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On Affirming the Unintelligible God: Examining Denys Turner’s Account of Atheism

Prior to questions of a subject’s content and entailment, it is necessary to investigate matters under which its existence is presumed. However, debates concerning whether God exists between theists and atheists alike do not easily follow this order given the severe challenges of clarifying their respective notions of God. Thus, the issue of God’s existence seems to be irreversibly entangled with the issue of what we mean by “God.” Making matters worse, while atheists are charged with misunderstanding the notion of God, as an entity among others, theists themselves admit that God is unknowable. Encountering the same problem of understanding God, theologians and philosophers of religion employ apophatic and cataphatic descriptions leading to either incongruent affirmations or paradoxical negative theologies. The contemporary English philosopher and theologian Denys Turner, in his paper *On Denying the Right God: Aquinas on Atheism and Idolatry*,¹ presents these challenges of interpreting God and arguing for His existence and prescribes ways to deal with them through the form of rational thought in St. Thomas Aquinas. Although for Turner, the atheist is often too confident in asserting the claim that God does not exist by inadequately

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¹ Denys Turner, “On Denying the Right God: Aquinas on Atheism and Idolatry,” *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004): 141–161.

accounting for what this precisely means and entails, the theist as well should be baffled by the weight of his/her conceptions of God and their ontological repercussions. On considering the difficulty of taking a stance regarding God's existence due to lack of univocity and potential incomprehensibility, one may ask: if God's nature is unintelligible (or at least, posited as so), would this dismiss or vindicate arguments for God's existence? This essay argues the following: since (a) for theism, God's existence would be difficult to prove if the underlying reasons for believing in God's existence are treated along the same lines as other entities, and (b) for atheism, if God is an unintelligible entity then denying God's existence would be limited as an assertion insofar as its form of language and worldly criteria of evidence allows, then (c) theist arguments for God's existence should be on the basis of treating God as belonging to a category of its own.

Aquinas's Theistic Account of God

Indeed, the unintelligibility of God is prevalent by way of the confinements of language. To say that God possesses all perfections, or that God is pure act, or infinite for that matter, is to utter qualities which we ourselves are incapable of fully comprehending. Hence, when Turner cites Aquinas's "we do not know what God is"² he touches upon an issue that not only surrounds the limited ability of human thinking and rationality to elucidate these qualities, but also, concerns the infinite nature of God that exceeds all boundaries. Such a nature is not applicable to other entities as they can be defined and thus limited along necessary and accidental properties which, in turn, leaves them as having separate essence and existence. The case for God, however, is markedly unique. Therefore, Turner mentions Aquinas's terminology which

² *Ibid.*, 142.

describes God as possessing an essence identical to His existence, originally written as, “*ipsum esse subsistens*.”³ And with this particular feature, it follows that this mode of existence is not univocal—as no other being has such a trait. This initiates the problem of how difficult it is to comprehend God and leaves open the question of whether God is intelligible at all. Furthermore, one might question how it can be so that God’s essence is identical to His existence when God is believed to exist but is also claimed to be unknowable—if there were in fact identity between the two, would not both be simultaneously demonstrated?

The Thomistic approach, however, points our understanding of God to an insightful direction. So, although for Aquinas, God is unknowable, his approach to understanding God’s nature can be understood analogously and through traces suggestive of divine intervention. This approach is illustrated in Aquinas’s Five Ways, which although for Turner, “did not set out, and did not intend to set out, formally valid, rational proofs of the existence of God,”⁴ nevertheless “are meant to show a lot about reason.”⁵ The Five Ways is a set of causal arguments which ascribe to God certain roles from which all else supervenes. Namely, these roles are comprised of God being absolute, necessary, the first cause/mover, and the designer.⁶ While the form of argumentation integrates both premises based on experience and logical consequence, their ontological significance is profound. Because of this, Aquinas eloquently portrays elements of God’s nature and ties them with our worldly knowledge. But is this sufficient for one to believe in God? Turner would rather claim that the question is not applicable, as his in-

³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶ See Bruce Reichenbach, “Cosmological Argument,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

terpretation of Aquinas's intent here is not to prove the Five Ways as formal evidence or grounds for one's faith. However, the question may be better put as whether these arguments suffice to explain one's theistic rationale. If this is so, then the atheist could better understand what he or she is arguing against since the rationale of theists could be revealed.

