# Tradition and Faith

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Abstract: This article explores the relation between tradition and faith, arguing, first, that the issue about reason is an issue about faith and, second, that faith rediscovers itself in the debate with tradition. This debate with tradition ought to be less an appeal to, or an authoritative repetition of tradition, but rather a reworking of tradition in the context of contemporary questions and problems. So the appeal to tradition is not a naive appeal to a source of truth that is not in need of interpretation. Rather, it is the acknowledgement that there is a set of limiting conditions on contemporary theological argument. This position about the role of tradition in theology is illustrated by a discussion of our contemporary problems about language, God and 'difference', particularly as dealt with by postmodern philosophers, and the medieval tradition of negative theology.

## I

Hegel's famously cynical *obitum* concerning history is perhaps a better summary of a contemporary hostility to tradition, it being commonly thought that what once was tragedy is now revisitable only as farce. In any case, in one respect opponents and proponents of appeals to 'tradition' frequently share a like opinion of it, viewing tradition as a sort of *repetition* – whether or not they suppose appeals to it to constitute legitimate grounds of present argument. In this article I take a stand on a position which I shall not argue for in the general terms it properly requires, but merely illustrate by means of an instance. That position is that a theological appeal to an ancient tradition is by no means a naive appeal to a source of truth beyond the need for interpretation, as if positively determining contemporary statements of faith, and is rather an acknowledgement of a set of limiting conditions on contemporary theological argument, that is to say, on the manner of its conduct.

It might of course be supposed that the degree to which tradition is determinative of the limits of faith importantly differs for questions of dogma from

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that to which it determines more open-ended theological questions, and in this way: that while an ancient dogmatic statement of the church does not determine how positively we should speak of faith today, it is conclusively but negatively determinative of the *limits* of our contemporary theological articulations; whereas in the case of non-dogmatically defined theological questions, no such conclusive determinations are laid down either positively or negatively. But while I am laying down the law, I should say that though fundamentally correct, the distinction thus made is too easily made. It is true that today we do not need to think out our theologies of the eucharistic presence, say, in the Tridentine terms of 'transubstantiation'. It is also true that however we *do* articulate our theologies of the 'real presence' today, such theologies must not be in demonstrable *conflict with* Trent. But that last constraint, 'determinative' as it genuinely is of certain limits of faith, in any case merely brings us back to the more open question of *theology* and tradition. For what would *count* as a conflict between a contemporary theology of the Eucharist and Tridentine dogma, and what would not, is itself a matter of theological argument – indeed, you might say that it is pretty much what theological argument *consists in*. Hence, either way, the same question arises: how does tradition properly figure within theological argument?

In any case, one reason why an appeal to tradition could never consist in a simple authoritative *repetition* of past formulae, dogmatic or otherwise, is the obvious, and well-rehearsed reason, namely that such repetitions are in any case always 'non-identical', as people say. Another way of putting that is to say that one can argue from either end of a tradition with the other; or from the middle of it with either end; but that in any case doing so is always a *present* appropriation of the tradition by means of argument. In short, the *only* way to rehearse the ancient is by doing something new, because the tradition has never argued, or been argued with, in quite that way before. I should, of course, also want to say that the only way to do something new is by way of rehearsing something ancient, in matters of faith at any rate; but that is another matter and beyond the scope of this article, the main business of which I had better get on with right away.

## II

This I will do, as I said, by way of illustration, and in the following manner: the question of 'difference' has become much vexed in recent French philosophy and theology, both as a highly general question about language as such (in fact as a much *too* general question for my liking), and as a particular question about theological language. Now in this latter case, it arises as a question about 'the' difference between God and creation. But when it comes to that question, theologians today seem to be at a loss to know whether they should or should not say that 'the' difference between God and creatures is the 'ultimate' difference. Moreover, they are at a degree of loss to know what to say about that last question to the extent that they are in thrall to a 'deconstructionist' account of difference for which (I suppose

one could say) since *difference* itself is what is ultimate, there is not, and could not be, any *one* difference which is *the* ultimate difference. For to say that there is one ultimate difference, foundational of all the rest, would be, it is thought, 'ontotheological' error. So the question arises: must our account of 'difference' be such that either theology is impossible, or if not impossible, then idolatrous and ontotheological? The question taxes Derrida, and Caputo and Marion, in different ways, largely, it would seem, because Nietzsche bothers all of them a lot; but the last time this question taxed theologians as persistently as it does now was, I guess, in the high medieval period, and I just wondered whether, for the purposes of this article, there might be some sort of argument to be got going between a medieval tradition of negative theology, which for its own reasons was much exercised by like-sounding questions, and our contemporary problems about language, God and 'difference'.

