

The Existence of God: Can It Be Demonstrated?

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The Position of the *Magisterium*

ONE MIGHT raise the question, first of all, as to the position of the Catholic Church's *Magisterium*. One thinks, of course, of the decree of Vatican I. If I were to answer the question with a "no," would I be anathema? The Twentieth Ecumenical Council, Vatican I, voted the following definition and corresponding canon on April 24, 1870:

. . . holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the origin and goal of all things, can be known with certainty through created things by the natural light of human reason; for "ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature . . . has been clearly perceived, known through the things that have been made."¹

The canon has:

¹ Cf. *Constitutio dogmatica "Dei Filius" de fide catholica*, Conc. (oecum. XX) Vaticanum I, Sessio III, 24 Apr. 1870, cap. 2. *De revelatione*: in H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (36th ed.) (Barcinone-Friburgi Brisgoviae-Romae: Herder, 1976), no. 3004: ". . . sancta mater Ecclesia tenet et docet, Deum, rerum omnium principium et finem, naturali humanae rationis lumine a rebus creatis certo cognosci posse; 'invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur' [Romans 1:20]."

[Much of the material in this opening section on the *Magisterium* is taken from the appendix to my "Communion with the Tradition: For the Believer Who Is a Philosopher," ch. 25 of my book *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 397–99.]

If someone has said that the one true God, our creator and Lord, cannot be known by the natural light of human reason with certainty through those things that have been made, let him be anathema.²

In fact, they did not use the word “demonstrated.” They explicitly chose not to do so in their deliberations. In presenting, on March 14, 1869, the Schema to the Fathers of the Council for their vote, Msgr. Gasser [bishop of Brixen, Tyrol, Italy], representing the Deputation concerning the Faith, read the document: “Observations attached to the Schema prepared by the Deputation concerning the Faith and distributed to the Fathers.” In it, concerning our text, we read:

This definition: “God through created things can be known with certainty by the light of reason,” and the canon corresponding to it, were seen as necessary, not merely because of traditionalism,³ *but also because of the error widely spreading, that the existence of God is proved by no firm arguments, nor hence is it known with certainty by reason.* [My italics]⁴

After explaining how this touches traditionalism, a statement is added about the word “Creator” used concerning God in the text of the canon; we are told:

Though in the canon one reads the word “creator,” there is not on that account a definition that creation, properly so called, can be demonstrated by reason; rather, we are retaining the word which Scripture uses in revealing this truth, while adding nothing meant to determine its meaning.⁵

² Ibid., *Canones 2. De revelatione* (ed. cit., no. 3026): “Si quis dixerit, Deum unum et verum, creatorem et Dominum nostrum, per ea quae facta sunt, naturali rationis humanae lumine certo cognosci non posse: anathema sit.”

³ Dom Cuthbert Butler, *The Vatican Council* (The Story Told from Inside in Bishop Ullathorne’s Letters), 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930); vol. 1, 275–76, tells us that the point concerning natural reason was especially against the Traditionalists, such as Lamennais, who “held that the human reason is unable of itself to attain to a knowledge of God, but depends on a primitive revelation to our First Parents, handed on to mankind through the ages.”

⁴ “Definitio haec, Deum per res creatas rationis lumine certo cognosci posse, et canon ei respondens necessaria visa sunt, non solum propter traditionalismum sed etiam propter errorem late serpentem, Dei existentiam nullis fermis argumentis probari nec proinde ratione certo cognosci.”

⁵ “Etsi in canone legatur vocabulum creator; *non ideo definitur, creationem proprie dictam ratione demonstrari posse*; sed retinetur vocabulum, quo Scriptura hanc veritatem revelans utitur, nihil ad eius sensum determinandum adiecto” (my italics).

Here the note refers us to Wisdom 13:5: "A magnitudine enim speciei et creaturae cognoscibiliter poterit *creator* horum videri." I notice that while the Ecumenical Edition of the Revised Standard Version⁶ translates the passage as follows: "For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator," Ronald Knox has: "Such great beauty even creatures have, reason is well able to contemplate the Source from which these perfections came."⁷

The Council was asked to vote on a proposed emendation reading in part: ". . . naturali rationis lumine certo cognosci et demonstrari posse" [. . . can be certainly known and demonstrated by the natural light of reason]. Commenting on this, the Deputation concerning the Faith, the commission responsible for the formulation of the doctrine, made it clear that they meant to speak in favor of the viability of philosophical proofs. Nevertheless, they deliberately chose the words "certain knowledge" rather than "demonstration." We read:

The [proposed] . . . emendation, which has in its second part: ". . . can be certainly known and demonstrated by the natural light of reason," on the one hand is deficient and on the other is excessive. In one respect it is *deficient*, because the natural means by which man can naturally know God are not indicated; but in another respect *it goes too far*, because it does not merely say "God can be certainly known by the natural light," but also that this existence of God "can be *certainly proved or demonstrated*." Now, while "know certainly" and "demonstrate" are to some extent one and the same, nevertheless the Deputation concerning the Faith *opted to select the milder expression rather than the stronger one*. [My italics]⁸

⁶ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Ecumenical Edition (New York: Collins, 1973); the copyright for the Apocrypha is dated 1957.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: A Translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*, school ed. (London: Burns and Oates, 1957). This translation by Monsignor Ronald Knox in its Old Testament part was first published in 1949. For the particular passage, he notes a variant: "Some manuscripts of the Greek read 'such greatness and beauty'."

⁸ ". . . emendatio, quae habetur in secunda parte: naturali rationis lumine certo cognosci et demonstrari posse, ex una parte deficit, et ex altera abundat. Deficit ex una parte, quia media naturalia, quibus homo posset naturaliter cognoscere Deum, non indicantur: excedit ex altera parte, quia non solummodo edicit, Deum naturali lumine certo cognosci posse; sed etiam hanc Dei existentiam certo probari posse, seu demonstrari posse. Quamvis aliquatenus certo cognoscere et demonstrare sit unum idemque, tamen phrasim mitiorem Deputatione de fide sibi eligendam censuit, et non istam duriorem."

For these texts and much else in my remarks concerning Vatican I, I am indebted to Jean-Michel-Alfred Vacant, *Études théologiques sur les constitutions du*

The Council voted to reject the proposed emendation and thus ultimately affirmed the milder language proposed by the Deputation (though, of course, also including the mention of the knowledge being had “through the things that have been made,” i.e. the natural means.)

In fact, that rejected emendation was more complex, proposing two different possible versions. It read:

The same holy mother the Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of things, can be known certainly and demonstrated by the natural light of human reason, that is, by metaphysical, cosmological, and moral arguments.—Or, simply: can be certainly known and demonstrated by the natural light of human reason.⁹

Speaking for the Deputation concerning the Faith, Msgr. Gasser asked that this emendation (in either form) be rejected, *and it was*. Here is what he said:

What is suggested by this emendation can hardly be approved, the reason being a false supposition of this emendation. The reverend emendator in expressing it is of the opinion that our teaching is opposed to the best known arguments, or at least opposed to the metaphysical argument. But this supposition is altogether false: our teaching is in favour of these arguments and not against these arguments. For, if we say that God can be known by the natural light through creatures, that is, through the vestiges which are impressed on all creatures, much less do we exclude the image which is impressed on the immortal soul of man: hence, the metaphysical argument is certainly not excluded. Who amongst us, when he shall have confirmed by his vote this doctrine which has been proposed by us, who indeed will think that he has condemned the celebrated ontological argument of St. Anselm, whatever he may think of that argument?¹⁰

Concile du Vatican: tome I: *La Constitution Dei Filius*, ed. Delhomme et Briguet: prologue, ch. 1 and 2 (Paris/Lyon, 1895); cf. p. 658.

