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How Humans, as the Inventors of the Negative, Utilize the Negative in Their Search for
Metaphysical Answers: A Comparative Study of Kenneth Burke and St. Thomas Aquinas

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to examine the work of Kenneth Burke and St. Thomas Aquinas to understand how the negative is used in the pursuit of metaphysical answers. I will do this by outlining the views of Burke and Aquinas about the negative, using the negative in naming, and metaphysical transcendence. I will consider how the two scholars would approach the views of the other and frame the thesis as the analysis of a “conversation” between Burke and Aquinas that could occur in Burke’s metaphoric parlor. I will include the insights of Aristotle and Plato to outline the Ancient philosophical thought that influenced both Burke and Aquinas. This will show how Burke and Aquinas built upon the scholarship of these ancient scholars, expanding upon some views while diverging from others. The comparison of Burke and Aquinas naturally leads to an assertion that it is important to embrace intellectual collaboration regardless of religious or non-religious affiliations. Whether someone is seeking God, seeking answers to the questions of life and purpose, or both, there is value in human connection. Burke’s scholarship exemplified the modern focus of rhetorical studies. As humans study rhetoric, we are led toward the question of the purpose of language which causes us to consider humanity’s motivations and purpose. Aquinas, in contrast, began with the question of human purpose. Along the way, he embraced the value of language in leading humans to this purpose.

As it was beautifully articulated by Burke, “If nature gives birth to an animal that can talk, then by the same token nature becomes able to comment on itself” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 276). The comments become a conversation, and suddenly humans are faced with more questions but also more people searching for truth who are excited to share their discoveries and collaborate. There does not appear to be any scholarship that puts Burke and Aquinas directly in

conversation with one another, yet much knowledge can be gained by considering their insights in tandem. This thesis offers readers the opportunity to learn about the negative, and the implications of the negative, from two experts that are rarely, if ever, referenced in the same work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As humans, we desperately seek understanding. We want to understand ourselves, others, and the world. Language is the means through which we can contemplate and communicate existence, allowing for understanding to occur, yet there are still many things beyond understanding. Metaphysical philosophy is the domain in which scholars contemplate what lies beyond the reality of the physical world. Though Kenneth Burke is categorized foremost as a communication scholar, his theory of language offers insights into metaphysical questions. One such question is whether there is a creator of the universe, a metaphysical sovereign. This question has existed for centuries, and one of the most well-respected theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas, made it a point to examine who God is and how we can connect to God and speak about Him. Influenced heavily by Aristotle, Aquinas is a religious scholar whose metaphysical views are not necessarily religious at their base. He asserts that God is the creator of the world, but Aquinas turns to cause and effect as his argument for God. God, as the ultimate cause, the unmoved mover, offers an explanation of the world around us while also being found within the world around us. From this belief that God exists, Aquinas expands upon his view of who God is and how we reach Him.

An important reason to study Burke and Aquinas together is to uphold the value of the conversation between religious and secular insights in the humanities. A true scholar does not shy away from the literature of a person who has different beliefs about a higher power, instead, they embrace the intellectual argumentation of others with awareness of their values and

influences. Burke recognizes the value in studying theology despite his status as a secular scholar. In fact, he finds theological study “particularly rewarding” for secular scholars because it is one of the earliest forms of linguistic study. In his words, it pushes scholars to the “thoroughness of statement we take as the culminating attribute of the linguistic faculty” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 456). Theologians learn with the intention of acquiring knowledge that goes beyond their physical life on earth. For secular communication scholars, this is essential as well. Though the intention may not be to achieve divine knowledge of God, the profoundness that exists in the study of language is indisputably beyond the realm of knowledge humans can possess at this time, or maybe ever.

Although Burke showed great interest in theological language and even wrote a book titled *The Rhetoric of Religion*, he rarely addresses the writings of Aquinas. He engaged in deep analysis of another Catholic Saint, St. Augustine, but there is a noticeable gap in his opinions regarding St. Thomas Aquinas. However, Burke’s theory of the negative and his discussion of negative theology resonate with Aquinas’s teachings. The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate this resonance by putting these two thinkers in conversation. Burke’s metaphor of a “parlor” as a space of intellectual dialogue across time invites this comparison:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either

the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

(Philosophy of Literary Forms 110-111).

Burke never wrote about entering a parlor with Aquinas, so, instead, I must enter a parlor with them both. The heated topic of discussion of the hour is the Negative, and I will offer an account of the discussion I witness between Burke and Aquinas. The negative accounts for unknowingness while also revealing the power of human communication, and these two certainly have something to say about it.

I will first introduce Burke and Aquinas by sharing information about their lives and work. Within these introductions, I will explain the influence of their Greek predecessors, the prominent figures, some might even argue the hosts, of the Burkean Parlor. Plato and Aristotle are seen as some of the most influential figures of the ancient world, and their insights continue to shape modern scholarship. In the times of ancient Greece, rhetoric and philosophy were nearly synonymous with one another, and scholars of the time offered guidance about wisdom and communication all at once. Burke and Aquinas continue this tradition of merging the humanities into a pursuit of the truth of self and society. Although the purpose of this paper is to understand the relationship between the scholarship of Burke and Aquinas, their academic ancestors uniquely impacted them both. Aquinas is known for popularizing Aristotle whereas Burke is recognized more for his shift away from traditional Aristotelian rhetoric leading to changes in the study of rhetoric in the late twentieth century. Burke finds more inspiration in Plato's imaginative dialogues than in Aristotle's dry treatises, though he is influenced by both. Each of

these four scholars understood the concept of truth differently, yet all understood the importance of having a clearly defined epistemological position in which to ground their other intellectual pursuits.

In this thesis, I will focus on three interconnected concepts of which each of the scholars has their own view. Chapter Four will focus on the concept of Negativity. I will examine Burke's understanding of the negative in language and moral exhortation and Aquinas' negative theology rooted in his beliefs about God's existence. Chapter Five will build upon the foundation of negativity by examining how the negative is essential in naming. Burke's concept of the Title of Titles and Aquinas' thoughts regarding the naming of God are interconnected and rooted in their theories of the negative. Understanding how to name the highest order of being, God in Aquinas' case and the Title of Titles for Burke, offers insight into how language plays a crucial role in reaching transcendence through the pursuit of that metaphysical superpower. Chapter Six will study how Burke and Aquinas believe the negative is utilized in humans' pursuit of transcendence.

I now invite you to join me in Burke's Parlor as we examine how a conversation about the negative would progress between Kenneth Burke and St. Thomas Aquinas.

Chapter 2

Introduction of Kenneth Burke

Kenneth Burke was an American rhetorical scholar whose rhetorical system revolutionized the study of language and social systems. He attended Ohio State and Columbia University but never finished degrees at either university. Instead, Burke chose to forge his own path of scholarship. Throughout his career, Burke was a writer, editor, translator, and lecturer. His diverse array of writings includes novels, short stories, political commentaries, reviews, and essays. After a long and successful career, Burke passed away in 1993 at the age of 96. In his obituary, published in the *New York Times*, Burke was described as a philosopher of language (Lyons). Burke's numerous writings seek to explain the purpose and value of language while highlighting the centrality of human communication throughout the history of man. Burke's observations and theories about language and human understanding are profound and allow for further exploration of the ineffable questions of philosophy. Two of his most notable contributions, relevant to the content of this thesis, are his definition of man and system of Dramatism.

