

A New Approach to the Natural Desire to See God

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We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God. . . . Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (§27). We seek the true and the good, and God is absolute Truth and Goodness. Does this mean that the desire for truth and happiness is a direct ordering to God? How to understand this desire in relation to the supernatural desire for God?

I propose in the following pages to explore the intellectual side of our aptitude for God around St. Thomas’s theme of the natural desire to see him. We can situate the various views on this subject according to two main lines, both of which have their difficulties. One group holds that, since our faculties are innately ordered to their proportionate and therefore limited objects, they cannot also be ordered to the Beatific Vision of the infinite God. The other position affirms that, since creatures do not satisfy us, our spiritual faculties must somehow be innately directed to that Vision. In the first case one needs to counterbalance by showing how grace builds on nature, how the Vision fulfills our nature. In the second, one has to make clear how one can still preserve the distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders.¹

¹ Most all Thomist types of publications on this subject in the twenty-first century have rejected an innate order to the Beatific Vision. As for books that argue against this order, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010); Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Bernard Mulcahy, O.P., *Aquinas’s Notion of Pure Nature and the Christian Integralism of Henry de Lubac* (New York: Peter Lang,

I will call the “elicited-desire position” the opinion that a direct order to the Vision arises only after one becomes aware of God’s existence, and “natural-appetite position” the stand that intrinsic principles of our spiritual faculties are ordered to the Vision.² St. Thomas did not use these terms

2011); and, although differing from these in important ways, Jacob Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019). There have been a number of articles in *Nova et Vetera* (English) and *The Thomist* in this line: Steven Long, “On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man,” *Thomist* 64 (2000): 211–37; Long, “On the Loss and Recovery of Nature as a Theonomic Principle,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 1 (2007): 133–84; Harm Goris, “Steering Clear of Charybdis: Some Directions for Avoiding ‘Grace Extrinsicism,’” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 1 (2007): 67–79; Reinhard Hütter, “The Natural Desire for the Vision of God: A Relecture of *Summa contra gentiles* III, c. 25 après Henrie de Lubac,” *Thomist* 73 (2009): 523–91; Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei*,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 1 (2007): 81–131; Guy Mansini, O.S.B., “Loneragan on the Natural Desire in the Light of Feingold,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 1 (2007): 185–98; Mansini, “The Abiding Significance of de Lubac’s *Surnaturel*,” *Thomist* 73 (2009): 593–619; Christopher Malloy, “De Lubac on Natural Desire,” *Nova et Vetera* 9, no. 3 (2011): 567–624; Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “Good Extrinsicism: Matthias Scheeben and the Ideal Paradigm of Nature–Grace Orthodoxy,” *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (2013): 537–63; White, appendix A in *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2016). On the side supporting an innate order to the Vision, there is Georges Chantraine, S.J., “The Supernatural: Discernment of Catholic Thought according to Henri de Lubac,” in *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., trans. Robert Williams (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), 21–40, but this writing is not in a Thomist perspective and does not study St. Thomas’s texts. For that, one would need to turn to Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “The Natural Desire to See God,” trans. Aaron Riches, *Nova et Vetera* 8, no. 3 (2010): 627–46, which, however, is not recent, being first published in 1976. Indeed, for Thomist studies teaching a direct innate order, one must go back to that period. I would mention two other French writings: Jorge Laporta, *La destinée de la nature humaine selon Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1965), and the review of that book by Michel-Marie Labourdette, O.P., *Revue thomiste* 66 (1966): 281–89. Labourdette, by the way, is especially interesting as a major disputant with promoters of the *Nouvelle Théologie* who, prior to this review, had been on the other side of the natural-desire question.

² On the notions of natural appetite and elicited desire, see Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 13–16. There are of course many nuances among the authors in the interior of each category. For example, Wood does not accept that the natural desire of which St. Thomas speaks is elicited. By “natural desire,” St. Thomas would be thinking of a “desire” to fulfill the natural appetite as much as possible according to the current actualization and specification of that appetite. Wood nevertheless excludes an innate order to the Vision, and so I put him in the “elicited” camp. For a summary of his position, see *To Stir a Restless Heart*, 430–32. Some representatives of the elicited-desire position, such as White and Hütter, strongly insist on the elicited desire flowing from the natural appetite, but do not recognize an order to the Vision at that structural level. Some

here and did not turn his attention especially toward that distinction; some therefore prefer not to resort to them for fear of obscuring St. Thomas's perspective. Nevertheless, I adopt them because that is where the question lies in the current debate.

St. Thomas in fact would seem to have a foot on each side of the debate. In some texts, especially when arguing in favor of the Vision, he presents a deep, natural *élan* in that direction. In others, when he is manifesting that we need grace to enter the supernatural order, he explains that we can have no natural movement toward that order. So, as everyone remarks, we have a second problem: what exactly is the thought of the master, of the guide through whom we need to reflect on the natural desire?

Why take up again this so embattled issue? For the good reason that any better glimpse of the beautiful mystery of man in his relation to God is fruitful for our spiritual life and contemplation, for philosophy and theology. To make headway, I think that we need to embrace the question more largely, take it up from its foundations by re-immersing it in St. Thomas's metaphysics. I differ from most others partly because I study the dynamism of the intellect, not the will. I disagree with the elicited-desire position, for I judge that the intellect innately surpasses its object toward God. I differ also from many who hold the natural-appetite position in that I do not conceive the intellectual appetite as oriented toward something supernatural; I do not consider God to be included in our natural intellect's object.

In the first part, to manifest the need of a fresh approach, I will examine how well the two fundamental positions measure up to the Church's and St. Thomas's teachings on the relationship between nature and grace. We will see that St. Thomas teaches and the Church indicates that God is not the direct, formal object or term of a natural faculty and yet our intellect innately tends beyond its natural object toward God.

In the second part, I will introduce new texts of St. Thomas that study in metaphysical terms the relation of our intellect to God. We will find that the fact that the intellect's object is being (*ens*)—in the sense of existent, of something-that-is—implies that the intellect is also natively in dynamic relation to the act-of-being (*esse*), so to God, who is that act in its absolute purity (*ipsum esse subsistens*).

In the third part, in order to specify the intellect's natural appetite in regard to God, we will turn to first principles. Extending St. Thomas, we

representatives of the natural-appetite position maintain that the will and the intellect are ordered to the supernatural object of beatitude, while others see it as ordered to God as First Cause.

will recognize that the intellect progresses toward the knowledge of God especially through the principle of non-contradiction, which aims toward absolute identity that can be found only in pure act-of-being. We will conclude that the intellect's natural appetite possesses a certain aim toward the act-of-being as such, especially under its intelligible character of identity, but without having God, the subsisting Act-to-Be, as its object.³

Let me note here, to avoid ambiguity, that I will not use the term "being" in the sense of *esse*, but in that of *ens*, of the existent, what-is. For *esse*, I will resort to "existence" when it is preferable to evoke our immediate experience, to "act-of-being" if a more philosophical view is appropriate, and by "Act-to-Be" for God's best philosophical name.

This article is relatively long mainly for two reasons. First, to found and specify my orientation, I go back over the basic points of the controversy concerning natural desire, with which readers of *Nova et Vetera* are acquainted. Second, to consider the metaphysical foundations of what St. Thomas has to say about natural desire, I again cover known terrain, yet the perspective here is unfamiliar to most readers and I need to argue my position. I believe I have a worthwhile contribution in the debate and I hope some will give this new approach with new conclusions a fair trial.⁴

The Two Main Positions Are Inadequate

In this section we are going to compare the two basic positions with the Church's and St. Thomas's doctrines. My intention is to specify the direction we need to pursue in our study. The texts of St. Thomas relevant to the

³ Although I know of no developed writings in the perspective I propose, I did not invent it. My teachers, Hyacinthe Paissac, O.P., and Yves Chauveau, O.S.B., reflected along these lines. Chauveau pointed out most of the new texts of St. Thomas that I will put forward in the second part, but left no writings on this subject. In English, there are a few pertinent pages in Paissac's treatise on God in *Theology Library*, ed. A. M. Henry, trans. C. Miltner, vol. 2 (Chicago: Fides, 1955), 45–46 and 85–86. Paissac wrote an article envisioning the philosophical itinerary as a quest of identity: "Vocation du métaphysicien," in *L'Homme: Métaphysique et Transcendence*, ed. P. Thevenez (Neuchâtel: Baconnière, 1943), 11–30.

⁴ St. Thomas's main texts on the natural desire to see God are: *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] III, ch. 25, no. 11, and ch. 50, nos. 2–7; *Compendium theologiae* [CT] I, ch. 104; and *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 12, a. 1; I-II, q. 3, a. 8. When a text of St. Thomas is quoted, I suppose in the reader some acquaintance with the question of natural desire, plus familiarity with St. Thomas's technical vocabulary. I make my own translations of his writings, mainly to distinguish *ens* and *esse*. I base these translations on Marietti editions.

necessity of a proportionate object have been largely scrutinized in recent writings; that will permit me to keep their presentation to a minimum, completing it by a few references to sources. I will develop to a greater extent his writings that point to a tendency that goes beyond the intellect's natural object, writings which have not been closely examined in our day.⁵

God Is Not the Natural Object of Our Faculties

The Church holds fast to the fact that the supernatural is a free gift from God. She intervened several times against the Jansenist idea that grace was due to Adam before the Fall.⁶ The "due" here is generally understood to mean that God, having established a certain order in his creation, owes it to himself, so to speak, to render its intrinsic ends naturally possible. If he creates animals that thirst, he should create water as well.⁷ More recently, Pius XII warned in his 1950 *Humani Generis* against the idea of a natural ordering to the supernatural: "Others destroy the supernatural order since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the Beatific Vision" (§26).

The Church even teaches that we can have no natural advance toward grace. The Council of Trent thus tells us that man "cannot by his own free will move toward justice in God's sight." The *Catechism* teaches that "[the vocation to eternal life] surpasses the power human intellect and will" (§1998).⁸ We need grace to truly appreciate this entry into God's interior life as our fundamental good and happiness, to tend to it as to our true life, our home.

These teachings and warnings would certainly seem to exclude a natural

⁵ On the distant context for St. Thomas's study (context that pertained to the question of how to harmonize Aristotle's view of nature having its own end with what revelation tells us about the Vision of God as our end), see chapter 1 of Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart*; on the immediate context (which was the denial by some of the possibility of that Vision), see 183–86 in chapter 2 of Wood's book, or Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 27–28. For St. Thomas's thought on the relationship of nature to grace prior to when he developed the natural-desire argument in *SCG*, see chapter 2 of Wood. On the history of the controversy after St. Thomas up to and including de Lubac, see chapters 4–16 in Feingold's book, adding to that Wood's study of the Augustinians in his ch. 6. In the discussions of this section, I will mainly refer to Feingold's book for its clear and comprehensive presentation.

