks through the bounds of knowability and is the self-destructive form of Kantianism that Milbank critiques. Burrell will eventually develop a reading of analogy so 'austere' that it is almost as if the exploited 'awareness' of the unknown has itself receded into darkness. Indeed, Burrell begins his chapter on 'Analogical Predication' with a manifesto against the neo-scholastic doctrine of analogy: what many have taken to be Aquinas' theory of analogy are, according to Burrell, but 'vague remarks' in Aquinas' oeuvre that display a certain 'grammatical astuteness'. Indeed, Aquinas *never* professes an intuition of being, especially not one that grounds the analogy between God and creation.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 59-60.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 62.

Analogy is a linguistic discipline, and it is simply the middle between univocity and equivocity. In this context, the difference between the thing signified and the manner of signification returns. It is perhaps best seen in the perfection terms that can be literally predicated of God, but which nevertheless fail properly to represent God. The meaning of perfection terms changes, according to Aquinas, depending on the context in which they are used. We can therefore come to many understandings of a perfection, yet there is always more to any perfection than any of its given instantiations. Since our understanding is always necessarily mannered, we cannot claim an understanding that totally encapsulates the perfection itself. Rather, our understanding can always be extended into new contexts and thereby we recognise that this extendibility is characteristic of perfections. Thus is the case with theological attribution. 'We need not know how to use the term of God, therefore, to know that it could be so used by someone who did know how.'⁷¹ One need not be a visionary to see Christology and eschatology latent in the background of Burrell's point here; the science of God and the blessed lurks luminously, inaccessibly, behind such a new context. Although we can use perfection terms of God, Burrell notes that these are in God 'not as a possession' but in accordance with God's simpleness.⁷² Again, 'existence and attributes cognate to it ... [are such] that no one could propose a proper account. For existence is precisely what escapes scientific explanation.'⁷³ In this way, according to Burrell, 'Aquinas ... is able to endure so unknown a God.'⁷⁴ It is almost as if the stuttering 'second' account of *esse* has been passed over in silence.

It is worthy pausing at the 'almost' in the last sentence. Aquinas asks a further question: can we speak truthfully of such an unknown divinity? At first, Burrell seems unsure. Any understanding of God that claims to be adequate must be a pretender since we only know what God is not. Literal predications of God will be approached, yet they will always outreach us.⁷⁵ Thus 'an authentic religion will need not try to explain what must be left mysterious.'⁷⁶ Instead, Aquinas' treatment of analogical language of God is an exercise in grasping limits. The philosopher can say what is sense and what is non-sense, but '[t]he skills of the philosopher do not place him in a position to determine whether what can properly be said is in fact the case.'⁷⁷ So far, so limited. Yet, at the end of this reflective chapter the limit is once again crossed, and we return to what appears to be his 'second' resemblance:

Because incapacity to formulate a terminus for our quest cannot cancel out the original impulse to find out if there is one. And a sign of that is the logical acumen which allows us to go on even when we have reached the limits of descriptive discourse. ... By exercising these logical powers to elucidate the limits of our understanding, we gain some intimation of a region beyond those limits, even though we cannot envision it or tell about it. This highly intellectual awareness confirms the

⁷¹ Ibid.73. Here Burrell gives a nod to Preller's notion of 'making motions in a language we cannot understand'. See Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

⁷² Burrell, *Aquinas*, 73.

⁷³ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 77-79.

⁷⁶ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 80.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 78.

original impulse, giving that precedence over our continued failure to answer the question which propels it.⁷⁸

This provides 'just enough light ... to keep us from abandoning a task which proves so strange,' and 'through the rational idiom of logic, is the presence of that mysterious power.'⁷⁹ Once more we are returned to our limit, yet this limit is one we overcome. Burrell describes it as an 'intimation,' and is 'highly intellectual' while simultaneously alerting us to 'the presence of that mysterious power.'⁸⁰

There are thus two points at which Burrell's *Aquinas* attempts to go beyond the limits he is so careful to ascertain. This is Burrell at his most transcendental. One might grumble that this is not a purely Kantian position, since there are strong traces of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* present as well, especially in Burrell's use of the saying/showing distinction and the relationship between the limits of our language and the mystical. But this complaint will not suffice to undermine Burrell's position, as I will show below. In *Aquinas*, Burrell is not *quite* able to pass over in silence whereof he could not speak. What is it to 'realize', 'acknowledge', to have a 'capacity' or 'awareness' of a simple unknown? And how does this fit with Burrell's claim that language 'transcribes' our present state? And, indeed, how does this fit with the aforementioned comments that if we know what it is for anything to exist then we would know what God is, even though '[w]e have no way of expressing the kind of fact that existence is.'⁸¹ Or the more striking claim: 'This statement can only be taken as a joke?'⁸²

This 'second' account of *esse* is not quite the intuition of being Burrell is so keen to reject—that is more a starting point than a conclusion—which at least demands pause before accusations of contradiction are adjudged. But it does sound like a privileged perspective of metaphysical knowledge which Burrell readily denies. The second account goes against many of Burrell's explicit statements, such as: 'Aquinas deliberately eschewed any attempt to tell us what God is like. He did not feel himself or anyone else to be in a position to do that.'⁸³ The fundamental question I have is *why* does Burrell do this? Is it to safeguard religious experience or some form of God-consciousness? Unfortunately, Burrell does not explicate any more than I have described. Perhaps the only clue as to what this might be comes on the final page of *Aquinas* where Burrell distinguishes contemplation from 'act':

