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Motum Dei Immobilis: In Defense of Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Immutability

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Motum Dei Immobilis: In Defense of Aquinas's

Doctrine of Divine Immutability

A Research Paper

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by

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*“As the geometrician, who endeavors
To square the circle, and discovers not,
By taking thought, the principle he wants,*

*Even such was I at that new apparition;
I wished to see how the image to the circle
Conformed itself, and how it there finds place;*

*But my own wings were not enough for this,
Had it not been that then my mind were smote
A flash of lightning, wherein came its wish.*

*Here vigour failed the lofty fantasy:
But now was turning my desire and will,
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,*

The Love which moves the sun and other stars.”

—Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*
Canto XXIII, 133–145

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INTRODUCTORY PREFACE

Ex nihilo nihil fit. It is difficult to ascertain who precisely coined the phrase, but the timeless wisdom contained within this brief but poetic verse is nothing short of remarkable. Perhaps one should expect no less than that such a beautifully succinct maxim would arise from the meditations and works of those who followed in the path of those first “lovers of wisdom.”

Ever since the inception of human reason, questions concerning the nature of causality have been pondered. In a long-forgotten era of human history, it was customary to attribute the causes of certain phenomena to the action (or lack thereof) of supernatural persons with unimaginable power. It was also not uncommon to suggest that these same beings (or perhaps others, as is the case with the Titans of the Greeks) were responsible for the creation of the world and all that is in it; that is, the idea of a “First Cause.” Nowadays, more secular and materialistic models have come to occupy the spotlight within the Academy, yet they share at least one thing in common with the myths of old: both agree that nothing comes from nothing. *Ex nihilo nihil fit.*

It has become common in our postmodern era to point out that Christian theology (or any other discipline, for that matter) is not done in a vacuum. The obviousness of this claim may incline one simply to gloss over it without much thought. Of course the theologians of old were particular people that lived in particular cultures within particular eras and spoke to address particular problems. This much should be, and is, obvious. What is not obvious, however, is the problems that this has raised for contemporary Christian theology. Rather than noted as a mere observation or qualification as such,

oftentimes this fact is pointed out with a particularly malicious intent: to discredit the positions of those being discussed. Bad theology, so it is suggested, arises from the limitations that one's place, time, and culture imposes upon one's capacity for coherent and sensitive theological reflection. *Ex nihilo nihil fit*.

Perhaps no era has become such a whipping-boy for contemporary theologians and philosophers than the Middle (or so-called "Dark") Ages. In light of the Reformation, perhaps this will come as no surprise, as calling tradition into question surely betrays some degree of break with it. Yet the Reformation's skepticism of papal influence over the Christian tradition in itself had a negligible impact upon theology when compared to the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of Modernism. As the Moderns spoke of the "progress" humanity was making (particularly within the sciences), a simple comparison would expose the Medieval period as a "regressive," "primitive," and "barbarous" era of human existence; one which the world would presumably be better off without.

It was only a matter of time before such sentiments began to show within Christian thought generally. Modernity's sense of ethical superiority led to widespread condemnations of the Church's actions within the Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, and colonization. As if accusations of moral backwardness were not enough, theologians began to criticize the Patristic and Medieval thinkers for relying too heavily upon Greek philosophy in their theological speculations. This twofold historical narrative—that both pagan (i.e. Greek) thought and a lust for power (i.e. the Papacy) had "corrupted" the originally Hebrew Christian faith—provided Enlightenment thinkers with the justification they sought for the general rejection of Medieval thought.

However, *ex nihilo nihil fit*; out of nothing, nothing comes. The majority of Modern thought has defined itself in stark opposition to the Medieval period. But the rejection of something can only result from an initial offer. If the Moderns were so adamant about its rejection, then the Medieval world must have had *something*—not nothing—to offer Modernity, and, clearly, whatever was offered could be of no little consequence. This, if nothing else, should encourage us to take a second look at those things which Modernism has rejected and, subsequently, forgotten.

* * *

A colleague of mine has suggested that half of academic work is telling other people why they are wrong. The other half, he explained to me, consists of grading bad papers. My hope is that this paper will (gently) accomplish the former whilst avoiding the fate of the latter.

Initially, when I began my research for the present work, I hoped to examine Aquinas's position on time and eternity in the hopes of synthesizing it with contemporary scholarship in Christian philosophy and theology. What I found, however, was that modern scholarship has been quite critical towards the ideas of Patristic and Medieval theologians, especially with regard to God's relationship to time. In further pursuing my research, I found that many contemporary theologians have elected to abandon entirely the idea of a timeless God in favor of a more temporalist theistic framework. Though the precise "mode" of divine temporality varies from thinker to thinker, the general trend is evident: a timeless God is no longer philosophically, theologically, or otherwise relevant.

It is with this lattermost trend that I take objection. I believe that Patristic and Medieval theology is quite relevant with regard to this particular issue, especially (as I hope to show) in light of recent philosophical, theological, and even scientific trends. While contemporary criticisms of so-called “classical theism” have their place, it seems to me that the present theological movement against the classical model may be unduly reactionary and extreme, stemming in part from an improper understanding of ancient thinkers and their ideas. This paper, therefore, examines the ideas and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas concerning divine immutability, with the particular aim of suggesting that modern sensibilities are well satisfied within the context of his theology. In so doing, I hope to encourage future scholars and divine temporalists alike to study Medieval philosophy to a greater depth; there are far more and greater treasures to be gleaned from this rich period of Western history than those presented here.

This work is, without question, much too brief to accomplish what I have set out to do. Such an undertaking is most formidable, and may well take a lifetime (maybe even several lifetimes!) to accomplish. Nevertheless, I hope that this small contribution to the discussion will be of benefit to myself and my fellow scholars-in-the-making. To this end, I have cited other brilliant thinkers (themselves more studied than I) and attempted to argue against their criticisms as best I can. I would have my readers understand that my rhetoric within such argumentation—even where it may seem fierce—in no way stems from a spirit of antagonism, but rather a spirit that strives to uncover the truth.

I anticipate that many of my readers will be in some way aligned with, sympathetic towards, or otherwise familiar with contemporary movements in theology

and philosophy of religion that posit, contrary to traditional Western thought on the subject, that God is in some way subject to time and temporal change. Readers are encouraged to be at least familiar with the thought of notable divine temporalists such as Charles Hartshorne, Clark Pinnock, and William Lane Craig. In no way, however, is this a necessary prerequisite for understanding the material therein; even familiarity with more popular authors such as Gregory Boyd, I hope, will prove more than sufficient to help the reader along with the ideas presented here. As for Aquinas's work, I anticipate most will not be as familiar; consequently, I have elucidated his thought in as much detail as I can, such that those new to Aquinas's work should follow along perfectly well.

In what follows, I first exposit Aquinas's general position on divine immutability, explaining as succinctly as possible Aquinas's position and the way by which he arrives at his conclusions. I then proceed to examine numerous general criticisms that have been leveled against the Medievals and Aquinas in the past century, demonstrating that such criticisms stem at least partially (if not entirely) upon various misunderstandings of Aquinas's work. After this, I address some more technical concerns that have been raised by contemporary scholars William Lane Craig and R. T. Mullins, themselves both formidable analytic philosophers of religion. Finally, I offer a few brief reflections as to why I contend that Aquinas's insights on the nature of God and time ought to be studied more extensively (and be seriously reconsidered) in today's philosophically and technologically accelerated world. I do all this in the hope that, in the pages that follow, readers will become as enamored as I have with Aquinas's rich theological vision of the motion of the immovable God.

AQUINAS'S IMMUTABLE GOD

Aquinas on Motion and Divine Immovability

In order to understand Aquinas's ideas regarding God's immutability (that is, his unchangeability), we must first understand his ideas regarding time, change, and motion; all of which come primarily from Aristotle. Aristotle defined "movement" itself rather broadly: instead of referring solely to spatial change, Aristotle defines "movement" as *a change from a potentiality to an actuality*. These changes, for Aristotle, can take place with respect to the substance, quality, quantity, or position of a given object¹—that is, an object can be said to "move" when it begins to obtain different substantial, qualitative, quantitative, or spatial properties (and/or relations). In this respect, it could be most succinctly said that Aristotle speaks of "motion" in terms of a "change of attainment" more than anything else—an acquisition of new traits, properties, or relations previously unpossessed. Borrowing this metaphysical framework for motion, Thomas Aquinas observes that everything that actualizes its potential must have this change catalyzed by some actualized object external to itself.² Put another way, everything that is "in motion" must be put into motion by something external to itself.

Aquinas notes that since God is the creator of all things, and creation is an act, God must be "pure act"³—that is to say, God is not "potential" in the sense that He is put

¹ Bodnar Istvan, "Aristotle's Natural Philosophy" (1st ed. May 2006; rev. Jan 2018). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

² "Nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality." (Thomas Aquinas, "Pt.1, Q.2, Art.3: Whether God Exists?" *Summa Theologica* [New York: Benziger Bros, 1947], 1:13).

³ It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Aristotelian categories of act and potency. For a robust treatment of act and potency as they pertain to Scholastic metaphysics in general, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 31ff.

in motion by something external to Him.⁴ Nor can God be a composite of both “potential” and “action,” as this implies that there is differentiability in a God who is metaphysically simple;⁵ thus, since there is no differentiability in God, Aquinas concludes that God must be “pure act” and, if God is “pure act,” then there is no “potential” in God and thus nothing which God can actualize. The implication follows naturally: if God has no potential to actualize, then there is no way God can change, and, hence, “move.”⁶ To reiterate the argument: everything that can be changed is in a state of potentiality—that is, it *can* (i.e. has the potential to) change into something it *could be*, but *is not*. However, Aquinas contends that if God is pure actuality—that is, if God *is* what He *is*⁷ and all He *could be*—then He cannot be said to have “potential” to any degree, and so cannot change or be changed. Thus the God who is “purely actual” is also unchangeable, since to change is to imply the potential to change, and God has no potential, only act. Since God cannot change, then, it follows that He must remain unmoved, for to “move” is to change from potentiality to actuality, given Aristotle’s definition of motion.

Aquinas’s reasoning can thus be summarized as follows:

1. God is the First Mover
2. If God is not pure act, then He cannot be the First Mover
3. Therefore God is pure act
4. Movement is a change from potentiality to actuality
5. If God is pure act, then He has no potential to make actual

⁴ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.9, Art.1: Whether God is Altogether Immutable?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:38. Strictly speaking, an object which is “pure potential” could not exist, because in order for an object to have real potential it must first have *some* actuality (that is, at the very least, it must *actually* exist).

⁵ That is to say, one substance, not comprised of parts. See Aquinas “Pt.1, Q.3, Art.7: Whether God is Altogether Simple?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:19. For a more detailed explanation of divine simplicity, see James E. Dolezal, *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 40ff.

⁶ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.9, Art.1” *Summa Theologica*, 1:38.

⁷ C.f. Exodus 3:14a: “God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

6. Therefore God has no potential to make actual
7. Therefore God cannot change from potential to actual
8. Therefore God is immovable, by definition of motion

We can see that, thus far, Aquinas has made no impressive innovations,⁸ save the clear articulation of the doctrine of immutability itself. Aquinas simply connects the Aristotelian definition of motion (taken somewhat axiomatically)⁹ with the argument for the existence of the Unmoved Mover. It should also be noted that Aquinas insists that God is “pure act,” though he concludes that God remains unmoved. Clearly, this is not “act” as we humans understand it, but something higher and, in a certain sense, far more primordial than the mechanical sorts of “actualization” with which we finite beings are familiar. For Aquinas, though God is said to be “pure act,” He remains Himself unmoved, for to be moved implies a sort of “change of attainment” or “gain.” Since God’s being is infinite, He cannot possibly lack or be added to; accordingly, then, it follows from all these considerations that God must remain unmoved.¹⁰

Aquinas on Time and Eternity

The discussion of God’s relationship to time follows naturally from the discussion of divine motion. Yet again, Aquinas borrows heavily from Aristotle, this time making use of his definition of time. According to Aristotle, time is “the number of movement in

⁸ This is a generalization, as Aquinas was quite innovative in many ways, not least of which is the synthesis he attempts between Aristotelian thought and Christian Neo-Platonism. Particularly, Aquinas has a very robust understanding of what it means for God to be “pure act” that surpasses Aristotle’s comparatively narrow understanding of the subject. For more on this technical aspect of Aquinas’s thought, see Michael J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 127–130.

⁹ One could argue against Aristotle’s definition of change and time, but only to the detriment of modern science, which depends largely upon Aristotle. See Edward Feser, *Aristotle’s Revenge: The Metaphysical Foundations of Physical and Biological Science* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid, Germany: Editiones Scholasticae, 2019), 1f. & 233ff.

¹⁰ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.9, Art.1” *Summa Theologica*, 1:38.

respect of the before and after”;¹¹ that is to say, time is the measurement of motion. As is apparent from this definition, Aristotle linked time and motion very closely in his metaphysical speculations. Though not going so far as to argue that time *is* motion, he maintains that the two are inseparable, claiming that we can only apprehend or understand time once we have designated certain times “before” and “after” with respect to the motion of an object.¹² However, motion is not merely the measure of time; for Aristotle, the relationship goes both ways. He points out that we as humans seem to measure both *time* by motion and *space* by duration; in other words, we measure space and time by each other: “For we say that the road is long, if the journey is long, and that this [the journey] is long, if the road is long—the time, too, if the movement, and the movement, if the time.”¹³ Aristotle also observes that duration can be measured by changes in our mental states, for if our mental states do not change, then we have nothing with which to mark the passage of time, and so to us it seems that little time has passed when, in fact, a great deal of it may have.¹⁴ Since movement is defined roughly as “change” for Aristotle, time is primarily measured by the degree of change (or “motion”) that has occurred in an object.¹⁵

Aquinas agrees with the Aristotelian linkage of time and space, himself assenting that time is “nothing else but the measurement of before and after in movement.”¹⁶

¹¹ Aristotle, “Time” in W. E. Kennick, and Morris Lazerowitz (eds.) *Metaphysics; Readings and Reappraisals* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 98.

¹² Much like “length” can only be apprehended or understood with explicit reference to two (different) points in “space.” See Aristotle, “Time” in *Metaphysics*, 96.

¹³ Aristotle, “Time” in *Metaphysics*, 99.

¹⁴ Aristotle, “Time” in *Metaphysics*, 96.

¹⁵ Those familiar with Einstein’s theories of Special and General Relativity will notice a striking similarity to Aristotle’s ideas regarding time and space. This is addressed in the Appendix, for those interested.

¹⁶ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.1: Whether This is a Good Definition of Eternity, ‘The Simultaneously-Whole and Perfect Possession of Interminable Life?’” *Summa Theologica*, 1:40.

Motion implies change, and change implies temporal measurability; given an object in motion, one should be able to measure some degree of change with respect to its “before and after” a given change. In other words, the concept of motion is inextricably linked with *measurability* and, hence, *differentiation* between two “points” of any given object.¹⁷ This leads Aquinas to suggest that, since time is primarily a measurement of change “before and after,” time must not in any sense apply to God; to measure time is to measure change, and to measure change is to differentiate between two points of a given object, and differentiation cannot be found in God, for He is an absolute simplicity.¹⁸ Since God’s duration is not measured by time, then, it must instead be measured by something else, which Aquinas calls “eternity.”

Borrowing a definition from Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Aquinas refers to eternity as “simultaneously-whole,”¹⁹ explaining that the difference between time and eternity is twofold. First, he says that time is divisible and categorizable into “before” and “after,” while eternity is an indivisible unit of duration; to speak of “before” and “after” in terms of eternity is nonsensical, for it is, in a sense, like a single moment in that it is indivisible. Second, Aquinas argues that time and eternity are different concerning their measurability by virtue of its indivisibility, since while the terms “before” and “after” apply to time, they cannot apply to Eternity.²⁰ Thus time differs from

¹⁷ The point here is that to measure some property of an object (such as length) is to differentiate between two points of the same object. For example, one measures the length of an object from “one” end to “the other”; two differing points on the same object. For more details on this aspect of Aquinas’s argument, see especially Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.4: Whether Eternity Differs from Time?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:43.

¹⁸ That is to say, God a real distinction cannot be made between God and His attributes. A popular way of putting it is that God is not comprised of any “parts” which together constitute “God.” For our purposes, it is only important to note that this means God is *undifferentiable*. See footnote 5 above, and Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 100.

¹⁹ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.4” *Summa Theologica*, 1:42.