## III

So I start with Nietzsche, in whose *Twilight of the Idols*,[1] we are told of his 'fear [that] we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar', thereby expressing, perhaps seminally for much Western philosophy since, its logophobia, its fear of language. The supremely wordy Nietzsche nonetheless fears language – for its primordial taint; it torments him with paradox. Language, constructed internally from the formal constituents of grammar, divides. Not that, as Rousseau would seem to have had it, that language fails as *expression* because it divides into the artificial units of grammar what were, as if in some way *prior* to language, the natural and given unities of thought and experience, for language is there from the beginning as structure within thought and experience, which possess in consequence no prior unities for language then to betray. It is the taint of language which is original and originating, and the unities it denies have no pre-existent 'presence', and are no more than those which language itself provides us with the possibility of envisaging: for that grammar which divides is also that alone which can generate a prospect of unity, a goal of experiential coherence which, nonetheless can exist only as unachievable. Therefore, the coherences which language alone holds out as promise, language itself denies us. If language taints us with divisions, there are no unities *prior* to language which it taints. On the other hand, if the fragmentations of language are to be seen in some way as 'taint', then it is only on account of the expectation of a unity they frustrate that they are so to be seen.

Nor is this paradox of language confined to its internal structure as, in the narrow sense, 'grammar'. For language holds out 'representational' promise too, the promise of determinable relationships with *objects*, relationships of truth and falsity with what it describes, only at the same time to deny us any finality in that determination.

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1  Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 38.

It is because of language that there are objects, it is within language alone that there can be a distinction between speaker and that which is spoken of. The prospect, therefore, of establishing objects for language to be *about* is at the same time given *by* language; hence, access to those objects is denied us by any route independent *of* language. The dualism of speaker and spoken of, of word and object, is therefore both constructed within language and deconstructed by it. Just that which promises is also that which disappoints. Language is, as it were, a sysiphean striving, generating the very goal which it also frustrates.

'Grammar', therefore, is at once necessary and impossible in any absolute and final way. But it is the fear that language *might* be possible – might at some point resolve the paradox on the ground of some ultimate, redeeming 'reality' – which, as God, haunts this Nietzschean mentality. For were language not denied what it promises, were language to secure its hold on the meanings which it contains, and so be able to make finally 'present' the meanings which it seeks to disclose, then speakers would be trapped within their utterances, locked into an utterly deterministic world, a world determined by what can be said, since what can be said would be locked deterministically into its relations with its objects. Total loss of freedom would therefore be the price of any grammar which could be shown to have resolved its own contradictions. And since the possibility of any such 'resolved' speech depends upon the existence of God, then the existence of God can be bought at the price only of a total loss of freedom. For, on Nietzsche's account, the possibility of speech's standing in fully determined relations with its objects requires a guarantee outside it, a 'foundation' *of* speech which is accessible *within* speech; and since such a foundation would have to take the form of an *absolute* presence, a *self-confirming* presence, itself requiring no further guarantees, that foundation would have to bear the name 'God'. Hence, only if God, then grammar, and consequent loss of freedom. But freedom, hence no resolved grammar, and no God.

Are we then to say that language has no foundations? Must we accept, because it seems to be entailed – that language could not have any *describable* foundations, since were the foundations of language to lie within the range of the describable they would therefore lie within the range of language itself? And how would that be different from saying that language is founded in itself, and so to say that it has *no* foundations? Or are we to say that language rests on *indescribable* foundations – to say which would appear to be but an oxymoron, since the word 'indescribable', for all its descriptive form, *a fortiori* describes nothing? Language can have no describable foundations, for to be founded upon something within itself is not to be founded: nor can it be founded on anything outside itself, since 'outside' language nothing is described as founding it.

If, therefore, we are to accept Nietzsche's proposition, there can be no God, because there is no grammar. Of course, disconcerting and radical as this conclusion may appear to be – and it appeared so to Nietzsche – our culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is largely unperturbed and has found it, as conclusions go, quite tolerable, even acceptably bourgeois. It does not seem to follow, if language is foundationless, that we cannot speak, that because there is no

finality to grammar there is *no* grammar at all, and that we human beings are therefore thrown as jetsam on some tossing sea of meaninglessness. As it turns out, the denial of God seems unalarming; it seems only that we float without excessive anxiety on a surface, normally placid enough, on which the possibility of navigation is not removed for want of a determinate shore-line. For if there is no absolute positioning, we can at least establish relative position in reference to other boats. That there is no ultimate meaning does not entail that there is no meaning at all, since for the most part things can go on as if there *were* some ultimate meaning, our relative positions not being any different, or harder to calculate, simply because they are not absolute. All that follows from the absence of a shore-line – and all we need for the maintenance of a decent life – is to agree on a prescription: that if in one sense everything is arbitrary because nothing is absolute, then the only truly destructive arbitrariness is any claim to absoluteness made in the name of a particular, relative, position. Today, it is absolute claims which appear arbitrary and dangerous, intellectually, morally and politically. To acknowledge the arbitrariness of all positions seems the safer, more democratic, and more just, practical mentality. For the rest, in any sense in which we need to know, we know where we are.