⁹ “Eadem sancta mater Ecclesia tenet et docet, Deum, rerum omnium principium et finem, naturali humanae rationis lumine, id est, argumentis metaphysicis, cosmologicis et moralibus, certo cognosci et demonstrari posse. – Aut simpliciter: Naturali rationis lumine certo cognosci et demonstrari posse” [quoted at Vacant, *Études théologiques*, 646, documents printed and distributed March 31 to the Council Fathers].

¹⁰ “Quod hanc emendationem attinet, ea approbari vix poterit, et quidem ideo, quia falsum est suppositum huius emendationis. Rmus emendator enim in ea est sententia quod nostra doctrina sit contra argumenta notissima, vel saltem contra argumentum metaphysicum. Sed haec suppositio omnino falsa est: *nostra doctrina est pro istis argumentis, et non contra ista argumenta. Nam si dicimus, Deum cognosci*

This latter assurance, that St. Anselm's *Proslogion* argument is viewed as surely complying with the judgment of the Council, is of interest, since that argument is clearly viewed by St. Thomas Aquinas (who rejects it)¹¹ as pertaining rather to the position that the existence of God is "known by virtue of itself," i.e. stands in no need of "demonstration," indeed, is too well known to be a demonstrable conclusion.

In the present essay, then, my question pertains to "demonstration" as understood and affirmed by St. Thomas.

Our Question in This Present Discussion

Unlike the Vatican I Fathers, we have explicitly before us the word "demonstrated." As we shall see, St. Thomas Aquinas certainly teaches the possibility of such demonstration.¹² It is my intention to follow him through his step-by-step approach. However, while he actually tackles the task in *ST* I, q. 2, he has already had something important to say to us on the matter in his very first discussion, viz. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1.

The first article of the *ST* affirms our need for a teaching that transcends the teaching of the philosophers. The primary reason for such a teaching is the revealed truth that God has given to the human being a goal that surpasses his natural knowing powers, whereas the human being, as a kind of thing, is meant to seek *known* goals: thus, it was necessary that God make known to us, reveal to us, the goal he has decided upon. Our benefiting from that revelation must be through an act of supernatural faith.

Still, there is more to the situation than that. As Thomas continues in the same first article, even as regards the truths concerning God that the human mind can know by its natural powers, there is need for a revelation, and so for faith. While there are things about God which human

naturali rationis lumine per creaturas, idest per vestigia quae creaturis omnibus impressa sunt: multo minus excludimus imaginem, quae animae hominis immortalis impressa est: proinde argumentum metaphysicum certe non excluditur. Quis enim nostrum, cum hanc doctrinam, quae a nobis proponitur, suo suffragio confirmaverit, quis putat ea damnare argumentum illud celeberrimum ontologicum s. Anselmi, quidquid hoc de argumento sentiat?" (Vacant, *Études théologiques*, 658; my italics). This passage continues with the discussion of the proposed emendation quoted in note 8 above.

One should note carefully the employment in the above of the distinction between "vestige" and "image," classical in theological considerations of the likeness of creatures to God: cf. *ST* I, q. 93, a. 6.

¹¹ Cf. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, obj. 2. Wherever it seems helpful, I will pinpoint texts citing page, column, and line of the Ottawa edition of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* [henceforth "*ST*"], viz. ed. Commissio Piana, Ottawa, 1941: Collège dominicain [1953 emended edition].

¹² *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2.

reason can discover, that sort of human knowledge is known only to a few people, and only after a long time spent in investigation, and with an admixture of error. Thomas notes this in order to conclude that even as regards such truth, truth about God that is *within* the range of human reason, it was necessary to have a divine revelation! As he says:

... On knowledge of this truth [*philosophical truth!*] depends the entire salvation of the human being, which consists in God. Thus, therefore, that salvation might come about for human beings both more suitably and more certainly, it was necessary that they be instructed concerning divine things through divine revelation.¹³

This caution of Thomas, a line of discussion he found in the writings of the twelfth-century Jewish theologian Moses Maimonides,¹⁴ is quite in accord with the stress that Aristotle put on the *difficulty* of metaphysical knowledge, the philosophical knowledge that attains to some truths about God. It is the knowledge that is most difficult for the human being. It is “divine” knowledge, because God alone can have it, says Aristotle, or God above all others.¹⁵

¹³ ST I, q. 1, a. 1: “... a cuius tamen veritatis cognitione dependet tota hominis salus, quae in Deo est. Ut igitur salus hominibus et convenientius et certius proveniat, necessarium fuit quod de divinis per divinam revelationem instruuntur.”

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas, *Expositio super librum Boetii De trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1, where Thomas explicitly refers to five reasons given by Rabbi Moses why faith is needed even for things which some can demonstrate concerning God.

¹⁵ About the difficulties of metaphysics, Aristotle tells us that “these things, the most universal, are on the whole the hardest for men to know; for they are farthest from the senses” [*Metaphysics* I 2 (982a23–25) (Oxford trans.)]. Again, in the same place [*Metaph.* I 2 (982b25–32)], it having been argued that wisdom is non-utilitary but rather sought for its own intrinsic worth, the suggestion is made that it is perhaps not a suitable pursuit for human beings, whose nature is servile, i.e. must in large part be absorbed in the pursuit of the useful. Aristotle rejects this view, but he goes on to admit that one of the reasons wisdom should be regarded as “most divine” is that “God alone can have it, or God above all others” [*Metaph.* I 2 (983a9–10), (Oxford trans.)].

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the discussion of human happiness, the life of contemplation of truth is proposed as the most appropriate candidate to qualify as human happiness. An objection is raised, precisely on the grounds that “such a life would be too high for man; for it is not insofar as he is man that he will live so, but insofar as something divine is present in him” [*Eth. Nic.* X 7 (1177b25–27) (Oxford trans.)]. To this, it is countered that we “must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us” [*Eth. Nic.* X 7 (1177b35)]. But Aristotle does not leave the matter there. He goes on: “. . . This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if

Still, I have actually met people who thought that Thomas did not mean to include among the needed revealed truths the truth of *the very existence* of a God. Surely, they thought, he means other *further* philosophical points. I accordingly stress that when discussing later in detail the range of supernatural faith, Thomas explicitly speaks of the need to believe by supernatural faith the truth that God exists; this is the case until one truly understands the power of the philosophical demonstration.

We read:

It is necessary for the human being to accept *at the level of faith* not only those things which are above reason, but also those which can be known by reason. And this for three reasons, the first of which is so that the human being come more quickly to a knowledge of the divine truth: for the science to which it pertains to prove *that God exists*, and other such things about God, is proposed lastly to be learned by the human being, many other sciences being presupposed. And thus the human being would come only after much of his lifetime to a knowledge of God. . . .¹⁶

he were to choose not the life of his self but that of something else . . . for man, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man" *Eth. Nic.* X 7 (1178a2–8) (Oxford trans.). I.e., in this argument, human nature itself is seen as something akin to divine nature. Still, and this is my constant point, the activity in question is viewed as requiring extraordinary effort. It is not presented as easy.

Nor should it be thought that Aristotle's gods care nothing for the human being, or that the human being's happiness involves no social relation to the gods. Thus, in the same *Nicomachean Ethics* context, we are told: "He who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods. For if the gods have any care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e. reason) and that they should reward those who love and honour this most, as caring for the things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly. And that all these attributes belong most of all to the philosopher is manifest. He therefore is the dearest to the gods. And he who is that will presumably be also the happiest; so that in this way too the philosopher will more than any other be happy" [*Eth. Nic.* X 8 (1179a22–33)]. It should be added that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle is not going into such matters in the deepest way possible, but only inasmuch as is needed for practical agreement. Cf. e.g. *Eth. Nic.* X 8 (1178a20–24).