A contemplative moment not only can free us from space and time; it can also resolve impasses by allowing hitherto incompatible horizons to merge. ... The activity itself bears no resemblance to our attempts to sort things out, yet many confusions come unravelled in its wake.⁸⁴

If this is the way to resolve the tension in Burrell's second account of *esse* as intimated somehow, then it is a cryptic response. Nevertheless, this second account of *esse* goes more toward confirming Burrell's *Aquinas* than exposing his theology as just so much straw. For

⁷⁸ Ibid., 84-85.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 58.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 196.

Burrell's attempts to 'not describe' end up intimating and even validating the 'unknowing' that he delimits. *If* this second account of *esse* truly makes sense, then there is a vision, there is a knowing, that surpasses the limit. Here, Milbank *is* right: Burrell is dangerously Kantian.

There is, however, something more broadly Kantian that Milbank sees in Burrell's *Aquinas*. Milbank finds a tension between a purely negative stream in Burrell's *Aquinas* towards 'the unknown beyond the known', and his narration of another stream of 'the specific "grammar" of creation *ex nihilo* in which the "unknown" and the "known" are specified together according to a particular religious assumption about ultimate reality.'⁸⁵ Milbank's reading is in fact *plausible* insofar as Burrell's beginning with the fact of God as the beginning and end of all things does not imply that God is anything we can understand. There could be a sleight of hand here, for one could object that once God is said not to be part of creation, then all we have is a pure negation of creation. Indeed, one could argue further, using the 'hard' Kantianism outlined above, and suggest that Burrell's *Aquinas* claims a certain privileged access into the divine that guides the non-application of our categories in a way that is not so unknowing but as dogmatic as Milbank's Kant.

Yet I do not think this is the only way to read Burrell. For the two poles Milbank finds in Burrell makes Milbank's position *almost* invulnerable. Since any evidence that could be found of the more ambiguous, and less dogmatic, form of negative theology whereby the apophatic and cataphatic are disclosed together could simply be discounted as part of the particularly Christian grammar. Hence, no counterevidence can be found that could disprove Milbank's claim. For any counter would be seen merely as part of the 'good' aspects of *Aquinas* for which Milbank expresses admiration; they would not touch upon the problematically Kantian elements. On the other hand, one could read the second 'stream' as qualifying the first so that the extreme negation is not simply a dogmatic unknowing but is itself made stranger and more negative by the intertwining of the negative and positive predications with which Burrell is comfortable. This is most naturally found in Burrell's focus on perfections as the locus of theological analogy. Our access to perfections is never purely to the perfection itself, the recognition of which always brings with it a manner of knowing that exposes the limitations in our understanding. We cannot leave the intimations of our limitations behind. Instead, when we ascribe perfections to God (such as 'the living God'), 'we are licensed to make the statement once we have become aware that we can use "living" to express many ways of being alive, without thereby exhausting the range of this term. If we couple that awareness with Aquinas' formula that God is the source and goal of all things, his observations become more compatible.'⁸⁶ Thus, to affirm the primacy of God's perfections is to claim that they exist in him most perfectly and primordially. Note, however, that Burrell couples the indeterminate range with the claim that God is the creator of all as a way of pointing to Aquinas's conviction that these claims be held *together*. What at first seems to be a potentially dogmatic kind of knowing unknowing, of the Kantian sort that Milbank objected to, turns out upon closer inspection to be in direct contact with a more intertwined negative theology where affirmation and negation are disclosed together. To transcribe the apophatic/kataphatic into the *modus/res* distinction, which is but another way of describing the combination of known and unknown, one may say that

⁸⁵ Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 13.

⁸⁶ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 72-73.

there is no way of knowing which aspects of our knowledge are affirmed and which denied, given that we cannot in our finite, contingent existence leave behind the manner in which we know.

As such, Burrell can introduce divine simpleness in various ways. One way that makes it sound like a pure negation comes at the start of the chapter, 'the Unknown', where Burrell argues that since God is the beginning and end of all, God must be distinct from the universe—which means that we can *only* consider ways in which God is not.⁸⁷ Yet Burrell also gives an earlier description of simpleness as a philosophical expression of divine transcendence that is not a description of God but more 'a shorthand way of establishing a set of grammatical priorities designed to locate the subject matter as precisely as possible.' Burrell illustrates this need for precision with the claim that God is both wise, and God is wisdom itself. *Both* of these claims must be used to 'express something else that we know but cannot otherwise state. The need for two shows that neither form is adequate, since we know that "we do not know him as he is in himself".'⁸⁸ This way of introducing the matter seems to integrate the two streams that Milbank sees as disparate. It might be that they can be isolated, but they need not be.

After Aquinas: Burrell's 'Soft Kantianism'

In addition to his book *Aquinas*, we can also see Burrell come to the limits of our language in his *Knowing the Unknowable God* and in *Faith and Freedom*. In these latter works, however, he does not attempt to look beyond human limitations and intimate an awareness of the divine mystery.