²⁰ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.4” *Summa Theologica*, 1:42.

eternity in that it is both differentiable and measurable while eternity is neither. So similarly do these two attributes of eternity mirror the absolute unity (indivisibility) and infinity (immeasurability) of God that Aquinas concludes—rather poetically, if somewhat vaguely—that God is His own eternal duration.²¹

If, as Aristotle posits, time and motion are thus linked, Aquinas convincingly argues that it stands to reason that timelessness implies immovability. Objects which “always are,” according to Aristotle, cannot be moved, for then they would not “always be”—that is, they would be temporal.²² As regards those things which “always are” as Aristotle puts it, Aquinas argues that they must be called “eternal” insofar as they cannot be measured by time because they do not change. The logical consequence is that those objects which cannot be moved must not be in time, for if something could be moved, then its (theoretical) motion could be measured by time. Consequently, Aristotle concludes that objects that *can* move are necessarily temporal (because they have unactualized potential), while Aquinas argues that those things which “always are” (as Aristotle puts it)²³ must be called “eternal” insofar as they cannot be measured by time because they do not change: “any subject [which] is subject to change [...] recedes from eternity, and is subject to time.”²⁴

²¹ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.2” *Summa Theologica*, 1:41. It should be noted that this conclusion also comes as a result of the doctrine of divine simplicity, which states that God cannot be differentiated; God’s duration cannot be differentiated from God Himself, for this implies that a distinction can be made between God’s being and act (i.e. His act of duration). But if God is pure act, then He must be His own act. Since God is not comprised of parts, it follows that “everything that is in God is God,” as James Dolezal puts it.

²² Aristotle, “Time” in *Metaphysics; Readings and Reappraisals*, 100.

²³ Aristotle, “Time” in *Metaphysics; Readings and Reappraisals*, 100.

²⁴ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.4” *Summa Theologica*, 1:43.

The Motion of the Immovable God

As we have seen above, Aquinas comes to two incredible conclusions about the nature of God. First, Aquinas demonstrates that God is not only unmoved, but also *immovable*, as He is pure act and has no potential whatever in Him. God cannot be said to “change” because God is, in a sense, “already moved” from potential to actual. In other words, God already *is* what He *is*, which is *all He could be*. Secondly, Aquinas derives from this that God cannot in any way be measured by time; that is to say *God is temporally immeasurable*. Since time is nothing but “the measurement of motion,”²⁵ and since “motion” (that is, change) cannot be properly predicated of God, neither can God’s duration be measured by time. As time relies upon differentiation (and, hence, change) in an object, and God cannot be differentiated, it follows that God cannot be properly said to exist “in time.” This mode of existence apart from temporal measurability has been given various names, ranging from “timeless” to “eternal.” Aquinas himself opts for the latter. For our purposes, it will be sufficient for us to simply conclude that, for Aquinas, God is incapable of being measured temporally on account of His immutability.

It should be considered, however, that, despite these conclusions—which seem to have been derived from airtight reasoning—Aquinas cannot entirely escape the idea of a God that is, in some respects, in motion; nor does he try to. As noted above, Aquinas consistently reaffirms that God is “pure act,” and that no potential is found in Him.²⁶ Yet “act” is itself a dynamic, not a static, mode of existence. As we have seen, it is only objects that are themselves in “act” or “motion” that are capable of actualizing the

²⁵ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.10, Art.4” *Summa Theologica*, 1:43.

²⁶ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.9, Art.1” *Summa Theologica*, 1:38.

potential of other objects.²⁷ Thus Aquinas concludes that God is somehow both *dynamic* and *unchanging*.

Wedding these two concepts in our finite minds is difficult, as every instance of dynamic “act” we are familiar with is directly linked with “movement”; the change from potential to actual. To suggest something is *static* (i.e. not dynamic) is to suggest that it is *remaining in its potential*, while saying an object is *dynamic* implies that it is *actualizing its potential*. In both cases, potential is implied.²⁸ Thus we (understandably) demand to know: how can a “static” being such as Aquinas’s God participate in such a *dynamic* mode of existence? The key is to divorce the concepts of *stasis* and *dynamism* on the one hand and *movable* and *immovable* on the other hand.²⁹ Only then will we realize that the possibilities broaden, and we can begin to conceptualize an *immovable dynamism*; an object or being that is “pure act,” and remains in this particular state unwaveringly.

The aforementioned limitations of our cognition (and, indeed, human language in general) prevent us from fully grasping the high concept of God that Aquinas is putting forth here. Aquinas argues that God is, in a sense, “immovable” not because He is *devoid* of the ability to move; rather, Aquinas suggests that God is immovable in that He is *already* moved; that God’s *potential* is already *actual*. Aquinas does not seek to demonstrate that God is essentially unchanging; he only seeks to deny that God changes

²⁷ See page 6, above. See also Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.2, Art.3” *Summa Theologica*, 1:13.

²⁸ Any finite object will never be *completely* rid of its potential, as it is finite and can always adopt new spatial, qualitative, or relational properties. We say in physics that a ball is “at rest” (or “static”) when it is not moving but *could move*. Even when we *do* see actualized potential, as when the ball begins to roll, it still has potential in that it *could have* rolled the other direction, or it *could* roll faster. Thus finite objects can never fully actualize their potential, as to *gain* certain forms of actuality is to *lose* other forms of it.

²⁹ Alternatively, we can substitute “changeable and unchangeable” for “movable and unmovable.”

insofar as “change” implies potentiality (and thus limitation) in God’s being.³⁰ In fact, Aquinas himself ascribes a type of “rectilinear” motion to God and—through a series of somewhat convoluted arguments and observations in his *On Dionysius the Areopagite's “The Divine Names”*—Aquinas declares, somewhat paradoxically, that “not only do theologians attribute motion to God, but it is also granted us that we may fittingly praise the motion of the immovable God.”³¹

These paradoxical conclusions are not the most intuitive, particularly in light of recent developments within the Western theo-philosophical tradition. Increasingly, Christians have come to reject many of the conclusions of Aquinas and other earlier theologians, of which immutability is only one. Such critics argue that *soi-disant* “classical theism” does not provide an adequate or coherent framework for Christian theology. Yet it seems to me that all of their concerns (with regard to immutability, at least) are well-addressed within Aquinas’s work.

³⁰ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 145.

³¹ Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii de diviniis nominibus expositio* (caput 9 lectio 4), qtd. in Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 58–59.

GENERAL CRITICISMS OF AQUINAS'S POSITION

The doctrine of divine impassibility in particular has fallen out of vogue for many that think a God who does not share in human suffering cannot be properly called “Christian.”³² This has called into question immutability, simplicity, and a host of the other “classical” attributes of God. Conceptually, the doctrine of impassibility relies strongly upon the idea that God is immutable, such as is offered by the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical model. Furthermore, one recent idea in philosophy has made it very difficult to suggest that timeless objects (and especially timeless *persons*) exist—specifically, the idea that existence in general implies *temporal* existence. These ideas, among others, have led to a general rejection of classical theism; a trend which Brasnett, writing in the early twentieth century, very summarily articulates (with specific regard to divine impassibility):

The reaction in our day from the traditional doctrine of the divine impassibility [...] is often taken for granted in popular thought and exposition [...] There is a growing feeling that to make God a kind of passionless, scientific discerner between good and evil is not to honour him but to degrade him, to give him the emotionless precision of a machine, and rob him of the rich, full life of personality at its best.³³

Here Brasnett suggests that the shift away from the doctrine of impassibility (and immutability) is a matter of moral concern for the modern Church; that God be unaffected by human suffering seems heartless at best and cruel at worst.³⁴

³² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 182.

³³ Bertrand R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1928), 15. Though writing in the early 20th century, Brasnett highlights many of the chief concerns of those opposed to the Aristotelian-Thomistic model even today. As we shall see, many contemporary concerns over the doctrines of impassibility and immutability are nothing new.

³⁴ It is worth mentioning here that such moral concerns do not feature much in the works of the medieval writers themselves, and where they are mentioned they are summarily addressed; it is only with the rise of Modernism that we begin to see an emphatic shift in the philosophical and theological literature away from

Of greater interest to us, however, are the metaphysical objections of divine temporalists. Above, Brasnett helpfully indicates one such metaphysical point of contention for the divine temporalists: many people think that if God is unchanging, this implies that God is *deprived* of something. That is to say that, by being timeless, God is *unable* to participate in something *good*; specifically, God is unable to participate in *time itself*. This sort of thinking is exemplified by a number of contemporary writers, such as Clark Pinnock and Gregory Boyd. Along this vein of reasoning, a similar argument suggests that God is not perfectly free if He is immutable.³⁵ Finally, and perhaps most fatally, divine temporalists argue that God is incapable of being *personal* on the classical model.³⁶ Not all of these objections can be addressed here; nevertheless, some comments about these general criticisms of Aquinas are in order, and in the process the reader may find some general principles that will help to resolve these issues.

The Greek Objection

Coinciding with many of the modern critiques of the doctrine of impassibility in general, the growing concern of the influence of Greek philosophy on the Christian tradition certainly did not help the doctrine of immutability receive, as it were, a fair trial. With the rise of thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Adolf von Harnack³⁷ in the 18th and 19th centuries came the decline of Patristic and Medieval theological

divine *being* towards divine *personality*. A number of plausible causes could be cited, from the Reformation's challenge to existing theological authority to Romanticism and Existentialism as philosophical movements. Only further research can determine precisely where this shift in thought began.

³⁵ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1977), 214–215.

³⁶ See Robert C. Coburn, "Professor Malcolm on God," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 41 (1963).

³⁷ Incidentally, Harnack himself was cautious enough to note that, though much of the Catholic and "Eastern Catholic" (i.e. Orthodox) churches have been severely altered as a result of their adoption of Greco-Roman philosophy and customs, "Ecclesiasticism has not availed to suppress the power of the Gospel" (Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* [New York: Harper & Row, 1957], 266). Nevertheless, his belief that institutional (Medieval) Christianity was corrupted by paganism tonally permeates the text.

credibility, particularly with regard to the “classical” conception of God.³⁸ Unfortunately, contemporary scholarship has not shown much in the way of innovation with regard to the “Greek-ness” of the ideas of immutability and impassibility. Boyd, for example, argues that the Western world, since Plato, has been “infatuated with the idea of an unchanging, timeless reality.”³⁹ According to Boyd, time was seen by the Greeks as inherently sub-par or “imperfect” compared to eternity. This conclusion is similarly voiced by Thorleif Boman in his work *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*:

The Greek conception of time is put into words not least adequately by the fact that time is assessed by Plato as well as by Aristotle [...] partly as an evil. Aristotle is in agreement with the maxim that time destroys [...] everything grows old [...] and is forgotten in the course of time, but nothing grows new or beautiful through time. Hence we [Western society] regard time in itself more as destructive than constructive.⁴⁰

Claude Tresmontant agrees,⁴¹ borrowing heavily from Henri Bergson, the 20th-century French-Jewish philosopher, who argued that the Western (that is, Greek) tendency to “individualize” time and treat it as a series of discrete, unrelated moments robs time of its

³⁸ That religious authority so “controlled” philosophical speculation in the Middle Ages is a common assumption, one particular to secular and Protestant groups alike, especially after the advent of German Liberal Theology, but this too is unfounded: “These reflections suffer from a completely unhistorical view of the circumstances in which men think and act. [...] To single out the Middle Ages as unique in respect of the [limitation of free thought] is to be victimized by the propaganda against medieval thought which began in the sixteenth century as a reaction of humanists and reformers [...]” (Julius R Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964], 3). Strangely, however, this was not always the case, as Dolezal points out that much of early Protestant theology was unashamedly influenced by classical theism. See Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 37ff.

³⁹ Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 130.

⁴⁰ Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 128.

⁴¹ Claude Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, translated by Michael Gibson (New York: Denslee Co., 1960). See especially pages 17ff: “[The Greek concept of becoming] evokes degradation, ascent and fall, everything flows away and undoes itself. [...] Platonic and Neo-Platonic becoming represents a dispersion of the One, a loss. The Greeks seem to have been particularly impressed by the movements of corruption and dispersal. [...] In terms of modern physics one might say that Greek thought seems to attach greater importance to entropy,” (26).

creative and life-giving properties.⁴² Hans Küng also notes this tendency,⁴³ as does Swinburne, who attributes the idea more to Neoplatonism's influence on Christianity.⁴⁴

There is not a little truth to be found in the above objections. One could easily argue that, if God called His creation "very good," this decree of "goodness" would seem to include time, contrary to Aristotle, who himself acknowledged time's fundamentally corrosive nature: "Time is [...] the cause of decay, since it is the number of change, and change removes what is."⁴⁵ This pessimism of time is something that not only historically dominates certain strands of Western philosophy, but also of a great deal of poetic (and prosaic) literature through the centuries. It would seem, then, that the general Western pessimism of time can be, in some ways, traced back to the Greeks. Furthermore, it could be argued that this pessimism is contrary to the Christian idea that all of God's creation is, fundamentally, "very good."

However, the pessimism of time is not the *only* strand of thought in the Western world. Nor were the Patristics and Medieval theologians ignorant of the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thought.⁴⁶ To suggest that Greek philosophy crept into Patristic and Medieval Christian thought without the knowledge of the Church is naïve at

⁴² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1944).

⁴³ "Mediaeval theology, like that of the early Church, as a result of its dependence on classical Greek philosophy, was inclined much more to a metaphysic of being than to a metaphysic of becoming [...] the notion of God's immutability, taken over from Greek metaphysics, [...] created a variety of difficulties for the apologists and the later Fathers [...]" (Hans Küng, "Hans Küng on the Immutability of God" in Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*. [New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016], 200–201.

⁴⁴ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 215.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, "Time" in *Metaphysics; Readings and Reappraisals*, 100.

⁴⁶ As alluded to in the Preface, much of this reaction was not to Greek philosophy *as such* but rather the Scholastic interpretation and utilization of Greek Philosophy. A great summary of the development of the myths surrounding the so-called "Dark Ages" can be found in Edward Grant, *Science and Religion, 400 B.C. to A.D. 1550: From Aristotle to Copernicus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2–12.

best and gravely insulting at worst.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the “hellenization thesis,” as it were, does not itself demonstrate the falsity of the doctrine of divine immutability. To suggest that the doctrine of immutability must be discarded simply because it came from Greek sources is nothing more than an expression of the genetic fallacy—albeit a pious one.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, it seems that many scholars have come to see it as fashionable (and, in some respects, obligatory) to point out this particular “fact” about divine immutability—as though the Greek origins of the idea had not been suggested by a hundred others before them.⁴⁹ Such claims, at this point, seem to be of little constructive influence, save that it attracts the attention of those in support of the thesis that Christianity must “purge” itself of such “pagan” philosophical speculations.

Faith and Reason

One such manifestation of the aforementioned aversion to Greek influence on Patristic and Medieval theology can be found in the work of Charles Hartshorne.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ And particularly so with Aquinas: “It is a misrepresentation of what really happened to imagine that a young Thomas turned to Aristotelianism because it had become modish and that he thus became ‘Aristotelian.’ This notion literally obstructed any real understanding of Thomas for decades—until in recent years it was energetically pointed out that Plato too, Augustine too, the Neo-Platonist Dionysius Areopagita too, are very much present and effective in the work of St. Thomas, and that Thomas himself was not unaware of their presence” (Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 43ff.).

⁴⁸ That most defenders of divine temporality have failed to see this obvious flaw in reasoning seems unusual, yet it has largely gone unaddressed by proponents of divine timelessness as well. I have learned, however, that “playing the Greek card” has been sharply criticized by Mullins, himself an opponent of Aquinas. To hear such from one in support of divine temporality himself is rather refreshing. See R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2016), xiii.

⁴⁹ Incidentally, as anyone who has read Patristic works knows, this polemical tactic of accusing theological ideas of being Greek in origin is not new to Christian theology; old habits die hard, it seems.

⁵⁰ In what follows, a fairly negative appraisal of the work of Charles Hartshorne is given. However, this is not to demean Hartshorne’s work in general, but to outline the problematic objections he makes which are themselves based in popular misconceptions of Aquinas’s position. For a more positive appraisal of Hartshorne’s general contributions to the discussion surrounding God’s relationship to time, see H. A. Walton, “The Temporal Mode of an Eternal God: Classical, Contemporary, and Process Perspectives” *University of Amsterdam* (2013), 60ff. www.academia.edu/5780614/The_Temporal_Mode_of_an_Eternal_God_-_Classical_Contemporary_and_Process_Perspectives.

