

What Is Not, Was Not, and Will Never Be: Creaturely Possibility, Divine Ideas and the Creator's Will in Thomas Aquinas

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AMONG THOSE PHILOSOPHERS carrying the inheritance of Thomas Aquinas into contemporary intellectual engagements, one of the most creative and penetrating was James F. Ross, who taught at the University of Pennsylvania for almost five decades until his death in 2010. His deep insights into the great medieval thinker were expressed in a forbidding prose style, at once repetitive and elusive; often they were not foregrounded, but emerged by way of their incorporation into his own constructive project. Though he was deeply critical of the unquestioned canons and hidden ontological presuppositions that masquerade as common sense in much so-called “analytic” philosophy, he tended to stick to the reigning Anglo-American philosophical argot, avoiding the common Thomist terms of art. It is perhaps for these reasons, to say nothing of an approach to reviewing the books of colleagues that could sometimes be brutal, that his influence has not yet matched his stature. In specialist Thomist circles he is perhaps best known for his provocative intervention in a recent controversy concerning the status of the divine ideas in Aquinas.

The language of ideas, though rooted in ancient Platonism, had for centuries been taken up into Christian theology in order to express the eternal knowledge God has of the various creatures, a knowledge that “precedes” and creatively grounds them. Aquinas, like most other mediev-als, readily adopted the notion, responding to the authoritative weight of its usage by Augustine and Dionysius but adapting it to fit into his

own framework of thought.¹ Especially in the twentieth century, scholars began arguing vigorously about the precise motive for this adoption and the precise nature of this adaptation. The particular issue that Ross addressed concerned what should be, in Aquinas's scheme, the systematic relationship between God's ideas, God's will, and the possibilities of things prior to their creation or, more radically, of those things which will never be created. Opposing himself mainly to two very distinguished Aquinas interpreters—Lawrence Dewan, O.P. and John F. Wippel (who themselves were responding to earlier stages of the debate)—Ross criticized any account of the divine ideas that characterized them as an infinite set of discrete items, objects of God's eternal knowledge, each corresponding exactly to some creatable possibility, whether actually realized in time by the divine will or not.² Ross admitted that, in many places, Aquinas's language could easily be interpreted on such lines. But what he called "photo-exemplarism" had to be wrong, he argued, both because of how individuation works in Aquinas and because of how the latter conceives the radicality of the creative act. On the one hand, it is dubious "to think that 'the realm of the contingent' determinately decomposes into actual and possible individuals and common natures, or into exemplar ideas for them"; hence, "[d]ecomposition into individuals may be a consequence of creation, but not an exemplar condition for it." Put another way, "there cannot be a domain of 'all possible creatures' or 'every possible individual of every possible kind' because there is nothing to 'divide' being into 'all possible kinds': there can be no individuated mere possibilities, no *definite* 'elder brother you might have had.'" ³ On the other hand, because God creates *ex nihilo* not just individuals but

¹ A valuable and thorough survey of the ancient developments and their appropriation by Aquinas is provided in Vivian Boland, O.P., *Ideas in God According to Saint Thomas Aquinas: Sources and Synthesis* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

² Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "St. Thomas and the Possibles," *The New Scholasticism* 53, no. 1 (1979): 76–85; John F. Wippel, "The Reality of Nonexisting Possibles According to Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Godfrey of Fontaines," *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 4 (1981): 729–758; James F. Ross, "Aquinas's Exemplarism, Aquinas's Voluntarism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (1990): 171–198. Dewan responded in "St. Thomas, James Ross, and Exemplarism: A Reply," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1991): 221–234. Ross answered in turn with "Response to Maurer and Dewan," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1991): 235–243. Though Ross addressed mainly Wippel in his original essay, he noted in his response to Dewan (237, fn. 1) that the latter's "seminal" paper had also been in his mind from the beginning.

³ Ross, "Aquinas's Exemplarism," 174.

kinds and, indeed, defined possibilities for creatures, the “domain” of his power “is realized with its exercise. . . . God’s power has no exemplar objects, only a perimeter (that is, finite being) plus a limit (that of internal consistency, compatibility with the divine being).”⁴

Of course, Ross concedes that Aquinas does indeed say that God’s knowledge of created things, and of every possibly creatable but never actual thing, is rooted in his perfect comprehension of his essence, of which all creatures are nothing more than modes of participation. Thus he knows all possible creatures. But it was Ross’s contention that this should not lead us to imagine God being “confronted,” as it were, by an eternal range of possible products unavoidably and already given in his self-understanding, from which he “selects” some to actualize: “creation is not ‘adding actuality’ to a possible world.”⁵ On his more voluntarist reading of Aquinas, the divine will has a more central and creative role to play than simply providing “instantiations” of already constituted possibilities. However, to the degree that his argument has found detailed engagement, beginning with Dewan himself, it has not been received sympathetically.⁶ To be sure, there has been little discussion of Ross’s detailed position on the inherent logical and metaphysical flaws in the “photo-exemplarist” account. Instead, the retort to him has been that, whatever its weaknesses, something like “photo-exemplarism” was evidently behind Aquinas’s discussions of divine ideas.

What follows is based on the conviction that Ross, though his specific readings of some Aquinas passages may be in need of adjustment here and there, offers, on the whole, a more appropriate and satisfying way of interpreting Aquinas. It will be an attempt to offer a fresh reading

⁴ James F. Ross, “God, Creator of Kinds and Possibilities: *Requiescant universalia ante res*,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 318–319.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁶ Besides the reply of Dewan cited above, see John F. Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas on the Divine Ideas [1993],” in *The Gilson Lectures on Thomas Aquinas*, ed. James P. Reilly (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008), 132, where Wippel dismisses Ross in a footnote and refers the reader to Dewan; Aaron Martin, “Reckoning with Ross: Possibles, Divine Ideas, and Virtual Practical Knowledge,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 78 (2005): 193–208; and Gregory T. Doolan, “Is Thomas’s Doctrine of Divine Ideas Thomistic?” in *Wisdom’s Apprentice: Thomistic Essays in Honor of Lawrence Dewan, O.P.*, ed. Peter A. Kwasniewski (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007). Doolan offers similar comments in *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

of the Aquinas evidence in order to secure the possibility that Ross's insights into what creation means and what ideas are can, in fact, be defended. The basic problem to be acknowledged at the beginning, and which affects the entire debate, is the scanty and ambiguous nature of that evidence. Especially on the central issue of divine ideas and their relation to what I will be calling non-existents (i.e. possibilities open to the creator's power but never realized, as opposed to actual creatures), Aquinas has some things to say, but not much. In fact, the sporadic and compressed nature of his comments invites us to see here an issue which did not seem to him worthy of too much attention. By the end of the entire discussion that will now ensue, it is at least to be hoped that the marginality of the issue for him will not seem strange. In the meantime, it must be admitted that much of what follows is tentative and that the position outlined for Aquinas will be partly speculative, an attempt to think "with Aquinas" and, under his guidance, to draw some conclusions he never troubled to formulate definitively. His writings will not warrant, I believe, much more than that. The hoped-for result will not be a triumphant refutation of Ross's opponents, but rather the delineation of a space in Aquinas's thought within which Ross's account can be located and find genuine support.

The first three sections will each examine one important aspect of Aquinas's way of thinking about divine ideas in general; the collective relevance of these positions to our problem has not received sufficient attention. The fourth and fifth sections will marshal this data, drawing out their possible implications in order to attempt an imaginative fleshing out of Aquinas's nowhere fully-stated mature position on the divine knowledge of non-existents. This speculative construction will provide the positive counterpart to the negative thesis of the paper, showing how Aquinas can be read as envisioning a divine knowledge of non-existents quite distinct from his knowledge of creatures, a kind of knowing that points us away from a "photo-exemplarist" array of discrete ideas of possibles eternally in God's mind, complete with all potential details of concrete state and interrelations (thus replicating the sort of knowledge God admittedly has of actual creatures). While the fourth section will present Aquinas's vision by focusing on the more central role of the Divine Will in the content of the divine knowing, the fifth section will illustrate how the resulting apparent "lack" of eternal divine knowledge of uncreated possibilities in no way represents a cognitive deficiency on God's part. The sixth section will turn to the most developed presentation of the opposed "photo-exemplarist" reading of Aquinas, that of

Lawrence Dewan, in order to raise questions both about it and about his related criticisms of Ross. The brief concluding section will summarize the results of the discussion.

Ideas as Implications of God's Unique Intellectual Object

We begin with a key passage:

Idea, properly speaking, has regard not only to actually practical cognition, but also to habitually practical [cognition]. Whence, since God has virtually practical cognition concerning all those things that he can make, even though they never are nor will be made, it remains that there can be [an] idea of what is not, nor was, nor will be; not, however, in the same manner as [there is an idea] of those [things] which are, or will be, or were; because with those [things] which are, or will be, or were, that they are to be produced is determined from the purpose of the divine will, but not with those [things] which are not, nor will be, nor were; and so [things] of this kind have in a certain way indeterminate ideas.⁷

In answering objectors, Aquinas adds a couple of further points. In the first and second replies of article 6, he distinguishes the presence or existence of (possible or actual) creatures “in God” (*in Deo, in ipso*) from their presence or existence “in his knowledge” (*in Dei cognitione, in eius scientia*), pointing out that “because God knows all things distinctly . . . things are distinct in his knowledge even though in him they are one.” Then, in answering the third objection, he specifies that by God’s “practical” knowledge he means the knowledge “to produce into the act of existence the things . . . of which he has ideas” (*producere . . . res in esse quarum ideas habet*). This article, short as it is, turns out to be the most

⁷ *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 3 a. 6 (hereafter, *QDV*). Translations from this work are my own. The rather stilted version I provide here is deliberately over-literal, useful for a passage that will be subject to closer verbal analysis. Right away, it serves to bring out an issue that will not be pursued further, but which is not irrelevant for the discussion. It concerns singular versus plural forms of the word “idea.” Aquinas will very often use the singular “idea” even when the ideational content or referent (i.e., what the idea is “of”) is plural in form. One could cautiously infer that a plurality of things does not pluralize the divine idea in any straightforward way. The issue is clouded by the standard English translations, which habitually but carelessly introduce far more plural usages (“ideas”) than the Latin contains.

explicit single treatment of the issue in question in his entire corpus.⁸ One question immediately forces itself on our attention: what is meant by the proviso that there are ideas both of creatures and of non-existents, “but not in the same manner” (*non tamen eodem modo*), and that the ideas of non-existents are “in a certain way indeterminate” (*quodammodo indeterminatas*)? This exegetical query poses as well as anything the interpretive question answered in divergent ways by Ross and his opponents. Aquinas’s wording suggests that the ideas of non-existents are “indeterminate” because they are not determined to production by the purpose of the divine will. But are we to take this to mean that they are, in terms of their cognitive nature and content, simply identical to the ideas of (actual) creatures, their only difference being that they are not actualized by an act of divine will, hence an act itself, so to speak, extraneous to their cognitive status? That might be a fair statement of the position Ross is opposing. His own preference is to assign a less extrinsic role to the divine will in constituting ideas in general, such that, precisely because the ideas of non-existents are not determined to creation by God’s will, we might suspect that, even on the purely cognitive plane, they do not relate “in the same manner” to their cognitive content (i.e., the things which do not exist and never will).

Aquinas does not here decide the issue for us. But in this and the two following sections we will use the language of this passage to bring out in turn three major aspects of his thinking on ideas as developed elsewhere in his writings. These aspects will be necessary elements in the development in sections IV and V of a more systematic picture of God’s knowledge of non-existents, one which will favor Ross’s position. The first aspect is indicated by Aquinas’s careful distinction between the way created or creatable things are in God and the way they are in God’s knowledge. The entire role of the doctrine of ideas is to explain how there can be multiple things “distinctly known” by God without pluri-fying his utterly simple being. The second aspect (discussed in section II below) focusses on the term “thing” (*res*): if it is asked what ideas are primarily “of,” the consistent answer for Aquinas is that they are, first and foremost, ideas of things. This turns out also to have surprisingly large implications. Third and finally, Aquinas stipulates here that there

⁸ Aquinas treats in detail the general issue of divine ideas in three main blocks of material: first in the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* I, d. 36, q. 2 (hereafter, *Sent.*), then in *QDV* q. 3, aa. 1–8, and finally in the *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 15, aa. 1–3 (hereafter, *ST*). A few much shorter discussions are scattered elsewhere in his corpus.

are ideas “properly speaking” of non-existents, just as there are of creatures. This points to a distinction that underlies all of Aquinas’s more detailed accounts of God’s ideas, one between idea in a narrower and more proper sense and idea in a broader sense. However, on a single point related to this distinction, Aquinas strikingly reversed himself, and on a matter of prime importance to our discussion: do non-existents have in God an idea properly speaking or an idea only broadly speaking? It will be argued (in section III below) that his shift on this question, though involving merely a technical adjustment in his terminology, is in fact a significant clue for untangling the problem at hand.