Knowing the Unknowable God presses at the limits of our understanding. From the outset, Burrell describes his primary aim as one of securing '... the distinction of God from the world, and to do so in such a way as to display how such a One, who must be unknowable, may also be known.'⁸⁹ Of pressing relevance to this article are the points where Burrell comes to the limit of the unknown without at the same time succumbing to the temptation to transgress these limits by invoking an 'awareness' of the beyond.

Burrell contends that we need 'to shift our perspectives', by which he means that we need to set aside the project of trying to understand being in terms of an essence, and instead use analogies and metaphors to make sense of our unknowing.⁹⁰ The distinction between existence and essence is again key for divine unknowability and simpleness. But in *Knowing the Unknowable God*, Burrell does not mention the 'second' way of knowing being in terms of a kind of awareness or intimation that we journey towards. Instead of

... considering God's essence in the line of properties, [we are] invite[d] to recognize the limits of our conceptual powers. The affirmation of God's simpleness, then, is not an ordinary statement about God, so much as an assertion showing where 'the distinction' is to be drawn, and in what directions we should look to overcome our endemic 'essentialism'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁹ Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God*, 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44–46.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

What must be overcome, in other words, is not our unknowing, but rather our expectations of existence as but another essence. We come to the point from which Burrell's *Aquinas* looks for a beyond that we can intimate only to arrive at a negative judgment regarding our knowledge and the unknown. We are, in short, called to be *self-reflective*. We simply know that we can extend our words meaningfully into new contexts, without having to intimate what this might be like.

The same implicit refusal to look beyond the limits of our knowledge comes in Burrell's expansive homage to Ralph McInerny on analogy.⁹² Here, Burrell comes once more to the limits of our knowing, and how we can speak *in divinis* while still claiming God to be unknown. This passage comes at the end of this essay, mirroring the way in which Burrell reached the 'hard' Kantian attempts to come to the boundary between known and unknown and to intimate, in some respects, the beyond. He argues that Aquinas' key move is to offer the distinction between the 'thing signified' and 'our manner of signification', which allows us to use terms expansively. Having reintroduced Aquinas' programmatic remark that we can 'only know what God is not', Burrell comments:

One could not, it seems, engage in 'negative theology' so gracefully without having some other access to the One whose nature remains unknown to us ... And that other access must be such that it does not reduce the 'unknowing' but rather offers a way of living with it. In the terms which we have been using from Aquinas' treatment of discourse *in divinis*, we need not be able to articulate the *res significata* [thing signified] to assure ourselves that there is such. What we need to be able to do, however, is to recognize that the very terms we use have a reach beyond the *modus significandi* [manner of signification] that is accessible to us.⁹³

Amid his attempt to engage in negative theology, Burrell comes again to the limits of knowledge. The key move is the distinction between what words signify and the manner in which they signify, which makes possible the recognition that words can be extended into various contexts. Such extendibility can be exploited to say *that* these words could be used in contexts that we do not understand *without* pretending to understand these contexts. Words can 'reach beyond' our meaning for them. Since we cannot, however, come to a firm understanding of the 'thing signified' the creator God remains inaccessible to us.

These texts—excerpted from *Knowing the Unknowable God* and in *Faith and Freedom*—are examples of where Burrell comes closest to the limits of the unknown after *Aquinas*. Whereas these texts speak to how we arrive at the limits of our knowledge of God and the world, they do not, as in *Aquinas*, offer a second way intimating what lies beyond those limits. In these latter works, Burrell underscores the way we can talk about the unknown by virtue of the fact that our language can be extended into new contexts *without* disclosing ahead of time what these new contexts are. Burrell does not try to describe what the unknown is like and resists intimating *esse* or making it into another essence, and instead relies on the way in which terms can be meaningful in various contexts to show that they could function meaningfully in a context we did not know, as is the case when we talk of a 'simple' God. There is a gap between our knowledge of

⁹² Burrell, 'From Analogy of "Being" to the Analogy of Being'; Republished in David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 113–26.

⁹³ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 124–25.

God and God in Godself, but Burrell (at his best) refuses to transgress the boundary between known and unknown, but focuses instead on showing how language functions contextually, and exploits this phenomenon.

Burrell himself describes the difference between his earlier and later writings as stemming from his encounter with Robert Sokolowski's notion of 'the distinction'.⁹⁴ This 'distinction' is between God and creation, with an emphasis on the utter transcendence of the divine. For Burrell, 'the distinction' becomes keen from the early 1980s onwards, which means that *maintaining* rather than overcoming the boundary between the known and the unknown gains in utmost importance. That said, this attention to the distinction between God and creation does not stand in fundamental discontinuity with Burrell's earlier work. It is better seen as a re-focusing. One can find reference to the importance of creation for Aquinas' philosophy throughout Burrell's oeuvre, and this goes hand in hand with his formulation of the distinction.⁹⁵ Indeed, attempting to overcome the boundary goes against the fundamental flow of Burrell's *Aquinas*, which attempts to map out the appropriate grammar *in divinis* and navigate amid such an unknown God. Remember, it was only a 'second' account of *esse* and never an alternative to the unknowability; even this 'second' is clearly in tension with the earlier claims Burrell makes in *Aquinas*. That it swims against the stream should be a mark *against* Milbank's critique of Burrell insofar as this 'second' has nothing to do with the *res/modus* distinction. It is more an added extra—a strategic transcendentalism not an essential one. In later works, one can see Burrell come to the same point regarding the unknowability of *esse*, and instead of seeking to overcome the limits of our knowledge and intimate the beyond, he realises that to do so risks making *esse* into another essence.