Following in the footsteps of Alfred North Whitehead, Harshorne has served as something of a popularizer of Whitehead's "process theology," the influence of which has (to a certain minimal extent) resulted in the recent academic shift towards divine temporalism.⁵¹

Characteristic of the anti-Greek-philosophy sentiment, Hartshorne argues that "if theology is to be emancipated from metaphysical assumption and argument, [...] it cannot be taken over ready-made from the work of older theologians [who have borrowed from secular metaphysics]."⁵² However, Hartshorne's reasons for criticizing the Medievals are more nuanced than they may initially seem. Rather than succumbing to basic anti-Hellenization rhetoric (as we have seen many scholars are prone to doing), Hartshorne instead goes deeper, arguing that the Medieval theologians were wrong to utilize metaphysics in their theological speculations as a result of methodological fallibility: "both secular reason and revelation are fallible."⁵³

Ironically, however, Hartshorne then proceeds to overreach his own claims with his personal preference for logical positivism. Seemingly oblivious to his earlier statement about the fallibility of secular reason, he argues that, since faith claims are necessarily true or false, the claims of Medieval theology regarding God's immutability are false because Modernity has "proven" them false:

⁵¹ Process Theology's conception of God is primarily one of *social function*; one that is "temporalistic" in nature. According to Hartshorne, the theory denies immutability and timelessness on the grounds that all of reality is (per the title of Hartshorne's book) "social process." This is not to say that there are no absolute or unchanging aspects of said reality, but that these "immutable" aspects of reality are constantly changing in relation to mutable aspects of reality and, in this respect, change. See Charles Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process: Studies in Metaphysics and Religion* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953), 134–135.

⁵² Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*, 129.

⁵³ Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*, 130.

I believe that metaphysics is, in ideal possibility, a genuine expression of reason, but that in historical achievement it has in good part been a failure [...] I hold that among the most successful of the efforts of metaphysicians are those which go to prove the erroneousness of certain elements in the main stream of orthodox theology [...] Modern philosophy, with increasing unanimity and emphasis, declares that whatever the highest truth may be, it is not to be found in certain theological tenets [such as immutability] for which almost innumerable theologians in various churches have stood.⁵⁴

The problem with this should be evident. On the one hand, Hartshorne is quick to emphasize that, in the case of the Patristic and Medieval theologians, secular reason is fallible; meanwhile, in the case of Modernist criticisms of earlier theologians, Hartshorne insists that said criticisms are “among the most successful of the efforts of metaphysicians.” Here Hartshorne must abandon one thesis or the other: either the Patristics and Medievals are justified in their use of philosophy, in which case Hartshorne must prove that their use of philosophy is somehow wrong; otherwise, he must discard the thesis that Modernist criticisms of Aquinas and others are valid, in which case the discussion becomes irrelevant. Opting for neither, we are left instead with Hartshorne’s unjustified preference for Modernism; a rather disappointing and singularly unconvincing treatment of the subject.

There is a deeper issue with Harthorne’s treatment here. Not only does his esteem of logical positivism undercut his own argument, but it renders himself incapable of properly interpreting Aquinas’s theology. Generally, logical positivism is somewhat problematic within a Scholastic framework; however, it is *fundamentally opposed* to Aquinas’s understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. To understand this, one need look no farther than logical positivism’s claim that everything that is

⁵⁴ Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*, 167.

meaningfully true can be proven rationally or empirically.⁵⁵ Aquinas, on the other hand, believed that not all truths can be so proven:

All science is derived from self-evident and therefore *seen* principles; wherefore all objects of science must needs be, in a fashion, seen [...] that which is proposed to be believed by all, is equally unknown by all as an object of science: such are the things which are of faith simply.⁵⁶

For Aquinas, of all *true things*, only some can be “seen” (literally and metaphorically) as objects of reason, whereas others can only be known by faith. By this, he means that there are limits to the things which can be either empirically “seen” (i.e. with our observation of the physical world) or rationally “seen” (i.e. through logical demonstration and deduction). Consequently, for Aquinas, not all true things can be proven by reason; some can only be known by faith. Etienne Gilson explains Aquinas’s position well:

To have faith is to assent to something because it is revealed by God. And now, what is it to have science? It is to assent to something which we perceive as true in the natural light of reason. The essential difference between these two distinct orders of assent should be carefully kept in mind by anyone dealing with the relations of Reason and Revelation. I know by reason that something is true because *I see* that it is true; but I believe [by faith] that something is true because *God has said it*.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ To be clear, logical positivism does not necessarily claim that questions such as Aquinas’s “Is God Immutable?” are necessarily *false*; rather, logical positivism argues that such metaphysical queries are ultimately *meaningless* because of their semantic content (or their lack thereof). In Hartshorne’s case, however, such logical positivism manifests itself instead by claiming that Aquinas’s metaphysical claims are necessarily false (see Hartshorne quote above, page 19). In any case, it should be evident that such a position is in stark opposition to Aquinas and the Scholastics in general. See Augustyn, Adam Augustyn, et al. (eds.), “Logical Positivism” Encyclopædia Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/logical-positivism.

⁵⁶ Aquinas, “Pt.2-2, Q.1, Art. 5” *Summa Theologica*, 2:1172. Note that when Aquinas refers to “science” he is referring to “certain knowledge of a demonstrated conclusion through its demonstration” (Ibid., note 1); that is to say, objects of science are necessary conclusions derived from reason.

⁵⁷ Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 72. That this was Aquinas’s position is elucidated well by Gilson, but that this sort of differentiation between the media of reason and revelation was common to Medieval theology can be found in Grant, *Science and Religion*, 13–14.

Gilson further explains that, as a result of the distinction between these “orders of assent,” Aquinas maintains that we should never attempt to substitute the function of one mode of knowledge for the other; that is to say, we should not assent to an object of rational truth by faith, nor confess belief in an article of faith as a result of necessary demonstration. For Aquinas, “believing” and “knowing” truths require two different media of apprehension.⁵⁸ It is a small wonder, then, how Hartshorne comes to conclude so radically different than Aquinas on everything from the place of metaphysics and theology to God’s relationship to time. What Hartshorne calls “metaphysics” or “reason” would not ever be called such by Aquinas, who held that merely suggesting that those things which are necessary demonstrations of reason could be false deprives the word “truth” of all meaning.⁵⁹

In the end, then, Hartshorne has left us with a supremely underwhelming examination of the issue. His arguments against the Patristic and Medieval use of philosophy are unquestionably self-refuting, but, more fundamentally, they are ignorant of the basic presuppositions of pre-Modern (sc. Scholastic) Christian thought. Perhaps most disappointing is not his unjustified preference for logical positivism and Modern thought in general, but the fact that even granting these assumptions, he provides little in the way of constructive thought on the issue. It seems, then, that Hartshorne’s preference

⁵⁸ Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 73–74. Gilson notes that Aquinas is purposefully silent as to where precisely this line is, fully aware of the nuanced relationship between faith and reason. Though theology is a discipline based upon revealed knowledge, it does not preclude the use of reason in drawing conclusions from revelation, as is well-attested by the many theological works of Aquinas, the *Summa* included.

⁵⁹ See Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 79–81. Hartshorne’s willingness to admit the fallibility of metaphysics is, incidentally, Aquinas’s chief criticism of the Averroists of his day. C.f. Aquinas, “Pt.2-2, Q.2, Art.4: Whether it is Necessary to Believe Those Things Which Can Be Proved by Natural Reason?” *Summa Theologica*, 2:1182.

for Modernism is nothing more than an appeal to novelty, heightened by Modernity's general case of "chronological snobbery."⁶⁰

The *Via negationis*

While Hartshorne and others seem skeptical of the appropriateness of philosophically driven theology, others try the classical model on the basis of supposed *methodological* issues. Gunton, for example, takes aim at Aquinas's conception of God by suggesting that the dialectical methodology of the Patristic and Medieval theologians was fundamentally flawed and, consequently, led them to a number of erroneous conclusions. Specifically, Gunton criticizes the use of "negative theology," particularly as expressed and formulated through the Medieval *via negationis*:

Negative theology has in effect driven out the positive [...], so that the God who makes himself known in scripture has been turned into one who cannot be known as he is [...] the divine attributes have been conceived largely [...] in terms of timeless relations between the eternal and the temporal, to the exclusion of attributes suggested by divine action in time.⁶¹

Charles Hartshorne has voiced a similar impression of the *via negationis*: "it was believed that the inadequacy of the human mind to comprehend the divine could be mitigated only by negating our conceptions, deity being the meaning that remains after all our ideas, unworthy as they must be, are set aside."⁶² However, more often than not, the *via negationis* is misunderstood as making a *positive statement* about properties or

⁶⁰ This term was coined by C.S. Lewis to refer to "the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own [Modern] age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited" (*Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966], 207–208).

⁶¹ Colin E. Gunton. *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 17.

⁶² Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*, 114. Though Hartshorne goes on to qualify this statement somewhat (115), the fact that he brings up this (generalized) statement betrays an implicit belief that Patristic and Medieval theologians truly neglected to speak of God in positive terms.

attributes of God. Consider, for example, Mullins's explanation of divine immutability: "to say that God is immutable is to say that He is necessarily unchanging in regards to His essential properties."⁶³ This is a prime example of an incorrect understanding of the place of the *via negationis* in Aquinas's theological method. Contrary to Mullins, to say (as Aquinas did) that God is immutable by way of the *via negationis* is *not* to say that God is *essentially unchanging*; rather, it is to say that God *does not change*—particularly insofar as "change" is defined as the gain or loss of certain attributes. This is exactly what Aquinas states in the *Summa*:

Everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite [and possesses all perfection in His being], He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him.⁶⁴

It is important to recall that "movement" here is a technical term that is synonymous with the word "change" in the ordinary sense. Aquinas therefore utilizes the *via negationis* to say, roughly, that *God does not change* (insofar as change is defined as the gain or loss of attributes).⁶⁵

The misunderstanding here lies in the ignorance of the fact that to make this negative statement ("God is not changeable in this manner") is *not necessarily* to attribute

⁶³ R. T. Mullins, "Divine Perfection and Creation," *The Heythrop Journal* 57 (2016), 131.

⁶⁴ Aquinas, "Pt. 1, Q. 9, Art. 1" *Summa Theologica*, 1:38.

⁶⁵ See Matthew Lamb, "Wisdom, Faith, and Reason in St. Thomas Aquinas: The Challenge of John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*" *Fides Quarens Intellectum: A Journal of Theology, Philosophy, & History*, 1 (Summer 2001), 14: "The 'via negationis' negates all the created limitations of our understandings of beings, goodness, truth, beauty, holiness--the negation does not bear upon the judgments that God is Being, Truth, Goodness, Holiness, Beauty." C.f. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 147: "In predicating immutability of God according to the *via negationis* [Aquinas] certainly does not intend to create [a static image of God]. Far from attributing the imperfect immutability of creatures to God in a positive way, he proposes no positive statement at all. He wishes only to make a negative statement [...] that creaturely imperfection may be found in God."

a positive attribute to God (i.e. “God is essentially immutable”). Aquinas himself is very careful to specify the place of the *via negationis* in relation to how we speak of God: “Negative names applied to God or signifying His relation to creatures manifestly [i.e. “Immutable”] do not at all signify His substance, but rather express the distance [that is, difference or “otherness”] of the creature from Him.”⁶⁶ Thus, when Aquinas argues for God’s “immutability,” this should *not* be seen as a descriptor of God’s *essential unchangeability*; rather, it should be seen as a *denial of mutability insofar as mutability testifies to a lack of infinite being*.⁶⁷

If such were the whole of the story, one could argue that the disagreement here is just fundamental in nature—that the place of the *via negationis* in philosophical theology is merely a matter of debate. However, though Aquinas’s contemporary opponents are quick to criticize the *via negationis*, they remain conspicuously silent about its relationship to the other two “ways” of speaking about God; namely, the way of causality and the way of eminence.⁶⁸ Dodds (citing Aquinas) helpfully summarizes the place of the three in the work and thought of Aquinas:

⁶⁶ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.2: Whether Any Name Can Be Applied to God Substantially?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:60.

⁶⁷ Puzzlingly, it seems that though Mullins understands this fact, he nevertheless chooses to proceed with his work as though Aquinas’s negative claims were positive claims: “I think it best that one understands [Aquinas’s position] to be making positive statements because the claims [...] have a determinate content despite that they appear, at first glance, to be a list of negations.” (Mullins, *End of the Timeless God*, 71). While *some* negative statements may have such “determinate content,” Mullins does not sufficiently demonstrate that this is the case with Aquinas’s claims, nor does he adequately justify *completely disregarding* Aquinas’s own insistence to the contrary.

⁶⁸ This seems especially curious to me, as it seems that Aquinas’s arguments for the doctrine of immutability do not stem from the *via negationis* as much as from the way of causality. Specifically, for Aquinas, that God is immutable follows naturally from Aristotle’s argument for the existence of the unmoved Mover (as I have attempted to show above, see page 7). Gunton and others have not, to my knowledge, even mentioned the role that the *via causalitatis* plays in the discussion, let alone satisfactorily argued against its use.

We know and speak of God through our knowledge of creatures, using the ways of causality, negation, and eminence. Through causality, we know ‘whether he is’ and recognize ‘his relationship [...] to creatures as the cause of them all.’ By negation, we see ‘the difference of creatures from him inasmuch as he is not any of those things which are caused by him.’ Through eminence, we find that creatures ‘are not removed from him by reason of any defect on his part, but because he super-exceeds them all.’⁶⁹

In brief, then, it could be said that the way of causality demonstrates to us the existence of God and certain necessary truths about him, such as can be found in Aquinas’s arguments for the existence of God using Aristotle’s metaphysics. The way of eminence discusses God’s positive characteristics in the superlative sense, such as God’s possession of all power or all knowledge. For the *via negationis*, the impetus is to clarify the distinction between creaturely being—or “becoming,” as has become popular to say—and divine Being.

The Medieval *via negationis* is thus not, as many seem to suggest, an attempt to contrast God as much as possible from man. It is, rather, part of a robust tool kit that Aquinas (and other Medieval theologians) have employed to speak about God as accurately as possible. It is to use man’s understanding of his createdness in an effort to discuss God, precisely what Gunton and others have accused the Scholastics of ignoring. Certainly, positive comparisons can be made between the Creator and His creation, but there are also many negative contrasts which must be made. Specifically with regard to the doctrine of immutability, Dodds continues:

Through the way of negation we know and speak of God in terms of his absolute distinction from creatures, denying of him every aspect of creatures that implies limitation or imperfection. Since motion as found in creatures implies limitation in its very definition [...] it must be denied of God. When we say God is

⁶⁹ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 144–145.

immutable according to the way of negation, we mean simply that motion, insofar as it implies limitation and imperfection, does not belong to God.⁷⁰

Even with all this said, however, to not ascribe *creaturely* motion to God through the *via negationis* is not to suggest that God does not move at all. To see this, we need only to consider that, per the *via eminentiae*, anything in creatures that is a *positive good* can be “supereminantly” ascribed to God; that is to say, such good traits can be properly ascribed to God, though in a nuanced and unfathomably higher sense than can be conceived by finite humans. This would mean that the positive traits of motion which can be found in temporal creatures, such as dynamism and vibrancy, *can* be predicated of God. Thus movement *can* be predicated of God insofar as “movement” implies dynamism and animation (as opposed to stasis and stagnation). However, God’s “movement” as such must be thought of as a type of “movement” that is “supereminent” and (consequently) quite different than the “movement” we are familiar with. Recall that Aquinas himself says “not only do theologians attribute motion to God, but it is also granted us that we may fittingly praise the motion of the immovable God.”⁷¹

It seems, then, that the objections of Gunton, Hartshorne, Mullins, and others to the doctrine of immutability on the basis of its reliance upon the *via negationis* is ill-founded at best, betraying an ignorance of Aquinas’s basic methodology. More importantly, however, we can see how Aquinas’s rich theological explanation of God as a “dynamic stasis” also addresses the earlier objections that we turned away from earlier.⁷² The claims that an immutable God must “lack” some aspects of “the rich, full life of

⁷⁰ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 145.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *In de div. nom.* (caput 9 lectio 4), qtd. in Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 58–59.

