

CHAPTER IV

NEGATION IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

What is undoubtedly the most important use of negation is that to which we must resort to know God. We are here faced with an object which is of all objects the most intelligible, and yet, one whose essence is beyond the apprehension of our intelligence here below.

"The divine substance exceeds, by its immensity, every form that our intellect attains, and so, we cannot grasp it in such a way that we would know what it is"(124).

It might be thought that if the essence of God cannot be seen in itself it could at least be known through some form which is similar to it; but

"since our intellect, in our present state of wayfarers, has a determined relation to forms abstracted from sensible things (since it is dependent upon phantasms in the same way as sight is upon colors, as is said in III De Anima)"(125),

this similar form would have to be abstracted from sensible things, and hence would be related to God only as effect to cause.

If an effect adequates the power of a cause, then, through adequate knowledge of such an effect there can be had full knowledge of the power of the cause, and consequently, its essence. But when the effect is not

completely equal to the cause, even adequate knowledge of the effect does not lead to adequate knowledge of the power of the cause, nor to a knowledge of what the cause is in itself. The most we can know of the cause as a result of knowing such an effect is that the cause exists.

"Now it is according to this ... mode that every effect stands in relation to God; and hence we are not able, in this life, to attain to any knowledge of Him, except that He is"(126).

It does not follow from this, however, that the only proposition we can form of God is that which affirms His existence, for the knowledge of a cause, even through an effect which is not adequate to its power, is susceptible of degrees of perfection. So,

"of those knowing that He is, one will know Him more perfectly than another, because a cause is more perfectly understood from its effect, the more perfectly the relation of the cause to the effect is apprehended"(127).

The human mind can grow in its knowledge of God (even though it cannot know of Him ~~what~~ He is) by a more perfect knowledge of the relation of the visible effects to the invisible cause.

"Thus, in the first place, God is known as His productiveness and efficacy are more perfectly known. Secondly, inasmuch as He is known as the cause of the nobler of His effects, since those creatures which display being of a higher mode, in their resemblance to Him manifest His eminence more than others.

In the third place, He is better recognized as differentiated from all those things which appear in His effects"(128).

In these words St. Thomas introduces the three-fold manner in which the knowledge of God may be acquired by natural reason: the way of causality, the way of eminence, and the way of negation. The division is referred to the work of Dionysius, "De Divinis Nominibus"(129).

The same division is given in the Prima Pars:

"We can know of Him His relation to creatures, namely, that He is the cause of all of them; and the difference of creatures from Him, namely, that He is not any of those things which are caused by Him; and that these (that is, the characteristics of creatures) are denied of Him, not because of any defect in Him, but because of His excellence"(130).

None of these ways leads us to a knowledge of what God is, but the way of causality leads us at least to a knowledge of the existence of God, and it is on this way, consequently, that any other knowledge of God ultimately rests. For this reason the way of causality can be called the most important way along which the intellect, using its own natural powers only, can reach knowledge of God.

However, when it comes to a question of making our knowledge of God more explicit, it is the way of negation (sometimes also called the "via remotionis")

that is most fruitful. This is affirmed by St. Thomas in the Contra Gentiles:

"The way of removal is to be used principally in the consideration of the divine substance"(131).

We cannot know what God is, but we can have a kind of knowledge of Him by knowing what He is not. In this way we approach the unattainable proper knowledge of the substance of God by separating Him, according to a certain order, from all the things we know. The more we deny of God the characteristics of creatures, the more our knowledge of Him approaches His proper nature,

"for we know anything more perfectly the more we grasp its differences from other things; because each thing has in itself its proper being distinct from all other things. So, in the things whose definitions we know, we first gather them into a genus, through which we know what they are in a general way; then we add the differences by which each is distinguished from others. And in this way the complete knowledge of the substance of the things is acquired.

But because, in the considerations of the divine substance, we cannot take the 'quid' as a genus; nor can we take its distinction from other things by means of affirmative differences; it is necessary to discover this distinction through negative differences. And just as in the case of affirmative differences one contracts another, so that we approach more to the complete designation of a thing according as we make it differ from more things, in the same way one negative difference is contracted by another which is the cause of its differing from more things. If we say, for example, that God is not an accident, He is

thus distinguished from all accidents; then, if we add that He is not a body, we distinguish Him also from some substances. And thus, by negations of this kind, He is distinguished, through a certain order, from everything which is outside of Him. There will be a proper consideration of Him at that point where He is known as distinct from all things. But it will still not be a perfect consideration, because there will be no knowledge of what He is in Himself"(132).