Definition of Man

Burke's "Definition of man" offers a foundation for all his views, especially those in the fields of rhetoric and philosophy. He defines "man" in five clauses: "the symbol using animal," "inventor of the negative," "separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making," "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy," and "rotten with perfection" ("Definition of Man"

507). As one can predict, the first two clauses of this definition are most relevant to this paper's goals, so I shall focus on those.

Man as the symbol using animal is the understanding that humans possess a unique ability to share our understanding of reality with others through symbols. Our understanding of the world is also shaped by the symbols that we make and use. The essence of man is that we use symbols. Our reality is a collection of symbol-systems ("Definition of Man" 493). Symbols can be created to share factual information like truths of science that are yet to be discovered or not yet shared with the public. They allow for the dissemination of this information, adding to the general mindset of those who are within range of our communication practices. Symbols also are used to share subjective, even erroneous, beliefs that can alter the way others perceive the world. A parent who disapproves of a certain type of people may never directly tell their children that those people are insignificant or inferior, but their actions are nonverbal symbols of their mindset. Their children respond to these symbols as they shape their own view of the world, whether they will treat the group of people in a similar or different way from their parent depends on how they interpret the symbol. A symbol conveys the beliefs of the person who shared it, and those who receive the symbol use their own conception of the world to interpret and use the symbol to shift their own views of the world. In the case of the parent and child, suppose the parent is a father who has a bias against women working as doctors. When the father acts surprised that his doctor is a woman, that is a symbol which is interpreted by both the child and the doctor. Prejudice, even unconscious prejudice, can be conveyed in a symbol, and prejudice can also arise from interpreting symbols of others. The child may internalize various symbols that convey sexism and, over time, come to believe that men should be in higher positions than women. The father may be consciously aware of his bias, but it may also be

unconscious. His symbol-making might offer a truer picture of his reality than what that he knows about himself. He may not realize that he expects men to be in charge and is sharing that message with his child through his words and actions.

Symbols can also deceive people through misinterpretation. Suppose the father is not biased against female doctors. In fact, his wife, the child's mother, is a doctor at the same hospital. He may be surprised that his doctor is a woman because his wife mistakenly told him that the appointment was with a man. His surprise was the result of expecting another person, not expecting a man rather than a woman. The female doctor, who may have faced prejudice throughout her career, saw his surprise and interpreted it as bias. Her view of the father changed because of how she interpreted symbols. The person interpreting a symbol interprets it based on their experiences. Those experiences may differ from those of the person creating the symbol. This may lead to unintentional meanings being derived from a symbol. Symbols have the power to shape our view of the world, but our understanding of symbols is also based on our current view of the world.

Language is imperfect, but it is used because we yearn for collaboration. Regardless of the context in which symbols are utilized, it is evident that humans are reliant on others when creating our unique views of the world. Symbols are constantly being created, shared, modified, and rejected as humans try to capture their individual reality in a collaborative medium: language. Knowledge is the collection of symbol-systems that have shaped perceptions and actions throughout humanity's history. The purpose of language is to collaborate, and rhetoric is the means through which we can understand the intricacies of human relationships.

Just as it is not fully accurate to claim that man created language, Burke is not entirely happy with entitling the second clause of his definition of man the *inventor of the negative*.

Rather, this clause focuses on how negatives are not products of nature, and they exist only in human symbol systems. Inspired by the chapter “The Idea of Nothing” in Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, Burke seeks to develop a Dramatistic view of the negative. Dramatism will be elaborated on in the next section, but for the purpose of understanding negativity, consider the phrases “it is not” with “thou *shalt* not” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 9-10). When something *is* not, the emphasis is on the scientific view of nature or presumed objective factuality in everyday discourse. Everything in nature exists or else it would not be in nature. A symbol for something that doesn’t exist only works by alluding to the things which do exist. It is like picturing the infinite nothingness of a black hole, we can only do so by imagining something like a very deep ditch or maybe a black circle in the sky. We cannot picture nothingness. Burke argues that the hortatory negative “thou shalt not” can exist even though the scientific no of “it is not” cannot exist. This is because the hortatory negative is not a symbol for something physical, it is a symbol for an idea and “though we cannot have an ‘idea of nothing’ we can have an ‘idea of no’” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 10). This idea of no is rooted in moralistic commands and statements about how people should and should not act. The hortatory negative is the means through which morality can be symbolically shared. When humans are understood as people who act, as they are understood in Burke’s Dramatistic approach, the necessity to communicate morality exists.

Dramatism

Burke’s concept of dramatism finds its foundation in his definition of man. As a person lives their life, they come across other people. In these interactions, they could simply regard the

other person as a body in motion. The world is full of moving systems like the “endless cycle of births and deaths” or “the slashing of waves against the beach,” yet humans do not treat one another as if they are only things in motion. Humans treat one another like actors. Burke explains that “whether or not we are just things in motion, we think of one another (and especially of those with whom we are intimate) as persons. And the difference between a thing and a person is that one merely moves whereas the other acts” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 53). In our efforts to understand the symbols shared by those around us, we must consider their motives as people who act. This can be simplified by a pentad of key terms: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. These terms describe what people are doing and why they are doing it, and that is the Dramatistic approach (*A Grammar of Motives* xv). Burke’s understanding of communication and his understanding of human motives are deeply intertwined. Humans do not look at one another as beings passing by. Burke explains that “we hope to make clear [in *A Grammar of Motives*] the ways in which dialectical and metaphysical issues necessarily figure in the subject of motivation. Our speculations, as we interpret them, should show that the subject of motivation is a philosophical one, not ultimately to be solved in terms of empirical science” (*A Grammar of Motives* xxiii). People engage with their fellow man and make decisions about themselves and the world as a result of their community. Rhetoric induces cooperation between humans because humans respond to symbols. In the dramatistic model, rhetoric allows for collaboration.

Because Burke is so relationally centered in his rhetorical scholarship, his areas of inquiry go beyond the simple science of humans and move toward questions of motives and purpose. The Dramatistic approach will be revisited throughout this thesis to emphasize the way linguistic negativity is used as part of the pursuit of metaphysical answers.

Ancient Influence on Kenneth Burke

The consideration of epistemological positions of Burke and Aristotle shed light on their differences, especially their opposing beliefs about whether rhetoric can promote truth. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explains that “rhetoric is useful. [first] because the true and just are but nature stronger than their opposites, so that if judgments are not made in the right way [the true and the just] are necessarily defeated [by their opposites]. And this is worthy of censure. Further, even if we were to have the most exact knowledge, it would not be very easy for us in speaking to use to persuade [some audiences]” (*On Rhetoric* 35). As evidenced by this passage, Aristotle believes that there is definitive truth that can be defended by rhetorical means, but it is important to establish that Aristotle believes truth is found through dialectic means rather than rhetoric. In the words of Maurice Natanson, “rhetoric is subordinate in the hierarchy of knowledge to dialectic as belief is subordinate to knowledge... the division of rhetoric and dialectic warns us against confusing truth with its artful presentation and at the same time shows that they are separate facets of a single universe of discourse: the intelligible world” (Natanson 134).

In conceptualizing the art of rhetoric, Aristotle is acutely aware of the criticisms of rhetoric in his time, including those of his teacher, Plato. Plato’s famous dialogue *Gorgias*, for example, attacked rhetoric as a sham art that deceives the public with beautiful words the same way cosmetics fools us into believing that someone is healthy and beautiful when they are not (Plato). Aristotle is careful not to paint rhetoric as the source of truth but rather as a useful means for conveying truth in a public forum. Just as rhetoric can be used to deceive, it can also be used for virtuous purposes. This activity of discovering truth is foundational to Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia*, perfect happiness by means of virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*) (Capuccino). Our

purpose as people is to utilize our unique human ability to think rationally in an effort to reach the truth of virtue and, consequently, achieve eudaimonia. Rhetoric allows individuals to defend the truth they have discovered through dialectic reasoning.