In the late twentieth century, other ways have been found in which to articulate these Nietzschean concatenations, which link the essential indeterminacies of language with human freedom, democracy and the denial of God, and they draw the issues in more closely – indeed explicitly – with our own late antique and medieval sources. In much the same way as for Nietzsche, the determinacy of speech and the denial of freedom are linked to God through the consequence that determinacy of grammar and reference would require that God is some absolute, self-confirming 'presence', a presence which would obliterate human freedom. And Jacques Derrida's philosophy of 'différance' is linked through a logophobia as intense as Nietzsche's. As such, of course, Derrida's version of Nietzsche's concatenations is thus far ambiguous as between an admirable scotching of idolatry and an outright denial of God. Which way one reads it depends much on how one reads the complex and ever-modified story of his dialogue with 'negative theology'.[2] How, for the purposes of this article, *we* read that story is all to do with his account of difference, and not much to do with a lot else that there is in Derrida: for in any case, how, from time to time Derrida construes that relationship with the classical traditions of apophaticism turns principally on how he reads the accounts of difference within those traditions.

Derrida, of course, delights in a philosophy of ambiguity. But that is no excuse for an ambiguous philosophy. 'Tout autre est tout autre',[3] he says, 'every other is totally other', being characteristically unclear as to what he could possibly mean. And, surprisingly, too many critics and commentators have let him get away with

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2   Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', in Sanford Budlick and Wolfgang Isler, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 3–70.

3   Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

it. 'Every other is wholly other': which could perhaps mean that every case of otherness – of 'this' rather than 'that' – is a case of complete otherness, so that there are no differences within the logic of difference, no kinds of difference, and that all difference is univocal, whatever substantives one substitutes for the pronouns 'this' and 'that'. But that is manifestly false. Or it could mean the opposite, namely that there are kinds of otherness, but that all othernesses are of completely different kinds from one another, and all difference is equivocal; which is also false, and as manifestly so, and for the same reason, namely that either way 'complete otherness' is an unintelligible notion. At any rate, so we shall see in due course. In the meantime, if Derrida is right, that everything in his account of deconstruction follows from every 'other' being 'wholly other', then we must consider how this principle generates one of those consequences, the consequence for how 'deconstruction' stands in relation to classical forms of negative theology. To which tradition we now turn.

## IV

Though he is the primary source of the negative theologies of the high Middle Ages – in fact, I should say, his is quite the most sophisticated theology of 'difference' in the Western Christian theological tradition – I shall have to pass over the theology of the pseudo-Denys very quickly, pausing only to note that, looked at from one point of view, his hierarchical account of theological language, of the epistemological degrees into which our talk about God falls, is also from another point of view, and inevitably, a hierarchical account of 'otherness', of 'negation', and so of 'difference'. But note the governing paradox of the pseudo-Denys' 'hierarchicalism': the *nearer* our language gets to God – the more 'similar' the similarities' as he puts it – the more we are aware of 'the difference' between God and creatures, the more 'other' God is seen to be; but the more we are aware of the difference between God and creatures, the less hold our minds have on the nature of this difference. For if, as the pseudo-Denys so constantly reminds us, 'there is no kind of thing which God is, and there is no kind of thing which he is not'[4] it follows that 'the' difference between God and creatures cannot itself be of any kind: to know 'the difference' between God and creatures is to know it to be, he says, 'beyond both similarity and difference'. In short – and I *have* to be short here – whereas any one creature is different from any other in *some respect*, God is 'different' in this alone, that there is *no respect* in which God differs from creatures: difference, therefore, is ultimate – *tout autre* – only where we no longer have any hold on *either* 'sameness' *or* 'difference'. Only an unknowable other could be *totally* other: *et hoc*, as Thomas Aquinas was later to say, *omnes dicunt Deum*.[5]

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4   Pseudo-Denys, *Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius the Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 98.
5   Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae (ST)* 1a q. 2 a. 3.

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Leaping to the other end of the high dionysian tradition, to Meister Eckhart, the dionysian hierarchy – whether in the form of an ontology of degrees of being, or in that of the outflow of descending illuminations – notably plays little or no part in the formulation of his theology. If difference is central to that theology and spirituality, the carefully structured hierarchical gradings of the pseudo-Denys found in chapters 4 and 5 of his *Mystical Theology* collapse into one central distinction which entirely eclipses all others: the distinction, on the one hand, between those created distinctions which obtain between one creature and another – between each *hoc aliquid* as an *unum distinctum* – and, on the other, that distinction which obtains between every *esse hoc et hoc* and the *unum indistinctum* of the divine *esse*. Let me explain.

