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Chapter Author(s): ERIC D. PERL

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Into the Dark

How (Not) to Ask “Why Is There Anything at All?”

ERIC D. PERL

Τὸ δὲ πάντων αἴτιον οὐδέν ἐστιν ἐκείνων.

PLOTINUS¹



Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern da ß sie ist.

WITTGENSTEIN²



Ich muß noch über Gott in eine Wüste ziehn.

ANGELUS SILESIUS³

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1. “The cause of all things is none of them.” Plotinus, in *Plotini Opera*, ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, editio minor, rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964–1982), 6.9.6, 55–56. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2. “Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but rather *that* it is.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 6.44.

3. “I must pass beyond God into a desert.” Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, in *Sämtliche Poetische Werke*, ed. Hans Ludwig Held, vol. 3 (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1949), 1.7.4.

I

Recent discussions of the question “Why is there anything at all?” or “Why is there something, rather than nothing?” often treat this as a distinctively modern question, citing its explicit formulation by Leibniz⁴ and occasionally its resumption by Heidegger.⁵ But reflection on the problem that the question raises did not begin with Leibniz.⁶ When Neoplatonic philosophers such as Plotinus and Proclus find it necessary to discuss a first principle which is the “cause of all things” or the “cause of being,” when Thomas Aquinas, in the same tradition, argues to God as the “cause of beings insofar as they are beings,” it is clear that they are addressing this very question, even if they do not formulate it in set terms.⁷ But they do so in a radically different way from contemporary philosophers, including many of those who take the question as the starting point of an argument for “theism.”⁸ Contemporary treatments of the question tend to proceed in one of two ways: either they limit its scope, or they dismiss it altogether as senseless

4. E.g., Jan Heylen, “Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing? A Logical Investigation,” *Erkenntnis* 83, no. 3 (2017): 531–39, at 531. Heylen provides an extensive bibliography of recent treatments of the question, although he omits the papers collected in *The Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatever?*, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

5. E.g., Stephen Maitzen, “Stop Asking Why There’s Anything,” *Erkenntnis* 77:1 (2012): 51–63, at 51.

6. On medieval formulations of the question see John F. Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas on the Ultimate Why Question,” in *The Ultimate Why Question*, 84–106, at 84–86.

7. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed points in the same direction: “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of *all things* visible and invisible.” Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Peter Hünermann et al. 43rd ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2012), 65. Taken strictly, this says that *all things*—no qualifications or exceptions—have a cause or “maker,” and therefore implies that God is *not one of all things*.

8. On this use of the question see Maitzen, “Stop Asking,” 51–53, 60. As we shall see, Aquinas’s reasoning to God as the cause of all being, or of beings insofar as they are beings, should not be assimilated to modern arguments to God as a “first being” or “necessary being” which is the cause of “contingent beings.”

or meaningless. Philosophers such as Plotinus, Proclus, and Aquinas, however, neither limit it nor dismiss it, but rather, recognizing its full, all-inclusive scope, show how it forces the inquiring spirit, on strictly rational grounds, to abandon itself into the darkness and silence of philosophical mysticism.

One way of limiting the question's scope is to take it to mean, “Why are there any contingent beings?”⁹ Leibniz himself approaches the question in this way, attempting to answer it by arguing that there is a “necessary being” (called ‘God’) which causes all contingent beings. This approach limits the question to a certain kind of beings, contingent ones, rather than asking about absolutely all that is, all being as such. Another, more recent way of limiting the question is to take it to mean, “Why are there any concrete objects?”¹⁰ Peter van Inwagen provides a good example of this approach, beginning his paper “Why Is There Anything at All?” thus: “The question that is my title is supposed to be the most profound and difficult of all questions. Some, indeed, have said that it is a dangerous question, a question that can tear the mind asunder. But I think we can make some progress with it if we do not panic.”¹¹ The reason for this deflationary attitude emerges in what follows:

By a ‘being’ I mean a concrete object—whatever *that* may mean ... I do not think that the question people have actually intended to ask when they ask why anything at all should exist could be answered by pointing out ... that the number 510 would exist no matter what. If the notion of an abstract object makes sense at all, it seems evident that if *everything* were an abstract object, if the *only* objects were abstract objects, there is an obvious and perfectly good sense in which there would be nothing at

9. See Heylen, “Why,” 531; Maitzen, “Stop Asking,” 57.

10. Heylen, “Why,” 531. Maitzen, “Stop Asking,” 58, evidently conflates “contingent” and “concrete.”

11. Peter van Inwagen and E. J. Lowe, “Why Is There Anything at All?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 70 (1996): 95–120, at 95.

all, for there would be no physical things, no stuffs, no events, no space, no time, no Cartesian egos, no ... [ellipsis in original]. When people want to know why there is anything at all, they want to know why *that* bleak state of affairs does not obtain.¹²

Like the Leibnizian approach, this expressly interprets the question in such a way that it fails to ask about absolutely all being as such, including even “abstract objects” such as numbers or anything else which, *qua* abstract, “would exist no matter what.” It is precisely because van Inwagen interprets the question in this limited sense that he believes it can be approached safely, without the risk of “tearing the mind asunder.”

Those who acknowledge the absolutely all-inclusive scope of the question, on the other hand, frequently dismiss it as meaningless, on the ground that absolute nothing, or an alternative to ‘something’ or ‘being,’ is unthinkable. Brian Martine offers an exceptionally clear example:

If ‘the ultimate why question’ [that is, why is there anything at all?] is taken to mean asking why there is something rather than nothing, where the expression ‘nothing’ is supposed to mean ‘nothing at all’ or ‘absolutely nothing,’ I don’t think the question is worthy even of being called useless. It is simply meaningless. Proposing ‘absolutely nothing’ as the alternative to ‘something’ is the same as saying that there is no alternative to ‘something’ ... In order for the question ‘why is there something rather than nothing’ to mean anything, there has to be at least in principle an alternative proposed to the existence of something. Where no alternative is proposed—as is certainly the case when one suggests that the alternative is absolutely nothing—what was formulated as a question turns out to be an assertion, the assertion of something or other.¹³

Franklin Gamwell makes much the same point: “On my accounting, the question is not sensible because it presupposes that there

12. Van Inwagen, “Why,” 95–96.

13. Brian Martine, “Pragmatic Reflections on Final Causality,” in *The Ultimate Why Question*, ed. John F. Wippel, 206–16, at 206.

being nothing at all is a sensible thought, and ... I do not think that this is the case,¹⁴ and again, “Existence as such cannot be completely absent, and thus a complete negation of existence is senseless. So far as I can see, a putative thought whose conceptual content is in no way existentially positive cannot be distinguished from a putative thought that has no sensible content at all.”¹⁵ The unthinkability of an “alternative to ‘something,’” or of a “complete negation of existence,” is no doubt why the question appears liable, as van Inwagen says, to “tear the mind asunder.” But to dismiss the question as meaningless on the ground that an alternative to being is unthinkable is to fail to take thinking to its uttermost extreme, to question meaning or thinking itself, and thus to compel thought to transcend itself. Both of these contemporary approaches render the question anodyne, depriving it of its true, mind-shattering force, even prior to any consideration of whether it can be answered or what answer, if any, there may be.