Even though our consideration does not touch on the substance of God as it is in itself, it is still proper knowledge for

"we can have proper knowledge of a thing through negation as well as through affirmation; as we have, for example, when we demonstrate of God that He is immobile, eternal, incorporeal, simple, one, etc. The difference is that when proper knowledge of a thing is had through affirmation, we know what the thing is and how it is separated from others. When proper knowledge is had through negations, on the other hand, we know that the thing is distinct from others, but what it is remains unknown. Such is the proper knowledge which is had of God through demonstration"(133).

In his commentary on the third last passage quoted from St. Thomas, Sylvester of Ferrara explains that the way of negation is said to be the principal way of acquiring knowledge of God, and to be of greater value to us than the way of causality or that of eminence, because it is the most convenient ("convenientior") and the easiest way for us(134). As a matter of fact, the way of

negation is not only the one which we find most adapted to our intelligence, but it may be said to be absolutely necessary for any progress in the knowledge of God. It is implied even in the other ways of causality and eminence. For since there can be no adequation between the effects and the cause in this case, God being the "*prima omnium causa excedens omnia sua causata*"(135), then no perfection can be predicated of the cause precisely as it is found in the effect. In order to predicate of God the perfections found in creatures we must remove from them all limitation, all imperfection, and this is why we speak of predication by way of eminence. In other words, even when it is a case of affirming some positive perfection of God there is an implicit denial of the presence, in God, of that perfection as it is found in creatures.

This is obviously not the same as saying that nothing positive can be predicated of God, or that the names of positive perfections, such as life, wisdom, etc., do not indicate perfections that are truly in the divine substance. St. Thomas expressly refutes this opinion, which was held, in particular by Rabbi Moyses. If what we predicated of God indicated only the removal of something from Him,

"as if we were to say God is living because He does not have existence in the manner of inanimate things, as he (Rabbi Moyses) says, then we could say God is a lion, because He does not have existence in the manner of a bird"(136).

Although there are certain predicates that are only denied of God, as is the case of the predicate in the proposition, "God is not a body," still

"in the removal of certain things from God there is implied the predication of the same through eminence and causality"(137).

"Besides, the concept of a negation is always based on some affirmation ...; hence, unless the human intellect knew something affirmatively of God, it could not negate anything of Him"(138).

All of which leads to an obvious objection which would seem to destroy everything we have said about the necessity of using the way of negation in knowing God. For if a negation is known only through an affirmation, then it would not seem possible to know what God is not without knowing the what He is. The objection is raised by Sylvester of Ferrara (139) and is answered by him as follows:

"Although not every negation, absolutely speaking, is based on a real affirmation (because, as is said in the Predicaments, chap. viii, 'not-sitting' is said both of what is and of what is not), yet a negation which is said of some real being is always based on something existing in it which is incompatible with that which is denied. So, man is (said to be) not an ass, because his nature is such that it is incompatible with the nature of ass. And the Ethiopian is

(said to be) not white, because of his blackness, which is incompatible with whiteness.

So, a negation said of God must be founded on something existing in God. Still, it is not necessary that the one who knows the negation know determinately and distinctly the affirmation on which it is based. For a negation can be known and the affirmation which is its basis ignored. We can know that God is not an ass and not know distinctly that nature which is incompatible with the nature of ass."

Of course, to negate any nature, or form, of God we must know that it is incompatible with his nature, and this implies some positive knowledge, at least in the last analysis. When we say, for example, that God is not a body, we base this negation on the fact that He is not composed, or that He has no potency, or that He is immobile, etc. (140). These attributes are known, in turn, through other attributes, but eventually we must come back to some positive reality which is at the basis of these negations, namely, that God is "ipsum esse subsistens." The reason for one negation may very well be another negation, but ultimately they will be all founded in the knowledge we have of God in the proof of His existence. The negations, then, are all based on some affirmation, but this affirmation does not necessarily indicate the specific form that excludes the form negated. St. Thomas says that the name "qui est" befits God above all others because it does not determine any form for God but signifies His being indeterminately (141). This is the most proper

name of God, at least "quantum ad id a quo nomen imponitur et quantum ad modum significandi"(142).