¹⁶ ST II–II, q. 2, a. 4 (ed. Ottawa 1416b45–1417a2): ". . . necessarium est homini accipere *per modum fidei* non solum ea quae sunt supra rationem, sed etiam ea quae per rationem cognosci possunt. Et hoc propter tria. Primo quidem, ut citius homo ad veritatis divinae cognitionem perveniat. Scientia enim ad quam pertinet probare deum esse et alia huiusmodi de deo, ultimo hominibus addiscenda proponitur, praesuppositis multis aliis scientiis. Et sic non nisi post multum

**Thomas's Three-Step Pathway: [1] Is the Proposition:
"a god exists" Known by Virtue of Itself?¹⁷**

Notice that I have stated the proposition as "a god exists"; i.e. I have omitted the uppercase letter "G," and I have inserted an indefinite article: "a god." This brings out the fact that the word "god" is the name of a nature.¹⁸ The Christian has such familiarity with the deity that we tend to use the word "God" as a personal name, so that the question becomes: "Does the individual known as 'God' exist?" The sense of St. Thomas's question is rather: "Is there such a thing as a god?" It is only subsequently, after having reached an affirmative conclusion, that Thomas further demonstrates that there can be only *one* such being.¹⁹

While I might have used the familiar expression "*self-evident*," the expression used by Thomas is "*per se notum*," literally "known through itself," which I have put in the translation as "known by virtue of itself." The expression is important for a proper appreciation of the meaning of the doctrine. Since we commonly use light and ocular vision to express truths about intellectual cognition, as for example when I say "I see" for "I understand," we can *imagine* a proposition "known by virtue of itself" on the model of a light. Some objects are visible only through others, i.e. the things on which we must "throw light"; other things are intrinsically and by themselves visible, i.e. lights. Thus, the necessary truth of some propositions reveals itself directly to the "eye" of the mind, such as "a whole is greater than its part" (such are sometimes called "axioms"), whereas the necessary truth of some propositions becomes "visible" only when they are seen in the "light" of axioms; thus, we *demonstrate* the necessary truth of the proposition "the angles opposed to one another, made by intersecting straight lines, are equal";²⁰ we demonstrate this by viewing it in the *light* of axioms.

The discussion begins with the presentation of what constitutes a "proposition known by virtue of itself," that the predicate belongs to the notion (or idea, or intelligibility, or definition) of the subject. The exam-

tempus vitae suae homo ad dei cognitionem perveniret" (my italics). All three reasons are relevant, but I omit the other two for the sake of brevity.

Note also that in *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 10, ad 1, Thomas uses "the existence of God" as the example of a preamble to faith one can first believe and may subsequently *demonstrate*.

¹⁷ Cf. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1.

¹⁸ Cf. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 8.

¹⁹ Cf. *ST* I, q. 11, a. 3.

²⁰ Cf. Euclid, *Elements*, bk. I, prop. 15. Cf. *Euclid's Elements*, ed. Isaac Todhunter, Everyman's Library, no. 891 (London and New York: J. M. Dent, 1933), 19–20: "If two straight lines cut one another, the vertical, or opposite, angles shall be equal."

ple is "a man is an animal"; "animal" is found within the very definition of "man": man is "a rational animal." This, then, is the sort of proposition that we are here generally discussing.²¹

Next, we begin to make a distinction between two sorts of such propositions. If one has such a proposition, and, moreover, it is known *to all* concerning the predicate and the subject "what it is," i.e. if we possess the definitions of predicate and subject, and understand how they stand one to another, then that proposition will be known by virtue of itself, both in its own intrinsic character *and to all minds*. This can be seen to be the case with the first principles of all demonstration, i.e. of all scientific reasoning; the terms of these propositions bear upon features found throughout experienced reality, "common things," i.e. such features as "a being" and "not a being" (which figure in the principle: "the same thing cannot both *be* and *not be*"), "whole" and "part" (as in "a whole is greater than its part"). No one is ignorant of such things. Such propositions are known by virtue of themselves, in themselves and *to everyone*.

However, if the definitions of subject and predicate are such as are not known to some minds, then the proposition, since it has the proper intelligible structure, will be known by virtue of itself in itself, yet will not have that character for those who remain in ignorance of the things being spoken of. The sort of proposition which illustrates this has been pointed out in a work of Boethius, and is this: "incorporeal things are not in a place." The very existence of incorporeal beings, Thomas points out elsewhere, was unknown even to some philosophers.²² So also, what exactly is meant by "place" is not easy to grasp.²³ Such a proposition, then, which requires a knowledge of the relation between "place" and "corporeity," as also some conception of incorporeal being, can be known by virtue of itself to a restricted group, the *learned* in such matters, and yet remain unknown to the uneducated.

The distinction between the two ways that a proposition can be known by virtue of itself now being clear, the doctrine can be applied to the matter at hand. The proposition "a god is," just in itself, *is indeed known by virtue of itself*. It has the intelligible structure proper to such propositions, because, not merely is the predicate included in the notion of the subject, but subject and predicate are altogether identical. As Thomas will

²¹ It might be as well to recall that a demonstrable conclusion is merely a conclusion and not an axiom, precisely because, while its predicate belongs necessarily to its subject, a third term, a "middle term," is needed to reveal to the mind that necessary connection.

²² See *ST I*, q. 44, a. 2 (280b27–29); *I*, q. 75, a. 1, ad 1 (440a1–2).

²³ See the discussion in Aristotle, *Physics IV* 1–5.

eventually demonstrate, there is a god, and in the case of such a being, there is an identity between the essential nature, signified by the term “a god,” and the actual being of that nature, signified by the term “is.”²⁴ Nevertheless, the proposition is not known by virtue of itself *to us human beings*. The reason is that we do not have the sort of knowledge of a god that would qualify as knowing “what it is.” Hence, the proposition “a god is” needs to be demonstrated, making use, in order to do so, of our knowledge of things which are better known to us, even though they have a grade of being which is intrinsically less intelligibly luminous (i.e. they are less known, we would say more naturally “less knowable,” as regards their intrinsic nature). Those things are effects of a god.

What is to be noticed is that, while in our introduction to the idea of “known by virtue of itself but not to us,” the “us” was *a certain group* of human beings, the uneducated, as compared with the learned, here in the application to our problem about a god, the “us” has to do with the entire human race: *the nature of the human mind* is being viewed, and presented as too weak to know the divine nature, as regards *what the divine nature is*. This very point is itself the subject of an eventual proof.²⁵

Here (article 1 of question 2) we are being asked to consider the human mind and the sort of access it has to reality. What are the sources of our difficulties in learning the truth about things? This is not a minor question in the domain of metaphysics.²⁶ We are confronting the different judgments of great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.

One sees this later in the *prima pars*, where Thomas is presenting the nature of human intellection. Question 88 considers the extent to which incorporeal substances superior to the human mind itself can be known to us in this present life (i.e., this side of the grave). The general answer is that we cannot know such natures.

What St. Thomas says in *ST I*, q. 2, a. 1 is best considered in the light of the view that what has more of the nature of a cause is intrinsically more knowable than what has the nature of an effect.²⁷ When a thing has a cause, we do not think we understand it completely until we see it in the *light* of the cause. A cause *throws light* on its effect. In the mystery story, the *poisoning* of the aunt (an effect) “makes sense” once it is known that the nephew, her heir, is *a person who needs money* (the cause).

²⁴ This is demonstrated at *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4.

²⁵ See *ST I*, q. 88, a. 3.

²⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* II 1 (993a30–b11); St. Thomas, *In Metaph.* II, lect. 1 (ed. Cathala, 273–86).

²⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* I 2 (982b1–4); cf. Thomas, *In Metaph.* I, lect. 2 (49).

