

The *Summa Contra Gentiles* and Aquinas's Way to God

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There is to be found in Aquinas's writings a way to God which is his own and most personal. This way to God is the way from existence (*esse*) and arrives at God as pure existence itself, the fount of all being, without which nothing would be. It is deployed in several contexts ranging from the *De ente et essentia* to the *Summa theologiae* [ST]. Yet, in the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], it is peculiarly absent. The proofs of God's existence which Aquinas offers in the latter are almost exclusively drawn from Aristotle, and they do not exhibit any of the refined metaphysical thinking about *esse* that characterizes Thomas's thinking about God in other works.¹ For a work that is intended to be both apologetical in nature and explicitly philosophical from the outset, this is strange. Thomas is always at home in his own metaphysics of *esse*, and he deploys it with ease and finesse especially when demonstrating God's existence and discussing the divine nature. But in the SCG his proofs of God's existence and the subsequent reasoning about the divine nature are awkward and, one could even say, clumsy. Why did he not just dispense with the Aristotelian thinking on motion and movers and all the clarifications that involves? Why not simply stick with his own favored account of act and potency interpreted in terms of the metaphysics of *esse*?

In the current paper I wish to address these issues. I shall begin with an account of what I take to be Aquinas's way to God and why I think it is

¹ For the purposes of this article I will narrow my focus to the proofs of God offered in *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 13. I grant that a further proof of God is offered in ch. 15 on the basis of necessity and contingency, and which anticipates the third way of *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 2, a. 3.

his way to God. Having done that, I will then address the issue as to why this way to God does not appear in the *SCG* reasoning, but slowly emerges only after God's existence has been demonstrated. I shall conclude that the apologetical and consciously philosophical nature of the *SCG* offer us an insight into why Thomas did not lean on his metaphysics of *esse* in his (initial) discussions of God there.

Aquinas's Way to God

Aquinas famously argues that there is a distinction between essence and *esse* in things. The context of this distinction is that of universal hylemorphism, which holds that in all composite things there are two principles: a principle of potency and a principle of actuality. In traditional Aristotelian fashion, defenders of universal hylemorphism held that the principle of actuality in a thing is its form, whereas the principle of potency is its matter.² All things other than God are composed of matter and form, since all things other than God have some element of potency. But to locate the potentiality of anything other than God in the matter of the thing creates a problem when it comes to separated substances (angels) and the immaterial rational soul. Such substances (or components of substances in the case of the rational soul) are taken to be separated from matter and all material conditions. Nonetheless they are created and thereby dependent on God, so they must have some potentiality.

So how do we attribute matter—that is, potency—to separate substances?

According to defenders of universal hylemorphism, the answer is to distinguish between corporeal matter and incorporeal matter. The former is the kind of physical matter that we typically take to be the matter of things, whereas the latter is a kind of non-physical matter which the separate substances possess. Thus, it is not proper to say that such substances are

² The representative defender of universal hylemorphism is Solomon Ibn Gabriel, known to Aquinas as Avicbron. Aquinas cites Avicbron's *Fons Vitae* as the origin of this view, see *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4. See also: *In II sent.*, d. 3, au. 1, a. 1; *ST I*, q. 50, a. 2; *Quaestio disputata de anima*, a. 6; *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 3; *De substantiis separatis*, chs. 5–8. For a discussion of Avicbron's universal hylemorphism, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "Jewish Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. S. McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 121–46, at 126–28 (on Ibn Gabriel and universal hylemorphism). For a more general discussion of its presence and influence in theology in the thirteenth century, see John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Godfrey of Fontaines* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 275–77.

immaterial, but rather that whilst material they are incorporeal. Universal hylemorphism has the advantage that it neatly distinguishes all things from God by isolating a principle of potency (matter) which all things other than God have. Nevertheless, universal hylemorphism presents problems of its own, not least the thorny one of making intelligible just what exactly a real (as opposed to conceptual) kind of matter is that is incorporeal.