⁶ See, for example, the 1713 apostolic constitution *Unigenitus* of Clement XI (Denzinger-Schönmetzner [DS] no. 2435).

⁷ See *ST* I, q. 21, a. 1, ad 3, for a good explanation of how we can analogically apply to God the notion of "debt."

⁸ For the quotation from Trent, see DS nos. 1525 and 1553. See also the Council of Orange (DS nos. 374–75).

appetite for the supernatural. A natural appetite is simply the natural form (of either the substance or of a faculty) in dynamic relation to its full actuality and perfection, to its object.⁹ Having such an appetite for the supernatural would make grace due in the sense given above; the supernatural would be part of the natural order.¹⁰ A natural desire, at least in the strong sense of a firm will, is also excluded because that would be a natural movement toward the supernatural.

Since these Church teachings deal with the supernatural, they do not of themselves deny the possibility of a natural appetite or desire to see God as naturally known, as the First Cause of the universe, which is indeed the terminology St. Thomas uses in the natural-desire texts. The First Cause and the Blessed Trinity are the same concrete reality, but it is one thing to want to see God as principle of the world and Supreme Being, and quite another to desire personal intimacy with our Father and Friend, a participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity.¹¹ I will henceforth take for granted that we are speaking of a natural desire or natural appetite to see God as First Cause.

To explain why we do not naturally tend to the supernatural, St. Thomas constantly asserts that nature gives rise to an inclination only in regard to what is proportioned to it and so can be attained by its natural operation.¹²

⁹ See ST I, q. 6, a. 1, ad 2, and q. 78, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁰ De Lubac argues that, since man in the present economy has only the Beatific Vision as his end, this finality must be inscribed in his nature. For an exposition of this position, see Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 297–99. To maintain nevertheless the gratuity of the supernatural, de Lubac claims that we would desire the supernatural as a gift, and that love, the gift of self, is never due. Pinckaers has similar arguments in “Natural Desire,” 639–42. One can respond to them that this idea of gift cannot evacuate the innate order to the Vision that they teach, and consequently a certain debt. We cannot force a father to love his child, but he has a duty to do so. For a presentation of de Lubac’s efforts to maintain gratuity of the supernatural, see Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 309–14, and Malloy, “De Lubac,” 568–79, with refutations in Feingold, 325–39, and Malloy, 580–624. There are also several very good writings that show the necessity of a consistent human nature with its own proper finality if we are going to be able to speak of a supernatural order. See for example Long, “On the Loss,” 151–52, and André-Mutien Léonard, “The Theological Necessity of the Pure Nature Concept,” in Bonino, *Supernatural: A Controversy*, 325–30.

¹¹ On this distinction, see, for example, ST I-II, q. 62, a. 1, ad 3, and q. 109, a. 3, ad 1. Scholars tell us that the idea that St. Thomas was thinking of the natural desire to see the First Cause in contrast to a desire to enter into God’s interior life was first proposed by Sylvester de Ferrari in the seventeenth century, but I believe this is generally held today among Thomists. See, for example, Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 171, 179, 403, and Long, “On the Possibility,” 222–23.

¹² See, for example, *De veritate* q. 14, a. 2; q. 27, a. 2; ST I, q. 62, a. 1; I-II, q. 109, a. 5. St. Thomas also tells us that the supernatural exceeds our faculties: ST I, q. 12, a. 1; q.

He inculcates that God is not the natural object properly speaking of either the intellect or the will. The intellect directly knows only creatures and must reason to God “from the effect proceeding to the cause.” The will “does not move toward the impossible”—so it does not effectively desire to possess God in the Vision.¹³

Although these arguments of St. Thomas directly concern the necessity of grace for the supernatural life, they are valid also against a natural appetite and natural desire (again in the strong sense) directly ordered to the vision of the First Cause. This Cause is infinite, out of proportion with our finite being and faculties.

Most Thomists conclude that, by natural desire to see God, St. Thomas must have been envisioning an elicited desire. An actual, conscious desire indeed is not restricted to the natural form's direct object, since it is immediately based on acquired knowledge that can provoke new inclinations. One can even wish for something out of proportion to one's strength, for something naturally impossible, as is the case of a natural desire of God. This desire of God, then, would be conditional, not an authentic motion toward this transcendent term. It would be natural in the sense that this spontaneous wish extends, through a particular determination, the inherent dynamism of the natural appetite to know and be happy.¹⁴

Looking back to the quotation of the *Catechism* in the first line of this article which spoke of the intellect's innate tendency to truth, we can say

62, a. 2; I-II q. 5, a.5, sc; q. 91, a. 4; q. 114, a. 2. He often brings in the disorder of our sensible faculties after the Fall as a reason for the need of grace; we will not deal with that aspect, which is not pertinent to our study.

¹³ *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2; I-II, q. 40, a. 1, ad 3. St. Thomas teaches that in a non-fallen, natural state, man would have loved God more than self (see, for example, I, q. 60, a. 5); God would in a way be an object in that case, but as a distant Creator, with whom one had no personal communion, to whom one rendered honor and gratitude. He would not be an object in the strict sense of something directly attained by our faculties. It is remarkable that St. Thomas, studying God's presence in creation and envisioning among other types of presences that of the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover, excludes these latter presences for God in the natural order (see I, q. 8, a. 3). When we know a rock, it is intentionally present in us by its idea, but when we know God on the natural level, he is not. Likewise, when considering man as God's image by our knowing and loving him, St. Thomas affirms that, in the natural order, we are in his image merely as apt to know and love him, and that it is only in the supernatural order that we actually do know and love him (see q. 93, a. 3). St. Thomas contrasts theological virtues from moral ones by the fact that the first have God himself for object (see I-II, q. 62, aa. 1–2).

¹⁴ On the nature of a conditional elicited desire, see Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 20–25; on arguments for it as the natural desire St. Thomas had in mind, see 261–69 and 349–54.

that, according to the elicited-desire position, the ordering to see God is a contingent application of that tendency to a particular truth.¹⁵ Yet, with those rather of the natural-appetite position, we must point out that there is obviously some difference between the dynamism to know God and the one to know, for example, an angel. This latter knowledge remains a side issue, whereas knowledge of First Truth is at the heart of our quest for truth. Absolute Truth is in some way the reference when we seek truth, whether we are conscious of it or not. We need to explore what exactly this reference might be.

It is time to look over the other set of texts of St. Thomas and of the Church, which express nature's harmony with the supernatural. I find that those of the elicited position too easily brush aside these passages as seeming to contradict the proportionate object principle. Henri de Lubac and others may at times be groping, but they have hold of some truth which we must take into account.

Beyond Our Object, toward God

We should place in this "other set" the texts on the natural desire to see God. These certainly put before us an elicited act of desiring God that follows knowledge of him, but it is obvious that St. Thomas's attention in the developed passages concerning this subject bears on the natural tendency behind the conscious act. We see in chapter 50 of the *Summa contra gentiles* (SCG) III, for example, that all the force of the argument is based on the drive to know God as deriving from the irrepressible desire to know causes, which itself results immediately from the natural appetite to know:

The desire to know, which is naturally implanted in all intellectual substances, does not rest until, after they have come to know the substances of the effects, they also know the substance of the cause. Therefore, their natural desire tends toward the understanding of the divine substance. (no. 6)

St. Thomas wields the idea of a natural desire to see God in two types of arguments, which we find clearly distilled in the *Summa theologiae* (ST). In both cases, he establishes as a premise that, when we recognize an effect, we have the natural desire to know the cause, which leads to a quest that normally should come to the affirmation of the existence of the First Cause, from which arises the desire to see him. In ST I, q. 12, a. 1, he reasons from there

¹⁵ See Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 41, 43, 265–66, and Goris, "Steering Clear," 77.

that, since a natural desire cannot be vain, such a vision is not impossible. *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8, determines that, if we did not immediately understand the essence of the First Cause after knowing of it, there would remain an unfulfilled natural desire, and consequently we would not be perfectly happy.

As for the first type, it is precisely because this desire depends on our essential nature that it cannot be absurd. *SCG* II, ch.79, no. 6, avails itself of the argument “cannot be vain,” but refers directly to the natural appetite and not to natural desire, which could indicate that St. Thomas is thinking along that line even when he resorts to the latter expression. One time, St. Thomas identified natural desire with natural appetite, explaining that a natural desire cannot be vain because it “is none other than an inclination inherent in things by the ordination of the first mover that cannot be frustrated.”¹⁶ He does not always use the expression “natural desire” in such a strong sense, but appetite and natural desire are very linked in his mind, and we can appreciate that he focuses on the desire as deriving from the natural appetite.¹⁷

The second type presupposes that our fundamental intellectual aspirations are fulfilled only in understanding God’s essence. That argument does not apply to classical examples of a conditional natural desire, such as knowing as an angel does or flying as does a bird, because one can be blessed without those qualities. Our proportionate object even in its highest mode—knowing God through creatures—does not satisfy our intellect’s natural orientation.

St. Thomas in fact always presents God as man’s immediate end, but sometimes without spelling out how we attain him, whether by vision or simply as knowing him through creatures. Usually, however, he specifies that our true end is the Vision of God.¹⁸ He also refers to the natural contemplation of God through creatures as a beatitude or end, but he qualifies

¹⁶ Aquinas, *In I ethic.*, lec. 2, no. 21.

¹⁷ On St. Thomas’s various uses of the expression “natural desire,” see chapter 2 of Feingold, *Natural Desire*. In chapter 1 of *To Stir a Restless Heart*, Wood makes clear that St. Thomas’s predecessors basically used “natural” for wills or desires that envisioned the end, and “free” for those that dealt with means.

¹⁸ For the indication without specification, see notably *ScG* III, c. 25. For explicit mentions of the Vision, see *Quodlibetales* X, q.8, a. 1: “Because the soul is immediately made by God it cannot be blessed unless it immediately sees God”; and *Super Ev. S. Jo.*, c. 1, lect. 11, no. 212: “It is impossible for anyone to attain perfect happiness except in the vision of the divine essence.” In *De ver.* q. 8, a. 1 and I, q. 12, a. 1, St. Thomas argues for the possibility of the Beatific Vision by the fact that since something’s ultimate perfection consists in returning to its principle, and the human soul is immediately created by God, man, for his perfection, would need to attain God. *ScG* IV, c. 55, no. 2 tells us that we are “born to be united to God by the intellect,” which certainly alludes

it as “imperfect” in contrast with the supernatural end, which is “perfect” (see notably *ST I*, q. 62, a. 1).