Turning to the first point, there can be no understanding of what ideas are according to Aquinas and what work they do for him without seeing the relevance of his much-discussed treatment of the originally Augustinian notion of the “intellectual word” or “word of the heart.” More than one commentator has stressed that the special role of the word of the intellect, which is primarily a feature of Aquinas’s account of human understanding, provides him an analogical way to reconcile the vast, even infinite, plurality of things known by God with the ultimate simplicity of his act of intellection. Very briefly, Aquinas sharply distinguishes between two mental forms involved in intellectual cognition. There is, on one hand, the intellectual species that informs the intellect in its act of knowing, serving as the shared formal medium by which the intellect (*intellectus*) and the thing understood (*res intellecta*) coalesce or coincide in the act of understanding. This “perfects” the intellect itself as cognizant. But as informed or perfected, the now actualized intellect engages in the production (“conception”) of a second form, the intellectual word, by which the intellect actively expresses to itself (and potentially to others, hence “word”) the intelligible content of its achieved cognitive unity with the thing understood. Aquinas sometimes calls this “word” the “intellected” (*intellectum*), thereby emphasizing both its status as a product of the act of intellect and its role as counterpart and completion of that act. In other words, it is not the thing “outside” the intellect that is the “object,” properly speaking, of intellectual knowledge. The object is the complement that specifies an individual act and is the term that completes or perfects it (*Sent.* I, d. 1, q. 2, a. 1 ad 2). Thus, the object of the successful intellection is not primarily the thing understood (*res intellecta*), but the thing-as-understood (*res ut intellectum*), existing within the understanding.⁹

⁹ Some of the more important discussions in Aquinas include *QDV* q. 3, a. 2 and q. 4; *Summa contra gentiles*, bk. 1, ch. 53 (hereafter, *SCG*); *Quaestiones disputatae*

The important thing to note is that the thing-as-understood, or intellectual word, is not simply the existent thing, but rather its understandability, its potentially infinite ensemble of intelligible aspects or self-relations. Its existence as intelligible is a unique achievement of intellectual power, the result of that union with intellect that is effected only by intellect.

In response to a particular problem, Aquinas now analogously applies this schema of the intellectual act in order to identify the nature and role of divine ideas. But what is an “idea”? Generally, an idea is a formal standard, a likeness in accord with which something is, at least, cognitively grasped or, more properly, intentionally fashioned. Aquinas argues repeatedly that God’s knowledge must contain ideas of creatures in accord with which he creates, since creation, in all its diversification, is an intentional act. But how can this multiplicity within God, especially given the classic (Augustinian) understanding that “all that is within God is God,” avoid making him metaphysically composite? Aquinas’s teacher, Albert the Great, had argued that, since all the different creatures are each individually nothing but a limited range of imitative perfection, and thus collectively represent many different modes of participating in the infinitely perfect divine essence, they constitute nothing but different relations to or “regards upon” (*respectus*) the divine. Their reality outside God constitutes their diversity, but within God, they are only relations of reason (*secundum rationum*), and thus their only reality there is their unity with the simple divine being.¹⁰ It appears that Aquinas was at least partially satisfied with this explanation in his own early commentary on the *Sentences*, but, perhaps anticipating the objection that Duns Scotus would later make to this position, he moves beyond this answer to make a close analogical application of the intellectual word (*Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 3, a. 2 [hereafter, *QDV*]).¹¹ His point is to make as clear as possible that it is not the created things as real outside of God that

de potentia dei, q. 8, a. 1 and q. 9, a. 5 (hereafter, *QDP*); and *ST I* q. 27, a. 1 and q. 34, a. 1.

¹⁰ Albert the Great, *Commentarii in I Sententiarum*, d. 35, E, aa. 7–9, in B. Alberti Magni Ratisbonensis episcopi *Opera omnia : ex editione Lugdunensis religiose castigata, et pro auctoritatibus ad fidem Vulgatae versionis accuratiorumque patrologiae textuum revocata, auctaque b. Alberti vita ac bibliographia suorum operum a PP. Quetif et Echard exaratis*, ed. Auguste Borgnet et al., vol. 26 (Paris: L. Vivès, 1890–1899), 189–195.

¹¹ On this see Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, vol. 2 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 19.

plurify and denominate the ideas, but rather their status as “*intellecta*,” as generated within the divine intellectual act by which God eternally knows his own essence as multiply participable.

Does this mean the ideas themselves are so many objects of God’s intellect, so many “words”? No. For, in fact, God’s act of understanding has and can have only one “object,” properly speaking. A discrete act of intellect is metaphysically singular because in it the intellect is informed and actualized by a single intellectual species. The eternal act that is God’s intellect, which is nothing other than God’s very act of existence, is unique in that God knows himself and everything else (i.e., all that does or could participate in the likeness of his perfect essence by being created) only through his own essence. And one form perfectly and exhaustively grasped results in the conception of one intellectual word (SCG I, chs. 51–54: “*intentio intellecta*”). This word is, of course, identical with the eternally generated Son, the perfect reflection of the mind of the Father, the “repetition” without multiplication of the divine essence intelligently grasping itself as such. But if there is only one word, how are there many ideas of different creatures? The answer lies in the nature of intelligent act itself, which eminently contains within its single formal grasp a virtual range of subordinated intelligible truths. God and only God is the first and “per se” object for God. But in and through knowing his infinity, God also implicitly knows the infinite finitudes which do or could partially assimilate to him. Note that there is no shift of objects here; God does not stop considering God in order to consider the participants. The point of the model of intelligence is precisely that it allows for subordinated knowings within the simplicity of a higher knowing.

We will return in the next section to the implications of this intelligible model for God’s grasp of non-existents. For now, it clarifies two things about Aquinas’s discussions of divine ideas generally. First, it provides a mechanism by which Aquinas can see the single divine essence as itself the proper exemplar for many highly divergent creatures without in any way multiplying that essence. Loosely speaking, the unique divine existent can become the model for this or that finite existent because, in understanding himself, God also, by the very same act of understanding his own infinite existence, understands every act of existence which falls short of that infinity. By abstracting, so to speak, from the completeness of his self-grasp, God thereby artificially isolates a limited zone of imitability, as if bringing together in one view (Aquinas speaks of a “*comparatio*”) his fullness and a “section” of it, all else being “blocked out.” The association with the act of understanding makes this

possible. God cannot *be* less than God, but he can *understand* himself as less than himself, and in many different ways. He thus “receives” the form of the thing that creatures are to imitate (i.e., his essence) as not simply the “idea,” but in the form of his essence understood with a limited proportion to itself. Only as *res ut intellectum* could God’s essence also serve as the idea for this, that, and everything else created. God’s self-concept is thus virtually decomposable into a primary object virtually containing secondary ones. But God’s infinite essence in itself is not decomposable in any way. There are not “secondary” acts of divine being really “contained” in God’s essence, only diverse reflections in the divine intelligence that themselves constitute what is not God, non-divine beings.

But the second advantage of the model of the intellectual word must be emphasized right away, lest the account above suggest multiple acts of divine knowing, or perhaps a first “stage” of divine self-knowledge followed logically by a second “stage” or secondary act of “reflection” whereby God knows the multiplicity of participations. God’s intellect, unlike ours, is not discursive. In order for us to attain intellectual knowledge, we must collect and intelligently correlate the results of many acts of cognition. Likewise, once we have obtained an intelligent grasp of some matter, we would need multiple subsequent acts of articulation in order to relate the stages of our logical ascendance to that knowledge, or to tease out the various implications already grasped therein. But nonetheless, at its ideal peak, the knowledge, even in a human knower, is already there, contained in the intellectual concept, even if not adverted to or subsequently reflected upon. In God, we should imagine the grasp of infinite subordinated partial truths as itself nothing other than his single “glance” (*intuitus*), his one act of sheer intelligible self-transparency, on the analogy of our highest intellectual attainments. The centrality of the model of intellection lies behind a curious remark in Aquinas’s discussion of ideas.

In explaining why there are many ideas but only one divine “art” or “wisdom” (equivalent here to God’s essential self-understanding), Aquinas compares God to a builder who, “when he understands the form of a house in matter is said to understand the house, but when he understands the form of a house as considered by himself [or observed by himself, *a se speculatam*], from the fact that he understands that he understands it, he understands the idea or intelligible content [*ratio*] of the house” (*ST*

I, q. 15, a. 2 ad 2).¹² God, Aquinas explains, understands many things *by* his one word or art (i.e., his intellectual species), but *what* he understands (i.e., the *intellecta*) are therefore many and are called ideas. This multiplicity is not only of the things themselves but also of the *res ut intellecta*. But how can this be, if all is understood by understanding the single essence? The answer lies in the unique achievement of intelligence, which the parable of the builder illustrates, albeit somewhat cryptically. The point is to remind us how understanding many things can be understood in one act because understanding as understanding involves a cognitive grasp not just of the thing outside, but also of the mental medium by which that grasp occurs (i.e., the interior word). God, like the builder, does not just understand the many; he knows that he knows the many through an internal form itself intelligible precisely as such. An earlier discussion (*ST* I, q. 14, a. 6 ad 1) clarifies this by a comparison with the sense of vision: “the eye does not know the stone according to the act of existence the stone has in the eye, but through the species of the stone which it has in itself it knows the stone according to the act of existence it has outside the eye.” In contrast, “the intellect knows the stone according to the intelligible act of existence it has in the intellect, inasmuch as it knows that it understands [*cognoscit se intelligere*],” but for just that reason it also knows the stone in its proper nature as outside intellect. We can now understand better Aquinas’s conclusion that “God does not just understand many things through his essence, but also he understands that he understands [*intelligit se intelligere*]” them that way, and this is to understand “many ideas to be in his intellect as things intellectuated [*ut intellectas*]” (*ST* I, q. 15, a. 2 ad 2). The unique achievement of intellect as opposed to sense knowledge, called elsewhere its “turning back on itself” or *reflexio*, is not to be understood as a second, subsequent act to the original knowing, but rather as implicit in the one act of understanding itself. Intellect understands the thing by knowing within itself the thing-as-understood. Hence there is multiplicity in the divine knowledge, not just outside it (his point here), but this is no threat to the unity of divine knowing precisely because that knowing is intellectual and (as explained in the previous paragraph), this means that “there is indeed one [idea] of all things on the part of the divine essence, but a plurality [of ideas] is found on the part of the diverse proportions

¹² The adjective “*speculatus*, -a, -um” is very rare in Aquinas. For a similar instance, where the sensible phantasm is adverted to (*speculatum*) by the knower rather than the sensed thing itself, see *Sententia de sensu et sensato*, tractate 2, lectio 3.

of creatures to the essence.”¹³ The “reflective” nature of intellect makes this possible as a single act.

So, to sum up, because ideas are things-as-understood and these are not prior to the act of divine knowing itself (as objects of sense knowing would have to be), God’s knowing of his essence as variably participable is not simply a “finding it so.” The participants are not “already waiting” there in the divine essence itself. They are constituted only as implicit in the cognitive achievement that is God’s self-intellection. God’s essence as infinite being and his power as infinite efficacy do not present the ideas as such apart from the act of intelligence—hence, the stress repeatedly laid by Aquinas on the distinction between the one intelligible species in God and the word as conceived, with its many subordinated “*intellecta*.” The preliminary result is a reminder that the operative analogue for our thinking of divine ideas must always be intellectual grasp, as opposed to vision or imagination. We can now turn to the second issue arising from our initial quotation: instead of focusing, as up to now, on how ideas fit in the divine act of knowing, the question here is what primarily is known by God through ideas.

What is the Size of an Idea?

Already in his earliest discussion of ideas (*Sent.* I, d. 36, q. 2, a. 1), Aquinas distinguishes “idea” in a narrower sense that, in accord both with common usage and etymology, refers to the exemplars according to which things are produced in being by God from “idea” in a broader sense that refers to any intelligible content (*ratio*) of the divine knowing that corresponds to anything knowable (other than himself). The bearing of his discussions, I would argue, is that ideas, properly, in some sense, “track with” or “match up with” things (*res*) as producible in being, as existents (*entia*) bearing their own act of existence (*esse*). The “thing” par excellence, to Aquinas’s way of thinking, is the individual substance, especially as determined by its unique specific form. As he argues (*ST* I, q. 45, a. 4), when we speak of a creature we mean first and foremost the subsistent thing. The myriad accidental qualifications of substances, that we tend to think of as giving them their concrete identities, Aquinas does not deign to grant the status of existents properly speaking (*entia*). Accidents, which, as inhering in the substance, can only share in its act of existence, as well as aspects of an existent abstractable by intelligence but having no existence apart from it (such as material forms), are more fittingly called co-existents (*coexistentia*).

¹³ *QDV*, q. 3, a. 2.