Aquinas for his part rejected universal hylemorphism from his earliest writings.³ He holds that it is precisely because separated substances are separated from all material conditions that they are taken to be separated. Regardless of the cogency of such a response, Thomas is left with the challenge of accounting for the potency of creatures without appeal to the traditional Aristotelian dichotomy of matter and form. Aquinas cannot affirm that separate substances are pure actuality, for then they would be no different from God; so there must be an element of potency in them (and all creatures), and this is the potency that they have for *esse*.⁴

Accordingly, anything that in any way exists other than God does so because it has *esse*. Creatures are then characterized precisely as creatures because they have *esse* not in virtue of what they are but because of a distinct cause from which they derive *esse*. So it is not in virtue of being composites of matter and form that creatures are beings at all; rather it is in virtue of their *esse*.⁵

This dependence on *esse* as the mark of creaturehood is something that Thomas adverts to in his interpretation of philosophical engagement with the doctrine of creation. In two texts, one from the *De potentia Dei* and the other from the *ST*, Aquinas looks at the history of philosophical reflection on creation and observes that there was an upward trajectory from consideration of things in terms of their matter, to the distinction of matter and

³ See for instance *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4. For a historical overview of the different accounts of matter which played a role in the formation of Aquinas's thought, see M.-D. Roland-Gosselin, *Le De Ente et Essentia de s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1948), 6–103; see also 120–21 (on Thomas's rejection of universal hylemorphism).

⁴ *De ente et essentia*, ch. 3. Here follows immediately Aquinas's argumentation for distinction of essence and *esse*. I shall not on this occasion endeavor to unpack this central theme of Aquinas's metaphysical thought. For a good historical presentation, see ch. 5 of John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000); For my own contributions to this area of Thomist scholarship, see chs. 1–3 of *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵ Aquinas, *In II sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 2. The same definition can be found in: *SCG* II, ch. 17; *De potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 1; *ST* I, q. 45, a. 1; *De substantis separatis*, ch. 10, no. 56.

form, to the recognition of beings in terms of their very being without which they would be nothing—in terms of their *esse*. Aquinas concludes that it is only when we arrive at a consideration of creatures in terms of their *esse* that we in turn can think about a primary cause of such, without which there would be nothing, and hence no creator.⁶

The point to bear in mind in all of this is that, for Aquinas, dependence for *esse* is the distinctive mark of being created, such that a thing is a creature insofar as it is dependent for its *esse*. Now, this does not yet indicate that there is a creator from which *esse* is derived; rather, it establishes only that a thing is a creature; systematically speaking we can affirm the latter whilst remaining uncommitted on the existence or otherwise of a creator.⁷

What all of this is intended to establish is that we have a robust characterization of creatures precisely as creatures in terms of their dependence for *esse*. This then will give us a clue as to Aquinas's way to God; for when we turn to Aquinas's logic of demonstration, what he says there connects with what he says about the creaturehood of creatures, such that the only logically demonstrative proof of God is one that involves existential act as its starting point.

In several places Aquinas discusses the logic of demonstration and applies it to God.⁸ This logic is based on the traditional Aristotelian demonstrative syllogism, and when considering God's existence, Thomas notes a problem. The demonstrative syllogism involves a middle term which serves to connect the major and minor terms in the conclusion. The middle term itself is taken to tell us something about the essence of the minor term and its subjectivity to the major term. Accordingly, to conclude a demonstrative syllogism, something must be known about the essence of the subject of the conclusion.⁹

⁶ See *De potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 5, and *ST I*, q. 44, a. 2. I discuss these passages in greater depth in chapter 1 of *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁷ It is true that in *ST* Thomas reasons this way about creatures *after* he has established the existence of God as a primary cause. On the other hand, in *De potentia Dei* he offers three proofs of the existence of God, proofs that he attributes to Plato, Aristotle, and Avicenna (all involving *esse*), *after* he has reasoned as such about the metaphysical constitution of creatures. Thus, systematically speaking we can characterize a creature as dependent for its *esse* without being committed to there being a primary cause of *esse*. Of course, such a characterization of creatures raises the question of whether or not there is such a primary cause.

⁸ *ST I* q. 2, a. 2, and *SCG I*, ch. 12.

⁹ *ST I* q. 2, a. 2, obj. 2. For more on the middle term of a demonstration see *In II analyt. post.*, lec. 1.