However, in defending Burrell against Milbank's accusation, this does not totally dismiss the charge of Kantianism. As I have argued throughout, Burrell's thought shows two different kinds of Kantianism: the 'hard' one, which looks to overcome the limits of our knowledge in order to intimate what lies beyond, and a 'soft' Kantianism in which our conditions of knowledge always already affect everything we know so that there is a (coherent) conception of God in Godself that is distinct from the way in which we know God.

For Milbank, however, there is still a questionable version found in my 'soft' presentation of Burrell. It comes from his use of the distinction between the thing signified and the manner of signification. That vestiges of Kantianism are present in this position is confirmed by Burrell. As noted above, a 'gap' is posited between God in Godself and our knowledge of God (albeit with the implication that we nevertheless have some direct knowledge to which our categories do not apply).⁹⁶ However while this position is Kantian in a broad sense of the term, it is not aligned by Burrell with a seeing or intimating *beyond* the limits of our knowledge. Rather, it is a way to note the parallels between Kant's critical awareness and negative theology.

The distinction between the *modus significandi* and the *res significata* is evidently present in Aquinas. Notable for its centrality in Aquinas' reception (including for Milbank and Burrell) and its reflective location in the *Summa Theologiae* where Aquinas examines how God does (not) exist. Aquinas introduces the *modus/res* distinction, arguing that the intellect apprehends perfections 'as they are in creatures, and as it apprehends them it signifies them by names'.⁹⁷ These perfections might come from God (and exist

⁹⁴ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); For Burrell's account, see 'The Christian Distinction Celebrated and Expanded' in Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*.

⁹⁵ Burrell, *Aquinas*, xv, xviii, and 155; Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xix, 15, 54, 64, 116, and 118.

⁹⁶ Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', 83.

⁹⁷ *ST* Ia 1. 13 a. 3.

more perfectly in God), but our understanding and naming depends on our encounter with them in creation. As Burrell points out, this implies that all our knowledge is mannered and everything we know is unavoidably considered from our particular, created, and therefore limited perspective.⁹⁸ Already, a gap appears between exactly *how* we understand things and *what* these things are.⁹⁹ If this claim seems Kantian, it is nevertheless grounded in Aquinas' theology and not alien to it.¹⁰⁰ Notably, Aquinas goes on to write that when it comes to God our use of words like *wise* (i.e. perfection terms) 'leaves the thing signified as incomprehended, and as exceeding the signification of the name.'¹⁰¹ As Burrell reminds us, we must always be aware that we cannot help but consider things from within the perspective of our mode of signification. There is indeed a 'gap' between the way we know God and the way God is, and it is this gap that Burrell emphasises in his interpretation of the *res/modus* distinction. However, this distinction does not give us permission or the ability to see into the beyond of the divine perfections in itself: 'The answer is that we cannot.'¹⁰²

Another telling account of the thing signified and manner of signifying distinction comes in Burrell's short essay 'Beyond Idolatry'. Here again, Burrell places Aquinas' account of the divine names in the context of both creation and divine simpleness, which (for Burrell) already points to the inadequacy of language to describe a transcendent God. Not only does creation ground God's transcendence, it also gives us some warrant to trust that the perfections we find in this world can lead us to an imperfect understanding of the perfect Creator, given that the world is patterned on divine wisdom.¹⁰³ As Burrell says, this way we can show that the difference between Aquinas and Kant turns on the doctrine of creation as warranting our talk about God,¹⁰⁴ or, as Milbank puts it, 'we take it on trust that language does disclose.'¹⁰⁵ Characterising the world as 'creation' brings with it a 'promissory' form.¹⁰⁶ Or, in more Thomistic parlance, since 'whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in the effective cause ... the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way.'¹⁰⁷ Yet, our un-

⁹⁸ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 10.

⁹⁹ As Ashworth points out, Aquinas' explanation of issues, including the way many predicates can be given to a simple God, 'depends on a distinction between *significatum* or *ratio* and what the name signifies in the sense of external object.' Note that *significatum* is the analysis [*ratio*] that is identified with the intellect's conception. See E. J. Ashworth, 'Analogy and Equivocation in Thirteenth Century Logic: Aquinas in Context', *Medieval Studies* 54 (1992): 52-53.

¹⁰⁰ For Milbank, the distinction is a contrast between 'a mode of being and comprehension of the knower not fully commensurate with the mode of being and sense of the thing known, which, none the less, in the case of God, constitutes the existence of, and meaning available to, the knowing subject.' See Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, 27 n. 15. Yet this either implies the same gap Burrell tries to exploit or it collapses negative theology into a univocal access to God as God, depending on one's interpretation of 'constitutes'.

¹⁰¹ *ST* Ia q. 13 a. 5 trans. Dominican Fathers of the English Province.

¹⁰² Burrell, *Aquinas*, 11.