This privileging of the substantial thing carries over into all Aquinas's major discussions of what can properly be said to have its own idea in God's mind. Two criteria appear to be at work, not always clearly distinguished: first, some aspects of creation knowable by God have only an "idea" in the broader sense (i.e., of anything merely knowable in some relatively distinct way), whereas some have it properly (i.e., of an actually producible thing); second, some aspects of creation have their own distinct idea, whereas others have no complete idea, but rather are known or created as an aspect of something else that does have a complete idea. Thus, what cannot exist except in mental abstraction, such as prime matter apart from the composite,¹⁴ or genus apart from species,¹⁵ is said, to use language favored in the commentary on the *Sentences*, not to have an idea according to its complete intelligible content (*perfecta ratio idea*) or to lack the completion of idea (*perfectio ideae*). When it comes to accidents, Aquinas distinguishes so-called proper accidents (necessary concomitants of a particular specific form) from categorical accidents that are contingent. Since no particular accident of the latter kind necessarily accompanies a given substance, it must have its own idea, though only in the broader sense. The proper accident, however, will have no complete idea for itself, but will share in the idea of the species it necessarily accompanies, which is an idea in the narrower sense.¹⁶ Of special note is his stance on singulars, multiple instantiations of a single species, individuated by matter. Aquinas is consistent throughout his writings that, since divine governance of the world extends to singulars, there must be ideas of singulars, a stance Aquinas recognizes as somewhat un-Platonic. His stance is qualified or complicated, however. The single proper idea of a thing "covers" its specificity, its genus (which cannot be apart from species), and its individual instantiation, if the species has one (as angels, for example, do not).¹⁷ Yet the formal differentiation between one species and another is more perfect than the differentiation of individuals within the same species, and therefore "the distinction of intelligible contents [*rationum*] is more perfect corresponding to diverse species than to diverse individuals."¹⁸ The conclusion seems to be that the idea in the proper sense, as of what can be brought to exist in some determinate and substantial way, aligns more closely with species than

¹⁴ Cf. *Sent* I, d. 36, q. 2, a. 3 ad 2; *QDV* q. 3, a. 5; *ST* I, q. 15, a. 3, ad 3.

¹⁵ Cf. *ST* I, q. 15, a. 3 ad 4.

¹⁶ Cf. *QDV* q. 3, a. 7; *ST* I, q. 15, a. 3 ad 4.

¹⁷ Cf. *QDV* q. 3 a. 8 ad 2.

¹⁸ *Sent* I, d. 36, q. 2, a. 3 ad 3.

with singulars, though, as known by God, individuals have their own idea in the broader sense.

It should be noted that the passage treating ideas of non-existents with which we began section I above is one among this set of articles (in *QDV* q. 3) dealing with “special cases” (prime matter, accidents, individuals, etc.). We will need to return to this, but for the present, a significant question arises from this discussion. Is not the created cosmos more than just a collection of things or substances? Are they not crucially and complexly interrelated by a swarm of accidental or even essential relations of efficient and final causality, relations always shifting as the cosmos moves through time? In fact, is this not what we mean by the world? The answer to all these questions is yes, and Aquinas is quite aware that this critical dimension of creation must also be the result of pre-existent knowledge and intention in God. But what is almost never noticed in discussions of the divine ideas is that this pre-existent knowledge of what might be called the “order” of things to each other does not itself point us to just another idea, but to something quite different. “The exemplar form of a thing taken absolutely according to its species is idea; but the form of a thing as it is ordained to an end is providence.” Aquinas adds that idea relates to species as providence relates to fate, the order God has implanted in things.¹⁹

But unlike ideas, providence is not plural. “In things good is found not only as regards their substance [i.e., foreknown by God through the idea], but also as regards their order towards an end, and especially their last end . . . the intelligible content [*ratio*] of things ordered towards an end is . . . providence.”²⁰ Aquinas argued that the ideas of created things must be plural because “the order of the universe is properly intended by God” and he could not have an idea of the total order without ideas of the parts going to make it up (*ST* I, q. 15, a. 2). Only later in the *Summa* does he name this unique “*ideam ordinis universi*” as providence. To the plurality of ideas of things there must correspond the single idea of the order of the whole. This includes the ordering of created things to each other in various ways (i.e., the many ways in which the different species of things are drawn into a network of relations of means and ends). But beyond this, and more importantly, there is the ordering to God himself, what Aquinas calls the final or ultimate end. It is both these ordering relationships together that unite the many different things with their differing grades of being to one another, constituting a single universe.

¹⁹ Cf. *QDV* q. 5, a. 1 ad 1.

²⁰ *ST* I, q. 22, a. 1.

Aquinas, in a number of places, distinguishes this twofold order of the world, the order of parts to each other to make up a whole (which itself would include various relations where one creature serves another as its proximate end) and the order of the whole to the final end. He also points out the priority of the latter, just as the ordering of the soldiers to each other for the good of the army is subordinated to the ordering the army to the good of the general, which is victory.²¹ This mutual ordering of creatures to each other results directly in the divine governance of “all the acts and movements that are to be found in each single creature”; governance moves each thing to its due end.²²

This providentially ordered web of created acts and ends, which for us is the mark of things in their concrete reality, is for Aquinas a higher good than that of the creatures individually: “For each thing in its nature is good, but all things together are very good, by reason of the order of the universe, which is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.”²³ But precisely because it is the highest perfection in things, (i.e., a created perfection), it falls short of the infinite perfection of the divine essence, which is the ultimate end of the universe, as it is the perfect act of being and goodness in which all created things participate simply as creatures. The crucial thing to see is the clear distinction Aquinas routinely draws between creatures as things, chiefly substances, and the created universe as a totality, which he calls “this course of things [*iste cursus rerum*]” or the “order of things” (while a different universe would be “*alius ordo rerum*”).²⁴ But since God foreknows all created things (by containing their ideas) and also foreknows the order of things (by containing the intelligible content of providence), a question arises that Aquinas never fully answers, and may never have concerned himself with: what sort of logical relation subsists in the divine mind between the ideas and providence?

Two conclusions that might cautiously be drawn from scattered clues and hints will be important for our overall argument. The first thing to be said is that Aquinas discerns the closest relation between the things that go to make up the actual created order and that order itself. For one thing, this world, the actual order of actual creatures, is identified as such by the ensemble of kinds of creatures it contains. Thus, Aquinas argues (*Sent.* I, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2) that the universe is an integral whole, and hence,

²¹ Cf. *Sent.* I, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2.

²² *ST* I–II, q. 93, a. 1.

²³ *SCG* bk. II, ch. 45, par. 10.

²⁴ *ST* I, q. 25, a. 5; cf. *QDP* q. 1, a. 5.

if additional kinds of creatures were added or current kinds replaced, one would no longer be speaking of the same world. (The significant focus on kinds is due to the fact that the specific form is ontologically superior to individuating matter, which multiplies “accidentally,” so to speak. Hence, “the universe is ennobled more by the multiplication of species than by the multiplication of individuals within one species”).²⁵ That is why there is little point in speaking of this universe as the best possible; it could only be the best relative to the particular kinds of creatures it actually contains.²⁶ But there is something else. Aquinas indicates in numerous places that because, as has already been mentioned, the good of the ordering of the whole to God supersedes the good of the parts in their ordering to each other,²⁷ it must be said that things are not created at random but are created to complete or perfect this particular universe (the only one there is). The production of the parts is for the sake of the production of the whole.²⁸ The universe is not produced merely as the background condition for the actualization of creatures, but rather, to take an example, God “wills the human being to be, so that the universe may be complete.”²⁹

This suggests a picture in which the particularity of different creatures and the particularity of the total created order mutually condition one another. The order is of just these things, and these things exist to perfect just this order.³⁰ But it also suggests a logical precedence of providence over the many ideas insofar as they represent a mere accumulation of possibilities unrelated to one another. At the very least, some of Aquinas’s language should give pause to anyone inclined to picture God’s ideas of creatures as, as it were, fully complete and determinate “prior” to or apart from their being foreseen in their total providential organization. Consider how closely Aquinas at times links the very act of distinguishing things from each other to their ordered interrelations in the world. Thus, he says that the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things and thus contains the exemplars³¹ because “the determination of forms must be reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists

²⁵ SCG II, ch. 93, par. 5.

²⁶ Cf. QDP q. 3, a. 16, ad 17.

²⁷ Cf. SCG III, ch. 64, par. 10.

²⁸ Cf. QDP q. 3, a. 16.

²⁹ SCG I ch. 86, par. 5.

³⁰ Cf. ST I, q. 47, a. 3.

³¹ Cf. ST I, q. 47, a. 1.

in the variety of things.”³² Such a wording is at least open to a picture of creation in which, rather than simply selecting and actualizing already distinct “possibilities,” God distinguishes in the act of creation itself. This impression is strengthened by the comparison, borrowed from Aristotle, of the species of things with numbers. As Rudi te Velde points out, “like numbers [the different species] form a continuous sequence from the lowest to the highest species without any gap.” When he adds that “[t]he perfection of the universe is such that every possible nature is instantiated in it,” he should have included a proviso that makes clear that other universes are possible—namely, that the range of species is continuous and complete in relation to just this concrete created order.³³ But the basic point is well taken, and provides a further impetus for our imagining that the specific forms of creatures in their diversity are not simply given but are “tailored,” so to speak, by the divine wisdom to fill out and complete the unique course of things intended by God.

Yet another passage that at least gestures in this direction (*QDV* q. 5, a. 1, ad 9), attributes the so to speak “formal” hierarchical relations of things to each other (i.e., their arrangement along relatively different ontological planes or levels of excellence) to the divine act of “disposition,” while their being ordered to their end is a function of providence. But Aquinas immediately undermines too sharp a separation here, since he proceeds to argue that “disposition” in this sense is just as much determined by the final end of the ordering of the world to God as are the other ordering acts of providence, so much so that “divine providence is, in a sense, the cause of God’s disposition of things, and for this reason an act of his disposition is sometimes attributed to his providence.”³⁴ In other words, the providential ordering of things to one another includes the very pattern of distinctions among specific forms and should not be reduced to a simple “operatizing” of already given forms.

This same article (*QDV* q. 5, a. 1) also points toward the second important conclusion that arises once it has been grasped that creation,

³² *ST* I, q. 44, a. 3.

³³ Rudi A. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 229. Harm Goris, in his appreciative review of this book (“Participation and Substantiality: An extensive summary of, and some notes on R.A. te Velde, *Participatie en substantialiteit*,” *Jaarboek Thomas Instituut te Utrecht* 11/12 [1991/92]: 112), rightly warns that the contiguity of species should not be interpreted (as Te Velde appears to do) to mean that God’s freedom in creating would be constrained by a principle of plenitude demanding the instantiation of every possible creature.

³⁴ Cf. *ST* I, q. 22, a. 1 and ad 2.

for Aquinas, necessarily involves the bringing together of ideas and providence. In his answer to the first objection, Aquinas argues that, while an idea can, in a certain way, pertain to speculative knowledge (he apparently intends “idea” in the narrower, more proper sense, since he speaks of “the exemplar form of a thing considered absolutely in its species”), providence exclusively concerns God’s practical knowledge “from the fact that it implies an order to an end, and so to the work by means of which the end is attained.” The overall point of the article is to argue that the providence by which God “foresees,” and in accordance with which he creates the universe, cannot be traced back to the divine knowledge alone, but must incorporate the divine will to create as well. This marks an important distinction between providence and the notion of idea that Aquinas had developed earlier (*QDV* q. 3, a. 6, the passage quoted at the beginning of section I above). There he had made a close linkage of the ideas of producible things with God’s practical knowledge (whether actually or virtually practical). But here (*QDV* q. 5, a. 1), in his answer to the second objection, amplifying the point of his reply to the first, he points out that “practical knowledge taken absolutely relates in common to cognition [both] of the end and of the means to the end,” but it does not “presuppose the willing of the end.” The eternal divine “*ratio*” that he calls providence, however, does indeed include just this act of willing.

Hence his conclusion to his answer to the first objection: “although an idea can pertain to speculative knowledge in a certain way, providence pertains solely to practical” (*ibid.*). Aquinas’s talk of a practical knowledge that pertains to speculative knowledge “in a certain way” (*aliquo modo*) suggests that he is here recalling the distinction he developed (at *QDV* q. 3, a. 3) between “actual” and “virtual” practical knowledge. By insisting that God’s knowledge of providence actually includes the will to produce the world thereby foreknown, he is contrasting providence especially with that kind of idea associated with practical knowledge that also involves “in some way” (*quoddammodo*) speculative knowledge,³⁵ namely, the idea of the non-existent, the producible that God will never produce.³⁶ This kind of idea refers to the kind of knowledge God has of what-might-have-been. At the time of composition of the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, Aquinas still wants to identify this knowing as practical, even though as merely “virtually” practical, it is uncoupled from or unrelated to the divine will to actual creation. This is presumably the

³⁵ Cf. *QDV* q. 3, a. 3.

³⁶ Cf. *QDV* q. 3, a. 6.

point of specifying this as knowledge “taken absolutely,” as attributed to the cognitive power alone without relation to the act of will. But this means that, even though God foreknows the things he will not create, he cannot be meaningfully said to providentially interrelate such things into a world. The entire network of the myriad causal interconnections between creatures that go to make up what can be called a universe or world, and which involve each creature being at once means for some and ends of others, and in turn interacting with others as its own means and ends, presupposes the actual will of God that a universe come into being. On this point Te Velde appropriately cites Aquinas’s interpretation of Boethius’ *De Hebdomadibus*: “Every end that is not the ultimate end only has the character of an end insofar as it is ordered in relation to the ultimate end.”³⁷

We should pause for a moment to take stock of this remarkable finding. The implication is that, although the divine knowledge encompasses knowledge of everything God could create, it does not follow that God envisions an array of “possible worlds.” God knows the infinite substances, entities (*entia*), “things” that could participate his goodness, and he does so by knowing his own essence perfectly. But this is not to know infinite “worlds,” for there is more to a world than things, and a world itself is not a thing properly speaking, but an aggregate of them, a “*dispositio*” or “*ordo*” of things created and put into mutual relation. Only this defines a world. In fact, it defines the one and only world there is, and it does so by “operatizing” the envisioned substances—that is, giving them their own fullness of possessed being, including accidents and relations, and inserting them into the total web of causes and effects.