For Eckhart, a created individual is an instantiation of a kind, a *hoc et hoc*, a 'this, that or the other', enumerable on condition of falling under a description. I can count the number of people in this room if I know what counts as a person, the number of desks if I know what counts as a desk. But I cannot count the number of things in this room, because 'thing' is not a description definite enough that enumerable instances fall under it. Likewise, I can distinguish kinds from one another against the background of more general descriptions: I can tell horses from sheep because they differ as animals, or chalk from cheese because they differ in chemical composition, or taste or texture, as sometimes they do. But note here an apparent paradox, in logical form much the same as that of the pseudo-Denys: the less things differ, the easier it is describe how they differ. It is easy to say how a cat and a mouse differ, because we can readily describe what they differ *as*, they belong, we might say, to a readily identifiable community of difference. But how does this piece of Camembert cheese differ from 11.30 in the morning? Here, the community of difference is too diffuse, too indeterminate, for this difference, obviously bigger as it is than that of chalk and cheese, to be so easily described. In general, the bigger the difference, the harder, not easier, it is to describe the manner of its difference.

Of course, the logic of difference thus described does not require of us any very particularly deterministic account of types or species or 'categories', for this logic entails no particular ontological commitments as such. As it stands, however, this logic already has consequences for the question: what may we say about language that can cope with the difference between God and creation? It follows that it cannot cope at all; or, if we are to say anything about this distinction it is what Eckhart says about it, namely that God is distinct from any creature in this alone, that if any creature is necessarily a distinct being, an *hoc aliquid*, God is not; a creature is, as he puts it, an *unum distinctum*, distinct by means of its difference in respect of some background sameness which they share, whereas God is an *unum indistinctum*, that is to say, is distinct from any creature whatsoever in this, that, unlike any creature, God is not distinct in kind from anything created at all – there is no background against which a distinction of kind can be set. Therefore, God is distinct because

God alone is not distinct. 'Indistinction', as he puts it, 'belongs to God, distinction to creatures.'[6]

But if God is not a describably distinct *kind* of anything, God cannot be an *individual* distinct from other individuals, and so cannot be counted at all. Suppose you were to count up all the things in the world on some lunatic system of enumeration, all the things that there are, have been and will be, and suppose they come to the number n. Then I say, 'Hold on, I am a theist and there is one being you haven't yet counted, and that is the being who created them all, God'; would I be right to say that now the sum total of things is n+ 1? Emphatically no. There is no need to reconstruct Eckhart here, for he says for himself in his *Commentary on Exodus*:

> God is one in all ways and according to every respect so that he cannot find any multiplicity in himself . . . Anyone who beholds the number two or who beholds distinction does not behold God, for God is one, outside and beyond number, and is not counted with anything.[7]

So how can God be one – *unum* – if not countable in any series, if not in any way another individual, so as not to be one more something, not a *hoc aliquid*; how an *unum*, if *indistinctum*? And if God is not an individual, is God therefore many? That neither, for the argument which shows that God is not one more individual must also show that God is not many more individuals. Neither one nor many: so neither an individual distinct from everything else, nor many, identical with everything else; hence 'one', but not an individual; 'distinct' from everything, but not *as* anything; hence, an *unum indistinctum*. And we should note that what holds for the divine oneness holds also for the Trinity itself. If there are in any sense 'three' in God, there is nothing of which there are three instantiations in God, any more than there is any 'one' instance of anything called 'God' in which there are 'three'. The same principle of apophaticism holds of the divine Trinity – not three instances of anything, as of the divine essence – there is nothing of which God is one instance.

Now, as Aristotle said – and in the Middle Ages he is often quoted in this connection – *eadem est scientia oppositorum*, 'to know an affirmation is to know its negation'.[8] Hence, if God is beyond difference, then God is beyond sameness. If what Jacques Derrida means by saying that 'every other is completely other' is that there is no ultimate sameness of such nature that it stands in no possible relation of 'otherness', then of course he is right, for of course every 'sameness' is resolvable into its differences from something else. But then it follows *also* that there can be no ultimacy to any particular 'difference' either: it is 'différance' which is ultimate,

6    Meister Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus*, 20.104, in Bernard McGinn with Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstadt, eds., *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 79.
7    Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus*, 15.58, McGinn *et al.*, p. 63.
8    See Aristotle, *Peri Hermeneias*, 17a 31–3.

not *a* difference. For 'sameness' and 'difference' have the same apophatic destination, as it were, in that they can only ultimately disappear into that same vortex of unknowing which is beyond both. Just as you could not have a sameness which establishes itself beyond all possible difference, so you could not have *a* difference which is, without qualification, beyond similarity alone.

