

Knowing God from the Things That Have Been Made

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Sacred Scripture teaches that God can be known in two ways. God can be known by the natural light of reason from the things that have been made (see Rom 1:19–20). Second, God’s existence can be known by supernatural faith. As Hebrew 11:6 teaches, “without faith it is impossible to please him,” and “whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” That what Hebrews speaks of is a supernatural faith is clear from the fact that it illustrates this faith by adverting to the friends of God in the Old Testament who were promised a “homeland,” a “better country” (11:14, 16), the “heavenly Jerusalem” in which everyone is a firstborn son cleansed by the blood of Jesus (12:22–24). Here, God is apprehended as inviting us to communion of life with him, an end surpassing the proportion of our nature.

This is not to say that the first way of knowing God is not also “religious.” When the First Vatican Council teaches in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, that God can be known “from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason [naturali humanae lumine],” it teaches that God is known as “the source and end of all things [principium et finem]” (ch. 2).¹ Knowing him as our end, however, is knowing that we have certain duties in justice in his regard, as was understood at the Council.² But this natural knowledge of God and of the natural law that bids us acknowledge him in worship is by no means

¹ Translations of *Dei Filius* are from, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, S.J., vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990).

² Marcel Chossat, S.J., “Dieu (connaissance naturelle de),” in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* [DTC], 15 vols. (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1907–1951), 4:824.

the knowledge that we are called to be friends with God and, as our final end, know God face to face, as the Council makes evident. So, the Council quite rightly and properly *first* declares the Church's faith in this God who reveals himself to us, and says that the apostolic and Roman Church "believes and acknowledges that there is one true and living God" (ch. 1). As to the other knowledge, the Council merely "holds and teaches [tenet et docet]" that God can be known by the natural light (ch. 2), and this is quite distinct from the fact that it "believes and acknowledges [credit et confitetur]" that God exists (ch. 1), the God who calls us to a supernatural end, which calling can itself be known only by faith (ch. 2). The natural knowledge is asserted as a truth belonging to the secondary object of ecclesial teaching authority, things that follow from what is revealed and are to be "held"; the supernatural knowledge of God is asserted as a truth belonging to the primary object of ecclesial teaching authority, things in the deposit of faith itself which are to be believed.³

If there are these two ways of coming to know God, by faith and by reason, what is their relation to one another? It is sometimes supposed that one must first know God by reason before coming to know him by faith, but the Council by no means asserts this, nor do Catholic theologians.⁴ What can be maintained is that one must be able to know God by reason in order for faith in revelation to be coherent.⁵ This is why the Council troubles itself to teach something that touches immediately only on our natural knowledge. But what of the other way round? What of the dependence of the natural knowledge on the supernatural knowledge of God? Is it the case that God must have revealed himself supernaturally in order for us to come to a natural knowledge of him? This is sometimes granted, and it is recognized that revelation is necessary in our present state, post-fall and post-redemption, to come to the natural knowledge of God.⁶ The argument of this paper, however, is that this is true across

³ See Ioachim Salaverri, S.J., "De ecclesia," in *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, vol. 1 (Madrid: BAC, 1958), nos. 909–13.

⁴ Jean-Hervé Nicolas, O.P., *Synthèse dogmatique, complément: de l'Univers à la Trinité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1993), no. 45.1. See also St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1; *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 4.

⁵ Guy Mansini, O.S.B., *Fundamental Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 151–56; Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), 252–54.

⁶ White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*, 283n103: "In the concrete historical order, in order to recognize God as one's true final end *even naturally*, some kind of *supernatural* grace of God (that itself implies—but is not limited to—the gift of supernatural faith)

the board, and would be true even in some (never in fact instantiated) state of “pure nature.”⁷ This may sound counter-intuitive, at the least, and perhaps obviously false and wrong-headed, given the way the teaching of the Council is ordinarily received. But it is, in fact, the case, as this paper maintains: coming to know God by reason depends on first having come to know him by faith. In this way, the paper takes up what Robert Sokolowski has long ago pointed out in *The God of Faith and Reason*.⁸ More fully, this paper argues that, in addition to the philosophical, phenomenological explanation of this fact, which will be rehearsed in the third section (“The State of Fallen Man: A Philosophical Consideration”), there is also an important statement in Sacred Scripture of the dependence of our natural knowledge of God on the supernatural knowledge of him, a statement too often ignored in expositions of the natural knowledge of God. This will be taken up in the second section, concerning Scripture on man’s knowledge of God (“The State of Fallen Man: Theological, Magisterial, Scriptural Considerations”). We begin, however, with a brief word on the importance of what may be called the theological historicity of human nature.

Same Nature, Different States

Attention to the various states of man takes his historicity seriously, his theological historicity, accordingly as it is impacted by the word and action of God and man’s response thereto. Human nature is one and remains the same whether before the fall or after, whether redeemed or in glory. But the exercise of man’s faculties—which are, once again, the same in every state—is historically conditioned in such a way that the scope of these faculties, including what it is they can accomplish even *naturally*, is severely

is necessary.” White argues by parity of reason from the necessity of supernatural grace to love God above all things in our present condition, something of which we were naturally capable prior to the fall.

⁷ Which conclusion might seem to but does not in fact sustain an argument for the impossibility of God not calling us to a strictly supernatural end, and which conclusion raises the question of the nature of the revelation of what we can naturally know of God that God would be morally required to make even did he not call us to a strictly supernatural end, an issue touched on by Pius XII in *Humani Generis* (1950), §3.

⁸ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 114–15. That Sokolowski’s position is “absurd” is maintained by Joseph Trabbic, “By Revelation Alone? Some Objections to Robert Sokolowski’s ‘Christian Distinction,’” *Heythrop Journal* 59 (2018): 456–67, at 459, who however invokes the authority not of the Council, but of St. Thomas.

impacted. So, as is well known, St. Thomas recognizes that, although man is naturally capable of loving God above all things, he cannot in fact do this in the state of fallen nature.⁹ It should therefore not really surprise us that there are similar states of affairs in the order of knowledge, including most especially the knowledge of God.

In man's first state, the state of original justice, he is endowed with sanctifying grace and the preternatural gifts. Sanctifying grace enables Adam to love God in the power of God's own love of himself and all other things. As it is ordinarily understood, it brings with it the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The preternatural gifts, in addition to immortality and the integrity by which human passions are subordinate to reason, include the gift of knowledge. In this state, therefore, man knows the existence of God by being made in his image,¹⁰ and by concourse with God in the garden accordingly as friends spend time together in each other's company (Gen 2:19, 3:8), and by seeing him in the things that have been made.¹¹

Seeing God *in* the things that have been made is more direct than knowing him *from* the things that have been made. The former is seeing God mirrored in his intelligible effects in things. The latter is a matter of first knowing sensible things and then coming discursively to know him as the cause of these things (as with the Five Ways). Just in itself, it is an unassisted exercise of the natural light. This is the knowledge referred to in Romans 1:19–20.¹²

⁹ ST I-II, q. 109, a. 3.

¹⁰ Gen 1:26–27; Psalm 8; St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 12; St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.2. Being made in the image of God ought probably to be cashed out as enabling both a natural and a supernatural knowledge of God. It connotes a supernatural knowledge of God accordingly as it can be understood as stating that man is the adoptive son of God and so, from the beginning, in covenant relation with God. See John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, vol. 1, *The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 98. But the image specified in Gen 1:26 and 28 as meaning man's having dominion over the beasts of the earth and being fecund seems to be something belonging to man's nature.

¹¹ ST I, q. 94, a. 1, corp. and ad 3.