At the very least, this way of looking at Aquinas makes it difficult to draft him into the ranks of “possible worlds” theorists. The underlying point is, again, the mutual conditioning of things and their order. The dilemma for such a reading of Aquinas can be put as a series of questions without answers. Are the infinite things not to be created already world-determinate, already ordered to each other? If so, then is only one such mutual ordering possible, hence a fixed and finite number of possible worlds? If not, then is their “subsequent” ordering quite distinct from their inherent qualities, and hence, are they eternally “disordered,” distributed randomly within a pre-existing possibility space? But how could they be definite without being ordered to one another? And again, how could some be “selected” and placed in a quite different order, that

³⁷ Te Velde, *Participation*, 29, citing *QDV* q. 21, a. 5.

of the actual created world? We will gladly leave such conundrums aside, since the thrust of the current paper is precisely that the very notion of an infinity of definite things preexisting in God's mind, from which he "selects" some to create, is not at all helpful as a guide to Aquinas's way of thinking.

Ideas in the Proper Sense and Divine Intent: A Shift in Aquinas's Position

What is "indeterminate" about God's ideas of non-existents, of what is not, was not, and will not be? In our initial quest for an answer we have highlighted two aspects of Aquinas's thinking about ideas in general. The first was that the multiplicity of ideas must be understood as so many instances of deliberate divine self-abstraction or not-knowing, whereby God's intelligent grasp of his essence as a whole already, as a single eternal act, implicitly and eminently contains its own partial modes in their plurality. The second was that ideas are attuned, first and foremost, to subsistent entities properly speaking, but also that ideas as such do not include the mutual interrelations of these entities in their own acts of being. Only providence sees them as parts of a single created and willed order; there is no divine "entertaining" of multiple "possible worlds" prior to the creation of the actual one. The third and final issue was already broached when it was noted how Aquinas (in the *QDV*) is able to contrast providential knowing, as necessarily involving will, with a kind of divine idea that is "practical" and yet need not involve any actual willing of the practical operation, namely, the idea of the non-existent as producible (rather than actually produced). However, what must now be attended to is the strange fact that Aquinas came to abandon the position upon which this early account of the ideas of non-existents is based. That God's idea of non-existents is an idea in just as proper a sense as that of actual creatures, and hence that the "practical knowledge" which must characterize all such divine ideas narrowly speaking does not imply the willed intention to create—some time after the composition of the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* Aquinas came to flatly reject these notions, so carefully insisted upon there in that early work. A brief discussion of the evidence for and possible implications of this shift will be needed to complete this section.

I would suggest that there is an obscurity hovering over Aquinas's earlier discussions of God's knowledge of non-existents, one having to do with the various senses in which knowledge can be divided into practical and speculative. A retrospective light can be cast on his earlier account by keeping in mind the threefold distinction drawn in

the *Summa* (ST I, q. 14, a. 16). One criterion for determining whether knowledge is speculative or practical concerns what is known: knowledge of what is producible by the knower is practical, but speculative knowing concerns what is not so producible. A second criterion is the manner or mode of knowing: to know something in terms of its general identity or characteristics is speculative, since practical knowing involves the particular grasp of elements, circumstances and procedures necessary to produce the distinct artifact. The third criterion has to do with the end or goal of knowledge: if the knower is concerned only with the truth or falsity of some assertion or state of affairs, the knowledge is speculative, while practical knowledge is directed to and terminates in the actual performance of what is envisioned. For purposes of the following discussion, practical knowledge according to the first criterion can be called *objectively* practical, while the second criterion marks *modally* practical knowing, and the third criterion determines *intentionally* practical knowledge. The point of the distinction is that, in a given case, all three criteria will not necessarily agree: an instance of knowing could, for example, be practical according to one of the criteria but speculative according to the others.

As was said earlier, Aquinas, throughout his career, worked with a distinction in the divine ideas between ideas properly or narrowly speaking, which are the patterns according to which creatures are made, and ideas more broadly speaking, which denote any intelligible aspect of the created order, whether a “thing” or not, that God eternally knows. The shift in Aquinas’s thinking comes down to this: in the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (q. 3, aa. 3–6), he firmly states that the ideas of non-existents must be regarded as ideas in the proper sense, while in the *Summa* (at I, q. 15, a. 3) he states with equal firmness that such ideas are not ideas in the proper sense, but only in the broader sense.³⁸ I will suggest that this shift should be read as evidence of an increasing awareness on his part of the central role played by the divine will (i.e., the will to create this universe) in what and how God knows.

³⁸ It should be pointed out that, in ST I, q. 15, a. 3, though he repeats his standard division of ideas into principles of knowing and of making, Aquinas does not, as earlier, speak in terms of the latter following more properly from the sense of the term “idea,” or the former only in a broader sense. Too much should not be made of this indifference, however. The later *Quodlibet* IV, q. 1, a. 1 finds him appealing once again to his earlier argument, that the word “idea” signifies a form according to the likeness of which something is produced. So, he cannot be said to have abandoned his position that an idea more properly is an exemplar, though he finds no need to advert to it in the passage from ST.

The ground for Aquinas's earlier position is laid when he argues (*QDV* q. 2, a. 8) that God knows non-existents and not just actual creatures, apparently presupposing (without adverting to) the fact that God's knowing of non-existents must be objectively and modally practical (since the non-existents in question are producible and God knows how to produce them). The most straightforward way to answer the objections, then, appears to be to call God's knowledge of both creatures and non-existents basically practical, while acknowledging a difference in divine intention (some are created, some not). Thus, in this passage, the difference between creatures and non-existents that is emphasized is not the different ways God might know these two classes, but rather the sheer divine will to create one and not the other. The result, necessary due to his strategy of argument here, is that practical knowledge is defined entirely in terms of object and mode, and intent becomes somewhat secondary, as is clear from the illustration used: cannot a human craftsman think up a product, and know how to produce it, but decide not to do so? Indeed, this argument privileges modality in defining practical knowledge. It is not the producing of something, but the knowing how to produce it (what in this article he calls the "*rationes operis*" and later [q. 3, a. 3] the "*modum operandi*" or "*modum operis*") that truly marks practical knowledge. Actual production then becomes a matter, in a telling image, of simply "extending" this already achieved knowledge to the actual operation. This discussion, with its vivid analogy of the human craftsman, leaves the impression that the will to operate (i.e., intention) is rather extrinsic to practical knowing.³⁹

The next crucial discussion occurs when, guided no doubt by this earlier argument, Aquinas specifies (*QDV* q. 3, a. 3) that God's practical knowledge must fall into two sorts: actually practical (knowing things that he actually creates) and "virtually" or "habitually" practical (knowing things that he could create but does not). The question then arises as to whether ideas in the proper sense are restricted to God's actually practical knowing or are involved in his virtually practical knowledge as well. It is crucial to note that Augustine's classic account of ideas dominates

³⁹ The concept "intention" does appear in the definition of ideas at *QDV* q. 3, a. 1, but, perhaps under the influence of this earlier decision, the intent in question is mainly the intent of similitude, not of production. In other words, the practical intention of the artist having an idea is only that any produced artifact will be fashioned deliberately to resemble the idea; no further intention to produce the artifact is necessary.

the discussion here.⁴⁰ Aquinas carefully analyzes Augustine's language to find support for his own distinction of ideas properly and ideas broadly, and locates it in Augustine's use of "*forma*" as well as "*ratio*." "Form" means an idea in the proper sense, since form can connote causality ("informing"), while "*ratio*" is a broader notion involving only cognitive similitude. Nor is this the only contribution of Augustine, for the second objection reminds readers that Augustine explicitly stipulated that not only is everything that comes to be or passes away "formed" by "ideas," but also everything that *can* come to be or pass away. In choosing not to dispute this authority, Aquinas is practically forced to the conclusion that ideas in the proper sense apply even to God's virtually practical knowledge. The vague characterization of ideas in the proper sense as involving causality, the impetus (built into the language of "virtually" vs. "actually") to see practical knowledge primarily in terms of mode and not intention, and finally Augustine's own words all combine to influence this decision.

Once the explicit question is put (*QDV* q. 3, a. 6, the passage with which this section began) about whether there are ideas of non-existents, the answer is by now a foregone conclusion. Yes, there must be such ideas, and in the proper sense of the word. Aquinas insists on this despite the third objector's argument that Dionysius (Aquinas's other great authority alongside Augustine) links ideas as exemplars (i.e., in the narrow sense) to their actually being willed by God. Aquinas must, in his reply, resort to some verbal sleight of hand, but it is possible that in later work he continued to ponder Dionysius's position, which admittedly sits awkwardly with the position at which he has arrived. After all, how much sense does it make to speak of an *exemplar* that never has an *exemplatum*, which is what Aquinas's position here on ideas of non-existents amounts to? At any rate, the conclusion of question 3, article 6 leaves him in effect with a threefold classification of ideas: there are "*rationes*" (ideas in the broader sense), ideas "*proprie*" (of actual creatures, willed by God), and ideas somehow "*proprie*" and yet "*indeterminatas*" (ideas of non-existents). The upshot of his later position, then, will be to simply dissolve this curious third category and fold ideas of non-existents into the first category, leaving ideas of actual creatures the only ideas in the proper sense.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, ed. A Mutzenbecher, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), 44a:70–73. Question 46, "On Ideas," incalculably influenced the scholastic discussion of divine ideas.

There are strong signs of this turn away from his earlier position already in the *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia dei* (q. 1, a. 5, ad 11), where he points out that God must indeed have ideas of non-existents (since he has no “potential” ideas—i.e., all his ideas must be “thought out” [*excogitati*] and not habitual, a term pointing to the status of any idea as a produced intellectual word) but that these cannot be ideas according to the perfect notion of the term, since such ideas are “ordered to the work” of production.⁴¹ Thus he now rejects his own earlier argument (*QDV* q. 3, a. 6) that there can be full and proper ideas even of what merely *can* be so ordered. The new position is further solidified in the commentary on the *Divine Names*, where he completely forsakes his earlier reading of Dionysius so as to set up an account wherein there is no longer any sense in speaking of an exemplar in God (i.e., an idea properly speaking) unless it can be differentiated from an *exemplatum* outside God (i.e., an actually willed creature).⁴² All this is given its decisive expression in the *Summa Theologia* I, q. 15, a. 3. Here the merely possible creature no more warrants an idea in the full sense than do accidents or mental abstractions. The disappearance of proper ideas of non-existents is cemented by a newly stabilized terminology: there are only two senses of the term idea, the broader “*ratio*” and the narrower “exemplar” (Earlier he had no distinct term designating ideas in the proper sense).⁴³ A brief comment in the context of a later disputed question (IV q. 1, a. 1) simply reiterates this conclusion: idea in the proper sense involves not only some likeness, but the intent to produce something to that likeness.⁴⁴

What Aquinas’s new position amounts to is a decision to make the practicality of a divine idea hinge not, as in his earlier discussions in the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, upon its mode (i.e. “knowing how” to make something, whether one wills to make it or not), but rather upon its intention. A possible line of reasoning lying behind Aquinas’s self-re-

⁴¹ SCG bk. II, ch. 47, par. 4 shows that “*excogito*” is used by Aquinas as a metaphorical synonym for “conceive,” so that what intellect “thinks out” has the status of an intellectual word.

⁴² Aquinas, *Expositio super Dionysiam De divinis nominibus*, ch. 5, lectio 3.

⁴³ The intricate etymological argument from Augustine’s usage grounding his earlier position on the two senses of “idea” at *QDV* q. 3, a. 6 has now been abandoned in favor of a simple appeal to Plato! As already noted, Aquinas, in this passage, does not use the terminology of broader vs. narrower/more proper. This is probably connected with his tactical decision to employ Plato’s language rather than Augustine’s.

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *Quaestiones de quodlibet I–XII*. IV, q. 1, a. 1.

versal suggests itself. The problem lies in the degree of precise applicability of the craftsman analogy to God. For a human being, to know, say, a house is one thing, to know how to make one quite another. And there are other things, natural objects, which we cannot produce at all. Thus the case of a craftsman knowing how to make something but simply choosing not to do so, makes perfect sense as a distinct category of knowledge. But the case of the divine creator is so different as to greatly weaken the analogy in this specific instance. The comparison only works if, in both cases, objectively and modally practical knowing is meaningfully different from objectively and modally speculative knowing. For the human maker, they clearly are, but for God they are not. God's eternal foreknowing of the producible thing can be distinguished as practical versus speculative neither according to object nor according to mode: not according to object because, unlike the human maker, for God, whatever is inherently producible at all is producible by him; not according to mode, because, again unlike the human maker, God's "practical" knowing of the producible *qua* producible is simply identical with his "speculative" knowing of his own potency.⁴⁵ Since God creates and does not fashion, there is nothing to know in the thing other than its operability. Aquinas can still make use of the comparison,⁴⁶ but he no longer tries to make it bear the weight of grounding any conceptual distinction between kinds of ideas.

