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## God as First Known

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## *Summary*

THE IDEA THAT THE GOOD, or divine being, is not only ontologically, but also epistemologically first is a philosophical idea with a long tradition, finding its roots in Plato. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (ca. 1217 to 15 July 1274) is part of this tradition, but also changed this 'beginning with the absolute'. He is the first to conceive of divine being as *first known* in the context of a transcendental, first philosophy. I argue that this 'transcendentalization of the absolute' could only take place within the thirteenth-century project to rethink the disciplinary autonomy and systematicity of philosophy as a science next to theology, which led to the transformation of metaphysics into transcendental thought.

Most interpreters of Bonaventure presuppose that his doctrine of God as first known is a coherent, stable doctrine, with one singular message. The purport of this message, it is held, is that a created principle cannot be the final foundation on which knowledge of everything else rests, in favor of a first philosophy in which all knowledge rests on an understanding of divine being. Interpretations that start from this premise however insufficiently recognize that there are different accounts of God as first known to be found at different places in Bonaventure's work. I argue that only after close scrutiny of these different accounts and of the way in which they relate to each other, is it methodologically acceptable to decide upon the purport, coherence, and claim(s) of Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first known. The leading question of this study therefore is: *What is the meaning of the fact that there are different accounts of God as first known, found at different places in his work, for Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first known?*

I answer this main question by dealing with a series of subquestions that approach this subject from several perspectives. I conclude that on several levels, the doctrine of God as first known can indeed be differentiated. This provides Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first

known with a more complex character than is often assumed in the scholarship on Bonaventure.

A first question concerns the role and place of *Deus primum cognitum* in two important ‘system-building’ elements of Bonaventure’s *metaphysica reducens*: his adaptation of the doctrine of the transcendentals and his reductive exemplarism. The question is whether these two elements are successfully integrated in Bonaventure’s thought, or whether a redundancy remains: if Bonaventure has found himself a foundation for all knowledge in exemplarism, why would he need an account of God as first known within the framework of the doctrine of the transcendentals? It is concluded that the combination of these two accounts of the foundation of natural knowledge in Bonaventure indeed suggests a redundancy: in exemplarism, natural reason relies on the transcendent ideas as the foundations of empirical knowledge, whereas in the doctrine of the transcendentals, natural reason is founded on the self-evidency of the transcendental notions as first principles. In Chapter 3, however, it is argued that the foundation of natural knowledge found in Bonaventure’s exemplarism primarily – but not only – corresponds with an act of judgment in confuse knowing, i.e. the process of making the sensible intelligible, whereas the account of divine being as first known within the doctrine of the transcendentals corresponds with the act of judgment that is involved in the establishment of distinct knowledge.

This question regarding the relation of reductive exemplarism and the doctrine of the transcendentals in Bonaventure’s metaphysics is linked to an investigation of Bonaventure’s integration of two models of science into one system: an Aristotelian and a Platonic model of science. Whereas an Aristotelian approach to science allows for a plurality of sciences, each with their own foundation and subject, a Platonic model of science seeks to unify the sciences into a system in which all sciences are preliminary to one ultimate science, in which the foundation of all knowledge is studied.

I argue that the role of the doctrine of God as first known in Bonaventure’s metaphysics is *ambiguous*: on the one hand, it can be argued to function within a ‘Platonic’ approach to science, in which metaphysics has no proper foundation but is relative or ‘reduced’ to theology, in which all sciences should culminate. On the other hand, it can be seen as part of an Aristotelian approach to science, in which it provides natural knowledge and metaphysics with a proper foundation. However, Bonaventure distantiates himself from an Aristotelian inter-

pretation of metaphysics as a science of being qua being, and aligns it with his reductive exemplarism, in which all knowledge is founded on knowledge of divine being.

The second chapter concerns the methodology of Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first known: *resolution*. The scholarly literature focuses on the fact that Bonaventure, in his accounts of God as first known, holds that a resolution into created principles is insufficient to establish full knowledge of anything; in order to obtain full knowledge, the resolution should proceed until it arrives at an understanding of God. Therefore, Bonaventure distinguishes between a *semiplena* and a *plena resolution*, which is seen as the most original feature of Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first known. However, it is left unclear *which limit* is transgressed by a full resolution. Are these the same created principles in every resolution? Does every resolution in Bonaventure's work present the same kind of critique of created principles? If not, what is the meaning of these differences? I show that there are three different *types* of resolution that Bonaventure considers to be inadequate to establish full knowledge of something. I show that they correspond to three types of resolution found in Thomas Aquinas.

First, resolution as *division* is criticized, which is based on the idea that what is composite is ultimately understood through an understanding of its elements. Bonaventure argues that created parts are never truly simple as the created is inherently composite. As a resolution has to end in what is *absolutely* simple, it has to end in divine being. Furthermore, next to the created elements of a thing, of which it is composed, Bonaventure argues that another essential element of any given thing is its relation to first being as its exemplary cause, which has to be assessed as well in order to know something completely. This assessment presupposes preliminary knowledge of this first being.