So for example, in the classic Socrates syllogism: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. The middle (man/men) tells us something about the essence of Socrates, and since from the first premise we know something about men, which is what Socrates is, we in turn are led to know the same thing about Socrates: he is mortal. The problem when it comes to demonstrating God's existence is that we do not know and cannot know God's essence; indeed, systematically speaking, at this point we do not know even that God exists. Thus, we are without a middle term. So how can we demonstrate God's existence?

Aquinas's solution is to distinguish between a demonstration *propter quid* and a demonstration *quia*. The former reasons from something known about the nature of a cause to its effect, and so reasons to something about the cause in the conclusion. This was the nature of the Socrates syllogism. However, a *quia* demonstration reasons from something known about the nature of the effect to something in turn known about the cause. And this is a *quia* demonstration; it is *quia* insofar as the effect is such *because* of its cause.¹⁰ In this respect, Aquinas uses the example of the twinkling of the heavenly bodies, and he holds that we can reason from the lack of twinkle of the heavenly bodies to their nearness to us. The heavenly bodies are known to be near *because* of their lack of twinkle. On the other hand, if we already knew that the heavenly bodies are near, we could reason from their nearness to us to their lack of twinkle, in which case we would be holding that the heavenly bodies do not twinkle on account of (*propter quid*) their nearness to us.¹¹

When it comes to God then, we cannot have a *propter quid* demonstration of his existence, since we cannot know his essence as a middle for demonstration. However, we can have a *quia* demonstration, since we can know something about creatures which will serve as a middle, permitting us to infer that creatures are such *because* there is some primary cause. Aquinas then is clear that we can engage in causal reasoning for God's

¹⁰ ST I, q. 2, a. 2. For the division of demonstrations *quia* and *propter quid* see *In I analyt. post.*, lecs. 23–25, particularly no. 195 in lec. 23. For discussion, see: Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The "Divine Science" of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 42–47; Joseph Owens, "The 'Analytics' and Thomistic Metaphysical Procedure," *Mediaeval Studies* 26, no. 1 (1964): 83–108, at secs. 3–4; David Twetten, "Clearing a Way for Aquinas: How the Proof from Motion Concludes to God," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1996): 259–78, at sec. 3; Twetten, "To Which 'God' Must a Proof of God's Existence Conclude for Aquinas?," in *Laudemos Viros Gloriosos: Essays in Honour of Armand Maurer, CSB*, ed. R. E. Houser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 146–84, at sec. 4.

¹¹ See *In I analyt. post.*, lec. 23, nos. 197–98, for this particular example.

existence beginning with something known about creatures to an affirmation of a primary cause.

Given all of this, in order to demonstrate God's existence, we must isolate some feature of creatures by which they are the very creatures that they are and explore whether or not that will justify an affirmation of a primary cause. We have already seen that creatures are characterized as creatures (and independently of any question of a creator) from their dependence for *esse*. A creature is something rather than nothing precisely because it has *esse*. Its having and being thereby dependent for *esse* is knowable independently of knowing anything about God's existence. Consequently, the dependent characteristic by means of which we will mount a *quia* demonstration of God's existence will be the dependent character of *esse* in any creature.¹²

From the dependent character of *esse* in a thing, then, Aquinas can reason from such to a primary cause. This reasoning generally involves a consideration of *per se* ordered series such that members of such series do not have the causality of the series in virtue of what they are. Accordingly, unless there is a cause for the causality that the members of the series possess, there will be no causal series in question.¹³ The key point here is that the members of *per se* ordered series participate in the causality granted to them by the primary cause, which primary cause is primary precisely because it can originate the causality in the series in virtue of what it is. Accordingly, given that composites of essence and *esse* do not possess *esse* in virtue of what they are, unless there is some primary cause for such *esse*, such things will not have *esse*, and thereby will be nothing. But, given that we do have composites of essence and *esse*, there must be some primary-cause participation which grants the *esse* of such essence-*esse* composites and which itself does not merely have *esse*, but insofar as it is capable of originating *esse* in such a *per se* causal series its essence, is its *esse*—it is pure *esse* itself.