Consistent with their position that nothing innate can be a positive disposition toward the Vision, those of the elicited-desire position often argue that this imperfection of natural beatitude is only relative to the supernatural beatitude as to something better. The natural beatitude would be perfect in itself, in the sense that the proportionate object would content the natural appetite of our intellect and will. The Vision would properly speaking fulfill the natural appetite only by the fact that it abundantly contains the natural proportionate object.¹⁹ Yet, the fact that our proportionate object at its highest point does not fulfill all our natural capacities—that some natural order is completed only by seeing God—is very much present in St. Thomas’s texts, even outside of those that refer to the natural desire.

St. Thomas sometimes explicitly speaks of the Beatific Vision as the fulfillment of human nature. He even mentions a natural “order” and “potency” to the supernatural beatitude, and affirms that we are “naturally inclined” to it.²⁰ If such passages are not to contradict his other teaching, we must assume that St. Thomas in this instance took these words in a less strict sense than a formal ordering to an object. Perhaps for that reason he speaks in this case of “man” rather than of a particular faculty, although he does use “order” for the operations of the intellect and will in *ST I*, q. 62, a. 7, ad 3, which would imply an order for faculties: “Natural knowledge and love are ordered to knowledge and love of glory.” In such texts, he is in any case affirming some sort of natural orientation toward the Vision, some fulfillment of a natural potency.

Those of the elicited-desire position constantly appeal to the necessity of a proportionate object as an impregnable fortress, a sufficient reason to ward off any argument for an ordering toward God. I would say, however,

to the Vision. In these texts, St. Thomas seems to be again thinking rather in terms of First Cause than of the supernatural order.

¹⁹ See Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 148, 213–15; Marie-Bruno Borde, O.C.D., “The Natural Desire to See God According to the Salmanticenses,” in Bonino, *Supernature, a Controversy*, 257. Long seems to be more nuanced in “On the Possibility,” 231.

²⁰ In *ST I-II*, q. 113, a. 10, *secundo* implies that man has a “potency” for the supernatural. See also *III*, q. 9, a. 2: “Man is in potency to the [Vision of God] and is ordered to it as to his end”; *De malo*, q. 2, a. 11, ad 14: “Ability for grace is . . . an order of the natural good to grace”; *In Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 4, ad 5: “Although man is naturally inclined to the ultimate end, he cannot attain to it naturally but only through grace.” Commentators remark that “inclination” is a strong term for St. Thomas, reserved normally for the natural appetite. See also *ST I*, q. 62, a. 1: “Ultimate beatitude does not belong to nature but is nature’s end.”

that St. Thomas himself puts a few chinks in the battlements.²¹ We can first remark, with St. Thomas, that in such a use of the term one should not take “proportion” in a quantitative perspective.²² The quantitative finite is not in proportion to the infinite, yet a limited yellow would still have some relation to absolute yellow, a finite mind to an infinite one. In fact, St. Thomas a couple of times applied the word “proportion” to our natural relation to God and to grace.²³

Although his explanations on the necessity of grace that resort to the premise of a necessary proportion to the object mainly refer to our lack of enough power to reach God, he sometimes brings up our lack of fittingness and similitude in regard to God.²⁴ Notwithstanding, he does also at times, to the contrary, put forth man’s fittingness and similitude for God’s gift. Thus, to found man’s natural suitability to grace, he usually speaks of him as *capax Dei* and also mentions our aptitude and ability (*aptitudo* and *habilitas*) for the supernatural, which are a certain fittingness. And to explain our natural capacity for God, he nearly always points to the fact that we are in the image of God, which is obviously a similitude.²⁵ We can add that *ST* I, q. 35, a. 2, ad 3, and q. 93, a. 4, present this image as tending to its perfection here below in the supernatural level, and ultimately in the Beatific Vision.

Even when St. Thomas insists on the fact that our faculties are without proportion to the supernatural order, he nuances his words by stating that our reason and will “are ordered to God naturally as principle and end of nature” but “not sufficiently” to him as supernatural object.²⁶ One can say that this “not sufficiently” underlies all these types of affirmations: we are

²¹ We might also mention one instance where the human faculties are ordered to a term that they cannot attain by their own power: conceiving a child where God intervenes to create the soul.

²² *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, ad 4, and *De ver.*, q. 23, a. 7, ad 9, note that fact.

²³ In *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, ad 4, the article where he argues for the possibility of the Vision on account of the natural desire, St. Thomas explains as another reason for that possibility that the intellect has some proportion to God as effect to cause and potency to act. Elsewhere, what he wrote in an objection was not rejected in the answer: “Grace is proportioned to nature as a perfection to a perfectible” (*De ver.*, q. 27, a. 5, obj. 17).

²⁴ For similitude, see *De ver.*, q. 14, a. 2, which explains that the needed proportion is “the end existing inchoatively” in us so we have “some likeness to the end,” a “certain initial participation”; see also *ST* I, q. 62, a. 3, and I-II, q. 62, a. 3. *SCG* III, ch. 150, no. 5, speaks of a thing’s necessary “fittingness” to its end.

²⁵ On our being *capax* because we are in God’s *image*, see *ST* I-II, q. 113, a. 10, and III, q. 9, a. 2, ad 3. In I, q. 93, a. 4, St. Thomas speaks of our aptitude for grace to explain the fact that we are made in the image of God. He uses both “aptitude” and “ability” in *De malo*, q. 2, a. 11.

²⁶ He employs this expression in various passages where he establishes our need for grace,

similar to God, correspond to him, are launched in his direction, but not enough to reach him by ourselves. In the next section, we will consider texts that take up this idea of harmony between grace and nature but with a more metaphysical perspective.

The Church, likewise, has its “other set” of texts. Her interventions on the subject of relationships between the natural and the supernatural have needed rather to underline the disproportion between the two, since the Church’s primary concern has been to safeguard the gratuity of God’s gift of the supernatural order. Nevertheless, she does presuppose some natural correspondence in man to the gift. St. Pius X classically writes in his 1907 *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* of man’s “capacity and suitability for the supernatural” (§37).

It was especially in and after the Second Vatican Council that there came to the fore an effort to present the whole picture of how grace is complementary to human nature. There is the famous line from *Gaudium et Spes* §22, taken up often by St. John Paul II, which points to some deep natural disposition for the supernatural: “It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man becomes clear. . . . Christ revealed man to himself and manifested to him the sublimity of his vocation.” A major theme of St. John Paul II’s teaching was man as image of God, man in such a similitude to God that he is open to the call to participate in the interior life of God.²⁷ Benedict XVI went farther in his 2007 *Spe Salvi*, articulating the universal experience that man seeks more than the created: “In some way we want life itself, true life, . . . yet at the same time we do not know the thing toward which we feel driven. We cannot stop reaching out for it, and yet we know that all we can experience or accomplish is not what we yearn for” (§12).²⁸

It is most of all in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its *Compendium* that we find strong declarations concerning a natural disposition for the Vision. The *Catechism* teaches that, “from his conception, [the human person] is destined for eternal beatitude” (§27). It even professes some sort of natural ordination to the supernatural: “From creation man is ordered to a supernatural end” (§1703) In the extreme, one could suppose

such as *SCG* III, ch. 150, no. 5; *ST* I-II q. 62, a. 1, corp. and ad 3; q. 62, a.3 corp. and ad 1.

²⁷ See especially St. John Paul’s general audience of April 23, 1986, found in *God, Father and Creator* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1996), 233–35.

²⁸ In the Wednesday general audience of November 14, 2012, Benedict spoke, concerning all men not just Christians, of “the thirst for the infinite that we bear within us, that impels us to go further [than the noisy and dispersive world] and to refer to the One who can quench it” (*L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed., November 21, 2012, p. 24).

that these passages allude not to anything positive in man but merely to God's plan. Other texts, however, speak explicitly of an intrinsic order. One of them expresses this order in terms of a fundamental desire for the Vision itself: "I want to see God" expresses the true desire of man" (§367). The *Compendium of the Catechism* emphasizes how essential this desire is to man: "By creating man in his image, God himself inscribed in his heart the desire to see him" (§2). "The desire to see God is man's deepest desire. That is the cry of his whole being: 'I want to see God'" (§533).

Similarly to what we affirmed concerning St. Thomas's "other set," these Church texts cannot be evoking a proper disposition or a natural movement for the supernatural, for that would evacuate her constant teaching. They must be speaking of our innate appetite for absolute truth, goodness, and beauty, for God naturally known, as preparing for the supernatural order and intimacy with our Father.

The Intellect's Dynamism

If we hope to correspond to all aspects of the teaching of the Church and of St. Thomas on our subject, we need to look into how there could be some innate, positive ordering that goes beyond our proportioned object toward the First Cause, without him being the direct, formal object or term of a natural faculty. We are not going to delve into the will's possibilities. As we said, we intend to limit ourselves to considering the intellect's natural tendencies, which I believe are in fact St. Thomas's main focus.

The term "desire" normally means an act of the affectivity, and one usually envisages only the tendency or movement of the will as the natural desire. Yet, some scholars have also considered the intellect's dynamism. In fact, one has only to read his natural-desire texts to recognize that St. Thomas is concerned most of all with the intellect. We quoted chapter 50 of *SCG* III as a good example of his attention to the natural appetite. The quoted passage also clearly speaks of the inclination to know as constituting the driving force toward God, and the text continues in that vein (what is said of angels pertains to man as well):

The knowledge angels [separatae substantiae] have of God without knowing his essence is imperfect, . . . with it their natural desire does not come to rest. . . . Rather such knowledge further arouses the desire to see the divine substance. . . . The desire to know, which is naturally implanted [inditum] in all intellectual substances, does not rest until, after they have come to know the substances of the effects, they also know the substance of the cause. . . . Nothing finite can fully satisfy

the desire of the intellect [desiderium intellectus]. Whenever a finite object is presented, the intellect extends its interest to something more. . . . No desire carries on to such sublime heights as the desire to understand the truth. . . . It does not rest until it reaches God. (nos. 2, 3, 5, 9)

St. Thomas's natural-desire passages that put forward rather the desire to be happy nevertheless presuppose this intellectual inclination toward God. It is because of this inclination that a desire arises in the will. St. Thomas even uses the expression "desire of the intellect" a few times, as in the text above, arguably for the dynamism of the intellect itself.²⁹

The subject of our article, then, concerns the native relation of the human intellect to God, which we will strive now to understand in metaphysical terms. As we emerge out of the common approach to the natural desire to see God, I will refer less to protagonists in that debate and mainly comment texts of St. Thomas.