Thus, God, the highest cause, is the most *intrinsically* intelligible being, the very source of all intelligible light (the notion of wisdom, i.e. things seen in the light of the highest cause, derives from this).²⁸

Accordingly, in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, there is a twofold answer. The proposition “God exists” expresses a truth known by virtue of itself, in itself, but *not to the human mind*. The mind that knows the very essence of God, i.e. has that being as its own proper intelligible object, knows that truth at the level of what is “known by virtue of itself;” but that is the unique vantage point of the divine mind: only God so knows himself by his very nature.

The human intellect can demonstrate that God exists, starting from his effects, as we shall discuss in a moment, and can go on to demonstrate that God’s essence and his act of being must be identical; in so doing, as Thomas notes in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, one sees the point that, though the proposition “God exists” is not known by virtue of itself to the *human* mind, it is so known for the *divine* mind.²⁹

This is a huge issue, since one must consider the nature of the human intellect, as contrasted with the divine intellect. There is a certain awkwardness, because the discussion is and should be presented at the *beginning* of the *Summa theologiae*, a work whose very subject of discussion is God.³⁰ Eventually in the *ST* there will be detailed discussion of the human being. This is because (1) God is known through *his works*, and among the variety of creatures he produces, there is that one called “the human being” (thus, we have *ST* I, questions 75–102, all presenting the nature and original production of the human being); and (2) God is known through considering *his image* (and thus we have the *secunda pars*, in its entirety, where the human being as having mastery over its own actions is seen as being *in the image of God*).³¹

In the detailed presentation of the nature of the human being (in the *prima pars*), the focus of the theologian is primarily on the soul as principle of intellectual operation.³² We learn that its level of intellectuality points it (1) first of all toward natural, material things; and only through

²⁸ Cf. *ScG* I, ch. 94, par. 2 (ed. Pera, no. 792), with reference to Aristotle, *Metaph.* I 2 (982b9–10), and Thomas, *In Metaph.* I, lect. 2 (51).

²⁹ One sees the general point that the divine essence is very differently placed as an object for the divine mind and for created minds beautifully presented in *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4, which asks whether any created intellect, by virtue of its natural wherewithal, can see the divine essence (answering, of course, in the negative).

³⁰ Cf. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 7.

³¹ Cf. *ST* I–II, prologue.

³² Thomas simply states (in *ST* I, q. 75, prologue) the appropriateness for the theologian of this focus on the soul; it occurred to me that such considerations as we see in *ST* I, q. 97, a. 3, on the ultimate spiritual life encompassing even the

such intellection does it (2) reflect on *its own self*, a spiritual principle; and only by a still further step does it consider (3) things more noble than itself; it is *then*, in *ST* I, q. 88, a. 3, that we have an article with the precise topic: “whether God is that which is *firstly* known by us?” In that question 88 we see that Thomas’s just-noted approach to human understanding—which starts first with intellectual knowledge as focused on *corporeal* things (qq. 84–86), and moves next to our knowledge of *our own incorporeal intellect* (q. 87), and finally to our knowledge of things above our intellect (q. 88)—relates to his judgment that Aristotle’s doctrine is more faithful to human experience than is Plato’s. As we read in q. 88, a. 1:

... according to the opinion of Plato immaterial substances are not only understood by us, but are even the *primary* things understood by us. . . . But according to the judgment of Aristotle, *which we rather experience*, our intellect, according to the state of the present life has a natural relation to the natures of *material* things: hence, it understands nothing save by turning itself towards the images in the imagination, as is clear from things already said.³³ And thus it is clear that immaterial substances, which do not fall within the field of sense and imagination, cannot be understood by us firstly and through themselves, according to *the mode of knowledge that we experience*.³⁴ (My italics)

It is worth recalling that Aristotle himself regarded his difference with Plato in this respect as the greatest problem in metaphysics.³⁵

Thomas accordingly, in *ST* I, question 88, goes on to teach that while we are able to grasp the essential nature of the human intellective soul, immaterial substance though it indeed is, since we have access to its own proper

body, might help see that point. For the theologian, all roads lead to the situation of beatitude. Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 4, ad 3.

³³ Cf. *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7.

³⁴ *ST* I, q. 88, a. 1 (545a44–b17, in part).

³⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* III 4 (999a24–26); concerning which St. Thomas says, *In Metaph.* III, lect. 9 (443): “Concerning this problem he [Aristotle] speaks thus: firstly, that it ‘is had,’ i.e. that it stands in sequence with the preceding: because, as has already been said, on it depends the consideration of the preceding question. For, if the universals are not separate, they are not principles; but if they are separate, they are principles.—Secondly, he says about it, THAT IT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT OF ALL THE PROBLEMS OF THIS SCIENCE. Which is shown from this, that *the most eminent philosophers judged diversely about it*. For the Platonists held that the universals are separate, with the other philosophers holding the contrary.—Thirdly, he says about it, that it is most necessary to consider, because ON IT DEPENDS THE ENTIRE KNOWLEDGE OF SUBSTANCES, SENSIBLE AS WELL AS IMMATERIAL” (caps added).

act, still we cannot grasp the nature of higher immaterial substances.³⁶ It is not, then, surprising that he begins his lesson on our knowledge of God with this statement:

... since the human intellect, according to the state of the present life, cannot understand created immaterial substances, as has been said, much less can it understand the essence of uncreated substance. Hence, it is to be said, unqualifiedly, that God is not the first object that is known by us; rather, we arrive at a knowledge of God through creatures, in accordance with the words of the Apostle [Paul], in Romans 1.20 ...

One should consider as background to *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1 not only *ST* I, q. 88 but also *ST* I, q. 14, a. 1. This is the discussion of God's own knowledge. Is it right to attribute knowledge [Latin: "*scientia*"] to God? We are given a short resumé of epistemology, with modes or measures of knowledge based on modes of immateriality. Sense is cognitive, but intellect is more cognitive because more immaterial; and so God, at the height of immateriality, is at the height of cognition. Indeed, his knowledge is primarily of himself as supremely intelligible object, and he thoroughly comprehends himself.³⁷

Thus, we are in a position to cope with the twofold answer given in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1: the model of a proposition, a truth, "known by virtue of itself" is that its predicate be included in the very notion of its subject. If the notion of the predicate and subject are known to all, it will be "known by virtue of itself" to all. Thus, we can see why the proposition "God exists" is known by virtue of itself *in itself*, but *not to us* (where the "us" includes *all* human beings!). God's very notion includes existence, but we humans do not know his essence that way and must approach God through his effects.

The lesson is based on the differences between the divine and human minds, and thus supposes some study of such differences.

Furthermore, the lesson is based on the conclusion, not only that God's existence can be demonstrated (otherwise what would we be talking about in *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4?), but that it can be demonstrated that in the case of God, there must be identity of essence and act of being (the conclusion of *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4).

My point is simply how much metaphysics is at work in the article *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, that God's existence is known by virtue of itself in itself, but

³⁶ Cf. *ST* I, q. 88, a. 2, especially ad 3. Thomas is speaking of the immaterial substances below the first principle, spoken of by Aristotle, as well as the angels such as Thomas has presented them.

³⁷ Cf. *ST* I, q. 14, a. 3.

not to us human beings. And this is what separates St. Thomas, not only from St. Anselm (though he is not named here),³⁸ but also from so prominent a contemporary of Thomas as St. Bonaventure.³⁹

Thomas's Three-Step Pathway: [2] Is the Proposition "a god exists" a Demonstrable Conclusion?⁴⁰

Here we have two points to consider: first, the two modes of demonstration, and secondly, the approach to something whose *mere existence* requires demonstration (where the *meaning of the name* of the thing becomes crucial).