II

The question before us is not “Why are there contingent beings?” or “Why are there concrete objects?,” still less “Why is there a

14. Franklin Gamwell, “Speaking of God after Aquinas,” *The Journal of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2001), 185–210, at 204 n. 26.

15. Gamwell, “Speaking of God,” 205. See also John Heil, “Contingency,” in *The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing*, ed. Tyrone Goldschmidt (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 167–81, at 175–76: “I find it hard not to think that the question ‘Why is there anything?’ or ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ makes sense only when the nothing in question is really a something: empty space, the void.... If, in contrast, nothing is understood as the absolute absence of being, the question cannot so much as be addressed.” Cf. Goldschmidt in the “Introduction” to this volume, 1–21, at 4: “The question should thus not be construed as a question about why a possible world containing some being obtains rather than a world containing no beings at all. The notion of such a perfectly empty world is incoherent.” He adds (4 n. 3), “For my part, I don’t really get the notion of such a bare possibility as there being nothing at all.” These remarks occur in the introductory setup of the problem to which all the essays in the volume are devoted, thus ruling out *a priori* the question in its absolute sense.

physical universe?,"¹⁶ but "Why is there *anything at all?*" or "Why is there being, rather than nothing?" The terms 'anything' and 'being' are absolutely all-inclusive: there cannot in principle be anything whatsoever that falls outside their scope. They are altogether inescapable. No matter what we may think, imagine, come up with, propose, or mention, it is already included under the head of 'anything' or 'being.' As Aquinas observes, "That which intellect first conceives, as most known, and into which it resolves all conceptions, is being [*ens*, that which is]."¹⁷ Or, as he explains more fully, "Being [*ens*] falls first in the conception of intellect, because anything is knowable according to this, that it is in act. . . . Wherefore being is the proper object of intellect, as it is the first intelligible, as sound is the first audible."¹⁸ Just as whatever can be heard is necessarily some sound, so whatever can be thought is necessarily some being. 'Being,' then, is absolutely all-comprehensive; there can be no more comprehensive term. Thus, "To be [*esse*] itself is

16. The foregoing remarks should make it clear that the question in its full sense has nothing whatsoever to do with cosmology. The question is not about "the physical universe" but about *being as such*. To use the question as the starting point of a cosmological argument for theism is to fail to understand its full, unrestricted sense. Nor does it have anything to do with generation or origination. The question is not "How did this or that thing, or the entire physical universe, begin?" but rather, "Why does anything and everything exist? Why is there reality at all?" To confuse the question of existence with that of origination is to be blind to existence itself and so to miss the very point of the question. See further below, notes 31 and 83.

17. Aquinas, *De veritate*, 1, 1, resp.

18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, editio altera emendata (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953), 1, 5, 2, resp. Brian Davies, OP, "Disputed Question: Are Names Said of God and Creatures Univocally?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (Spring 2018): 321–327, at 323, observes, "I may say that there is nothing between the west of Ireland and the coast of North America. But I would mean that there is no land, not that there is absolutely nothing. The 'nothing' in 'God accounts for there being something rather than nothing' means 'no spatio-temporal reality' or 'nothing that can be taken to be part of the empirically explainable universe.'" This limitation cannot apply in the case of Aquinas, for two reasons. First, for Aquinas the world of created things includes the angelic intelligences, which are non-spatial, at most quasi-temporal, and not "part of the empirically explainable universe." Second, Aquinas expressly and repeatedly insists that being, *ens*, which is what God "accounts for," includes absolutely all possible objects of thought whatsoever, not merely spatio-temporal or empirical things.

common to all things”¹⁹—a simple, seemingly innocuous or even tautological observation which is nonetheless the foundation for Aquinas’s entire doctrine of God as *esse tantum*, “just ‘to be,’” or *ipsum esse*, “‘to be’ itself.”

In making such statements Aquinas is echoing at long remove “father Parmenides,”²⁰ who inaugurated the tradition of classical metaphysics by reporting the declaration of the Goddess:

Come, I will tell you—and having heard the story keep it safe—the only ways to seek out for thinking: the one, that it is and is not not to be, is the road of persuasion, for it follows truth; the other, that it is not and is needful not to be, this I say to you is a wholly unknowable path; for you could not know that which is not, for it cannot be done, nor express it. For the same is for thinking and for being.²¹

Quite simply, the Goddess is saying, there is not anything that is not, anything that falls outside the scope of being: “For never will this prevail, that there are things that are not.”²² It is indeed impossible to think absolutely nothing; to think at all is necessarily to think something, that is, some being. As she observes, “Without being, in which it is expressed, you will not find thinking. For nothing else is or will be apart from being.”²³ Being, or that which is, is all-comprehensive: there can be nothing else that is not included in it. Plato takes up the same point in the *Sophist*, quoting Parmenides and asking first whether “we dare utter ‘that which in no way is?’” and then “What must this name, ‘that which is not,’ refer to?”²⁴ He

19. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, 4, 3, resp.; cf. *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, ed. P. Bazzi et al., 9th ed. rev. (Rome and Turin: Marietti, 1953), 1, 3, resp.: “Esse is found common to all things.”

20. Plato, *Sophist*, in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–1907), 241d5.

21. Parmenides, in Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1954), 28B2, 1–8; 28B3; hereafter referred to as DK 28B2.

22. DK 28B7, 1.

23. DK 28B8, 35–37.

24. Plato, *Sophist* 237b7–8, c1–2.

concludes that it cannot be something, and therefore that the person who says “that which is not” is not saying anything at all. Hence, “We must say that he who tries to utter ‘that which is not’ does not speak [i.e., express any meaning] at all.”²⁵ His conclusion is that “it is not possible rightly to utter or to say or to think ‘that which is not’ itself by itself, but that it is unthinkable and unspeakable and unutterable and meaningless [ἄλογον].”²⁶ Plato later revisits this conclusion and argues that we can and must meaningfully think and speak of relative non-being, or difference, but never withdraws the judgment that that which is not anything at all in any way at all can neither be thought nor meaningfully said. Meaningful speech necessarily expresses something, not nothing, and to think is necessarily to think something, not nothing. Parmenides, Plato, and Aquinas all concur, then, that it is altogether impossible for thought to escape from being, from what is, which is all-comprehensive, from which nothing can be excluded and to which nothing can be added. There is nothing else from which being can be distinguished.