Being and the Act-of-Being

To understand how our intellect might go beyond its object in God's direction, we need first to determine exactly what that object is, which is crucial for our question. Then we will be able to consider how our intellect and its object are transcended by God and yet are linked to him.³⁰

The Object of Intellectual Knowledge

An object is what the faculty is confronted with, or more precisely and formally, what it is directly ordered to, how it has a hold on things.³¹ St. Thomas often speaks of the essence of things as the intellect's object, and for the human intellect, the essence of sensible things.³² It is indeed the essence that directly confronts our gaze, that is proportioned to the created intellect, that

²⁹ See *SCG* III, ch. 50, no. 5; ch. 51, no. 1; ch. 57, no. 4; and *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 11, no. 212.

³⁰ In this section, the basic understandings of being, essence, and act-of-being are in the line of Étienne Gilson. One can refer to a good synthesis of his thought on those central points in his *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas*, trans. L. K. Shook (New York: Random House, 1956), 357–78 ("Spirit of Thomism" section).

³¹ See for example *ST* I, q. 1, a. 7: "The proper object of a faculty is this under which all is referred to that faculty, as man and rock are referred to sight as colored."

³² See two fundamental texts among many possible references: *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4, and q. 84, a. 7. Since it is from the sensible that we have access to what is, we are particularly at ease with the essences of material beings, which essences are our most connatural object, you could say. On the essence of material things as our connatural object, see I, q. 85, a. 8.

we can grasp and scrutinize. The senses receive reality as it affects them, as it appears, whereas the intellect strives to grasp the essence of things. We hear barking and see a brown color, and the intellect recognizes that this is a dog.

When he needs to specify, however, St. Thomas even more properly and precisely teaches that being (*ens*) in the sense of existent is the intellect's object:

The first thing to fall into our knowledge is being [primo in conceptione cadit ens] because everything is knowable only inasmuch as it has actuality. . . . Hence being is the proper object [proprium objectum] of the intellect and the first intelligible [primum intelligibile], just as sound is the first audible.³³

St. Thomas elsewhere defines being (*ens*) as “what has existence” (*esse*).³⁴ To show that this is indeed the intellect's object, he tells us in the above passage that it is the first known: in our first encounter with reality, we recognize that “something is.” He underlines, here and often, this evidential character by the expression “falls into,” which marks the spontaneity and immediacy of this reception.³⁵

The text next explains why being is the first known: only what is in act is directly knowable.³⁶ St. Thomas is presupposing what he sets forth elsewhere, that existence is the fundamental act, the root of all actuality: “Nothing has actuality except in the measure that it exists [inquantum est]; hence existence itself [ipsum esse] is the actuality of all things, even of forms.”³⁷

St. Thomas does, however, specify for example in q. 88, a. 3, that it is only in our present state that our object is the essence of material things.

³³ *ST I*, q. 5, a. 2. See also *De ver.*, q. 1, a. 1; *ST I*, q. 55, a. 1; q. 78, a. 1; q. 79, a. 2; *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 7, ad 15. St. Thomas also speaks of truth as the intellect's object, but truth is being in relation to an intellect.

³⁴ Aquinas, *In IV metaphys.*, lec. 2, no. 558. See also nos. 553 and 2419, and *De ver.*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3; *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 1; I-II, q. 26, a. 4.

³⁵ For other examples using this expression for our knowledge of being, see *In IV metaphys.*, lec. 2, no. 558; *De ver.*, q. 21, a. 3; *ST I*, q. 16, a. 4, ad 2; I-II, q. 55, a. 4, ad 1. We might note that, in the prologue of *De ente*, St. Thomas mentions both being and essence as “falling in,” perhaps because this early work is studying *ens* and also *essentia*, and if the “what-is” falls in, that includes the “what.”

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 5, a. 2, also justifies the immediate recognition of being by the fact that a thing is knowable insofar as it is in act.

³⁷ *ST I*, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3. There are of course several texts on existence as the act of acts. See *In I Peryermenias*, lec. 5, where St. Thomas calls existence “the absolute act” (*actualitatis absolute*).

Another text spells out that the intellect knows everything through the perspective of something-that-is, of the existent. Our thought begins with being as the principle of intelligibility and continues, knowing all in its light. Being is indeed how our intellect has a hold on reality:

Since nature is always directed to one thing [ordinetur ad unum], for one faculty there must naturally be one object, as color for sight and sound for hearing. Hence, the intellect, as one faculty, has one natural object, of which it has knowledge essentially and naturally [per se et naturaliter]. And this object must be one, under which are included all things known by the intellect, just as under color are included all colors essentially visible. Now, this is none other than being [ens].³⁸

In a thing, in a being, it could indeed seem that the essence—the “what” in “what-is”—is the important element, as bringing value to reality. The “is,” the existence, would be act simply as making the essence real. Yet, in response to objections holding up the emptiness of *esse* or being, St. Thomas tells us that we must not think existence as receiving perfection from the essence but rather as communicating it.³⁹ The essence is rather its limit, a *measure* of being. *ST I*, q. 7, a. 2, explains that the essence “receives and restricts” the act-of-being (“quia forma creata habet esse . . . ipsum esse [est] receptum et contractum”).⁴⁰

After perceiving that something is, the intellect strives to ascertain what type of being it is dealing with. If, however, we halt our gaze with the “what,” we close up the intellect in the finite, whereas if we discern the “is” as the act of acts in the strong, normal sense, the mind opens to mystery.⁴¹ Nothing is more obvious, more ordinary than “something is,” yet it includes a call to the transcendent by the presence of the act-of-being.⁴² For St. Thomas, the

³⁸ *SCG II*, ch. 83, no. 31. *De ver.*, q. 1, a. 1, tells us that all ideas lead back (*resolvit*) to that of being. On the correspondence of one act or object for one power, see *ST I*, q. 77, a. 3.

³⁹ See *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2; q. 4, a. 1, ad 3; *De pot.* q. 7, a. 2, ad 6. *ST I*, q. 4, a. 2, and *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9, tell us that a pure act-of-being would have all perfections.

⁴⁰ See also *SCG I*, ch. 43, nos. 5 and 7; *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 2.

⁴¹ Those of the elicited-desire position tend to concentrate on the essence as the intellect’s object.

⁴² G. K. Chesterton evoked the primordial secret that is present to us in all things: “There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, . . . the abyss of actuality, of existence, of that fact that things truly are. . . . It is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it” (*Chaucer* [New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1932], 28). Joseph Rassam spoke of “this presence at once intimate and transcendent, that of being to thought” (*La métaphysique de St. Thomas* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968], 13–14). Jean Guittou wrote:

intellect's privilege is to consider things as being, as existing. The created intellect as such has being for its object, although in our condition we seek "being and truth in sensible things."⁴³

We are now ready to take up this section's question: what exactly is the relationship between our intellect's object and God, between being and the subsisting Act-to-Be? The following passage, without speaking in terms of being, holds onto both sides: God transcends both our intellect and its object, but these are related to him.

The divine substance is not beyond the capacity of the created intelligence in such a way that it is something altogether foreign [extraneum] to it, as sound is for the object of vision or as immaterial substance is for a sense faculty, because the divine substance is the first intelligible object and the principle of all intellectual cognition; but it is beyond the capacity of the created intellect in that it exceeds its power; just as sensible objects of extreme character are beyond the capacity of the sense faculty.⁴⁴

First we will consider, to some extent with the elicited-desire position, how the Act-to-Be is "beyond the capacity" of our intellect, and then, rather with the natural-appetite position, how this Act-to-Be is not "foreign" to it.

Transcendence of the Act-of-Being

The comparison of the relation between our intellect and God with that between senses and an excessive object could lead one to think that God is out of proportion to the intellect merely as a too intense degree of the same. This would be in the line especially of some representatives of the natural-appetite position, who maintain that God is included in our object, the general notion of being.⁴⁵ In this line, it is as if the intellect produces a

"I would like to go even farther and make you reflect on the most obscure and the most transparent word, that of being" (*L'absurde et le mystère* [Paris: Desclée, 1984], 22). All translations from French in this article are mine.

⁴³ *ST I*, q. 88, a. 3; see also q. 87, a. 3, ad 1.

⁴⁴ *SCG III*, ch. 54, no. 8. See also *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, obj. 2.

⁴⁵ Feingold presented the doctrine of Domingo de Soto, O.P., in this way: "The vision of God is included within the adequate object of the intellect, which is being in all its extension. If it were not, even God could not elevate it beyond the limits of its formal object" (*Natural Desire*, 215). Closer to us, Bernard Lonergan, S.J., taught in a similar but more nuanced way according to Mansini: "The knowledge of God is presented, not as a determinate object to which there is an innate inclination, but as simply included within the scope of an intellect whose adequate object is the transcendental

superior, universal concept which it can apply to inferiors, including God, as if our ideas dominated him, as if he too participated in being, as only the maximum in the group. Even many of the elicited-desire school tend to exclude God as object of our intellect merely because he is beyond its strength. Some speak as if the fact that our ideas are abstracted from the senses is the radical reason why the intellect cannot be ordered to God.⁴⁶

St. Thomas, however, constantly affirms that God is above and beyond all categories. He explicitly asserted that God is “outside the order of beings” (*extra ordinem entium*).⁴⁷ Especially two texts explain how the subsisting Act-to-Be is of another order than any created intellect’s natural object. In the first, prompted by the neo-Platonist affirmation that the Good or the One is above being, St. Thomas agrees that God is indeed not in the community of beings, although he prefers the term Act-to-Be (rather than “One”) to name the First Principle. This pure, infinite, non-participated Act stands on another level from our object, which is limited, participated and proportioned to our intellect:

The first thing acquired [*illud primo acquiritur*] by the intelligence is being [*ens*] and that in which is not found the nature of being [*ratio entis*] is not apt to be known by the intelligence. . . . The First Cause is above being since it is the infinite Act-to-Be itself [*Causa prima est supra ens in quantum est ipsum esse infinitum*]. Being is said of what in a limited way participates in the act-of-being [*ens autem dicitur id quod finite participat esse*], and this is proportioned to our intellect whose object is what something is [*quod quid est*]. . . . Hence only what has an essence that participates in the act-of-being is knowable for our intelligence. But God’s essence is his act-of-being and thus is above understanding [*supra intellectum*].⁴⁸

ens. Writing in this context, the elicited desire to know God is just a ‘corollary’ of a natural and transcendental desire to understand whatever there is. Again, the natural and innate desire to understand is said to ‘extend’ to understanding God” (“Lonergan,” 192). Malloy set forth the thought of Stanislaus Dockx: “Dockx’s claim is that created intelligence as intelligent nature has subsistent being (God) and thus union with him as its ultimate perfective object. . . . [The intellect’s] desire is proper to the intellect just as any form has a relation to its proper object” (“De Lubac on Natural Desire,” 547n31).