Thus, the result of this later position of Aquinas is that the only meaningful distinction to be made between God's practical and speculative knowledge of things other than himself is intentional: God wills to create some things, the rest he does not. The former have exemplars (ideas properly); the latter do not. There is no longer a shadowy "third realm" of complete ideas of non-existents. His shift on this issue should not be dismissed as a typical terminological ambiguity that he chooses to resolve differently on different occasions according to the needs of the argument at hand. Rather, I would suggest that it be read as the rectification of something like an anomaly in his overall position on ideas. In coming to emphasize the relative unimportance of any modal distinction between God's speculative and practical knowledge, with the implication that "virtually practical" divine knowing is a largely otiose category, Aquinas is also correcting the earlier impression that the divine willing (i.e., the decision to create or not) is completely extraneous to the content of

⁴⁵ The final reply at *ST* I, q. 14, a. 16 (a rare instance in the *ST* of a reply "*in contrarium*") makes this plain.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ST* I, q. 15, a. 2.

God's cognition. For it seems that it was Aquinas's position all along that God's will and intention are decisive in determining what and how God knows. The next section will discuss why this is so.

God does not "See" All that He Knows

To lay out the position on divine foreknowledge against which I am arguing, one could employ the terms just used: to claim that divine ideas of non-existents are essentially similar in terms of cognitive content to ideas of actual creatures is to make the divine will to create utterly extrinsic to the divine knowing of the creature. There is a mere actualization, or not, of possibilities already "given," so to speak, by the divine understanding to the divine power. The preceding three sections have outlined three aspects of Aquinas's account of divine ideas, none of which have garnered sufficient attention in most previous discussions, but all of which are crucial in helping to envision an alternative account of how God knows non-existents. The topics of section II (distinguishing ideas of things from their incorporation within the willed providential order) and of section III (Aquinas's mature position linking exemplars exclusively to actual, willed creatures) will be pertinent in the present section, where I will attempt to specify how Aquinas defines the role of divine willing with respect to God's cognitive achievement. The topic of section I (grasping ideas as subordinated intelligibilities implicitly contained within the divine understanding's unique intentional object, the Word) will come into play in the next section, where I will suggest reasons why the lack of exemplars for non-existents in no way impairs the perfection of the divine knowledge.

If the surmise behind the reading of Aquinas on offer here is correct, then there must be some way of describing, in Aquinas's terms, what is different in the divine knowledge associated with an exemplar or idea in the complete, more proper sense, as opposed to the knowledge associated with an idea broadly speaking, a "*ratio*." Does Aquinas make such a distinction? One important passage where he indeed does so is in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (bk. I, ch. 66, par. 8), in which Aquinas, elaborating upon just this question of God's knowledge of non-existents, appeals to an already established scholastic distinction between God's "knowledge of vision" (*notitia* or *scientia visionis*) and his "knowledge of simple intelligence" (*notitia* or *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*). The former regards God's knowledge of all that is, has been, or will be created, existing "outside" of him, so to speak, while the latter regards his knowledge of all things, actual and possible, as contained within his power. God

knows all possible things, whether they are created or not, in the latter way; but only actual creatures are known in the former way, too, i.e. only actual creatures are “seen” by God. It is striking that one of the direct implications of Aquinas’s shift (described in the previous section) on ideas properly speaking (exemplars) is that, while his earlier stance would have allowed exemplars in God’s simple intelligence and in his vision indifferently, his later position would mean an exclusive alignment of exemplars with God’s vision of actual creatures only. This is the key to understanding what makes exemplars different cognitively, in terms of what is known, and not just intentionally, as actually willed by God.

In other words, the question asked at the beginning of section I concerning Aquinas’s vague proviso that ideas of non-existents are “indeterminate”⁴⁷ can now be answered. I would propose that the cognitive distinction between exemplars and ideas of non-existents is to be found precisely in Aquinas’s account of the difference between God’s vision and simple intelligence:

[T]hose things that are not, nor will be, nor ever were, are known by God as possible to his power. Hence, God does not know them as in some way existing in themselves [*in seipsis*], but as existing only in the divine power. These are said by some to be known by God according to a knowledge of simple intelligence. The things that are present, past or future to us God knows in his power, in their proper causes, and in themselves [*in seipsis*].⁴⁸

Two important things follow from this passage when it is read in light of the results of the previous sections. First, it is the privilege of God’s vision alone to know things as causally co-implicated with each other. But it has already been pointed out that God’s foreknowing of these cannot be reduced to knowing the ideas of things, but only to his eternal knowledge of the one actually willed providential “course” of things (*cursus rerum*). In other words, Aquinas is here indicating one way in which the divine will is the critical determinant of the content of divine knowledge of the world. For only those possibilities willed into actual relations can be “seen” in the divine vision.

Second, the other cognitive achievement that separates God’s vision from God’s simple intelligence relates to knowing things “*in seipsis*,”

⁴⁷ QDV q. 3, a. 6.

⁴⁸ SCG bk. I, ch. 66, par. 8.

in their formally inherent acts of existence. To understand the force of this, some potential misunderstandings have to be put aside. An initial confusion might result from a comparison of this language to that of the *Summa* (I, q. 14, a. 5), where Aquinas says that God does not know any creature “*in seipsis*.” But the context makes clear that the two seemingly contradictory wordings are the result of two different positions being opposed. The SCG passage insists that God “sees” actual creatures in their own proper existence, rather than in the eminently unified existence they have in the divine potency. The *Summa* passage, however, insists that God does not know creatures “in themselves” in the sense of “through an adequated proper *ratio*” because God knows all things through his own essence, and this is not a species adequated to any creature, but infinitely surpassing all of them.⁴⁹ The first usage of “*in seipsis*” concerns the mode of being of what is known, while the second usage concerns the mode of the divine act of knowing, its medium *quo*. But this raises another question. If, with regard to the mode of divine knowing, the language of the *Summa* (I, q. 14, a. 6) suggests there is no distinction between actual creatures and non-existents, would this not lead us to interpret the SCG passage in such a way that the added content, so to speak, of God’s knowledge of vision has no relevance to the medium of divine knowledge, and hence indicates no distinction on the level of ideas between creatures and non-existents?

Such a reading would go against the grain of the position being argued here, but fortunately there is another passage that performs the useful service of specifying, in terms of ideas, just what the difference is between God’s vision and his simple intelligence. It also suggests that it was Aquinas’s basic intent all along to demarcate ideas of creatures from ideas of non-existents in terms of the very content of their respective ideas. The passage is so important, and to my recollection has been so little discussed or even cited, that it demands quotation at length:

God, who comprehends himself, knows all things which are in any manner in him, but in different ways [*diversimode*]. Because [on the one hand] those things which are, will be, or have been at any time he knows through knowledge of vision: because that is “seen,” properly speaking, which has an act of existence outside the seer. And although his essence, through which he sees, is one, yet because he sees them through distinct ideal *rationes*, he

⁴⁹ Cf. *ST* I, q. 14, a. 6 ad 3.

therefore has distinct cognition concerning them, as long as he knows anything good according to its proper idea, or anything bad according to the idea of what is opposed to it. But the distinction of these *rationes* is from the diverse relations [*respectus*] of the exemplar, namely the divine essence, to the things seen. But [on the other hand] those things which are not, nor were not, nor will be, yet could be or could have been or could be in the future, because in themselves [*in seipsis*] they do not exist, they have no distinction in themselves [*in seipsis*], nor do they exist except in the power of God himself, in which they are one: whence there cannot be diverse relations according to which the *rationes* of these possibles are distinguished; and hence these God does not know through distinct ideas, but through the cognition of his power, in which they are: and thus he is said to know them by simple intelligence, because it is the mark of intelligence to conceive even those things which are not outside the conceiver.⁵⁰

The point of the passage is as firm and clear as one might wish: God's knowledge of mere possibles is nothing but a knowledge of his power, and this knowledge does not warrant distinct ideas, or at least ideas distinct in the same sense that ideas of actual creatures are distinct.

I do not think the passage need be read as strictly ruling out all plurality of intelligible content in regard to God's knowledge of non-existents. In the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (q. 6, aa. 5 and 6), Aquinas manifestly affirms that the lack of determinate existence that marks non-existents within the divine power in no way renders the divine knowing of them itself indistinct. Anything, he says, that God can consider distinctly, may be said to have a distinct "*ratio*" in the divine cognition. But the context here shows that he is speaking of "*rationes*" as ideas in the broader sense. I would submit that, in the citation from the *Sentences*, it is equally plain that those "*rationes ideales*" that attain the dignity of distinction by their actualized diversity of relation to the divine essence can only be ideas in the narrower sense, what Aquinas will eventually restrictively term "exemplars." The distinctness in question (or lack thereof) is inherent, so to speak, in the counterparts of the respective kinds of ideas and in no way indicates any vagueness or defect in God's cognition itself. God knows all creaturely reality, actual and possible, with exactly the degree of distinctness that it actually possesses. If one is inclined to imagine

⁵⁰ *Sent.* III, d. 14, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 2.

Aquinas's ideas in "photo-exemplarist" terms, then it is almost irresistibly tempting to argue that things must always be distinctly known by God just because they are always known through distinct ideas, and then to attribute the same level of cognitive distinctiveness to ideas as such, consequent only upon the perfection of divine knowledge and quite irrelevant to the divine will to create or not. But the arguments and passages above suggest a different picture. There is a definite level of distinction within that class of ideas that attain the status of exemplars, deriving from the fact that created actuality accrues additional knowable content from the formally inherent acts of existence and causal interconnections of actual creatures existing "outside" of the divine potency. Finally, this access of knowable content is itself due solely to the divine will electing the actual created order in which we now stand.

Sometimes to Know More is to Know Less

Here is a different way of stating the "temptation" lurking within the "photo-exemplarist" turn of thinking: prompted by the legitimate concern to safeguard the perfection of the divine cognitive achievement, it seems safest to synthesize the various accounts in which Aquinas describes the unsurpassable range and depth of resolution characterizing God's knowledge of actual creatures and simply apply that same degree of cognitive grasp associated with exemplars across the board, retrojecting it, so to speak, into God's knowledge of non-existents as they dwell eminently in his power. But this is to make the mistake of assuming that the actual cognitive content of non-existent objects is identical with that of actual creatures, and the foregoing discussions have offered some forceful considerations that should dictate against that assumption. We have seen that the ideas in God's eternal knowledge of creatures vary in the degree of what might be called the "vividness" of their boundaries and determinacy as they approximate to or recede from Aquinas's paradigm of the creaturely existent (i.e., the substance as defined by its species). We have also seen that Aquinas was inclined to assign great significance to the divine decision to create some creatures as part of an actual worldly order, and that in at least one crucial passage he indicated that what God "sees" of such actual creatures must differ in kind from what God "sees" of non-existents. But this raises the question that must be dealt with in this section: why, if all this is true, does Aquinas repeatedly insist that God still has knowledge, indeed proper knowledge, of the infinity of things he chooses not to create, not just of what he actually makes? "Photo-exemplarism" has no problem answering this question, since it rejects any distinction in kind between ideas of creatures and

ideas of non-existents with regard to their richness of content or detail. God's "cognitive achievement" is the same in either case. Responding to this will involve showing, first, that our analogical modeling of God's cognition should be controlled more by the understanding already discussed of the divine ideas precisely as intelligible termini (*intellecta*), and less by imaginative extrapolation from our own sensuous vision. Then, second, an accounting will be called for whereby it is shown that no cognitive deficit can be assigned to God's *not* knowing non-existents with the degree of full implication and determination that characterizes creatures because there is quite simply nothing there to know.

Before turning to the first point, it will be helpful to recall that, besides "seeing" actual creatures in their causal order, God knows by simple intelligence the infinity of things that he can create, including but ranging infinitely beyond actual creatures. As infinitely less than God but nonetheless really existing, the created order cannot represent an added increment, so to speak, within the space of ontological possibility eternally defined by God's being. Hence, it is a deficient participation: different, but not more, indeed different because less. The same principle must hold on the level of knowledge: when God knows actual creatures "apart" from himself in their inherent being and causal interconnection, the two kinds of knowing that mark off vision from simple intelligence, what is known is indeed different, but it cannot be truly *more* than God knows in grasping them through the perfect comprehension of his essence as participative possibilities within his own power.⁵¹ The drift of our entire argument has been that, for Aquinas, the cognitive content of ideas of creatures must be different from that of ideas of non-existents, different because willed, but not merely different as willed. But now it must be added that this difference itself must be "already" implicit within God's utterly simple grasp of his potency. What is needed is a way of imagining a divine grasp of all possible creatures in their implicit infinity and distinctness which is meaningfully different from the divine vision of the actuality-as-world possessed by some, but in which the latter is in some sense eminently contained. The key is to be found in the topic of the first section above: the analogical model must be our own act of intellect and its inherent infinity.