⁷² See page 15, above.

personality at its best⁷³ are refuted by a proper use of the *via eminentiae*, which suggests God possesses all creaturely goods supereminantly. God cannot possibly lack any good things which are to be found in the creation; therefore, Aquinas is in full agreement that movement *can* and *must* be predicated of God, insofar as motion can be conceived of as a perfection. However, in a proper and technical sense, that God can “move” in this supereminent sense does not negate or work against the conclusion that God must be immutable, for God is necessarily immutable in respect of His simplicity and pure actuality.

Unfortunately, we have only scratched the surface of the numerous misconceptions which have led to such disputations over immutability. It will not be the last time that we shall see that ignorance has become a source of significant controversy surrounding the classical conception of God, and particularly the doctrine of immutability.

⁷³ Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 15.

TECHNICAL CRITICISMS OF AQUINAS

We have seen that many popular or general criticisms of Aquinas have fallen short of meriting serious consideration. There are, however, a number of more technical criticisms which do warrant more substantial answering. Contemporary philosophers of religion such as Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and Richard Swineburne have become increasingly popular in Evangelical circles, and not without cause; of Aquinas's recent critics, they deserve mention and response for their more substantial objections. In particular, William Lane Craig and R. T. Mullins' objections to the doctrine of divine immutability pose a challenge to anyone considering Aquinas's position on the subject.

An apparent flaw in Aquinas's general conception of divine immutability has to do with the concept of God *sans* creation.⁷⁴ That God is Aristotle's Unmoved Mover seems obvious, and is demonstrated by Aquinas's arguments found both in his *Summa Theologica* and elsewhere. A contradiction and counterargument to Aquinas's conclusion of divine immutability, however, can be easily derived when one considers whether God, as the Unmoved Mover, could be said to have the property of "having created the universe" *sans* creation.

Craig's argument, in essence, suggests that, while it seems appropriate to call God the Unmoved Mover *after* He has already created the universe, "prior" to this creation, it

⁷⁴ This terminology, so far as I can tell, was coined by William Lane Craig (in his *Time and Eternity*) to refer to God in His eternal being "prior" to the existence of the universe. While discussions of anything "before" the creation of time itself (assuming time was created) are nonsensical, it seems nevertheless imperative for Christian theologians to discuss the aspect or "period" of God's existence that excludes the creation and existence of the universe. See William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2001), 233–236. However, some (sc. process theologians) have criticized any discussion of God's being prior to or *sans* the creation as unfruitful at best and nonsensical at worst. See also Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*.

seems it would be inappropriate to say that God is the “Unmoved Mover” because, *sans creation*, God does not move anything and, hence, could only be called “the Unmoved.” Put in more philosophical terms, it seems as though the property of “being the Unmoved Mover” does not apply to God *sans creation*; this property only applies *after* creation. In fact, it seems that, *sans creation*, God’s properties are minimal; surely He possess those traits and properties implied by only by His aseity,⁷⁵ but post-creation it seems that God takes on a number of new properties. Furthermore, post-creation, it seems as though God inevitably adopts a whole new *class* of properties; namely, he seems to adopt *relations* to the temporal objects which He has created, and (particularly) the persons which God creates. Thus it seems that God *sans creation* lacks a number of properties that He possesses only post creation.

The implications of this are significant, because it turns Aquinas’s argument for God’s “pure act” on its head. Since God *sans creation* has some *potential* properties (such as “being a creator”), one could suggest that God must be partially potential. But if God is also simple, then He must be “pure potential”⁷⁶ and, thus, entirely mutable. Just as Aquinas argued towards God’s immovability and immutability on the basis of His having purely *actual* properties, so too one could argue that, if God has at least some *potential* properties, then He is mutable. This is the main conclusion of both William Lane Craig and R. T. Mullins, and it is this conclusion that I will contest in the following pages.

⁷⁵ Aseity is something of a misunderstood and amorphous concept; generally, it refers to the fact that God’s existence and traits are independent of His creation of the world (and this is the sense in which I refer to aseity). See R. T. Mullins, “Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 192.

⁷⁶ I use this term here to designate an argumentative thread in opposition to Aquinas’s claim that God is “pure act.” Strictly speaking, however, an object which is “pure potential” could not exist. For a more detailed exposition of the Medieval categories of act and potency, see Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 36ff.

God and “Real” Relations

However, Aquinas himself was not ignorant of this “flaw” in his reasoning. In response to the suggestion that God adopts relations to His creation at the moment of creation, Aquinas argued that God does not bear “real relations”⁷⁷ to created objects despite the fact that all objects bear “real relations” to Him. William Lane Craig has criticized Aquinas’s position on precisely this point:

This is certainly an extraordinary doctrine [and] is very problematic. God’s sustaining the world is a causal relation rooted in the active power and intrinsic properties of God as First Cause. [...] To say that the world is really related to God by the relation *is sustained by* but that God is not really related to the world by the relation *is sustaining* is unintelligible. It is to say that one can have real effect without a real cause—which seems self-contradictory or incomprehensible.⁷⁸

At first blush, it seems that Craig is correct in his analysis, since Aquinas himself maintains that:

Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but only a relation in idea inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.⁷⁹

However, one would be amiss to conclude from this alone that Aquinas thinks that God bears no relations to the world whatsoever. This is because the above quote, taken out of context, seriously misrepresents Aquinas’s thinking on the subject. Most astonishingly,

⁷⁷ Here and henceforth I put “*real relations*” (and its derivative terms) in quotation marks to denote that it is, in fact, a *technical* term, which we shall soon see.

⁷⁸ Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 88–89.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7: Whether Names Which Imply Relation to Creatures Are Predicated of God Temporally?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:66.

Craig neglects to mention that Aquinas uses the term “really related” in a specific technical sense:

There are [...] relations which are realities as regards both extremes, as when for instance a habitude exists between two things *according to some reality that applies to both*; as is clear of all relations consequent upon quantity; as great and small, double and half, and the like; for quantity exists in both extremes: and the same applies to relations consequent upon action and passion, as motive power and the movable thing, father and son, and the like.⁸⁰

Aquinas’s heavy use of jargon here can make for difficult interpretation. The key thing to note in this passage is the phrase “*according to some reality that applies to both.*” In Aquinas’s mind, “real” relations between two objects are relations that are “realities as regards both extremes”—that is to say, the two objects bear relations *in regard to some shared reality*. For instance, in suggesting that one given bowl is smaller than another, one describes a “real relation” between the two bowls in virtue of their *shared physical existence* and “real” relative properties. Thus, for “real relations” to exist between two objects, the objects must share a *common reality* or, put in the words of Aquinas, “one order” of being.⁸¹ Dodds explains this well:

Among creaturely agents, there is a real relation between cause and effect. The transient causal motion produced by a creaturely agent is distinct from the form of the agent. [...] Through this action, the agent in some way imparts actuality to its effect [...] when the gas flame heats the frying pan, for instance, the act of heating belongs to both the flame as agent and the pan as receiver. By reason of this common act, the agent and its effect belong in some way to the same order [of being].⁸²

⁸⁰ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 1:66, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Or, as some have put it, a common “is-ness.” See Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 66.

⁸² Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 166.

Given such a definition of “real relations,” Aquinas proceeds to deny that God can bear such relations to His creation because *God and creation do not share the same order of being*:

Sometimes a relation in one extreme may be a reality, while in the other extreme it is an idea only: and this happens whenever two extremes *are not of one order [of being ...]* they are called relative not forasmuch as they are related to other things, but as others are related to them. Likewise for instance, [the relation of “being on the right side of another object”] is not applied to a column, unless it stands as regards an animal on the right side; which relation is not really in the column, but in the animal.⁸³

This type of relation, one in which each *relatum* belongs to a different order of being, is commonly referred to as a “mixed relation.” Since God’s creative action is not mediated through a common order of existence between God and creation,⁸⁴ any “mixed” relation that God bears to the creation can only be “real” for the creation. This follows from the observation that the creation depends upon God for its existence, and not the other way around.⁸⁵ Thus the “real” end of the relationship obtains for the creation only, and not for God. This, I think, sufficiently clarifies Aquinas’s puzzling remark that “it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures.”⁸⁶

Thus, despite the fact that Aquinas denies that a “real relation” can exist between God and creation, it is apparent that Aquinas does not suggest God bears no relations to

⁸³ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 1:66, emphasis added.

⁸⁴ It seems obvious (though perhaps a bit unintuitive) that there exists no common order of being (or “is-ness”) between an *uncreated* Creator and a *created* creation, but curious readers would do well to see Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 166–169 for a more detailed analysis of the oft-termed “mixed” relations between necessary divine Being and contingent created being.

⁸⁵ This is also implied by the fact that real relations to a temporal world necessitate change within God; since God was demonstrated to be immutable as a result of His “pure act” by Aquinas (see page 8, above), it follows that the “real” end of the relationship applies to the world, and not to God.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 1:66.

the world at all; rather, Aquinas maintains that the relationship between God and his creation is necessarily asymmetrical. It seems, then, that Craig's popular criticisms of Aquinas, at least, are founded upon gross misunderstandings of Aquinas's thought.⁸⁷

The Truly Related God

Unlike Craig, R. T. Mullins⁸⁸ has avoided such a facile interpretation of Aquinas in his work *The End of the Timeless God*:

When Aquinas denies that God is really related to creation, he is saying that a ["real relation"] does not obtain between God and creatures because God cannot have any accidental properties. [...] Creatures are really related to God because they depend upon Him for their existence, and have an appropriate accidental relational property. God, however, is not *really* related to creation, but only exists in a relation of reason to creation.⁸⁹

Mullins, however, criticizes Aquinas on another front, arguing that "the denial that God is really related to creation brings about severe incoherence within Christian theology and practice."⁹⁰ Particularly, he maintains that the denial of "real relations" in God leads to religious subjectivism. Mullins observes that we not only predicate titles of God such as

⁸⁷ It must be conceded that, in one manuscript which I have found, Craig does not make this blunder, and he seems to demonstrate a proper understanding of Aquinas's position with regard to "real relations" (see William Lane Craig, *God, Time, and Eternity: The Coherence of Theism II: Eternity*, [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2001], 62ff.). However, this manuscript seems to be out of print (or at the very least hard to come by), and Craig's other publications on the subject appear to lack this more informed treatment of the subject (c.f. Craig, "God, Time and Eternity: Reasonable Faith." *Reasonable Faith*, www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/divine-eternity/god-time-and-eternity). Such omissions have provided an opportunity for me to clarify Aquinas's position with regard to the potentially confusing distinction between "real relations" and God being "really" (i.e. truly) related to creation. Accordingly, I have elected to include my criticisms as they stand.

⁸⁸ Mullins may be relatively new to the academic world, yet he may well be one of the most ambitious and promising defenders of divine temporality in the up-and-coming generation of philosophers of religion. His scholarship has posed a significant challenge to this work, and I anticipate that classical theists will have a great deal of work cut out for them in addressing Mullins's concerns in the coming years. Though what follows is something of a scathing critique of his conclusions, it must be acknowledged that Mullins has done his homework. He is very familiar with the work and thought of the Medievals and Scholastics, and while I may argue that Craig misunderstands Aquinas at points, I cannot say this is the case for Mullins. In my estimation, then, where Mullins criticizes Aquinas, it stems from fundamental disagreement as opposed to mere ignorance.

⁸⁹ Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 121, emphasis added.

⁹⁰ Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 122.

“Creator” and “Savior,” but we also invoke such titles in liturgy and prayer. If Aquinas is correct, Mullins suggests that this means liturgical invocations of these titles are self-referential because they “instead express a property of our minds. [...] We are only expressing things about ourselves and not anything about God.”⁹¹

However, as he continues, it seems to me that Mullins does not quite have the full picture of the nuance of Aquinas’s thoughts on “real relations” as he initially appears. Mullins takes it as incredible that “anyone who is a Christian theological realist could actually believe this notion that the accidental predicates like *Creator* and *Redeemer* are not true of God but only true of ourselves.”⁹² Aquinas himself, however, seems to suggest precisely the opposite of what Mullins is here accusing him of!

God is related to the creature for the reason that the creature is related to him: and since the relation of subjugation is real in the creature, it follows that God is Lord *not only in idea but in reality*; for he is called Lord according to the manner in which the creature is subject to Him.⁹³

Contra Mullins, Aquinas is *not* attempting to suggest is that titles such as *Creator* and *Redeemer* cannot be “truly” predicated of God; instead, Aquinas is trying to clarify that God does not “adopt” such relations in a manner that implies or amounts to a *change* in Him. It is by virtue of *change in the creation* (namely, the change from nonexistence to existence) that God is called Creator, not in virtue of *change within God*: “there is nothing to prevent these names which import relation to the creature from being predicated of God temporally, *not by reason of any change in Him, but by reason of the change of the creature.*”⁹⁴ Much the same could be argued of the titles *Lord* and

⁹¹ Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 123.

⁹² Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 123.

⁹³ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 1:67, emphasis added.

⁹⁴ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 1:66, emphasis added.

Redeemer. Aquinas, then, does not disagree with either Craig or Mullins that God is, in some way, *truly* (though not “really,” in the technical sense) related to the world. In fact, Aquinas goes so far as to almost contradict himself (by implying a change in God) to stress precisely this point which Craig and Mullins are so concerned about:

Though God is prior to the creature, still because the signification of Lord includes the idea of a servant and *vice versa*, these two relative terms, *Lord* and *servant*, are simultaneous by nature. Hence, God was not *Lord* until He had a creature subject to Himself.⁹⁵

That Aquinas would go so far as to almost imply change in God to stress the point that God is truly predicated by the temporal names *Lord*, *Creator*, *Redeemer*, etc. is evidence that the concerns of Craig and Mullins are not foreign to Aquinas. Yet, despite the apparent consonance of thought between Aquinas and these contemporary scholars, they are insistent upon opposing Aquinas as a result of their incorrect interpretation of his work. Craig, it seems, has misconstrued Aquinas’s terminology to such an extent that his opposition to Aquinas’s claim that God is not “really related” to the world is underwhelming at best. For his part, Mullins fails to acknowledge that, though Aquinas denies “real” relations of God, this does not preclude one from arriving at the conclusion that God *can* and *must* be “truly” related to the world. Thus it appears that, insofar as Aquinas’s understanding of God’s true (but not “real”) relation to the world is concerned, Craig and Mullins fall short in their analysis.

The Problem of Possible Worlds

A final criticism worth mentioning is that of God’s relationship to other “possible worlds.” Generally speaking, a number of contemporary philosophers of religion have

⁹⁵ Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.13, Art.7” *Summa Theologica*, 1:66, emphasis original.

had difficulty reconciling Aquinas's thought with contemporary modal logic, particularly as codified in formal modal reasoning systems (of which the "possible worlds" semantics are only a part).⁹⁶ While a detailed exposition on the nature and scope of modal logic cannot be given here, Mullins's explanation of possible worlds semantics should provide adequate for an unfamiliar reader to proceed.⁹⁷

An example of the problems that possible worlds semantics poses for Aquinas can be found in Craig's work:

[In a logically possible world where] God had not chosen to create a universe at all, He would surely have a different will than that which He has [...] He would know different truths than the ones He knows [...] He would not love the same creatures He actually loves [...] Incredibly, however, Aquinas denies this. It is the implication that God is perfectly similar in every possible world we can conceive [...] But then it becomes unintelligible why this universe or any other universe exists rather than nothing. The reason cannot lie in God, for He is perfectly similar in all possible worlds. Nor can the reason lie in creatures, for we are asking for some explanation of their existence. Thus, on Thomas's view, there just is no reason for why this universe or any at all exists.⁹⁸

Craig asserts that, if God *could have* chosen not to create the universe, this semantically implies that, at some point, there was a *potential* which God *could have* actualized but elected not to. This inference seems reasonable enough, yet it should be obvious that it

⁹⁶ Ambitious readers would do well to read James F. Ross, "The Crash of Modal Metaphysics," *The Review of Metaphysics* 43, no. 2 (Dec 1989), 251–279. Ross (himself aligned firmly with the Scholastic camp) persuasively argues that contemporary modal logic is problematic on a variety of fronts, going so far as to suggest that "Possible worlds' metaphysics is bankrupt" (279). A less severe and more nuanced discussion of the subject can be found in Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 235–241.

⁹⁷ "A state of affairs is the way things could be. For instance, Abraham Lincoln could be the 16th president of the United States of America. This is a possible state of affairs because it could happen. It is also an actual state of affairs. An actual state of affairs is a possible state of affairs, but it is different in that it obtains or is actual. A merely possible state of affairs does not [necessarily] obtain. A possible world is a maximal compossible totality of states of affairs. It describes the entire way things could be. [...] An [or "the"] actual world is a possible world that obtains. A merely possible world does not [necessarily] obtain" (R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 194). Readers can find a detailed exposition on the history, development, and scope of modal logic in Johan Van Benthem, "Modal Logic: A Contemporary View" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/modal-lo/.