¹⁰³ David Burrell, 'Beyond Idolatry: On "Naming" the One-God', in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley S.J.*, edited by Michael Himes and Stephen Pope (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996); See also Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', 78-80. Since Burrell notes that Aquinas' trust in our ability to imperfectly name God is grounded in our *belief* in creation, he is not giving a neutral grammar but follows a distinctly tradition-based track, albeit one walked by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, alike, and not Milbank's more monolithic motorway.

¹⁰⁴ Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language' 78-81.

¹⁰⁵ Milbank, 'Intensities', 475.

¹⁰⁶ See Stephen Mulhall, *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁷ *ST* Ia q. 4 a. 2.

understandings of perfections can only lead us to an improper knowledge of God because we are informed by various perfections as we apprehend them, which comes from their existence in a different, less eminent, manner in creation than they do in God. All our understandings of perfections bring with them our manner of signification, which depends on the world we inhabit. There is always some 'operative space' between how we apprehend a perfection and their potential to be used in any condition we can find them in. We have multiple manners of signification inasmuch as we use perfections in various contexts, which is precisely what opens the door to the distinction between *res* and *modus*. This distinction grounds the 'gap' that Burrell exploits, whether the distinction is parsed in terms of an ontology of creation or in terms of grammatical analysis; either way, the one does not exclude the other.

We can therefore understand that perfection terms can be used in various, related contexts; we can moreover understand that they originate in God and thus can be used of God; and, finally, we can understand that we do not know their manner of being in God.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, as Burrell phrases it, 'knowing *that* such terms express something of what God is as the source of the perfection at issue does not supply us with a transcendent *use* of the expression.'¹⁰⁹ Here again we see Burrell's implicit rejection of the idea that we can *see* beyond our limits. In short, Burrell calls us to recognise the 'transcontextual' nature of perfections¹¹⁰ without at the same time attempting to transcend our created vantage point.

This might well open up the 'soft' Kantian distinction between God in Godself and the way we understand God, but it is hard to fathom a negative theology that does not do this. The contrary is simply absurd. Burrell, following Aquinas, refuses to identify the way in which our understandings of perfections apply to the simple God with what God is in Godself. Indeed, how could he without straddling the boundary Milbank astutely identifies? To be sure, the *res/modus* distinction allows Burrell to extend our concepts from the finite to the beyond of our finitude; however, the real issue for Burrell is a 'retraction' as well as an 'expansion'. Here Milbank is very close to Burrell insofar as they both espouse a form of negative theology in which negation and affirmation are given together, indistinguishably. All our concepts must be denied because they all exist in a simple manner in a way that we cannot understand. There might be some kind of dialectic between affirmation and negation, but we can never know what is affirmed in our understanding.¹¹¹ Surpassing our *finitude* does not even get a mention in Burrell's *Aquinas*, and this is not accidental because he is more concerned there to emphasise the qualitative difference between God and creation than he is to press the quantitative difference implied in the finite/infinite distinction. This is described as softly Kantian since it exploits our awareness of how our mode of knowing shapes the known *without* trying to intimate what this is like.

As soon as one says that God is simple, one must always already be aware that every single idea applied to the divine, every name we give to God, formally fails to name the God who is. Steadfastly holding to divine simpleness is what really drives Burrell's 'soft' Kantianism inasmuch as it implies a failure of our words and ideas to quantify the thing itself (i.e. God). Moreover, his 'soft' Kantianism enables Burrell to show the

¹⁰⁸ Burrell, 'Beyond Idolatry', 32.

¹⁰⁹ Burrell, 33. See also *ST* Ia q. 2 a. 2 for the distinction between knowledge *that* God exists and knowledge of *what* God is.

¹¹⁰ Burrell, 'An Introduction to Theology and Social Theory', 32.

¹¹¹ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 64.

'critical' nature of Aquinas' theology but also Burrell's openness to modern philosophy insofar as our mode of knowing always affects how one theologises. One might also construe Burrell's 'soft' Kantianism as just a form of negative theology encountering a pre-modern epistemology, which leads him to this 'critical' grammar of divinity.

Conclusion: Simplesness and Participation

If Burrell's 'second' interpretation of God and *esse* can be separated from his reading of Aquinas—as I have here argued—then the 'soft' form of Kantianism that remains is relatively bland. Indeed, one may say—to borrow Chris Insole's contrast between the two-world and one-world interpretations of how the phenomenal and the noumenal are related—that for Burrell the former is 'radical' whereas the latter borders on trivial.¹¹²

Although there is clearly a Kantian stream running through Burrell's interpretations of Aquinas, this is not, *contra* Milbank, a fatal flaw. Moreover, despite a number of similarities there is a contrast between Burrell and Milbank's versions of Aquinas that allows us to think of the differences between them in an alternative light. Both show a hermeneutic that tends to centralise one aspect of Aquinas' thought, and they use this as a lens to re-interpret Aquinas' theology more broadly.¹¹³ For Burrell, the feature is a grammar of divine simplesness while for Milbank it is an ontology of participation.¹¹⁴ Burrell brings up simplesness time and time again as that which makes strange Aquinas' theology of God. Indeed, it is God's simplesness that drives Burrell's Aquinas into theological unknowing, and round in circles. For Milbank, on the other hand, the idea that creation participates in the divine plays a similarly central tenet of his reading of Aquinas.¹¹⁵

A detailed examination of the relationship between simplesness and participation is clearly beyond the scope of this article; however, a few musings on the matter can show the way in which Burrell's emphasis on simplesness can unsettle the notion of 'participation', which does a lot of legwork in Milbank's theology.¹¹⁶ Essentially, if God is utterly simple, and there is no divide between God's being, goodness, ideas, or anything else in God, then created perfections cannot, straightforwardly, participate in any divine

¹¹² Christopher Insole, *The Realist Hope: A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 104-16.