Furthermore, this primary cause is not only primary relative to the causal property of that one *per se* series; it is absolutely primary insofar as the causality of which it is the primary cause is an absolute causality. This is because *esse* is the condition for any other causality; for *esse* is the act of all acts, the perfection of all perfections. Any actuality that can be found

¹² See *In I sent.*, d. 3.

¹³ For an account of the metaphysics of *per se* ordered series, see my articles "Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012): 155–74, and "Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered Once Again," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2017): 541–55.

in anything is ultimately derivable from *esse*, in which case there is no actuality which escapes the causality of *esse*. Therefore, there is nothing which escapes the causal influence of the primary cause. But if that is the case, then there is nothing that does not have its being from this primary cause, in which case it is the absolute primary cause of all that is.¹⁴

From this standpoint, Aquinas has a very robust conception of the primary cause as pure *esse* itself; in being such, the primary cause is without any passive potency, in which case there is no distinction of components (no composition) therein. This is because whatever is composed is composed of act and potency, but given that the primary cause is pure act, it cannot be so composed. This means that the primary cause is utterly simple. Not only that, but the primary cause is also utterly unique, since insofar as it is utterly simple, there is no distinction between the individual that the primary cause is and the nature that it has. Rather, it is identical with its nature. Accordingly, there is nothing that it is like to be the primary cause except being the primary cause, in which case it does not have a nature that is shared. Anything other than it is caused to be by it. Hence, the primary cause is an absolutely simple, unique creator of all that is.

Armed with this conception of the primary cause, Aquinas is in a position to deduce the traditional attributes of classical theism: eternity, immutability, goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, and so on. I shall not go through his demonstrations of these attributes, but I will point out that the attributes are derived from an appreciation of what the primary cause must be like in virtue of being the primary cause that it is, pure *esse* itself. Hence, the divine attributes are not features that are applied to the primary cause from outside as it were; they do not signify accidents that the primary cause has. Rather, each divine attribute is revelatory of the being of God as primary cause, and whilst distinct for us in signification, they all refer to the same thing, which is God as pure *esse* itself.

Aquinas's case for classical theism depends on his way to God as beginning from the caused nature of *esse* in creatures to the affirmation of a primary cause that is pure *esse* itself. Accordingly, Aquinas's classical theism stems from his metaphysics of *esse* and proceeds naturally from that metaphysics. Many of the arguments for the existence of God found throughout his works deploy the metaphysics of *esse* and *per se* ordered series in one form or another, so that for example even if we begin with a consideration of motion, causality, modality and so on, such are taken to be revelatory of

¹⁴ For a systematic defense of this way to God, see my book *Aquinas's Way to God*.

dependence for *esse* and lead us to infer a primary cause which in being pure *esse* itself is the primary cause of motion, causality, modality and so on.¹⁵

One could painstakingly go through each of Aquinas's arguments for God's existence to see how they can be subject to the existential interpretation that I am here advocating. I do not deny that in some cases this would be a worthy and worthwhile enterprise, such as a study of the metaphysical backdrop of the five ways as yielding an existential interpretation. However, what I want to address in this paper is an obvious and immediate counterexample to the thesis I propose: the proofs in the *SCG*. This work is one of Aquinas's major theological syntheses. It is not a short treatise, a set of disputed questions, or a commentary. Therein he is not constrained by space, subject matter, or the text on which he is commenting; rather in the *SCG*, as with the *ST*, Thomas is free to develop his argumentation as he personally sees things. But the metaphysics of *esse* is strikingly absent from his proofs of God in chapter 13 of *SCG* I. Indeed, the proofs of God in the *SCG* are peculiarly divorced from any metaphysical context, despite Thomas's insistence elsewhere that God's existence is demonstrable only in first philosophy or metaphysics.¹⁶