Second, a resolution that ends in the most *general* created principles is criticized, such as transcendental being (*ens*) and its conditions one, true and good. All created being is deficient, and the deficient can only be understood through what is perfect, Bonaventure argues. Therefore, in order to understand anything created completely, we have to appeal to knowledge of a perfect being, which can only be divine being.

Third, a resolution is identified that ends in *esse*. *Esse* designates the perfection and the actuality of being. Rather than common being (*esse commune*), Bonaventure argues that only *esse divinum* can be this pure actuality, because all created being is mixed with potentiality.

Against these three types of *resolution* that Bonaventure criticizes, he

puts forward the *resolutio plena*, an analytic procedure that resolves into God as first known. His accounts of *resolutio plena* have the following three characteristics in common:

- 1 A distinction is made between resolving merely halfway (*semiplene*) and fully (*plene*).
- 2 A complete resolution in the order of knowledge, in contrast to an incomplete resolution, does never proceed by mere *iteration*, i.e. by repeating rounds of analysis, for instance in ever smaller parts. Rather, it is characterized by a ‘twist’ in technique. The point at which this change of technique takes place, coincides with that at which a *semiplena* resolution is complemented in order to make it complete (*plena*).
- 3 All complete resolutions establish a unifying ascent towards one special being. As such, they reflect Bonaventure’s ambition to introduce a Platonic approach to the foundations of knowledge within a reflection on the first principles of metaphysics that is dominated by an Aristotelian approach to science and to what is first known.

In the third chapter, the way in which knowledge of the divine is involved in the mechanism of human cognition is investigated. Interpreters of Bonaventure fail to agree on this issue. Roughly, they defend two different models of the ‘collaboration’ between the created truth and the divine truth in the act of cognition. Whereas the first model sees a role for the priority of knowledge of God *only* in the certification of knowledge, the second model grants this priority a more prominent place, as it argues that knowledge of God is involved in the act of abstraction itself as well.

On the basis of a discussion of Bonaventure’s pivotal texts on this subject, I argue that knowledge of the divine is involved in the noetic process of making the created intelligible: by means of an act of judgment, in which we take recourse to the divine ideas, an intelligible species can be abstracted from a sensible representation. This means that Bonaventure does not maintain an ‘Aristotelian account of abstraction,’ as some scholars defend. Rather than only on the level of certifying the truth of what has become known by the intellect, the priority of knowledge of God is also located at the level of *intelligibility itself*.

Thus, the way in which sensible data of created things become

intelligible through *abstraction* corresponds to Bonaventure's accounts of *resolution*: both activities involve an act of judgment in terms of a comparison of created being to first being. In abstraction, the intellect appeals to the divine ideas in order to *identify* the created essence of a thing. In resolution, it *assesses* the essential relation of a created being to its first cause – and discovers its principles. In the former case, the result is 'confused' knowledge of a thing. In the latter case the result is 'distinct' knowledge: the parts and principles of a thing become separately known.

The priority of the divine is therefore *twofold*: both on the level of abstracting the intelligible from the sensible and on the level of a complete analysis of what has become known, preliminary knowledge of the divine is necessary.

The fourth chapter deals with the remarkable fact that in both the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, we find *two* accounts of God as first known. Although this has been acknowledged in the scholarly literature, not much attention has been paid to the *meaning* of the fact that there are different accounts of God as first known found at different places in one and the same work, let alone to a comparison of both works with regard to this fact. Why does Bonaventure present two arguments for God as first known in one text? How do these accounts relate to one another? Do they articulate one and the same thesis? What is the significance of possible differences? How do these two works relate to each other in this respect?

In order to answer these questions, a close analysis is provided of the resolutions to God as first known in Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*. I conclude that there is a structural similarity between the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and the *Collationes in Hexaemeron* in their treatment of God as first known. Four common characteristics are identified.

First of all, in each work, a *double account* of God as first known is given, each account indicating a different stage of the soul's knowledge of God.

Second, these accounts of God as first known have different *outcomes*. In the third chapter of the *Itinerarium*, a resolution to God as 'a most pure, most complete, most actual, and absolute being (*ens*)' is given. The resolution of *Itinerarium V* surpasses the level of the concrete (i.e. that of entities). Here, it is argued that divine existence (*esse divinum*) is first known. As pure actuality, divine being falls into the intellect first, and is *presupposed* to the understanding of every concrete being

(*ens*). Whereas the immediacy of revealed truth allows divine being to be identified as first known in *Hexaameron* X, the resolution of *Hexaameron* V only reflexively establishes awareness that God (*esse*) is first known. Third, in both works, the transition from the first account of God as first known to the second is *prefigured* by a distinction *within* the first account. The surpassing of the first resolution by the second is prefigured by a parallel pattern *within* the first resolution. The first part of the first resolution of the *Itinerarium* is presented as a complete resolution at first, as the comprehension of a thing is identified with completely knowing (*plene scire*) the definition of something, whereas the second part of the resolution replaces this first '*plene*' with another; i.e. an understanding completely resolving (*plene resolvens*) into an understanding of an perfect and absolute being.