⁴⁶ Hütter even claims that the angelic intellect, because it does not abstract ideas from the sensible, has an innate appetite formally ordered to God (“Natural Desire,” 583).

⁴⁷ *In I per.*, lec. 14, no. 22. On God as outside categories, see *ST I*, q. 3, a. 5; q. 4, a. 3; *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 3.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *In librum de causis*, lec. 6, nos. 45–46.

The other text is often quoted in the natural-desire controversy, but I reserved it for here because of its metaphysical perspective. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, specifies why the subsisting Act-to-Be transcends our intellect. St. Thomas there tells us that to know is to receive the other in one's self and so according to one's mode of being (*modus essendi*). Man, who is an incarnate form, thus naturally knows incarnate forms abstracted from their material subject; the angel, a subsisting form, naturally knows pure forms. Angels and men are nevertheless on the same level in that both deal with forms. God alone, the subsisting Act-to-Be, naturally knows this Act ("cognoscere ipsum esse subsistens sit conaturale soli intellectui divino"). Only God is on the level of this Act and can naturally have it for object.

St. Thomas here speaks of form as the created intellect's object, probably because he wants to focus on the limits of that object, but he does not forget existence, as the responses to the objections will show; he is thinking of a form of being. The created intellect, because it is limited, needs limits to grasp, and so has for its objects limited beings. It can appreciate measures and types of being, not the pure, full, infinite, subsisting Act-to-Be.⁴⁹ St. Thomas wrote a couple of articles earlier in this question 12: "The divine essence is his very act-of-being, with which no created form can compare [competere]. It is something unlimited, supereminently containing in itself whatever can be signified or understood by a created intellect."

No form can essentially represent this Act. We know the particular beauty of a horse, of a mountain, of the stars, but God is not a particular beauty. He is Beauty itself, absolute, infinite Beauty, above all types. All beauties signify his, but he is more beautiful than anything we can conceive. Furthermore, he accomplishes in his simplicity and according to a superior mode all perfections which we know only as distinct, something like white light contains eminently all the various colors. God for our intellect is like the vanishing point in a painting: He gives meaning to all, everything points to him, but he himself is not seen, is not in the picture. The analogy Aristotle elaborated among existents does not hold in this case. In the analogy between being and the Act-to-Be, the latter analogate is not known, is lost in the clouds.⁵⁰

The two texts just studied correspond to the ones on the gratuity of the supernatural which insist on God's transcendence. The following are parallel

⁴⁹ Although he refused God's existence, Jean-Paul Sartre recognized the logic of God as a pure act which cannot be object when he wrote: "God is the being who gazes but cannot be gazed upon" (*L'être et le néant* [Paris: Gallimard, 1943], 495).

⁵⁰ St. Thomas works out the details of the analogy of things with God especially in *ST I*, q. 12, a. 12, and q. 13; see also the parallel study in *De pot.*, q. 7, aa. 3–7.

with those that put forward that man is the image of God, and *capax Dei*, that bring out how we are open to grace.

Discerning and Seeking the Act-of-Being

God, although transcendent, is not foreign to the intelligence. Its object is in relation to God first of all because God is its cause. St. Thomas wrote for example in *ST* I, q. 6, a. 2, ad 3, about the relation of things to God: "God is outside categories but is the principle of all categories." *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 3, explains that the intellect, by the very fact that it is made for being (*ratio entis*), "has an immediate order to the universal principle of being [universale essendi principium]," and concludes from this that man must reach this principle if he is to achieve perfection and beatitude. Embracing, dominating as it were, the whole of beings, the intellect goes beyond them toward this in which they participate.

Two passages notably put this relation of the intellect and its object to God in terms of being to act-of-being. They are especially interesting also because they are in the immediate context of the natural-desire articles in the *ST*, and in fact lead through a metaphysical perspective to the same conclusions as the articles arguing from the natural desire: it is not impossible for man to see God, and he cannot be perfectly happy unless he sees him. I am dumbfounded that no one ever refers to these texts on the subject of the natural desire to see God.

The first is the ad 3 of the just studied *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4. By arguing for the possibility of the Vision, this solution completes the corpus which so strongly affirmed God's transcendence. The third objection protests against the necessity of supernatural help for the Vision. It asserts that, just as a sense faculty cannot be lifted up to the knowledge of spiritual realities because these are above its natural level, likewise the intellect could not be raised to the Vision of God if this Vision was not already in its natural power. Ad 3 replies that the analogy between intelligence and senses is not strong enough to lead to that conclusion. The senses reach the material singular and nothing more, whereas the intellect is not totally absorbed by its object and is open to knowledge of a superior level:

Since the created intellect is naturally capable of abstractly apprehending [per suam naturam natus sit apprehendere . . . in abstractione] by a kind of analysis [per modum resolutionis cuiusdam] the concrete form and the concrete act-of-being [esse concretum], it can by grace be raised to know separate subsisting substance and the separate subsisting Act-to-Be [ut cognoscat . . . esse separatum subsistens].

To show that it is not impossible for the intellect to be lifted to the Vision of God, article 1 of question 12 argues that a natural desire cannot be vain. For the same goal, St. Thomas here builds on the fact that the intellect surpasses its object in the measure that it can break an existent down into its constituents, disengaging both the form and existence to consider them in themselves.⁵¹ He does not underline it here, but a reader of this part of the *ST*, in which St. Thomas constantly speaks of God as *subsistens esse*, could not fail to remark that St. Thomas is arguing also that, since the intellect recognizes the *esse* of things, it could know absolute *Esse*, the subsisting Act-to-Be.⁵²

This text does not mention an ordering toward the act-of-being. The other text we want to consider here, *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 7, makes clear, however, that the intellect by nature seeks the act-of-being in its absolute state. This question 3 endeavors to determine in what consists man's end, as foundation for the whole edifice of moral theology. It builds up to article 8, which argues that our natural desire of God manifests that only the Vision of God can give us perfect beatitude. In preparation for that last article, the seventh denies that the intellect can be satisfied in knowing angels, the highest reality short of God, because they too only participate in being. In fact, article 7 gives rise to the same conclusion as 8: only the absolute Act-to-Be adequately, ultimately, totally, responds to the intellect's expectation:

Man's perfect happiness consists not in knowing something that is a perfection by participation but what is that perfection by essence [est per essentiam tale]. Now, it is evident that whatever is the perfection of a faculty is such in so far as it presents the formal object of

⁵¹ In this ad 3, St. Thomas at first says that man abstracts the form and the angel discerns the act-of-being, but he of course appreciates that man too detects this act. At the end of this response, he speaks in the quoted passage of the created intelligence as such considering separately both form and act-of-being, concluding that the human intellect can know angels and God. In *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6, he affirms concerning man in a text like our ad 3: "The senses know an act-of-being only here and now, but the intellect apprehends it absolutely."

⁵² In the very corpus of this article 4, St. Thomas speaks of God as subsisting Act-to-Be. Article 1 of question 8 notably teaches that a thing's existence is what most resembles God, that it is God's proper effect, that is, what God does because of what he is and what he alone causes: "Since God is the very Act-to-Be by his essence, it follows that the created act-of-being is his proper effect, like to ignite is the proper effect of fire." On the act-of-being as God's proper effect, see also *SCG* II, ch. 21, no. 4, and ch. 22, no. 3; *De pot.*, q. 3, a. 7; *CT* I, ch. 68; *ST* I, q. 45, a. 5; as what most resembles him, see *SCG* II, ch. 6, no. 5, and ch. 53, no. 5.

that faculty [ratio proprii objecti illius potentiae]. The proper object [proprium objectum] of the intellect is the true [verum]. Therefore, contemplation of whatever has participated truth does not complete the intellect with its final perfection. . . . Whatever are beings by participation are only true by participation [quaecumque sunt entia per participationem sunt vera per participationem]. Angels have a participated act-of-being because for God alone is his act-of-being his essence [angeli autem habent esse participatum quia solius Dei suum esse est sua essentia].

In somewhat the same manner as the previously quoted text from chapter 50 of *SCG* III, this one shows that things do not suffice for our intellect, but it also spells out why the intellect is not satisfied. Made for being, it cannot come to rest in participated, limited being.⁵³ The passage goes so far as to say that the absolute, subsisting Act-to-Be represents the perfection and fullness of the intellect's object.⁵⁴ St. Thomas often states that this pure Act is the highest, perfect intelligible, while still acknowledging that it is not the object of any created, limited intellect.⁵⁵ In chapter 54 of *SCG* II, also quoted before, he explains that God is not foreign to our intellect, since he is "the first intelligible."

Not only is the intellect not content with limits, but it also has some sense of what it is looking for. It goes beyond things in the line of its own object, seeking absolute being. St. Thomas famously declares that, "in any knowledge, God is implicitly known, . . . [because] nothing is knowable except by a likeness to the First Truth."⁵⁶ Things are intelligible only in the measure that they are like God, in the measure that they are act and being. And recognizing that these things are limited and mixed with potency, the mind seeks farther for the "fullness" of its object, which is a sort of inaccessible and unconscious objective. The act-of-being itself is too bright for created

⁵³ The *quarta via* has a similar presupposition: we perceive that things are only degrees, participations of being.

⁵⁴ The term "fullness" is used in the ad 3, which I did not quote. This shows that Wood's idea of an analogy between the natural desire and matter is insufficient (see, e.g., *To Stir a Restless Heart*, 434). Matter is always restless, so to speak, under this or that form because it can receive others. The human intellect is restless because only the Act-to-Be can fulfill it.

⁵⁵ *De ver.*, q. 2, a. 2, and *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, among other texts, also remark that God is the supreme intelligible.