¹¹³ This way of reading Burrell and Milbank is both crude and helpful. Of course, these are not the only themes they explore when reading Aquinas, and I do not want to reduce their interpretations to these features, but centralising simplesness and participation respectively does bring out some unique facets to and distinctive elements of their respective versions of Aquinas.

¹¹⁴ Burrell, in *Aquinas*, might be reading Aquinas as providing a grammar of God the 'beginning and end of all things', but simplesness, examined and explicated, is the feature of this grammar that colours his articulation of divinity.

¹¹⁵ For instance, in 'Intensities' Milbank makes the following claims: (1) to understand truth requires our intellect to participate in the divine understanding, (2) to understand faith and reason's relationship is to understand how theology participates in the mind of God, and (3) to understand how Aquinas examines the divine attributes is to understand how different creatures signify God through their hierarchical participation.

¹¹⁶ In Burrell's later works, 'participation' might be seen as getting a promotion from his early book, *Aquinas*, where the term is passed over in silence. However, Burrell maintains that he is using the term 'metaphorically', which means that his use of participation remains as austere here as it was in his theology of God in his book *Aquinas*. This renders problematic Tromans's claim that Burrell moves to a more participatory metaphysic. For participation remains fundamentally metaphorical, even in his 'highest' account of participation, in the section 'Creation and Participation' of the essay 'From Analogy of 'Being' to the Analogy of Being'. Even here, participation adds little to the notion of creation that has been fundamental throughout Burrell's writings. It characterises the distinction and the fact that there are no shared perfections between God and creation; see Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 115-20; Olivier Tromans, 'Similarity Within (Ultimate) Dissimilarity: Burrell and Milbank on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology', *The Heythrop Journal* 61, no. 5 (2020): 749-62.

perfections because there is no such thing as a divine attribute apart from the divine essence. Created good cannot be said to really participate in the divine good, while created being is said to really participate in the divine being, since there is no divine being or divine good *per se*, only the divine essence which is imitated by creation.

Milbank adamantly insists that there is a real and direct participation of creation in the divine essence itself. Aquinas 'does not say that we participate only in a "similitude" of God that is secondary to the divine essence: rather, the similitudes are likenesses of the essence and these likenesses are the created beings.'¹¹⁷ Creatures directly participate in the divine essence, and thus,

the ultimate shares itself without reserve, while nonetheless entirely reserving itself in its unsoundable mystery. What it gives in a measure is the ungivable, and it is only the ungivable that can be given. Hence it is precisely the imparticipable that can be participated and actually, because it is imparticipable, an inexhaustible fountain.¹¹⁸

Such an account of participation is what, ultimately, grounds Milbank's stronger claims of our actual knowledge of the divine essence in this life. With such a high account of participation, it is unclear how much sense it makes even to talk about 'boundaries' between God and creation in the first place, since all things are, in some sense, 'in' God.

However, the line between paradox and contradiction is rather thin at this point. It seems more plausible that a text which Milbank uses to justify his position as pointing to a paradox is more straightforwardly read as the denial of this position.¹¹⁹ Thus Milbank translates: *inquantum participat quodam similitudinem divini esse* as 'insofar as it participates of the divine essence [through] a certain similitude.'¹²⁰ But this is an esoteric and un-scholastic rendering of the Latin. Every other translator I am aware of renders the text along the lines of 'participates in a similitude of the divine essence'.¹²¹

Likewise, one can find very similar phrases to Milbank's aforementioned citation from the *Tertia Pars* throughout Thomas' oeuvre. A clear example is in Aquinas' commentary on *The Divine Names*, where he uses the same phrase, normally taken to mean that creation is not a sharing in the divine essence, but a participation in the likeness thereof.¹²² This rendering is preferred and explicated by Rudi te Velde, who holds that it is only the similitude of the divine essence that is participated in, not the essence itself, and that our participated likeness to the divine essence is best understood as referring

¹¹⁷ John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 101 n.197.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101 n.197.

¹¹⁹ Milbank makes the same point in his essay 'Christianity and Platonism in East and West'. Creation's participation is in the divine essence the way in which creation is like God; it does not participate 'in' the similitude (149-50). This is a sharing through reflection, 'not a portioning out of the indivisible God' (150). John Milbank, 'Christianity and Platonism in East and West', in *A Celebration of Living Theology: A Festschrift in Honour of Andrew Louth*, edited by Justin Mihoc and Leonard Aldea (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 107-60.

¹²⁰ Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 101 n.197. The Latin comes from ST IIIa q. 62 a. 2.

¹²¹ Thanks to Michael Barbazat, Ben DeSpain, and Dawn LaValle Norman for their confirmatory translations.