¹² The definition of the Council, it should be noted, does not limit the natural knowledge of God to *a posteriori* and discursive deployments of reason. See Marcel Chossat, "Dieu (connaissance naturelle de)," in *DTC*, 4:839, 844, 846–47. See also Fergus Kerr, O.P., "Knowing God by Reason Alone: What Vatican I Never Said," *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010): 215–28, at 219–20.

The State of Fallen Man: Theological, Magisterial, Scriptural Considerations

Fallen man no longer knows God in things as did Adam in his first state. We are distracted by sensible things and preoccupied with them.¹³ One of the consequences of original sin is ignorance. Fallen man can still know God from the things God has made, but soon loses the proximate capacity so to do.

This loss is seemingly attested to by the cultural history of the Mediterranean world, by the magical practices condemned by Augustine and the Fathers, religious practices in which demons are worshipped.¹⁴ There is also, second, the cultural history of those people in Africa and the Americas and Australia who recognize sky gods and high gods, a cultural history thoroughly known to moderns, where the first god is some creator who later often retires and leaves the foreground of religious imagination and practice to fertility deities.¹⁵ It can be difficult to characterize the status and nature of such creators, and what their retirement means.¹⁶ But religiously, we seem to be far from the Book.¹⁷ Third, there is the philosophical history of the ancient world, to which there is abundant ancient witness, although the knowledge of divinity there attained to is also difficult to characterize.¹⁸

¹³ *ST* I, q. 94, a. 1, corp.

¹⁴ See Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 10.19–11 and 10.27. See St. Thomas, *ST* II-II, q. 94, on idolatry. Article 4 discusses the responsibility for idolatry on the part of man and of demons; article 1 reports various opinions as to the origin of idolatry.

¹⁵ See for instance Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), ch. 2, “The Sky and Sky Gods,” which includes a treatment of the God of the Israelites (93–96).

¹⁶ Eliade, *Patterns*, 109: these gods “are creators, good, eternal (‘old’); they are founders of the established order and guardians of the laws.” These findings recall the hypothesis of Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt of an original revelation, for discussion of which see Yves de Montcheuil, “Le fait religieux, le besoin religieux,” in *Apologétique: nos raisons de croire, réponses aux objections*, ed. Maurice Brillant, M. Nédoncelle, and M. Coppens (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1948), 25–75, at 35–36, and E. Mangin, “Nature et origine de la religion,” 76–138 in Brillant, Nédoncelle, and Coppens, *Apologétique*, 76–138, at 96–100.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger supposes that, certainly from the time of Solomon, the personal God of Abraham “had been identified with the high god, the creator, who is known to all religions,” but who was not in these religions worshipped as the one engaged in fulfilling man’s needs (*Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 148).

¹⁸ For a brief review of Graeco-Roman philosophical teaching on the divine for comparison with Christian doctrines, see Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), ch. 6.

Today, it is not uncommon to deny that Aristotle and Plato and Plotinus characterized the divinity they spoke of in a way easily harmonized with the biblical characterizations of God.

Catholic Theological Tradition

Catholic theological tradition as a whole, however, is much inclined to impute a natural knowledge of God to ancient pagans, and indeed to man in general. According to Marcel Chossat, "the Fathers have often insisted on the spontaneous, natural knowledge [of God] common to all men, even to pagans."¹⁹ The Scholastics distinguish a knowledge spontaneous and obscure from a knowledge clear but confused.²⁰ The first is a function of the ordination of our faculties to the true, to the good, to being, to beatitude (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] §27). Chossat enlists Alexander of Hales, St. Albert, St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas, Duns Scotus, and Henry of Ghent for this view. This knowledge is indeed obscure: "It does not attain ... to a precise idea that distinguishes God from other beings," and so "it does not by itself exclude monism, pantheism, polytheism."²¹ For a knowledge that sustains religious life, there must be an illation to a more determinate notion of God (CCC §28). This more determinate notion is in fact taken to have been possessed by the pagans. Chossat writes: "Nothing was more frequent in the literature of ancient paganism, Greek and Roman, than the designation of God under the names of the principle of things, of the architect of the universe," and this is to be found in Xenophon and Plato. For their part, the Fathers appeal often enough to the argument from contingency "when it is a matter of proving to the pagans that they have the idea of the true God."²² The consensus of the Fathers is thus that pagans "have some knowledge of a God unique and provident,"²³ while the Scholastics agree that this idea "was less perfect than the idea of God that Christians have by revelation."²⁴

¹⁹ M. Chossat, "Dieu (son existence)," in *DTC*, 4:876. He references Tertullian, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome, and Prosper of Aquitaine.

²⁰ See Chossat, "Dieu (son existence)," 4:875: A clear idea is yet "confused" "if the object is there distinguished from every other [only] by extrinsic denominations;" it is clear and distinct "if it attains in a clear way the intrinsic nature of the object."

²¹ Chossat, "Dieu (son existence)," 4:878.

²² Chossat, "Dieu (son existence)," 4:880. These include Minucius Felix, Theophilus of Antioch, Athanasius, Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, and John Damascene.

²³ Chossat, "Dieu (son existence)," 4:880.

²⁴ Chossat, "Dieu (son existence)," 4:882.

So we come to a delicate point. How perfect must this idea be in order to be an idea of God? Pagans, including Plato and Aristotle, understand God as the best thing in existence, and as in some way serving as a principle for what is not divine. Augustine says of “Platonists” that God is “maker of all created things, the light by which things are known, and the good in reference to which things are to be done.”²⁵ St. Thomas is taken to recognize that Aristotle conceived of the God of the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* as a creator who creates matter, and so as a creator who creates *ex nihilo*.²⁶ Apart from thinking that God creates *ex nihilo*, however, one understands him to be part of a whole greater than and inclusive both of himself and of what is not God, even if he has the high duty of putting forms into matter, and even if he moves all things by being the most desirous thing.²⁷

Magisterial Teaching

When Vatican I teaches that God can be known as the first cause and last end of the things that have been made, it is not teaching that God is here necessarily known as the Creator in the strict sense, who causes the whole

²⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 8.9, in *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 253. But he is not at this point a clear witness to the native capacity and scope of the philosophical mind, since he thinks it likely that Plato learned of the transcending and immutable being of God from discussion with the Jews and from Exod 3:14, see *De civitate Dei* 8.11 (pp. 256–57). Augustine grants Plato could not have met Jeremiah or read the LXX (pp. 255–56), as he had earlier supposed in the *De doctrina christiana* 2.43, but thinks the argument remains strong based on the text and content of Plato’s teaching.

²⁶ Mark Johnson, “Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?” *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 129–55, and Lawrence Dewan, “St. Thomas, Aristotle, Creation,” *Dionysius* 15 (1991): 81–90. And see Jan Aertsen’s account of the historical question in *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas’s Way of Thought* (Leyden: Brill, 1998), 200–209. Ralph McInerny vigorously defends the view that St. Thomas correctly interprets the twelfth book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as concluding to the existence of a creator (*Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006], 245–82). The interpretation of *ST* I, q. 44, a. 2, now common supposes the *aliqui* who know God as the Creator of matter and so as the Creator *ex nihilo* refers not to Plato and Aristotle but to people like Avicenna; see Robert Dobie, *Thinking Through Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 166n13. A very satisfactory discussion of the texts Johnson adduces and that distinguishes God as *causa essendi* and God as Creator *ex nihilo* can be found in John F. Wippel, “Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas III* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 142–73, esp. 157 and 165–69.