⁵⁶ *De ver.*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 1. *ST* I, q. 4, a. 3, tells us that things resemble God in the measure that they are beings (*inquantum sunt entia*).

intellects and needs to be veiled, filtered, softened by limiting essences, but the Act-to-Be is what by nature those intellects tend to know.⁵⁷

The findings of this second section correspond to what we concluded in the first, but in metaphysical terms. Being, the intellect's object, is limited, proportionate to the intellect, but leads toward the infinite subsisting Act-to-Be. It relates to that subsisting Act, and the intellect can follow this relation. God is not its object, but the intellect reads things as being, as in relation to the act-of-being.

Being, the intellect's proper object, appears to it only in a sort of aim toward non-participated Being, toward the act-of-being as such, somewhat like the archer aiming toward the sun in order to hit the mark at the end of the field with his arrow. That metaphor, however, is not perfect, because, on one hand, the intellect does not see that goal, usually is not even aware that it is aiming at it; on the other, it is ultimately seeking this goal beyond the immediate target. When the intellect encounters beings, it tastes that they are not pure. Made to know being and truth, it is inclined toward a fullness it cannot attain.

For those of the elicited-desire position, the intellect is made for truth and being in general, but not directly for First Truth and the Act-to-Be. Recognizing effects, the intelligence seeks their causes, and eventually it runs across a cause that is not an effect, but there was no innate, formal ordering to that particular cause.⁵⁸ Yet, according to *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 7, it is a lack of being as such that forces the intellect to pursue beyond a thing. The other texts of St. Thomas that spoke of potency, order, inclination, and natural desire in regard to the Vision confirm that there is an innate drive of our intellect that tends beyond creatures and toward the pure act-of-being.

Nevertheless, the first recognition of existence is vague. It is only after much analysis and reasoning that the intellect discovers its primacy and can consciously begin aiming for it. We need now to examine how the intellect proceeds from the recognition that "something is" to the affirmation of the subsisting Act-to-Be, in order to specify the intellect's natural dynamism. What does the intellect immediately seek as it rises to the cause of an effect, and how does this lead to God?

⁵⁷ One can think of St. John of the Cross's poetry telling us that all creatures speak of God, like a baby that can only babble what it is trying to say: "Do not send me any more messengers, they cannot tell me what I must hear . . . all wound me more and leave me dying of, ah, I-don't-know-what behind their stammering" (*Spiritual Canticle*, stanzas 6–7, trans. K. Kavanaugh, in *Collected Works* [Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991]).

⁵⁸ See Malloy, "De Lubac on Natural Desire," 613–15.

Quest of Being and Identity

St. Thomas places our intuition of first principles in the midst of the first evidence of being and also tells us that they are the means for this intellectual journey to God. Furthermore, he presents, notably in the texts on the natural desire of God, the phenomenon of wonder as triggering our intellect's course toward the First Cause. We need then to study first principles in their relation to being and to wonder, in order to understand how they lead to God, and so how the intellect's natural appetite is ordered to him.

Being and First Principles

The evidence of first principles is an essential part of the intellect's original grasp of its object; these principles are properties of being:

Our intellect therefore knows being and whatever else belongs to being as such; and upon this is founded the knowledge of first principles, such as the impossibility of simultaneously affirming and denying something, and the like. Thus only these principles are known naturally by our intellect while conclusions are known through them, just as through color sight is cognizant of both common and accidental sensibles.⁵⁹

St. Thomas, in a previously quoted text, told us that the intellect approaches all things under the perspective of being. Here, in almost the same terms, he affirms that we know only through first principles, something like the eyes directly perceiving color and through color indirectly recognizing extension. He then sets forth as a consequence that all natural certitudes must issue from these evidences.⁶⁰

The preceding text gave as example the principle of non-contradiction. The following tells us that all the other principles depend on that one because it is the most immediately tied to being—it is the fundamental characteristic of being for our intellect:

⁵⁹ SCG II, ch.83, no. 31.

⁶⁰ See the similar text of *ST* I-II, q. 8, a. 2: "We intellectually know properly what are known by themselves, namely the principles. All else is known through the principles and only in the measure that the principles are considered in it." See also *De ver.*, q. 11, a.1, ad 13: "All certitude rises from the certitude of principles." SCG II, ch. 83, nos. 29–30, teaches that all new knowledge and conclusions come through the first principles. We have to be able to "reduce" our affirmations to first principles, that is, "lead back," trace back, to evidence.

What first falls in our apprehension is being, the perception [intellectus] of which is included in anything else that one apprehends. Therefore, the first indemonstrable principle is that the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied, which is based on the notion [ratio] of being and of non-being, and on this principle are all others based, as it is said in *Metaphysics* IV.⁶¹

Our first evidence is to know that something is, and by the very fact is non-self-contradictory. This view of the impossibility of contradiction presupposes the sense of the identity of being, even if non-contradiction is first in our explicit awareness. We remark first that this rock is not that tree, but this evidence relies on a perception that each is itself, a tree is a tree, a rock a rock.

Now that we have some understanding of the first principle and its relation to being, we are prepared to study how the intellect advances toward God through this first principle. Somehow, in the evidence of being and its properties, when it is confronted with things of this world, the mind is surprised. We need to consider this wonder which arouses the pursuit of causes.⁶² What follows is the more novel part of our article, with a perspective that was not brought out for reflection by St. Thomas. We will see that it is nevertheless well rooted in his texts.⁶³

Wonder, Principle of Identity, and the Pursuit of Causes

For Aristotle and St. Thomas, if we wonder (θαύμα and *admiratio*) at the sight of the stars, for example, it is less as a repose in their beauty than as an incitement to come out of our ignorance. This occurs when something new or extraordinary strikingly reveals our lack of understanding.⁶⁴ St. Thomas gave as example the eclipse as provoking this reaction and the consequent

⁶¹ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2. In II-II, q. 1, a. 7, he writes: "In [first principles] there prevails a certain order, as some are positively included in others. Thus, all principles are finally reduced to this one, as to their first: it is impossible for the same thing to be affirmed and denied at the same time." See especially *In IV metaphys.*, lec. 6, no. 605, but also *De ver.*, q. 1, a. 1.

⁶² Plato (*Theaetetus* 155d) and Aristotle (*Metaphysica* 1.2.982b.12–20) famously affirm that wonder is the beginning of philosophy, and Aristotle immediately after (983a.13–20) speaks of philosophy leading to knowledge of God.

⁶³ On this perspective, see Paissac, "Vocation du métaphysicien," as well as the writings of Émile Meyerson, who spent his life scrutinizing causality especially as found in the sciences—for example, *De l'explication dans les sciences* (Paris: Payot, 1921).

⁶⁴ See particularly *ST* I-II, q. 32, a. 8; q. 41, a. 4; III, q. 5, a. 8, as well as St. Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's passage on wonder (*In I metaphys.*, lec. 3, nos. 54–55).

quest of causes. Modern accounts of movements of the earth and moon have perhaps diminished this particular wonder, but there are plenty of other surprising events in our world.

Let us suppose that we have a friend who fell sick, whom we discover a few days later up and walking, full of energy. We are amazed and cry out: "Is that you? how is this possible? I don't recognize you!" We do not understand, our intelligence cannot function, so to speak, until we find a reason for this impressive change in our friend. What startles is that our friend is not the same as he was.

Consider the occurrences which many of us lived through when we were confronted with the fall one after the other of the communist regimes in the late 1980s. Our intelligence did not have anything to hold onto in this extraordinary upheaval, until little by little we learned of preparations for these events. We heard about the rise of the Christian religion among the masses, how intellectuals had been working secretly for years to change the general mentality, that there had been a growing dissatisfaction with the degenerating economy, and so on. As many preparations as we found, so our shock diminished. Our intelligence acquired some grasp of the phenomena by this continuity between the before and the after of the event. The fall of these regimes was no longer a pure rupture with the past, not an incomprehensible, isolated newness.

Our intelligence thus reacts to change by seeking permanence, and comes to rest in the measure that it finds some. Concerning a chemical transformation where there is a brusque change of qualities, science shows that the weight persists, that no energy is lost. We use an equation as if water, for example, was still in fact two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. The effort to understand a change comes down to striving to eliminate it!

One might object that we are sometimes surprised because, to the contrary, there is no change. For example, when we see a boy who after a few years has not grown, we are disturbed because he should be taller. We seek to understand why he is not. Nevertheless, there is still a diversity that we are trying to explain, because little boys usually grow. It is not normal that a boy be stunted in this way. It remains also that growth itself is a marvelous mystery that calls for explanation.

We can conclude from these facts that the shock rises basically from the fact that things do not seem to respect the principle of non-contradiction, that this law of being does not apply perfectly to beings we experience. A thing seems to be other than itself, which is absurd, unintelligible.

We now need to take a step beyond the usual way of thinking the principle of non-contradiction. The intellect in fact strives not only to explain change,

diversity in time. It cannot think diversity as such. It must at least relate the elements one to the other, recognize some sameness in them. The mind attempts to account for any multiplicity by reducing it to a fundamental identity. As said above, we experience diverse sensible data but we recognize one thing, a dog. We neglect particular details to find a unity among them—these tall things in the backyard are all “trees.” Given any two things, we will want to see why they are different, how they are alike, how we can link them. Encountering something new, we refer it to something already known—this strange thing in the air is like a “flying saucer.” Even with one thing, we want to know why it has various features. We may not feel stunned in these cases, but everything provokes questions for us. The intellect searches for causes, for reasons that account for the diversity. It can operate only when it finds some application of the principle of identity.

Wonder, at least in the sense of amazement at change and diversity, is a reaction to an apparent contradiction. An *effect* is something that lacks identity and so is not completely intelligible all alone. The *cause* puts together or supports the limited unity of the thing in question, provides it with intelligibility, responds for its measure of identity, explains it.⁶⁵

Things indeed possess a measure of unity, and therefore of being, which provides a place for our intellect to put its foot—this is a tree. Nevertheless, the intellect does not come to total rest, because the thing in view is only relatively one, and so only partially intelligible. One begins by turning to immediate exterior causes: the earth’s movement, the medication my friend took, hydrogen and oxygen coming together to produce water. But these also have need of explanation for their measured identity: why does the earth move? How did this medication work? How do the particles of an atom unite?

This or that particular, limited explanation suffices for most of us, most of the time, but philosophers seek the total satisfaction of the intellect. They strive to find the ultimate ground of reality, the definitive respondent for the limited identity of what we directly know. They pursue a principle that would provide a grip on all reality, allow a synthesis to be elaborated. Let’s follow them in their efforts, to see how this quest of identity leads to God.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ One spontaneously thinks of the efficient cause, but intrinsic causes also contribute to a thing’s intelligibility. “Matter” provides a certain continuity under change, and “form” furnishes a thing’s identity here and now.