To treat the approach of understanding how theistic rationale proceeds in Catholicism, the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition offers rich accounts. Despite this, it is worthy of note that "it is hard to find material in Thomas which relates in any very direct way to those issues of explicit theoretical atheism which arise for us today."⁷ Thus, the religious sentiment of Aquinas's time period and socio-political context was impervious to forms of atheistic argument because of the dominance of non-secular doxa. By contrast, in contemporary theist-atheist debates, staunch atheists Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Samuel Harris, and Daniel Dennett, labelled infamously "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," have provoked defenders of theism to argue for atheism and rebuke religion. In such manner, Denys Turner has derogatorily referred to such thinkers as "simple-minded [and] parasitical" atheists.⁸ And while they are viewed as such, Turner denounces their points of criticism about religion as too rashly confident in understanding what is meant by the term "God." Hence, their charge is also related to God being unintelligible, but the difference between them and many theists is that they claim to know the nature of what is at stake.

Negative Theology

How can one come closer to understanding what is at stake concerning whether God exists? One way to do so is proposed in the work

⁷ Turner, "On Denying the Right God," 141.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

of negative theologians who, instead of ascribing affirmative propositions to God, come to understand God by virtue of what God could not be, were He to exist as the supreme being. Some negative theologies, for example, claim that God is not spatiotemporal. This is hypothesized under that: were God to be spatiotemporal then such a being would in some sense be contingent—which is not possible for God conceived as the most necessary being. Further, God is believed to not be spatiotemporal because of how God cannot be affected by worldly causes—otherwise, God would be in potency, rather than pure act.⁹ These negations are part of many which speculate ontological repercussions of God's existence. But whether they in fact bring us closer to an understanding of an unintelligible God is difficult to determine because the concepts used through this negative propositional language may be too dependent on prior affirmative presuppositions of the idea of God. Take, for example, God's being necessary and in pure act as logically antecedent to His non-spatiotemporality.

According to Turner, holding that negative theology says nothing about God would be mistaken—a conviction which he charges to the atheist. He remarks:

Of course to a simple-minded atheist of the Dawkins sort . . . negative theology will seem like a mere intellectual evasion: he will naturally insist on some hard and limited proposition of the kind his sort of limited denials are good for, and negative theology can sometimes be mistakenly represented as if to disallow any affirmation of God, leaving the atheist with apparently nothing to do.¹⁰

Although Turner, in my opinion, rightly posits against the idea that negative theology is meant to eschew any affirmational claims concerning God, his conviction surrounding “simple-minded” atheists becomes less

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

compelling when accepting the view that the negative theologies of theists are prone to fallaciously conceptualizing God in terms of what God is not in a manner that is heavily reliant on presuppositions of what God is.

Idolatry

As Denys Turner illustrates, a point of agreement among theists and atheists alike may be that they both reject forms of idolatry—that religious idols are not meant to be some literal embodied God but are instead symbolic of God. While for the theist, this rejection is warranted for such reasons as how God cannot be reduced to a finite material object or how the religious idol is first and foremost a human artefact, the atheist simply does not discern religious idols as special in any metaphysical way from other things. The religious idolater is thus in a unique position apart from the theist and atheist. For although he/she may believe in a God (as opposed to the atheist), “he worships as if it were God something which is not and could not be God”¹¹ (which is arguably not what the theist is doing).

In Turner’s account of idolatry, he cites Duns Scotus to explain how there must be a univocal meaning and understanding of God in order for the theist and idolater to contradict one another.¹² Still, they “must mean the same thing by ‘God’, and . . . ‘exists’,”¹³ if their ideas of what can be predicated of God and what it means to say God exists are contradictory. Otherwise, they would be speaking of different subjects. Following the tradition of Aquinas and Duns Scotus, Turner emphasizes the need for God’s univocity to avoid equivocation and confusion.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

The chance for univocity concerning God, however, is often lost when voicing the stance of atheists, much to the detriment of constructive discussion. For unlike theists and idolaters, the atheist neither agrees on the subject (God) nor the predicate (that God exists)—discounting Immanuel Kant’s argument that “existence” is not a predicate. Moreover, to the atheist, the problem is not a matter of God being unintelligible, but to the contrary, that what theists and idolaters take to be God is intelligible, but also unjustified. Under what grounds then can theists and atheists argue with each other? Assuredly, if they are playing separate language games with respect to religious belief and the existence of a deity, then the consequences of each should be compared, to serve as a distinction between world views ontologically, anthropologically, and eschatologically.