The idea of demonstration is familiar enough to anyone who has learned some elementary Euclidian geometry. By the same token, what I am calling its "first mode" is clear, i.e. arriving at the certain knowledge of a thing's properties from the nature of the thing itself: e.g. from the nature of a triangle as such, one is led to the certain knowledge that the angle made by extending one side is necessarily equal to the sum of the interior and opposite angles, and that the three interior angles of any

³⁸ Anselm is named and rejected clearly in the recently published work: Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura romana in primum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, ed. †Leonard E. Boyle and John F. Boyle (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2006), 3.1.1, lines 13–18 and 45–50. This work is dated 1265–66, according to John Boyle's introduction (p. 3).

In Thomas's *In I Sent.* d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4 (Mandonnet ed., p. 95), Thomas names Anselm, but chooses to understand his position as already presupposing the existence of a God—a rather benevolent gloss; so also, in his *Expositio super librum Boethii de trinitate*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 6, Thomas interprets Anselm as speaking merely of the proposition "God exists" as being *per se notum* in itself.

³⁹ See my paper "St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, and the Need to Prove the Existence of God," in *Philosophie et culture (Actes du XVIIe Congrès mondial de philosophie)*, ed. Venant Cauchy, vol. 3 (Montréal: Editions Montmorency, 1988), 841–44. I there discuss Bonaventure's *De mysterio trinitatis, a quaestio disputata*. This to be found in his *Opera Omnia*, Quaracchi ed. (ex typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae), vol. V, 45A–B. There is an English translation: *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1979), introduction and translation by Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. [*Works of St. Bonaventure*, edited by George Marcil, O.F.M., vol. 3]. Hayes dates this work 1253–57 (p. 26), just before Bonaventure's academic career ended (he became General of the Franciscan Order). However, the translations used below are my own. The work begins with two discussions of "preambular" character. The first Bonaventure calls "the foundation of all certitudinal knowledge (*fundamentum omnis cognitionis certitudinalis*), and this is the doctrine that "God exists" is an unquestionable truth: "*Deum esse sit verum indubitabile*." The second he calls "the foundation of all faith-knowledge" (*fundamentum omnis cognitionis fidelis*): God as a trinity as a truth of faith.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2.

triangle are equal to two right angles.⁴¹ To so proceed from the definitional characteristics of a thing to its necessary derivatives is to see those derivative situations *in the light of their cause*.

It is the second mode of demonstration that rather pertains to the discussion of the existence of a God. Such demonstration begins with effects and seeks to know their cause. This is the sort of inquiry we often see in detective stories. The death of the elderly lady is determined to be caused by arsenic in her food. The question is raised: who is the agent that has poisoned her meal? We consider those with the opportunity, and ultimately learn that her nephew is the only one. We know reasonably well *that* he did it, but do not yet know *why*.

To move from the effect to the cause provides a knowledge of the cause, that it is the cause, but not the *why* of the cause.

This is what Thomas tells us about any demonstration of the existence of a God, viz. that we will acquire only knowledge "*that*," not knowledge "*why*."

In presenting these two modes or grades of demonstration, Thomas is not yet limiting the discussion to the particular problem of proving that something or other exists. He is speaking about movements in our cognitive life generally. We are in a position, let us say, to observe the effects of a cause, and the more we can gather about those effects, the more we will get to know about the cause.

Next, he *now* takes up the case of *demonstrating that something exists*: "... But from any effect it can be demonstrated 'that its proper cause exists,' if, of course, its effects are more known to us." I.e. taking it for granted that we have *knowledge* of the effect (and even minimal knowledge of a thing is knowledge of its *existence*—cf. the article's *sed contra*),⁴² if we are in ignorance of the cause as to *its* existence, we can come to a knowledge of the existence of the cause.

This is itself a universal affirmative assertion. From any effect, the existence of its cause can be demonstrated. This is itself proved, concluded to, argued, on the basis of the metaphysical status of effects relative to causes. Since *an effect depends on its cause*, if the effect is posited, the cause must *exist-by-priority*. I use hyphens here so as to call to the reader's attention

⁴¹ Euclid, *Elements*, bk. I, prop. 32 [ed. cit., p. 35]: "If a side of any triangle be produced, the exterior angle is equal to the two interior and opposite angles; and the three interior angles of every triangle are together equal to two right angles."

⁴² ST I, q. 2, a. 2, *sed contra*: "... there is what the Apostle says, *To the Romans* 1.20: 'The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood through the things that have been made.' But this would not be, were it not that through the things that have been made one could demonstrate that God is; *for the first thing one must understand about something is whether it is*" (my italics).

Thomas's use of a *single* word: "*praeexistere*," "pre-exist." To explore this doctrine, let us note that "depend" here means that an effect's existence is seen as *flowing from another*, i.e. that *without* the cause the effect *cannot* be.⁴³

It should be noted here that the image of *cause and effect* is of things *given together*, i.e. simultaneously. Often we hear people include in the idea of a cause its being *temporally before*, *earlier* than, its effect: like parents before children.⁴⁴ It *can* be the case that a cause exists before its effect, and in some causal situations it *must* be the case.⁴⁵ However, what is *absolutely* essential for causality is that the cause exist when the effect exists (either in the same mode of duration or in a higher mode of duration).⁴⁶ What we mean here by "an effect" is a thing *as actually depending on something else*. So taken, a house, for example, depends on the housebuilder *while it is*

⁴³ The very word "depends," in the proposition "an effect depends on its cause," supposes as already *understood* the effect-to-cause relationship of the beings we know. One can see this in St. Thomas's *In Metaph.* V, lect. 13, where he is commenting on Aristotle's presentation of the notions of priority and posteriority. Thus, in para. 950, the first way in which something is prior to another "in being" [*in essendo*] involves the notion of dependence [*. . . ratione . . . dependentiae*]; and he says: ". . . those things are called 'prior' which can be without others and those [others] cannot *be* without them." And in para. 953, all modes of priority and posteriority are said to be reducible to that first one. The reason for this reducibility: ". . . For it is clear that the prior does not *depend* on the posterior, the way the converse is true. Hence, all prior things can *in some way be* without the posterior things, and not conversely" (my italics).

⁴⁴ This is seen in the "definition of cause" presented by David Hume in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel, Section VII, part 2 (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 87. He says: ". . . an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought of that other."

⁴⁵ Cf. *ST* I, q. 46, a. 2, ad 1 (297b12–24): ". . . an efficient cause which is effective *through motion* necessarily precedes its effect *temporally*; because the effect is not, save only at the *conclusion* of the action, whereas every agent must be the *origin* of the action. But if the action is instantaneous, and not successive, it is not necessary that the maker be prior in duration to the thing made, as is clear in the case of illumination. Hence, they [i.e. some philosophers] say that it does not follow of necessity, if God is the efficient cause of the world, that he is prior in duration to the world; because creation, by which he produced the world, is not a successive change." Thomas took illumination to be an instantaneous event, since that is how it sensibly appears, and so it furnished him with a suitable example. Not having this available as an illustration, I generally use one thing maintaining another in a state of rest (my hand holding up a book), in order to present simultaneity of effect and cause.

⁴⁶ I add this qualifier because of the difference between time and eternity. God and his effects exist "simultaneously;" but God's sort of duration, eternity, is of an incomparably higher order than the creature's sort of duration. See *ST* I, q. 10, a. 4, obj. 1 and ad 1; also I, q. 10, a. 5.

under construction. Once the house is finished, the dependence on the builder has ceased. He is not the cause of the house's *being*, only of its *coming to be*. While it was *coming into being*, his contribution was necessary. Once the process of construction has been completed, it is the support of the ground underneath, the pressure of the atmosphere, etc., which *maintain* the house *in being*. These are causes of the being of the house.⁴⁷

I usually use, as my example of cause-effect relationship, my hand held up high, itself holding a book. The onlooker sees the hand and the book on high as a *unity*. Furthermore, he knows that the book is *not* the hand. Both have the perfection called "being up high," but the onlooker knows by experience that "*being up high*" belongs to the *book* only insofar as it *derives* from the "*being up high*" of *my hand*. The book has *derivative-being-up-high*, while my hand has a *being-up-high-by-priority*. "Being" is something we find in things *according to priority and posteriority*, and so we speak of "cause and effect."

