

What Has Metaphysics to Do with Wisdom?

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There are two loci of ambiguity in the title of the symposium from which this essay derives—“Is Belief in God Reasonable? Aquinas’s *Summa contra gentiles* in a Contemporary Context.”¹ The first concerns the opening question, “is belief in God reasonable?” and the second the closing clause “in a contemporary context.” I observe this not in the spirit of pedantry, but because I want to consider certain interpretations of what is at issue, ones which may be different from those of other contributors but which are relevant to Aquinas’s circumstances and interests and to ours. So far as the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] is concerned, I will touch mainly on issues discussed by Thomas at the outset of book I, in chapters 1–15, which deal with philosophical knowledge of first principles and arguments to the existence of God. First, however, the general issue of reasonable belief.

I

Concerning the first locus of ambiguity, the question of the *reasonability* of belief in God is multiply interpretable. It may be treated as relative to a subject’s other beliefs and attitudes, where that subject *e* may be an individual or a group. Given that *S* believes *p* and *q* (and these can each be conjunctions of any number of propositions), is it reasonable for *S* to believe *r*? This aspect of relative credibility is itself ambiguous because it

¹ Thomistic Institute Angelicum, Rome, December 5, 2020.

can be viewed narrowly, without regard to the status of those antecedent beliefs and attitudes, or broadly, as also asking whether those are themselves reasonable. In a court setting, for example, it may be asked whether it was reasonable for someone to have believed (or done) something given their antecedent beliefs, but it may well be countered that this is an insufficient standard of reasonability, since the prior attitudes may be incredible, or credible but irresponsibly held. The issue of reasonable belief, foresight and foreseeability are common courtroom examples.

In these respects, then, it may be granted by someone *A*, who holds that believing in God is not reasonable, that it was nevertheless reasonable for *S* to do so given *S*'s antecedent beliefs. This need not be a matter of condescension, however, since *A* may grant that the prior beliefs were themselves reasonable for *S* to hold, and would also have been reasonable by some more objective standard prevailing at the time or in the circumstances.

A "rationalist" objector may counter, however, that this is all beside the point, since the question to consider is not the relative, but the absolute one: is belief in God reasonable? Full stop. I agree that there is nothing to be gained by unconstrained relativizing, but if "absolutism" is the implied contrast, it is over-stated. First, if reasonability is related to having (or having access to) reasons, and to the "quality" of those reasons, then some degree of relativity is entailed, and the only standard of reasonability that can be applied is a contextual one. To ask *simpliciter* whether it is reasonable to believe *p* carries an unacknowledged implicit reference either to something such as prevailing commonly held beliefs and associated normal cognitive processes or to an idealized thinker with access to relevant proofs or evidence. On further consideration, however, the latter, somewhat like Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" in ethics,² tends just to be a more abstract version of the contextually reasonable thinker. There is perhaps a step beyond this, namely to the Omniscient Reasoner (OR) but it is a sophistical move, since it amounts to saying that a belief is reasonable if and only if it would be held by someone who knows everything relevant to its justification. which given that we cannot know antecedently the range of relevant considerations, is for us an inapplicably high standard. There is also some irony in asking if OR would judge belief in God Reasonable since OR would be God or at least God-like in respect of being all-knowing.

² See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pt. I, sec. I, ch. 5 ("Of the Amiable and Respectable Virtues").

II

The other respect in which the question “is belief in God reasonable?” is ambiguous (in this first of the two areas ambiguity noted at the outset) is that, while it may be asking if there are sufficient reasons to believe that there is a God,³ it may instead be asking whether it is reasonable *other than by reference to reasons*. By way of analogy, consider the question: is belief in the existence of gold in some region reasonable? How might our subject *S* come to have a belief that there is gold there? There are three broad possibilities:

1. *S* inferred it from information about the terrain, the color of the soil, the underlying geology, and so on;
2. *S* derived it from the testimony of someone else;
3. *S* observed it.

The first course is a clear example of believing something on the basis of inferential reasons; the second is somewhat different, since one may simply defer to the testifier with or without supporting reasons for doing so; the third need not involve supporting reasons at all. To say, “I believe there is gold there because I saw it,” suggests a relation between two distinct cognitive states, perception (seeing) and holding true (believing), but this is somewhat misleading. For, consider the actual occasion of observing the gold, seeing that there is gold before one. The content of this state is not (or need not be) that of a belief *based on* perceptual evidence; it is just that of the perception itself, a perceptual belief that there is gold there. This is not at any inferential or testimonial distance from the (purported) fact; it is a cognitive encounter with it. Belief on the basis of testimony need not be based on inferential reasons either. If someone tells you that Latin has no definite or indefinite article (no “the,” “a,” or “an”), one may believe that directly, without any inference of the form “this man is an expert; experts should be believed; this expert says that *p*; therefore I should believe that *p*; therefore *p*.” One may simply believe it having no reason not to. This need not be credulity, and in educational contexts it is often an epistemic necessity, as Aquinas indicates in describing docility as a virtue on the part of a student.⁴

³ Leaving to one side questions about the reasonability of believing God to have this or that attribute.

⁴ *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 49, a. 3. Quotations from *ST* are based on the literal translations by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd. rev. ed. (London:

So, in response to the question “is belief in the existence of gold in some place reasonable?” there seem to be three kinds of positive answers: “yes” based on *inferential reasoning*; “yes” based on *testimony*; and “yes” based on *observation*. And the last of these is not a case of giving reasons from which the belief is derived—as might, but need not, be so in the testimony case, where one’s reason was that the testifier had said that he had observed it and where some reasoning from that fact to the conclusion of the sort mentioned is carried out. Rather, the belief is the retained observational content, not an inference from it. Assuming that there are no reasons to think that the observer’s vision was faulty, against which counter-reasons might have to be cited, we have in the observation case (and perhaps in the testimonial one) reasonable belief without reasons.