What is to be kept in mind is that if the negations are based on some prior affirmation, at the same time the affirmations always imply a certain negation, especially because of the incompatibility of the mode of signifying of the names we use with the simplicity of God. It is with this incompatibility in mind that Dionysius says that "negations befit God more properly than affirmations" (143). And even those attributes by which we signify the substance of God are said to be susceptible of being denied of God more properly than affirmed (144).

St. Thomas relates this opinion of Dionysius to the general doctrine of the manner in which we name God as exposed in Question 13 of the Prima Pars. In brief, the names which represent the substance of God are all deficient in a certain respect, a deficiency which is attached to the necessary connection between the names we use and the proper object of the human intellect. In every name we attribute to God as signifying His substance there are two factors involved, the perfection signified, and the mode of signifying. The mode of signifying is linked to the mode of existing of sensible creatures, because knowledge of these latter is connatural to us;

and since we name things according to our knowledge of them, there will always be an imperfection involved in the names we use, for they are all derived ultimately from creatures. Thus, in sensible things, what subsists must be composed, and what is simple, like a form, is incapable of subsisting; hence, if we wish to indicate a subsisting being we must indicate it by a name that involves composition; and if we wish to signify a simple form we are forced to use a name that connotes the impossibility of subsistence (145).

In using these names derived from creatures to signify the substance of God we must take into account the fundamental defect in the names, and if we were unable to make abstraction of this imperfect mode of signifying involved in every name, we would be able only to deny it of God. For although the names

"are truly attributed to God as to the thing signified, which is in Him in some way, ... as to the mode which they signify they are to be denied of God, because they do not befit Him in the mode signified; for the mode signified is according to the way they are in our intellect"(146).

A theology which would not make abstraction of the mode of signifying would have to be content with negations; such a theology is called negative. But if abstraction is made of this mode, we can signify the substance of God positively, for the perfections found in creatures are surely in God, and in Him more properly than in creatures,

although in an eminent way. Negations are thus said to be absolutely true of God, but affirmations are true only "secundum quid;" because while true as to what is signified, they are not true as to the mode of signifying (147). Indeed, we can deny any name of God both as to what is signified and according to the mode of signifying. For, although the perfection signified is in God, it is not in every way the same as the perfection we know in creatures.

Following Dionysius, then, St. Thomas admits three ways in which names can be said of God:

a) Affirmatively. Thus we say: "God is wise," and we must say this of God because there is in Him a likeness of the wisdom that flows from Him.

b) Negatively. For, since the wisdom in God is not the wisdom that we know and name, we can deny this latter wisdom of Him and say: "God is not wise."

c) Eminently. For, since wisdom is not denied of God because He lacks wisdom, but because it is in Him in a more eminent way than in the things in which we first know and name it, we must say that God is "superwise" (148).

The works of Dionysius (149), and the commentaries thereon, are the most fruitful source of information on the precise nature of the methods by which a knowledge of God is acquired in affirmative and negative theology.

These works were introduced to the western schools by John Scotus Eriugena, who, although not the first to translate them into Latin from the Greek, was yet looked upon, during the Middle Ages, as the first to explain Dionysius (150). John Scotus speaks of four books on theology written by Dionysius, three using the affirmative method and one the negative (151). These books, and their contents, were as follows:

1) De Divinis Hypotyposibus, in which is discussed the unity of the divine essence, the distinction of persons, paternity, filiation, procession, etc.

2) De Divinis Nominibus, in which is explained the manner in which God is called "good," "existing," "life," "wisdom," etc.

3) De Symbolica Theologia, in which the application of symbolical or metaphorical names to God is explained; we see how God is called "a lion," how He is said to be "angry," "sad," etc.

4) De Mystica Theologia, in which is contained the negative theology of Dionysius.

This is not a complete list of the works of Dionysius (152), but it represents a complete enumeration of the various ways in which God may be known and named. The same division is given by St. Thomas in the Prooemium

to his commentary on the "De Divinis Nominibus." It is the last work, in particular, the Mystical Theology, which is of interest to us here, and we shall see in it how negations can be of great utility in bringing us to as intimate a knowledge of God as is possible here below.