¹⁵ One can see this way to God appear in the demonstrations from *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4, *In I sent.*, d. 3, *De potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 5 (the ways from *esse* attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Avicenna), and, on my reading of them, the five ways. To date I have argued that the second and the fifth ways deploy Aquinas's metaphysics of *esse* and reasoning pertaining to *per se* ordered series; see my "The Relevance of Aquinas's Uncaused Cause Argument Today," in *Revisiting Aquinas' Proofs for the Existence of God*, ed. Robert Arp (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 71–86, and "Design Arguments and Aquinas's Fifth Way," *The Thomist* 82, no. 3 (2018): 447–71. Joseph Owens has argued that *esse* is the metaphysical backdrop to all of the five ways, and he has argued that, with regard to the argument from motion, unless motion is interpreted in terms of existential act, the argument fails to arrive at an absolute primary cause; see his essays "Aquinas and the Five Ways," "Immobility and Existence for Aquinas," "Actuality in the *Prima Via*," and "The Conclusion of the *Prima Via*," all in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), and his "Aquinas and the Proof from the 'Physics,'" *Mediaeval Studies* 28 (1966): 119–50. Recently John Knasas has argued in a manner similar to myself that Aquinas's way to God is based on his metaphysics of *esse*, and whilst he and I are in agreement that that metaphysics is visible in the five ways, he and I disagree that it is to be found in the proofs from the *SCG*. See John Knasas, *Thomistic Existentialism and Cosmological Reasoning* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), and "Thomistic Existentialism and the Proofs *Ex Motu* at *Contra Gentiles* I, C. 13," *The Thomist* 59, no. 4 (1995): 591–615.

¹⁶ For details see *In III Boetium de Trinitate*, q. 5, aa. 1 and 4; for translation see *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1953). Note in particular a. 4, corp. 4. See also *In*

Are we constrained then to say that Thomas was an eclectic thinker who churned out as many arguments as he could find with no systematic constraint? Or can we affirm a systematic approach to the demonstration of God's existence (as I have suggested we can) and explain away the anomalous nature of the demonstrations in the *SCG*? In the remainder of this paper, I will argue for the second disjunct.¹⁷

The *Summa contra gentiles*

Just like he does in the *ST*, Aquinas offers a quintet of arguments for demonstration of the existence of God in the *SCG*. However, unlike the *ST* (which is later), the *SCG* does not offer neat and efficient demonstrations for each argument. Rather, the *Summa contra gentiles* offers Aquinas's lengthiest and most sustained presentation of demonstrations for God's existence to be found in his entire corpus. The arguments offered therein are by far the most complex and drawn out that can be found in the writings of Aquinas on God's existence. According to Thomas, these are the proofs by which the philosophers and Catholic doctors have established the existence of God.¹⁸ In chapter 13 of the first book, we are offered two arguments from motion taken from Aristotle's *Physics*, one argument on the order of efficient causes, one argument on the convertibility of being and truth, and a final argument drawn from John Damascene and based on finality.

Thomas's attention in this chapter is focused primarily on the first two ways which defend the proof of motion from Aristotle.¹⁹ The text of the

metaphys., proem. See also *In I phys.*, lec. 1, nos. 1–3. Thomas's position here is contrary to that of Averroës, who believed that God's existence could be established in physics; see Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 13–14.

¹⁷ My procedure here stands in contrast to that of Knasas. Whilst he recognizes that Thomas does not appear to conduct the arguments in the *SCG* in a metaphysical fashion, he argues that that is merely an appearance and that the metaphysics is under the surface. This is because elsewhere Thomas holds that even matter and motion can be considered under the *communem rationem entis*. In my view, Knasas's reading forces the arguments into an unfitting mold, since nowhere does the *SCG* deploy explicitly metaphysical reasoning; hence Knasas is reading into the text. By contrast, his suggested mold would be more fitting for the first way of *ST*, since this argument does deploy explicitly metaphysical reasoning, in which case it can be read metaphysically.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *SCG*, I, ch. 13.

¹⁹ Owens presents a survey of the argument from motion and its appearance in Aquinas's thought in "Conclusion of the *Prima Via*," sec. 4. For Aquinas's commentary on the proof as it appears in Aristotle's *Physics* see *In VII phys.*, lec. 2, and *In VIII phys.*, lect. 9.

first two ways from motion takes up most of chapter 13. Therein Thomas sets himself the task of presenting the Aristotelian proofs and either (1) justifying the premises (first way) or (2) justifying the conclusion that the prime mover is wholly immobile (second way). These first two ways run to just over 2,200 Latin words, whereas the last three ways run to just over 260 words.²⁰ Given the disproportionate amount of space he devotes to them, Thomas clearly took it to be of some importance to defend these first two ways.