This is not paradoxical, let alone directly contradictory, when we appreciate, as the example enables us to do, that “reasonable” can mean either (1) based on acceptable reasons or (2) being in accord with reason.⁵ Believing what you see, which in the immediate case is believing perceptually, is in accord reason, because if it were not, then perception could not be a source of knowledge, nor could testimony or a posteriori reasoning. What we have thus far, then, is that whether belief in X is reasonable depends disjunctively upon three sorts of conditions:

1. One has *inferential reasons* that rationally support believing in X.
2. One has *testimony* that X, and either there are reasons for believing the testifier or, even though there are no independent reasons for believing him, it is nevertheless in accord with reason to do so.
3. One has *experience* of X and no reason to doubt the reliability of that, in which case, again, it is reasonable to do so.

Bringing all of this to bear on the question of belief in God, we can see that there are three potentially reasonable openings to this: *inference*, *testimony* and *observation*. And beyond those there are combinations of them. Pure rationalists say it is reasonable to believe in God only if conceptual or other a priori metaphysical arguments can be given in its favor; pure empiricists that it is reasonable only if sense experience directly supports such belief; and pure testimonialists (if there were such) would assert that it is reasonable only if suitably placed testifiers witness to it.⁶ A

Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1920–1922).

⁵ See in this connection Aquinas’s *duplex veritatis modus* (*Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 3, no. 2, and section V below).

⁶ Pure testimonialism is arguably incoherent, since reasoning (even when it is defective)

pluralist, however, may draw on all of these and say that belief in God is reasonable if warranted by some combination of rational inference, direct or related testimony, and observation (and perhaps other considerations besides, such as pragmatic efficiency and efficacy). Add to this the idea that these varieties of considerations should interrelate coherently and we get “pluralistic holism.”

III

I said there is a second locus of ambiguity in the general title, this concerning the clause “in a contemporary context.” Grammatically what that qualifies is not the question “is belief in God reasonable?” but “Aquinas’s *Summa contra gentiles*.” The two, however, are thematically linked, since the aim is to address the reasonability question via consideration of this text as it might be seen and drawn upon in a contemporary context. The ambiguity, then, derives from the fact that there are two relevant interpretations of “in a contemporary context.”

The first is what one might term “the prevailing culture,” which perhaps is too deratiocinated and chaotic to be dignified by the term *zeitgeist*. In this connection we need hardly contemplate introducing themes from the *SCG* into that contemporary context unless in a very elementary and piecemeal fashion, in part because of the catastrophic loss of general knowledge of religious ideas or even interest in them. And it is not clear how that might be done or how it could have any uptake. I am not saying that it cannot, but that it needs much more thought and practice. As regards pursuing the issue of the reasonability of belief in God aided by some Thomistic notions and arguments, this faces similar challenges, but in addition the fact that the prevailing culture is increasingly disposed to consider belief in God as not just unwarranted (other perhaps than as a private preoccupation in the “whatever floats your boat” mode), but obsessive, weird, and associated with bigotry and intolerance. I say this not in a spirit of despair, but only to remind us of how very great is the challenge of engaging the contemporary culture. Just to illustrate by reference to the association of religious belief with intolerance, this is connected to an unwitting or perhaps manipulated shift in the understanding of toleration from *forbearance* to *approbation* to *celebration*, to such an extent that someone who fails in respect of the

and experience (even when non-veridical) are intrinsic to human thought and agency; also there have to be some starting points where originating testifiers draw upon experience or reasoning. But that is not to say that testimonial cognition reduces to experience or inference. Think of a child learning its original language from a teacher.

second and third is intolerant. There is philosophical work to be done here but it is of the nature of an analytic and critical propaedeutic to any future presentation of natural theology, or indeed of serious, coherent public discussion of ethics and politics.

The second sense of “contemporary context” pertains to the academic world. Apart from within broadly Thomistic circles and fields of non-aligned Aquinian scholarship, where the *SCG* is approached as a common object of study, the forum into which Thomas and his writings are likely to be brought is that of mainstream philosophy of religion of the sort that began to take its present shape more than half a half-a-century ago in the work of such figures as William Alston, Dewi Phillips, Terence Penelhum, Alvin Plantinga, William Rowe and others. This has a well-established agenda of topics, taxonomy of arguments, and lexicon of terms all of which draw upon broader features of analytic philosophy, especially philosophical logic, philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics. These fields of study tend to be pursued according to certain paradigms and to be governed by certain broad assumptions. These include methodological (and increasingly, substantive) naturalism, evidentialism, scientific realism, physicalism, event causalism, compatibilism (about determinism and freedom), and atheism.⁷ While one can engage in philosophy of religion without being a theist and even while sharing these generally inhospitable assumptions, it naturally tends to be the case that the incidence of religious believers is much higher in this area than in any other field of professional academic philosophy, which in general, and increasingly, is atheistic within both the analytic and continental traditions. This has, I think, two observable effects. Either contributors try to avoid considerations and modes of thought liable to be thought inapt for the defense of the rationality of belief in God, or else they try to conform to the prevailing paradigms, stylistically and to some degree substantially, in the effort to secure a hearing and (what is not the same thing) to have their work accepted. Neither effect must needs be bad, but the tendency is either to fail to engage or else to overlook other ways of approaching the issues.