⁶⁶ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., writes: “The principle of identity is the ultimate basis for the existence of God. . . . The intellect that would understand all the meaning and scope of the principle of identity, supreme law of both thought and reality immediately implied in the idea of being, would see *quasi a simultaneo* that the fundamental

All the Way to the First Cause

It is easy to recognize that the historical philosophical movement in the West was a quest of identity. As Aristotle remarked in his major text on wonder, the ancient Greek philosophers were not seeking to find practical solutions in order to use things for the city's benefit. They posed questions because they were surprised by this world. These first philosophers are famous for having claimed that all comes from one element, or fundamentally consists in that element—"water" said Thales, "air" according to Anaximenes. Democritus was not far from some modern scientific theories when he envisioned that all was made of uniform atoms that produce an appearance of qualitative change and diversity merely by their local movements and various arrangements; there is no real change in the atoms themselves. Parmenides, pursuing intellectual requirements, refused movement and even any diversity, whereas Heraclitus rejected those requirements and heeded only sensible experience, saying that "everything flows."⁶⁷

Plato was haunted by the paradox that reality is at once same and other.⁶⁸ He found a sameness, and so intelligibility, in the fact that different things participate in one Idea: these trees we experience participate in the Idea of Tree. He also perceived, however, that Ideas themselves are also same and other, and take part in the supreme Idea of the purely Good, or Beautiful, or One. He thus stretched toward an absolute identity, beyond all differences.⁶⁹

Aristotle realistically and methodically worked his way in a search for sameness. Thus he posed the substance beneath changing accidents and found continuity in all changes through the notions of form and matter or, more largely, act and potency. And he of course climbed beyond change to

reality, the Absolute, is not this composite and changing universe, but one reality in all ways and from all points of view identical with itself, *Ipsum esse subsistens*" (*Dieu, son existence et sa nature* [Paris: Beauchesne 1933], 70).

⁶⁷ Heraclitus himself of course perceived a certain unity in movement. In modern times, Nominalists and then especially Kant and his followers recognized this function of our intellect to identify but, somewhat like Heraclitus, refused its speculative validity. See, for example, Henri Bergson, who directly attacks the principle of identity in *La pensée et le mouvant* in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presse Universitaire Française, 1959), 1257–59.

⁶⁸ See his discussion around this very expression in *Sophist* 247–57.

⁶⁹ In the *Symposium* 211a–b, he ascended through beautiful things to Beauty itself and gave a model description of identity: "First it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there. . . . It is itself by itself with itself" (trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in *Plato, the Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper [Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett, 1997]).

the unmoved mover, to a pure act on the level of operation, as explanation of the movements of this world.

Plotinus, the last major pagan philosopher, ascended to the affirmation of the absolutely identical One, considered as even beyond being. The Fathers of the Church realized that the Creator, He Who Is, must be to the contrary the fullness of being. To explain this fullness, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine, notably, characterized him as unchanging, which is a true but limited view.⁷⁰ No one had as yet put the finger on the heart of being.

By St. Thomas's day, one had begun reflecting on the distinction between essence and existence in things. Some proposed that existence in regards to essence would best fit in the category accident.⁷¹ As we know, St. Thomas transposed Aristotle's teaching onto this fundamental level: existence and essence are in a relation of act to potency. In this way, he at once probed to the primordial deficiency in being and identity and discovered the door opening to the path toward absolute being and identity. The Fathers of the Church recognized that the Creator must be simple; he could not be made up of parts. St. Thomas realized that only a pure Act-to-Be could be absolutely simple. The quest of absolute being and identity explodes as it were the framework of being, coming to the subsisting Act-to-Be, an infinitive beyond being in the sense of a participle.

For a proof of God's existence, St. Thomas sometimes took a direct, short route to the subsisting Act-to-Be. For example, he reasoned that, "since all things that exist share in the act-of-being and are being by participation, it is necessary that at the summit is the very Act-to-Be by its essence, that is, whose essence is its Act-to-Be, and this is God."⁷² Underlying this argument is indeed a quest of identity: things are composed of what participates and what is participated, and they ultimately rely on a pure non-participating. Chapter 4 of *De ente* explicitly builds from the distinction of essence and act-of-being, and tells us that what receives existence depends on a first giver who exists by self, who can only be *esse tantum*.

The five ways of the *ST* begin with a more concrete analysis and do not

⁷⁰ St. Augustine speaking to God wrote in *Confessions* 7.11: "I cast mine eyes upon those creatures beneath thee, and I perceived that they neither have any absolute being nor yet could they be said to have no being. A being they have because they are from thee, and yet no being for what thou art they are not. For that truly hath a being which remains unchangeably" (trans. William Watts [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912], 375). For St. Gregory of Nyssa, see, e.g., *Vita Moysi* 2.25.

⁷¹ See Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, 36–38.

⁷² *Super Ioan*, prol., no. 5. On proofs using this theme of participation in the act-of-being, see also *De pot.*, q. 3, aa. 5–6; *SCG* II, ch. 5, no. 5; *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4; q. 65, a. 1.

broach the composition of essence and act-of-being, nor do they conclude to the Act-to-Be. They do, however, implicitly explain some composition, and converge in *ST I*, q. 3, which is an explicit quest of simplicity, working through a progressive elimination of diversity: God is not composed of matter and form, nor of accident and substance, nor even of essence and existence. Article 4 is the ultimate conclusion of the proofs. St. Thomas there shows that only the subsisting Act-to-Be is the pure Act the first way worked toward, the First Efficient of the second way, and the First Being of the fourth way. It is of course the necessary Being of the third way; and one could extend the fifth way and recognize that only the *Esse purum* can order all things to more being.⁷³

This pure Act-to-Be, where the fullness of being and identity come together, is the definitive response to our initial wonder that arose from the lack of being and identity in things, the ultimate overcoming of apparent contradiction in reality. Reality is not only this divided world but also he who fully is. In the last analysis, the world is intelligible because perfect Being and Identity are there shining through it, supporting the relative, measured beings and identities we experience. This is what the intellect was looking for without knowing it when it sought identity and being.⁷⁴

Wonder in the sense of the emotion arising from a problem has ceased, but is reborn in what we might call awe or stupor in the presence of this

⁷³ Thomas O'Brien, O.P., for example, explains that *De ente* spells out the ultimate proof, whereas the five ways are paths of discovery toward the fundamental distinction of act and potency in things, namely between existence and essence, with *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4, concluding by taking up the essential of *De ente* (*Metaphysics and the Existence of God* [Tacoma, WA: Cluny Media], 223–25).

⁷⁴ After the proofs of God, the rest of the treatise on God endeavors to show how the perfections we find in creatures resolve ultimately in the simplicity of the absolute Act-to-Be. It thus brings to the surface the riches of this pure, absolute Act-to-Be, fullness of perfection above all diversity. Of course the revelation of the Trinity introduces a new dimension, but any theology of the divine persons must build on the view of the simplicity of the divine essence, as the Fathers saw so well. The Church teaches that there is no distinction in God except for opposed relations: the Father cannot be the Son; they are distinct, but not as parts of the absolutely simple divinity. The Son is *what* the Father is, but is not the Father. The persons are distinct as the one giving the essence, the other receiving it. Their only distinction is relative. The analogy with the human soul helps point our gaze in the right direction. A rational being is more united, more identical to self than a material being because, says St. Thomas, he is not only in himself like a rock is, but also for himself; he possesses himself by fine, spiritual relations of knowledge and love. The simple Act-to-Be is in absolute possession of itself through the procession of knowledge in the Word and the procession of love in the Holy Spirit. See *SCG IV*, ch. 11.

infinite First Cause, which we affirm, which we know exists, but which so transcends us and which we cannot adequately conceive.⁷⁵ Man's intellect can find the highest natural intellectual joy in thinking about this Act, gazing toward him through analogy of creatures. Nevertheless, as we know, this contemplation is an imperfect beatitude. The mind's repose is not total. It remains unsatisfied. There arises an elicited, conditional desire to see this infinite Being, but it flows from a primordial aim of our intellect toward that Act.

Conclusion: Natural Appetite and Grace

We formulated two questions at the beginning: Is our search for truth a direct quest of God from the beginning, an innate tendency toward the Vision? How do we understand this search in relation to the supernatural order?

The Light of Being

What is the intellect's natural appetite in relation to God? The intellect is ordered to being. It recognizes being characterized by identity in its first encounter with things, and by that very fact perceives that these things are not pure being and identity. It then seeks being and identity in their purity and can find what it is looking for only in the subsistent Act-to-Be. Consequently there is an unconscious aim for this Act from the beginning. What exactly does this aim presuppose in the intellect's natural appetite?

The intellect recognizes being and its laws the first time it is faced with things, as if it knew them before. The intelligence indeed seems already to know something, since, in spite of the diversity it comes upon, it knows that being is identical. Thus, against those who argue that we know God innately, St. Thomas responds that there is no actual a priori knowledge of God but there is some innate knowledge that leads to God: "The knowledge of God is said to be innate for us in the measure that by innate principles we easily know he exists."⁷⁶

Elsewhere St. Thomas specifies that the first principles arise "partly from the interior, partly from an exterior principle." They were already present before our first actual knowledge, but only "by way of beginning" (*secundum*

⁷⁵ In *ST* I-II, q. 32, a. 8, and II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 3, St. Thomas gives as another reason for wonder the recognition that a cause exceeds the capacity of our faculties.

⁷⁶ In *Boeth. de Trin.*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 6. See also for example *De ver.*, q. 10, a. 12, ad 1: "In all intellects is naturally inserted [naturaliter insertum est] something through which we can attain to the knowledge that God exists."

inchoationem).⁷⁷ He gives as example the evidence that the whole is greater than the part: we would not think this obvious truth, would not actually know it, without the experience of a whole and its parts. To appreciate the intellect's innate relation to God, we need to determine more exactly this "partly" innate in what concerns the evidence of being and the principle of identity and how it leads to God. A dense text of St. Thomas will give us matter for reflection on this.

ST I, q.11, a.2, ad 4, which studies our perceptions of unity and multitude, in fact also lays out for us the first evidences. The steps portrayed in sequence are in fact perceived rather simultaneously in one psychological act, although they are logically distinct: "First, being falls into the intelligence; we then recognize that this being is not that one, and thus secondly we perceive division; thirdly, one; fourthly, a multitude."⁷⁸ With the evidence that "something is" comes into play the recognition that there are various things, that is, the principle of non-contradiction, as well as the realization that each thing is one with itself, or the principle of identity. We see that the first principle is not an actual knowledge before experience.