For Burke, dialectic and rhetoric share a more equal relationship than they do for Aristotle. In an article published in a 1966 edition of *College Composition and Communication* entitled “Kenneth Burke, Aristotle, and the Future of Rhetoric,” Joseph Schwartz outlines the relationship between the rhetorical views of Aristotle and Kenneth Burke concluding that the discipline of rhetoric is not fundamentally changing, nor will it likely ever drift from the central concept of I-Message-Thou (Schwartz 215). Schwartz explains that “[Burke] feels as strongly as Aristotle does that rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic and is related especially to ethics and politics. Burke makes much of dialectic, the naming process, insisting that it is a veritable part of rhetorical inquiry itself. For Burke dialectic is the counterpart of rhetoric in the same way that for Aristotle rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic” (Schwartz, 212). Burke took the conventional Aristotelian view of rhetoric and began to introduce insights that allow for a more modern understanding of how rhetoric exists in our deeply interconnected world while still permitting classical influence from Aristotle and Plato.

Unlike Schwartz, I do believe that rhetoric has made significant strides and Burke has ushered scholarship into a new era of rhetorical study. Though language itself is consistent in many ways, our efforts to understand human communication are ever-changing. Schwartz’s belief that the I-Message-Thou concept will always remain central to rhetorical study ignores the importance of Burke’s influence on rhetorical study to question what the message is and how the actors in a dialectical exchange influence the message that is created. Burke does not discard the work of Aristotle or Plato, nor does he accept it as indisputable law. Instead, he expands upon

ancient insights and creates a new way of considering how humans, as symbol-using animals, collaborate and persuade in order to discern truth within the complexity of society.

Burke understands rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 430). Burke, like Aristotle, believes that rhetoric is a means through which we can reveal justice. Throughout the numerous works of Burke, it is evident that he puts a greater emphasis on persuasion than Aristotle. Aristotle believes that persuasion comes easily when you are sharing the truth, but Burke does not necessarily share Aristotle’s view that there is a definitive truth in the first place. Truth is discovered through dialectical collaboration, resulting from identification with the rhetorician. Each person individually persuades others of their views, in a constant back and forth of philosophical discourse, until pieces of the discussion become accepted as truth as a result of collaboration rather than the great wisdom of an individual. In fact, the truth is likely the mixing of many individual thoughts which found one another, assembling into a puzzle of truth, because of dialectical rhetoric. This transcendence from the individual to the collaborative whole of humanity is foundational to understanding Burke’s theory of rhetoric.

Burke turns more toward Plato for guidance in his concept of dialectical-rhetorical transcendence (*A Grammar of Motives* 429-430). He seems to share the Platonic belief that philosophical insights are more useful in acquiring truth than nature, as Aristotle would claim. In Burke’s own words, “If I, that is, have the type of mind as a Plato rather than an Aristotle, I shall find in Plato a fuller response to my requirements. Thus, my type of mind may find in Greek writers an expression which overlaps into Occidental thought, even though I cannot completely accept the Greek mode of thinking (indeed, for that matter, do I completely accept any one person’s mode of thinking, or even my own total mode of last year’s thinking?)” (*The Selected*

Correspondence 170-171). If truth is found in nature, truth can be discovered individually, yet Burke adamantly claims that rhetorical collaboration is the means for transcending the minimal knowledge that can be possessed by an individual.

Rhetoric offers a means for cooperation in which people can engage in discourse about what truth is and to discover truth together. Though it is extreme to describe Burke as a sophist, as scholars such as John Crowe Ransom and Austin Warren have done (Brown 6), Burke's rhetorical insights spark an important shift away from traditional Aristotelian views of rhetoric. The draw to call Burke a Sophist arises when Burke's emphasis on the audience is misconstrued as flattery alone. Burke does not claim that persuasion is the means of creating truth. It is simply a process of effective discourse while collaborating with others. Collaboration is essential to understanding Burke because, unlike Aristotle, Burke understands identification with the audience as a "theory of radical oneness." Ekaterina Haskins makes the claim that "unlike neo-Aristotelians, Burke extends the notion of audience participation to theorize the constitution of the audience itself" (Haskins 83-84). Burke's philosophy of rhetoric is rooted in collaboration between two speakers in a discourse and in the engagement between the speaker and the audience. The audience's participation in the rhetorical process allows for collaboration in society when coming to conclusions. Aristotle's speaker-centric view does not fit within Burke's Dramatistic schema. The speaker treats the audience as people, not simply things in motion, so accounting for the motives and values of the audience is essential to rhetoric. Moving past the view of traditional Platonic and Aristotelian rhetoric, Burke paints a Dramatistic picture of the rhetorician as a symbol-using animal seeking oneness with their audience.

Chapter 3

Introduction of St. Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was born around 1225 in the castle of Roccasecca near Naples. At five years of age, he was sent to the great Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino and was received as an oblate, a child with more monastic commitment than most children. He eventually went to the University of Naples to study the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, and it was there that Aquinas was first introduced to the works of Aristotle. In 1244, Aquinas became a Dominican Friar, a role which greatly upset his family. They had expected Aquinas to become a monk rather than a friar because monks were more respected and had a stable place within society whereas friars were traveling evangelists who associated themselves with the poor and lived by begging. There was a brief period in which his family kidnapped and imprisoned Aquinas in hopes of turning him away from a peripatetic life. He remained true to his calling and went on to the Dominican house of studies in Cologne where he studied under Albert the Great from 1248 to 1252. Around this time, Aristotle's works had become available in Latin translations and Aquinas grew to appreciate Aristotle more. (Kenny) (Eardley and Still).

Ancient Influence on Aquinas

Like many theologians of the time, Aquinas was well studied in Plato. Neoplatonism significantly influenced Catholic canon of the time, so it is no surprise that Plato is referenced throughout the works of Aquinas. Plato's philosophy dominated Christian theology, providing secular insights into God's being and our ability to acquire knowledge through a relationship

with God. Platonic idealism offered a way for Christians to understand the separation between man and God as well as present philosophical thought as a means to reaching toward the truth of God's unreachable perfection. Unlike Platonic thinking, Aquinas was compelled toward theories of knowledge that account primarily for human intellect in making things intelligible (Eardley and Still 54). Theories like that of the Platonic forms, divine ideas, and innate ideas focus more on the faults of sense perception rather than regarding sense perception as a divine gift that allows for knowledge acquisition.

Aristotle was not yet widely accepted as a reliable source for philosophical knowledge by the Catholic Church prior to Aquinas' time. Aquinas is seen as the foundational figure in including Aristotelian philosophy as part of Catholic canon. His many commentaries on Aristotle's writings and defense of certain Aristotelian theories popularized Aristotle among Catholic scholars. Though Aquinas did not agree with all of Aristotle's beliefs and often expanded upon a philosophical foundation provided by Aristotle to support theological doctrines, he found Aristotelian views of virtue and happiness, the mind, and the relationship between the human body and soul to be especially useful, among other topics (Kenny 7). For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note how Aristotle's view of first causes and the immovable mover provided a foundation for Aquinas' support of God's omnipotence which leads to the many questions related to the naming of God. In addition, Aquinas turns to Aristotle as an authority in explaining how philosophical knowledge is based on observation and reason. Like many of the beliefs that Aquinas shares with Aristotle, Aquinas moves beyond the traditional Aristotelian view and claims that, although much philosophical knowledge can be acquired through

observation and belief, it is not enough to reach transcendence because there is knowledge which can only be acquired through relationship with God.