The affirmative method in theology attributes to God the perfections found in creatures, perfections which must exist in some way in God as the cause of all things. But we have already seen that, as a result of the inherent deficiency of the mode of existence of sensible things, and the consequent defective character of our knowledge, the names we derive from creatures as effects cannot be said of God except with certain reservations. God will thus always remain unknown to us as to what He is, and we can only hope, whether by affirmative or negative theology, to come to a more adequate understanding of what He is not. As a means to this end Dionysius considers negative theology the more promising method, for while God is "supra omnem et ablationem et positionem"(153), "nevertheless, "arcanorum obscuritati magis propria est rerum invisibilium per dissimiles effictiones explanatio," because "negationes in divinis verae, affirmationes vero incongruae sunt"(154).

The incongruous character of affirmations as said of God results, of course, from the manner of signifying

of the names we use, which manner must be withheld in the use of these names in affirmative theology. Strictly speaking, the truth of an affirmation requires that the whole predicate be affirmed of the subject; but for the truth of negation it suffices that one part of the predicate be absent (155). The negations can then be rightly said to be true "simpliciter," and the affirmations true only "secundum quid," because the latter are true as to what is signified but not as to the manner of signifying. This element of untruth of affirmations in theology has already been explained (156). But the affirmations, although not "simpliciter" true, cannot be said to be false (157), for in attributing a predicate affirmatively to God we make abstraction of the mode of signifying.

Still, it is not merely to avoid the danger of a false proposition that the way of negation is to be preferred to that of affirmation. It is true that the way of negation is less likely to deceive us into believing that we know what God is, as Scotus Eriugena explains (158); but what is more important is that we are led by this way of negations to a more perfect knowledge of God. In the first place,

"I understand more of God when I hear it said of Him: 'He is not essence,' 'He is not goodness' (Because He is super-essential and

more than good), than when I hear: 'He is essence,' 'He is goodness.' For these latter place Him among other things, but the former exalt Him above all things"(159).

The same thought was expressed in the second century by St. Maximus:

"The one who philosophises about God by affirmations, makes the Word flesh, since he cannot know God as cause except from those things which we perceive and touch; but the one who philosophises in a negative way by removing, makes the Word spirit, as He was in the beginning and with God; thus rightly knowing Him who is supremely unknown, in no way among those things which can be known. It is thus evident that it is more proper to philosophise about God through negations than through affirmations, insofar as the one makes the Word spirit, and the other makes the Word flesh. ... Negative theology proves that God is above all things, and he is most in possession of the truth who says God is none of the things that are, but is above substance and above all things"(160).

If we are to understand fully the advantages of the way of negation, we must consider it in the light of mystical theology, a supernatural knowledge that is supported by divine grace, and gives us in this life, through the gift of understanding, a certain beginning of that perfect knowledge of God that is the privilege of the blessed. This knowledge does not go beyond the proper mode of human knowledge, a mode from which we cannot escape in our present state, and so we are left in obscurity as to the essence of God, but if there is any

vision of God in this life it is a vision that is based on a greater understanding of His separation from all earthly things (161). According to St. Albert the name "mystical" indicates a theology that

"begins with sensible things that are manifest to us, denying these of God, and proceeds by removing everything from Him and leaving our intellect in a confused state as regards that of which are denied all the things it knows and of which it cannot say what it is. It is called 'mystical' ... because it leaves us in the dark ..." (162).

St. Albert understands that the end of mystical theology is union with God (163), and if he speaks of it as leaving us "in the dark," he is aware at the same time that this "darkness" is not to be considered only on a natural plane. For, if in our knowledge of God all modes of knowledge natural to us "vacant," at the same time

"our mind receives a certain divine light, which is above its nature, which elevates it above all natural modes of vision, ... It is not a question of pure negation but the reception of a certain habitual ... and supernatural light" (164).

The obscurity of mystical theology is to be understood as a kind of necessary purgation of our intellect, removing from it all knowledge of God through creatures, as if these latter were a veil preventing a more intimate knowledge which God can bestow on us in a supernatural way. When this veil is drawn aside the soul is able to

contemplate God in silence by a sort of intuition. Such is the state of the soul in contemplation as described by the Venerable Louis de Blois:

"And there, dead to itself, it lives in God, knowing nothing, feeling nothing, save the love that inebriates it. It loses itself in the vastness of divine solitude and darkness; but to lose oneself here is rather to find oneself, for the soul really divests itself of all that is human in order to clothe itself with God ... Heretofore there was but coldness in this soul, from now on it is all aflame; from darkness it has passed to the most radiant brightness"(165).