²⁷ Neither does Plotinus think that God creates, since what is not the One comes from the One, inexhaustible as he may be.

of the being of what he causes, and without relying on any preexistent matter.²⁸ Concordantly with this, theologians hold that the idea of God attained by natural reason can be “very vulgar,” compassing no more than the idea of a supreme being who is to be worshipped and adored, or “more cultivated,” recognizing this being as the author and governor of the world, or “an explicit concept of a necessary being who exists *a se*.”²⁹

Sokolowski is concerned with God understood in this latter sense, where the necessity of God is beyond that of any this-worldly necessity that we encounter in our experience, and who could exist even without any world from which he was distinct on the supposition that he chose not to create at all, and where creation is therefore absolutely unconditioned—*ex nihilo*. It is a question of whether God so conceived in this way can be known independently of revelation, as Thomists generally think. And that question is left open by the Vatican I. Of course, that God does in fact create the world *ex nihilo* is defined by the Council (*Dei Filius*, ch. 1, can. 5). But that this can be known with certitude by the natural light from the things that have been made, and that this can be known easily—those things are not defined. So, the fact that Sokolowski calls the distinction between the Creator who freely creates from nothing and the world that he freely creates the *Christian* distinction is by no means reproved by the Council. Naming it the Christian distinction is by no means evidently improper as measured by the teaching of the Council. On the other hand, the propriety of calling it the Christian distinction is not always evident to every Christian, and that is what this paper is about.

If thinking of God as the Creator who freely creates, and so if distinguishing him from all else in such a way that that very distinction is not constitutive of his identity (since he therefore does not need not to be other things in order to be himself)—if we build *that* into our idea of God, such that, without that note, we will say that we are not thinking of the Christian God, then it is fairly easy to conclude that no one outside of the scope of revelation ever thought of this, ever thought this truly of the true God. On the other hand, if one is content to think that thinking of the first and highest principle of things is to think of God, then lots of pagans

²⁸ Chossat, “Dieu (connaissance naturelle de),” 4:837. Rather, the Council uses “Creator,” as does Wis 13:5, which all know does not of itself imply creation *ex nihilo*. See also Joseph M. Dalmau, S.J., “De Deo uno et trino,” *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, vol. 2 (Madrid: BAC, 1958), no. 3.

²⁹ Dalmau, “De Deo uno et trino,” no. 2. For St. Thomas on the vulgar knowledge of God, see *SCG* III, ch. 38: the relatively immediate knowledge available to all men that there is someone who orders the world is, however, subject to many errors.

thought of God. Or, as we might put it, they were certainly thinking of “divinity” in some largely and loosely conceived way.

It is moreover fairly easy to come to this conclusion once one realizes that the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, expressly conceived, is not itself hammered out until the second century *after* Christ. It is indeed implicit in the Scriptures, since it follows from the all-sufficient power of God’s speaking, of his saying “let there be,” in the first creation account. Expressly, however, the notion is worked out over against the Greek idea that the first principle makes things out of a pre-existent matter.³⁰ Thus, this notion does not even exist in its explicit form prior to the Christian knowledge of God. And while it is worked out over against the presupposition of an eternal matter, it is worked out in virtue of the distinctively *Christian* confession of the Incarnation and resurrection of Christ: it is the unconditioned omnipotence of God that these works presuppose that leads to the denial that God’s power depends on a preexistent material.³¹ That it is in fact the resurrection of *Christ* that puts the Christian mind in motion to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and thence to a conception of the transcendence of God unknown to pagan philosophy should make us cautious in claiming how easy it is to come to the natural knowledge of God as Creator *stricte dicta* apart from the invitation that *revelation* gives the philosopher to think a philosophic thought he had not previously entertained.³²

Scripture on the Loss and the Maintenance of the Knowledge of God

The loss of the knowledge of God as Creator is evident both from the point of view of the reader of the Old Testament from the first chapter of Genesis onward and from the point of view of the people in the Old Testament—the people in the story, from the point of view especially of the righteous descendants of Adam. This loss is first attested by the increasing forgetfulness of God reported from Genesis 3 onward, especially remarked in 6:1–8, where the sons of God, the Sethites, marry the daughters of Cain.³³ Second, it is indicated by the fact of the emergence of pagan gods, whose

³⁰ Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Aberdeen: T & T Clark, 1994), 149–50 (the role of Tatian), 160–63 (the role of Theophilus of Antioch).

³¹ For the role of Justin Martyr in this, see May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 127–29.

³² For the understanding of which last argument from the resurrection of Christ, it is helpful to consult St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 18, aa. 2 and 3: if death, the non-living, does not constrain the power of God, neither does non-being, in that *vivere* is the form of the *esse* of living things.

³³ Bergsma and Pitre, *Catholic Introduction*, 1:115.

worship shows up as it were incidentally and accidentally, but for all that the more tellingly, in Genesis 31, where Rachel steals the household gods of Laban (vv. 19, 30–32). Household gods? Where did they come from? Their presence attests a sort of cultic ignorance of the existence and rights of God. Joshua 24:2 is more explicit about other gods in patriarchal times. Joshua addresses the people and says: “Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods” (see also 24:14–15). The question is not a historical-critical one at this point, asking from what tradition or under what conditions and when the acknowledgment of pagan gods entered the text of the Pentateuch and Joshua as we have it today. We are reading things as the finished surface of the text gives us to construe the religious history of man from his creation forward. That is, we are reading accordingly as the text, accordingly as the word of God, reveals the theological truth of this history to us.³⁴

In the third place, there are the early chapters of Exodus. The pharaoh in Abraham’s time seems to know God (Genesis 13:17–18); and the pharaoh in Joseph’s time knows God (Genesis 41:38–39). But the pharaoh in Moses’s time does not—he knows neither Joseph nor Joseph’s God (Exod 1:8, 5:2). Fourth, there is the Book of Wisdom, quite explicit about the human ignorance of God (13:1–9). Fifth, there is the Letter to the Romans, chapters 1 and following, which recapitulates the reaching of Wisdom.

To advert to the cultural and philosophical and scriptural attestation of this loss is not to deny the correlative important thesis that there have always existed men who knew and worshipped the true God, the true God understood according to the word of revelation itself recorded in the Old Testament. It is, rather, to bring this correlative thesis to prominence by its contrasting partner. Both the loss of God and the faithfulness to God detailed in the Old Testament enable a scriptural, which is to say revealed, assessment of the relation of the natural knowledge of God to God’s supernatural revelation of himself.

The teaching that there have always existed men who knew and worshipped the true God has very strong and even obvious scriptural

³⁴ Supposing we were reading the pieces of the Old Testament in the order of their composition, where Gen 1–2 could well show up after the history of the patriarchs and the national history of 1 and 2 Sam and 1 and 2 Kgs, there might be a better display of the “stages of manifestation” of God’s otherness to the world; of which stages see Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 127–30. And see below, the section “A Philosophical Consideration of Man’s Knowledge of God.”

warrants. In the first place, let us be clear that it is not to be supposed that Adam does not know that the God who walks with him in the garden is the God who made him, since he arranges Adam's life, speaks with him, provides a partner meet for him. This is a God in covenant relation with Adam and Eve. It is noteworthy that Enoch, who walked with God (Gen 5:24), was born within the lifespan of Adam. St. Thomas remarks that there was no idolatry in the first age of man, from Adam to Noah, "on account of the recent memory of the creation of the world, from which there still flourished a knowledge of the one God in the mind of men."³⁵ The lifespan of Shem, the son of Noah, overlaps Abraham's lifespan.³⁶ Moreover, Shem is traditionally identified with Melchizedek,³⁷ and blesses Abraham when they meet after Abraham rescues Lot (Gen 14:18–20). When God speaks to Abraham in Genesis 12, the reader must suppose that Abraham knows who is speaking to him. Further, when God reveals his name to Moses in Exodus 3:14, this is the name by which men have called on the Lord since Genesis 4:26.³⁸ From the surface of the text, as it were, reading straight through from Genesis to Exodus, it is clear that Moses already knows what the name of God is; but he needs to find out if whoever it is who is speaking to him from the bush is that very God.