IV

Next, consider a radically different perspective. My title “What has Metaphysics to do with Wisdom?” may call to mind a famous question posed

⁷ See in this connection David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, “What do philosophers believe?,” *Philosophical Studies* 170, no. 3 (2014): 465–500.

by Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” This is usually quoted in isolation and without reference to its source, so let me provide the context. It comes in chapter 7 of the polemical work *De praescriptione haereticorum* (On the Prescription of Heretics), headed “The Connection between Deflections from Christian Faith and the Old System of Pagan Philosophy.” Tertullian, who we should recall is often regarded as the first Latin Christian theologian and is no naive philistine, writes referring to and quoting the “apostle” Paul as follows:

Whence spring those “fables and endless genealogies,” and “unprofitable questions,” and “words which spread like a cancer?” From all these, when the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names philosophy as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says, “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost.” He had been at Athens and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon” [a cloister on the east of the temple court in Jerusalem where teaching went on—a Jewish “Areopagus”], who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.”⁸

The words of Solomon are from Wisdom 1 which continues: “For he is found by them that tempt him not; and he sheweth himself to them that have faith in him.” Elsewhere Tertullian quotes Paul from 1 Corinthians 27 railing against the wisdom of the philosophers,⁹ but the reference here

⁸ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, trans P. Holmes, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. Cleveland (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885).

⁹ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 5.19 (trans. Holmes, ed. Roberts, Donaldson, and

in *De praescriptione haereticorum*, is to Paul's visit to Athens as recounted in Acts 17:16–34, where having been in argument with Epicureans and Stoics, he is invited to present his “philosophy” on the Areopagus hill. Acts tells us that Paul related the Christian message including the resurrection of Jesus, at which point the mockery began. Nonetheless, it is said he made some converts, of whom two are named: a woman Damaris and a man Dionysius, the Areopagite. In general women were not admitted in the philosophical schools, the exception being the Stoics, so Damaris may have been a follower of Stoicism, and conceivably the wife of Dionysius, as stated in early Georgian translations of Acts and in a letter of St. Ambrose, and as suggested by Raphael in his 1515 tapestry drawing *Paul Preaching at Athens*.¹⁰ There is an irony here that may subvert the invocation of Paul contra the philosophers, or at any rate moderate it.

At first sight, it may seem a clash of faith against reason. On this account the conversion of Damaris and Dionysius (who according to Eusebius later became bishop of Athens) was a turning of them away from philosophy towards Christian faith and mention of it is intended as evidence that the Gospel is mightier than the dialogue. But, on the basis of fable in the first case and misidentification in the second, both figures were later honored by Christians as religious philosophers. Indeed, it was the acceptance that the author was the Pauline convert that bestowed such prestige on the *Corpus Dionysiacum* which drew commentaries from Grosseteste, Albertus Magnus, and Aquinas, who mentions Dionysius over fifteen hundred times.

A further point is that, notwithstanding his denunciation of worldly wisdom, Paul's own hostility to philosophy may be ambiguous, for as the English philosopher C. E. M. Joad never tired of saying, “it depends what you mean by . . .” in this case “philosophy.” In his Areopagus address Paul says:

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of Heaven and earth, . . . he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. . . . [God] did this so that they would search and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have

Cleveland, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3).

¹⁰ On traditions about Damaris, see J. W. Childers, “A Reluctant Bride: Finding a Life for Damaris of Athens (Acts 17: 34),” in *Renewing Tradition*, ed. M. W. Hamilton, T. H. Olbricht, and J. Peterson, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 65 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 207–35.

our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” (Acts 17: 24–28)¹¹

Here he is quoting two philosopher-poets Epimendes (from his *Cretica*) and Aratus (from his *Phenomena*). Paul’s relation to Stoic thought is a matter of scholarly debate, but that school of philosophy was well represented in the “university” city of Tarsus, and there is a parallel between what Paul writes in Romans 1: 18 and a tradition within Stoicism of natural theology. Compare Paul in the Romans passage:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

with the beginning of a section of Cicero’s dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*:

The first point, then, says Lucilius, I think needs no discourse to prove it; for what can be so plain and evident, when we behold the heavens and contemplate the celestial bodies, as the existence of some supreme, divine intelligence, by which all these things are governed? ¹²

What follow immediately are a series of five or six arguments given by Balbus for a Providential deity: from common consent, from miracles, from order in nature, from mind, from degrees of being, and from tradition. Cicero’s dialogue was written about a hundred years before Paul’s epistle and he is likely to have been familiar with the Stoic “theological” tradition which it records. At some point in the fourth century, a forger composed a series of letters between Paul and the Spanish-Roman Stoic Seneca. They are referred to by St. Jerome and, like the Dionysian texts, were only finally dis-attributed in the 1400s. The point of these observations being that, notwithstanding Paul’s repudiation of philosophy and celebration of Holy wisdom, and Tertullian’s amplification of these

¹¹ Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

¹² Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.2, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

attitudes, the relation between faith and reason in the apostolic period was not unambiguously hostile.

What was in line for attack is human vanity and the idea that by means of human thought the mysteries of reality and of the meaning of human life might be solved and ultimate wisdom secured. Early Greek-speaking Christians knew that academic philosophy aspired to understand reality and human purpose and had no reason to repudiate those desires. What troubled them was that they were convinced that the way, the truth, and the life had been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, and that, instead of accepting this secure revelation, the academicians continued with their vain and fruitless disputes: sophisters entangled in webs of their own making.