This is what Dionysius has in mind when he insists on the need of proceeding by way of negation if we are to reach the most perfect knowledge of God possible here on earth.

"The soul, progressing mystically towards God, enters a mystical obscurity of unknowability and casts aside all scientific knowledge, adhering completely to the intangible and invisible ... and by the very fact that it knows nothing knowing beyond (the powers of) the mind"(166).

It is by complete nescience that we come to perfect knowledge. As Corderius explains,

"this union with God (that is, the mystical union) consists in entering, by complete nescience, into that infinite, incomprehensible, and immense ocean of divine nature"(167).

St. Thomas speaks of the same union with God in similar terms:

"Our soul is joined to God, rising by negations above the limits of all, even the most excellent, of creatures. And this union of the soul to God takes place to the extent that it is possible for us to be now joined to God; for in our present state our intellect is not joined to God in such a way that it sees His essence, but so that it knows of God what He is not. Hence, this union with God which is possible for us in this life is perfected when we come to know that He is above the most excellent of creatures"(168).

It is no wonder that this mystical contemplation, involving as it does the rejection of all natural modes of knowledge, should be, at the same time, beyond the powers of human description. In the words of St. John of the Cross:

"It cannot be discerned or described. Moreover, the soul has no wish to speak of it, and besides, it can discover no way or proper likeness by which to describe it so as to make known a knowledge so high, a spiritual impression so delicate and infused. Yea, if it could have a wish to speak of it, and find terms to describe it, it would always remain secret still ... The soul is like a man who sees an object for the first time, the like of which he has never seen before; he handles it and feels it, yet he cannot say what it is or tell its name, do what he can, even though it be an object perceived by the senses. How much less, then, can that be described which does not enter by the senses"(169).

The complete silence imposed on the soul privileged to share in this mystical vision of God is a confirmation of the suitability of negation as the means of rising to such knowledge. Dionysius discovered an explanation of the ineffability of the contemplative's knowledge in St. Bartholemew:

"Regarding God the mind goes through three stages. In the first it uses many words, in the second a few, and in the third none. It uses many words when it affirms and denies of God whatever presents itself, using the same words, but in a different sense. It uses a few words when it speaks of God in the light of His relation to creatures and that of creatures to Him, as is explained in the book, 'De divinis Nominibus.' Finally, it uses no words when it no longer relates creatures to God nor God to them, but understanding that God transcends all creatures and relations to creatures it neither affirms nor denies anything of God, but adores Him, as is meet, in a religious silence"(170).

In a similar vein St. Albert remarks:

"In negations, as we ascend (from lower to higher negations) our speech is contracted, until finally our entire discourse will be 'sine voce,' because the soul will be united with Him who is ineffable - and this is why this science, above all others, is called mystical"(171).

Mystical theology, whose method is the method of negations described by Dionysius, is, in its ultimate perfection, incommunicable. The supernatural light of which St. Albert speaks enters the intelligence only at the end of the process of negation, and if God so wills, and consequently, we cannot speak of this ultimate termination of mystical theology, this intimate union with God, as if it were automatically acquired as the result of the application of the method of negations. In fact, as the spiritual writers unanimously testify, we cannot speak of this union in human terms at all. What we can describe is the way in which, by negations, the soul is released from its reliance on sensible creatures and the

names thereof in knowing and speaking of God. The way of negation reveals to us that creatures are an obstacle to the most perfect knowledge of God possible in this life, and that in knowing God only through the almost negligible likeness of Him found in creatures we are drawing a veil across His true features. The way of negation destroys this veil, and although this way does not in itself reveal the face of God, it is still a necessary preliminary, as a sort of purgation, to that intimate mystical union to which God in His goodness deigns to elevate certain souls.

But let us see in more detail the actual process of this way of negation. In the second chapter of his De Mystica Theologia Dionysius contrasts the methods of affirmation and negation:

"I think it is necessary to make use of negations in a way contrary to that of affirmations; in the latter we begin from the highest notions and descend through intermediate ones to the lowest; in the former we ascend from the lowest to the highest, removing them all, so that we may clearly know that unknowability which is hidden by all those things of which we have knowledge; and we come to an intuition of that supernatural darkness which is concealed by the light that is in things" (172).