⁴⁷ See *ST I*, q. 104, a. 1; and see my paper "St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and Existence," *The New Scholasticism* 56 (1982): 421–41.

Concerning the proposition: "An effect depends on its cause," used here in *ST I*, q. 2, a. 2, and which is thus the foundation for all of the Five Ways, see my paper "St. Thomas and the Principle of Causality," in *Jacques Maritain: philosophe dans la cité/A Philosopher in the World*, ed. J.-L. Allard (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985), 53–71; concerning the position of Hume, see especially 70–71, n. 68. (This is reprinted in my book *Form and Being* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006], 61–80, at 80.)

The simultaneity of cause and effect is presented by Aristotle, *Physics* II 3 (195b16–26); see Thomas, *In Phys.* II, lect. 6 (ed. Maggiolo, no. 195 [9]). Thomas says: "... between actual causes and potential causes there is this difference, that causes actually in operation are and are not simultaneously with those things of which they are the actual causes, in this way, however, viz. that one take the causes in their singularity, i.e. the proper causes; for example, this healing person simultaneously is and is not with this person being healed, and this building person with this structure being built. But if the proper causes are not taken, even though they be taken as actual [or in operation], what is claimed is not true. For the one who is building is not [found] simultaneously to be and not to be relative to that which is built: for one can be actually building, and yet this building is not being built, but some other [building]. But if we take the builder building this building, and this building according as it is being built, it is necessary that the one being posited the other is posited, and the one being removed the other is removed. But this does not always occur with causes which are potential: for the house and the man who built it do not simultaneously cease to be.

"Hence, one can gather that just as lower agents, which are causes of things as regards their coming to be, must be simultaneously with those things which are brought into being, while they are brought into being, so also the divine agent, which is the cause of existing actually [*causa existendi in actu*] is simultaneous with the being actually of the thing [*esse rei in actu*]."

We should stress also Thomas's use of the word "proper." "From any effect, it can be demonstrated that its *proper* cause is." This is to say that the character of the effect *demand*s the possession by the cause of a suitable grade of perfection, such as is sufficient to account for the effect. If I find that the piece of cheese I left on the table is missing, I may not be sure whether a mouse or a human being or a cat took it. Still, I may rule out, usually, the *wind*. However, if what I left is a ten-dollar bill, the wind might suffice (if the window were open).

Notice also that even if the effect is such that it shows it could *only* have been the work of *one* person, e.g. a letter written with such details as could only have come from my elder brother, still the letter does not tell us *everything* about my elder brother. A cause may be the *only* cause from which such an effect could come, and yet be capable of many other effects of other sorts. The power of the cause need not be fully revealed in this or that of its *proper* effects. This is the lesson taught more explicitly in the answer to the third objection of *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2: the God's effects may reveal the God's existence, but not the full perfection of his essential nature.

There is one other point that must be clear: we are speaking of knowing the effect *as an effect*, i.e. such that the thing *reveals its dependence*. It is no accident that the first of Thomas's Five Ways, presented in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, takes its start from *change*. As Thomas has said elsewhere:

... it is to be observed that we were first able to infer the origin of one thing from another because of change [Latin: *ex motu*], for, given that some thing was taken away from its disposition by change, it was clear that this came about through some cause.⁴⁸

The work done in the First Way is mainly to make apparent the *derivative* character of change as such.

Thomas now simply concludes that, in accordance with what he has said about knowledge of effects, and demonstrating the existence of their proper cause, the proposition "a god is," inasmuch as it is not known by virtue of itself *to us*, is *demonstrable* by means of effects known to us. This provides us with a general idea of what Thomas is about to undertake. Its truth can only be judged by what happens in article 3.

However, we have not finished with the analysis of demonstrations of the existence of something. A most essential point is made in Thomas's *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2. The objection runs as follows:

⁴⁸ *ST* I, q. 41, a. 1, ad 2: "... primo conicere potuimus originem alicuius ab alio, ex motu: quod enim aliqua res a sua dispositione removeretur per motum, manifestum fuit hoc ab aliqua causa accidere."

The means of demonstration is the what-it-is. But concerning a god we cannot know what it is, but only what it is not, as Damascene says.⁴⁹ Therefore, we cannot demonstrate [the proposition] “a god is.”

And Thomas replies:

It is to be said that when the cause is demonstrated through the effect, it is necessary to use the effect in place of the definition of the cause in order to prove that “the cause is;” and this occurs *most of all* in [the case of] a god. Because, in order to prove that “something is,” it is necessary to take for the means [of demonstration] what the word signifies, not the “what it is,” because the question: “what is it?” follows upon the question: “is it?” But the words [used] of a god are conferred from [its] effects, as will later be shown. Hence, in demonstrating “a god is” through an effect, we can take as means [of demonstration] what this word “a god” signifies.⁵⁰ (My italics)

This turns our attention to the meaning of the word “a god,” which is to serve as the means, i.e. the *middle term*, in any demonstration of a god’s existence: in the case of anything whose very existence is questionable, all that is really known at the outset is the item as “talked about,” i.e. the meaning of the word.

The *scientific* “question of existence” is not about the existence of contingent individuals, but about the existence of a *kind* of thing (a “sort”). That is why one uses the expression: “Is there any *such thing*?” The human being exists. Many types of spider exist. Does “a god” exist? Before asking: “is there only one or are there many?” we must ask: “is it a sort-of-thing to be found in reality?”

⁴⁹ Cf. St. John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* (versions of Burgundio and Cerbanus), ed. Eligius M. Buytaert, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1955), ch. 4, par. 4, pp. 20–21. We read: “. . . These [viz. such terms as ‘incorruptible’ and ‘inalterable’] signify, not what [God] is, but what he is not. But someone who wishes to present a substance, must say what it is, not what it is not. However, in [the case of] God, it is impossible to say what he is, as to [his very] substance; one comes closer building a notion by negating everything. For he is none of those things which are; not [as though] he were not a being, but as a being which is above all, and a being which is above being itself [*super ipsum esse ens*].”

⁵⁰ ST I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2: “Ad secundum dicendum quod cum demonstratur causa per effectum, necesse est uti effectui loco definitionis causae, ad probandum ‘causam esse,’ et hoc maxime contingit in deo. Quia ad probandum ‘aliquid esse,’ necesse est accipere pro medio quid significet nomen, non autem ‘quod quid est,’ quia quaestio ‘quid est?’ sequitur ad quaestionem ‘an est?’ Nomina autem dei imponuntur ab effectibus, ut postea ostendetur; unde, demonstrando ‘deum esse’ per effectum, accipere possumus pro medio quid significet hoc nomen ‘deus’ ” (my italics).

We can supply meanings for the word “god” and then on that basis seek evidence of the real existence of the named item. Thomas is here, in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, once again introducing into the discussion something he will speak more about later, viz. the words we use concerning a god. *ST* I, q. 13 is a comparatively lengthy *ST* question, containing as it does twelve articles. The general topic is the application of human speech to the God who has revealed himself and whose existence has also been demonstrated in the previous questions. Articles 8–10 are about the particular word “god” and its usage. Here in q. 2, a. 2 the point made is that the words, the names, we use concerning a god are taken from the *effects* attributed to such a being.