With which Derrida may be construed as thus far agreeing: I affirm this rule of 'différance', he says, not in order to affirm some new ultimacy, only now a purely negative one, but in order to affirm only a *pen*ultimacy – which is not, by the way, to *insist* upon anything, but rather to *desist* from all possible forms of ultimacy, from every 'destination', even an ultimacy of the negative. To declare the ultimacy of 'différance' is precisely not to propose, but on the contrary to deny, some new ontology of difference, according to which *there is an ultimate difference*, which is what he accuses the negative theologians of affirming when they insist upon their 'ontological distinction'. For it is precisely in that insistence of negative theology, in that surreptitious, last-minute, retrieval of the existential quantifier 'there is an . . .' attached to their ultimate difference, that an ontotheological sleight of hand appears to have been revealed, thus to regain for their apophaticisms a divine 'destination', their postponements and deferrals notwithstanding – a given, superessential presence of an absolute absence, generative of all lesser, postponable, essential difference. For Derrida, this *khora*, this 'place' of 'otherness', cannot possess the name of the God of the negative theologians because it cannot be, as God is, 'a giver of good gifts',[9] and could not therefore be the Creator.

Therefore, this tactic of the negative theologians contains, he thinks, an impossibility, a contradiction. For the theologians must choose: either this 'there is an . . .' must itself either be cancelled as affirmative utterance by their negative theology of ultimate difference; and, after all, the theologians do concede this 'erasure', for how can they allow an ordinary, undeconstructed existential utterance as a foundation for their apophaticism, and do they not insist that their God is 'being beyond being'[10] and 'within the predicate neither of nonbeing nor of being'? On the other hand, if not thus cancelled, must not this 'there is an . . .' remain in place as an existential quantifier, which therefore ontotheologically and idolatrously cancels the apophaticism. Hence, negative theology collapses either into the ceaseless penultimacy of an atheistic deconstruction or else into an idolatrous ontotheology. As a project, therefore, negative theology is an impossibility.

To which, in turn, it may be replied: the negative theologies of the pseudo-Denys and an Eckhart do not affirm, as if at the last minute to hypostatize, *a* difference as ultimate any more than they affirm the ultimacy of some sameness and presence, of some given identity. For both recognize that *a* difference, *any* difference, is

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9   Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', pp. 106–8.
10  Eckhart, Sermon 83, *Renovamini Spiritu*, in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 206.

determinable. But what is 'beyond similarity and difference' is not in some measurable, calculable degree of difference from creation, even if different beings in the created order are in determinably different degrees of difference from God, because in determinably different degrees of difference from each other. God's 'difference' does not cancel created differences. Nor is 'the ontological distinction' between God and creatures in any *knowable* sense or degree 'beyond' anything knowable; for our language of 'difference', that is to say, our language as such, falls short of God to a degree which is itself absolutely beyond description: it therefore could not be the case that we could say *how* different God is. This ontological distinction is 'beyond' precisely by reason of its unknowability and indetermination, so that it inhabits neither some place of absolute presence, nor of absolute absence; hence, we might just as well say, as Nicholas of Cusa in fact does say, that God is *totaly non-Aliud* ('the one and only not-other') as say that he is in any way *aliud* ('the absolutely other') – which, after all, is the same logic as Meister Eckhart's 'distinct by virtue of indistinction'.

It is such things which you have to say if you are to speak intelligibly of an 'otherness' which is 'totally other'. No such otherness could be a finitely knowable, determinable, otherness, which is why Derrida's principle, 'every other is completely other', is a straightforward logical absurdity, and a Nietzschean one at that. For it leaves all negation and otherness without 'grammar' just as it takes leave of God;[11] Derrida can have no God precisely because either he collapses all the differentiations of difference into a monolithic, univocity of absolute difference, or else he reduces it to a multifarious equivocity, depending on which way you (and he) reads it. But Thomas Aquinas and Eckhart thought neither of these things: neither, that is to say, that there is no end to difference, nor that there is *a* difference at the end. It is true that so far as creation is concerned, Thomas thought that some differences are naturally determinate, for natural objects in the world differ as individuals under their identifying, fixed, specific descriptions. But how far does Thomas's account of difference, and of predication across those differences, depend upon those differences being in some absolute way fixed? It would seem that Thomas's account of predication, being a matter of logic, is not as such in any way dependent on any particular ontology of specific differences, fixed and deterministic, as his is, or fluid and indeterminate, as is Derrida's. And I do believe that on the score of his account of difference, Thomas's disagreement with Derrida is a matter of logic alone, 'ontology' does not come into it at all. For even if – as Derrida believes – the 'backgrounds' against which differences are determined are themselves not ultimately determinate, there will still be some predicates of the kind Thomas describes as behaving logically in the way 'transcendental' predicates of the form '. . . exists' or '. . . is good' behave. It would follow even for an indeterministic ontology that such predicates are predicable – as Thomas says – non-univocally, non-equivocally and non-metaphorically. It would follow for Derrida that no

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11   Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*.

predicates could behave logically in this way only if he meant strictly what his words say, namely that every other is completely other, for then all predications would either be haplessly equivocal or rigidly univocal, and then there would be no possibility of any kind of meaning at all. But I suspect that either Derrida does not mean what he says, or does not know what his words mean.