The author of the prologue of John's Gospel addresses philosophically literate Hellenic Jews in Alexandria and Antioch when he writes: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him: and without him was made nothing that was made." Our "Word," Thomas's *Verbum*, was *Logos* for the Greek speakers, and it is a providentially Janus-faced and far-seeing concept. The prologue looks on the Hebrew side towards Genesis 1 ("In the beginning God created heaven, and earth"), Proverbs 8:27 ("When he established the heavens, I was there"), and the personification of Wisdom in Sirach 24:3 ("I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist"), and on the other side it looks to Greek philosophy, where it features in contemporary Stoic cosmology but also goes back into the middle of the previous millennium to the utterances of Heraclitus: "Therefore it is necessary to follow that which is for all; but although the *Logos* [i.e., the "account"] is for all many live as if they had a private understanding [of the truth]. Listening not to me but to the *Logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one"¹³

Earlier I said that Tertullian's Jerusalem–Athens account of Paul's engagement with the philosophers made it look like a clash between faith and reason, but in light of the foregoing and in terms of my earlier analysis, it might better be represented as a difference between two kinds of purportedly reasonable belief: faith expressive of immediate experience and/or of received testimony in contrast to rationally-inferred theory "metaphysics." In his account of Jesus's calling of his first apostles, Matthew (4:18–22) is bracingly brief:

¹³ See fragments 198 and 199 in G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 188.

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

I do not think this is to be understood as a short summary of a longer process of discourse, reasoning-giving, and deliberation. Matthew is telling us that for Simon Peter and for Andrew, to see was to believe, to which I will add and that their believing was reasonable; it was in accord with reason.

V

Against the background of points introduced and developed in the previous sections, I turn to the *SCG*.¹⁴ Aquinas begins with a discussion of the function of the wise man. In general terms, this is to achieve understanding, placing things in their right order by noting how one activity may be subservient to the end of another. Wisdom absolutely (*simpliciter*) involves tracing this sequence of ends to the highest level, which being a final end is also a cause of the existence and activities of secondary beings. The word “metaphysics” (*metaphysica*) occurs about eighty times throughout the *SCG*, but in all but two instances, it is simply in reference to Aristotle’s work of that title. One exception is where he mentions “logic and metaphysics” as being the only sciences that have concepts (*intelligible species*) as their objects of study (*SCG* II, ch. 75, no. 7). The other, more directly relevant to the present subject, is when early on he identifies wisdom absolutely as the knowledge of the Highest Cause and of its role in relation to dependent beings and their operations. He terms the pursuit of this through natural reason “metaphysics” (*SCG* I, ch. 4, no. 3). This follows his description of the quest for the highest wisdom as “the most perfect, sublime, useful, and agreeable of all pursuits” because of the value of its end (*SCG* I, ch. 2, no. 1). In practicing this field of study, however, the wise man has both to seek the highest truth and to counter error regarding it. Here Aquinas introduces the idea of a twofold mode of truth, *duplex veritatis modus*, regarding the divine: for some truths about God transcend reason and can be known only by revelation, such as that the divine is a

¹⁴ All quotations of the *SCG* are trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

Trinity of persons, while others are attainable through the exercise of natural reason, such as that God exists and is One, “and these [latter] have been demonstrated by the philosophers” (*SCG* I, ch. 3, no. 2). So there are two kinds of ignorance and error to be dealt with: those concerning the truths of revelation, and those regarding the truths of reason.

Notwithstanding the claimed provability of the existence and singularity of a First Cause, now identified with God, Aquinas also sees a limit to this kind of natural theology or metaphysics in consequence of the nature of the human intellect and its dependence on sense experience as a source of its concepts. His discussion of this is brief because he only wants to make the general point. Since it is important to my analysis and argument, however, I quote the full section (*SCG* I, ch. 3, no. 3), italicizing, numbering, and separating important elements:

That there are certain truths about God that totally exceed man’s ability is clearly evident. Since, indeed, the principle of all knowledge that the intellect perceives about something is the understanding of the very substance of that being (for according to the Philosopher [Aristotle] “what a thing is” is the principle of demonstration), it is necessary that the way in which we understand the substance of a thing determines the way in which we know what belongs to it. Hence,

[I] *if the human intellect comprehends the substance of some thing [rei substantiam], such as that of a stone or of a triangle, no intelligible characteristic belonging to that thing surpasses the grasp of the human reason.* But this does not happen to us in the case of God. For the human intellect is not able to reach a comprehension of the divine substance through its natural power.

[II] *For, according to its manner of knowing in the present life, the intellect depends on the senses for the origin of knowledge; and so those things that do not fall under the senses cannot be grasped by the human intellect except insofar as the knowledge of them is gathered from sensible things.*

[III] *Now, sensible things cannot lead the human intellect to the point of seeing in them the nature of the divine substance; for sensible things are effects that fall short of the power of their cause.*

[IV] Yet, beginning with sensible things, our intellect is led to the point of knowing about God that He exists, and other such characteristics that must be attributed to the First Principle. There are, consequently, some intelligible truths about God that are open to the human reason; but there are others that absolutely surpass its power.