⁵¹ When Aquinas argues (in *QDV* q. 8, a. 4) that the created human mind of Jesus in hypostatic union with the eternal Word can see all that God sees in his knowledge of vision, but, as with any other creatures, cannot possibly see all that God can do (i.e., cannot share in God's simple intelligence), the prior supposition is that the actuality of the entire created order is miniscule against the background of the infinity of divine power.

The most helpful discussion for this is in the *QDV* (q. 2, a. 9), concerning how God knows infinities. There, Aquinas carefully compares God's knowledge of the infinite things that could participate in his goodness with a human being's intellectual grasp of the nature of the color of some infinitely extended surface. If the entire surface is white, for example, and the intellect understands the meaning of whiteness, then the human knower, through a single intellectual act, knows the whiteness of the surface at every point of its unlimited expanse, even though he or she is not presently considering any particular point or section in its particular whiteness, and in fact could never attend to them all. The crucial point for the comparison is that this intellectual cognition, far from being less than the concrete beholding of each discrete instance of white, is in fact a higher cognitive achievement. It is an "eminent containment" of the infinite white extension within a single concept. Indeed, perfect cognition, Aquinas insists, is simply incompatible with knowing any infinity *qua* infinite, since quantitative infinity in itself is a mark of imperfection or privation, a lack of determinacy. In the same way, would it not perhaps be beneath God to imagine that he knows the infinity of created things that could exist by simply "beholding" them from eternity discretely, as an unlimited aggregation? Instead, as was discussed earlier, God has the idea of every possible creaturely existent (*ens*) by understanding himself as "*maxime ens*" and thereby implicitly understanding every modality by which something could be less than his essence. The result is, indeed, an infinity quantitatively speaking, but because each specific form is a deficient participation, it represents an "intensive" finitude of existence, and can thus be intellectually co-conceived with the concept of the divine essence itself without itself being "singled out" in particular. This is what Aquinas means when he argues that not even God knows a quantitative infinite "according to its infinity" (or "*per viam infinitatis*") by, so to speak, "running through" every possibility one by one or considering a set of infinite and discrete items.

The parallel passage in the *Summa* (I, q. 14, a. 12) shows where God's intellect transcends the "infinity" of the human intellect. The human's grasp of some intelligible truth about creation implicitly contains a potential infinity of instantiations of that truth, but, as occurring via some limited intelligible species, it can only know the relevant intelligible aspect. God's species, however, is the divine essence itself, and so there is no aspect of the infinite number of possible and actual beings, including their principles of individuation, that is not already known in the single divine intuition. This presents a conundrum that can be tack-

led in two different ways. The “photo-exemplarist” position imagines that Aquinas’s point must be that God’s more powerful species allows him to know distinct things along the lines that we do when we sense them, as discretely imagined items. But this ends up analogically assimilating God’s achievement more to our lower cognitive apparatus (sense, imagination) than to our higher (understanding). By a single cognitive act, we know infinite human beings in understanding the “*ratio*” of human being, though we do not know them as individuated except through sense-mediated encounters. God, however, through his single cognitive act, knows even the *propria* of the individuals. It is, I am urging, more true to Aquinas to read God’s perfect cognition of individuals in their distinguishing details in terms of a higher instance of intellection, of knowing in unity, rather than in terms of a much more high-powered sense function that knows by an accumulation or multiplication of individual marks. The latter turn of thought is what might be called a “raw extrapolation” approach to God’s knowledge of the infinity of possible creatures. It follows the natural inclination of imagination by taking our sense intuition of multiplicity and simply projecting it to infinity in the case of God.

The alternative imagining of divine ideas being advocated here would involve, if it can be put this way, a kind of “telescoping” of successive layers of incidental detail when, through the divine will, the passage is made from the “*rationes*” of possible things in God’s simple intelligence to the exemplars of actual creatures. At each level, possibilities only implicit in eminent form at a higher ontological level but grasped in God’s intellect are drawn out, made explicit, by the divine decision to create just this world. We moderns tend to think of concrete reality in terms of “states of affairs,” maximally determinate cross-sections of the world through a single instant (whether confined to a “local” event-complex or expandable to encompass an entire “world-moment”), including the mass of all accidents and relations. But the kernels of concrete reality are, for Aquinas, identities perduring through time, specific substances to which accrue a successively shifting array of accidents and relations that are assigned to an ontologically diminished level as parasitic upon the substantial act of being. Even material individuation is relatively “*per accidens*,” which is why ideas are “more properly” of species. So, the depth of detail which “photo-exemplarism” is so anxious to read back into God’s knowledge of merely possible things is actually present in those things as possibles only *eminenter* as a second, lower-order level of inherent possibilities for that kind. Intellect, for Aquinas, grasps, first

and foremost, what something “is,” absolutely speaking, while the relative modes that are the dispersed aggregation of this “is-ness” among lower (material) creatures are incidental to true identity. Thus any such “details” are sufficiently, even perfectly, known in God’s understanding of what the thing is, even though no determinate range of specifications of them is actually under eternal consideration. That is why Aquinas can say that all created perfections, whether those of specific forms themselves, as well as those added by their “second acts,” or operations, are contained virtually in the divine perfection just as the conclusions of the demonstration are virtually pre-contained in the premises.⁵²

So in God’s simple intelligence an infinity of things, existent or not, are known primarily as producible bearers of their own acts of existence, yet not as a collection but in an unimaginably unified way. Only in God’s vision are some possibilities resolved out of this unity pursuant to their being collectively co-implicated and mutually operative as a world. God eternally and eminently knows every possible thing in every possible mode, but this in no way involves envisioning an infinity of concrete “possible worlds.” This is no failure, since Aquinas is ontologically unimpressed by circumstantial detail simply as such, all such incident being in service of the concrete total order. This order, we have seen, is more excellent than the things ordered, and yet it must also be said it is for the sake of the very things so ordered. Is this a paradox? Not really, because, though the individual substances themselves are ontologically ultimate in the finite order, they are all limited, and hence, collectively, their unified aggregate is a closer approximation to God’s perfection. Recall that substantial forms are perfections in their own right,⁵³ and so substance is more perfect compared to any particular set of its accidental qualities or operations taken in themselves, even those that perfect the substance as its second act. They are for the sake of the substance, which is why nature supplies the faculties of operation through the specific substantial form. And yet, no individual substance or set of substances is more perfect than the total beauty of the “course of things.”

So, according to Aquinas, for God to know “all possible things” is the *ne plus ultra* of genuine speculative cognition. To know more, to know the actual world, is no longer to remain at the purely speculative level, since God knows them as actual in the good end, which is himself, and thus also in their proper created ends, and this is his providential knowledge of this world, the only one there is. Otherwise put, the “*ratio*” of

⁵² Boland, *Ideas in God*, 223, n. 116.

⁵³ Cf. *QDV* q. 1, a. 10 ad sc 3.

the disposition of actual things into an ordered interaction (world) is itself part of God's willed decision to create at all. Conversely, the simultaneous grasp of any possible formal participation by a unified thing (the world not itself being a thing, but an ordered aggregate) is an ultimate cognitive perfection in the speculative order. So the willed passage from knowing the merely possible to knowing the creature can be pictured as the progressive unfolding of regions of eminent implication within the divine intelligence: by knowing his essence, God knows every possible thing; by knowing his own wisdom, a range of actuals is known, accommodated to each other in the fitness of order; by knowing these forms in their ordered specificity, God knows all their accidental and operative competences and their genera and wills some of those competences to be actualized.

The point of this analogical picture is simply to suggest ways of acknowledging the divine perfection of knowing this world and knowing every possible non-existent creature as well without falling into the trap of thinking of the divine mind as pre-containing a set of determinate items. There is no failure of knowledge here. Just as Aquinas explains God's self-comprehension not as a containment of himself, but rather as complete transparency to himself, so too God comprehends all possibility not because he contains an unlimited set of "things" but *because nothing (no thing) is hidden from him*.⁵⁴ Consider the related case of utterances, where Aquinas argues that God knows the truth of propositions even though he does not think propositionally.⁵⁵ Thus, even though God knows all propositions that can be formed, it cannot be by precontaining a "list" of all possible sentences! This is akin to the mistake that generative grammar was intended to expose, the kind of "brute force computing" thinking that mistook chess skill for a fast computation that at each turn had to run through every possible move. What grounds fluency or mastery of a language? It is certainly not the memorization of every possible verbal combination suitable to every possible situation. Similarly, the divine creation of this world should not be conceived, à la Leibniz, as the "selection" from a pre-given infinite array of already constituted discrete possibilities. It should rather be seen more in terms of the "feel" involved in the production of a work of art, not the output of a divine computer but a gesture of immense and unerring tact.

We do not regard human linguistic skill as a poor substitute for a computerized thesaurus of utterances, but rather vice versa. So, too,

⁵⁴ Cf. *ST* I, q. 14, a. 3 and ad 1.

⁵⁵ Cf. *ST* I, q. 14, a. 14.

we should not try to envision God's knowledge of infinite possibility by equipping him with a hypertrophied human imaginative apparatus, but rather recall the miracle of even merely human intellection. To recall Aquinas's example, our knowing the infinite white surface may be compared to God's knowing of the infinity of creatable things in his power. Now, if I consider a specific part of the surface, the rest is hidden due to an accidentally (though inevitably) limited relation of my vision to the surface. I know it all, but can consider only some. With God as well, there is a "consideration" of only "some" of the expanse of possibility contained within him sufficient to resolve it into definitely possible *entia* (it is not as if God's essence itself is eternally parceled out into creature-size packages), only in this case the limitation is not accidental at all. The zone of inspection is demarcated by God's will to create just this, to actualize as a world just this region of imitability. The consideration is limited only by the eternally free will to create; nothing is hidden. What must be fundamentally challenged in the "photo-exemplarist" turn of thought is the transfer of Aquinas's descriptions of divine cognition of actual creatures into direct application to divine cognition of non-existents. A moment's consideration will show that the warrants for his conclusions cannot easily be extended in this way. Does God know the world? Yes, but only as the unique result of his particular providential will. So there are no "possible worlds" to know. Does God know exhaustively every actual state of affairs? Yes, but a state of affairs is only fully determinable as embedded within a world-order. So, again, there are no merely possible states of affairs, utterly detached from the actual creation, to know. Does God know material singulars? Yes, but the reasons are, first, that otherwise he could not providentially manage individuals, so the implication for knowledge of non-existent singulars is obvious. The second reason is that, otherwise, God would not know what some creature knows. Again, no extension to the case of non-existents follows, as no creature knows or can know a non-existent singular. Indeed, we are told that God knows singulars and that he knows non-existents, but never, to my knowledge, that he knows singular non-existents. Finally, does God know kinds of things, properly, according to their specific essences? Yes, and here we must say he also knows every possible kind of non-existent, but not according to their discrete infinitude. We are told he knows things properly because, otherwise, he would be unable to wisely insert them within a world order. Non-existents, though implicitly grasped in their potential differences, are not willed into patterned interconnection and hence call for no discrete consideration.

Part of us will always be ready to balk at this. Troubled by the dreams of modal logic, we find it hard to acknowledge that what fails in God's ignorance of sheerly possible states of affairs is not at all God's knowledge, but rather the knowability of the object. But for those who share Aquinas's basic metaphysical instincts, possibility can only attain definition as anchored to actuality. Knowing what a creature "could do" makes sense in some way, but speaking of what a kind of thing that is not actual "could do," by removing us a step from the actual, instantly suffers a drastic diminishment of meaning. Merely possible creatures are known determinately by God in their eminent identity with his essence, hence as indeterminate in themselves. In fact, since even an infinity of creatures could not fully express God, it is hard to know what is meant by saying that God knows all possible participations of himself in the form of a set of discrete items. For Aquinas, multiplicity is the immediate concomitant of inferiority to God. There must be an infinity of "angles of decline" from the divine essence, and along any one of them there will ramify an infinite set of progressively unanchored possibilities. Note that the set along a given line will neither exclude nor even border upon any other set. Due to their intensive finitude, there is no way for creatures, even in their infinite quantity of possibilities, to fulfill the divine potency. To use a mathematical metaphor, the possibility space defined by the divine essence presents an impossible "tiling" problem. The reason is that, as possibilities pile on possibilities, at each hypothetical step removed from actuality, they do not merely diverge. Their supporting linkages with the real dissipate, and along with them their definiteness of meaning, the ontological equivalent of the iterating images in two mirrors facing each other that recede to their vanishing points. Hence, it is no cognitive failure on God's part not to know the identity of "the first cousin of the chiropractor of the third son of the little brother you never had." And yet, somehow, to the degree that the "photo-exemplarist" indulges in a reading of Aquinas's ideas in terms of possible worlds (and it is not clear how such terms can be consistently avoided), the identity of that "first cousin" must be just as concrete and determinate as yours or mine! One has only to glimpse the bizarre and awkward metaphysics involved here to seize on one of James Ross's most basic points and to be driven back to Aquinas in search of something more elegant.⁵⁶

Such a search lies behind this section's presentation of an alternative

⁵⁶ The elegance, I should clarify, lies entirely in the handsome economy of Aquinas's metaphysical technique, not in the comparatively clumsy attempts of this paper to evoke it.

imagery of divine knowing. It has been guided by the conviction that any conception of God's way of knowing non-existents must, in its analogical extrapolation "upwards" towards God's cognitive supremacy, keep constantly in mind some basic epistemological themes in Aquinas. One is that greater knowability follows upon greater actuality. Another is that what is less inherently knowable must be known through what is more inherently knowable. A third is that greater achievements of intellection occur through a decrease of primary objects, not an increase. These, along with a few precious clues here and there in his works, have pointed away from any account that would populate God's mind with an accumulated mass of detail that, apart from an actual world complex, is inherently meaningless and unreal. The resulting picture agrees with Ross's position. There are no exemplars in the full sense of definite non-existents, because the latter are inherently unknowable in their definiteness. They do not exist in God (the only place they exist) as distinct in themselves. Of course, God's knowing of them is distinct in that God knows himself perfectly, and perfectly too every principle that could possibly differentiate anything from himself. But in so knowing, God already knows all that is really knowable, and in the most excellent way. The details involved in knowing actual creatures are not really "additions" to God's knowledge, but are more like "precipitates" out of the selected participants as put into a world-order. For God not to know them in detail, e.g. their singularity in matter, their accidents, their general "*passiones*," would be a deficiency, since we, and angels too, can know them: they are there to be known. But not to know such things about non-existents is no lack; not to know nothing is compatible with knowing everything.