When we look at his defense, we notice that the Aristotelian proofs from motion are not straightforward. This is either because the premises are disputed, as in the first way, or because the conclusion requires some finessing to get us to a wholly immobile first mover, as in the second way. Either way, the proofs require a lot of work to be deployed for the business that Thomas wants to them to do. This contrasts with all of the other proofs of God offered in Aquinas's works, especially the first way from motion of the *ST*

Furthermore, one striking feature of the proofs of God from the *SCG*, not just the proofs from motion, is that they are not metaphysical proofs, nor does metaphysical reasoning play a significant role. Rather, they are physical proofs wherein the operative characteristics leading to a conclusion are those drawn from physics or what we today would call philosophy of nature. By contrast, the reasoning of the later five ways in *ST* (and many of his other proofs besides) is carried by metaphysical considerations pertaining to act and potency in motion, causality, modality, and so on. Aside from one out of three defenses of Aristotle's motion principle, and perhaps one out of three defenses of a denial of an infinite series of ordered movers, metaphysical considerations are strikingly absent from the proofs in the *SCG*.²¹

²⁰ Based on the electronic text of the Index Thomisticus, the word count for the first two ways is 2,281, whereas the word count for the following three ways is 268. And for a further comparison, the five ways of the *ST* come in at 773 words altogether. That means that the space Thomas devotes to just the first two ways of the *SCG* is about 8.5 times the space devoted to the remaining three ways, and almost three times the space given over to the five ways as a whole in the *ST*.

²¹ The two metaphysical proofs from *SCG* I, ch. 13: "[Motion principle:] Nothing is at once in act and in potency with respect to the same thing. But everything that is moved is, as such, in potency; for motion is the act of the existing thing in potency qua potency. All that moves then is in act as such, because nothing acts unless it is in act. Therefore nothing is both mover and moved with respect to the same motion. And thus nothing moves itself"; "[Denial of an infinite regress of ordered movers:] That which moves instrumentally cannot move unless there is something that moves principally.

The pivotal realities by means of which Thomas seeks to demonstrate God as the primary cause of all things are physical realities in the sense of realities whose study pertains to that of physics or philosophy of nature. Accordingly, such realities are within the genus of *ens mobile*. As I see things, Thomas's mode of procedure here stands in contrast not only to what he writes elsewhere, but also to what he writes in the *SCG* itself. For, in chapter 4 of book I, he states that it is metaphysics that deals with divine things. And more importantly, in chapter 12, immediately preceding the proofs of God, Thomas offers the now familiar reasons for the demonstrability of God's existence. Such a demonstration is not one which proceeds from a knowledge of God's essence, *propter quid*; rather such a demonstration must proceed from a knowledge of effects to a knowledge of God's existence as the cause of such effects, per *quia* demonstrations. However, the effects that Thomas considers in chapter 13 are effects drawn from mobile being, and so they are incapable of getting us any further than a first mover of mobile being. The latter is not necessarily God, and in his second way Thomas recognizes this; for, as noted, in the second way Thomas takes some time to defend the view that the first mover is immobile, and he does so only by augmenting the proof from physics with a proof which draws on considerations in metaphysics.²² So whilst the early chapters of the *SCG* and Thomas's procedure elsewhere point to the need for a metaphysical proof of God, the proofs themselves are certainly not metaphysical.²³

The lack of metaphysical argumentation is even more striking when we turn to a work contemporaneous with the first book of the *SCG*, and that is the commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius. In this commentary, Thomas treats us to an articulation of the divisions and methods of the sciences. Therein he argues that God's existence is established in first philosophy (metaphysics) as the source of all being, whereas God's

But if one should proceed to infinity in movers and things moved, all movers will be as instrumental movers, and because they will be moved movers, there will be nothing that is the principal mover. Therefore, nothing will be moved" (trans. mine).