From this it follows that all distinctions whatsoever—abstract/concrete, necessary/contingent, real/fictional, or any others—are necessarily distinctions *within* being.²⁷ Hence it is illegitimate to exclude anything at all from the scope of the question “Why is there anything at all?” To limit the question to “Why are there any concrete (as distinct from abstract) objects?” is to fail to ask “Why is there anything at all?” Let us take van Inwagen’s example of the number 510 as an instance of an abstract object. No matter what numbers may be—sets, abstractions, universals, concepts, Platonic forms, or anything else—the number 510 is

25. Plato, *Sophist* 237e1–2.

26. Plato, *Sophist* 238c7–10.

27. On necessary/contingent as a distinction within “all being” (*totum ens*), where “all being” refers to that which comes from God and does not include God himself, see Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*, editio Leonina, vol. 1*/1, editio altera retractata (Rome: Commissio Leonina; Paris: Vrin, 1989), I, 14, 22. On this passage see further below, p. 202. This is radically different from identifying God as a necessary being and creatures as contingent beings.

most definitely something, not nothing. If it were not anything, it could not be distinct from anything else, e.g., the number 511, or the sheet of paper on which these words are printed. Indeed, if it were not anything, it could not be an abstract object. Hence it is already included in what we are asking about. The fact that such things exist does not answer the question, because the question is, “*Why is there anything at all?*” Even if numbers, or other abstract objects, “would exist no matter what,” we can and must still ask, “Why is there something that would exist no matter what? Why is there anything at all? Why not nothing?”

The same objection applies if we limit the question to “Why are there contingent (as distinct from necessary) beings?” Even if we could demonstrate that there is a necessary being (often called ‘God’), that being would still be something, some being, and would therefore be included within what the question in its unrestricted form is asking about. A “God” who is a necessary being would not be the maker of all things, absolutely and without exception, but only of all things except himself. Even if there is a necessary being, we can and must still ask, “*Why is there this necessary being?*” ‘Necessary,’ here, is a determination of ‘being.’ But as Aquinas insists, being is logically prior to all determinations thereof, and all determinations are determinations of being. A necessary being is necessary only given that it is, so its necessity cannot account for its existence. To be sure, if some being is a necessary being, then to deny its existence would be self-contradictory. But we can still eliminate even a necessary being from consideration, not by thinking it and denying that it exists, but by not thinking it at all. Hence a necessary being, even if we could prove that there is one, would not serve to answer the question “Why is there anything at all?” Such a being, or a God who is understood as a necessary being, is still included in the scope of that question.

The assumption underlying the “necessary being” argument, in terms of “possible worlds,” is that if some being is necessary, that

is, exists in all possible worlds, then an “empty world” is impossible, and the question is therefore answered. In such discourse the question “Why is there anything at all?” is taken to mean “Why not an empty world?” But an empty world is not nothing: an empty world is still a world. Within such a world, the conditions of logic, the laws of thought, still obtain. This indeed is what it means to be a “world.” But those very conditions are themselves something, not nothing. If logic itself is taken for granted, being is already given. If there is a world, it must be a possible world, and then indeed the only question is, “Why not an empty world?” But suppose we ask instead, “Why any world at all? Why not *no* world?” To ask this is in effect to ask, “Why the very conditions of thought itself?” This question completely sets aside all logical issues of possibility, impossibility, and necessity, which only serve to determine what worlds are possible within the presupposed framework of thought. From within “possible worlds theory,” the only answer is “No world is not a possible world.” This is of course true, but it begs the question by presupposing that there must be some world and thus taking logic itself, and with it being, for granted.

Wittgenstein famously observed that “the world is all that is the case,” and again, “The world is the totality of facts, not of things.”²⁸ A “world,” in this sense, is a set of facts or a “state of affairs,” and a possible world is a possible state of affairs. From this point of view the question “Why any world at all?” becomes the question “Why is anything the case?” The obvious reply is that “Nothing is the case” is a performative contradiction: if nothing were the case it would be the case that nothing is the case. Hence it is impossible that nothing is the case. This is quite true, and is effectively equivalent to “No world is not a possible world.” Again, therefore, this begs the question by presupposing the very con-

28. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1 and 1.1.

ditions of thought. It is indeed impossible to think that nothing is the case, or that there is no world. But this is simply to repeat Parmenides’s dictum that to think is always already to think something, that there can be no thinking without being, that nothing is not an intelligible option. This is precisely why Martine, Gamwell, and others, interpreting the question in its absolute, all-inclusive sense and recognizing that thought cannot escape from or dispense with being, declare the question meaningless. But at this point, the question “Why is there anything at all;” taken without restriction in its full, radical sense, reveals itself to be in fact the question, “Why thought, meaning, logic, or intelligibility itself?”

We can now see that if the question taken in its full sense appears to be meaningless, this is because what it is questioning is meaning itself.²⁹ As Gamwell rightly says, “a complete negation of existence is senseless.”³⁰ But, why sense? If we are questioning intelligibility itself, which we can now understand to be what is really put into play by the question “Why is there anything at all;” then it is no response to say that there is no intelligible alternative. To be sure, given thinking, being is already given, not only because thinking itself is something but because to think at all is necessarily to think something, not nothing. To think away everything is to think away thinking itself, which is, again, a performative contradiction. But to dismiss the question on the ground that an alternative to being is senseless, meaningless, or unthinkable is to presuppose sense, meaning, or thought itself. The question now is, why thought? Why thinking, and with it, necessarily, being?

Taken in its full sense, then, the question “Why is there anything at all;” directs thought where it cannot go. It asks for a

29. Cf. Jean Trouillard, “Procession néoplatonicienne et création judéo-chrétienne,” in *Néoplatonisme: Mélanges offerts à Jean Trouillard* (Fontenay aux Roses: Les Cahiers de Fontenay, 1981): 1–30, at 1: “It is not surprising that this radical undertaking seems devoid of meaning [*sens*], for it aims at that by which there is a meaning.”