Aquinas wrote commentaries on many of Aristotle's works, and these provide deep insight not only into Aquinas' interpretations of Aristotle's philosophy but also into Aquinas' own philosophy. Aquinas turned away from this mystical approach to theology and focused instead on Aristotelian means for acquiring truth. Aristotle believed that truth can be discovered through the study of nature. Aquinas, steadfast in his belief that God created the world, latched on to Aristotle's confidence and proclaimed that nature is not a mere reflection of God's glory, it is a product of God's glory that can allow us to get closer to the truth of God's unknowable perfection. Aristotle was not a monotheist, but his belief that there must be a first cause, an unmoved mover, is very influential in Christian theology. Aquinas utilizes this concept of the first cause when explaining the only names that belong to God and God alone: the highest good, the first being, and the like (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 140). Aquinas believed that providing natural evidence for Christian values is a highly effective means for evangelism and used the naturalistic approaches of Aristotle to defend the existence and eminence of God. Aquinas found the work of Aristotle so profound that he turns it into Biblical canon.

It has been disputed throughout history the extent to which Aquinas agrees with the metaphysical claims of Aristotle, and, at times, Aquinas' writings seem to provide opposing evidence. In the 1960 article "Saint Thomas and the Aristotelian Metaphysics: Some Observations" published in *New Scholasticism*, Thomas R. Heath offers insights into the influence Aristotle had on Aquinas while proposing a powerful interpretation of Aquinas' view of philosophy and theology that accounts for his intellect and reverence. Heath compares Aquinas' view of human intellect and happiness as it appears in his *Commentary on the*

Metaphysics and in *Summa Theologica* pointing out that a reader without knowledge of the author may assume the two works were written by entirely different authors or, if they knew it was the same author, assume that they were written at different times in the author's life. In fact, the two works were written around the same time and Aquinas' view of intellect and happiness are the same in both texts, though described in different ways (Heath 454). Aquinas is a theologian, yet his commitment to apologetics may sometimes cause readers to view Aquinas' works as strictly philosophical. Aquinas wanted to develop defenses of Catholic beliefs that could be accepted by both the Christian and the non-Christian. This led him to philosophical discourse, specifically that of Aristotle. He discerned truths from Aristotle's writings and would later use that knowledge to support his theological claims. Reading only Aquinas' commentaries of Aristotelian works, a reader may be tempted to see Aquinas as a philosopher. Once a reader opens *The Summa Theologica* or *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas' religious grounding is evident. Aquinas does not try to force God into the philosophy of Aristotle, rather he uses Aristotle to support his theology,

In Aquinas' *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, he provides a three-fold proof for Aristotle's claim that "all men by nature desire to know" with the third piece of evidence causing much confusion among Aquinas scholars. He claims that because "it is desirable for anything to be joined to its principle, for in this the perfection of anything consists. Thus a circular motion is the most perfect, as is proven in the eighth book of the *Physics*, because the end joins the beginning. Now to the separated substances, which are the principles of the human intellect, and to which the human intellect is related as imperfect to perfect, man is not joined except by intellect; whence in this the ultimate happiness of man consists. Therefore man naturally desires knowledge" (Heath 449). This original philosophical insight of Aquinas relies on Aristotelian

concepts of circularity and separated substances making the claim that the ultimate happiness of man is in intellect which comes from separated substances. Aquinas, as a leader in the church, would not dare to say that happiness came from any source other than God, even if he somehow believed it. Of course, Aquinas did believe that God is the source of happiness and human transcendence lies in our ability, as intelligent beings, to engage with the substance of God. Yet, in a commentary on a philosophical work, Aquinas does not explicitly share his theological views. He focuses on analyzing the philosophical claims and commenting on them so that he can later connect those to the theology in his other works.

In comparing *Commentary on the Metaphysics* with *The Summa Theologica*, a reader can understand that Aquinas believes that man can achieve some extent of participatory happiness through the knowledge of God, though it is imperfect happiness because perfect happiness is God. This knowledge of God, an immaterial being, comes by means of negation and relation to material things, the way in which humans can come to have knowledge about immaterial things. The separated substances according to Aquinas are both God and angels because they are means of knowing God, although angels do not provide the full extent of the knowledge of God. This is not apparent in either text on its own because Aquinas focuses strictly on philosophical insight in *Commentary on the Metaphysics* whereas *The Summa Theologica* is deeply theological. Heath explains that “the thesis, so to speak, of reason's worth is presented in the philosophical works of St. Thomas; the objections, and the consequent qualifications of the thesis are presented where they belong, in the theological works” (Heath 455). Analysis of the complexity of Aquinas’ view of human intelligence and happiness offers scholars insight into the influence of Aristotle on Aquinas’ philosophy and theology. Aquinas’ understanding of humans is also essential to understanding his approach to negative theology.

Aquinas' scholarship often focused on theology rooted in philosophy with the direct goal of encouraging non-Catholic, even non-religious individuals to achieve divine insights through natural means. Uniquely introducing Aristotelian views into his exegesis and hermeneutics, Aquinas offered a way for secular scholars who are interested in religious metaphysics to grasp theological concepts regardless of their prior beliefs about God and the divine. Without Aquinas, Aristotle may never have become accepted as a philosopher with anything to contribute to Christian theology. Now, through Aquinas' extensive use of Aristotelian philosophy in his philosophical and theological works, Aristotle lives on in Catholic canon as an ancestor of Christian theology, as a philosopher just short of divine revelation.

Aquinas Meeting Burke in the Parlor

If time in the Burkean Parlor is linear and one only enters the parlor after their lifetime of scholarly contributions on Earth has come to an end, Plato and Aristotle were likely chatting for a long while with many other profound scholars before meeting either St. Thomas Aquinas or Kenneth Burke. Aquinas would join them at some point, sharing how their influence impacted his ministry and discussing his various theological insights that shaped the Catholic faith. They would converse about many complex concepts, likely even debating the best way to engage in disputation regarding the nature of "truth" and ways of discovering it. It may even be probable to assume that Aquinas' evangelistic nature would cause him to seek the conversion of Plato and Aristotle. Later, Kenneth Burke would join this exceptional group in his proverbial parlor to join in the conversation. Burke was familiar with Aquinas' work, but he only referenced Aquinas anecdotally on the rare occasion he referenced Aquinas. Of course, Aquinas would have no idea

who Burke is when he enters the parlor considering Burke's entered the scene well after Aquinas. Because of this, I have the great joy of imagining their first encounter.

Although Burke and Aquinas would recognize one another for their respective contributions to the life of the mind, they would likely not be friends. Burke was described as feisty and sometimes mad, even by those who respected him. He was a boisterous character who liked to push back on people's assumptions and whose mind would move between topics constantly. Aquinas, on the other hand, was very reserved and preferred to take lecture notes over socializing. He even received the nickname "dumb ox" by his classmates because of his introversion and large stature (Kenny 3). These are not two men that I would expect to socialize outside of an intellectual setting, yet their conversation would be profound and exciting, if you enjoy the back and forth of scholarly debate.