²² *SCG* I, ch. 13: "But because God is not a part of something that is self-moving, Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* proceeds from the mover that is a part of something self-moving to another mover that is wholly separate, which is God. For since everything that moves itself is moved by appetite, it must be that the mover that is a part of something self-moving moves on account of an appetite for something desirable. The latter is higher in moving, for the one desiring is a kind of moved mover, but what is desirable is a mover wholly unmoved. There must therefore be a primary mover wholly separate and immobile, which is God."

²³ See also Knasas, "Thomistic Existentialism and the Proofs *Ex Motu*," sec. II.

revealed nature is considered in theology proper.²⁴ It is further interesting to note that the commentary on the *De Trinitate* was written on the same parchment and made use of the same Parisian ink as a substantial portion of *SCG* I, including chapter 13.²⁵ Hence, in a text contemporaneous with that chapter, written in the same geographical context and same teaching period, and indeed even written with the same stationary, Thomas affirms that the approach to God is metaphysical (*De Trinitate*), and then in the *SCG* he abandons the metaphysical way and offers physical demonstrations, taking up the metaphysical way once again only in other works.

Is there an explanation for this change in attitude?

I think it is fair to say that Aquinas is somewhat ill at ease with the proofs of God in the *SCG*; this is especially true when it comes to the proofs from motion. He goes out of his way to address disputes about the premises or conclusions, and he does not appear to exhibit the confidence (or elegance) of the later five ways of the *ST*. I think the reason for this is not because of any deficiency on Thomas's part, but because of a deficiency with the proofs themselves.

Why would Thomas choose proofs that are problematic and that he has to take some time and energy to fix?

I think the context of the *SCG* indicates that Thomas was not simply concerned with establishing the truth of the matter—something that he could have done by appeal to the caused character of existential act and a denial of an infinite series of ordered causes, as he does quite deftly in other works. Rather, Thomas's concern here is to convince either Aristotelians or those in substantial agreement with Aristotle of the existence of some absolute primary cause. This is clear from the opening lines of chapter 13, that these ways are how the philosophers and Catholic doctors have proved God's existence. The only proof from a Catholic theologian is the final way from teleology attributed to John Damascene, whereas the first four proofs are all Aristotelian in nature. This speaks to the context of the *SCG* as a whole in which Thomas states that he wishes to show the truth of the Catholic faith and set aside errors opposed to it (ch. 2). Furthermore, when it comes to the errors he wishes to set aside, he mentions Jews, Muslims, and pagans, who do not accept the authority of Sacred Scripture, and so who must be convinced by appeal to natural reason (ch. 2).

Whilst a systematically theological work, the *SCG* has a significant

²⁴ See n. 16 above.

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and his Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 101.

apologetical context wherein non-Catholics are being led to the truth of the Catholic faith.²⁶ In the context of those who do not accept Sacred Scripture, they must be led by natural reason. And so appeal must be made to those authorities of natural reason that such thinkers would take seriously; this would no doubt involve to Aristotle and the Aristotelian commentators. This explains the Aristotelian context of the proofs from chapter 13 of *SCG* I and Thomas's obvious difficulty with them, when in other contexts he prefers to proceed on the basis of metaphysical considerations pertaining to existential act.

Even though Thomas begins from an Aristotelian context in motion or more generally in physical realities, he does not remain there. We do see his existential metaphysics gradually creep into the *SCG* once he has established the eternity of God and the fact that there is no passive potency in him. After this, Thomas is free to think of God, free from passive potency, as pure act. And thence he begins to pick up the pace and enter into reasoning and argumentation with which we are more familiar and he is more comfortable (by the time he gets to book II, Thomas speaks freely of *esse* in the articulation of his metaphysics of creation).