30. See above, p. 183n15.

source, ground, principle, or explanation of thought, of intelligibility, of being, which cannot itself be within the scope of thought, intelligibility, or being. It thus leads thought to its own stultification. Properly understood, therefore, the question does indeed threaten to “tear the mind asunder,” or rather to annihilate it altogether. Those who do not panic when confronted with this question show no adequate awareness of what it means to question $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$ —everything—to which the only alternative is

III

At this point it should be clear that the question “Why is there anything at all?” does not admit of an answer: any proposed *explanans* would, necessarily, be something, and would therefore be included in the *explanandum*. Indeed, all that has gone before has merely served to highlight the absolutely all-inclusive scope of the terms ‘anything’ or ‘being’ and hence of the question itself. In that sense Heylen, Maitzen, and others are right to demand that we stop asking the question, in the sense of asking it with a view to getting an answer. Rather than calling for an answer, the question leads instead to the silencing of the mind at the astonishing realization, vouchsafed to Parmenides by the Goddess, that *being is*.³¹ And this, rather than any answer—which would of necessity be a wrong or question-begging answer, revealing a failure to understand the question—is what we find in the Neoplatonic discourse

31. Cf. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, vol. 3.11, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, vol. 4.1 (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 514: “Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of existence, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully, It is!, heedless at that moment, whether it were a man before you or a flower, or a grain of sand? Without reference, in short to this or that particular mode or form of existence? If thou hast indeed attained to this, then thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder.” Those who limit the question, or dismiss it as meaningless, or mistake it for a question about origination (see note 16), are evidently immune to this experience.

of the One, and in Thomas Aquinas’s apophatic treatment of God as *ipsum esse*.³²

Plotinus follows the tradition established by Parmenides in affirming the inescapable co-belonging or togetherness of thinking and being: “Intellect, by thinking, establishes being, and being, by being thought, gives to intellect thinking and existence.... For they are simultaneous and exist together and do not depart from each other.”³³ Thinking is, necessarily, the apprehension of being, and as such possesses being as its content; being means, and can only mean, that which is intelligible, and as such is that which is given to thinking. But Plotinus goes beyond Parmenides when he argues that thinking and being, precisely in their togetherness, are conditioned and in that sense have a “cause” which is other than themselves. Thus in between the two sentences just quoted, he says, “But the cause of thinking is something else, which is also [the cause] for being; thus something else is the cause of both simultaneously.”³⁴ But this cause, precisely as the cause of being itself, cannot be anything, any being:

All things come to [intellect] from there ... because he [that is, the One] is none of all things.... For this reason, that is none of the things in intellect, but all things are from it. This indeed is why they are realities: because they are already determinate.... Being must not float, as it were, in indeterminacy, but must be fixed by determination and rest; and rest in intelligibles is definition and shape, and by these it possesses existence.³⁵

Precisely as intelligible, being is determinate and thus conditioned, and so cannot be absolutely first. Neither being as a whole nor any being, therefore, can be the first principle, and the first principle cannot be any being.

32. On Aquinas’s *ipsum esse* as apophatic, see Brian Davies, OP, “Kenny on Aquinas on Being,” *The Modern Schoolman* 82, no. 2 (2005): 111–29, at 126–27.

33. Plotinus, 5.1.4, 26–28, 30–31.

34. Plotinus, 5.1.4, 28–30.

35. Plotinus, 5.1.7, 19–26.

Plotinus moves from being to the first principle by observing that anything exists in virtue of its unity, the determining 'one' that it has, whereby it is one thing, is itself, is intelligible, and so is at all: "All beings are beings by the 'one,' both those which are primarily beings and those which are in any way said to be among beings. For what would something be, if it were not one? If they are deprived of the 'one' which is said [of them], they are not those things."³⁶ Plotinus's point here is that 'one' is "the transcendental condition of appearing,"³⁷ the condition under which anything and everything can appear, or as we might say "show up" or be constituted as anything at all. As such it is the condition at once of thinking and of being. In this sense, and in this sense only, we may speak of 'one itself' or "the One" as the "cause of all things,"³⁸ "the cause of thinking ... which is also [the cause] for being."³⁹ But this is not to say that there is something named "the One" which causes all things to be. This is clearly impossible, since in that case the One would be included among all things and thus would not be the cause of all things. As Plotinus carefully explains, "Even to say 'cause' is not to predicate some accident of it, but of us, in that we have something from it, while that is in itself; but speaking precisely, one must not say 'that' or 'is.'"⁴⁰ "The One," so called, is not a thing or being which has 'one' as an attribute; if it were, it would be merely one of the beings, rather than the condition such that there are any beings at all. "The One" is not even one: "If

36. Plotinus, 6.9.1, 1–3.

37. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 146. See also 144: "Plotinus has seen that any discourse which seeks to anchor phenomena in an unconditioned foundation falls into a vicious circle. To seek the reason of beings in another being is to spin around among what is representable. In other words, he has seen the strategic difference between an entitative *cause*, which is representable and knowable, and a non-entitative *condition*, which is unrepresentable and only indirectly thinkable" (italics in original).

38. E.g., Plotinus, 6.9.6, 55–56.

39. Plotinus, 5.1.4, 28–30.

40. Plotinus, 6.9.3, 49–52.

‘the One,’ the name and what is expressed, were some affirmation, it would become less clear than not saying any name of it; for perhaps this was said so that he who seeks, beginning from this which is wholly indicative of simplicity, may finally negate even this.”⁴¹ Nor is it the attribute ‘one’ as found in and limited to any or every being. It is not the ‘one’ of something, but rather, as Plotinus says, “one without the something; for if it were some ‘one,’ it would not be one itself [αὐτοῦν].”⁴² To arrive at what Plotinus often calls “the power of all things,”⁴³ that is, the condition such that there is anything at all, we must as he insists take away all intelligible content, all that is, all being, anything and everything whatsoever. For any such content, any thing, would necessarily be something that has ‘one’ as an attribute and so would not be “one without the ‘something’” or “one itself,” the principle of all things.