Two general aspects of Aquinas's account of human cognition are relevant to this and what follows.¹⁵ First, our knowledge of existents is in general inferential, proceeding from effects to causes. More specifically, we begin with incidental features and proceed from these to proper accidents from which we infer the natures of the substances to which they belong and whose essences they express (though they are not strictly part of them).¹⁶ The non-contingent character of the relation between *propria* and essences makes this second inference something different from the first, but since they hold "for the most part" (*ut in pluribus*), it is not one of entailment but some kind of partly a priori induction. The second relevant and related aspect of human cognition is that knowledge of natures is rooted in sense experience, since our conceptions are formed by abstraction from this. Again there is a staged process here. First, the exterior senses "receive" singular sensible forms: particular instances of specific colors sounds, odors, and so on (*sensibilia propria*) and of shape, size and motion (*sensibilia communia*). Second, interior senses, including the common sense (*sensus communis*) and the imagination (*phantasia*), work to integrate, conjoin and disjoin, and retain these forms, and a further "sense," or more perspicuously a cognitive function, the cogitative power (*vis cogitativa*) constructs generalized perceptual forms (*phantasms*) from these, in which the underlying principles of unity are closer to being expressed. Finally, the intellect in its concept-forming mode (*intellectus agens*) abstracts the intelligible universal from this prepared percept, and in its retaining and

¹⁵ For discussion of his theory of human cognition see *ST I*, qq. 78–79, and from the commentaries on Aristotle: *In II de anima*, lecs. 5–11; *In III de anima*, lecs. 1–8; *In de sensu et sensato*.

¹⁶ See, for example, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 5: "For even in the case of sensible things, the essential differences themselves are not known; whence they are signified through accidental differences which rise out of the essential ones, as a cause is signified through its effect; this is what is done when biped, for example, is given as the difference of man. But the proper accidents of immaterial substances are unknown to us; whence their differences cannot be signified by us either through themselves or through accidental differences" (trans. A. Maurer [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968]). Compare this with Aquinas, *In I analyt. post.*, lec. 13.

exercising mode (*intellectus possibilis*) deploys these in acts of first and second intention, such as (1) judging that something is a cat and (2) judging that cats are mammals.

The limitation of natural theology or metaphysics so far as Aquinas is concerned is due to the gap between that from which inferences proceed—namely, the observable effects of the First Cause—and the essence of the latter: “For sensible things are effects that fall short of the power of their cause.” Here, however, there are ambiguities, first, between a general and a particular reading of this limitation principle, and second with regard to the source and nature of it. As regards the first issue, if sensible effects fall short of the power of their cause, then all attempts to specify something based on the observation of accidents, even proper accidents, will be subject to, if not void for, under-determination.

In the first of the italicized parts of the section just quoted Aquinas writes that, “*if the human intellect comprehends the substance of some thing* no intelligible characteristic belonging to that thing surpasses the grasp of the human reason,” but note that this is a conditional and that in the next but one section he writes:

The same thing, moreover, appears quite clearly from the defect that we experience every day in our knowledge of things. We do not know a great many of the properties of sensible things, and *in most cases we are not able to discover fully the natures of those properties that we apprehend by the sense*. Much more is it the case, therefore, that human reason is not equal to the task of investigating all the intelligible characteristics of that most excellent substance. (SCG I, ch. 3, no. 5; emphasis mine).

Here the point is put in terms of properties, but elsewhere, in his exposition of the Creed, it is made in relation to the natures of substances themselves:

But our manner of knowing is so weak that no philosopher could perfectly investigate the nature of even one little fly. We even read that a certain philosopher spent thirty years in solitude in order to know the nature of the bee. If, therefore, our intellect is so weak, it is foolish to be willing to believe concerning God only that which man can know by himself alone.¹⁷

¹⁷ Aquinas, *In symbolum apostolorum*, prologue, in *Exposition on the Apostle's Creed*, trans. J.B. Collins (New York: Wagner, 1939). The reference may be to Philiscus of Thasos,

What is the nature of this weakness? In the *SCG* he says: "We may easily see the same point from the gradation of intellects. Consider the case of two persons of whom one has a more penetrating intellectual grasp of a thing than does the other. He who has the superior intellect understands many things that the other cannot grasp at all" (*SCG* I, ch. 3, no. 4). This suggests a contingent variability in the power of human minds to know things from their sensible effects, rather than an in-principle limit due to the gap between effects and causes (in this case accidents, properties, and natures). Thomas wavers somewhat between claiming that we *rarely* know the essences of natural things and that we *never* do, but on balance his view seems to be that, while it is possible for us to proceed from sensibles to a grasp of the intelligible natures underlying, them it is very difficult to do so, and only very few succeed, and then only very rarely.

If that is the truth of the matter, then the correct interpretation of the limitation principle would seem to be as restricted to the case of our attempting to infer the nature of God from his effects in creation. But now we cannot say that this is due simply to human cognitive weakness or to the fact that there is a gap to be crossed from effect to cause, for the previous reconciliation implies that this is sometimes successfully traversed. Rather, if we cannot know the nature of God by inference from observation of things, this must be because sensible effects fall short of the power of their *divine* cause. Now, however, one might wonder about angelic knowledge of natures, and of the divine nature in particular, which, lacking bodies and hence sense experience, they cannot infer from sensible effects. In book II of the *SCG*, Thomas discusses how separated substances have knowledge other than from sensible things:

The object of a higher power must itself be higher. . . . Hence, the object of a separate substance cannot be a thing existing outside the soul, as that from which it derives its knowledge immediately; nor can it be a phantasm. . . . But in the order of knowable objects, nothing is higher than a phantasm save what is intelligible in act. Separate substances, then, do not derive intellectual knowledge from sensibles, but understand things which are intelligible through themselves. (*SCG* II, ch. 96, no. 3)

And two chapters later he writes:

who Pliny reports lived in the desert tending swarms of bees and was also known by the epithet "Agrius" ("wild man").