One could ask: why is there a word at all? If we do not know of a thing’s existence, how does it get into the discussion? Furthermore, how do we judge of the meaning of words?

A teaching of Aristotle featured on occasion by Thomas is that “the usage of the multitude is to be followed” as to the meaning of words.⁵¹ Furthermore, I would say that the very existence of the word “a god” suggests *a line of thinking* among human beings, such as is referred to by St. Thomas in *ST* II–II, q. 85, a. 1 (the query being: whether it pertains to natural law that one should offer sacrifice?). This *ST* II–II teaching is closely linked to *our experience of our own imperfection*. We read:

... *natural reason* [*naturalis ratio*] declares forcefully [*dictat*] to man that he is placed under some superior [being], because of the defects which he experiences in himself, with regard to which he needs to be aided and directed by some superior. And whatever that [superior] is, this it is which among all [men] is *called* “a god”. But just as, in natural things, the lower are naturally placed under the higher, so also *natural reason* strongly declares to man, seconded by natural inclination [*naturalis ratio dictat homini secundum naturalem inclinationem*], that he [should] exhibit, in a way in keeping with his own self, submission and honour to that which is above man.⁵² (My italics)

⁵¹ Cf. *ScG* I, ch. 1 (ed. Pera, para. 2): “The usage of the multitude, which according to the Philosopher is to be followed in giving names to things, has commonly held that they are to be called ‘wise’ who order things rightly and govern them well” (trans. A. C. Pegis). The reference is to Aristotle, *Topics* II 1 (109a27–29).

⁵² *ST* II–II, q. 85, a. 1 (1861b48–1862a6): “. . . *naturalis ratio dictat homini quod alicui superiori subdatur*, propter defectus quos in seipso sentit, in quibus ab aliquo superiori eget adiuvari et dirigi. *Et quidquid illud sit, hoc est quod apud omnes dicitur ‘deus’*. Sicut autem in rebus naturalibus naturaliter inferiora superioribus subduntur, ita etiam naturalis ratio dictat homini secundum naturalem inclinationem ut ei quod est supra hominem subiectionem et honorem exhibeat secundum suum modum.”

Here the resulting precept of natural law, our duty to offer sacrifice, pertains to the virtue of religion, the highest form of justice.⁵³ However, what interests us at present is the nature of the knowledge of God that is involved, *the fruit of natural reasoning*. And it is seen as universal, i.e. pertaining to man by his very nature.⁵⁴

I would relate this rather universal “sizing up of our situation” on the part of human beings to Thomas’s teaching concerning “what is right among the peoples” [*ius gentium*]⁵⁵ and see it as source of our having such a word as “a god.” The meaning of the name is prior to the name itself and is expressed in the argument for such a being. Notice how Thomas works the name into the passage at II–II, q. 85, a. 1 as a kind of conclusion. This all call a god.

We have seen enough of the general description of a demonstration of the existence of a god.

Thomas’s Three-Step Pathway: [3] whether a god exists?

Thomas, having first of all rejected the view of those who hold that the existence of a god is known by virtue of itself to the human mind, and secondly rejected the position that the existence of a god is not demonstrable by human reason, now presents us with an article displaying five avenues, five pathways, in humanly experienced reality that conclude to the existence of a god. I have elsewhere on more than one occasion indicated what I take to be the careful order of discussion in this article.⁵⁶ Here I will only mention that I see the last two, the fourth and fifth ways, as most satisfying, in which Thomas concludes with the “we” form: “this we call a god.” The god presented by the fourth way is “something which for all beings is the cause of being and goodness and of every perfection.” We are surely presented with a being, described as “*maximally* a being,” which is a *creative*

⁵³ Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 122, a. 1.

⁵⁴ I am here quoting a paragraph from my review article “Kevin Flannery, S.J., *Acts Amid Precepts: The Aristotelian Logical Structure of Thomas Aquinas’s Moral Theory* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2001),” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 2 (2007): 431–44, at 433–37. There I present a similar doctrine of our natural reasoning to a god, as taught by St. Thomas in his *Super psalmos*, commentary on Psalm 8.

⁵⁵ *ST* II–II, q. 57, a. 3; cf. my paper “The Foundations of Human Rights,” in *Science et Esprit* 62, fasc. 2–3 (May–Dec. 2010): 227–36.

⁵⁶ I first proposed this reading on the Ways and their order in “Number and Order of St. Thomas’s Five Ways,” *Downside Review* 92 (1974): 1–18. Most recently I have gone over it in “St. Thomas Aquinas as an Example of the Importance of the Hellenistic Legacy,” in *Doctor Communis*, fasc. 1–2 (2008): 88–118. (The volume is the Proceedings of the Seventh Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Vatican City, 22–24 June 2007.)

source.⁵⁷ The god, as presented in the fifth way, is seen as the *intelligence* at the origin of all nature, thus definitely a personal sort of being.

St. Thomas distinguishes between the very universal reasoning to a god that he sees throughout humanity and the carefully controlled judgments of the philosophers. In the last part of this essay I will simply indicate some current interest in his demonstrations and the field of battle that they occupy. In the end of all, one will either hold the existence of God by the certitude of supernatural faith, or by philosophical demonstration, or by more “homespun” reasoning. Otherwise one will find oneself among the atheists or the doubters or the uncertain.⁵⁸

Among the Five Ways for proving the existence of a God proposed by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae*, the Fifth has a special status. It is true that the First Way is designated as “more manifest” [*manifestior via*] among the five.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, in other places we see a certain primacy accorded to the sort of argument given in the Fifth Way. Thus, when commenting on the Gospel according to St. John (commentary dated 1269–72, thus later than the 1266–68 *ST I*), and undertaking to characterize the nobility of St. John’s wisdom, Thomas reviews the modes of knowing God that the ancient philosophers had developed. The very first relates to the Fifth Way. We read:

... some came to a knowledge of God through his authority [*per auctoritatem*]; and this is the most efficacious pathway [*via efficacissima*].

For we see that those [things] which are among natural things act for the sake of a goal, and attain to useful and definite goals; and since they lack intellect, they cannot direct themselves, unless they be directed and moved by something directed through intellect. And hence it is that the very movement itself of natural things to a definite goal indicates that there is something higher by which natural things are directed to a goal and governed. And therefore, since the whole course of nature proceeds and is directed in an orderly way towards a goal, of necessity we must posit something higher which directs them and governs them as a Lord: and this is God.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Cf. my paper “St. Thomas, the Fourth Way, and Creation,” *The Thomist* 59 (1995): 371–78.

⁵⁸ The following several paragraphs, up to and including the 1997 quotation from Michael Behe partially reproduce material from the prologue (pp. 47–48) to my paper “St. Thomas’s ‘Fifth Way’ Revisited,” *Universitas* [Taipei] 31, no. 3 (March 2004): 47–67.

⁵⁹ *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3 (13b39–42): “... the first and more manifest way is that which is taken from the aspect of change [*ex parte motus*].”

⁶⁰ *Super evangelium s. Ioannis lectura*, prologus s. Thomae, ed. R. Kai, O.P. (Turin: Marietti, 1952), no. 3. The passage continues: “And this governing authority [present]

Thomas here designates the Fifth Way line of reasoning as “most efficacious.” True, the above is somewhat fuller than the Fifth Way itself, since it takes the trouble to formulate a premise concerning the entire universe. The Fifth Way itself could not be more Spartan in its presentation.⁶¹

Again, when preaching to the people in Naples in Lent of 1273, and using only one line of argument for the existence of a God, Thomas presents the atheist as one who views the universe as a result of chance, and the theist as convinced of a cosmic providence.⁶²

I am certainly satisfied with the line of thinking of the Fifth Way. However, it is a long way from the knowledge of a god’s existence, to the

in the Word of God is demonstrated when he is called ‘Lord’; hence in Psalm 88.10 it is said: ‘You lord it over the power of the sea; you calm the movement of its waves: so to say: You are the Lord and you govern the universe.’