Having reasoned his way to the recognition that being as such is conditioned and so cannot be the first principle, Plotinus therefore asks,

What then could the One be, and having what nature? It is not surprising that it is not easy to say, since it is not easy even [to say what] being or form [is]; but knowledge bearing on forms is possible for us. But insofar as the soul goes toward formlessness, since it is quite unable to comprehend what is not defined and as it were stamped by a varied stamp, it slips away and is afraid that it may have nothing.⁴⁴

Plotinus has the good sense to panic when, upon recognizing that all things are conditioned and therefore not first, he finds himself compelled to ask why there is anything at all. For as we have seen, the removal of all things is the demise of thought itself. And precisely because the One is the cause of all things in the sense we have explained, it follows by strict necessity that the One is not

41. Plotinus, 5.5.6, 30–34.

42. Plotinus, 5.3.13, 52.

43. Plotinus, 3.8.10, 1; 5.1.7, 10; 5.3.15, 33; 5.4.1, 36; 5.4.2, 39; 6.7.32, 31.

44. Plotinus, 6.9.3, 1–7.

any thing. As Plotinus repeatedly observes, if the One were anything at all, it could not be the cause of all things, because it would itself be included among all things. The logic is incontrovertible: “That is not anything, but prior to every thing, and is not a being... For since the nature of the One is generative of all things, it is none of them.”⁴⁵ Again, “The cause is not the same as the caused, and the cause of all things is none of them.”⁴⁶ Again, “In order that being may be, on this account he is not being, but its generator.”⁴⁷ Or, as Plotinus explains at greater length:

Since the reality which is generated is form ... and the form not of something but of everything, so that there is nothing else left out, it is necessary that that [that is, the first principle] be formless. But if it is formless, it is not a reality [ὄντα]; for a reality must be some “this,” that is, something determinate; but that is not understood as a “this”; for then it would not be the principle, but only that “this” which you said it was. If therefore all things are in what is generated, which of the things in it will you say it is? Since it is none of these, it can only be said to be beyond these. But these are the beings, and being; therefore, “beyond being.” This “beyond being” does not mean a “this”—for it does not affirm—and it does not say its name, but it conveys only “not this.”⁴⁸

The One, then, is not anything, none of all things, and therefore is not an (inevitably wrong) answer to the question “Why is there anything at all?” or “Why are there beings?” Rather, the passage beyond being represents the self-annihilation of thought upon the recognition that being, just in that it is intelligible and therefore conditioned, is dependent, derivative, not first. “How then can this come about? Take away all things.”⁴⁹ “If you wish to grasp the ‘isolated and alone,’ you will not think.”⁵⁰

45. Plotinus, 6.9.3, 55–56.

46. Plotinus, 6.9.6, 55–56.

47. Plotinus, 5.2.1, 7.

48. Plotinus, 5.5.6, 2–14.

49. Plotinus, 5.3.17, 39.

50. Plotinus, 5.3.13, 33. The phrase, “isolated and alone,” is a decontextualized tag from Plato’s *Philebus*, 63b7–8.

“WHY IS THERE ANYTHING AT ALL?”

The so-called “ascent to the One,” therefore, is not an ascent to an object, a being, to something or anything. It is rather an ascent of the self, an ascesis or mortification not merely of the body and the senses but of the mind itself. This is why, for Plotinus, what is sometimes termed the “outer” path, the metaphysical argument to a first principle from the existence of the world, coincides with the “inner” path, the phenomenological or existential discovery of the first principle as the inmost ground of consciousness or self-hood.⁵¹ The way “up” is the way “in”:⁵²

The soul must become formless if there is to be no obstacle set in it to the fulfillment and illumination of the first nature. If so, letting go of all outward things, it must turn altogether to the inward, not inclining toward any of the outward things, but unknowing all things, as previously with regard to sense, but now even with regard to the forms, and unknowing even itself, come into the vision of that.⁵³

Plotinus compares this ascesis of the mind, this “unknowing all things,” not merely sensible things but intelligible reality or being itself, to fasting in preparation for a religious ritual:

The first is the principle of being and more properly [first] even than reality. So opinion must be reversed; if not, you will be left deprived of God, like those who at festivals, by gluttony, stuff themselves with things which it is not right for those going toward the Gods to take, thinking that these things are clearer than the vision of the God, for whom it is proper to celebrate the festival, and do not share in the rites within.⁵⁴

The demand that we unknow all things, even intelligible reality itself, may explain Plotinus’s enigmatic remark that beauty—not merely the beauty of sensible things, but intelligible beauty which is identical with being or intelligible reality itself—can distract us

51. For these “paths” see W. Norris Clarke, SJ, *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 162.

52. See, e.g., Plotinus, 1.6.8, 1–5, and the whole of 5.1, especially sections 1–2 and 10–12.

53. Plotinus, 6.9.7, 15–21.

54. Plotinus, 5.5.11, 12–17.

from the first principle: beauty “even draws those who do not understand away from the Good, as the beloved [draws a child] from its father.”⁵⁵ Expressions such as “Take away all things” and “You will not think” clearly articulate the ascent to the One not as a passage to a “first and highest being,” which would be included among beings and therefore would itself be put into question when we ask “Why is there anything at all?,” nor as an ascent to something beyond being, which is obviously self-contradictory, but rather as the self-transcendence or silencing of thought to which that question impels the mind. It is a “standing outside and simplification and giving up of oneself,”⁵⁶ so that we ourselves become “not reality but beyond reality by this intercourse.”⁵⁷

One of Plotinus’s best and favorite metaphors for the One is that of light. He repeatedly compares the One not to a source of light, such as the sun, but rather to just light itself.⁵⁸ As light itself is not any visible thing, but rather the condition by which anything is visible, so the One is not any intelligible thing, any being, but the condition such that anything is intelligible and so is. The only way to “see” light itself is to redirect our attention, in seeing visible things, from the things themselves to the condition by which they are visible. Likewise, to pass from beings to the One is not to turn to another thing, but rather to attend to the condition by which there is anything at all: “If [intellect] dismisses the things seen [that is, the intelligibles, or beings] and looks toward that by which it sees, it looks at light and the source of light.”⁵⁹ The question “Why is there anything at all?” serves to prompt this shift of attention. But to attend to sheer light itself, taking away anything that underlies it or is illuminated by it, any visible thing, is not

55. Plotinus, 5.5.12, 36–37. This distraction may perhaps be compared to what Heidegger calls the “forgetfulness of being” (*Sein*) in our attention to beings (*die Seienden*).

56. Plotinus, 6.9.11.2.

57. Plotinus, 6.9.11, 42–43.

58. E.g., Plotinus, 5.3.17, 27–38; 5.5.7, 12–14; 5.6.4, 14.

59. Plotinus, 5.5.7, 18–21.

to see anything, to “unsee” all things. Thus Plotinus describes the “vision” of the One as “filling the eyes with light, not making one see something else by it, but the light itself is what is seen.”⁶⁰ This analogy should once again evoke the mind’s fear and distress at the passage beyond being, for eyes filled with light are dazzled, blinded, not seeing anything. This super-saturation and blinding of the intellect, not the apprehension of a “first and highest being,” is what Plotinus means by the “vision” of the One.