⁹⁸ Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 89.

implies potentiality within God, which is in direct contradiction with Aquinas's conception of God as pure actuality. The consequences of this for the doctrine of simplicity (and, hence, immutability) are fatal; if God could have acted other than He has at any point in human history, then God must not be simple.

If Craig's argument holds, it would seem that Aquinas's position on God's pure actuality is mistaken. If God would have had different properties or relations in a different possible world—that is, one in which God created a different universe (or not created one at all)—then it follows that God has unactualized potential and is not “pure act.” Since the doctrine of immutability and the other “classical” attributes of God are closely tied to the doctrine of divine simplicity (i.e. God's pure actuality), it would follow that drastic revisions to these doctrines would be required. Clearly, then, Craig's reasoning is of no little consequence.

Be this as it may, however, I suggest that an examination of the possible worlds semantics in use will reveal that, useful and popular as they are in contemporary metaphysics, such semantics assume far more than they demonstrate. In particular, Craig's modal semantics assume a common order of being⁹⁹ between God and creation. This has been argued by James Dolezal, who maintains that possible worlds modal logic in general suffers from this deficiency.¹⁰⁰ Possible worlds semantics describe the world in

⁹⁹ See page 30, above.

¹⁰⁰ See Camden Bucey, and Jeff Waddington, “God without Parts: The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity” (with James Dolezal), youtu.be/-davnzphHdc, 44:02. Dolezal goes on to demonstrate how “possible worlds” modal logic assumes univocism, itself hotly debated by classical theists and process theists. For a more detailed discussion about the problems surrounding univocism, see Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 72f and Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 139ff. C.f. Mullins, *End of the Timeless God*, 68–70.

terms of a “maximal state of affairs”—of which God is assumed to be only one.¹⁰¹

However, Dolezal suggests that treating God as any other object within a “possible world” assumes that God is on a level of *esse* that is analogous to that of the creation—that is to say, it assumes a common mode of being between God and creation; an assumption which is completely foreign to Aquinas’s work.

The problem with the above arguments against Aquinas, then, is that—by virtue of using “possible world” modal logic at all—Craig *assumes* a common order of being between God and creation rather than *demonstrating* that such an order of being exists. With this (unjustified) assumption, Craig is fully capable of concluding that God must have potential (and thus be complex) *if and only if* God and his creation share an order of being. Such a conclusion, however, is not revolutionary, nor does it prove that God is complex—unless it could also be proven that God and the creation share an order of *esse*. This fact, coupled with the more general uncertainty about the viability of contemporary modal logic,¹⁰² makes Craig’s argument on the basis of “possible worlds” suspect at the very least.¹⁰³

However, even granting such a common order of being between God and creation, it seems to me that suggesting that God “could have done otherwise” than He

¹⁰¹ See Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 194 (emphasis added): “A possible world is a *maximal compossible totality of states of affairs*. It describes the entire way things could be.”

¹⁰² See Ross, “The Crash of Modal Metaphysics,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 43, no. 2 (Dec 1989), 251–279.

¹⁰³ I would also suggest that it testifies to the fact that contemporary modal logic assumes a creaturely *esse* in its formulations of modality. The implication of this is that contemporary modal semantics (including the concept of “possible worlds”) are not fitting for application within the context of a being with a fundamentally higher order of *esse* (i.e. God, see page 30, above). It may well be that modality may apply, as it were, “supereminantly” to God (much like motion can, as we have seen), though it does not seem readily apparent to me that modality *per se* is a necessarily “good” thing in creation so much as it is a byproduct of spatiotemporal finitude. In either case, the main point is that Craig’s use of modal logic assumes no distinction between creaturely being and God’s *esse*.

has in the actual world simply presupposes divine potentiality rather than demonstrating it. Consider Craig's claim that "If God had not chosen to create a universe at all, [...] He would know different truths than the ones He knows."¹⁰⁴ While this statement may be true, does this really imply that a God who chose not to create is *different* than from the God that has chosen to create? According to Aquinas, the difference is not to be found in God, but in the world; in this instance, the list of "*truths*" *to be known* is what changes, while *God remains immutably knowing*. Much like the temporal names which can be predicated of God, it is thus by virtue of change *in the world* that God's knowledge and relation to it changes, not by virtue of change in God Himself. *That* God knows remains constant; it is only *what* God knows that could be said to change. Thus God's act of knowing need not change in order to accommodate temporally "new" knowledge.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, Craig here assumes that God's action is distinct from His being, contrary to the doctrine of divine simplicity. While it may be reasonable for one to dispute the doctrine of divine simplicity directly and thus conclude God's mutability,¹⁰⁶ Craig simply derives that *God is not simple and has potential* by assuming that *God is complex* (i.e. that God's being and knowing are separate). The reasoning is circular, and so it seems Craig's argument asserts divine temporality more than demonstrates it.

Consequently, the argument fails, and Aquinas's stance remains uncontested.

¹⁰⁴ Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 89.

¹⁰⁵ The question about whether God's knowledge is variable is a hotly-debated subject largely revolving around the nature of the relation between the knower and the thing known. This subject is much too nuanced to go into here; briefly, it could be said that, for Aquinas, the metaphysics of *theology proper* (i.e. God's pure act, immutability, etc) logically precede questions about the metaphysics of *epistemology*. In other words, in Scholasticism, epistemology is preceded by metaphysics. This assumption is not shared by later Modern thinkers, who, beginning with Descartes's "*Cogito ergo sum*," argue that logical priority should be given to epistemic (not metaphysical) concerns. See Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 27–30.

¹⁰⁶ C.f. Aquinas, "Pt.1, Q.14, Art.15: Whether the Knowledge of God is Variable?" *Summa Theologica*, 1:84–85.

Mullins, for his part, wholeheartedly agrees with Craig’s reasoning and, thus, falls under many of the same criticisms I have raised against Craig. To Mullins’s credit, however, he avoids the assumption that God is complex, instead arguing for divine complexity on the basis of God’s free will:

Could God have refrained from creating the universe? If God is free then it seems that the answer is obviously ‘yes.’ He could have existed alone. Yet, God did create the universe. If there is a possible world in which God exists alone, God is not simple. He eternally has unactualized potential for He cannot undo His act of creation. He could cease to sustain the universe in existence, but that would not undo His act of creating.¹⁰⁷

Anticipating a possible rebuttal, he continues:

One could avoid this problem by allowing for a modal collapse. One could say that everything is absolutely necessary. Necessarily, there is only one possible world—this world. Necessarily, God must exist with creation. There is no other possibility. God must create the universe that we inhabit, and everything must occur exactly as it in fact does. There is no such thing as contingency when one allows a modal collapse.¹⁰⁸

Mullins then goes on to point out that such a “modal collapse” is “odious to Christian theology” for various reasons, including the denial of divine and creaturely freedom of will. Mullins rightly points out that such a modal collapse seems to imply a form of fatalism and, as a result, poses significant problems for the standard Christian positions on the problem of evil and moral responsibility, among other things.¹⁰⁹

In considering such questions, it must be first of all pointed out that we have officially departed from theology as “scientific” endeavor insofar as our considerations henceforth cannot help but be highly speculative. No Christian can rightly claim to know the mind of God; “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his

¹⁰⁷ Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 195–196.

¹⁰⁸ Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 196.

¹⁰⁹ Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 196–197.

counselor?”¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Mullins’s objection here seems fair, and well deserves an answer. Should Christians really be so willing to hold fast to simplicity and immutability that they deny God’s freedom to create?

Foremost, it is evident that God *has* created the world. From this, it is clear that, whatever the case may be, *God has willed the world to be*. If God has so willed the universe to be, one might well ask why God did not will the universe to be different.¹¹¹ In a certain analogical sense, perhaps we may think it makes sense to ask such a question, as we humans are well aware of the fact that our decisions have consequences and that these consequences vary with our actions.

However, when we conceptualize an infinite, all-powerful, all-wise, and all-benevolent being that is supremely self-sufficient and self-fulfilled, one may begin to wonder if the question even applies to such a being. Whatever the goals of such a being in creating the universe as we know it, is it plausible to even think that such a being can fail to obtain that which it is seeking? If it is possible, then we are not thinking of an infinite being, but a finite one. If impossible, then how could the universe be but one way; the way which the infinite God has desired and decreed?

Admittedly, such speculation is vague and perhaps ill-formed (not least insofar as “desire” implies lack, which a being such as God cannot have). Nevertheless, it does not

¹¹⁰ Romans 11:34, NRSV.

¹¹¹ In fact, Aquinas himself addresses the issue in a couple articles of his *Summa*. See Aquinas, “Pt.1, Q.19, Art.7: Whether the Will of God is Changeable?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:104f. Particularly important when considering the question of whether God “could have made the universe differently” is Aquinas’s “Pt.1, Q.19, Art.3: Whether Whatever God Wills He Wills Necessarily?”, where he distinguishes between “absolute” and “supposed” necessity: “Since the goodness of God is perfect, and can exist without other things inasmuch as no perfection can accrue to Him from them, it follows that His willing things apart from Himself is not absolutely necessary. Yet it can be necessary by supposition, for supposing that He wills a thing, then He is unable not to will it, as His will cannot change” (1:105). See also “Pt.1, Q.25, Art.4: Whether God Can Make the Past Not to Have Been?” *Summa Theologica*, 1:139.

seem so far-fetched to suggest, contra Mullins, that there is indeed only one way things could have turned out: the way things have *in fact* been, and will *in fact* be. Though, far from depriving God of His freedom of will, it seems that this vision of God—one that is supremely unrestricted in actualizing the one and only universe that He wills—*exalts* God’s sovereignty rather than *detracts* from it.

Doubtless, Mullins would criticize such a position for its lack of intellectual rigor. Yet I would pose the following argument in challenge to Mullins and those who would side with him: are “possible worlds” possible insofar as they are *logically comprehensible* (i.e. that they are “logically possible”), or insofar as they are *willed by God*? It seems to me that a possible world could not obtain unless God so desired it to obtain. But all “possible worlds” are defined as “possible” in that they could (possibly) obtain. To this end, one could argue that all “possible” worlds which God does not desire to obtain are *necessarily impossible*, since they could not possibly obtain. This includes every so-called “possible world” in which God is different than He is in the actual world, as *an omnipotent God could not fail to be as He so desired to be*. Since God desires to be what He is in the actual world, and He could not fail to be different than He desired to be, there is *no “possible world” in which God is different than He is now*. Since the remaining possible worlds are, necessarily, those in which God does not vary from world to world, it does not follow from Mullins’s argument that “God could have been different than He is,” because, in fact, *God could not be different than He already is*.

It seems to me that this line of reasoning demonstrates a form of “modal collapse” that is not odious, but rather quite necessary for Christian theology. Nor does it entail that

there is only one possible world: any possible world can be conceived in which God is the same as He is in the actual world. Yet this conclusion seems to support—rather than detract from—Aquinas’s understanding of divine simplicity and, hence, divine immutability.

The above considerations aside, I would think it naïve to conclude that Mullins’s concern has been addressed in its fullness. The dilemma faced by the theologian is to find a sufficient reason by which to explain the fact that the *actual* world obtains out of the innumerable worlds God seemingly *could have* actualized. In some ways, it is doubtful whether such a question could ever have a satisfactory answer; it may well haunt the Church for the rest of time. Be that as it may, I have attempted to demonstrate that Christian theologians can uphold Aquinas’s position on divine immutability reasonably, despite Mullins’s insistence to the contrary. Concerning the same issue, Dodds has an insightful reflection that is worth quoting at length:

Our remarks regarding the act of the divine will are necessarily halting and inadequate since the operation of God’s will infinitely exceeds the capacity of our thought and language. In what we say, we do not seek to explain the mystery of God’s will, but only to preserve it from our all-too-human tendency to reduce God to something we can understand. At the same time, in answering the hypothetical question that we have posed regarding what God ‘might do’ or how God ‘might be,’ we refuse to abandon the actual truth that we have discovered about what God is: that God is pure actuality, *ipsum esse subsistens*, and that as such he is (unlike us) absolutely simple and unchanging. It is of course tempting to deny our ignorance and to pretend instead that God’s will is like our own, with a multitude of acts, some of which would be different or changed if God did not will the creation of the world. But if we yield to that temptation, the God of whom we speak will be only a human God, made in our own image. He will be only a ‘pretend’ God who ‘might be this’ or ‘could be that.’ He will no longer be the God of transcendent mystery who has made us in his own image and likeness and who reveals himself as ‘He who is’ (Ex. 3:14).¹¹²

¹¹² Dodds, Michael J. *The Unchanging God of Love*, 180.

A WAY FORWARD

Thus far, I have attempted to elucidate Aquinas's position with regard to divine motion in some detail. I have also tried to show that various criticisms, general and technical, fall short of satisfactorily demonstrating the falsity of the doctrine of immutability. As yet, Aquinas's doctrine goes unchallenged. Be this as it may, however, a thesis not proven wrong is not necessarily right. The remainder of this work will attempt to argue for the plausibility of Aquinas's position, and will look at the merits of reconsidering the classical conception of God with respect to immutability. Because Aquinas's conclusions have been argued for and defended both by Aquinas himself and a compendium of contemporary Thomists, I will not endeavor to rehash the arguments of others; instead I offer my own reflections as to why Aquinas's view is relevant to contemporary philosophical theology.

Philosophical Superiority of Divine Simplicity

In the first place, it seems to go without saying that the doctrine of divine simplicity (upon which the doctrine of immutability is based) is far more philosophically tidy than any doctrine of divine composition. Generally, it seems apparent that divine simplicity satisfies the most basic of the philosopher-theologian's needs: the need for a single, unified cosmological principle to serve as the foundation for the rest of reality.

The doctrine of divine simplicity is meant to correct any proclivity we might have toward conceiving God's being as dependant upon principles or sources of being more basic than His own divinity. This temptation is very real insofar as everything else we know and experience is composed of parts. [...] But a God composed of parts is unworthy of our worship because He is not the highest being [...] If other theological proposals about God do not conform to this most fundamental conviction of His existential absoluteness [...] then we run the very

real danger of worshipping that which is not the unsurpassable and most absolute being.¹¹³

In many ways, however, divine simplicity is the heart of the disputation between the classic and modern conceptions of God. Medieval theology, in its discussion of the classical attributes of God (such as those given by Aquinas), unanimously assume divine simplicity, whence we see that immutability follows necessarily from God's undivided being.

Contemporary theologians would not disagree with this lattermost point, though it is for this precise reason that divine temporalists conclude that God must be complex. Craig and Mullins argue that divine simplicity is problematic because it implies immutability, which they reject. The logical consequences of a simple, immutable God, it is argued, are so reprehensible that it could not possibly be true.¹¹⁴ Consequently, they conclude that God must be complex because God is mutable. But surely this is the wrong way to go about resolving the issue! One could just as easily argue the other way around: since divine complexity is problematic, and Craig and Mullins base their argument for divine complexity upon divine mutability, divine mutability must be incorrect!¹¹⁵

Here it is appropriate to make another note of some interest. Most opponents of Aquinas (including Craig and Mullins) do not argue directly against his reasoning for immutability; his syllogisms for immutability go untouched. Rather, those who argue for

¹¹³ James E. Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 58.

¹¹⁴ See R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 181–203.

¹¹⁵ I strongly suspect that Craig and Mullins would think that arguing "backwards" against mutability as I do here is "inappropriate"; yet, this is precisely what they do with Aquinas's arguments for immutability. While it is true that a proper *reductio* might be made against immutability, such a *reductio* can also be leveled against divine mutability. Absent any other reason to believe in divine mutability, a *reductio* is not itself sufficient to abandon immutability.

divine mutability attempt to construct a *reductio ad absurdum* to show that immutability is incompatible with other aspects of Christian belief, such as the creation of the world or the Incarnation.¹¹⁶ Yet if divine immutability were truly an unreasonable *a priori* hypothesis (as Mullins and Craig seem to argue), then one would think that a critical reading of Aquinas's argument would reveal some fatal, glaring flaw, either in assumption or syllogism. Yet such an appraisal does not seem to have been made;¹¹⁷ indeed, perhaps Aquinas's airtight reasoning has ensured that it cannot be made.¹¹⁸

Setting aside the *soi-disant* "reprehensible" conclusions of divine immutability, it seems that divine simplicity in itself is a much more reasonable assumption to make. If we were to assume the alternative—namely, that God is complex—it follows that He would then be composed of parts. But whence do these parts originate? The implication is that the components of God must have some origin outside of God, which is problematic for orthodox Christianity's claim that God is the sole origin of everything. Furthermore, divine complexity implies that God's existence is contingent upon the existence upon His component parts; an idea in stark contrast to that of God as a

¹¹⁶ See Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 99ff. & 156ff.