# VI

Which brings us to Thomas's famous teaching that existence is predicated 'analogically' – which in the first instance means that it is not predicated either equivocally or univocally. I think, on this matter, it is fair to comment that too much has been made of Thomas's so-called 'doctrine of analogy' – metaphysics of baroque complexity were once constructed on the back of a late medieval version of it. In fact the texts in which he introduces the term are remarkably off-hand and casual, as if he were throwing in a mere term of art to stand for whatever those forms of predication are which could not be read as either logically univocal or logically equivocal. He is in any case much clearer how existence is not predicated than about how it is.

At all events, the business starts with the proposition that when you say of something that it 'exists' you are saying that it stands against, that is to say, in contradictory opposition to, there being nothing at all. But to say that is to say one sort of thing that is near to being vacuous, and another complex set of things which is far from vacuous. The near to vacuous thing that you say is, for Thomas, that it is created. For if the thing's possession of *esse* refers *just* to its 'standing against there being nothing at all', that *that* it exists can be accounted for if and only if there is the sort of cause which can bring it about that it does so – and, as Thomas says of such a cause, *hoc omnes dicunt Deum*. And this is a nearly vacuous thing to say, because in saying either thing – 'that it exists' and 'that it is created' – you add nothing at all to our knowledge of *what* x is.

But the complex set of things that you say, when you say that x exists, is that *if* it exists, then there exists (rather than nothing) all those conditions which must obtain – the sort of 'world' – such that x *can* exist in it. A sheep cannot exist without an ovine world – requiring (at any rate until recently) there to have been at least two other sheep, one male and one female, requiring a whole range of other conditions, atmospheric, chemical, biological, environmental and so forth such as permit the possibility of the kind of thing a sheep is to exist at all. To give such an account is to engage in the forms of scientific knowledge which explain what it is like that there should be sheep – or, as Thomas puts it, it is to know the answer to the question *quid est*?, the answer to which yields knowledge of its 'essence'. But to answer the question *an est*? answers no question about what anything at all is *like*. When you have fully described an ovine world you know nothing more about what it is like that there are sheep when you say add: 'but also they exist'. And that is why, for Thomas, there cannot be any kind of thing *such that* it exists. In turn, that is what

Thomas means when he says that the *esse* and the *essentia* of a created thing are 'really distinct'.

Now you can imagine, and describe, the difference between a world in which *this* sheep 'Dolly' exists and a world in which Dolly does not exist. You can imagine, and describe, the difference between a world in which there are sheep and a world in which there are not and have never been any. The difference between Dolly's existing and her not existing is just a difference in the ovine world, and you do not get at the *esse* of Dolly by contemplating that difference. Likewise, the difference between there being any sheep at all, and there being no sheep at all, is just a difference within the animal world, and you do not get at the *esse* which sheep possess by contemplating that difference either. You get at Dolly's *esse* by contemplating the difference between there being Dolly and there being nothing at all. And if *that*, as Thomas says, is to grasp the sheep's *esse*, then it follows that to grasp a thing's *esse* is to grasp its character *as created*. And this is to say, *esse creaturae est creari* – the *esse* of a creature *is* its being created.

Hence, the *content* of the expression 'x exists' is the value of the variable x. *What* it is for a sheep to exist is simply what it is to be a sheep. *What* it is for there to be sheep, the species, is given in the description of the kind of animal world which includes ovines. Hence, *what* it is for a thing to be created is whatever it is for that thing to be brought to exist 'out of nothing' – that there should be such a world rather than nothing at all. For that reason, what it is to be brought to be out of nothing differs for every kind of thing in the sense that every meaning for the expression 'x exists' is determinate to a substitution for x: in this sense there is nothing 'in common' between different values for the expression, just as there is 'nothing in common' between 4 as the square of 2 and 9 as the square of 3. But in the sense in which both values are derived by the same function of 'squaring', operating upon different variables, we cannot say that 'square of . . .' is an equivocal term. No more can we say that '. . . exists' is predicated univocally. And to be honest, I doubt if Thomas meant much more than this when he says that *esse* is predicated 'analogically' – just: *not* equivocally, *not* univocally.

It would seem, then, that both those who criticize Thomas for maintaining the proposition that there is a 'common conception of being', and those who deny that he maintains it, will need to explain more than they commonly do about what it is they are respectively affirming and denying that Thomas maintains. For of course Thomas denies that 'existence is predicated univocally', *even of creatures*. On the other hand, in the sense just explained, he does *of course* deny that 'existence' is predicated equivocally. *Of course*, Thomas would never have said that there is some 'common conception' of existence, for the reason that on his account 'existence' is *never* grasped in any concept anyway: to repeat, for Thomas a 'concept' is our grasp of a thing's *whatness* and answers to the question *quid est?* and not to the question *an est?* All the same, Thomas does maintain that *esse* is predicable non-equivocally not only of every creature that exists, but also of God and creatures – and if we allow that he says this, we might just as well allow him to say (for it is at the very least

misleading to deny it) that *esse* is 'predicable in common' of both God and creatures. And say it he does. Is this 'ontotheology'?