I imagine Burke would eagerly take on the role of the catalyst of their discourse. In fact, Burke has a history of provoking theologians and testing their beliefs. When Burke was lecturing at Drew Graduate School, a secularized graduate school that still has a large population of practicing ministers, many students were upset with Burke's class because he had them read *Milton's God* by William Empson, a work with a very unfavorable view of God. Burke later said that his students "are supposed to be practicing ministers; [they] ought to be able to take care of these objections" (Wilner). Aquinas would likely be a breath of fresh air for Burke, considering his mastery of apologetics. Aquinas' name is still known because of his great mind and rhetorical skills. Despite his quiet disposition, Aquinas would "exhibit the astounding superiority of his dialectical talents" when he engaged in scholastic disputation, and Albert the Great once defended Aquinas, saying "this dumb ox will fill the whole world with his bellowing" (Kenny 3). One could easily argue that Aquinas did just that.

To effectively discuss the negative as a means for finding metaphysical answers, I imagine Burke and Aquinas would first clarify their own understanding of the negative to be sure that they agree on definitions. In ways that they disagree, they can understand the others' view and allow it to guide their conversation. Next, the scholars would discuss naming. They want to understand the symbol-system that guides each of their metaphysical values. Aquinas will explain the value of the negative in naming God while Burke will explain his equally intangible concept of the Title of Titles. Both see these all-encompassing metaphysical concepts to be central to their pursuit of transcendence. Aquinas would, of course, be sure to emphasize throughout their conversation that God is more than a linguistic concept. God is a being who exists. Burke is unconcerned about the existence of God because his focus is on how the humans' symbol system alludes to a sort of god-name, the Title of Titles, rather than the existence of an actual God.

Their discussion offers the beautiful revelation that all humans seek a metaphysical purpose that is greater than their current state of being. Aquinas and Burke are both interested in transcendence and how humans can achieve metaphysical transcendence. The negative is incredibly important in both of their schemas, which leads the witness of this conversation to wonder about the universality of negativity in human transcendence. Despite likely disagreeing on the religious aspects of the process of transcendence, both Aquinas and Burke recognize the negative as a central part of process.

With a knowledge of the agents in the parlor conversation, their background and their motives, we now proceed to the conversation itself.

Chapter 4

The Negative

According to Burke, “everything that can be said about ‘God’ has its analogue in something that can be said about language. And just as theorizing about God leads to so-called ‘negative theology,’ so theorizing about language heads in the all-importance of the Negative” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 469-470). Burke and Aquinas both recognize the power of the negative in offering descriptions, albeit ambiguous and imperfect descriptions, for the indescribable. For Burke, language itself could reach the point of acting like a sort of “god” because of its ineffable yet all-encompassing nature. The way Burke approaches negative within language and rhetoric can be closely related to how Aquinas creates a theory of God rooted in the balance of positive and negative theology. In this chapter, I will examine and compare Burke’s theory of the negative and Aquinas’ negative theology to understand how these scholars would approach one another’s view. Understanding the negative will provide a necessary foundation for understanding naming and transcendence.

There are No Negatives in Nature

Burke and Aquinas would agree that there are no negatives in nature. The concept of the negative is purely linguistic. Whenever something in nature is “not” something else, that thing is actually in a positive condition. Burke uses the example of when the ground is described as “not damp” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 419). The ground’s actual condition is that of dryness, but a person implicitly understands that positive condition even when a negative is used to describe the condition of the ground. This is because “the word’s ‘meaning’ is not identical with its sheer

materiality. There is a qualitative difference between the symbol and the symbolized” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 16). Even without the descriptor of “wet” or “dry,” the word “ground” itself is not the same as the physical ground that is being discussed. The word “ground” is a symbol for the physical ground. The word brings about the image of the actual object when spoken, but it is not the actual object itself. Even the image itself is positive rather than negative. Similarly, Aquinas explains that “as the generation of man is from not-being which is not-man, so creation, which is emanation of all being, is from the not-being which is nothing” (*The Summa Theologica* 242). Aquinas believes that the universe was created by God out of nothing, and this assertion makes it clear that creation itself is in a constant state of positive being. Everything came from nothing and is now in existence. The negative acts as a description of order. For example, the phrase “something coming from nothing” does not mean that a positive, physical thing is materially caused by “nothing.” Rather, “from” implies the order of nothing to something. The negative itself is not participating in the event of creation, it is simply a linguistic means to explain a progression of creation.

Both Burke and Aquinas assert that everything is in a state of positivity. Because of this, the negative now exists as a linguistic concept. It is unclear whether Burke, like Aquinas, believes that nothingness, the ultimate negative, was once the state of the universe; however, it is evident that Burke and Aquinas agree that the negative exists as a linguistic concept as a means of description. In fact, both scholars use the linguistic negative in a more complex way than simply describing a lack of something. There is a power in using the negative because it is a way to comprehend immaterial ideas that do not have perfect physical descriptors. The concept of “right and wrong” and “good and bad” are especially important in understanding the use of the negative by Burke and Aquinas.

Burke's Dramatistic Approach to the Negative

Burke's concept of the negative works through his Dramatistic approach because of his focus on moral exhortation. Moral commands rely on the negative because every positive command implies a negative. Telling a child that they may play outside implies that there are situations in which they may not play outside. Whether the child is told if they may or may not go outside, it is always true that the child could physically go and play outside. There is a moral expectation tied to the action and expressed by means of the negative. Burke elaborates on how the thou-shalt-nots of the world are ideas that recall the image of what is being commanded not to do (*Language as Symbolic Action* 431). Understanding the linguistic significance of thou-shalt-not is the foundation of the Dramatistic approach.

By our 'Dramatist' approach, we leap to such a form as the 'essence' of the negative. The steps are these: (1) A totally formalist approach might try to deal with 'negative propositions' as such; (2) a 'scientist' approach might incline to bring out their use in giving information or instruction; (3) an anthropologically pragmatist approach might widen the notion of informative usefulness by such social terms as *admonitory* and *pedagogical*; (4) a Dramatistic approach would look for the 'essential' instance of an admonitory or pedagogical negative – and it would find this to perfection in the negatives of the Ten Commandments. Hence, we would 'start' in the thought of the negative command. Such reduction to the 'Complete Hortatory Negative' has its special kind of simplicity, to be distinguished from atomistic reduction." (*Language as Symbolic Action* 422)

Human as a symbol-using animal relies on the negative because symbols themselves rely on the negative. For a human to comprehend something as what it is, they are implicitly understanding that thing as what it is not. For Burke, humans' understanding of Heaven and Hell, regardless of whether those places exist literally, demonstrates how humans think in negatives about perfection. Hell is the ultimate No - it embodies all the thou-shalt-nots and the full absence of perfection. Heaven, dialectically opposed to Hell, is the ultimate yes. Heaven *is* perfection, yet it can only be considered so because we have a concept of Hell and full imperfection. Heaven and Hell exist linguistically as a way for humans to comprehend perfection because we could not understand the completeness of one without the other (*Language as Symbolic Action* 474-475).

Burke's dramatism emphasizes the unique experience of humans as free agents. Human language introduces a type of causality related to purpose and ethics. Looking beyond what is and what is not, Burke sees a great significance in "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" because these moralistic phrases are rooted in justice. It is not simply about what is and is not there, it is about what is and is not right or good or just. In reducing a quote by Thomas Mann, Burke states "all the universe is to be approached in terms of No; even inorganic nature is to be so understood; and man should not act otherwise than as if it were an undeniable fact that he should strive toward perfection of his Negativity, i.e., toward Ideal Justice." (*Language as Symbolic Action* 470) Perfection of the Negativity of man is Ideal Justice because it encompasses the knowledge of right and wrong. Just as Aristotle taught that truth and justice have a natural advantage over their opposite, Burke believes that understanding of their opposites allows for reaching truth and justice more perfectly. Negativity is how humans grasp right and wrong of the world. The Dramatistic approach of the negative recognizes that negativity is what causes

concepts of right and wrong, and the study and discussion of this phenomenon is what allows us to reach true justice.