¹¹⁷ The closest to such a valid critical appraisal is perhaps that given by Mullins, who argues that divine simplicity is a false assumption made by Aquinas. However, as I have argued earlier in this paper, Craig and Mullins' arguments against simplicity *assume* divine complexity to be true before "demonstrating" divine simplicity to be false (see pages 35–40, above). Furthermore, my criticism stands doubly so for Mullins, as his argument against simplicity attempts the same *reductio* tactic he and Craig employ against immutability. In both cases, Aquinas's actual syllogisms remain unconsidered, and often go unreferenced by other "theistic mutualists." In a proper sense, then, the search for a valid criticism of Aquinas's reasoning for divine immutability continues.

¹¹⁸ More positively, the doctrine of divine simplicity is, quite frankly, more aesthetically pleasing than any alternative notion of divine complexity. Unfortunately, such a judgement cannot be well argued for, except in the vaguest terms; in my case, it has been the most fleeting of glimpses into eternity, prompted by my study of God and time, which have convinced me of this singularly crucial fact. Perhaps only further reading and reflection (in addition to personal devotion and prayer upon the subject) could convince the reader of this. In any case, divine simplicity could not be, in my estimation, better argued for than by Aquinas himself.

metaphysically necessary Source of all contingent being. Assuming divine complexity, then, seems to fly straight in the face of everything that Christians have historically said about God. Accordingly, it seems that divine simplicity, considered in itself, is a philosophically and theologically superior position to divine complexity by, in my estimations, a wide margin; far more than a few, unconvincing reasons should be given before its wholesale abandonment.

In Defense of Faith and Reason

A second strength of Aquinas's position regards his epistemological position regarding the relationship between faith and reason. His belief that "science" and "faith" are two media of knowledge—one which is mediated by reason and empirical observation, the other which is mediated through the reception of knowledge from an authoritative¹¹⁹ source—enables Aquinas to hold apparent contradictories in a tension otherwise impossible. Since Aquinas believes that the immutability of the First Mover is a necessary conclusion of reason, he firmly holds to the doctrine of divine immutability. However, he is also capable of holding in equal esteem the truth of faith that God is the Good from which all other goods derive, and as such God must possess mutability insofar as mutability can be a perfection. Thus Aquinas's unique epistemology allows him to hold these two truths in paradox.¹²⁰

This is not so for the divine temporalist—though the shortcoming is less the fault of divine temporalism as much as it is Modernism in general. For Modernity, if truths of

¹¹⁹ In this respect, perhaps, it could be argued that a great deal of contemporary "science" relies upon "faith" (i.e. belief in claims offered upon the authority of scientific research institutes, publishers, and "experts" yet remain untested by the individual). For an excellent treatment of this subject, see Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

¹²⁰ See pages 18–22, above.

faith and reason seem to contradict, one must be right and the other wrong because *all* truth is, supposedly, in accordance with and intelligible by human reason. Corollarily, anything incomprehensible by human reason is *de facto* discarded as contradictory and false. By thus collapsing the dividing line between the truths that can be apprehended only by faith on the one hand and those apprehended by reason on the other, the new philosophy effectively makes impossible Aquinas's paradoxical idea of the "most-moved Unmoved Mover." This way of thinking stems largely from the epistemic revolution of early Rationalism, whence divine temporalism derives its general epistemological tools. Paradoxically, however, divine temporalists allegedly combat *against* the Rationalists by their subordination of Reason to Revelation (which explains at least in part why divine temporalism has become popular in Evangelical circles).

Despite this, divine temporalism is far more Rationalistic than its proponents would perhaps care to admit. Generally, for the divine temporalist, the necessary truths of reason are set aside for the "superior" truths of faith—i.e. the "philosophical" veracity of immutability is trumped by the theological necessity of divine mutability. Yet implicitly, it could be argued that this is not actually the case, as the entire impetus for discarding one of the paradoxical claims is based upon a *prejudice of reason* which suggests that the two members of the paradox are in fact contradictory. It is an idea of *reason* (viz. Rationalism) that the articles of faith and reason should wholly overlap and be entirely comprehensible with one another. Thus, the estimation of divine mutability over divine immutability as "the superior truth of faith" is not actually an act of faith, but instead a superposition of preconceived reason over faith.

It is, therefore, *Modernism* that is unable to abide with logical tension, not Christianity.¹²¹ Ironically, the divine temporalist movement, for all its praise and esteem of the Hebrew aspects of the early Christian faith, is terribly discontent with the Jewish propensity to live by paradox. In contrast to this dissatisfaction with not knowing, it is the mark of genuine Hebrew (and, by extension, *Christian*) faith to be capable (as Aquinas is) of abiding with paradox in full tension. G. K. Chesterton spoke well on this subject in his *Orthodoxy*, worth quoting at length:

By defining its main doctrine, the Church not only kept seemingly inconsistent things side by side, but, what was more, allowed them to break out in a sort of artistic violence otherwise possible only to anarchists. [...] It is true that the historic Church has at once emphasised celibacy and emphasised the family; has at once (if one may put it so) been fiercely for having children and fiercely for not having children. It has kept them side by side like two strong colours, red and white, like the red and white upon the shield of St. George. It has always had a healthy hatred of pink. It hates that combination of two colours which is the feeble expedient of the philosophers. [...] So it is also, of course, with the contradictory charges of the anti-Christians about submission and slaughter. It *is* true that the Church told some men to fight and others not to fight; and it *is* true that those who fought were like thunderbolts and those who did not fight were like statues. All this simply means that the Church preferred to use its Supermen and to use its Tolstoyans. [...] It is constantly assured, especially in our Tolstoyan tendencies, that when the lion lies down with the lamb the lion becomes lamb-like. But that is brutal annexation and imperialism on the part of the lamb. That is simply the lamb absorbing the lion instead of the lion eating the lamb. The real problem is--Can the lion lie down with the lamb and still retain his royal ferocity? *That* is the problem the Church attempted; *that* is the miracle she achieved.¹²²

¹²¹ See Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 6f: “Ineffability is an ill-judged metaphysical compliment given to God. It is a misplaced piety that attempts to express the transcendence of God by noting the limits of human language and reason, but ultimately lands in nonsense because it teaches that ‘God is unknown and unknowable.’” Mullins’s frustration with the doctrine of ineffability (evident by his tone throughout the cited pages) is perhaps evidence of his epistemic reliance upon reason. While acknowledging that “we will [not] fully comprehend God” (6) Mullins argues that ineffability is “self-referentially incoherent” (6) and that “It is time to get rid of ineffability to have an adequate account of religious language” (8). This is due, I think, to an exaggeration of the claims of classical ineffability, which all the more advances my thesis that Mullins does not have a full understanding of Partistic and Scholastic thought. However, his reasons tie into his beliefs about analogical language, which will be looked at in a subsequent section (see 52ff, below).

¹²² G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 177–181. <https://books.google.com/books/about/Orthodoxy.html?id=p7UEAQAAIAAJ>.

What is most appropriate for the Christian, then, is a theo-philosophical position that is capable of accounting for the apparently contradictory truths of faith and reason. Such a position, I argue, cannot be found in post-Rationalist, post-Enlightenment Modernity, with its preference for reason over and above faith. Aquinas, on the other hand, *does* allow for such paradoxical tension to exist, and even in such a way that his position, by limiting the respective domains of faith and reason, accords with both. This, then, is another point in favor of Aquinas's general position.

Analogical Language and Primordial Being

Aquinas's sharp distinction between divine Being and creaturely being is yet another point in favor of his position. Equating God's form of existence with ours is perhaps one of the most elementary blunders of contemporary philosophical theology. To suggest that the Uncreated Creator "exists" the same way that a created creature "exists" is much like saying Sir Arthur Conan Doyle exists in the same manner as Sherlock Holmes. That God and creation share different classes or "orders" of being seems almost necessary for the Christian to hold. Yet many contemporary philosophers and theologians have instead begun to treat God as though He were simply one being among many.¹²³

The issue arises in part as a result of disagreements over the nature of theological discourse; specifically, whether certain things ought to be predicated of God *literally* or *analogically*. For divine temporalists, "motion" must be applied to God literally (i.e. God *actually* moves and changes), while Aquinas suggest that it can only be predicated of God *analogically*. The difference is *not*, as some would argue, that applying motion to

¹²³ See the above section on "real" relations for a refresher on the concept of "orders of being" (30f).

God analogically is somehow *less true* than predicating it of God literally; rather, it is a difference of the *kind* of truth being addressed, whether literal or analogical.

Consider, for example, the claim that God is a “rock.” Is God *literally* or *analogically* a rock? The answer, clearly, is the latter; God is not *literally* made of stone, but by way of analogy we can attribute certain characteristics of rocks (i.e. steadfastness, solidity, etc.) to God. Not let us consider the claim that God is “divine”; is it to be literally or analogically predicated of God? Clearly literally; the very definition of “divine” and “God” demands it. These examples highlight an important aspect of predicative language: the truth of a predicate is *not* dependant upon whether it is applied to God *analogically* or *literally*; rather it is dependant upon whether it is *appropriately predicated of God*, whether that be in an analogical or a literal sense (i.e. an analogical truth predicated analogically, or a literal truth predicated literally).

Thus it is not so much that the claim that “God must, in some respects, change or be able to change” is fundamentally erroneous. In fact, as I have demonstrated, the intuition is correct that, insofar as immutability implies static imperfection, God is not immutable.¹²⁴ However, the difficulty arises when contemporary theologians insist that *all* things must be predicated of God *literally*. By describing God in primarily *relatable* (that is, *analogical*) terms rather than attempting to understand God *as He is*, divine temporalists confuse *truth* with *literal predication*. This is not the case with all contemporary thinkers, to be sure; but it seems that the usage of “ordinary” language—which emphasizes God’s relatability and mutability—has become so

¹²⁴ See the above section on the *via negationis* (pages 22–27, above) and especially the section on the *via eminentiae* (24–26, above). See also Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 147.

commonplace in discussions of metaphysics and philosophical theology that the conclusions of divine temporalists are, in many ways, inescapable.

An example of this is the common misunderstandings of the term “real relation,” as we examined earlier. The phrase is a *technical* term used in Aquinas to describe a particular type of causal relation between two objects. A “real relationship,” according to Aquinas, entails a common mode of being between *relatum*, whereas a “mixed relationship” obtains between objects with different orders of being. The precise nature of this theological language, when rightfully differentiated, resolves any misunderstandings of the issue. However, when a layperson (or contemporary theologian) hears or reads that Thomas Aquinas states that “God is not really related to the world,” the ordinary usage of the words in question suggests that God does not bear *any* relations to the world whatsoever. To be clear, Aquinas *does* believe that God bears relations to the world, they are just not “real” relations. However, as we have seen, authors such as Craig have either misunderstood or misconstrued this to mean that Aquinas thinks God bears no relations to the world, only “imaginary” relations.¹²⁵

Though genuinely well-meaning, the push for the abolition of theological jargon in theological discourse has been damaging to Christian theology. Assuming a common mode of being between the Creator and the created (that is, by assuming that God “be” the same way we “be”) destroys the distinction between God and man.¹²⁶ Some might argue that the “destruction” of the “distinction between God and man” is precisely what Christ attempted to do in the Incarnation, but the point is missed that the Incarnation loses

¹²⁵ See the above section on God and “real” relations, pages 29–34.

¹²⁶ For a complete treatment of the subject of the relationship between Aquinas’s “orders of being,” divine predication, and the issues presented by univocism, see Feser, Edward, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 256ff.

its significance if there is no metaphysical distinction between Creator and created. How impressive is it, really, if a being—one that exists just as everything else—became something else? At best this is common, and hardly to be lauded since we humans change in this way all the time.

On the other hand, what are we to say to the idea that God, in His infinite and primordial Being, the Ground of Being Himself, became finite and ordinary being, contingent and fragile? This is a paradox beyond mystery; yet it is pregnant with precisely the high Christology so rightly praised by 20th century Neo-Orthodoxy. The greatness of the God who “became what He was not so that Man could become what He is”¹²⁷ is fittingly magnified in this paradoxical mystery of the Christian faith, that the infinite God became finite man. But such a mystery *does not* and *cannot* exist for the contemporary philosopher of religion, who treats God as just another being among beings. For him, God has not traversed the infinite to dwell in the finite, He has only changed His form among the finite. The classical position, held by Aquinas and many others, seems yet again the only position that can be reasonably called “orthodox.”

The Vision of the “Most Moved” Unmoved Mover

It seems to me that, beyond the above considerations, perhaps the most compelling reason for adhering to Aquinas’s general position (that is, the classical position) is the grand vision of God granted by it. It is my belief that the *beauty* and *grandeur* of a hypothesis should bear equal weight in considering questions of truth, as the highest truth is too beautiful to be contrived by man. Ergo, where two hypotheses are

¹²⁷ See Irenaus’s *Against Heresies*, book 5 and Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation*, section 54.

otherwise considered equal, the more elegant, grand, and mystifying should be preferred over the more clumsy, mundane, and base. Are the contemporary doctrines of divine complexity, myopic knowledge, and divine finitude to be preferred over those of Aquinas—divine simplicity, the bifurcate cooperation of faith and reason, and doctrine of primordial being—as *more* beautiful?

This is, admittedly, not an argument so much as an elegy for the pervasively scientific study of God that theology has become. Nevertheless, it almost goes without saying that we humans are not only extrinsically, but intrinsically, changed by time. Our duration is in constant flux, and whatever small changes we experience often snowball into significant personal changes that affect who we are as people, affecting even our inmost being. “Becoming” is the only mode of existence we know. It is therefore difficult for us to imagine the existence of anything which is *uncreated*, and which remains *unchanged* by the experience of time. Yet in no way does the “otherness” of an object preclude its existence, nor the implicit incomprehensibility of an eternal God’s work in a temporal world any case for His temporality.

Therefore the same sense of bafflement, confusion, and wonder with which Christians have historically articulated and confessed such doctrines of the Tri-unity of God must be present in any Christian doctrine of God’s relationship to time. It must articulate, to some degree and in some way, the paradox of (apparent) contraries; “a mystery revealed, but not understood.” In light of this, it seems to me that contemporary attempts at demonstrating and exhaustively defining God’s duration in terms of *temporal*

extension lack the sense of wonder and awe of the “otherness” of God; a sense which is well evoked in Aquinas’s writings on the subject.

That this particular crisis of philosophy and theology stems from the West may come as no surprise to some, and particularly historians of chronometry. Time has become something like a god of in the Western world, perhaps to the degree that Christians concede that even their deity is subject to it? What modern Westerner, enslaved as he is to society’s hyper-awareness of time and its ceaseless chronological motion, would not presume that this all-encompassing and utterly binding force, had not, in some way, managed to chain down God Himself?

Doubtless, such a question will come across as brash at best and rhetorically charged at worst. Naturally, it is not the disposition of divine temporalists to “enchain” God to time, but to “liberate” Him from the static conception they have of Aquinas’s temporally immeasurable Unmoved Mover. How little, however, does their idea of an immutable God look like Aquinas’s; how much indeed it *does* have in common with the deistic clockmaking god of the Modernists, who are probably more to blame for the Medievals' disrepute than any. Were the divine temporalists to glimpse for one instant the grand vision of the “motion of the immovable God,” they too might join Aquinas in saying “I can do no more. Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written until now seems to me like straw.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Fink, John F., *The Doctors of the Church: An Introduction to the Church's Great Teachers* (New York: Alba House, 2000), 79.

CONCLUSION

Concluding a paper with as many topics, studied in as much depth and breadth as I have presented in the foregoing pages, is difficult and perhaps impossible to do to anyone's full satisfaction, my own included. The truth of the matter is that, in many ways, I do not wish to conclude this work, as the subject is one of continual fascination for me. I hope the reader will be as enamored by these issues as I am, and that the thoughts contained herein have sparked a curiosity that will consume them in a grand desire to plumb the riches of Aquinas's thought. Regrettably, however, we must draw our considerations to a close.