## VII

Thomas, of course, knows no such nomenclature; but he knows the objection and entertains it for himself. Discussing God's simplicity, Thomas locates its root meaning in the identity of God's *essentia* and *esse*,[12] and then poses the objection that if God's *esse* and God's *essentia* were identical, then it would follow that God's existence (*esse*) was an existence of no particular kind – 'unspecific existence'. From that it would follow that the name 'God' would simply name 'existence in general', that is, unspecifically any kind of existence, neutral as between the created and the uncreated, between the finite and the infinite – which is approximately what Duns Scotus does say. Now this is a telling objection, particularly for so enthusiastic a follower of the pseudo-Denys as Thomas, for the pseudo-Denys's famous *obitum* 'there is no kind of thing that God is' could easily be interpreted as entailing the consequence: 'God exists, but his existence is of no kind; hence, God is, unspecifically, "existence in general".' In turn, that could be interpreted in one of two ways: either as in the manner of the later Spinoza to mean that 'God' names the overarching category of 'being' of which all beings other than God are instances, from which the pantheistic consequence would follow that all created beings are 'instances' of God; or else to mean that *both* God *and* creatures are instances falling under the general category of 'being'. Both would be forms, one supposes, of ontotheological error, since either way the difference between God and creatures would be reduced to that which could obtain between 'beings' belonging to the same, albeit most general possible, category.[13]

The objection provides Thomas with an opportunity to clarify what could possibly be meant by the pseudo-Denys's *obitum*. In agreeing that God is not 'any kind of thing' Thomas is not consenting to some notion – as one might be tempted to suppose – that the name 'God' names an *utterly empty category*. That *we* cannot form any 'concept' of God is not, Thomas says, due to the divine vacuousness, but, on the contrary, to the *excessiveness* of the divine plenitude. That excessiveness eludes our language because we could not comprehend it except in a surplus of description which utterly defeats our powers of unification under *any* conception, an excessiveness which is exactly captured in the full text of the dionysian formula: 'There is no kind of thing which God is, *and there is no kind of thing which God is not.*' If ever there were a compendious statement of the relationship between the cataphatic and the apophatic in the pseudo-Denys's writing, this is it: for it says that

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12   *ST* 1a q. 3 a. 4 *corp.*
13   One merely supposes this. Not all critics of 'ontotheology' agree on the terms in which the error is to be described.

God is beyond our comprehension not because we cannot say anything about God, but because we are compelled to say too much, more than we can know how to mean. In short, for the pseudo-Denys, and for Thomas following him, the 'apophatic' consists in the superfluity of the 'cataphatic', the 'darkness of God' consists in the excess of light.

And so Thomas makes a distinction between two logically different kinds of 'unspecificness', or, as we might put it, two kinds of 'undifferentiation'.[14] In the first kind of case, he explains, further specification is *excluded*, as 'reason is excluded by definition from irrational animals'. In that case, he adds, the exclusion of the specification 'rational' adds *content* to the concept 'animal' since by virtue of the exclusion of the *differentia* 'rational', we know that what is referred to is, specifically, non-human animals. By contrast, in the second kind of case, 'unspecificness' is achieved by *indifference to either inclusion or exclusion*, as when we speak of the *genus* 'animal in general' indifferently as between 'rational' and 'non-rational'.

When we say, therefore, that God's *essentia* and *esse* are identical – hence, that 'there is no kind of thing that God is' – we could mean that God's existence is 'unspecific' in either sense. To mean it in the second sense would turn out to mean that the existence predicated of God is such as to be indifferent to any kind of specification – and that, for sure, would be 'ontotheological' error, since it would certainly entail that the name 'God' named the entirely empty category of *ens commune*, as if God were some most general 'concept' of which beings are 'instances' – or, on the contrary, that God is just another 'instance' of 'beings' falling under that general concept.

And, of course, Thomas denies that the identity of *essentia* and *esse* in God entails that second kind of 'unspecificness'. For God's simplicity consists, on the contrary, in this alone, that in God all specification of this and that *is excluded* – 'there is no kind of being that God is'. The paradox is, however, that this kind of 'unspecificness' of the divine *esse* is such as to be totally inclusive, which is the opposite of what one might have supposed. For note that the specific difference 'rational' divides the *genus* 'animal' into exclusive species ('rational' and 'non-rational'), such that, if the one then not the other: if any animal exists, then it is either a rational animal or a non-rational animal. Both belong to the same *genus*, but, of course, there cannot exist an animal which is, just, *generically* an animal, being neither rational nor non-rational. But if, *per impossibile*, a generic animal *could* exist, then, *per impossibile*, it could not be *neither* rational *nor* non-rational, for then it would have none of the character of either; it would *have to be both rational and non-rational* in some way which excluded both specifications, in order to exclude the disjunction between them, and thus allow for both in some non-exclusive way.