¹²² "*sed in processione creaturarum, ipsa divina essentia non communicatur creaturis procedentibus, sed remanet incommunicata seu imparticipata; sed similitudo eius, per ea quae dat creaturis, in creaturis propagatur et multiplicatur et sic quodammodo divinitas per sui similitudinem non per essentiam, in creaturas procedit et in eis quodammodo multiplicatur, ut sic ipsa creaturarum processio possit dici divina discretio, si respectus ad divinam similitudinem habeatur, non autem si respiciatur divina essentialitas*" (Thomas Aquinas, 'Sancti Thomae de Aquino; In Librum B. Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio, a Capite I Ad Caput II', 2019, c. 21. 3, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/cdn01.html>). A short mea culpa: Unfortunately, this text has not been fully translated, hence the presence of a block of Latin here.

to our reception of being from God.¹²³ Similarly, Doolan emphasises that a creature's 'being' is a participated likeness to the divine essence insofar as creatures' individual act of existence participates in its own essence, and as this gestures to its relation to God, as the principle and exemplar of created being.¹²⁴

Returning to the commentary on *The Divine Names*, Aquinas goes on to claim that God's essence 'remains uncommunicated or unparticipated'.¹²⁵ This should be taken to mean exactly what it says: the divine essence remains uncommunicated or unparticipated. It is not a rhetorical or real use of paradox, but a straightforwardly literal predication.¹²⁶ Aquinas gestures to this in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where he argues that God is not the formal being of all things, since if this were so then all things would be *one*,¹²⁷ for the divine being is the divine nature.¹²⁸ If all creation participated directly in the divine nature, either creation would not be diverse or God would not be simple since God would have to enter into composition with their various natures.¹²⁹ Aquinas'

¹²³ Rudi te Velde, *Participation & Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 93-95; Rudi te Velde, 'Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics by Andrew Davison (Review)', *The Thomist* 84, no. 2 (2020): 326-30.

¹²⁴ Gregory Doolan, 'Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation', *The Thomism* 82, no. 4 (2018): 626-28.

¹²⁵ "*ipsa divina essentia non communicatur creaturis procedentibus, sed remanet incommunicata seu imparticipata*" (*In de div nom*, c. 2 l. 3).

¹²⁶ An interesting counter example is Andrew Davison's account of participation in the divine similitude in Aquinas. Davison is clearly sympathetic to Milbank's broader project, citing him at various times in *Participation in God*, and seems to agree fundamentally that creation's participation is in the divine essence (cf. Davison, *Participation*, 54). Yet there is an intriguing section entitled 'Participation of a Likeness' that caps the chapter 'Characterising Participation'. In this section, described as 'optional' for the reader, Davison analyses the phrase 'participation of a likeness' (*participatio similitudinis divini esse*). This phrase might 'strike the reader as surprising, given that his metaphysics of creation and redemption is based so squarely on participation in or from God' (157). In explicating the phrase, Davison cedes that there is a divine hiddenness and unparticipated-ness that implies that the divine essence is itself not participated in, even if this remains ambiguous (159-61). Any talk of God's being, goodness, or the like is one step removed from the divine essence, which remains 'one stage on' (159). Yet turning from 'a historical perspective ... to a linguistic one', Davison argues that one can understand 'similitude' as describing 'the manner or character of participation' (161). This might, grammatically, be a strained interpretation of the phrase *participatio similitudinis*, but it does make sense of certain texts where Aquinas presents this kind of participation in contrast to having-by-essence (163). Similitude is Aquinas' way of exploring the relationship between derivation and difference, between continuity and discontinuity between God and creation (163-64). Such an account cuts through 'intractable' discussions about distinctions of qualities 'in God' and as they come 'from God', and rather looks at creation's similarity to God (161-62). What Davison seems to be saying is that there is a historical account that Aquinas seems to have held of our participation in the similitude of God, which is not a direct participation in the divine essence, but that there is an alternative linguistic reading of Aquinas' phrase that is possible and closer to Aquinas' intent' (162). This is an alternative way of navigating the relationship between the fact that all creation comes from God and yet is also not in continuity with God (163-64). Davison's project might make sense of the phrase itself in a (tenuous) reading of the Latin, and is a possible constructive account, but he does downplay the problem of divine simpleness, as I argued against Milbank's account, which, on this point, is essentially Davison's position. What he describes as 'intractable' might in fact make any participation in the divine straightforwardly *impossible*. It would reduce everything to sameness and divine simpleness, which is absurd. Indeed, to talk of 'parts' of God is already bordering on incoherence, unless one limits this to our understanding of the divine attributes. Doolan interprets the phrase 'participates in the likeness of God' as referring to creation's participation in the formal causality of God, not the divine nature, as the sun enlightens through light participating not in its nature, but in its power. The key forms of causality to understand are formal, in which the cause is the exemplar of its effect, thus is extrinsic to this effect, and efficient, in which creation and preservation in being is a product of God's causal power. See Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 155-64; Doolan, 'Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation'.

¹²⁷ Aquinas' Latin is more evocative of divine simpleness than the standard translation: 'oportet omnia simpliciter esse unum' (*Summa Contra Gentiles* Book 1.26).

¹²⁸ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 1.26.