Religious Language

Given the vast difficulty in achieving univocal understanding of God, the perspective of religious language is necessary to take into account. Religious language is to be treated as a special type not only with respect to what is meant by the term “God,” but also, the divine attributes made to the deity as found in religious scripture. Referring back to Aquinas, Janet Soskice maintains:

Thomas Aquinas makes a distinction in the *Summa Theologiae* between the claims of *sacra doctrina*—revealed and to his mind privileged Christian teaching, especially in the Bible—and *theologia*, the speaking about God in which “pagan” philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as Christian writers, engaged. Yet the religious language of both poses philosophical problems; the language of scripture is replete with metaphors, for instance, whose construals are not obvious. And the language of philo-

sophical abstraction, while apparently more straightforward, contains its own layered complexity.¹⁴

This apparent difficulty in both forms of religious language (*doctrina* and *theologia*) thus may discourage one from such a discourse altogether, on grounds that either interpretative mistakes could be made or the language itself is non-sensical. Consider, for example, the aforementioned bold statement that God's existence is identical with His essence. Such claim is not easily comprehended by the reader because the understanding of existence and predication used here does not mean the same in comparison to when it is used to describe other entities. Therefore, Turner is misleading when he says, "[e]quivocity derives from differences of meaning, not from differences of predication,"¹⁵ because both the meaning and predication in "ipsum esse subsistens" lead to equivocal language on God. And as Turner continues to emphasize, an alleged opposition that treats the subject equivocally cannot be a genuine dichotomy.

Does the problem of religious language pose a challenge to theism? At first sight yes, but on a closer look, rather not. Firstly, considering accounts on which it does pose a challenge, Turner mentions "those atheists who do take negative theology seriously, such as Jacques Derrida, and concede that a non-idolatrous God is going to have to be 'on the other side of language'."¹⁶ Thus, in contrast to "simple-minded" atheists, Turner explains how Derrida, though an atheist, admits an unintelligibility of God while still rejecting the existence of God. As a result, it seems possible to maintain that God is unintelligible insofar as God "is outside of language" and remain in denial that such a God exists.

¹⁴ Janet Soskice, "Religious Language," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro, *et al.* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 349.

¹⁵ Turner, "On Denying the Right God," 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

Whether such a position as Derrida's is justified, however, is put in doubt when adopting Turner's view presented in the following:

For on which side of language is this "to be" itself supposed to lie? If on the "inside of language," then this may give us a notion of the divine existence which is intelligible, but just because it is intelligible must affirm an idolatrously onto-theological God, an instance of "being." And if on the "other side of language" how can there be anything asserted by this "to be"? A God so different as to be "on the other side of language" is, therefore, reducible to the ultimacy not of God, but of "difference" itself: not, that is, that "there is" an ultimate difference, ontological or otherwise—for that would still seem to imply that there is a something or other which is "ultimately different"—but that it is difference itself which is ultimate, and so not God.¹⁷

Therefore, on Turner's account, the atheist view of God as being beyond the confinements of language is not actually about God at all, but rather about an "ultimate difference." This ultimate difference is particularly incompatible with the Christian God for reasons such as the conception that human beings were created to God's image—marking similarity, or at least a divine trace, in our understanding of who we are in relation to God. Thus, God cannot play the role of being the "ultimate difference" as Derrida implies, despite its appeal in explaining God's unintelligibility.

What then does religious language mean for the theistic and atheistic positions on God's unintelligibility? To treat this question simply, it can be said that the two have separate understandings of how God is unintelligible and thus, are not using the same language. The theists associate this unintelligibility with respect to the mysteriousness and divinity of God whose nature cannot be defined as such because this would be to limit God who is infinite. While some atheists—not of the "simple-minded" sort—may mark themselves as human beings limited

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in knowledge and constrained by language thus leaving the issue of God's existence and His unintelligibility outside of meaning and provability.