Aquinas' Negative Theology

Central to Aquinas' view of negativity is his view of God. Aquinas holds to the traditional belief of divine simplicity. Divine simplicity is the idea that God's essence and existence are one and the same. This poses an interesting theological obstacle for Aquinas because Aquinas believes that God's existence can be defended through physical, positive, means, but God's essence is incomprehensible. Negative theology arises in Aquinas' explanation that we may use remotion to get nearer to the knowledge of God's essence (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 96-97).

Aquinas believes that all beings have an essence either as their being or in relation to their being. For example, in humans, our humanity is our essence, and that is part of our composition. God, however, is not composed of parts like other beings. God is simple. God simply *is*. The being, or existence, of God is one with His essence (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 116-121). This is widely accepted by the Christian community, and some theologians, like William of Ockham, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, believe that the simplicity of God means that God's existence cannot be rationally explained. In this fideistic view, faith is the only way in which humans can come to know that God exists. God's essence is incomprehensible, and His essence and existence are one and the same; therefore, God's existence is incomprehensible without divine revelation through faith (Eardley and Still 16-17). Aquinas disagrees with this claim. According to Aquinas, "although God transcends all sensible things and the sense itself,

His effects, on which the demonstration proving His existence is based, are nevertheless sensible things. And thus, the origin of our knowledge in the sense applies also to those things that transcend the sense” (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 85). Any rational being can obtain the knowledge of God’s existence through their sense experiences because they are affected by God. Using Aristotle’s metaphysical concept of the first mover, Aquinas defends the existence of God by explaining that God is the first mover. Because we recognize God as the first cause of all effects, we can be confident in His existence (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 85-96). Positive knowledge about the world allows us to become aware of God’s existence because everything is an effect of God as the first mover.

Despite his belief that God’s existence, his being, can be discovered through the sense world, Aquinas still believes that God’s essence is ineffable. According to Gregory P. Rocca in *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology*, Aquinas’ view of God’s incomprehensibility can be summarized into two theses: “no created intellect naturally possesses a quidditative knowledge of God’s essence; and no created intellect can ever possess, in principle, a comprehensive knowledge of God’s essence” (Rocca 27-28). Evident in these two theses, Aquinas does not believe that there is a way for humans to attain positive knowledge of God’s essence. Negative theology arises from this recognition that God can never be completely comprehended through human intellect. Aquinas, along with many other theologians, has approached God through means of the negative to get closer to comprehension of the divine.

God is the ultimate unknown. God is the being which is both fully one with the nature world yet indisputably not part of it. Aquinas believes that “because our minds are bound down to the sense world, the nature of God represents the unattainable for our speculative efforts. The

most perfect knowledge of God is that the nature of God lies completely beyond anything we can conceive in this life and that God remains for us unknown” (Meyer 234). The process of remotion is how humans can get closer to knowledge of God’s essence. Aquinas makes the profound claim that knowledge of something is based on our understanding of how it differs from other things. Because we are unable to know anything positively about God’s being, the best knowledge we can obtain is knowledge of what God is not: *via negativa*. Aquinas uses the example of saying that “God is not an accident” and “God is not a body.” Those negative claims distinguish God from all accidents and all beings with a body. This knowledge is helpful in gaining a clearer understanding of who God is by knowing what he is not, yet it does not tell us what God is Himself. Negative theology only offers insights about God’s being through comparison. It is not used to say anything definitive about God’s being, rather it is an acceptance of our ignorance and a means of working around our inability to comprehend God’s essence (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 96-97).

Negative Theology and the Dramatistic Approach to the Negative

For a scientist examining the world, all things can be understood as what they are or are not. As a Dramatist, Burke considers the human process of determining how we should and should not act. There is a clear Dramatistic aspect of Aquinas’ negative theology, which will be elaborated on later in the thesis, but his approach is primarily what Burke describes as a formalist approach. Rocco explains that “Without adverting to it consciously, [Aquinas] uses three basic grammatical forms for the expression of his *via negativa* or negative theology: negative propositions that use predicates positive in form and meaning (‘God is not a body’); affirmative

propositions that use predicates negative in form and meaning ('God is incorporeal'); affirmative propositions that use predicates positive in form but negative in meaning ('God is simple')" (Rocco 57). For Aquinas, the negative is a tool for description. It is a means for understanding God. Burke is focused on the "essence" of the negative. Burke's Dramatistic negative influences humans in our symbol-making and is an active player in our motives. I argue that Aquinas would share this view with Burke because the negative influences our understanding of God which impacts our conception of morality.

The hortatory negative allows for a conception of justice and acts as a tool for find the truth of justice. Aquinas would agree with this because he believes that negativity is the way in which we can get as close to understanding God as humanly possible. Justice is a non-essential trait for humans, it is a virtue rather than the essence of humans, but it is within the essence of God. Aquinas would agree that perfection of the negativity of man would lead to justice but only as a byproduct of comprehending God. This is all purely hypothetical in Aquinas' view since humans will never reach full knowledge of the essence of God, even by way of negativity. But, if the essence of God was understood, pure, undivided justice will be there along with the other aspects of God's essence including goodness and power.

With Burke's belief that justice, in its fullest sense, can be acquired by means of the negative and Aquinas' belief that the negative is the way which we can gain the greatest possible amount of knowledge about God, there is a clear sense of extrapolation. The negative is a way of expanding beyond the realm of the known. It allows for greater generalization while perfectly describing all that falls within it. This complex, often confusing concept leads to the importance of naming regarding the negative. Aquinas is concerned about utilizing the negative to give God a functional name, and Burke is interested in how the negative leads to a Title of all Titles. The

concept of a Title of all Titles could be God, or it could be a metaphysical, linguistic power.

Regardless, the parallel between Aquinas and Burke continues as we witness their parlor discussion.

Chapter 5

Naming

The purpose of negativity is to name. As symbol-using animals, we yearn to create language that represents our experiences as perfectly as possible. Because some things, like justice and God, are abstract and non-physical, negative language is used to create abstract, non-physical descriptors. The negative uses the power of positive language to describe while also asserting that which it is naming as distinctly non-positive. Something being described through negative means becomes increasingly more abstract as more is removed from it. Aquinas uses the way of remotion, his *via negativa*, to gain a clearer understanding of God. Burke uses similar methods in his pursuit of a Title of Titles.

Burke's Title of Titles

In Burke's efforts to understand the metaphysical nature of language, he arrives at the Title of Titles, "a logic of entitlement that is completed by thus rising to ever and ever higher orders of generalization." Burke uses the example of a perfect book title which would "sum up" all of the particulars of the book by somehow implying them all but all of the particulars would also have all of the material reality (*The Rhetoric of Religion* 25). The power of this Title of Titles is that it is both all-encompassing but also entirely empty. In the process of being perfectly inclusive of material reality, all that is left is a non-material nothingness. Because Burke puts great emphasis on dialectical pairs, it is evident that something which encompasses everything

(i.e. the Title of Titles) also implies the opposite: emptiness. Just as you must understand injustice to understand justice and you must understand goodness to understand evil, the dialectic pair for the Title of Titles is emptiness.