If separate substances understand those things which are intelligible through themselves, and if separate substances are intelligible through themselves, . . . then it follows that separate substances have separate substances as the proper objects of their understanding. Each of them, therefore, knows both itself and others. . . . It has been demonstrated that all the principal parts of the universe are created immediately by God. Hence, one of them is not caused by another. Now, each of the separate substances is a principal part of the universe, . . . since each of them has the nature of a species all its own, which is nobler than that of any corporeal things. Therefore, one separate substance is not caused by another, but all are immediately from God. . . . [So] each of the separate substances knows God, by its natural knowledge, after the manner of its substance; and through this knowledge they are like God as their cause. (*SCG* II, ch. 98, nos.1, 6, 7)

Since angels know natures directly, including their own (by having them), and know that their natures are those of principal parts and hence are caused directly by God, their knowledge of God, though mediated by that self-understanding, seems non-inductive and a matter of acquaintance or entailment. This, however, remains insufficient for them to know the divine nature as is explained in *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 56, a. 3, in answer to the question “Whether an angel knows God by his own natural principles”:

The angels can have some knowledge of God by their own principles, [for] a thing is known in three ways: first, by the presence of its essence in the knower as an angel knows himself, second, by the presence of its similitude in the cognitive power which knows it. Third, when the image of the object known is not drawn directly from the object itself, but from something in which it appears, as when we behold a man in a mirror. Knowledge of God by which He is seen through His essence is akin to the first; and such knowledge cannot be had by any creature from its natural principles. The third way comprises the knowledge whereby we know God while we are on earth, by His likeness reflected in creatures. . . . But the knowledge, whereby according to his natural principles the angel knows God, stands midway between these two; and is likened to that knowledge whereby a thing is seen through the species abstracted from it. For since God’s image is impressed on the very nature of the angel in his

essence, the angel knows God inasmuch as he is the image of God. Yet he does not behold God's essence; because no created likeness is sufficient to represent the Divine essence.

So, not even angels know the nature of God, and their ignorance is due not to the gaps between sensibles and intelligibles, but to that between effects and causes, of which the former as originally referred to is an instance. In the angelic case, however, the gap is between two spiritual natures, one created and the other uncreated, one finite and the other infinite, one a likeness and the other the reality itself.

VI

It might seem as if this has been a rather circuitous exploration of a familiar claim that God transcends understanding. First, however, the latter is more often said than explained, and here we have an explanation in terms of Aquinas's cognitive psychology and theory of embodied and separate intellects. Second, ambiguities have been identified and clarified, if not altogether resolved. Third, issues have been raised which bear upon the limits of natural theology. By Thomas's own account, reason cannot arrive at a direct account of the intrinsic nature of God, but it can prove that God exists (*SCG* I, ch. 13), and by the method of remotion (*via remotionis*) "have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not" (ch. 14).

Here I am concerned only with the existential proofs and with those only in general terms. Rejecting claims that there cannot be a demonstration of God's existence because it either is a directly self-evident truth or transcends the power of reason, Thomas prepares the ground by reflecting on the method of reasoning from effect to cause: "Although God transcends all sensible things and the sense itself, His effects, on which the demonstration proving His existence is based, are nevertheless sensible things. And thus, the origin of our knowledge in the sense[s] applies also to those things that transcend the sense[s]" (*SCG* I, ch. 12, no. 9). Several proofs of Aristotelian origins are then provided, of which the first and most familiar is that from observed motion (*motus*) or change in quality, quantity, or location (ch. 13, no. 3):

1. Some things are in process of change.
2. Everything that is changed is changed by another.
3. An infinity of changed changers is impossible.

4. Therefore, there must be a first unchanged and unchanging cause of change.

Others appeal to notions of whole and partial change, of a difference in kind between external and internal movement, of potentiality and actuality, of univocal and equivocal causes, of the character of an ordered causal series (*causis efficientibus ordinatis*), of degrees of truth and being, and of discordance within an order. I shall not present or evaluate any of these beyond saying that none is without interest, that some are hard to interpret, and that a few have real force. My general point is that none, I believe, meet the standard that Aquinas set himself when he envisaged providing a demonstration of the existence of God. A *demonstratio* in Aquinas's Aristotelian logic (discussed at some length in his *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*) is a deductive argument whose premises are self-evident, and thereby known to be true with certainty. Because the mode of inference is deductive, the certain truth of the premises is transmitted to that of the conclusion, which itself is thereby indubitable. The key notion in this conception of demonstrative proof is self-evidence. Nowhere does Aquinas address the character of self-evidence as an issue in its own right, but he refers to it in relation to knowledge of first principles of speculative and practical philosophy and in as a condition of demonstration, and here (and in *ST* I, q. 2) with regard to proofs of the existence of God:

Those propositions are said to be self-evident that are known immediately upon the knowledge of their terms. Thus, as soon as you know the nature of a whole and the nature of a part, you know immediately that every whole is greater than its part. (*SCG* I, ch. 10, no. 2)

But then he goes on to introduce a distinction within the category of the self-evident:

Distinguish between that which is self-evident in an absolute sense and that which is self-evident in relation to us. For assuredly that God exists is, absolutely speaking, self-evident, since what God is is His own being. Yet, because we are not able to conceive in our minds that which God is, that God exists remains unknown in relation to us. So, too, that every whole is greater than its part is, absolutely speaking, self-evident; but it would perforce be unknown to one who could not conceive the nature of a whole.