Of course, such a supposition is manifestly absurd, but the hypothesized absurdity brings out a central paradox of language about God of which, at this point

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14   *ST* 1a q. 3 a. 4 ad 1.

in his argument, Thomas is acutely observant. For it is by virtue of the divine nature's excluding every possible specification – that is to say, by virtue of excluding every *differentia* whatever – that God is such as to exclude all exclusion; hence, God stands in no relation of any kind of *exclusion with anything whatever*. God, as Eckhart says, is distinct in this exactly, that God alone is 'indistinct' – not, as Thomas observes, by virtue of an 'indistinctness' which is an excess of indeterminacy taken to the point of absolute generalized vacuousness, but by an excess of determinacy, taken to the point of absolutely total plenitude: 'there is no kind of thing', the pseudo-Denys says, 'which God is not'. That is why we cannot comprehend God: because the otherness of God is total, it is totally non-exclusive; because God is 'wholly other', God is the one being who is 'not-other' to anything created. And on no other account, we should note, is there any possible coherence to the doctrine of the incarnation.

If we are therefore to allow Thomas to say, as he does with some essential clarifications and precisions of terms, that *esse* is predicable 'in common' of God and creatures, how so? The full answer to this cannot be obtained within the compass of this article, but what we can say in the meantime is that, on whatever grounds we are enabled to understand created *esse* as that which stands against there being nothing at all, just those are the grounds on which we are able to say that the *esse* of a creature *is to be created*. But in knowing that for anything to exist is for it to be created is *thus far* to understand the name 'God'. We know God, in short, in so far as we know the *esse* of creatures, as Creator of all things, 'visible and invisible'.

And this is to know how to name the difference between God and everything which exists, which is the 'difference' between the Creator and the creature. And just as we are compelled thus to name it, we do not, and could not, understand the difference that it names, for the *tout autre* is not *a* difference at all: it is beyond our comprehension because 'difference' and 'sameness' have, in God, collapsed into that which is beyond both.

## VIII

Well may you ask what all this has to do with my subject, 'Tradition and Faith'? I fear you might have guessed the truth of the matter, which is that I should rather have written on the subject of 'Tradition and Reason', had I been asked to do so; and you may say that willy-nilly that is what I have done. But not so: even were I shamelessly to have stolen Fergus Kerr's brief, I should have started from the dogmatic decree of the first Vatican Council declaring to be anathematized anyone who says that 'the one true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of reason . . .'.[15] But note the paradox contained in that starting-point: the Fathers of the Vatican Council

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15   Norman Tanner, 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith', in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 810.

declare it to be *an article of faith* to be held by all Christians that reason has this potentiality, so that you get something importantly wrong about *faith* if you deny it. It does *not* declare that the power of reason to know God is known only *by* faith, as the Radical Orthodox theologians say. For it rather more sensibly maintains that the power of reason to know God is knowable *by reason*, and that *that* is an article of faith. And I think that you can best work that one through by means of debate with just that apophatic theological tradition whose response is called forth by the questions posed to it by the post-Nietzschean movements of deconstruction which I have discussed in this article. And the thought that today the demands of *faith* require some such reworking of our notions of *reason* is reinforced when one is reminded, as I have tried to do in this article, of how it is that the pre-modern 'rationalism' of that high medieval tradition is no more to be aligned with the 'rationalist' pretentiousness which Kant rejects – as so many contemporary Barthians still mistakenly imagine it to be – than is that more contemporary reaction to it which is post-modernism. Both, we might say, transcend the dichotomies of modernist 'rationalisms' and their 'irrationalist' mirror-images. And that the issue about 'reason' is an issue about *faith* – faith that reason at the end of its tether is capable of exposing all that exists *to be created* – is shown by what you have to make of faith if you abandon the claims of Vatican I, as Kant, in anticipation, does. After all, it was Kant who said that it was on account of *faith* that he had had to limit the claims of reason to know God. So, if you insist on being a Kantian about reason, you have not much choice but to be a Barthian about faith.

It would seem, therefore, that whichever article I had written I would have fulfilled my brief, which I do, in conclusion, more generally: what I had hoped I might have illustrated is a truism, that faith rediscovers itself in the debate with tradition, but that it does so by eliciting from that tradition new answers to today's questions. By such means a tradition is less 'appealed to' than reworked, for only in the medium of new questions does a tradition live. But by mere repetition does a tradition farcically die.