The resolution of *Hexaameron* V is part of a description of a conversion of the soul in order to find wisdom through contemplation. Here, 'Platonic', philosophers are argued to be enlightened, whereas the 'Aristotelian' philosophers remained in the dark. However, this position is abandoned later. Only the soul transformed by Christian faith is now argued to be enlightened.

Finally, a fourth characteristic was mentioned: the doctrine of God as first known acquires a *dynamic character* in both works.

In the fifth chapter, on the basis of an analysis of the literary-philosophical form of the *Itinerarium* and the *Hexaameron*, this dynamic character is accounted for. Both works are characterized as medieval discourses dealing with the soul's transformation in its meditative ascent. In these treatises, knowledge is presented as embedded in a way of life, which is oriented at moral progress. The acquisition of theoretical insights is conditioned by virtues, practices, and the reception of divine grace, and cannot be isolated from the state of being of the transforming soul. This means that the subject is capable to attain true knowledge at one stage, whereas it might not at another stage, as it requires yet another transformation. Correspondingly, the quality, scope and nature of knowledge that the subject attains differ in the subsequent stages of its development: what established a complete understanding first is surpassed by an insight acquired at a higher stage.

From a Hegelian perspective, the *Itinerarium* and the *Hexaameron* describe the 'history of the soul's development': both works present an articulation of the entirety of the itinerary of the soul. This means that insights and truths that are legitimate under the circumstances of a specific stage, but are qualified or replaced at a next stage, still

are all part of ‘the true’. Therefore, it is possible to posit a certain first known at one point and yet another at a second, without causing a contradiction or inconsistency. This epistemology, which expresses the inner logic of the soul’s transformation, provides the doctrine of God as first known with a dynamic character. Furthermore, in both works, two concepts of philosophy are integrated: a concept of philosophy as a transcendental science and a concept of philosophy that is concerned with self-reflection and conversion.

Having presented the results of a series of analyses of Bonaventure’s doctrine of God as first known from different perspectives, I come to conclude that, notwithstanding their similarities, the different accounts of *Deus primum cognitum* are everything but repetitions of one and the same claim or argument. As I have shown, the doctrine of God as first known has a much more complex structure. The following differentiations can be identified:

- 1 One differentiation of the doctrine of God as first known pertains to its method. The accounts of *resolutio plena* found in Bonaventure’s works are differentiated by that what they criticize: *division*, a resolution into *generalissima*, or a resolution into the actuality of created being (*esse commune*).
- 2 Preliminary knowledge of divine being is involved *both* on the level of *abstraction*, by which the sensible is made intelligible, and on the level of *resolution*, in which what has become known is further investigated in order to be completely understood.
- 3 ‘God as first known’ is encountered *both* on the level of *philosophy* and natural knowledge, and on the level of *theology*, and revealed knowledge. What is first in the latter realm *surpasses* that which is first in the former in both primordality and quality.
- 4 In two of Bonaventure’s later works, the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, a more *static* approach to divine being as first known is replaced by a *dynamic* approach.

What do these differentiations convey about Bonaventure’s ‘beginning with the absolute’?

First of all, the differentiations testify of the fact that ‘the beginning with the absolute’ is only fully realized when the domain of natural reason is surpassed, and the soul is transformed by faith and grace. The



doctrine of God as first known comes to completion in theology, rather than within philosophy. Hence, Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first known can be seen as a *Vernunftkritik*. By arguing that divine being is first known, Bonaventure stresses the limitations of philosophy and natural reason: knowledge rests on an irrevocable ground that is never fully comprehended itself, even if it is the indubitable foundation of both intelligibility and certitude. In so far natural reason is able to reflect on its foundation, this reflection is surpassed by the insights that the mind lifted up by grace can attain on the basis of revealed knowledge. Theology, the *scientia perfecta* in which all scientific knowledge culminates, starts off where metaphysics ends.

By placing a reflection of God as first known within the context of a synthesis that deals with spirituality, metaphysics is not to be seen as an autonomous discipline, but rather conditioned by a way of life, central to which is the conversion of the soul – a project that is thoroughly Platonic. As such, the doctrine of God as first known is part of Bonaventure's critique of the rise of the natural sciences, of Aquinas's perspective on the autonomy of human cognition, and of the fragmentation of the sciences into a plurality, in which each discipline is autonomous with regard to the others.

Yet, at the same time, by transcendentalizing God's cognitive priority by placing it within the context of a systematic investigation of being and knowledge of being, starting from first principles, Bonaventure incorporates it into the very system that he criticizes. In this sense, Bonaventure provides philosophy with a proper foundation, through which it acquired (relative) autonomy, which could compete with Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics.

Hence, the figure of 'God as first known' provides the foundation on the basis of which *both* theology *and* metaphysics are possible, and by which their distinction is understood: metaphysics acquires insight into this *primum* reflexively, mediated by empirical knowledge. Theology, however, grasps this foundation of all knowledge in a more immediate and profound way through the revelation of *esse primum as prima rerum intellectualium*. On this basis, philosophy not only gains its own domain distinct from theology, Bonaventure's doctrine of God as first known also creates a *common epistemological ground* between both disciplines.