So not only is there a significant apologetical context to the *SCG*, we also see Thomas here as a significant apologist. For he eschews an easy beginning in the metaphysical context with which he is most familiar, rather seeking a common ground with those who would disagree with him. Whilst in other contexts he may begin and remain with the metaphysics of existential act as the neatest, most convincing, and profound philosophy of God, here in the *SCG*, Aquinas leaves the metaphysical high ground and appeals to the more physical considerations with which other, non-Catholic Aristotelians would be sympathetic. But such a retreat is only so that he along with his interlocutors may take the high ground once again wherein God is considered as pure existence itself, and all the classical implications that flow from that.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I wish to reflect on what Thomas's procedure in the *Summa contra gentiles* can teach us today when considering demonstrations of God's existence. I think the perplexity of the proofs of God in the

²⁶ Whilst the Dominican missionary context of the *SCG* is disputed, Torrell is sympathetic to the view that there is an apostolic and apologetical dimension to it (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, 104–7).

SCG lies in the fact that therein Thomas was setting out proofs that would convince others, rather than simply offering proofs that get to the truth of the matter. We Thomists of a contemporary vintage must do the same. We must of course figure out what systematically speaking is the truth of the matter, however, we cannot avoid co-operation with other philosophers and sharing with them the fruits of our contemplation.

Whilst the *SCG* deployed physical proofs for God's existence, and that because of its apologetical context, it would be fruitless to employ such physical proofs within a contemporary philosophical setting. This is not only because the physics of Aristotle requires some subtle reasoning in its defense (just as it did in Thomas's day), but also because a proof from physics establishing a first mover is so far removed from God that it would take significantly more argumentation to show that such a prime mover is God (indeed more argumentation than even Thomas had to offer in the thirteenth century to convince other Aristotelians).

Not only that, but deploying a physical proof of God in a contemporary context would require a knowledge of contemporary physics significantly more specialized and finer-grained than what was required for the same in the thirteenth century. Whilst a knowledge of Aristotle's physics requires some significant personal investment on behalf of the researcher, it does not require the specialisms required for knowledge of contemporary physics. So, the contemporary defender of philosophical theism would be quite hampered in attempting to offer a proof of God from physics. And this is aside from the more systematic point that a proof of a primary cause of all that is within the context of physics is impossible, since such a proof can get us to only a primary cause of mobile being, not a primary cause of being *per se*.

By contrast, whilst one must specialize in philosophy to pursue a proof from metaphysics, one need not specialize in the various specialisms requiring several years of training, as one would for developing a proof from contemporary physics. Furthermore, whilst the non-philosopher may find the metaphysical demonstration of God quite perplexing, it does not jar with his common-sense intuitions concerning the contrast between being and non-being, the causality involved in typical examples of *per se* causal series, the fact that the medium-sized dry goods of everyday experience do not exist essentially, and so on. These are all features of Aquinas's way to God which reflect his own profound metaphysics of *esse*, yet can be intuitively grasped without the need for a systematic education in that metaphysics. Moreover, a proof of God based on the metaphysics of *esse* abstracts from developments in the natural sciences, since whatever those

developments may be, they will presuppose the actual existence of the realities with which they deal. Hence a proof of God which springboards from a consideration of the metaphysics of *esse* can incorporate any natural scientific framework. Accordingly, I submit that the metaphysical proof of God based on *esse*, which is Thomas's own and personal favorite, is quite promising from a contemporary apologetical context (and is more than promising from a systematically philosophical context).

If contemporary Thomists are to follow Thomas's example in the *SCG*, then it will not involve defending his defense of the physical proofs to the letter, but adopting his spirit of presenting the most convincing proof of God. I believe that a very strong case can be made for the truth of Aquinas's demonstration of God from *esse*; any objections to this proof are either wrong or based on a misunderstanding. But beyond that, I also believe that, for the reasons outlined in the previous paragraph, the proof of God from *esse* is the best proof from an apologetical point of view. And so in presenting a rigorously philosophical proof of God to a contemporary audience that seeks to convince unbelievers, the best approach to take is to adopt Aquinas's way to God.²⁷ N.V

²⁷ This paper was originally presented at a conference on the reasonability of belief in God with particular focus on the *SCG*, organized by the Thomistic Institute Angelicum. I wish to thank Prof. Thomas Joseph White and all the staff at the Thomistic Institute for organizing this conference, and to my fellow speakers and audience members for their participation and feedback. I also wish to thank Prof. Matthew Levering for helping me to bring this paper to publication. And finally I wish to thank God, the unique and subsistent act of being from Whom all that is comes to be.