Proclus formalizes and systematizes the inescapable logic by which Plotinus argues that the cause of all things must be none of all things. A fundamental governing principle of his entire system is that the cause of any level of reality must itself not be that level or any member of it, since, as cause, it is prior to that level and all its members: “In every case, the cause is other than the things caused. And on this account nature is incorporeal, being the cause of bodies; and soul is altogether everlasting, as cause of things that come into being; and intellect is unmoved, as cause of all things that are moved.”⁶¹ This is precisely why we make the dialectical ascent to a higher level by the negation or “taking away” (ἀφαίρεσις) of the lower. Such ἀφαίρεσις constitutes the type of negation that signifies neither privation nor co-ordinate difference, but causal priority.⁶² By the same logic, Proclus continues, “If then in every procession of beings, the things that pertain to the effects are denied of the causes, it is thus necessary to take away all things likewise from the cause of all things.”⁶³

“The cause of all things,” Proclus explains, “must be that which all things participate.”⁶⁴ That is, the cause of all things must not have, but must rather be nothing but, the character that all things

60. Plotinus, 6.7.36, 20–22.

61. Proclus, *Platonic Theology* (*Plat. theol.*) (*Théologie platonicienne*, 6 vols., ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink [Paris: Belles Lettres, 2003]), 2.10, 62.12–15.

62. For these three types of negation see, e.g., *Plat. theol.* 2.5, 38.18–25.

63. Proclus, *Plat. theol.* 2.10, 62.15–18.

64. Proclus, *Plat. theol.* 2.3, 24.15–17.

have and exist by having. Not all things are ensouled, or intellectual, or living, and therefore neither soul, nor intellect, nor life is the cause of all things. Matter considered in itself is formless, and therefore is not caused by being *qua* intelligible form. But all things whatsoever are one, and exist only by being one:

What then might be participated in every case and by all things? We must examine every being, what all things undergo and whatever is common in them all... What else, then, do we say of each of them, but that it is one ... and in general, that it is not possible to say anything else of all things, than that each and all are one? For if anything should be without a share of "one." ... straightway what becomes without a share of "one" would be nothing whatsoever.⁶⁵

As in Plotinus, therefore, "the cause of all things" is not anything which is one, but just "one itself." But since to be, to be anything at all, is to be not just "one" but one thing, that is, a thing that has or participates "one," it follows that the "cause of all things" neither is nor is anything at all. Since all things whatsoever are from the One, the One itself is no thing. Thus, "as many things are negated of the One as proceed from it; for it must be none of all things so that all things may be from it,"⁶⁶ or again, "For this reason it is none of all things, because all things proceed from it."⁶⁷

Proclus recognizes the performative contradiction entailed by thinking away all things whatsoever and therewith thought itself: "For there is neither any discourse nor any name of that ... and ... if there is no discourse of the One, neither is this discourse itself, which maintains these things, appropriate to the One.... And it is no surprise that, wishing to know the ineffable by discourse, one brings discourse to the impossible ... so that if there should be a discourse of the ineffable, it does not cease overthrowing itself

65. Proclus, *Plat. theol.* 2.3, 25.7–16.

66. Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria (In Parm.)*, 3 vols., ed. Carlos Steel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007–2009) 6, 1076.23–25.

67. Proclus, *Plat. theol.* 2.5, 37.24–25.

and fights against itself.”⁶⁸ Likewise, to say “There is no name of the One”⁶⁹ is to contradict oneself by naming the One in saying that it has no name. Thus in his *Parmenides* commentary, after negating all things with regard to the One, Proclus asks whether these negations themselves are true of the One, and replies that they are not: “The negations of the One are not about the One. For nothing whatever applies to it, neither as form nor as privation.... So none of the stated negative conclusions is about the One, but on account of its simplicity it is exalted above all opposition and all negation. Rightly therefore in the end he [that is, Parmenides in the dialogue] added that these negations are not about the One.”⁷⁰ Even such negations, therefore, must themselves be negated: “Rightly therefore he finally takes away even negations themselves from the One,”⁷¹ and “thus by negating he removes all negation and concludes with silence the study thereof.”⁷²

As in Plotinus, then, the dialectical ascent to the “cause of all things” culminates not in negative thoughts but in silence, that is, in not thinking: “Come then, now if ever, let us make away with multiform cognitions, and banish from ourselves the variety of life, and coming into quiet [ἡρεμία] let us approach near to the cause of all things.”⁷³ We naturally desire to know why there is anything at all, but this desire cannot be satisfied by knowing anything, and therefore by any knowing: “Even the purest of cognitions are not able to comprehend it.... But whatever they cognize, they desire more than this, on account of the connatural travail that is in them for the supereminence of the One.”⁷⁴ At the culmination of its

68. Proclus, *Plat. theol.* 2.10, 63.22–64.9.

69. Proclus, *In Parm.* 7, 508.12.

70. Proclus, *In Parm.* 7, 518.13–21.

71. Proclus, *In Parm.* 7, 519.8–9.

72. Proclus, *In Parm.* 7, 521.24–26. Cf. Trouillard, “Procession,” 2: “Super-negation [ὑπεραποφάσις] cuts away at once affirmations and negations, that is to say all the antitheses of meaning, to deliver the very origin of meaning.”

73. Proclus, *Plat. theol.* 2.11, 64.11–14; cf., e.g., *Plat. theol.* 2.9, 58.23; *Plat. theol.* 3.7, 30.8.

74. Proclus, *In Parm.* 7, 502.33–503.2.

ascent, therefore, the soul “approaches the One itself and unites, not inquiring what it is not and what it is, but altogether shutting down [*claudentem*]⁷⁵ and contracting all activity and content with union alone.”⁷⁶ The image is that of the soul contracting to a point and thus, so to speak, blinking out altogether. Here again, therefore, we find the self-transcending or self-annihilation of thought in its recognition that all things whatsoever are caused, or derivative, not first, and thus seeking to pass beyond all things.

It is perhaps less well recognized, though demonstrably the case, that a similar line of reasoning can be found in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, who uses the word *esse*⁷⁷ rather than ‘one’ to point to the “cause of all things,” which is therefore none of them. A being (*ens*, that which is), Aquinas explains, is a thing that has, or exercises, an act-of-existing (*actus essendi*, *esse*). Since a being is not just *esse* itself but something that has or “participates” *esse*, it follows that all beings are caused to be:

It cannot be that *esse* itself is caused by the very form or quiddity of a thing [that is, by what the thing is] ... because some thing would thus be its own cause and something would bring itself into existence, which is impossible. Hence it follows that every such thing, whose *esse* is other than its nature [that is, what it is], has *esse* from another. And since all that is through another is reduced to that which is through itself as to the first cause, it follows that there is some thing which is cause of existing [*causa essendi*] to all things, in that itself is just *esse*... For every thing that is not just *esse* has a cause of its *esse* ... And this is the first cause, which is God.⁷⁸

75. This part of *In Parm.* is extant only in Latin translation. The Greek “retroversion” by D. Gregory MacIsaac takes *claudentem* to represent *μύσασαν*, which can refer to shutting either the eyes or the mouth. Not incidentally, this word is the origin of “mystery,” “mysticism,” etc.