There are at least two ways on interpreting these passages. According to the first, self-evidence is a wholly epistemic/analytic notion: “*P* is self-evident if and only if, knowing the meaning of the terms in which it is formulated, one can thereby and directly recognise its truth.” In this interpretation, the distinction between the absolute and the relative senses is that between cases in which the meanings determine the truth but are not known, and ones in which they determine the truth and are known; and whether they are or are not known, or knowable, is a function of the capacity of cognitive subjects. What is graspable by one individual or group may not be comprehended by another.¹⁸ On the second interpretation, the distinction is between epistemic and ontic necessities. Put another way, propositions self-evident to us are ones knowable a priori (via the meanings of the terms), while propositions self-evident in themselves are not knowable a priori, but the referents of the terms are necessarily connected (with identity being the limiting but not only case of such ontic necessity). It seems to me that here and elsewhere Aquinas moves between these two conceptions; at any rate I find it difficult to settle on a single interpretation.¹⁹

This ambiguity or opacity is a problem so far as it bears on the question of whether an argument has the status of a demonstration. Furthermore even on the wholly epistemic interpretation, which is what would be wanted for a proof, there is a problem due to the theoretical character of the terms involved and in Aquinas’s mundane illustration of self-evidence. “As soon as you know what a whole is and what a part is [quid est totum et quid est pars] you know immediately that every whole is greater than its part [omne totum est maius sua parte].” Supposing, however, we distinguish qualitative and quantitative measures of greatness and we have two instances of qualitatively equal greatness, does it follow that the union

¹⁸ In support of this interpretation, see what he says in *In I analyt. post.*, lec. 36: “Of all the propositions of any science, the universal propositions are the common propositions, such as ‘Every whole is greater than its part.’ Hence these are absolutely the principles of demonstrations and self-evident to all. But the proposition, ‘Man is an animal,’ or ‘The isosceles is a triangle,’ is not a principle of demonstration throughout the science but only for some particular demonstrations; hence such propositions are not self-evident to all” (*Commentary on Posterior Analytics* trans. Fabian R. Larcher [Albany, NY.: Magi, 1970])

¹⁹ For an extended discussion, see M. V. Dougherty, “Thomas Aquinas on the Manifold Senses of Self-Evidence,” *Review of Metaphysics* 59, no. 3 (2006): 601–30, who suggests that “self-evident in relation to us” is a generic categorization to be read more specifically with regard to different kinds of cases distinguished by the intellectual capacities required for their recognition.

of these is (qualitatively) greater than each of the instances taken singly? Not obviously so, for “more of the quality” does not entail “qualitatively more.” Here it might be replied that it is clear that, in this context, Aquinas intends by *pars* and *maius* quantitative measures. What then of the case of the infinite sequence consisting of every odd term in the infinite sequence of every natural number? The former is a part of the latter but is equinumerous, and hence quantitatively not smaller than it. Or in the same vein, what of the infinite set whose members are themselves infinite sets? Moving from quantitative issues but remaining with the idea of epistemic self-evidence, consider the proposition “parallel lines cannot meet.” This seems true by definition of the terms: parallel lines are straight lines in a plane that do not intersect at any point. In hyperbolic geometry, however, geodesics (shortest paths between points) are parallel if they do not intersect in the plane but converge to a common point at infinity.

The upshots of these considerations are, first, that it may be indeterminate whether a premise is in fact epistemically self-evident, and second, where it is epistemically self-evident that may be only relative to a given but not exclusive conception of the meaning of the terms, hence in another way it again lacks determinate self-evidence. These points bear upon the possibility of clear and unqualified demonstrative argument, but it might be countered that they do not trouble Aquinas’s project, since the premises he employs are untouched by them, being epistemically self-evident (so not opaque) and conceptually non-relative (so not qualified). But there are two reasons why this may not be so: one internal to his own epistemology and semantics; the other more general.

Recall the brief summary of his account of cognition: sensible species being received in the external sense organs, conjoined and synthesized by the internal senses so as to provide phantasms from which the active intellect forms concepts by actualizing the intelligible species “within” them. I noted also that, for Aquinas, logic and metaphysics take as their starting points these empirical concepts, extracting or making more abstract and general formal notions “intentions” from them. This is the source of such ideas as those of cause, change, effect, form, matter, substance, property, privation, place, time, individuality, identity, unity, actuality, potentiality, and so on through the vocabulary of *De principiis naturae*, the commentaries on the works of Aristotle, *De ente et essentia*, the *ST*, and the *SCG*. Along with this, recall his oft-expressed principle that “something is received according to the manner or condition of the recipient” (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 5; III, q. 5), a special instance of which is that “knowledge is according to the mode of the one who knows; for the thing known is in

the knower according to the mode of the knower" (*ST* I, q. 14, a. 1, ad 3). This has three significant and related implications. First, absent a kind of transcendental argument, which Aquinas does not entertain let alone develop (showing that central logical and metaphysical concepts, in exclusive conceptions of them, are necessary to have any other concepts), even the most general ideas that we form are dependent on the contingencies of the modes and circumstances of human experience. Second, what count as "objects" for experience and how they are configured in relation to one another, and what the principles of individuation and identity are by which we distinguish and re-cognize them are conditioned by our sensory systems, cognitive architecture, and broader psychology. Third, what is self-evident under one conception may not be so under another, and which conception we have formed of say "change" or "causation" or "potentiality" may be a reflection of contingent features of our experience, rather than of the necessary structure of reality.