Let us sum up the account proffered here. Divine ideas attain the dignity of exemplars only as they are drawn out by an act of sovereignly free creativity, a divine inward glance (*intuitus*) highlighting a limited zone within the abyss of God's being. To use scholastic language, the real differentiation of a field of *scientia visionis* from the immensity of the *scientia simplici intelligentiae* occurs only as mediated by the *scientia approbationis*; it is nothing other than the willing of this world.⁵⁷ What is initially so hard to accept is that the resulting resolution of "detail" is no higher achievement, is nothing like (to use an image suggested by Aquinas) something blurred subsequently coming into focus.⁵⁸ It is more like a kind of degradation, a decomposition of what is already perfectly,

⁵⁷ For the phrase *scientia approbationis*, see *ST I*, q. 14, a. 8.

⁵⁸ Cf. *ST I*, q. 14, a. 6.

because more highly, known, a condescension that is warranted only by the demands of providential engagement with the detailed actualities of this *cursus rerum*. Compared with any creaturely knowledge of the world, it is supremely intricate and encompassing. But, as a knowing of creatures in themselves (through a cointelligence of God's own essence with some of its possible limitations), it is not an additional cognitive attainment, but rather a gracious declination from God's knowing the full intensity and glory of his infinite power. It is a "spinning out" of a specified set of possibilities attached to some of the infinite entities capable of participating in his essence. It is different, but not more, since it was all "already" there. The familiar phenomenon of a fractal image might prove a distant analogue. Through a single, compact mathematical formula a picture results that unfolds infinite layers of detail on each level of resolution. If I "zoom in," I *see* more detail, but more detail is not *produced*; it is "already" there in the algorithm, though not regarded, not considered. God knows all possibility, but not discretely, until he "zooms in" to create just *this*, choosing to know some of his potency as also different from himself in ordered, multiple interaction, as so many non-divine acts of being and causality collectively operating and thus mutually concretizing one another.

In Support of Ross Against his Critics

The foregoing discussions provide a way of reading Aquinas on ideas and non-existents very close, though not identical in every detail, to that of Ross. However, a creditable case can also be made for the sort of account Ross resists, which has been most fully developed by Lawrence Dewan in the already noted 1979 article that, along with pieces by Wippel and others, first prompted Ross to address the issue. But, in spite of Dewan's evident penetration and the masterful breadth of his Thomistic learning, there are problems in the position he constructs for Aquinas, and his later attempt to usher Ross's rival account off the field does not quite serve the turn.

Dewan sets up the problem in a skewed way from the outset when he argues that the voluntarist is on the horns of a dilemma: either the supposed willing of essences or quiddities that the voluntarist demands is identical with God's natural willing of his own goodness and power, or it is a willed choice. In the former case it could not be otherwise, and so ends up identical with the position it resists and that Dewan supports, namely, an eternal set of defined possibilities already known within the divine essence. In the latter case, it assumes that the quiddity somehow

exists as a possibility in God, but in a different mode of being from the divine essence, and we are stuck with the “*esse essentiae*” of Henry of Ghent and Scotus.⁵⁹ But the dilemma is created by Dewan himself. The voluntarist does not believe that quiddities as defined possibilities exist at all apart from the choice to create the creatures they define. And his associated reading of the *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia dei* (q. 3, a. 5 ad 2), where quiddity is created only in that actuality is attributed to it, is by no means a necessary one.⁶⁰ Dewan exploits the ambiguity of Aquinas’s language there to guide the discussion onto a favored path, but the voluntarist should reply that the question at issue is not whether a quiddity has a being in God’s intellect other than the divine being, but rather whether the quiddity *as such* has any being in God’s intellect apart from God’s decision to create it. In other words, Dewan has framed the question in a way that already presupposes his own position that divine “possibility” is already eternally “parceled out” into defined quiddities, utterly detached from any divine will to create.

Dewan’s position requires an infinite set of individuated creaturely possibilities that God’s own self-understanding “confronts” him with, as it were. Aware of those places in Aquinas where (in potential tension with this scheme) he speaks of the plurification of ideas as due solely to God’s act of intellect “causing” or “excogitating” them, Dewan tries to identify in Aquinas an eternally anterior moment in God where all creaturely possibilities in their definiteness are simply and passively “beheld” by God as an inevitable concomitant of knowing his own essence. But the first stage of this argument, which attempts to grant a dubious technical status in Aquinas to the term “possibility” by appeal to the latter’s definition of omnipotence (*ST* I, q. 25, a. 3), depends upon two unwarranted moves.⁶¹ Aquinas argues that, in order for us to define God’s omnipotence in a non-circular way, we need to employ a universal negative definition of “a” possibility as the subject of a non-contradictory act of predication. Dewan most questionably grants the “possibilities” so defined an absolute status in themselves, thus transforming a merely human intellectual requisite into an eternal condition under which God’s own self-knowledge labors. But God’s knowing is not propositional, nor predication, and thus our posterior apprehensions of definite essences as encoding distinctly formulable possibility conditions have nothing to do with God’s own mode of eminently

⁵⁹ Dewan, “Thomas and Possibles,” 77, n. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77, n. 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

grasping multiplicity in unity. Moreover, the wording of Aquinas's definition does not turn primarily on the non-contradictoriness of things, but rather more generally on the non-contradictoriness of divine creative acts, of the states of affairs that "fall under" his omnipotence. As has been argued in this paper, the ordering of possible worlds would constitute an infinity of such acts, which, according to the logic of Aquinas's position, do not themselves fall under any definite eternal pre-cognition. This is a second reason not to assume that "*possibilia*" as propositionally definable, retroactively, from our standpoint, must determine God's own self-comprehension from eternity.

The second stage of Dewan's argument also prompts some questions. He offers a curious reading of the *Summa* (I, q. 15, a. 2, ad 2) that discovers in it a distinction, found nowhere else in Aquinas, between a "first" divine knowing of pure possibilities that is distinct from a "second" divine act of reflection that constitutes ideas.⁶² On the contrary, the last part of the body of the article shows quite clearly that God's knowing of the imitability of his essence is simply identical with his knowing ideas. As for the ad 2 itself of this article, the start of the passage should have made it evident that the contrast Aquinas is drawing is not between God's knowing *possibilities* in themselves and then, in a second act, the ideas of them. Rather, God, by one act, knows created *things* (the question is concerned exclusively with actual creatures; non-existents are nowhere mentioned), and in so doing knows them also not as "over there" outside him, but as excogitated intellectual termini. The point, as we argued above in dealing with the same passage, is that God does not just know the truths of many creatures, he knows them via the prior production of their intelligible contents as ideas, just as the maker of the house knows the house not just through receiving its species from "out there," but by his mind's observing that species as thought out within.

In a similar way, Dewan is forced to explain away Aquinas's own language ad 3 that speaks of God's intellectual self-comparison "causing" the plurification of ideas. He says that, as mere relations of reason, the differentiating relations of ideas to the divine essence require no cause, presumably because they are eternally pre-given as part of God's essence itself—the "possibilities" are always already pluriform, the divine intellect passively receiving that itemized plurality in the form of ideas. But this again misses the force of the intellectual act. "*Excogitare*" in God means "*concipere*." Ideas are in the conception; they are the secondary and

⁶² Ibid., 83.

implicit termini of the one act of self-comprehension, not the result of some secondary act of passive reflection. God's essence is not "statically" plurified, as Dewan's account implies, but plurification "occurs" only in the dynamics of intellection. Aquinas's causal language, though analogical, should not be robbed of its force; the plurality of ideas is inexplicable otherwise. Creatures as posterior effects naturally cannot be the cause of the plurification of ideas (though the former "denominate" the latter, which is not the same thing). But, contra Dewan, the object known (the divine essence) is utterly simple in itself, a potency supporting an indefinite infinity of possibility, not a grid of potential essences. The plurality is "made" by God's eternal intellectual self-comparison; it is not simply "found" as a pre-given multitude.⁶³

In a final step Dewan turns back to the article on omnipotence (*ST* I, q. 25, a. 3), misleadingly exaggerating Aquinas's nominal stipulation that possibilities as "absolute" are not named in reference to any power in order so that, once again, he can isolate the specific forms of God's imitability from any connection with divine potency.⁶⁴ This runs counter to the plain language of the article, which stipulates that the possibility "in itself" that anything can be (i.e., its "absolute" possession of the *ratio entis*) is grounded in, and corresponds directly to, the active power of God springing from the divine essence as infinite act of being. There are further questions that could be raised, but this will suffice. The examples queried here are not intended to render any kind of final verdict on Dewan's complex and suggestive reconstruction of Aquinas's position, but they do raise the suspicion that it is at least partly leveraged upon some highly questionable readings of specific passages.

This impression is reinforced when Dewan's later article criticizing Ross is taken into account. Once again, little more can be done here than indicate what appear to be some problematic arguments. For example, he tries to read Aquinas's discussion of God's knowledge of infinities as if it clearly warranted his own demand for a divine apprehension of

⁶³ This is to express in a different way the essential point that, according to Lonergan, separates intellection as envisioned by Aquinas from the rival "conceptualist" scheme of Duns Scotus: "Scotus argues [against Aquinas's position] that [the multiplicity of] the divine ideas cannot be accounted for by adding notional relations to the divine essence; for the object precedes the knowing, and relations that precede knowing are not notional but real. The argument does not touch Aquinas's real position, which is that the object *as known* is *not* prior and that the relations pertain only to the object *as known*." (*Verbum*, 19, n. 28 [italics added]). On "conceptualism," see also *ibid.*, 39, n. 126 and 163.

⁶⁴ Dewan, "Thomas and possibles," 83–84.

non-existents in discrete detail.⁶⁵ But this is only convincing if one takes Aquinas's denial that God does not know "*per viam infinitatis*" to amount to no more than a denial of a temporal succession of divine cognitive acts. Such a reading ignores the heart of Aquinas's argument, where God's epistemic achievement is not reducible simply to the "simultaneity" of his glance, but more centrally involves the infinite power of his intellectual species "encompassing" infinite creatures via their intensive finitude of being, thereby sidestepping a fruitless, indeed impossible, "itemizing" knowledge. Similarly, Dewan seems to me to argue against the grain when he detects in Aquinas the elevation of human rational analysis to a prime analogue of divine knowing.⁶⁶ But "resolving" is a discursive procedure, and one needed only by a discursive intellect. It is superfluous to the divine mind, which, I have argued, has no need to decompose special objects in order to know fully (i.e., as fully as they can be known) the many-in-one. Only the will to create calls forth a partial "analytic" breakdown, the detachment of separate objects via worldly concretion.

Lastly, Dewan lays great weight upon God's "virtually practical" knowledge of non-existents, since God must thereby know everything about a possible creature needed to bring it into existence.⁶⁷ But just how much "detail" does this involve? At issue here is arguably only the bare "existent" in that potential specification implied in God's intellectual ability to "mask" or "hide" his infinite perfection from himself ("*comparatio*"). Aquinas's claim that God knows about non-existents all that a human intellect could resolve in them⁶⁸ (a key support for Dewan's "analytic" reading of God's cognition of non-existents) turns out, as Aquinas's examples show, to involve only the "*abstracta*" already implicitly contained in the specific form (genus, difference, and "*passiones*," i.e., proper accidents).⁶⁹ In other words, nothing like the richness of

⁶⁵ Dewan, "Ross and exemplarism," 230–231.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 226, 228.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 226–229.

⁶⁸ Cf. *QDV* q. 3, a. 3.