“John shows that he has this knowledge concerning the Word when he says: ‘He came unto his own,’ i.e. into the world; because the whole world is his own.”

⁶¹ It is true that the passage in Thomas’s prologue to the Gospel of St. John is not a presentation of ways to prove the existence of a God. It is a presentation of four modes of intellectually approaching God. The first way given, which I have reported, and the third include most formally proofs of existence. The others concern (2) immutability and eternity, (3) the divine dignity or nobility, and (4) the incomprehensibility of the divine truth. One might suggest that the adjective “most efficacious” compares the first of these approaches to the other three.

Another place we might note is Thomas’s *Commentary on the Psalms*, composed at Naples during the period 1272–73. It speaks of cosmic order and the need for an intelligent cause. See above, note 54.

⁶² In *Symbolum Apostolorum Expositio*, a. 1 (in *Opuscula Theologica*, ed. Spiazzi, vol. 2 [Turin: Marietti, 1954], no. 869): “Among all those things which the faithful ought to believe, this is the first which they ought to believe, viz. that there is one God. Now, one must consider what this word ‘God’ signifies, which is nothing else but a governor and provider of all things. Therefore, that person believes that there is a God who believes that all the things of this world are governed and provided for by him.

“But someone who believes that all arise by chance does not believe that there is a God. But none is found to be so stupid as not to believe that natural things are governed, provided for, and disposed, since they proceed in a particular order and at certain times: for we see that the sun and the moon and the stars, and other natural things, all preserve a determinate course; which would not happen if they were by chance. Hence, if there were someone who did not believe there is a God, he would be stupid. Psalms 13.1 ‘The fool has said in his heart: “there is no God.”’”

Thomas goes on, however, to note those who admit such a governor for the natural world, but not for human affairs. He also finds it necessary to argue further that there is only one God.

For the date and occasion of this work, I am following James A. Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas d’Aquino* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 401. Weisheipl uses the title “*Collationes super Credo in Deum*.”

truth of Christian revelation. The latter is a much richer vision of reality, one had only through supernatural faith.

Each of the ways involves a world of discussion, a world of discussion that takes place among human beings. Often they have impressive credentials. I will say something about the current interest in the Fifth Way, the source of finality, intelligibility, in nature.

From the beginning of our history, we have people attempting to derive such natural finality from chance. To attempt to conceive of the origins of the variety of living things in the mere random assemblages of distinct items is to attempt “to generate all things from night” or from what is merely potentially something, as did the theologians and natural scientists criticized by Aristotle.⁶³

Still, as I have often remarked, the Presocratics, like the poor, are always with us! There is much argument about the validity of the Fifth Way type of proof. We might juxtapose statements of two interested present-day scientists, particle physicist Stephen Weinberg and molecular biologist Michael Behe. Nobel Laureate Weinberg tells us:

One of the greatest moments in the history of human thought was the discovery by Darwin and Wallace in the nineteenth century that no “life force” is needed to explain the evolution of species. Life is not governed by independent fundamental biological laws—it can be described as the effects of physics and chemistry worked out over billions of years of accidents. It is not so long ago that many people’s religious beliefs were based on the argument from design, the argument that the wonderful characteristics of living things could not possibly arise without a divine plan. Lytton Strachey tells how Cardinal Manning came to his faith in just this way. Now that we understand how evolution can occur through the natural selection of random mutations, the argument from design has lost its force for anyone with a reasonable understanding of biological science.⁶⁴

On the other hand, Behe, the biologist, tells us:

The sterility of Darwinism indicates that it is the wrong framework for understanding the basis of life. As I argue in my book, an alternative hypothesis is both natural and obvious: systems such as the flagellum [of the *e. coli* bacterium] were intentionally designed by an intelligent agent. Just as in the everyday world we immediately conclude design when we see a complex, interactive system such as a mousetrap, there

⁶³ Aristotle, *Metaph.* XII 6 (1071b22–31); Thomas, *In Metaph.* XII, lect. 6 (2501–2503).

⁶⁴ Steven Weinberg, “The Future of Science, and the Universe,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 15, 2001.

is no reason to withhold the same conclusion from interactive molecular systems. This conclusion may have theological implications that make some people uncomfortable; nonetheless it is the job of science to follow the data wherever they lead, no matter how disturbing.⁶⁵

More recently we have the case of Antony Flew, a British philosopher who had published throughout his career as a decided atheist, and who recently (2004) announced that he now concluded to the existence of a God. As a result he came in for criticism from Richard Dawkins in a hugely popular book, *The God Delusion*. In reply Flew noted the failure of Dawkins to mention to his readers the view of Albert Einstein “that there must be a Divine Intelligence behind the physical world.” And Flew remarked: “I myself think it obvious that if this argument is applicable to the world of physics then it must be hugely more powerful if it is applied to the immeasurably more complicated world of biology.” Flew stresses that he is a Deist, i.e. that he recognizes no divine revelation.⁶⁶

I refer to such discussions merely to recall that there is a battlefield in such matters. I encourage the reader to persevere in the study of the Five Ways of *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3. I am a witness that it is well worth their while.

As I wrote in my paper “Truth and Happiness,” speaking of the turmoil of human philosophical discussion on proofs of the existence of a god:

And if we ask whence comes that turmoil, we cannot fail to notice that revelation presents us with human nature as a wounded nature. The natural inclinations of the human being are still present, but in a weakened condition. Intellectual judgment is affected, especially in the moral order.⁶⁷ We should not be surprised if there is deep division among philosophers, as to questions about the purpose of human life.

⁶⁵ Michael J. Behe, “The Sterility of Darwinism,” *Boston Review* (February/March 1997). Behe is referring in the quotation to his book *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). See also his more recent book *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free Press, 2007), in which, at page 4, we read: “As a theory-of-everything, Darwinism is usually presented as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. Either accept the whole theory or decide that evolution is all hype, and throw out the baby with the bath water. Both are mistakes. In dealing with an often-menacing nature, we can’t afford the luxury of elevating anybody’s dogmas over data. The purpose of this book is to cut through the fog, to offer a sober appraisal of what Darwinian processes can and cannot do, to find what I call the *edge of evolution*.”

⁶⁶ My information and quotation from Professor Flew is from “A Reply to Richard Dawkins,” by Antony Flew, *First Things* (December 2008).

⁶⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 85, a. 3 (1178b5–6): “. . . through sin, reason is rendered superficial, especially regarding the domain of action.”

Moreover, moral issues dividing philosophers will cast their spell on the contemplative mind itself. As . . . [Étienne] Gilson pointed out in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, very often our problems in speculative philosophy have their real roots in moral questions.⁶⁸ The idea is that, were it not for our inclinations, we might be readier to recognize theoretical principles more spontaneously. This was long ago maintained by St. Augustine, speaking of the Manicheans concerning the metaphysics of good and evil. Augustine remarked that what he was saying hardly needed the support of argument, so evident was it—had it not been an issue which touched upon human conduct—morals—thus spawning controversy.⁶⁹ N.V

⁶⁸ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribners, 1937), 61: “There is an ethical problem at the root of our philosophical difficulties; for men are most anxious to find truth, but very reluctant to accept it.”

⁶⁹ Augustine, *De moribus Manichaeorum* IV.6 (in *Oeuvres de saint Augustin*, vol. 1 of Bibliothèque Augustinienne [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949], 262). The previous two paragraphs are taken from “Truth and Happiness,” ch. 4 of my book *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), at 69–70.