In the way of affirmation we begin by affirming of God the most noble concepts we possess, and we descend towards the least noble. We speak of God as "existing," as

"good," as "living," and so on, as is the procedure of the De Divinis Nominibus. The more noble concepts are more obviously, and with more justice, to be affirmed of God than the inferior concepts (173). But in the way of negation the movement is in the opposite direction. Since the concepts that represent the lowest creatures are farthest from God, we begin by negating them, the negation of what is most imperfect being the negation the most true of God. Our process is then one of ascent towards the negation of ever higher degrees of created being.

"As if we were first to say that God is not a stone, then that He is not a lion, and so on for other sensible things; and then that He is not living, nor life, etc.; and proceeding in this way we will come to know that unknown (that is, the divine eminence unknown to us) clearly, that is, without the veil of any creature" (174).

It is when we arrive at the negation of our most noble concepts, and are able to say of God: He is not life, He is not essence, He is not being, etc., that we realize His transcendence in relation to all the perfections of creatures. At this point we are prepared to enter into the "super-lucentem caliginem" where, "per non videre et ignorare" we are able to see and to know "eum qui est super omnem visionem et cognitionem" (175).

Dionysius himself carries out his process of negation in chapters 4 and 5 of the De Mystica Theologia.

according to the ascent from lower to higher notions. In chapter 5 he completes the process as follows:

"Ascending further we say that He is not a soul, nor a mind, nor an imagination, nor does He have opinion or reason or understanding, nor is He reason or intellect, nor is He spoken or understood, ... He is not life, nor substance, ... nor science, nor truth, ... nor wisdom, nor one, nor unity, nor deity, nor goodness, nor a spirit, ... nor is He any existing thing, nor any essence."

These negations shock us at first, because we are more accustomed to the opposed affirmations, particularly in natural theology. We are more inclined to say that God is life, goodness, being, etc., than we are to say that God is not life, is not good, is not being. Yet, it is perfectly true, as Dionysius says, that the negations are more properly said of God than the affirmations. We can see, nonetheless, in the light of these considerations, the possibility of serious errors resulting from a misunderstanding of the process of negative theology, and this possibility of affirming and denying any conceivable predicate of God.

We can better understand, for example, the position of David of Dinant who, St. Thomas relates, "*stultissime posuit Deum esse materiam primam*"(176). As a matter of fact, the propositions of negative theology are quite reminiscent of the traditional definition of prime matter: "*Materia prima secundum seipsam non est quid,*

neque quale, neque quantum, neque aliquid eorum quibus ens determinatur." St. Thomas himself acknowledges a similarity between God and prime matter when he speaks of the way in which creatures share in divine goodness:

"... Just as prime matter is called unformed because of a lack of form, so the First Good can be said to be unformed, not because of a defect, but because of an excess; and so, according to a sort of remote assimilation, the likeness of the First Cause is found in prime matter"(177).

If one were not aware of the difference in the underlying reason for negating every determined form of God and of prime matter, he could not help but see the resemblance, the identity even, between the propositions of negative theology and the propositions that can be formed with prime matter as the subject. St. Albert feels obliged to answer a similar objection in his commentary on the De Mystica Theologia (178). If we remove everything from God it would seem that there is nothing left, and the fool of Psalm XIII, who said in his heart, "Non est Deus," would be justified. In replying, St. Albert explains that in negating all things of God we acknowledge that He is not any of the things negated. But this is so because He is above them. They are denied of Him "propter sui excessum et non propter defectum"(179). In prime matter every form is lacking because of an infinite potentiality;

negations befit it "propter defectum." In God there is an absence of every form we know because of His infinite actuality, by which He surpasses them. Prime matter is not a substance because of its insufficiency; God is not a substance because of the insufficiency of our concept of substance. He is not a substance because He is "super-substance."

Besides, negations said of prime matter have the sense of privations, at least in regard to all material forms, and even though prime matter is not identical with privation, since in spite of its imperfection it is nonetheless being in potency and not absolute negation or non-being, still, every negation by which some material form is denied of it represents one aspect of its imperfection. But no negation can be said of God in the sense of privation, since there can never be a negation destructive of God, and every privation is a negation ordered to removing and destroying some form in a subject (180).