76. Proclus, *In Parm.* 7, 520.20–23.

77. This word cannot be translated as “being,” since the latter term here translates *ens* and refers to that which is, not the principle by which anything and everything is. *Esse* is best left untranslated, or translated literally as an infinitive verb, “to be.”

78. Aquinas, *De ente* 3.

Like Plotinus in similar contexts, Aquinas is clearly speaking loosely when he refers to God as “some thing” (*aliqua res*), since in the same sentence he calls God the cause of existing to all things (*omnibus rebus*), not merely all other things. So too, in a similar passage in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas argues that “everything that in any way is [*omne quod quocumque modo est*] is from God,”⁷⁹ which implies that God is not included in “everything that in any way is.” In the next article he observes that “the earliest philosophers” assigned causes to beings insofar as they are “such” by accidental forms or “these” by substantial forms. But then “others raised themselves to considering being insofar as it is being [*ens inquantum est ens*] and considered the cause of things, not only according as they are ‘these’ or ‘such’ but in that they are beings [*secundum quod sunt entia*].” To seek a cause of “everything that in any way is,” a “cause of things ... in that they are beings,” is manifestly the same as to ask, “Why are there beings?” or “Why is there anything at all?” Aquinas continues, “This, therefore, which is the cause of things insofar as they are beings, must be the cause of things according to all that pertains to their *esse* in any mode,” and is therefore “the universal cause of beings.”⁸⁰

Aquinas’s God, then, is clearly not merely a “first being” which causes only all other beings, or a “necessary being” which causes only contingent beings, but rather the cause of being as such, the cause of existing to absolutely everything that exists in any way at all. God accounts for there being anything at all, in the absolutely all-inclusive sense. Thus Aquinas refers to God as *principium totius esse*, “the principle of all ‘to be,’”⁸¹ clearly indicating that ‘to be’ itself, that is, that anything at all exists, is caused by God. So, too,

79. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, 44, 1, resp.

80. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, 44, 2, resp.

81. E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, ed. C. Pera et al. (Rome and Turin: Marietti, 1961), 1, 68, 3; *Summa theologiae* 1, 3, 5, resp; 1, 4, 3, resp.; *De potentia* 3, 1, resp.; Thomas Aquinas *In libros physicorum*, editio Leonina (Turin, 1954), 8, 2, 5. This formula indicates as well that the name *esse* taken positively signifies not what God is, but what all things have from him.

he speaks of *totum ens*, all being or all that is, coming from God, or of God as the cause of all being.⁸² It follows, as he expressly recognizes, that God himself is not included in all that is.⁸³ God “stands outside the order of beings [*extra ordinem entium*], as a certain cause pouring forth all being [*totum ens*] and all its differences,”⁸⁴ and again, “The first cause is above being [*ens*] in that it is infinite *esse*.”⁸⁵ Thus it is well recognized that for Aquinas, metaphysics as the science of “being (*ens*) insofar as it is being” does not take as its subject an all-embracing totality “being” that includes both creatures and God, but rather addresses God, not as included in its subject, but only as the cause or principle of its subject.⁸⁶ Like ‘the One’ or ‘one itself’ in Plotinus and Proclus, therefore, the term *ipsum esse* does not provide a conceptual grasp of what God is,⁸⁷ but indicates God as the principle of what all things—“everything that in any way is”—have from him, namely, to be.

Aquinas’s doctrine of analogical predication does not mitigate

82. In addition to the passages quoted here see, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 2, 38, 3; *Summa theologiae* 1, 45, 1, resp.; *De potentia* 3, 1, resp.; *In libros physicorum* 8, 2, 5; *Sententia libri ethicorum*, editio Leonina (Rome: Sancta Sabina, 1969), 6, 2, 16.

83. Cf. Lawrence Dewan, OP, “What Does Createdness Look Like;” in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev’d Dr Robert D. Crouse*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten, and Walter Hannam (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 335–61, at 344: “[B]eing in its totality’ (*totum ens*) is the name for God’s effect, which he is himself beyond,” and again, 360: “Creation is a doctrine which pertains to *reality as such*. The Creator creates ‘what it is to be real.’ The Creator himself must be beyond reality, and can be called ‘real’ only in a somewhat new meaning of the word” (italics in original). The word “somewhat” is both vague and understated: Aquinas explains precisely in what sense God can, and in what sense he cannot, be called a “being.”

84. Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias* 1, 14, 22. He goes on to say that necessary/contingent is a difference within being, and that “the first cause ... transcends the order of necessity and contingency.” See above, n. 27.

85. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Librum de causis expositio*, ed. H. D. Saffrey (Fribourg and Louvain: Société Philosophique /Nauwelaerts, 1954), 6.

86. See John F. Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Christian Philosophy,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 1–33, at 18; Jean-Luc Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théo-logie,” *Revue thomiste* 95, no. 1 (1995): 31–66, at 38–39.

87. Cf. Davies, “Kenny on Aquinas,” 126; Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin,” 59–65, esp. 64; Stephen L. Brock, “On Whether Aquinas’s *Ipsium Esse* Is ‘Platonism,’” *Review of Metaphysics* 60 (2006): 269–303, at 301.

but rather reinforces this conclusion. Analogy, in Aquinas’s usage, is not a way of explaining how the same concept can apply both to creatures and to God. On the contrary, he invokes analogy to insist that the word ‘being,’ or any other word, does *not* express the same concept in both cases.⁸⁸ To say that everything is a being, or is a thing, is one, is good, and so on, and then to predicate the same terms not univocally but rather analogically of God, is just to say that “being” (or “thing,” etc.) is *not* a common totality that includes both creatures and God. Rather, such predication expresses only the order of all things to God as their principle: “Whatever is said of God and creatures is said according as there is some order of the creature to God, as to its principle and cause, in which all the perfections of things exist excellently.”⁸⁹ We may say that God is (*est*) or call God a being (*ens*) only in the sense that all beings insofar as they are beings are effects and likenesses of God.⁹⁰ It follows that there is no larger totality ‘beings’ that includes both creatures and God. Analogical predication thus says that God, as the principle of all being, is not included in all being (*totum ens*) or in “everything that in any way is.” Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy therefore effectively restates his insistence that there is no common totality—“beings,” “being,” “all that is,” “everything”—that includes both creatures and God, but rather that God is the principle of that very totality, *totum ens*, and as such not any member of it, or as Plotinus and Proclus would say, “none of all things.”⁹¹

88. See Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas and Analogy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 93: “[F]or St. Thomas, analogy is a kind of equivocation.” The interpretation of analogy as meaning that the same concept applies in different ways (finitely and infinitely) to creatures and to God is not Thomistic analogy but Scotistic univocity. By including God within the univocal totality “being,” this leads, via Suarez, to the failure on the part of Leibniz and his successors to this day to ask “Why is there anything at all?” in the full sense.