Included in the awakening of the first principle and this sense of communion of things is a sort of intuition of the distinction between existence and essence. In the second and third steps, in the experience of this and that, there is a perception of essences, which provide the measure of identity of each thing while opposing it to others. This opposition is in contrast to the communion of things mentioned in the fourth step, which lies ultimately in their common existence. This is not that, but we use the same verb for both: each exists. This awareness of the distinction is founded on a sense of the identity of existence: when you think a diversity, you think *something*-that-is and no longer just *is*. St. Thomas elsewhere explicitly used the evidence of the non-diversity of the act-of-being as a premise for his proof of the distinction between act-of-being and essence in things: "The act-of-being as such [*esse inquantum est esse*] cannot be diverse."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 51, a. 1.

⁷⁸ For parallel texts, see especially *De pot.*, q. 9, a. 7, ad 15, but also *In IV metaphys.*, lec. 3, no. 566.

⁷⁹ *SCG* II, ch. 52, no.2. We tend to think of the act-of-being as a what-is. But St. Thomas writes: "The act-of-being as such is not to be thought of as a subject of being, like to run is not the subject of running; as we do not say that to-run itself runs, likewise we cannot say that the act-of-being exists" (*In Boethii de hebdomadibus*, lec. 2, no. 23). Permit me to quote a few texts evocative of the simplicity of existence as such. François-Marie Genuyt, O.P., expresses this awareness of the fundamental difference between essences and the act-of-being when he invites focus on existence: "To feel the attraction of the act-of-being is no longer to think of what things are but to take into account that they

St. Thomas tells us that we have in the second step a certain consciousness of “division” in reality. This explains what fundamentally spurs the shock of wonder: being is not perfectly itself, which is of course the problem that has explicitly distressed philosophers since Parmenides: how can there be diversity in reality, since all is being? Essences divide being, and St. Thomas also explains in our text that this division is “a negation of being.” That is St. Thomas’s solution to Parmenides’s dilemma: essences are a certain limiting of being. The intellect needs essences to be able to think, to go forward in knowledge, to learn about being, but it must not stop with this relative, limited identity. Pure being and identity must be sought in the direction of existence.

Thus, in our first evidences, we indeed know God “implicitly.” The basis for the proof of God is present. None of this basis was known in act before experience, in the “partly interior.” Furthermore, analysis and reasoning are necessary to realize that existence is act in relation to essence, and that there is a subsisting Act-to-Be. The intellect, through the first principle, is able to unfold the meaning of what we experience, that it points to God.

This is obviously not ontologism: our knowledge of being is not equivalent to an idea of God. The tendency toward the Act-to-Be and absolute identity does not of itself attain an object; it cannot naturally come to fruition in an idea. We cannot think a pure “is,” but need a something-that-is in which we have a certain awareness of existence. Likewise, we cannot represent pure identity. We can think identity only by considering the relative identity of things.

The “partly from the interior” is rather an ability to perceive being and identity in what presents itself to our knowledge. Yet the intellect is not a sort of sponge that simply receives impressions. The intellect does not simply recognize that a rock is a rock, as in a mathematical formula such as three equals three. The intellect is active. It partially identifies the diverse: these colors

accomplish an act of presence. By letting oneself be attracted by the transcendence of the act-of-being through things, we enter into a domain that largely surpasses this or that particular being . . . because everything exists. The act-of-being is this by which things are present to me in a total presence” (*Le mystère de Dieu* [Tournai: Desclée, 1963], 37–38). Rassam wanted to help us enter into a metaphysical type of gaze on reality: “To be in harmony with the act-of-being, thought must put aside for the moment its separating power, its power of abstraction, division and simplification” (*La métaphysique*, 13). Aimé Forest strived to communicate a feel for this communion in being, this non-diversity of existence: “The meaning of being refers to a deep sense of things, where thought detached from any desire, as in the calm of an evening, envisions in things a ground of generality where they appear and only in which they are properly speaking themselves” (*Création et consentement* [Paris: Aubier, 1943], 24).

and sounds are a dog; these various things are trees. It works toward finding more and more of identity. The intellect has a tendency toward identity as such, toward absolute identity, and therefore toward the act-of-being. The act-of-being in its identity is the model, the criterion, and even the goal that governs our mental activity, that gives meaning and strength to it, although it is not itself directly known.

Thus our inclination to being and identity is not a *quod* but a *quo cognoscitur*, not what we know but this by which we know. Only by reflection on our way of knowing do we realize the presence of this tendency to identify. This is not transcendental Thomism, for which metaphysics begins with an analysis of judgment and proves God before the metaphysical path begins. St. Thomas teaches in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3, and *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 12, ad 3, that we know immediately that there is a truth, but not that Truth itself exists, which we can know only through a reasoning working with experience. Similarly, we know there is being and identity, but not that the absolutely identical Act-to-Be is a reality. One could en route eventually discern that the intellect tends to identity; one could reason to the primacy of existence and even realize that the intellect reads things according to the act-of-being, without knowing that there is a subsisting Act-to-Be. Only after the proof of God, when one reflects on what the capacity to know God presupposes in man, is one able to recognize that the intellect was aiming toward him all along.⁸⁰

In the intellect's natural appetite for being is included a certain aim beyond being, toward the inaccessible Act-to-Be, according to its intelligible character of identity. That appetite is a power or a light to seek being and identity. We think things as being, that is, in the light of the act-of-being. St. Thomas regularly put first principles in relation to our intellectual light. This light shining on experiential data immediately forms the first principles: "By the light of the agent intellect, the intellect chiefly [*praecipue*] knows the first principles of all that is naturally known."⁸¹ By this light, God launches the intellect in his direction, toward identity and the subsisting Act-to-Be, his proper object. St. Thomas indeed tells us that our intellectual light participates in his.⁸² We are in his image, are *capax Dei*, by this light.

⁸⁰ Meyerson, who meditated his entire adult life on the mystery of the intellect's inclination toward identity, never transposed this quest into metaphysics and the act of being, let alone God. For him, identity was an impossible ideal that nevertheless somehow gives the mind to advance in its knowledge of reality.

⁸¹ *ST* II-II q. 171, a. 2. See also I-II, q. 62, a. 3.

⁸² See, notably, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 11, ad 3; q. 79, a. 4; q. 84, a. 5. Our intellectual light is an *impressio* (I, q. 88, a. 3, ad 1; I-II, q. 92, a. 1), an *illustratio* (I, q. 109, a. 1) of divine

The intellect's inclination to being and identity, I believe, is what St. Thomas had fundamentally in mind when he argued for a natural desire to see God. He spoke of the relation of *ens* to *esse*, and so of the relation of our intellect to *esse*, when the opportunity presented itself. He did not bring into focus the intellect's quest of identity amidst things that are only relatively identical, but he did envision it to a certain extent, and vigorously and lucidly practiced it.

It would not take much, perhaps, for his interpreters to come to this view. The natural-appetite position recognizes that it is difficult to exclude an innate relation of the intellect to First Truth. The elicited-desire position perceives that we cannot make of this relation a formal order to that First Truth. Detecting that this formal order to the intellect's natural object nevertheless implies a certain aim toward that Truth resolves the problem, at least in what concerns the intellect. The key lies in the recognition that the act-of-being is transcendent and yet has a relation to being, which means that our knowledge of being is not an idea like the others but contains a mystery.

The Light of Faith

As for the question of the connection between this natural appetite of God and the supernatural life, we can glimpse that the intellect's natural appetite so understood could open us to the gift of grace, and eventually to the Beatific Vision. Since the intellect tends already toward God, since by nature it is attuned to being and simplicity, there is no obvious contradiction in our intellectual tendency being extended in its own course all the way to God. The dynamism of our natural knowledge in relation to God would be something like jumping toward the moon: even at the summit of natural knowledge, we are still at an infinite distance from it, but we are going in the right direction. This motion could be lifted like a small wave carried on by a bigger one.

By grace, the intellect begins aiming at God as a now fitting goal. Its habitus of faith is ordered directly and formally to the proper object of God's own knowledge. In this supernatural knowledge, there is still use of words and ideas, but one aims through them to God as specific object. This new ordering does not of itself make us better metaphysicians, but it penetrates our thoughts with a presence of God, through a connaturality with the Father. The things of God are known as things of our Father. The *Catechism* teaches: "The grace of faith opens the eyes of our hearts to a *lively* understanding of

light; I, q. 12, a. 2 speaks of our intellect as a "participating similitude of the First Intelligence," "a derivation from the First Light."

the contents of Revelation" (§158). "Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision" (§163). A dark night remains, nevertheless, as our supernatural gaze of faith looks beyond everything, toward its specific and adequate object: waiting, hoping, expecting to see at last its object, and so be perfectly fulfilled.

As Christians, our home is in the bosom of the Father and this life on earth an exile. Our natural elicited desire to see him is assumed in supernatural hope, a real momentum with the Beatific Vision as its proportionate and only end. Our work is to prune the parasitic branches that would take away energy from our one great desire, to concentrate on the pursuit of the One Thing Necessary.

In fact, if not by right, it is for the Beatific Vision that we were made. The Beatific Vision, God's supreme gift, is the end of the whole economy, the reason for all God does outside himself—creation, incarnation, redemption. The whole universe, all of creation, will come to its completion when man and angels are thus united to their Principle. Although in that Vision we will be taken up as it were into God's own gaze,⁸³ we men will never be more truly ourselves, more human, than when at last we receive the grace of seeing God. The *Catechism* describes this beatitude: "This consummation of perfect life and love with the Trinity . . . is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness." (§1024).

*Jesu quem velatum nunc aspicio,
Oro fiat illud quod tam sitio,
Ut te revelata cernens facie,
Visu sum beatus tuae gloriae.*⁸⁴ Amen

NEV

⁸³ St. Thomas indeed wrote that we will then see with God's own operation: *est eadem visio qua Deus se vidit* (*In IV sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2). Perhaps this participation in God's act of knowing will be something like what St. John of the Cross described for our participation in God's own love through the Holy Spirit: "[The soul] breathes out in God to God the very divine spiration that God . . . breathes out to Himself in her . . . although not in the open and manifest degree proper to the next life" (*Spiritual Canticle*, commentary in stanza 39).

⁸⁴ This of course is the last stanza of *Adoro Te*.