The teaching that there have always been men who knew and worshipped the true God is affirmed by St. Augustine in *The City of God* on the biblical evidence.³⁹ It is to be noted that this thesis is a doctrine of faith; it is not supported by reason except remotely by the demonstration of the *de iure* possibility innate to man of knowing God from the things that have been made, the *de facto* and proximate possibility of which in every moral condition of man and for all individuals, however, has never been asserted by the Church, as has been mentioned (see CCC §§37–38).⁴⁰ Precisely as a teaching of faith, the continuing knowledge of God within the abiding context of true *worship* of him indicates to us what is necessary for the preservation of the knowledge of God in the world. It is to be contrasted with the corresponding biblical assertion of our having forgotten God outlined above in the first part of this section.

³⁵ ST II-II, q. 94, a. 4, ad 2.

³⁶ St. Augustine discusses the life spans of the antediluvian patriarchs in *De civitate Dei* 15.9–14.

³⁷ Bergsma and Pitre, *Catholic Introduction*, 1:153–54.

³⁸ "Lord" does duty for "He who is" in the Hebrew. See its use in Gen 14:22; 15:2, 7–8; 28:13.

³⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.1–12.

⁴⁰ See Chossat, "Dieu (connaissance naturelle de)," 4:827–28.

Moreover, we ought to understand the loss of the knowledge of God recorded in the Old Testament as at least the loss of the proximate *capacity* to know God from the things that have been made. We need to introduce this idea of “capacity” here, for otherwise the loss of the knowledge of God will appear merely as a brute fact. We would be saying that it just happened to be the case that man ceased to know God. But there can be no brute facts when it comes to questions of the knowledge of the Exemplar, God, achieved by the Image of that Exemplar, man. Such facts are about the most intelligible thing in existence, God, and the orientation by nature and grace to God of the most intelligible thing in our experience, ourselves. Here, at any rate, we need an explanation of the loss of the human knowledge of God, and we point to this need by characterizing man’s fallen state as having lost the proximate capacity for knowing God from the things that have been made. We must characterize it as a proximate capacity of course, and one historically constituted, given the dogmatic teachings of Scripture and Tradition that bear on this capacity as in some way to be thought of as radically constituting the nature of man.

To be sure, whatever explanation we give of the loss of man’s proximate capacity to know God must not be divorced from the *moral* and historical explanation of man’s forgetfulness of God recorded in the Bible. This, too, is supremely relevant to thinking about the natural knowledge of God. This moral explanation of the fact of the loss of the knowledge of God is given in Wisdom 13–15 and in Romans (see Rom 1:21—“their senseless minds were darkened”).⁴¹ The explanation amounts to this: the ignorance of God detailed above is truly an ignorance, but it is a *guilty* ignorance; it is due to man’s sinful turning away from God, the God who first revealed himself to Adam, the God who maintains the knowledge of himself in the righteous descendants of Adam down to Abraham, and in the descendants of Abraham who make covenant with God at Sinai. This guilt, moreover, should be appreciated for what it is, a sort of mega-guilt that violates not simply this, that, or the other covenant commandment. It is more even than violating the first commandment, where such violation nonetheless does not obliterate the knowledge of God. For here, by contrast, the violation does obliterate that knowledge. The violation thus strikes at the very condition of the covenant as a whole. It is especially and rightly the object of God’s wrath (Rom 1:18; 2:8; Rev 9:20–21; 16:1).

⁴¹ See St. Thomas, *Commentary on the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P., Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 37 (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012), nos. 126–36.

What the Bible Thus Shows Us

What the Bible, the Old Testament, shows us relative to the knowledge of God can therefore be stated as follows. One can stay in covenantal, graceful relation with God, and then of course the existence of the God who spoke to our ancestors will therefore also be evident from the things that have been made. For, after all, the heavens declare the glory of God to the Psalmist (Psalm 19:1) and to all those who worship with him.⁴² “Glory,” of course, is just the showing of God as God—the heavens declare to us God as God, God as the first cause and last end of man. Or one can sinfully turn away from the revealed God of the covenant, from the God who reveals himself to man from the beginning, and then one loses the ability to know him from the things that have been made. As it were, what St. Paul gives with one hand in Romans, he takes away with the other. Man is innately capable of knowing God from the things that have been made; he is guiltily incapable of exercising this knowledge outside of maintaining covenant relations with God, outside of obeying the commandments, outside of living uprightly. Man curved in on himself does not lift his eyes to the heaven of heavens. He is upright, and can look up, only given grace, the grace that comes with the revelation of God as the maker of heaven and earth.

We may therefore well agree that sun and moon and sea and the things therein all declare that they are not God but have been made, just as St. Augustine says.⁴³ But our ears are stopped up—the ears of sinful man. It is only by first hearing the word of revelation, the direct and personal word of the Creator, that we can *then* hear what the creatures say to us of their own nature, speaking to our nature. This is a teaching of Scripture so important and so evident that ignorance of it is as astonishing as is fallen man’s ignorance of God.

The State of Fallen Man: A Philosophical Consideration

Man’s ignorance of God just in itself, and notwithstanding the explanation Scripture gives of it, remains astonishing. It is a wonder. Philosophy begins, it has been said, with wonder. Christian philosophy begins, let us say, with wonder over such things as the ignorance of God that seems so contrary to man’s nature.

⁴² See also Psalms 8; 104; 135:6–7; 136:4–9, 148.

⁴³ Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.6.

A Philosophical Consideration of Man's Ignorance of God

There is a philosophical explanation or illumination of the fact of the loss of the proximate potency of coming to know God from the things that have been made in man's fallen condition, a loss that Scripture reports and that we seem to experience anew in our own age. Moreover, it is not only *good* to have a philosophical explanation of this fact. There *needs* to be a philosophical explanation of this fact. We touched on this just above. If man's ancient ignorance of God is a fact, it is surely a fact of supreme importance for understanding the relation of the God who is known by faith to the same God as known by reason. Christian philosophy must come to the aid of faith and contribute to an understanding of this fact, and not leave it as a fact whose explanation is purely moral, an explanation unrelated to the epistemological prospects of man's natural appetite to know. For, if we leave it with a purely moral explanation, and given the fact that God wills all men to be saved, and given that this entails an availability of grace beyond the visible confines of the Church, then we should expect to see many successful exercises of the ability to come to the natural knowledge of God. If we do not, must there not be some account of this fact?

The point of departure of this philosophical explanation is the nature of man's intellect. The common understanding of the fall, of course, is that, once man is despoiled of the preternatural gifts, we are left in a state where our nature is unaided, un-augmented, in the exercise of our faculties, intellective and appetitive, or if it is augmented, as with the supposition of grace given outside the Church, then it is augmented anonymously. But as to the intellect and what the intellect can come to know and name, we are not in the realm of anonymity. Rather, we are in the realm where it is the very business of man to name things, and so make them present.

As, then, to the nature of the human intellect, we are taught that its natural object is being.⁴⁴ While this is so, however, being first meets the human intellect in the form of the abstract quiddity of *material* things.⁴⁵ Because of this double truth, when man comes naturally to inquire about being qua being, the answers to his questions will be analogically formulated.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ ST I, q. 5, a. 2,

⁴⁵ ST I, q. 84, a. 7; q. 85, aa. 1 and 8; q. 88, a. 3.