89. *Summa theologiae* 1, 13, 5, resp.

90. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, 4, 3, resp.

91. Cf. Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin,” 39: “Thus, for Thomas Aquinas, God as such belongs neither ... to *ens commune*, nor to *ens in quantum ens*,” and again, 43: “Common being [*L’étant commun*] cannot, according to Thomas Aquinas, introduce anything in

It follows that, as Aquinas argues, we cannot know what God is but only what he is not, and hence can know God only by “remotion” or “taking away.” “Since we cannot know of God what he is, but what he is not, we cannot consider how God is, but how he is not. . . . It can be shown of God how he is not, by removing from him those things that do not pertain to him.”⁹² But “what he is not” includes absolutely all things whatsoever, because “all things” is precisely what comes from, or depends on, God:

For the divine substance by its measurelessness exceeds every form which our intellect attains; and thus we cannot apprehend it by knowing what it is. Yet we have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not. We approach knowledge of it insofar as we are able to remove more things from it by our intellect. . . . And then there will be proper consideration of his substance when he is known as distinct from all things.⁹³

This corresponds precisely to Plotinus’s injunction to “unknow all things” or “take away all things” and to Proclus’s demand that we “take away all things from the cause of all things.” But when all things are removed there is nothing left to think, and so neither being nor thinking. To know God “as distinct from all things” is in fact not to know any thing, to “unknow” altogether.

When we proceed to God by way of remotion, first we negate of him corporeal things, and then even intellectual things, as they are found in creatures, such as goodness and wisdom; and then there remains in our intellect, that he is, and nothing more, wherefore it is as in a certain confusion. But in the end we remove from him even this *esse* itself as it is in creatures; and thus it remains in a certain darkness of unknowing, according to which unknowing, so far as pertains to the *statum viae*, we are best joined with God, as Dionysius says.⁹⁴

common—and above all not its intelligibility—between being insofar as it is being [*l'étant en tant qu'étant*] and God. The analogy of being [*L'analogie de l'être*] . . . never has any other function, for him, than to dig the gulf that separates these two acceptations of *esse*.”

92. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, 3, proem.

93. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1, 14, 2–3.

94. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, ed P. Mandonnet and

Aquinas’s argument from all things to a cause of all things, then, does not lead to a God who is a being, or who is anything at all, but rather to the same self-transcendence, self-emptying, or silencing of thought that we found in Plotinus and Proclus. Such an approach is clearly far more, indeed infinitely more radical than merely positing God as a “first and highest being” or a “necessary being.”



Far from being distinctively modern, the question “Why is there anything at all?” in its absolute sense has scarcely been asked since the Middle Ages.⁹⁵ This question, taken absolutely, does indeed drive thought outside of itself, which is why those who do not limit it but acknowledge its full, absolute scope often set it aside as meaningless. But one man’s meaninglessness is another man’s mysticism. Rather than admitting an answer, the question serves to drive thought to its self-immolation in the face of the “wonder of all wonders,” that there are beings.⁹⁶ Reflecting on this question, neither offering a positive answer nor dismissing it as meaningless but rather attending seriously to its all-comprehensive scope, thus offers some insight into what Neoplatonists mean, and what they do not mean, by “the One,” and what Aquinas means when he calls God “‘to be’ itself” or “‘just to be.’”⁹⁷ The recognition that whatever

M. Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929–37), I, 8, 1, 1, ad 4. The reference to the *status viae* might be taken to indicate by contrast that *in patria*, that is, in the beatific vision, knowing God by his essence, we will have a positive knowledge of what God is. This would imply that God is a “what,” a “something,” merely unknowable to us during this life due to our limitations. But in Aquinas’s account of the beatific vision, the divine essence itself is united to the intellect in the role of the intelligible species by which we know, so that it is both what we know and that by which we know (*Summa contra gentiles* 3, 51, 4). To be filled with “just to be” is not to apprehend a determinate essence, or “something.” Cf. Plotinus’s metaphor for the vision of the One as “filling the eyes with light, not making one see something else by it, but the light itself is what is seen” (see above, p. 197).

95. Heidegger is no doubt the most prominent exception.

96. Martin Heidegger, “Nachwort zu: Was ist Metaphysik,” in *Wegmarken*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1996), 307.

97. Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Distinguer pour unir, ou les degrés du savoir* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946), 457: “In saying ‘subsistent “to be” itself’ [‘Être même subsistant], or ‘in him no real distinction between essence and existence,’ the metaphysician designates

can be thought is something, that thought cannot escape from being, leads to the understanding of being as, precisely, that which is intelligible, that which is given to thought. This in turn leads to the realization that its very intelligibility implies that being is conditioned and therefore not absolutely first. But the ground or source of meaning itself, of intelligibility, of thought and being in their togetherness, cannot itself be thought, be intelligible, be something or anything. Thus thought leads itself to its own silencing. Such dialectical mysticism is nothing irrational, but rather the logically necessary culmination of the intellectual ascent to being as that which all thought apprehends. If the question “Why is there anything at all?” points to God, it is not the God of theism (which is also the God of atheism)⁹⁸ but the God of the mystics, never to be objectified as a “necessary being” or a “first and highest being” but inwardly approached with fear and trembling, by the self-transcendence of thought into the darkness of unknowing.

without seeing it the sacred abyss that makes the angels tremble with love or terror.” In the tradition to which Maritain refers, angels are, precisely, intellects.

98. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *Analogie et dialectique: Essais de théologie fondamentale* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1982), 20–21: “The distinctive feature of modernity ... does not at all consist in a negation of God.... Modernity is characterized in the first place by the annulling of God as a question.... What then is found set in play in a negation or an affirmation of God? Not God as such, but the compatibility or incompatibility of an idol called ‘God’ with the totality of a conceptual vision where the being in its existence [*l’étant dans son être*] marks the age.... Theism or atheism bear equally on a idol. They remain enemies, but brother enemies in a common and insurpassable idolatry.” So-called “classical theism” is not classical at all but distinctly modern.