The apparently paradoxical character of our manner of speaking of God, that is, affirming and denying of Him the same predicates, can very easily lead to the most monstrous errors if it is only superficially understood. It is impossible to avoid reference to Nicholas of Cusa in this context. It was a consideration of the "via negationis"

that led Nicholas to speak of God as the "coincidentia oppositorum," the synthesis of opposites. Like Dionysius he understood God to be "super omnem affirmationem pariter et negationem"(181); but unlike Dionysius, Nicholas did not see how we could avoid accepting the existence in God of the very predicates that are simultaneously affirmed and denied. If such seems to violate the principle of contradiction it is because, says he, this principle is valid for the human intelligence but has no place in God.

"Hoc autem omnem nostrum intellectum transcendit, qui nequit contradictoria in suo principio combinare via rationis ... (182).

The realisation that God is the synthesis of opposites, the "complicatio omnium etiam contradictorium"(183), transcending all distinctions by uniting them in Himself, is the attainment of a "learned ignorance" that is aware of the incomprehensibility of the divine essence.

"Et quanto in hac ignorantia profundius docti fuerimus, tanto magis ipsam accedimus veritatem"(184).

There is an obvious resemblance between this "learned ignorance" and the perfect nescience which Dionysius considered to be the term of mystical theology. We can easily imagine Dionysius saying, as Nicholas does, that God is "incomprehensibiliter intelligibile, et innominabiliter nominabile"(185). But there is a world

of difference between the two opinions. To understand this difference we must consider how Dionysius avoided placing any contradiction in God while affirming and denying of Him identical predicates.

In the De Mystica Theologia Dionysius explicitly states that we "are not to think that the negations are contrary to the affirmations" (186), by which he means, according to Corderius (187), that "it is not exactly what the affirmation affirms that is denied by the negation." As Pachymera puts it (188), "there is no question here of applying the principle of contradiction, because, although here (below) it is necessary that there be either affirmation or negation, and if the affirmation is true the negation must be false and vice-versa, there (that is, in divine things) both affirmation and negation are true, according to the senses explained." The affirmations and negations are true, but it is not a question of a reality which transcends the principle of contradiction. When we say, "God is wisdom," and "God is not wisdom," these propositions are not contradictory. For the predicate is affirmed of God (as St. Albert says) "secundum quid," namely, "causaliter," and it is denied of Him "simpliciter;"

"simpliciter autem negatum et secundum quid affirmatum non contrariantur, sicut album secundum dentes et non album simpliciter"(189).

When we say God is not wise, we are denying of Him the wisdom that we know in creatures. This wisdom truly is not in God according to the manner of signifying of the name, as we have previously explained; nor is it in Him even as to what is signified, because

"nihil nec secundum rem nec secundum modum nominis potest proprie praedicari de Deo; et propter hoc verius ab eo removentur"(190).

When we say, on the other hand, that God is wise, what we should mean is that He is "super-wise," that is, possessed of a perfection infinitely superior to that conveyed to us by the term "wise."

With some justification John Scotus Eriugena classifies the expression, "God is super-wise," among the propositions of negative theology (191), for the mind has actually no content, no idea, corresponding to the word, "super," in this expression, so that its addition to the word, "wise," is a sort of negation. It is not simply a negation, however, for we do understand from the expression that God does not lack wisdom by defect, but by excess. To say that He is "super-wise," then, conveys the idea that He is not wise as men are wise, but He is more than wise. The expression, "super-wise,"

encloses within itself a negation (of human wisdom) and an affirmation (of a superior wisdom). It is, as it were, a synthesis of "wise" and "not wise," but it is the distinction between the meanings of the term in each case that saves us from falling into the error of Nicholas of Cusa. When we deny wisdom of God we know quite well what we are denying, but when we affirm wisdom of Him the case is quite different.

We must always keep in mind that the affirmations we make of God are based on the existence in Him of the perfections of creatures only to the extent that effects can be said to be found in equivocal causes (192). God is said to be wise not merely because He causes wisdom, but also because "insofar as we are wise we imitate, to some extent, the power by which God makes us wise" (193). And yet, by reason of the equivocal nature of this causality, involving as it does an infinite distance between cause and effect, no perfection can be univocally said of God and creatures. It is, of course, a case of analogy and not of pure equivocation, but, while we cannot enter here into the question of analogy, we must reassert the impossibility of our knowing, even in an imperfect way, "what God is."