⁶⁹ Aquinas speaks here of God knowing the possible thing not just properly in itself, but also according to all the "*intentiones*" that a human intellect could apprehend in it through analysis, i.e., according to the "intentional" being of those parts of it which can be abstracted mentally though they cannot exist in themselves. Since contingent accidents are not part of the intellect's grasp of a thing's identity, I take it that the whole passage makes the best sense when the parallel language of knowing the "*passiones*" of the merely possible is taken to refer to "*passiones per se*" or necessary properties of a given kind. On this use of

the actualized creature-in-its-world is at stake. So Dewan's claim that God knows about the non-existent "all that pertains to its taking a place as a thing existing in its own being"⁷⁰ is perfectly compatible with the minimalist reading that would follow from the position defended in this paper. It means God always implicitly knows, by knowing his own being, what could also take its own place as a deficient participant of that being (or, better, of its similitude). This need not approach the demands of concrete existence; even where creaturely essences are concerned, a human being, for example, is possible because a rational animal is possible, but no human being can actually exist at all without a determinate height and skin color, and such requisites do not seem to be at issue for Aquinas here. Whereas (to speak of non-existents), if all things that could bear the "*ratio entis*" are implicitly in God's self-comprehension, then so too are implicitly present their respective ranges of possible distinguishing *propria* (none of which yet demands the "matching up" which resolves them into defined quiddities).

Whatever the questions raised here, Dewan's challenging articles give much food for thought to anyone sympathetic to a position like that of Ross. Hence, they also demonstrate just how difficult it is to reach any final decisions based on the scant evidence Aquinas provides. This is obscured by the highly assured stance conveyed by Dewan's prose, especially when he is situating himself vis-a-vis Ross. It is not so much that in summarizing Aquinas's arguments he adds his own vocabulary (e.g., "consideration" and "objective inspection") which tip the weight in favor of his preferred reading; that is simply the role of interpretation, and the same tactic is obvious throughout my own discussion. It is rather that the sheer ambiguity of the Aquinas material on non-existents is papered over by Dewan's vigorous assurances: Aquinas's incompatibility with Ross's reading is "perfectly clear"; Aquinas "is doing all he can" to rule such a reading out; and "[t]here can hardly be any doubt" of it, and hence Ross is going against "the evident intention" of Aquinas.⁷¹ If my arguments in the previous sections do not provide a decisive refutation of Dewan's position, they hopefully amount at least to a flat refusal of his implication that Ross's position is an obvious non-starter. And the considerations of the present section are designed to show that Dewan's own account is neither as natural nor as inevitable as his energetic rhetoric would suggest.

"passions," see Aquinas, *Sententia super Posteriora Analytica*, bk. I, lectio 14.

⁷⁰ Dewan, "Ross and exemplarism," 232.

⁷¹ Ibid., 222, 226, 231, 233.

There is no time here to fully address Ross's other critics, but I would submit that they add little that is of decisive significance to Dewan's critique. John Wippel has written much that is insightful on ideas in Aquinas, but when he turns to the particular issue of ideas of non-existents, his account amounts to a more cautious and less speculative variant upon Dewan's position (to whom he refers the reader for more detail).⁷² The fact that his Aquinas ends up on the question at issue in uncomfortably close proximity to Henry of Ghent might well be grounds for some disquiet. Aaron Martin's essay, its title notwithstanding, disappointingly fails to engage Ross's own arguments in detail. It relies instead upon a treatment of "virtually practical" knowledge in Aquinas that breaks no new ground, when it is not simply repeating Dewan and Wippel as if they had already settled the whole issue.⁷³ Gregory Doolan's article, in contrast, does indeed introduce a new element into the discussion, but it is a very contentious one. Joining in Dewan's attempt to secure a logically prior zone of divine knowledge in which the infinity of different possible creatures are simply "given" in isolation from the creative will, he appeals to the kind of "two-stage" model of divine creation earlier developed by Cornelio Fabro and Louis Geiger, in which there is first constituted an unlimited field of fixed, discrete "essences" within the divine being, prior to the willed bestowal of "existence" upon a "select" subset.⁷⁴ Accounts of creation in Aquinas along these lines were subjected to a searching and powerful critique by Rudi te Velde in the book that has been cited above, a critique which is not noticed in Doolan's paper.⁷⁵

⁷² Wippel, "Nonexisting possibles," 734, n. 11, and 737, n. 16.

⁷³ Martin, "Reckoning with Ross," 199.

⁷⁴ Doolan, "Is Thomas's doctrine Thomistic?," 166–167.

⁷⁵ Te Velde, *Participation*, 88–90, 95, 108–110, 146–147. Doolan does attempt a rather brief reply to Te Velde in *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 238–241, continuing in the vein of an even hastier notice in John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 128–129. Neither response, it seems to me, is particularly effective. Wippel unhelpfully assimilates Te Velde to Geiger (whom Te Velde is criticizing) and mistakenly attributes to him the easily dismissed fear of a *temporal* priority of essence to existence. Doolan, in addition to endorsing Wippel's reading, thinks he can obviate Te Velde's critique by the assurance that "double participation" is not a problem because the first or "formal" participation presupposes no real recipient, which is hardly to the point. (Doolan also complains that Te Velde is unclear on what the two participations consist in, yet remarkably fails to cite the crucial pages from Te Velde's book [87–91] where the matter is first discussed.) Neither author seems to have grasped Te Velde's actual concern, which has nothing to do with the "priority" as such, whether logical

Summary Reflections

Positions like that of Dewan cannot, it seems to me, satisfactorily account for Aquinas's paradoxical affirmation of a divine cognition that is infinitely diverse yet utterly without composition: God somehow knows many in one without knowing a "set." This paper has set out an alternative account in sympathy with that of James Ross, not through the kind of modal critique of the metaphysics of possibility and individuation which he brilliantly expounded, but through an exploration of what a more "voluntarist" reading of ideas in Aquinas might look like (thus providing what he complained had been missing in responses to his construal of that thinker).⁷⁶ Nothing like a final adjudication is on offer here, nor is one likely forthcoming from any side, given the paucity of the direct evidence. It seems that all that Ross or Dewan (or I) can offer are cautious speculations, appealing to one's broadest "feel" of the contours of Aquinas's thought as a whole. The reason for this lies in Aquinas himself: he is just not all that interested in possibilities never to be realized.⁷⁷ At best, possibility is a shadow of the actual, parasitic upon it for such determinacy as it may have. If something more profound is

or temporal, of essence. The issue is the very notion of a logical independence within the creature of two distinct orders of limitation, one in the formal order constituting essences as "possibles" known by the divine intellect, the other in the actual order whereby the divine will bestows "actuality" upon a selection of these pre-known possibles, such that an undifferentiated act of sheer existence is "contracted" by essences already themselves constituted in a logically distinct way. Te Velde's worry that, thereby, the unity of the act of creation is disrupted seems well-grounded, both from God's side (the divine intellect as exemplar cause is dissociated from the divine will as efficient cause) and the creature's (rather than a single limitation defining at once essence and proper *esse*, there are limitations of essence and *esse* springing from logically distinct principles in order that the former limit can ground the latter).

⁷⁶ For more detailed and wide-ranging accounts of Ross's metaphysical position on possibility and actuality, with related criticisms of widespread assumptions within the analytic tradition, see James F. Ross, "The Crash of Modal Metaphysics," *The Review of Metaphysics* 43 (December 1989): 251–280; and Ross, "The Fate of the Analysis: Aristotle's Revenge," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 64 (1990), 51–74. For the neglect of voluntarism in the discussion see Ross, "Response," 235.

⁷⁷ A striking indication of this can be found in his casual and passing reference to the distinction between God's "absolute" versus "ordained" power at *ST* I, q. 25, a. 5 ad 1. This is in strong contrast to the fascination of Scotus and the later scholastics in his wake, who leverage the question of what God *could* have done in order to open up an endless field of speculative determinations of "absolute" possibility.

at stake for us today in these questions, it is only because of those later philosophical developments wherein Avicenna's "essences" experienced a spectacular inflation (enabled in various ways by Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus and Francis Suarez) into the "possible worlds" of Leibniz and contemporary modal logic.⁷⁸ Aquinas might well have had some intimation of the troubles lurking in non-existents, but he had the good sense to turn to other things, never bothering to rectify the ambiguous wording of those few passages where he allows the matter even to come up.

Ross's own amusing but apt imagery for characterizing the alternatives cannot be bettered. Must we, with Dewan, Wippel, and their supporters, construe God's perfect foreknowledge of mere possibility as involving an itemized array of perfectly distinct and concrete ideas, like "tin soldiers spread out on a carpet"? Or is it rather more like the case of one who, having a good enough acquaintance with W.C. Fields, already has by that very fact an implicit grasp of every possible imitation of him?⁷⁹ Both readings affirm God's knowledge of infinities, but disagree on how best to construe that infinity. What has been laid out here sees God knowing every possible "thing," albeit implicitly: to know the template existent (the divine essence) is at one and the same time to know every imitation *qua* imitation, and therefore every way the imitation can fail. But the infinite uncreated "things" existing solely in the divine power are too indefinite to support a full array of possible detail. The filaments of derived possibility that ramify out from created actualities, surrounding them with a penumbra of less and less defined alternatives, are in the case of these unreal things purely spectral. It is no credit to God's foreknowledge to equip it with an empty infinity of iterated counterfactuality. I do not dispute, any more than Ross did, that language pointing in this latter direction can certainly be found in Aquinas. But I am also reassured that, in refusing to follow such indications, I am guided by the formidably informed instincts of many experts on Aquinas, not only Ross himself but also David Burrell, W. Norris Clarke, Rudi te Velde, Harm Goris and even, as I read him, Bernard Lonergan.⁸⁰ This paper has tried to

⁷⁸ For a nice capsule description of this development, see Goris's summary of comments by Simo Knuuttila in his *Free Creatures of an Eternal God* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 259.

⁷⁹ Ross, "Aquinas's exemplarism," 176.

⁸⁰ Burrell scornfully dismisses the idea that God, in creating, "chooses" from a set of options "like a jury in an architectural contest," and rightly stresses the exiguous and undefined status of non-created possibility (*Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993], 110–111).

show that the resources for such an alternative imagining of Aquinas on this issue are indeed there to be found.

In sum, the alternative runs like this: God eternally “sees” only actual creatures in their worldly causal matrix; non-existents he “simply understands” in their kinds as the infinitely diverse sectorizations of his potency in implied “comparison” with its essential plenitude. Only the will to create realizes this difference “outside” of the divine being itself, so to speak. In any case, God knows all things not through themselves but through himself, and there is no excess of “actuality” in the creatures that God “sees,” since the “more” of creation is, vis-à-vis the divine being, “less,” a proliferation of modifications and relations. Yet, as a whole, in the end intended by God of participation in himself as end, there is a unique, quite precisely intended reality, a splendidly ordered aggregation, a world. It is an augmentation not as another entity participating God’s maximal entity, but as the poetic artifact of the divine wisdom in its joyful superfluity. God’s knowing of it is at once practical and speculative. In knowing himself, God already “knows how” all things could be made, and in “knowing how,” he already knows all that is. The actualization of real things as a world unfolds an articulated mass of detail, but this “explicated” form need not be projected back into God as a kind of mental representation. Between the definite realities of

Clarke strongly emphasizes the “inventive” or voluntarist dimension in God’s “excogitation” of the ideas, a conception in definite tension with the notion that God “discovers” (Wippel’s term) the ideas as always already “given” within himself (W. Norris Clarke, “What is Really Real?” in *Progress in Philosophy: Philosophical Studies in Honor of Rev. Dr. Charles A. Hart*, ed. J. A. McWilliams [Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Co., 1955]), 85, n. 45; 88. Cf. Wippel, “Nonexisting Possibles,” 171, n. 19. Both Te Velde and Goris correctly discern the unacknowledged connection between positions like Wippel’s (“photo-exemplarist” ones in Ross’s terminology) and that dichotomous prioritization of finished and determinate essences over against an “additional” actualizing act of existence that characterizes thinkers like Avicenna and Henry of Ghent (i.e., “essentialism”) but that Aquinas decidedly transcended (Te Velde, *Participation*, 114, n. 46; Goris, *Free Creatures*, 273, n. 52). Finally, Lonergan, in a finely concentrated passage, describes how Aquinas’s doctrine of ideas, even though it cannot ground any demonstration of the generation of an intellectual word in God, appropriates “the Aristotelian theorem of knowledge by identity” and the dynamic of eminent containment as an essential component of intellection (“As we can understand *multa per unum* all the more so can God.”) in a way that obviates the “Platonist” assumption that God, in knowing his own possible creations, must “confront” them as distinct within himself (an assumption that forced Henry of Ghent and later scholastics to grant some kind of “*esse obiectivum*” to essences) (*Verbum*, 201–204).

this world and their unimaginable contraction in his eternal foreknowing stands the poetic wisdom of God's art in service to the free willing of one particular "by-way" to his own beatitude. The explicated form of worldly things is nothing but God's "showing his math." His knowledge of vision is akin to "going through the motions," or conducting the slow student through the steps of the demonstration, though the master grasps at one stroke the conclusion (the world) as implicated in the premise (the simple understanding of his essence). As for the world's realities themselves, they, like their ideas, can never be more than relations of reason. They "make no difference" to God (hence, the sheer gratuity of his love, as Julian of Norwich was shown⁸¹). Yet, to the world, they make all the difference in the world, because they are all the difference that makes the world. N&V

⁸¹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. and ed. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and James Walsh, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 130–132.