⁴⁶ For a careful discussion of the object of the intellect, see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Revelatione per Ecclesiam Catholicam Proposita*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Rome: Fr. Ferrari, 1945), 353–359: the proper object is “the intelligible being of sensible things or the essence of the sensible thing [ens intelligibile rerum sensibilibus seu essentia rei sensibilibus]” (354). But the *adequate* object of the intellect is “being according to the full breadth of being, and not only insofar as it is knowable in the mirror of sensible

Now another way of saying that the proper object of the human intellect is the quiddity of material things is to say that the distinctions men make are in the first place distinctions between things within the material world. That our intellectual appetite extends at the limit to thinking about being qua being requires as well the distinctions (1) of being qua being from being qua material and (2) of being qua being from being qua separable from matter. Neither of these distinctions, however, are the distinction between the God of Christians and the world, nor do they lead up to making that distinction. This is because worldly distinctions, even the distinctions that come with metaphysics, are distinctions between things that have to not be what they are distinct from in order to be themselves. A cat has not to be a porpoise in order to be a cat, and vice versa.⁴⁷ Gabriel has not to be Michael in order to be himself, and more basically, angels have not to be material in order to be themselves. In this way, separated substances are thought together with material substances. They are thought together because one exists only as not being the other.

God, however, does not have not to be the world in order to be himself. He exists in undiminished glory and goodness whether the world exists or not, while the world, on the other hand, must not be God in order to be the world. This distinction, therefore, is asymmetric and altogether unique compared to other distinctions. Making the symmetrical distinctions according to which we navigate our course in the world does not prepare us or teach us to make this altogether strange, asymmetrical distinction. Who could teach us how to make it?

Ancient philosophy does not make this distinction. Thus, Aristotle's god is within being qua being and not the principle of its existence.⁴⁸ The

things [ens secundum latitudinem entis, et non solum prout est cognoscibile in speculo sensibilium]" (355). God, *deitas*, does not fall outside this adequate object (357–58). It is very telling, however, that Garrigou-Lagrange grants that the argument that includes God within the adequate object is not apodictic, but merely probable (359). The argument is a sign, but not a demonstration, of the obediential potency of the intellect for grace and glory (359). For a denial that that God's "pure actuality" is included in the transcendental reach of the intellect, see White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*, 164–65.

⁴⁷ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 32–33, 107; Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence: A Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), last chapter; and see generally Sokolowski, "Making Distinctions," in *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions. Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1992), 55–91.

⁴⁸ On the nature of the first unmoved mover for Aristotle, see Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Plato and Aristotle*, trans. John Catan, 5th ed. (Albany:

One/Good of Platonism is beyond being, it is true, but not in the way God is, and the Demiurge does not create *ex nihilo*.⁴⁹ Further, the One/Good in Plotinus's telling is beyond being but must necessarily express itself in the beings that emanate from it. It is necessarily a part of a greater whole even if what it is not emanates from it according to Plotinus, and if we do not want to characterize this kind of Platonism as a pantheism. But God is not necessarily a part of anything. Neither Aristotle's self-thinking thought nor the One/Good can be conceived of without what is not them also being thought.⁵⁰ But God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, and this implies that he can be thought of and can be without the thought or existence of anything else. It may be argued that *we* must think what God is not in order to think God. But God need not think what he is not in order to think himself. This is simply an implication of his transcendence and the freedom with which he creates the world.

An important and terminal move of natural reason, re-articulated in first philosophy, is to fashion the idea of the world itself, to come to the idea of all things as a whole. Once this idea is reached, it is absolutely foreign subsequently to ask whether there is anything *outside* this whole. The world is something complete; the world is something final. It is against the very direction of the mind forming the idea of the world to think whether, beyond what is final, there is something else. To ask about something transcending the world would require the philosophic act that formulates the idea of a whole to contradict its own direction of thought. It is not a natural question. Just so, the world is eternal for Aristotle;⁵¹ his god is part of the world, though perhaps the best part, the way the leader of an army is the best part of the army, but still a part,⁵² like the forty-seven or maybe fifty-five other unmoved movers;⁵³ his god is thus included in being *qua* being, and so theology is no separate science from first philosophy.⁵⁴

State University of New York Press, 1990), 288–92. Sokolowski observes that “‘existing,’ or *esse*, is for Aristotle not a theme for thought, and indeed it becomes a theme for thought only within the special historical tradition of Christian belief” (*God of Faith and Reason*, 43).

⁴⁹ See the discussion of Plato in Reale, *Plato and Aristotle*, 99–115. The One-Good does not create the indefinite Dyad or the Receptacle (106). The two ultimate principles are coeval. Sokolowski remarks the greater difficulty of distinguishing Christianity from Platonism rather than from Aristotle in (*God of Faith and Reason*, 49–50).

⁵⁰ Or, if we do want to characterize Plotinian Platonism as a pantheism, then God turns out to be the *only* thing that can be thought.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Physics* 8.1–2.

⁵² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.10.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.8.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1.

Indeed, it is sometimes said that the basic question of metaphysics is why is there anything at all? But that is false. This question, too, is not natural. This is a question that is asked only after the idea of the Creator has been introduced into the Western mind. Neither Aristotle nor Plato nor Plotinus asked the question Martin Heidegger said was the origin of metaphysics.⁵⁵ Heidegger's understanding of metaphysics is, then, a wholly Christian understanding, in the sense that his project cannot be conceived except on this side of the fact of revelation. That is, the onto-theological characterization of metaphysics and the idea that this metaphysics is the result of the event of the revelation of Being that destines man to dominate and be dominated by technology cannot be undertaken except on this side of revelation.⁵⁶ (And that is the reason his attempt to keep theology and philosophy in air-tight compartments is untenable.)

A Philosophical Consideration of Man's Knowledge of God

If we should not expect man to come naturally to the idea of God as Creator and Lord, what would bring him to that conception? We can say "revelation," to be sure, but that does not say enough. We have to imagine the way this revelation might occur.

Here, there is another important philosophical consideration to make relative to grasping distinctions. Distinctions emerge from our lived engagement with the world.⁵⁷ The first time someone today sees a broad axe, he is likely to say something to the effect that it is a funny looking hatchet. But someone who knows—in his hands—the difference between limbing small trees or dressing a fishing rod from a limb, on the one hand, and notching logs for a cabin, on the other, knows exactly what he is seeing; he has already distinguished hatchets from broad axes. This works also for distinguishing local gods and spirits. The river sometimes dances in the spring rush and at other times is angry and floods, but there is no relation between these encounters with the river and how the winds and sometimes cyclones determine my life and work. The river god is not the wind god. They are distinct.

But God is not in the world, and we have no natural engagement with

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 1. For the alleged inability of Jews and Christians to ask this question, see 6.

⁵⁶ See Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969 [German original, 1957]).

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Posterior analytics* 2.19.

him as we do with trees and stones, timber and quarry. We never stumble into or over him as we move about in the world. Just because he is not a part of the world, he cannot enter our minds as parts of the world do. He has rather to take the initiative. He has to speak and act within the world. And this is how the distinction between the God who creates all that is not him and the world is established.

In the Bible, of course, we find a record of man's experience of God—of Israel's experience of God—in history. God is originally and immediately and personally present to man. He is originally present to man at man's origins; that is to say, he is present to the very first human beings, Adam and Eve. He is immediately present to man in that he forms the first human being by his hands and breathes the breath of life into him from his own breath and in that, by his own hand, he fashions Eve from Adam's rib. He is personally present to man from the very outset of his creation in that he speaks to him and walks with Adam and Eve in the garden.

We, the readers of Genesis, know who God is from the first chapter: he is the Creator of heaven and earth. And we presumed above that the obvious way to take the text is to suppose that Adam and Eve know who God is as well. And after all, Adam is established in Eden as in a temple, unto the worship of God.⁵⁸ And again, God is in charge of life and death—he breathes life into Adam and he is master of the Tree of Life—which is to say he is in charge of *being*. And he is called “Lord”—He Who *Is*—from Genesis 4:26 onward.