Aquinas' Naming of God

There is a great theological debate about whether a name can be used for God. Since a name holds power, potentially even holding the essence of something's being, it is not an insignificant conversation on how to name God if He could or should be named at all. In *The Summa Theologica*, Aquinas opposes the belief that God cannot be named, he then explains why God can be named and why some scholars are confused on the matter. Aquinas' arguments around the naming of God are rooted deeply in his negative theology.

“When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know what it is. Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not. Therefore, we must consider (1) How He is not. (2) How He is known by us. (3) How he is named. (*The Summa Theologica* 14)

For Aquinas, language holds the essence of that which it describes. This is known as quiddative knowledge. In the case of man, our essence is in our name. Citing Aristotle, Aquinas asserts that naming is connected to intellectual conception. Since we cannot know God's essence, and a name holds the essence of that which it describes, it seems improbable that we

would be able to name God. Aquinas argues that we can name God but only a functional name rather than a name rooted in God's essence.

“Since according to the Philosopher, words are signs of ideas, and ideas the likeness of things, it is evident that words relate to the meaning of things signified through the medium of the intellectual conception. It follows therefore that we can give a name to anything in as far as it can be known by our intellect. Now it is shown above that we cannot see the essence of God; but we know God from creatures as their principle, and also by way of excellence and remotion. In this way therefore He can be named by us from creatures, yet not so that the name which signifies Him expresses the divine essence in itself, as for instance the name ‘man’ expresses by its meaning the essence of man in himself, since it signifies the definition of man by declaring his essence. For the notion expressed by the name is the definition.” (*The Summa Theologica* 62-63)

It is important to understand that, though certain names of God can be used properly, they are not synonymous with God because “When the human intellect, for example, comprehends anything (e.g., stone or triangle), it knows the essence in such a way that none of the intelligible factors of the entity in question exceed the human faculty of knowing; but this is not the case with the divine essence” (Rocco 31). One could name God as “good,” and that would properly apply to God because the greatest, most perfect goodness belongs to God. However, goodness also belongs to God's creation and is not exclusive to God. Because of this, any name for God is not synonymous with God. It is a mere reflection of an aspect of God's being. Language imperfectly represents that which it symbolizes, but also creates meaning through being spoken.

The essence of man is within the name “man” because, by knowing humanity’s existence and giving it a name, humans are understanding our own essence. This is not true of God. God’s essence cannot be captured in a name. Aquinas’ *via negativa* is the path to discovering God by denying of God all things which we can perceive in our earthly minds to reach the greatest knowing that God is above them all. This process of negation does not imply that earthly things do not reflect God in some way, rather it accepts that they do not fully reflect God so they should be removed in our conception of God (Rocca 56). So, although a name can be given that is proper for God, that name will never be synonymous with God. Though a name, like “good,” may be true of God, a name cannot capture that which our intellect cannot know, and we cannot know God’s essence.

The Rhetorical Parallel between God and the Title of Titles

Burke’s Title of Titles uses the same process of *via negativa* that is employed by Aquinas in his negative theology. In the effort to create a symbol for everything, there is a movement toward a kind of emptying (*The Rhetoric of Religion* 25). Aquinas would readily accept this, which is unsurprising considering Burke created this concept with religiosity in mind. God can be understood in the negative sense as being not-everything else. God, as a perfect being, cannot be the same as anything else. That is why the process of remotion is used to gain an understanding of God. This Title of Titles is the linguistic parallel of God. It acts as the ultimate, all-encompassing descriptor, but it is never actually a perfect descriptor of each of its parts.

It is likely that Burke would push back on Aquinas’ view of quiddative knowledge because it gives language greater power than humans’ symbol-making ability. Burke focuses

primarily on how humans create meaning through symbols in order to cooperate. Although Aquinas never created a theory of language, it is reasonable to make the claim that he believes language is a creation of God rather than man. Man creating language has greater implications about the imperfection of symbol-systems. We cannot perfectly represent what we are describing through language. Names are symbols that describe, but the description does not possess the essence of the thing itself according to Burke. Aquinas believes that the essence of man is in the name “man,” and Burke would not agree with this assertion.

Burke makes the claim that “quite as language involves a principle of negativity in its essence, so theology comes to an ultimate in ‘negative theology,’ since God, by being ‘supernatural,’ is not describable by the positives of nature” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 22). Since this sweeping claim of negative theology is based on the negative theology of Heidegger, one of the philosophers who has heavily influenced Burke, one must ask if Aquinas would also agree. I would claim that Aquinas would agree with this point but feel as though Burke left too much room for misinterpretation. Aquinas believes that God can be named according to the positives in nature even though his substance cannot be described according to the positives in nature. God, as the creator, exists in all of nature, and His name is an operational name intended to reflect His providence over all things. The name of God does not reflect God’s substance, instead it reflects what we do know about God, His existence as the first mover, while still clearly implying what we do not know, His substance (*The Summa Theologica* 71). What Burke refers to, this Title of Titles, is unachievable just as the true, perfect name of God, which refers to God’s substance, is unachievable. The eminence of God and the Title of Titles does not discourage Aquinas and

Burke from pursuing the knowledge found by reaching them. In fact, both scholars believe that seeking closeness to their respective god-term allows for metaphysical transcendence.

Chapter 6

Transcendence

Transcendence is ascension to a higher level of being. If humans live at a standard level of metaphysical knowledge, transcendence is when someone attains metaphysical revelation beyond the standard. Burke and Aquinas agree that there is a human yearning for transcendence. The concept of negativity is central to both discovering and reaching transcendence. Using the negative in creating a name for transcendent being allows for knowledge of transcendence and promotes collaboration with the other people seeking transcendence.

Burke claims that there is a “linguistic drive towards a Title of Titles” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 25), and Aquinas believes that “in the divine plan of creation, reason was a sort of preamble to faith, leading man by its light toward a God Who, out of His infinite love and generosity, had created man in order to raise him to a participation in His life” (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book One* 23). There is a desire in the soul of men to find something greater than themselves, whether that is through God or dialectical collaboration.

Burkean Transcendence

The symbol-using animal clause of Burke’s definition of man offers the explanation as to why transcendence is so important to human communication. Ever the Freudian, Burke points to condensation and displacement in dreams as examples of a larger concept that exists in symbol-systems: substitution. Substitution is the means by which we communicate meaning through symbols that are not directly and fully representing what we want to communicate. In this sense,

substitution “sets the condition for ‘transcendence’ since there is a technical sense in which the name for a thing can be said to ‘transcend’ the thing itself” (“Definition of Man” 498). Burke’s transcendence goes beyond explaining this trait of symbols as transcendent compared to the thing itself. Transcendence is the goal of rhetoric. Dialectical rhetorical exchanges are rooted in a belief that people can be brought together through symbol-systems, and “that lesson is founded upon faith in a rational sort of transcendence – upon a belief that people can rise above their differences, and even their conflicts, to agree upon beliefs and actions by reasoning together” (Clark 170). These symbol-systems are not simply the way in which humans communicate and transcendence is not just a characteristic of symbol-systems. “Humans as symbol-using animals” is part of the definition of man because symbols are how we create meaning in the world. Communication allows for identification and collaboration which subsequently creates space for transcendent ideals that unite people.