Evidence

An argument in favour of God's existence cannot be supported by a theist on grounds of unintelligibility if he/she were to try to prove God along the same lines as any simple worldly entity, because, if the theist were to do so, it would contradict the very paradoxical and mysterious features that make God unintelligible (and by that token, incompatible with simple worldly entities) in the first place. But there is another reason why God cannot be proven in this way: whatever proofs one may have and try to convince others of God would reduce God to the context of discovery in which He is proven. Therefore, such a proof would be questionable insofar as it may be seen as an accident or contingency which would not fit with a supremely necessary, perfect and infinite being.

A consequence of this is that an unintelligible God cannot help the theist to prove such a deity's existence along the same lines as worldly objects which are proven to exist. However, this does not necessarily entail that the atheist position is rendered correct. A difficulty in proving something in a form acceptable to skeptics or atheists is not sufficient for the skeptic charge to be made valid. Therefore, the criterion of formal evidence, held by many atheists, would also have to find ways to disprove God's existence in a manner that fully takes into account an elaborate description and explanation of what is thought of when speaking of God. But under the arduous task of explaining an entity considered by others to be unintelligible, the atheist becomes less able to provide a conclusive answer to the debate.

Ultimately, the unintelligibility of God is a mark of the limits of our knowledge and the boundlessness of our imagination and beliefs. Rather than to outright dismiss God's existence immediately, one should be open to the possibility that such a God may exist but cannot be intelligible like other entities. But on the other hand, as well, to believe in the unintelligible God requires special treatment in that this God belongs to an ontological category of its own.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered the question of whether God's unintelligibility turns out to be either an argument in support of theism or of atheism. While Denys Turner's accounts in the philosophy of religion (pertaining to the theology of Thomas Aquinas, negative theology, and idolatry) were presented as starting points to tackle the question, the state of religious language and standards of evidence were introduced to bring us closer to an answer.

In agreement with Turner, the findings of Aquinas's Five Ways were shown to at least demonstrate traces of human rationality, particularly in its establishing of a link between God's created beings and God Himself as the ultimate causal source. However, two caveats made by Turner relating to Aquinas were mentioned concerning how Aquinas's alleged "proof" was not intended for convincing atheists to change their stance, especially not for modern atheists of the sort. Then, turning to negative theology, considerations of what God logically cannot be were seen as still reliant on presuppositions of what God is—therefore, rendering this approach still unable to solve the challenges of proving the existence of an unintelligible God. The last option, introduced by Turner, dealt with the issue of idolatry. While idolatry, according to him, can serve as a point of agreement between theists and atheists in the sense of it being a form of false worship, Turner also cites Duns Sco-

tus's demand for univocity in religious discussion concerning God. Bringing the issue of univocity to the next section: religious language, it was found that despite the difficulties of interpretation in religious doctrina and theologia posing a threat to theism, the atheist stance also is disadvantaged with respect to either being too simplistic or trivializing God in a way that instead unintentionally refers to "ultimate difference." Lastly, a look into what counts as evidence for God's existence was presented. On the grounds that God is unintelligible, it was concluded that contingent and accidental proofs would not suffice. However, atheistic disproof would also not suffice, if they were to not do justice with respect to a God by reducing such notion to similar standards and criteria of evidence as contingent entities in the world.

Thus, theism and atheism are both disadvantaged when it comes to arguing for or against the existence of an unintelligible God. The only benefit may be that either position is strengthened by the shortcomings of the other. Therefore, this predicament reveals how difficult it is to speak and justify our beliefs concerning that which cannot be immediately shown nor disproven—it is a subject exceeding the confinements not only of our worldly criteria of proof but also language itself. As a result, my view concurs with the idea that God, ontologically speaking, is to be treated as a special category of its own.



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SUMMARY

This paper investigates Denys Turner's article, "On Denying the Right God: Aquinas on Atheism and Idolatry." According to the author, Denys Turner's account contributes to theist and atheist debates by treating the issue of whether God can be intelligibly comprehended with great emphasis.

KEYWORDS

Denys Turner, Thomas Aquinas, God, theism, atheism, negative theology, idolatry, religious language, existence, intelligibility, evidence.

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