Suppose, however, that we bracket the first eleven chapters of Genesis and begin with Abraham.⁵⁹ Genesis 12 inaugurates a long series of very extraordinary, very intimate relations between God and the patriarchs and then the people of Israel. We perceive in this series certain disclosures in the very way God deals with Abraham and Israel, disclosures that provide the experiential requirement for making sense of the Christian distinction.⁶⁰ So, to Abraham, he shows himself master of all places in that he promises what land he will give to him, and he shows himself master of time, in that the promise looks to a future God is in charge of. He is a holy God, and just

⁵⁸ Bergsma and Pitre, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1:102–3.

⁵⁹ That is, suppose with some scholars that there is a so-called Priestly strain or source of the Pentateuch, a collection of material later than the stories of the patriarchs beginning with Abraham, which for some scholars is a narrative that combines material from the northern and southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah (“EJ”). For such a dating of the material in chapter 1 of Genesis, see for instance Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 325.

⁶⁰ For some of what follows, see Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 144–54.

in his dealings with Sodom and Gomorrah. With Abraham, he is master of life, promising descendants innumerable as the stars, but very closely and personally, he is master of life in the birth and sacrifice of Isaac.

The Lord's mastery of time and place is writ large and unmistakably in the history of Israel, especially in the exile to foreign lands that are not foreign to the Lord's power, and in Israel's return, in which foreign kings like Cyrus are God's instruments. Exile and return concentrate the mind of Israel, and lead some scholars to conjecture that Jewish monotheism is therein perfected. But there must first be established her mind before it can be concentrated. All these dealings that begin with Abraham and continue with Moses and David and the prophets—these experiences of God in history—prepare us for making a distinction between God and the world not like that of distinguishing one god from the world of which that god is a part.

At the start of the long history with Israel, a history that makes what was no people a people (Hos 1:23), there is the revelation of the divine name to Moses. It is noteworthy that when God names himself with the metaphysically pregnant "I am who am," he identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 3:6), recalling the prior experience with the patriarchs, the nest in which that egg can hatch. This name, "I am who am," is related to the Hebrew behind "Lord," but spoken when it is, before the deliverance from Egypt, before the settlement of the promised land, it will acquire a significance it could not previously have had, if we are still keeping bracketed the first chapters of Genesis.

In this light, what is first, both temporally and epistemically, is a covenant life in which the "Christian distinction" is embedded and lived before it can come to expression in words. Only so can the distinction be appreciated and received in its express form.⁶¹ There has first to be God's promise; he has first to be feared by those who break his command; there has first to be repentance before him; he has first to show himself master of the historical course of nations; he has first to show himself as the master of nature so as to be master of history, and there has first to be his praise in the

⁶¹ So, Biblical scholars inform us, there is first monolatry before there is monotheism. See: Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 185–91; André Lemaire, *The Birth of Monotheism: The Rise and Disappearance of Yahwism* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archeological Society, 2007), 133–34. Michael Dodds, O.P., takes note of these historical reconstructions in *The One Creator God in Thomas Aquinas & Contemporary Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), appendix 2 ("The Emergence of Monotheism").

Psalms before the formulation of the transcendence of God in Isaiah can come to expression (e.g.: 40:25; 44:24; 45:18–19; 55:8–11). Then comes a reflective grasp of natural theology as in Job⁶² and in the Book of Wisdom. The Book of Wisdom undertakes to teach us the possibility of coming to know God naturally from the world. And why does it bother to teach us this? Because it is not a possibility we otherwise would have thought of apart from revelation. The word of God has to put the things that have been made into the right audial space before we can hear the words that the things that have been made speak to us as Augustine heard them.

On the basis of this long history of Israel's engagement with God, there is also the most original expression of the Christian distinction in Christ himself, in whom it is "brought forward in the life and teaching of Christ."⁶³ The Scriptures themselves do not formulate the distinction in metaphysical terms; they do not say that "God could be all that he is had the world not existed."⁶⁴ But when we express in metaphysical terms what is accomplished in creation and redemption, then we find the formulations of Anselm and Aquinas. How can it be that the Son of God becomes man without ceasing to be God and without damaging the humanity of Christ as the Council of Chalcedon teaches? It must be that what the Son of God is as God is not defined by what he is not: he can therefore become other than divine, he can become human, without ceasing to be what he is.⁶⁵ And it must further be the case that what he becomes is nothing but a participation in his intelligibility and goodness, something always already known by God as a divine idea in the Godhead.⁶⁶

This very same context of a life lived in obedience to the commandments, a life knowledgeable of God's punishments and rewards, a life cognizant of God's universal control of history, a life acknowledging his mastery of life and death, a life given over to prayer and praise of God, a life verified in the life of Israel and then the Church, but *preeminently in the life of Christ himself*—that is the context in which Anselm formulates his argument for the existence of God, Aquinas his Five Ways, and Duns Scotus his *De primo principio*. In this light, there can be appreciated the propriety of calling the distinction the *Christian* distinction, since it is

⁶² Even Job, the pagan outlier, is no exception to this primacy of experience. God does not speak out of the whirlwind declaring his creative power and sovereignty except to a man who lives a life dedicated to God and in which the worship of God is architectonic.

⁶³ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 23.

⁶⁴ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 122.

⁶⁵ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 35–37.

⁶⁶ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 43–45.

Christ himself who lives it as a man most fully and completely, and insofar as the formulation of the dogma of creation *ex nihilo* depends signally on what God has done in *Christ*, as was noted above.

The Upshot for Fallen Man

Fallen man forsakes the realm where the distinction makes sense and so does not know God. He is “without God” as St. Paul says (Eph 2:12). This is also a deliverance of history, as indicated above. The philosophical explanation tries to account not only for the fact that, in a condition untouched by divine gifts, man not only remains in sin, but also for the fact that, absent a prior revelation of God’s existence bequeathed by revelation, we are not naturally set up actually to know God from the things that have been made. That is to say that we are set up actually to know God from the things that have been made *only* given a prior knowledge of God’s existence by revelation, only if we have been taught by God. This account appeals to our discursive knowledge of the things of the world as what we first and properly know and focuses on how ordinary distinctions are made (cats from porpoises) and how metaphysics, the highest science, is conceived, as dealing with being qua being. Of course, according to the Bible, there *was* a prior revelation of God, from the first creation of the human race. So we *were* set up in fact from the beginning actually to know God from the things that have been made. But now, we are not so set up, because of sinful ignorance. And so, our “natural” ignorance of God—natural in the sense of a proximate inability to know a non-natural thing, God—is now a guilty ignorance. The moral explanation in Scripture of the fact that fallen man is without God and does not know him means that fallen man is guilty for not knowing God from the things that have been made. The philosophical explanation explains *why* we should not expect man to know God from the things that have been made absent revelation.

The situation is exactly parallel to how it is we should characterize death. Is it natural? Or is it a punishment? It is both. Granted the preternatural gift of immortality, the death Adam died in accord with his created nature, which by nature is not immortal, is both natural and a punishment. So also, the proximate incapacity of fallen man to know God from the things that have been made is both natural, granted the natural orientation of our intellect, and a punishment for turning away from God.