These considerations lead to the general point that many of our terms are "theoretical," rather than directly or derivatively observational, in a particular sense of that expression, namely that their meaning is given by the set of generalizations in which they feature. Whether those generalizations are a posteriori or a priori is another matter, though some must be a priori, or else there would be a vicious regress. This does not, however, require that they be innate, but rather that the means by which we come by them is not that described in the Aquinian scheme summarized earlier. The alternative to empiricism and rationalism about the source of basic concepts and of the conceptual structures of which they are a part is acquisition through language. To be taught the word "change" or "part" or "whole" or "series" is to be taught fragments of a set of interconnected theories, and their meanings are relative to those, as in the abstract case of "parallel" lines. What all of this means, I suggest, is that there cannot be demonstrations *simpliciter* as Aquinas conceives of them, or put another way, any purported demonstration is *secundum quid* relative to a given conceptual framework and cannot presume to hold for other non-excludable interpretations of its terms. To assert otherwise, as in arguing from a Euclidian interpretation of "parallel" as if it were the only one, would be to commit the fallacy *a dicto secundum quid ad dictum simpliciter*. Earlier I quoted Aquinas writing that, "if the human intellect comprehends the substance of some thing such as that of a stone or of a triangle, no intelligible characteristic belonging to that thing surpasses the grasp of the human reason." He might well have felt greater confidence about our ability to comprehend the nature of geometrical figures than the essence of stones, because in the former case,

nominal definition (*quid nominis*) and real definition (*quid rei*) coincide.²⁰ In his *Posterior Analytics* commentary, Aquinas repeats Euclid's theorem (*Elements* I, proposition 32) that, "in any triangle the sum of the three interior angles of the triangle equals two right angles," and this would be part of the figure's essential definition, a priori self-evident. But as with parallel lines, this definition of triangle is theory-relative, for in spherical geometry, the total of angles in a triangle is not equal to 180 degrees. It might be replied that the original status of certain propositions as self-evidently true can be preserved so long as they are correctly indexed to different conceptions, in this case of Euclidian figure, of hyperbolic figure, and so on. The issue, however, is that Aquinas needs conceptions of cause, change, actuality, potentiality, part, whole, series, and so on having relevant features for the purpose of first-cause demonstrations, and he needs to show not just that these conceptions are analytically coherent, but that they represent the way things actually are. I am not suggesting that this is impossible (and earlier suggested the route of providing a transcendental argument), but that the work of advancing a demonstration has not begun until that task has been completed.

VII

Where does this leave us so far as concerns the questions of whether belief in God is reasonable and of the role of the type of arguments advanced in the *Summa contra gentiles* in answering that? Their merit is that they gather concepts that we have need of in thinking about the world and in thinking about such thinking, and *suggest* that plausible applications of these give reason to believe that placing things in their right order shows how one thing or feature or aspect may be dependent upon another, and that this order ascends to a highest level: an end that is also a cause of the activities of secondary beings and of their existence. Insofar as that merits the description "metaphysics," it corresponds to what Thomas described as Wisdom *simpliciter*. In part because of the limitations and obstacles I have described, however, and because of what it leaves out which is also relevant to the question of the existence of God, it would be a mistake to think that the role of philosophy in establishing the reasonableness of belief in God

²⁰ This terminology is not Aquinas's, but is introduced by Cajetan in his commentary on Aquinas's *On Being and Essence* where he writes that, "just as real essence is a thing's 'what it is,' so the nominal essence is the 'what it is' of a name" (*Super Librum de Ente et Essentia Sancti Thomae* [Bergomi: Typis Comini Venturæ, 1590], 290 [trans. mine]).

depends upon success in the metaphysical project of demonstrating the existence of a First Cause, as Thomas appears to suppose.

At one point he writes: "Almost all of philosophy is directed towards the knowledge of God, and that is why metaphysics, which deals with divine things, is the last part of philosophy to be learned" (SCG I, ch. 4). By "philosophy" here he means reflections upon and studies of the natures of things, which would include what we now regard as natural and social sciences, but also ethics and politics (and aesthetics). The claim that these are directed towards knowing God is neither an identification of their working assumptions nor a religious piety. Rather, it combines belief (1) that all activity is teleological in character, (2) that the ends of activities are goods, (3) that these goods are convergent, and (4) that the explanation of this is that they are part of a comprehensive system of substances, created, sustained and directed by God. Reasons for believing the latter may be quite diverse, and none need require, but may be reinforced by direct metaphysical arguments for the existence of a First Cause. They may draw upon personal observation and experience more broadly, the testimony of others, analogical and aspectual reasoning ("think of it like this"), inferences to the best explanation, and other sorts of belief-forming processes. Sections I and II above considered the contextual character of the reasonability of belief and the distinction between being "based-on" and "being in-accord-with" reason. Section IV explored the disjoining and conjoining of faith and reason in the minds of Tertullian, Paul, and the author of John's Gospel. Applying these to the situation arrived at through sections V and VI, in which aspects of Aquinas's ideas about demonstrative argument, concept origination and formation, and the limits of understanding were explored, suggests the conclusion that the better part of wisdom is to recognize that, while metaphysics has its place, it would be a mistake to rest too heavily upon it. Not only because it might not bear the weight of belief, but because that weight can be more broadly distributed across observation, testimony, and other kinds of reasoning, not singly, nor only aggregatively, but in the manner of interrelated coherence that I earlier termed "pluralistic holism."