¹²⁹ See also Doolan, 'Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation', 615-16.

use of the term 'similitude' or 'likeness' with respect to the divine essence renders his account of participation coherent with divine simpleness. It also makes sense of the claim that the divine essence remains 'unparticipated' while allowing for the dependence and intimacy between God and creation that theologies of participation make evident.

Aquinas' description of creation's constant dependence for its very being on God is thus seen through the lens of participation in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*.¹³⁰ At first glance, the absence of the language of 'similitude' in this precise passage might go against my reading of Aquinas.¹³¹ Yet Aquinas' description of participation retains the claim that the divine essence remains unparticipated. The image he uses is the way the air 'shares' in the nature of the sun by being enlightened. In this example, the sun remains extrinsic and distinct from the air, 'but not by partaking in the nature of the sun',¹³² even if the air contains a likeness of the sun, which is both the efficient and the exemplar cause of the light.¹³³ Likewise, creatures have their being by virtue of participation. Since creatures participate in 'God' as the air participates in the sun, there is an indirectness to this participation, and God must be said to remain 'unparticipated'. Thus, participation here cannot be directly 'in' the divine essence.¹³⁴ Indeed, Aquinas uses this exact point to create a distinction between God and creation by referencing divine simpleness. Whereas God's essence is God's existence, creatures exist by participation—which is a reminder that their existence and essence are distinct.¹³⁵

Simpleness is a fundamental reason why Aquinas presents our participation as in the *likeness* or *similitude* of God, and not in the divine nature. We cannot literally be said to participate in any divine attributes, because the simple God does not have any attributes that are distinct from one another in which creation could participate. Aquinas gives a handful of definitions of participation, such as in his commentary on Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus*, 'to participate is, as it were, "to grasp a part"',¹³⁶ and in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Caelo*, 'to "participate" is nothing other than to receive from another partially.'¹³⁷ We might be able to make some sense of having in part what God has in fulness, but there is no grasping *part* of God, since God has no parts.¹³⁸ Burrell's emphasis on simpleness in Aquinas' theology limits the way in which participation can be understood. There is a tension between Milbank's and Burrell's centralised features in

¹³⁰ *Summa Theologiae* Ia q. 104 a. 1.

¹³¹ Indeed, there are plenty of texts where Aquinas refers to participation in the likeness of the divine essence, but these require little (if any) explication for my reading. See, for instance, *On the Power of God*, q. 7, a. 5: 'just as all things participate in God's goodness not in identity but in likeness thereto so also do they participate in a likeness of God's being. But there is a difference: for goodness implies the relationship of cause, since good is self-diffusive: whereas being connotes mere existence and quiescence' (trans. The English Dominican Fathers).

¹³² *ST* Ia q. 104 a. 1: 'non tamen participando naturam solis.'

¹³³ Doolan, 'Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation', 634-37.

¹³⁴ Doolan argues convincingly that this form of participation refers to participation in God's causal power, not in his nature (see Doolan, 'Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation', 636-41).

¹³⁵ *ST* Ia q. 104 a. 1.

¹³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *An Exposition of the 'On the Hebdomads' of Boethius*, trans. Janice Schultz and Edward Synan (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), Chapter 2.

¹³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Caelo*, trans. Fabian Larcher and Pierre Conway, n.d., Book 2, Lecture 18.

¹³⁸ See *ST* Ia q. 2 and *Commentary on John*, 4.2.603.

Aquinas that cannot simply be reconciled. Rather, Burrell's grammar of simpleness shows the flaws in an un-nuanced theology of participation. To say that we participate in a similitude of the divine essence is also to say that we do not participate in the essence itself. Burrell's emphasis on simpleness provides a challenge through which we might better articulate creation's participation 'in' God in a more indirect manner. When Aquinas says that creation participates in the divine similitude, we are referred to God as both source and end of all things, and the various creatures as mimetic communications of the divine. Language of participation should be understood as such in order to uphold the distinction between God and creation while at the same time emphasising the causal dependence of creation on God.

It is not a coincidence that Milbank picks up on a lack of a language and ontology of participation in the Thomisms of Burrell and McCabe (and the 1980s Lash too, though he may have denied it), for this goes hand in hand with their emphasis on divine simpleness and transcendence. Likewise, it is not a coincidence that Milbank totally centralises participation which deflates divine transcendence to the extent that we have some 'inchoate' vision of God in this life when we understand *any* created perfection. These claims are natural companions. Too high an account of participation collapses the distinction between God and creation—a distinction Burrell is so keen to hold to. In order to maintain 'the distinction', one need not have a quite so deflationary (Aristotelian) view of participation as Burrell implies when he calls it a 'metaphor'.¹³⁹ One can articulate participation in the divine similitude to preserve participation's important place in Aquinas' metaphysics without collapsing his account of divine simpleness into pantheism or trying to move beyond his negative theology.

Simpleness is not opposed to participation; Milbank's Aquinas is not entirely unlike Burrell's. Bringing these two versions of Thomism into dialogue with one another shows a need to be careful, even austere, with our language when we speak of the divine. For 'nothing strains the resources available to human language so completely as our attempts to speak of God.'¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xvi, xx; Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', 87.

¹⁴⁰ Burrell, *Aquinas*, 65.