Divine Transcendence According to Aquinas

Aquinas believes that the ultimate end of all creatures is God and so, for the intelligible being, understanding God is its end (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book Three*, 100). The intelligible being, the human, seeks God as its ultimate end because God is the first cause and highest power of all. Aquinas believes that achieving transcendence through participation in the divine vision is attainable although perfect knowledge of the divine substance is unattainable and the knowledge of the essence of God is also unattainable. For someone to see the divine substance, they would understand everything of the world and intellect. They would have the knowledge of the world attainable only through God’s substance, and the level of participation in the divine vision does

exist on a scale. An individual can be more or less like God through their transcendence to this higher level of intellect. Aquinas believes that any level of intellect could be a participant in the divine vision. Although any intelligible being could have knowledge of the substance of God, the divine essence of God cannot be comprehended by any other being but God, who can alone comprehend His own essence (*Summa Contra Gentiles Book Three* 186-198).

Transcendence as the Metaphysical Purpose of Humanity

Burke's conception of dialectical-rhetorical transcendence heavily influenced by his theory of identification in rhetoric, transcendence is the ideal outcome of rhetoric. Transcendence occurs when individuals collaborate in their exchanges, recognizing that they alone cannot produce all the correct answers. Those engaging in this process test and correct ideas reaching closer and closer to truth by recognizing their own limitation (Zappen 281). Like Aquinas, Burke believes that humans desire truth, and his chosen means of obtaining truth is through dialectical-rhetorical transcendence. Aquinas would likely claim that this pursuit of transcendence through symbolic collaboration in humans is admirable but ignores the necessity of God. Both Burke and Aquinas agree that humans are unable to reach a higher level of knowledge on their own. It requires collaboration. For Burke, transcendence results from dialectical collaboration with other humans. Aquinas searches for transcendence through God, and collaboration is a means to better understand God by connecting with other creatures of God's creation. He believes there is great value in collaboration, or he would not have worked so diligently on finding the means by which humans can discuss God; however, the act of becoming like God (never the same as God) is a process that is between God and the individual person.

When explaining how substitution leads to transcendence, Burke uses the example “if I refer to Mr. Jones by name, I have cut countless corners, as regards the particularities of that particular person” (“Definition of Man” 497). By replacing “Mr. Jones” with “God,” it is suddenly clear why there is such great concern in the Christian community about how to name God. If there is no perfect way to use language, symbol-systems, to refer to God, is it wrong to use imperfect names and, if it is wrong, how can man grow in their knowledge of God without having a symbol for God? Just as symbol-systems transcend the word itself by implying all that it is without directly saying all that is it, it also implies all that it is not. The negative exists in all symbols in the same way that positives exist in symbols. Though the word itself is a positive, it is not a perfect positive that captures all positive aspects of what it describes. Just as saying “Mr. Jones” does not account for every aspect of who Mr. Smith is, it also implies that Mr. Smith is NOT Mrs. Jones or Mr. Smith. Herein lies the root of Aquinas’ negative theology. In naming God, it must be understood that the name imperfectly describes God and fails in capturing God’s essence because the “ultimate in human knowledge of God occurs when someone ‘knows that he knows not God, insofar as he recognizes that what God is exceeds everything that we understand of him’” (Rocca 29). Negative theology bridges the transcendence of God with the naming of God. Once someone understands that God’s essence is only comprehended by God and then understand that they cannot become God, they may pursue knowledge of the substance of God. Knowledge of the substance of God, participation in the divine vision, is the closest intelligent beings can get to God, and is, therefore, the route for transcendence according to Aquinas.

To both scholars, transcendence is the goal. Aquinas accepts that it is impossible to be united in God’s essence, yet humans can become closer to being like God by participating in

divine substance. Burke shares this idea of the Title of Titles which can be likened to God, but the difference is that Burke does not believe there is a being which is the Title of Titles. It is a complex linguistic ideal that humans strive toward in our symbol making. While it is unlikely that humans will ever reach that level of linguistic abstraction, it can be viewed as the end of language much like how participation in divine substance is the end of human intellect for Aquinas. For Aquinas, there is already an owner of that great title, and our pursuit of discovering the Title of Titles, God, begins once we accept that we will never reach the level of God and pursue being like God to the greatest degree possible. Both men want to utilize the negative to remove the complexity of the symbols which create our reality. While different, the purposes of humanity proposed by Aquinas and Burke equally represent the incomprehensibility of something which is and has all of life and existence within it.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

After hours of discourse, I can imagine the great respect that Burke and Aquinas would have for one another. Though their missions in life are not the same, they both care deeply about helping others pursue a higher level of being and recognize the value of rhetoric and collaboration in doing so. Aquinas would be impressed by Burke's definition of man but believe it was missing a key component. Man is a God-seeking animal. Burke believes that transcendence is the result of dialectical collaboration and that men will find truth through their relationships with one another. I can picture Aquinas asking Burke if that is enough. Can true knowledge exist as pieces scattered throughout the universe? Aquinas believes that truth is found in one place, or rather with one all-powerful being, that is attainable, to a degree. Burke is not necessarily convinced that such a being exists, but he does agree that a transcendence of intellect is attainable.

With the great emphasis that Burke puts on the hortatory negative for Dramatistic pursuits compared to the propositional negative of formal pursuits, it is necessary to consider where Aquinas stands in regard to his negative theology. As mentioned previously, Aquinas' negative theology focuses on the propositional negative, but I believe it is reasonable to assume that Aquinas would embrace Dramatism. Burke's intention with studying rhetoric is greater than just learning about words. Burke believes that human collaboration and purpose can be found in our creation of symbol-systems. I can imagine Aquinas looking upon Burke's scholarship in a similar way to how he regarded Aristotle's works. He would be disappointed by the lack of faith

in God, but that would not blind him from accepting the profound philosophical insights of a secular scholar.

Similarly, Burke would likely have great respect for Aquinas. It is unclear why Burke chose to exclude Aquinas from the long list of theologians who inspired his study, but I cannot imagine a discourse between Aquinas and Burke in which one man would completely reject the rhetorical skill of the other. As a secular scholar, Burke is surprisingly passionate about religiosity. He likens the study of God with the study of language because there is a search for a higher metaphysical goal. “If we defined ‘theology’ as ‘words about God,’ then by ‘logology’ we should mean ‘words about words.’ Whereupon thoughts on the necessarily verbal nature of religious doctrines suggest a further possibility: that there might be fruitful analogies between the two realms. Thus, statements that great theologians have made about the nature of ‘God’ might be adapted *mutatis mutandis* for use as purely secular observations on the nature of *words*” (*The Rhetoric of Religion* 1). Burke is not a theologian despite his great interest in God because his interest is foremost in the language used about God. Words used about the nature of God are symbols with the intention of uniting people with one another and a higher power. Burke believes that the same process occurs in all humans, regardless of their belief in God. God-terms, like justice, bring people together through dialectic collaboration about the purpose of humans. Aquinas and other theologians use language to reach God, but Burke believes that language itself acts as a god. The desire to reach a Title of Titles, the ultimate god-term, is intertwined with the desire to belong, to be united with others. Language is the means of collaboration, and god-terms are the tools for rhetorical dialectic transcendence.

It will never be known which came first: our yearning for something more or our ability to communicate about it in complex ways. Burke and Aquinas both recognize that humans seek purpose and community. They both agree that language is essential in the process of metaphysical transcendence. Where they disagree is whether language itself acts as a god or if there is a God who uses language as a tool for humans to collaborate and learn more about Him.

Although Burke and Aquinas' conversation could last forever, this thesis offers a snapshot of how their discourse about the negative revolutionizes our understanding of metaphysical transcendence. Further comparative study of Burke and Aquinas would yield endless scholarly discoveries, but, for now, "the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress"

(Philosophy of Literary Form 110-111).

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