"Non enim de Deo capere possumus quid est, sed quid non est, et qualiter alia se habeant ad ipsum"(194).

Our affirmative propositions about God can never be considered as revealing the divine essence. St. Thomas repeats time and again that "quid est Deus nescimus," and because of this the ultimate knowledge our intellect can have of God is to know that it does not know Him, insofar as it knows that what God is exceeds everything we understand of Him.

When we say "God is wise," then, what we mean is that there is in God, as the cause of all wisdom, some perfection (identical in Him with all that He is) of which human wisdom is a weak resemblance. The nature of this perfection, how it is in God, of these things we can have no understanding. The proposition is true, but its meaning we cannot comprehend, and we do our best to overcome the lack of comprehension by saying that God has wisdom in an eminent way, in a manner far exceeding that in which creatures have it, etc. The use of such expressions only serves to emphasize the insufficiency of the affirmation as to conveying any knowledge of what God is. What is the use of making affirmative propositions of God? This question is best answered by a summation of the knowledge of God possible to us by natural reason, as given in the Prima Pars:

"Hence, from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known, nor, consequently, can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects, and dependent on their cause, we can be led by them to a knowledge that God exists, and to a knowledge of what must necessarily belong to Him as the first cause of all things, exceeding everything He causes. Hence, we know His relation to creatures, namely, that He is the cause of all of them; and the difference of creatures from Him, namely, that He is none of those things caused by Him, and that these (effects) are not removed from Him by reason of any defect in Him but because He superexceeds them" (195).

By negations I can express only a part of this knowledge, that part, namely, by which He is known to be "none of those things caused by Him." But to express my knowledge of His possession of all the perfections of creatures in an eminent way I must form affirmations like "God is wise," or, what is more expressive, "God is super-wise."

The apparent contradiction involved in affirming and denying the same predicate of God is thus seen to disappear by reason of the difference in the meaning of "wise" as negated and as affirmed. In the case of the negation, the wisdom denied is the created wisdom of which we have knowledge here below. The wisdom that is affirmed, on the other hand, is a wisdom we do not comprehend, and yet, of whose presence in God we are certain;

the name "wisdom" signifies the divine substance as imperfectly as creatures represent it (196). The error of Nicholas of Cusa was not the assertion that affirmations and negations coincide in God, but his understanding of this coincidence as a coincidence of contradictories. "God is wise," and "God is not wise," are true (not equally, since the negation is more true than the affirmation), but "wise" and "not-wise" are not, in this case, contradictorily opposed.

If we consider now the three ways in which God is known and named by us, we can see how the role of negation assumes an increasing importance as our knowledge becomes more perfect. This is so not only in the supernatural order, to the extent that mystical theology can reach its term only when we have removed from God the veil of creatures, but also in natural theology. In the three ways in which we can name God, as already described, there is a use of negation that is rather remarkable. We first of all affirm: "God is wise," because of the perfection of wisdom found in His creatures. Then, aware of the infinite distance between cause and effect in this case, we make, with greater truth, the negation: "God is not wise." But this negation is, in itself and from a natural point of view (that is, unsupported by the

supernatural light of mystical union), unsatisfactory; and so we rise, by what we might call a negation of the negation, to the new affirmation: "God is super-wise." This new affirmation is superior to the first in that there is implicit in it the understanding of the negation, and that is why we may, with reason, call it a negation of the negation. It is not simply an affirmation, because of the negation implicit in it, for which reason John Scotus was inclined to see in it a negation. It is not merely a negation either, for "super-wise" is a good deal more than "not wise." The expression is, in effect, the closest we can come to the representation of God as "super omnem affirmationem pariter et negationem."

But it is interesting to note that the expression, "super-wise," represents a negation both of the "wise" of the way of affirmation and of the "not wise" of the way of negation. So it is for all the predicates of the way of eminence. In this sense the expression can be seen as something of a negation of the negation, a description that means simply that it is an affirmation superior in its representation to a simple affirmation that is not representative of the negation.

The realization of this progress in the knowledge of God by the use of negation will be helpful in the understanding of the next chapter, where the negation of the negation will be considered in quite another sense, as a process wrongly transferred from the logical to the real order to become a principle of fecundity and progress in nature.