Summary

Aquinas's formulation of the doctrine of immutability borrows heavily from Aristotelian conceptions of motion and time. For Aquinas, Aristotle's ideas lead necessarily to the conclusion that God is immovable and, hence, temporally immeasurable. These conclusions rely upon the assertion that time and motion are linked—a Greek idea which has come to be one of Aquinas's chief criticisms with regard to the doctrine of immutability. Despite the difficulties raised by Aquinas's arguments, however, he is careful to maintain that though God is atemporal, this does not inhibit His ability to act in any way. In fact, for Aquinas, God's temporal immeasurability seems to imply that He possesses a higher, more perfect degree of "motion" and "action" than any temporal being could hope to attain.

We have examined Aquinas's argument for divine immutability in detail. The conclusion that God is immutable follows from God's infinite, simple, and pure actuality,

which are in turn derived as a necessary conclusion from God's status as the Prime Mover of reality. Given Aquinas's epistemology, however, he simultaneously (and paradoxically) affirms that, while finite "motion" cannot be ascribed to an infinite God, the "goods" of motion—personality, vitality, and responsiveness—*can* be ascribed to God supereminantly. Thus God can "move," but this motion must be understood as a "primordial" sort of motion, one which does not imply substantial change in God. This "dynamic stasis" of God necessarily eludes all human comprehensibility, but for Aquinas it is essential to uphold both the necessary truths of reason and the revealed truths of faith. That God is unmoved is true by reason, while that God moves is also true, though not by reason but by faith.

We examined numerous general objections to divine immutability, including the claim that Aquinas's position should be rejected because of its Greek inspiration, that his "negative theology" constitutes an invalid theological method, and that immutability robs God of "the rich, full life of personality at its best."¹²⁹ Each of these objections has failed to demonstrate the insufficiency of Aquinas's position. In response to the Greek objection, I have argued that in its basic form it is merely a pious example of the genetic fallacy, while in the more nuanced views of Hartshorne it comes to be self-contradictory. Contrary to the claim that Aquinas's negative method is theologically invalid, I have shown that the *via negationis* is not only an indispensable component of any serious theological methodology to distinguish between Creator and created, but that it is in fact only one component of a more robust toolkit; comprised also of the *via causalitatis* and

¹²⁹ Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 15.

the *via eminentiae*. This lattermost tool helps us answer the final general objection by necessitating that the goods of creation find their higher and proper Source in their Creator. Accordingly, aspects of the existence that we finite humans enjoy (including motion!) can appropriately be ascribed to God, though only in a higher and more primordial sense. We also noted that many of these objections seem to stem, in part, from a general misunderstanding or mischaracterization of Aquinas's epistemology or theological method in general.

Proceeding to more technical arguments against Aquinas's position, we saw that the objections of William Lane Craig and R. T. Mullins are similarly based upon misconstruals of Aquinas's theology. First, we examined Craig's claim of God's mutability on the basis of the supposed difference of divine properties *sans* and post-creation. We saw that such an argument *assumes* a common order of being between the Creator and the created (thus destroying the Creator-creature distinction) rather than *demonstrate* it. Further, Aquinas argues that such "differences" in divine attributes *sans* and post-creation are not the result of change in the *purely actual essence of God*, but rather the change is to be found in the *transient properties of the created world*. We saw that R. T. Mullins's objection that we cannot truly call God "Savior" without implying a "real relation" between God and man was based upon a misunderstanding of Aquinas's technical term "real relation," and ignorance of Aquinas's emphatic insistence that such names may be "truly"—though not "really," in the technical sense—predicated of God. Finally, we examined the viability of "possible worlds" semantics in general, arguing that the assumed order of being between God and creation necessary to ascribe modality to

God causes problems for Christian theology; as a result, Mullins's modalistic argument against divine simplicity is circular and fails to demonstrate his conclusion.

In addition to the above considerations, some reflections upon Aquinas's position provide something of a positive argument for its importance. Of chief note is the intuitiveness of the doctrine of divine simplicity, upon which Aquinas bases the doctrine of immutability. Secondly, the sharp distinction between Creator and created, offered by Aquinas's idea of "orders of being," provides an important framework for the predication of divine attributes to God. Rather than complicating the Incarnation, however, the idea that God's infinite Being is nothing like our finite being seems to make it all the more significant: the wholly infinite and immutable God paradoxically becomes finite and mutable; "the" Being becomes "a" being. Aquinas's respect for this paradox bolstered his unique epistemology, which makes a clear distinction between the nature and media of sense-knowledge (reason) and revealed knowledge (faith), thus enabling the Christian to firmly hold *both* the necessary truths of reason and the revealed truths of faith in full tension. Finally, I argue that Aquinas's rich, grand vision of God is unrivaled in terms of its beauty and the awe it commands and, therefore, is more apt to be true than any (comparatively inelegant) formulation of divine temporality.

The Western Synthesis

A final consideration of the relevance of this work has to do with the present state of Western thought in general. It has been a number of centuries since the first fledgling Modernists rebelled against the Scholastics, yet it has seemingly reached its end. The Enlightenment project of pulling rational knowledge up by its own bootstraps has failed,

and the “Age of Reason” has been replaced by epistemic pluralism. This philosophical tension, maintained within the Academy for a number of years, has begun to bleed into Western society as a whole. Fault lines between progressivists and traditionalists have become aggravated, resulting in an increased dipolarity in politics, media, and culture in general.

Compounding upon this issue is the accelerated rate of change in society, as well as the sheer mass of information that has become almost a staple of our technologically driven world. It seems natural that, as human memory is only so expansive, our heads have become crammed with “information” and “facts” to the point that we have forgotten much of our own history, let alone the significance of it. But memory is the first part of learning; one cannot achieve a new synthesis by first forgetting what is to be brought together. Yet the Moderns have all but forgotten what the Scholastics have offered; they know only to reject it. Surely, such a mindlessness like this can only be to our detriment, politically and academically.

It seems to me that, in order for the Western tradition to continue, a new synthesis will have to be made between Scholasticism and Modernism. The innovations and epistemic concerns by the Moderns can only be kept in check by the values and metaphysics of the Scholastics. It has been suggested that Scholasticism, so focused on preserving its own existence, has become stagnant, while it also seems Modernism has crushed itself under the weight of its own presuppositions. It is for this reason that the two intellectual traditions, defined in stark opposition to one another till now, will need to forge a common framework within which science, religion, philosophy, art, politics, and

history can all be positively advanced. The rebellious Modern will need to come to accept and appreciate his wise father the Scholastic, while the Scholastic will need to recognize the youth and vigor of his Modern child.

Incidentally, something very similar to this proposed Grand Synthesis was attempted by Aquinas himself, though not with Scholasticism and Modernism; rather, he forged a strong philosophic system that combined the Christian Neoplatonism of his day with the newly rediscovered Aristotelianism. To this day, the Thomists continue in this synthesis of Plato and Aristotle, while the Modern world has torn them asunder. Perhaps, then, there will be no better way to forge this synthesis between Scholasticism and Modernism than by first examining the work of the one who was able to bring those two radically divergent worlds together.

Whether or not a proper synthesis of Aquinas's robust metaphysics with today's scientific and philosophical progression can be achieved is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that very little real progress can be made so long as Aquinas's contemporary critics and defenders talk past one another. My hope is that this paper has served to highlight some potential areas of miscommunication and misunderstanding, and has offered some potential starting grounds for further work to be done. To this end, I would encourage readers to be vigilant and thoughtful of the ideas presented by Aquinas as well as his fellow Patristic and Medieval thinkers. So much of their work has gone tragically underappreciated, and it would be in the best interest of not only individual readers but whole societies to further read and research these giants upon whose shoulders we stand.

I personally have committed myself to this, and I would encourage any who have read thus far to do likewise.

Final Thoughts

The challenge facing philosophers and theologians today is twofold. First is the task of reaching up or returning to the truly great philosophers and theologians of the past in order to be transformed by the truth and wisdom they communicate. The second task is transposing that truth and wisdom to the manifold problems and issues of today.¹³⁰

Much ink has been spilt over the issues touched upon in the foregoing pages, and it would be amiss to think that the brief reflections offered in this meager paper come anywhere close to a full treatment of the subjects therein. Be this as it may, I believe I can say that I have offered a modest defense of Aquinas's position whilst simultaneously demonstrating that misconceptions of Aquinas abound. Though some have come to see Aquinas's metaphysics of motion and time as a pagan stain on the Christian theological tradition, contemporary readers would do well to appreciate the breadth of scope and depth of reasoning that Aquinas offers; and, though over a hundred years of the Christian tradition has seen a departure from the wisdom of the ancients passed down to us, perhaps today's Christians can still join Aquinas in the right and fitting praise of the motion of the Immovable God.

¹³⁰ Lamb, Matthew L. "Eternity and Time" in M. Foley & D. Kreis (eds.) *Gladly to Learn & Gladly to Teach: Essays on Religion & Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin* (New York: Lexington Books, 2002), 214.

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APPENDIX—MISCELLANEOUS NOTES AND UNFINISHED WORK

What follows is a list of miscellaneous thoughts and ideas which, for various reasons, I elected not to incorporate into the final text of this paper. They may be of some interest to readers, as an entire section of this work was initially to be dedicated to the incorporation of contemporary science (especially some of the intuitions and consequences of Einstein's theory of Relativity) into Aquinas's metaphysics of time and motion. Unfortunately, most of the work that follows is not fully fleshed out, and is neither rigorous nor perfectly phrased. Nevertheless, I have chosen to present them here for those curious readers who may have enjoyed my above presentation on these subjects.

On the Incoherence of Divine Temporality

It must be pointed out that the general proposition of divine temporality is itself logically incoherent. Metaphysically speaking, an effect is ontologically dependent on its cause, not vice versa. In Aquinas's view of eternity, God is conceived as a First Cause and everything apart from Himself is wholly dependent on Him. Accordingly, he argues that the act of creation does not imply a real change in God but only in the creature. But in the divine temporalist's conception of eternity, this *particular* effect of God's creation is so powerful that it can *change the being of its cause substantially*. In such a situation, it seems only reasonable to question which of the two is the *actual* cause. For it could easily be asked, how is it that God can be the cause of the universe if the universe affects God? And if the universe affects God, then is it not also a cause? But if the universe is a cause of God, then what difference is there between God and the world? The denial of Aquinas's sharp distinction between *God as First Cause* and *creation as effect*

necessitates that God be (impossibly) contingent upon his own creation, leading to an infinite regress of cause-and-effect between God and the world. The philosophical complexities of the mere *notion* of a shared order of being between God and creation seem insurmountable, let alone when considered in light of other metaphysical questions.

On Omnipresence and Omnitemporality

If space and time are linked (as Aristotle, Aquinas, and Einstein suppose), then we should be able to use God's relationship to space as analogous to His relationship with time. Virtually no Christian theologian would dispute the idea that God is spaceless, yet the way this "spacelessness" is understood is a bit paradoxical. We do not mean (as the word itself may imply) that God is absent from all points in space; rather, we mean that spatial references and relations do not apply to God in the same way they do to us. We cannot go to a particular spatial location and say "God is here" or point elsewhere and say "God is there." Such statements imply that the totality of God's presence can be found in a single point, and—whether referentially inclusive of or in exclusion to all other spatial points—it seems that such a statement cannot help but be false is evident. Even if we say God is "omnipresent," we do not mean that God is located at the aggregate collection of all spatial points; rather, we mean that God is, in some way, "beyond" spatial categories, of course including spatial location. The thesis of God's lack of spatial measurability is similarly uncontroversial, for the reasons given above. We may speak of the "depth" of God, but we do not mean this in terms of spatial measure. If one were to suggest God could literally be measured spatially, I suspect the vast majority of Christians would (rightly) conclude that such a person was unorthodox at best.

Yet inevitably, Christians have historically (and even up to this day) referred to God as a dynamic, moving entity, with spatial relations and properties. The fact is that we often *do* attribute spatial motion to God, whether we like to or not. This is most vividly illustrated in various forms of liturgical expression going as far back as the Psalms. No one would speak literally of measuring God's "length" or "height." Yet in liturgical reflection this seems to be quite the opposite.

We have thus arrived at a point where contention could easily erupt: does God have spatial properties or not? To answer simply either in the affirmative or negative seems to safeguard particularly crucial properties of God at the expense of equally crucial properties. Perhaps what many readers may regard as the most obvious solution is to affirm both and abide with the paradox: of course God does not bear spatial relations precisely as we do, but that does not mean that we cannot speak of the presence of God as being 'here' in a higher, more poetical sense of the term. That God is not spatially measurable does not mean we cannot speak as though He is, or that the statement 'God is here' may not also fittingly be applied to Him.¹³¹

The same argument could be applied with regard to God's temporal measurability. To suggest that God is temporally immeasurable is not necessarily to deny Him certain aspects of temporal existence. It is only to say that our temporal (and spatial)

¹³¹ Incidentally, the willingness to live with and abide by theological paradox is a defining characteristic (albeit a somewhat stereotypical one) of Jewish thought; one need look no farther than the Talmud and its notorious lack of conclusions to recognize this. The logical principles of non-contradiction and the "excluded middle" are products of Aristotelian logic; decidedly Greek in its origin. Those who insist upon an abandonment of Greek philosophy in favor of a "return to Hebrew Christianity" and simultaneously demand a firm either/or position be taken with regard to divine temporality are, it seems to me, highly inconsistent.

analogies of His being in the world are nothing but crude approximations¹³² to God's actual relations to space and time. Indeed, if God possesses any relations to space, the best way those relations could be described as completely and wholly "other" than the spatial relations experienced by humans on a daily basis. If time and space are linked, then much the same could be said for God's temporal relations.

On the Congruence of Aquinas with Contemporary Science

The relevance of Aquinas's thoughts on immutability and the nature of time for the contemporary world has heretofore been mentioned primarily for its *philosophical* and *theological* merits. However, the significance of Aquinas for *science* has as yet gone unmentioned. Regrettably, the necessarily limited scope and length of this work has been primarily responsible for this; nevertheless, it seems crucial to at least broach the question as to whether a position so antiquated as Aquinas's is even worth considering, especially in light of recent developments in various scientific theories of the nature and properties of time.

Feser has argued at length for the congruence of Aristotelianism with modern science.¹³³ It is not within the scope of this work to defend this claim; I can only refer

¹³² One could argue that the meaning of the term "approximation" here is stretched to the breaking point. It may be best to say they are "educated guesses" more than anything else. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12, NRSV)

¹³³ Feser, Edward, *Aristotle's Revenge*, 246 (emphasis original): "the very possibility of science presupposes the reality and irreducibility of the conscious, thinking, embodied subject. Hence we cannot coherently eliminate that subject from our conception of the world, *especially* not in the name of science. [...] we cannot in turn make sense of this subject without deploying the fundamental concepts of Aristotelian philosophy of nature, such as actuality and potentiality, form and matter, and efficient and final causality. [...] Thus does Aristotle have his revenge against those who have overthrown him in the name of modern science. But he is a magnanimous victor, providing as he does the true metaphysical foundations for the very possibility of that science."

readers to his *Aristotle's Revenge*, which is particularly detailed in arguing the necessity of Aristotelianism for modern science.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that figures so prominent as Hegel and Heisenberg recognized the implicit debt owed Aristotle by modern science.¹³⁵ Boman, writing with the explicit intention of demonstrating the “static” mode of Greek thinking, nevertheless must concede the intuitive connections between Aristotle’s thought on the nature of time and Einstein’s theories of relativity:

“[Aristotle’s analysis of the essence of time] achieves such a depth and subtlety that a modern commentator, filled with admiration, can say that his analysis of the essence of time opens a direct path to the four-dimensional algebra to which so much attention is given in connexion with the theory of relativity.”¹³⁶

Such thoughts are bolstered by Carlo Rovelli’s argument that Aristotle’s intuition that time is “the number of movement in respect of the before and after”¹³⁷ is an important component of Einstein’s theory of relativity; specifically, Rovelli suggests that Einstein’s theory forged a synthesis between Aristotle’s *relative* theory of time with Newton’s *absolute* theory of time.¹³⁸ Though one might be tempted to suggest that this synthesis makes Aristotle’s thoughts on the issue irrelevant altogether, this is simply not the case.