The language is indeed difficult to manage. We speak dogmatically of a natural knowledge of God, of a natural capacity to come to know God from the things that have been made. But of course God is not a natural thing, and so we are saying dogmatically that there is a natural capacity to

come to know something that is not a natural thing. It should therefore not surprise us that there are non-natural conditions that must be met for the engagement of our natural capacity to come to know God.⁶⁷ The exercise of the natural capacity will produce a thoroughly natural knowledge, a true knowledge that the conclusion of the argument expresses, and by way of an argument that invokes no revealed premises.⁶⁸ But the exercise has non-natural, historical conditions of its actualization. The argument or arguments (say, the Five Ways) invoke no revealed premises, but they suppose the fact of revelation which introduces the very idea of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, as pure Act, and so on.⁶⁹

Return to Magisterial and Theological Tradition

How does what has been argued so far about coming to know the Christian distinction measure up to prior magisterial and theological tradition? It was pointed out above that Vatican I by no means proscribes Sokolowski's construal of our natural knowledge of God and the conditions of its exercise. Still, he seems on the surface to be at odds with Catholic theological tradition (see above, the first subsection under the second main section, "The State of Fallen Man: Theological, Magisterial, Scriptural Considerations").

This is in fact not the case. Sokolowski frankly and forthrightly acknowledges pagan knowledge of divinity, and in such a way that this knowledge is integral to appreciating the actual course of revelation. "The Old Testament establishes that there is only one God, in contrast to the many gods of the gentiles, and clearly forbids any image of God, in contrast to the

⁶⁷ Another analogous state of affairs is that the natural virtue of religion of which St. Thomas speaks in *ST* II-II, q. 81, and which cultivates one of the primary inclinations of nature listed in I-II, q. 94, a. 2, is not rightly exercised apart from grace; see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "Sacraments and Philosophy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 575–89, at 577, 579.

⁶⁸ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 108. Trabbic seems not to get this point in "By Revelation Alone?," 463. I think he also confuses arguing for the existence of God and arguing for the Christian distinction. The existence of God may be a conclusion of an argument, but distinctions are not established by argument. They are products of *nous* or *intellectus*.

⁶⁹ This may look like the traditionalism or semi-traditionalism of the nineteenth century, but it is not, for they make a historical assumption of continuity good for all men between the original revelation and our epistemic prospects for knowing God today. See Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury, 1977), chapter 2 ("French Traditionalism").

idolatries of other peoples.”⁷⁰ Pagan divinity thus serves as a foil against which the God of Israel stands out in his uniqueness. Again:

The God of the Old Testament is not unrelated to what the pagans worship. When the Jewish writers speak of God, they speak of “the same thing” that the gentiles speak of with their god and gods, except that the Jews consider themselves to be speaking truly while the others are in error. The others worship false gods, or they worship God falsely. The God of the Old Testament is the truth of what the pagans anticipate when they think they respond to the divine.⁷¹

The pagans somehow know God, but with just that admixture of error Vatican I teaches is difficult to avoid.

The pagans somehow know true things about the divine, and this must be so if Christians and pagans can have a real disagreement about the divine, as both St. Thomas and Sokolowski are aware. St. Thomas states:

Neither the Catholic nor the pagan knows the very nature of God insofar as it exists in itself. But both know it according to some idea of causality or excellence or negation. . . . And in this way, the gentile can mean the same thing when he says “the idol is God” as does the Catholic when he says “the idol is not God.”⁷²

They cannot disagree about the idol unless there is some agreement as to what the divine nature is. The pagan idea may be vulgar or more cultivated, as was pointed out above, but it must be an idea of God, even if not the very idea captured in the “Christian distinction.”

And correlatively at this point, Sokolowski, commenting on the Old Testament as the context for Christian revelation says the following:

The New Testament could not have arisen under the aegis of Zeus or Vishnu. However, once the New Covenant is established, does it not appear to enjoy a new, more direct relationship to natural religion [than that of the Old Covenant]? St. Paul when speaking to the Athenians in the Areopagus, could not say that he is there to tell them about the “true Zeus” or the “authentic Apollo,” but he was

⁷⁰ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 124.

⁷¹ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 125.

⁷² *ST I*, q. 13, a. 10, ad 5 (trans. mine).

able to proclaim to them the God for whom they had an altar but not yet a name (Acts 17:23).⁷³

The natural knowability of God is thus presupposed to Paul's dealings with the Greeks in Acts 14 and Acts 17. This, indeed, is the very point of Paul's teaching according to Henri Bouillard.

Within idolatry itself, [Scripture] discerns the presence of an original apprehension of God by man. There is room, then, to distinguish between the formal, unformulated idea of God and the historical representation of divinity. The first is present in every man; it belongs to the constitutive elements of his reason; it is man himself insofar as God creates him in his image. It is from this intuition of God that arise the historical representations, even when perverted, and even if they express God inadequately. It is this very idea which permits man to recognize eventually his error.⁷⁴

It is the very affirmation of this constitutional availability of the idea of God to every man in virtue of the natural light that is the concern of Vatican I, because such knowledge is a "transcendental condition" of the act of supernatural faith.⁷⁵

The State of Man in the Regime of Faith and Christ's Redemption

The re-introduction of an adequate idea of God into the world past man's guilty forgetfulness of God is, as we have seen once again, a work of revelation, a work that stretches from Abraham to Christ.

Once it is introduced into the world by God's speaking and once it is recorded in Scripture (Genesis, Job, Psalm 103, Deutero-Isaiah, Wisdom, John 1, Romans, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1), then the proximate capacity to know God from the things that have been made is restored. So, the Fathers know God in this way, the theologians know God in this way, and many ordinary Christians know God in this way.

Theologians are bound to know God in this way, because it is part of the project of making evident the coherence of faith. And as was said above,

⁷³ Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 160.

⁷⁴ Henri Bouillard, *The Knowledge of God*, trans. Samuel D. Femiano (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 30–31. See also the summary statement on 59.

⁷⁵ Bouillard, *Knowledge of God*, 24–40.

we must be able to know God apart from revelation for revelation to make sense.⁷⁶ We must be able to verify the existence of the speaker of revelation apart from revelation for a reasonable assent to revelation. Hence the fittingness of question 2 of *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, knowing that God exists by the natural light, relative to question 1 of ST II-II and following, the treatise on faith. The relation at issue is a symmetrical relation. We need to know God from revelation in order to exercise the natural capacity to know him from the things that have been made, and we have to be able know him from the things that have been made in order for faith in revelation to be reasonable. Arguments for the existence of God therefore remain a necessary part of a complete apologetics.

Since the completion of revelation, and since the idea of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived or as subsistent *esse* and so on has been introduced again into the world and established in human intellectual history in such a way that it is hard to think of it as being erased once again, it is possible for non-believers also to come to the knowledge of God from the things that have been made, and to construct some non-Christian, post-Christian metaphysics that includes God. This has in fact occurred. Even the *insipiens* understands what Anselm means when he says “id quo maius cogitari nequit.” The revelation of the incarnate Word means that the little words that the things that have been made speak cannot be silenced. But this implies nothing about an original capacity to know God from the things that have been made *absent* a prior revelation. The historical conditions of the different states of human nature really do differ and really do condition the exercise of our faculties.

Notwithstanding what has just been said, it is also to be noted that, in the contemporary age, the halls of ivy are not thick with natural theologians who by the natural light know God as the first cause and last end of all things. The possibility of coming to know God from the things that have been made is less and less actualized in a post-Christian world. For coming to such knowledge is ever bound to certain extra-philosophic conditions.

The account of man's refusal to know God from the things that have been made, the account given in Romans and Wisdom, means that ordinarily there must be some interior grace liberating man from his passions and his selfishness in order to come to such knowledge. Why is this necessary? Coming to know God is coming to know that the natural law really is a law legislated by the maker of heaven and earth. Therefore, the failure to keep it humbles us before God and frightens us accordingly as we suppose

⁷⁶ Mansini, *Fundamental Theology*, 151–56.

he punishes infractions of it. There is, consequently, sufficient motive for fallen man always to postpone thinking about God, about whether he exists, and always to find the proofs insufficient.

There are also two other factors. First, there is the matter of past sin. Whatever resolution I make relative to my future conduct upon knowing the God who makes heaven and earth, I have no sure course to take to make up for past fault and find forgiveness. Second, there is the inability of fallen man, apart from revelation, to imagine his personal destiny before God. Apart from the promise of the resurrection of the body, it is difficult, as St. Thomas notes, to sustain the immortality of the soul.⁷⁷ But a destiny that does not include some abiding relation of knowledge and love to God seems unsatisfactory, to say the least, and ignorance or uncertainty about it does not conduce either to the worship of God or to obedience to the moral law.

When we add up these factors—the necessity of grace, the problem of past sin, the mystery of death—it is evident why St. Paul is careful to include the possibility of repentance and the promise of resurrection when he announces to the Athenians on the Areopagus the news that the unknown God for whom they have an altar is the creator of heaven and earth (Acts 17).⁷⁸

But in our age, the cultural and common knowledge of what Christianity claims about both sin and the resurrection of the flesh is increasingly less common and less real than it was even seventy years ago. So, it can be suggested, the package deal that St. Paul proposed at Athens ought to be re-packaged today in addressing those who are ignorant of or despise Christianity.

Balance Sheet: Natural Knowledge of God in the Various States of Man

“Making the Christian distinction between God and the world is a more elementary activity than carrying out the traditional arguments for the existence of God.”⁷⁹ This more elementary activity is originally an activ-

⁷⁷ St. Thomas, *Super 1 Cor* 15, lec. 2, no. 924 (on 15:19): “If the resurrection of the body be denied, it is not easy, rather, it will be hard to maintain the immortality of the soul” (my trans.). That the soul be without a body is both *per accidens* and contrary to nature, and such a thing cannot be thought to perdure infinitely.

⁷⁸ On the unity of the content of Paul’s speech on the Areopagus, see Guy Mansini, “Acts 17 and the Integral Structure of Christian Hope,” *Logos* 24 (2021): 89–107.

⁷⁹ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 108.

ity of revelation such that without it we cannot carry out the traditional arguments for the existence of God. This seems to entail the following discrete situations within which to consider the knowledge of God.

(1) If George (a hypothetical man) were created *puris in naturalibus*, he would possess no proximate capacity to know God naturally from the things that have been made. This is because the proximate capacity depends on the ability to think of the world as a contingent thing. But the untutored mind does not ask why there is anything rather than nothing. The untutored mind thinks of the world as the meta-necessary and eternal stage within whose bounds the necessities and contingencies of our common experience are encountered, and as itself something that in itself is just there. The original sense of being is gerundial, just as the participle suggests: “it is raining”; “it is being.” The “it” is a dummy subject: nobody and nothing is raining, and nobody and nothing does anything to make being be.⁸⁰ The question of the necessity or contingency of being does not arise.

(2) If George (still hypothetical) were created *puris in naturalibus*, and if God revealed himself to George as creator, which Pius XII says it would be morally necessary for God to do even in the absence of our being called to a strictly supernatural end,⁸¹ then George’s mind would be tutored, and his natural capacity to know God from the things that have been made would be proximate, and the exercise of this natural capacity would be, one supposes, common.

(3) Adam, created in grace, possesses the proximate capacity to know God from the things that have been made, because he knows that the world is not eternal and that it is not necessary. His mind, in other words is tutored. And though he knows God personally insofar as he, Adam, is the dative of God’s revelation of himself to him, and though he knows God preternaturally in the things that have been made, he can also, if he wants, know God naturally from the things that have been made.

(4) Adam, fallen, continues to know God personally and insofar as he is still the dative of God’s revelation to him; he no longer knows God preternaturally in the things that have been made; but he and his immediate descendants can know God naturally from the things that have been made.

(5) Once the descendants of Adam become ever more wicked, they become ever more forgetful of God and the service due him, and they make gods who will serve them in the concupiscence of their flesh, the

⁸⁰ Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence*, 17–21, 167–72.

⁸¹ Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, §§2–3.

concupiscence of their eyes for riches, and the pride of their life which is power (the Book of Wisdom and Romans). This forgetfulness does not put the descendants of Adam in the moral condition of George, for they are not only *spoliati in gratuitis* but also *vulnerati in naturalibus*. This forgetfulness does however return them to the *epistemic* condition of George, such that they no longer have the proximate capacity to know God as creator from the things that have been made as their first cause and last end. Moreover, having lost this proximate capacity is something for which they are guilty in the same way they are guilty with the guilt of Original Sin for not being created in grace—an inherited guilt.

(6) Some of the descendants of Adam are chosen to enter into a covenant relation with God, within which guilt both original and personal can be forgiven, and within which the world is once again known to be something temporally finite and contingent. So they can once again know God by the natural light of reason from the things that have been made.

Moreover, they need to be able to know God from the things that have been made, and to exercise this capacity even if only quite informally, which does not amount to much, at least according to Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange,⁸² in order for the act of faith by which they receive revelation to be reasonable. There is nothing circular about this state of epistemic affairs as is sometimes alleged; there is nothing circular about the exercise of the natural knowledge of God depending on revelation.⁸³ It is like a geometry professor who gives his students some theorem, and whose assignment is to find a demonstration of it.

(7) The restoration of the knowledge of God as Creator to God's covenant partners, however, is in fact a long classroom exercise within the classroom of the world, where these covenant partners, by dint of both past revelation and their ongoing revelatory experience of God as active in history, come to know him as master of all natural necessities and contingencies, as providential governor of human freedom, and as a good than which no greater good can be conceived. This restoration is not finished except with the Incarnation, by Christ. We know this for many reasons but also because the idea of God as Creator *ex nihilo* is not formulated by Christian minds until the second century AD.

(8) The restoration is finished in two ways by Christ, both of which

⁸² Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Thomistic Common Sense: The Philosophy of Being and the Development of Doctrine*, trans. Matthew K. Miner (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic Press, 2021), 107–9.

⁸³ See Guy Mansini, O.S.B., “Why Revelation Gives Shelter to Metaphysics,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 18, no. 4 (2020): 1089–101.

together restore the proximate capacity to know God naturally from the things that have been made.

First, it is finished by his resurrection from the dead, which implies a divine omnipotence that is absolute, and that therefore depends on no preexistent matter for the work of creation.

Second, it is finished by the revelation of the Trinity, which informs us that the distinction of the world from God is not the first distinction ever to be established. Rather, the distinction of the world from God presupposes the distinctions of the divine persons from one another, such that the processions of Word and Spirit are themselves causes of the created world. This is important: it means that the distinction of the world from God is not a first thing, not the first distinction, and so does not add any such thing as “distinctiveness” itself to reality. God does not need the world to be himself, to be himself in being distinct from it; also, God does not need the world even for the good things that distinction and distinctiveness are, for these are realized eternally in the Trinity. This knowledge adds to the appreciation of the freedom with which God creates the world and human beings—it is not out of a sort of Hegelian neediness that he said “Let us make man.”

(9) Now, as St. Paul told Festus and King Agrippa, the things concerning Christ were not “done in a corner.” Christ makes the distinction that he brings to perfect articulation public. It is now at large in the world, and has in the providence of God escaped the boundaries of the Church. The epistemic condition given by God to Adam for the capacity to know God from the things that have been made is now proximate again, and this is so for Christians and non-believers alike. Therefore, it is possible for men in mortal sin and without grace and without faith to come to know God from the things that have been made as first cause and last end. It is rare, because of the moral resistance of fallen man to come to know the God before whom he must repent. But it happens. Even if we suppose it happens only with actual grace moving the will, the exercise of the mind in coming to know God from the things made remains natural. NEV