In the first place, even if Einstein was entirely correct in his scientific description of time,

¹³⁴ Attempting a pithy summary of Feser’s work in such little space would do a great disservice to the rigor of his analysis; accordingly, I must be content to merely refer readers to his work. Here I should also recommend Edward Grant’s *Science and Religion* to readers. Grant’s work demonstrates that many of the advances of modern science were due to the metaphysical and methodological groundwork laid by Medieval (Aristotelian) Christianity.

¹³⁵ “Einstein once remarked that ‘modern physics is Greek philosophy,’ which applies especially to *The Physics* of Aristotle. Werner Heisenberg, father of quantum physics, offered a similar assessment. He had Aristotle’s physics memorized by heart in the original Attic Greek. [Finally, Hegel has said, in his *Vorlesungen über die Gesch. der Philos.*] ‘He penetrated into the whole universe of things, and subjected its scattered wealth to intelligence; and to him the greater number of the philosophical sciences owe their origin and distinction.’” William Dunn, Alcuin Institute of Catholic Culture, e-mail correspondence to author, November 12, 2019.

¹³⁶ Boman, Thorleif, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, 125.

¹³⁷ Aristotle, “Time” in *Metaphysics*, 98.

¹³⁸ Rovelli, Carlo, *The Order of Time*, translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (U.K.: Penguin Books, 2018), 57ff.

Aristotle's thoughts on time would become *more* relevant as a component part of Relativity Theory. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case, as Einstein's Special and General Theories of Relativity are incomplete and do not work well with the scientific findings of Quantum Theory. Furthermore, Einstein's theory, limited by its materialistic suppositions, would only amount to an explanation of *physical* time,¹³⁹ leaving the discussion open for Aristotle's (and, hence, Aquinas's) broader conception of time.

All this may be well and good, but one may ask where the relevance of such considerations leaves *Aquinas's* thought. The answer for this is fairly straightforward: as Aristotle's Medieval champion, Aquinas's relevance for discussions of General Relativity are at least in proportion to his reliance upon Aristotle for his definitions and thoughts on the nature of time. As I have attempted to show above, however, Aquinas is much more than a mere Aristotelian, and is well worth considering in his own right. With regard to this, I must simply defer again to the work of others such as Gilson and Feser,¹⁴⁰ who argue for Aquinas's relevance in this respect better than I can...

That said, much work has yet to be done on this subject. What is particularly stinging about Mullins's work (and why it has been of such critical importance to this study) is his fundamental argument that while a presentist¹⁴¹ ontology of time enjoyed

¹³⁹ The concept of "physical" time is well explained in Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 32–35. Its counterpart concept, *metaphysical* time, is covered in the same work, pages 35ff.

¹⁴⁰ Attempting a pithy summary of Feser's work in such little space would do a great disservice to the rigor of his analysis; accordingly, I must be content to merely refer readers to his work. Here I should also recommend Edward Grant's *Science and Religion* to readers. Grant's work demonstrates that many of the advances of modern science were due to the metaphysical and methodological groundwork laid by Medieval (Aristotelian) Christianity.

¹⁴¹ Presentism is the belief that only the present moment exists, while past and future ones do not. This is based upon the intuitive notion that *present* objects have a privileged status in our minds as being "more real" than past or future objects. For a detailed treatment of the subject with respect to Open Theism, see David M. Woodruff, "Presentism and the Problem of Special Relativity" in William Hasker, Thomas Jay

wide endorsement by many Patristic and Medieval theologians, it is fundamentally contradictory to the classical model of God: “Divine timelessness, simplicity, and strong immutability bring serious difficulties for Christian theology when combined with presentism. If one is a presentist and a Christian, [sic] she should not believe that God is timeless, simple, or strongly immutable.”¹⁴² Yet presentism has emerged into the fore of contemporary discussions about the implications of Relativity Theory for a Christian theology of time. If it is to be argued that Aquinas’s position is relevant to the discussion, it will have to be shown that Mullins’s conclusions are mistaken.

On Einstein’s Reference Frames

Einstein’s biggest contribution to theology is the idea of reference frames; there is no preferred reference frame. We use them all the time. Classical theologians may cringe at the notion of suggesting God “moves”, but equally would (orthodox) theologians cringe at the notion that man has reached for God. Various reference frames can explain the same phenomenon, though one reference frame may give a more accurate or useful description of the phenomenon in question for a particular purpose.

The idea of inertial reference frames is not, by any means, in conflict with Aquinas’s theology of God’s immutability or relations to His creation. In fact, they provide a useful way of conceptualizing the relationship between analogical and literal predication of God. As Aquinas says, there is nothing wrong with *analogically* attributing motion to God, provided that God’s “change” in relation to objects is conceptualized as resulting from changes in the creation and not in God Himself. This is similar to a

Oord, and Dean Zimmerman (eds.) *God in an Open Universe: Science, Metaphysics, and Open Theism* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 94–124.

¹⁴² Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 122.

passenger on a train commenting on the scenery that appears to him to be “passing him by.” By similar analogy, we can truly speak of the “movement of God” in our midst without needing to *literally* suggest that God is *actually* moving, just as it would be preposterous for the passenger on the train to insist that the trees along the track are actually moving because it appears to him to be so.

The issue thus arises when we describe the relative change between Creator and created from the *temporal* reference frame *without acknowledging that this is being done*. According to Aquinas, there is nothing wrong with saying that God “moves” or “changes” *provided that we understand the fundamentally metaphorical nature of this expression*. The chief danger lies not in speaking about God as though He changes; it is rather in exalting the human reference frame to the extent that we attribute creaturely change (and, hence, finitude) to God.

On God’s Lack of Temporal Measure

To say that God “lacks temporal measure” is not to say that God has no duration, nor that He possesses nor experiences no time; rather, it is to say that His duration cannot be differentiated (and hence measured) over time. Were we to attempt a mathematical analogy for this concept, one might suggest that attempting to measure God’s duration is like trying to divide by zero, or trying to divide infinity by infinity, or trying to find a real solution to the equation $x = \sqrt{-1}$.

To say that God does not have temporal duration is not to say anything limiting about *God*, but rather about *us*; it is *our* finite categories, language, and cognition that prevent us from “measuring” God’s duration. We should not be surprised, then (and most

certainly ought not be offended!), when Aquinas says, quite reasonably so, that just as God's size cannot be measured with a meter-stick since God is not spatial, so God's duration cannot be measured by a clock since God is not temporal.

On the Rise of Divine Temporalism

What could have contributed to this gap in thinking? Though falling somewhat outside of the scope of this research, I strongly suspect that the advent of deism, along with its popularity among the academic during the Enlightenment and Modern eras, played a significant role in shaping the discussion of contemporary metaphysics. As it became more commonplace to find deists and even atheists among the highest tiers of academia, and as the creation of new secular states demanded religious neutrality in public education systems, committed Christians began to react against the trend of "liberalization" in favor of adopting a more fundamental approach to Christian theology. Broadly speaking, these more fundamental movements would give rise to Evangelicalism in general, which would come to re-engage the Academy in its quest to push forth the Gospel in an ever-more-educated world. Unfortunately, new to the Academic world, Evangelicals would adopt the presuppositions of the secularized Academy, including those that surrounded the "Dark Ages" which conveniently aligned with many Protestant suspicions of Roman Catholicism. The result of all this is an inherent bias in evangelical scholarship against Medieval philosophy in general (as it is "opposed" and "antiquated" to Modernism) and Medieval theology in particular (in that it is "Papist" and pre-Reformation). Thus the doctrine of divine simplicity has both its Medieval-ness and its Catholicity counted against it.

This is, admittedly, somewhat simplified, as there *has* been something of a resurgence of interest in the Early Church for many Evangelicals. Such interest seems to me largely apologetic in nature, motivated (at least popularly) by the “quests for the historical Jesus” and a general interest in the Jewish origins of Christianity. Notably, however, much of this interest does not seem to extend far past Constantine, perhaps because this violates Modernist sensibilities about Church and State. Alternatively, this may also be the result of Modernity’s rejection of Scholasticism, which incorporated Aristotle into the existing Neo-Platonic Christian tradition.

Of course, these are merely speculative generalizations, and confirmation of these theories would require extensive further research. However, certain scholars, such as Dolezal, have argued that divine simplicity was taken for granted in the early Protestant tradition, prior to the Enlightenment...

On Epistemic Modal Collapse

Even granting Craig and Mullins’s use of “possible world” semantics, it seems far from obvious to me that the only way to achieve a modal collapse—which Mullins admits gives Thomists a valid “way out”—is by limiting God’s freedom. Contrary to Mullins, I think that those in favor of Aquinas *can* advocate for an *epistemic* modal collapse on the basis of God’s *actuality*.

It seems to me that the ultimate goal of modal logic should be to understand the actual world better. To this end, we may discuss “possible worlds” as much as is necessary; however, if the goal is to understand the *actual* world, we must also *epistemically restrict* our speculations to only those possible worlds which are most like

the actual world. Thus, if we must restrict our speculations of possible worlds to those in which there is a (Christian) God who creates, then the possible world in which God did not create the world must be thrown out (since it is not a possible world anything like our own). In point of fact, we can continue to restrict our speculations by throwing out other possible worlds that do not line up with the state of affairs in our actual world. We can dispose of any “possible worlds” in which God, for example, chose not to create humans, speak to Abraham and Moses, or incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, since these are not “possible worlds” in which God is recognizable as the Christian God. We can do this for all of God’s past actions, whatever they may be, even up to God’s present actions.

Yet we can go further still. This is because—regardless of the seemingly innumerable ways things may turn out—there can and will be only *one* state of affairs at each future point in time. This conclusion naturally stems from the intuition that there is only one reality: that which has been, is, and will be.¹⁴³ And in this reality, there is only one God, who acts as He has acted, is acting, and will act.

This, it seems to me, is precisely the “modal collapse” which Mullins has argued against, yet as a result of trying to speak of the actual God who was, is, and will be, we have concluded that Mullins’s “God who could have not created” does not exist precisely because the God that *does* exist *has created*. We have not arrived at this conclusion by suggesting that God’s freedom is limited in the course of the foregoing argument; we have only *epistemically restricted* our discussion of “possible worlds” to those that are

¹⁴³ This thesis might be contested by those who take a many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. Be this as it may, my point here is not to demonstrate that such an interpretation is necessarily false; rather, it is to point out that those in favor of Aquinas’s general position have more alternatives before them than Mullins has suggested.

consonant with the *actual* world. As there is only one *actual* world, and consequently only one *actual*, “possible” God, we can conclude that there is only one possible version of God: the God who is.

On Craig’s Anthropomorphic God

In conclusion, in the classical philosophy and theology God is conceived as an ultimate principle. In this view, God is the First Cause and everything except him came into being thanks to His act of creation. The fact that God is the First Cause means that there is a radical, sharp distinction between God and his creatures in terms of mode of being. For that reason, medieval philosophers never approve of the idea of God’s becoming temporal and try to explain God’s relationship with the temporal world in accordance with this metaphysical framework. But in Craig’s view of eternity, because he concedes that God becomes temporal with creation, it is very difficult to explain, at least after creation, the difference between the Creator and the creature. Likewise, his idea that God became temporal because of His relation with temporal beings is controversial. For, if God, as Craig claims, becomes temporal due to His relations with temporal beings it might also be thought that He becomes spatial due to His relations with spatial things. Of course, God might be conceived as a temporal and even a spatial being but it is clear that such a conception of God is more anthropomorphic than the timeless one.¹⁴⁴

Contra Gunton

“Which is the graver insult; to err on the side of saying the Christian God is utterly beyond our pithy conceptions of time, or to err on the side of saying the same God is moving and acting as we are?”¹⁴⁵ Truly, either side could be framed as an insult, but perhaps the greater insult is to say God’s motion is entirely limited and explained by our (uncontestedly primitive) categorizations of space and time. Furthermore, it could be argued that to say that God “moves” just as a human does is an insult to His higher, more perfect degree of motion.

¹⁴⁴ Engin Erdem, “Craig and His Concept of Eternity: A Critique from the Standpoint of the Kālām,” in Hanna, Patricia (ed.) *An Anthology of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 3 (Athens, Greece: Athens Institute for Education and Research, 2018), 138.

¹⁴⁵ Gunton. *Act and Being*, 36.

On Henri Bergson

Bergson argues that conceptualizing spatial movement as “the passage of an object through successive points” only complicates the question.¹⁴⁶ Rather than attempting to apprehend the pure phenomenon of movement itself, Bergson argues that traditional (scientific) approaches to the question have inserted the idea of an infinite number of mathematical points of space which the object passes through, then attempts to describe the “mysterious passing” of the object from discrete point to point. The entire process could be simplified by discarding the conceptualization of points altogether and just apprehending the “mysterious passing” in its purest form. Much the same, Bergson argues, could be said of time. Bergson suggests that thinking of time as an aggregate sum of infinitely many states of an object between two points in time does nothing to explain the mystery by which an object changes from one state to the next; in defining “time” as such, we rob the object of its continuity from state to state that makes the concept of “change” meaningful.

Divine temporalists may think that Bergson is on their side here. However, I do not see how any of these observations in themselves are much different from Aquinas’s. In fact, there seems to be a great deal of similarity in the way the two think about time. For Aquinas, God’s duration is eternity, which is “simultaneously-whole.” This means that there is a lack of differentiability in God’s duration, which means that he undergoes no “change” in time; rather, He remains continuous between two points in time unaltered. This in no way contradicts Bergson’s complaint that movement in itself does not consist

¹⁴⁶ Bergson, *Intro to Metaphysics*, 42–43.

of points in space, nor duration points in time. Given Bergson's point that "duration" does not consist of mere points in time but rather that by which an object passes from one point to the next, one could argue that all duration in itself is to some degree immeasurable, which only solidifies Aquinas's position rather than detracting from it.

In fact, it seems to me that Bergson's point that the analysis of an object cannot give rise to an intuitive apprehension of the phenomenon in itself seems perfectly in line with Aquinas. Aquinas's analysis of God paradoxically concludes that God remains both unmoved (insofar as movement entails imperfection) and moved (insofar as stasis entails imperfection). This parallels Bergson's analysis that duration seems to consist of both unity (continuity of the experience of duration) and multiplicity (multiple states that blend together seamlessly in time). Yet Bergson and Aquinas both conclude that, though there are paradoxes to be found in their respective analyses of the subject, this in no way entails that their analyses are false, or that only one of their two conclusions is true. In point of fact, those who followed Bergson, such as Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, came to such paradoxical conclusions themselves.¹⁴⁷

Where Bergson departs from Aquinas, however, is when he suggests that "reality is mobility. Not *things* made, but things in the making, not self-maintaining *states*, but only changing states, exist. Rest is never more than apparent, or, rather, relative."¹⁴⁸ A few comments are in order. Foremost, it seems apparent to me that Bergson's lattermost point here seems to rest upon the claim that motion should be considered as prior to

¹⁴⁷ Though I am not exhaustively familiar with the work of these two champions of Process Theology, it is not hard to pick up the paradoxes between extremes that often arise in their work. Hartshorne, for example, suggests that God is immutable "provided it be admitted that he is not in every respect immutable" (*Reality as Social Process*, 135). See Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*, 129ff

¹⁴⁸ Bergson, *Intro to Metaphysics*, 49.

stasis. This seems roughly parallel to Aquinas's claim that act is prior to potential,¹⁴⁹ and is perhaps not controversial. However, where Bergson departs from Aquinas is in assuming that *mobility necessarily implies change*. According to Aquinas, as we have seen above, God is capable of mobility *without* change. If this is correct, then Bergson's claim that "only changing states exist"—the premise upon which divine temporalists make their case—cannot be applied to God.

Further, Bergson goes on to suggest that "fixed concepts may be extracted by our thought from mobile reality; but there are no means of reconstructing the mobility of the real with fixed concepts."¹⁵⁰ This statement is, in some respects, directed against scientific tendencies to attempt reconstruction of a phenomenon from without rather than within. However, this has not stopped divine temporalists from suggesting that Aquinas's analysis of God's lack of temporal measure erroneously concludes His immutability on the grounds that such analysis comes from a human attempt to describe God from the outside, rather than allowing God to reveal His internal experience of time. However, such criticisms seem to neglect the fact that Aquinas himself acknowledged the limitations that reason has when considering God, particularly in relation to the knowledge that revelation provides the Christian...

¹⁴⁹ Aquinas, "Pt.1, Q.9, Art.1: Whether God is Altogether Immutable?" *Summa Theologica*, 38.

¹⁵⁰ Bergson, *Intro to Metaphysics*, 51