

Can We Demonstrate That “God Exists”?

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“STANS AUTEM PAULUS in medio Areopagi, ait: Viri Athenienses, per omnia quasi superstitiosiores vos video. Præteriens enim, et videns simulacra vestra, inveni et aram in qua scriptum erat: Ignoto Deo. Quod ergo ignorantes colitis, hoc ego annuntio vobis”¹ (“Then Paul stood up at the Areopagus and said: ‘You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious. For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, “To an Unknown God.” What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you”²) (Acts 17:22–23).

Can we demonstrate that *God exists*? I want to begin this essay by asking you to consider three statements:

- 1) A god exists.
- 2) There is only one god.
- 3) God exists.

My thesis is that while 1) and 2) are, for the sake of argument, philosophically demonstrable, 3) is not. First, let me say what I mean by philosophically demonstrable. By demonstration, I have in mind at least what Thomas Aquinas argues in the second question of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, which involves the ideal of Aristotelian demonstration as set out in the *Posterior Analytics* and as commented upon by Aquinas. At the very least, that ideal involves an ideal of

¹ <http://sacred-texts.com/bib/vul/act017.htm>.

² <http://www.usccb.org/bible/acts/17>.

deductive validity. But demonstration adds, among other things, that the premises are true.

By philosophical, again, I mean what Aquinas has in mind in the first question of the first part of the *Summa* when he argues that it is necessary that there be a discipline *in addition to* the philosophical disciplines. In making that point, he characterizes the philosophical disciplines as those that proceed by the natural light of human reason without the assistance of divine grace and revelation. And of course, by revelation I have in mind here with Aquinas the revelation made by God to the Jews and fulfilled in Jesus Christ as manifested to the Apostles. So, a demonstration is philosophical for the purposes of this discussion if it does not appeal to revealed truths with the premises it employs.

Thus, my thesis is that the statement *God exists* is not subject to a deductively valid argument that proceeds from true premises that do not employ elements of divine revelation. Perhaps, at this point, it looks to some as though I am denying a central position that Aquinas holds in the very context of the *Summa* to which I am appealing for the sense of “philosophically demonstrable”—namely, that “Unde deum esse, secundum quod non est per se notum quoad nos, demonstrabile est per effectus nobis notos.”³ Aquinas clearly uses “*demonstrabile*” here in characterizing “*deum esse*.” Others, perhaps who take seriously the councils of the Church, will remind me of the pronouncement of the First Vatican Council that “Si quis dixerit, Deum unum et verum, Creatorem et Dominum nostrum, per ea, quae facta sunt, naturali rationis humanae lumine certo cognosci non posse: anathema sit,”⁴ where the more recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has “Etenim existentia Dei Creatoris potest lumine rationis humanae per eius opera certo cognosci, quamquam haec cognitio saepe obscurata et deformata est errore.”⁵

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q. 2, a. 2, at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth1002.html#28311>; my own English translation is as follows: “Hence, that a god is, which is not known to us per se, is demonstrable through effects known to us.” This translation and those in the next two notes, however, are given only provisionally because of a point I intend to argue later precisely concerning the translation of “*deum*.”

⁴ *Decreta Dogmatica Concilii Vaticani De Fide et De Ecclesia Christi*, Caput IV, Canones II.1 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.v.ii.i.html>; my own English translation is as follows: “If someone says, that the one and true god, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty by the natural light of human reason from the things that have been made: let him be anathema.”

⁵ *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*, §286, at <http://www.vatican.va/archive/cate->

However, I do not have time here to defend my claim in the face of either Vatican I or the recent *Catechism*. I will only make my case in relation to Aquinas. But let me be clear. I am not claiming that it cannot be known that God exists. I think it can be known. I just do not think it can be philosophically demonstrated. And I think Aquinas agrees with me. If correct, this point is very important for this gathering to discuss “What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology in the 21st Century,” for it suggests that, while the theologian can know that God exists, the philosopher cannot. So what do they have to say to one another about God?

Aquinas on Faith and the Name “God”

To begin arguing my case, I want to point to a curious passage in Aquinas that should give pause to anyone who takes Aquinas’s thought seriously. In the discussion of the Act of Faith in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa*, Aquinas asks, in article two of question two, whether faith is suitably distinguished as first “believing that God is such and such,” second “believing God,” and third “believing in God.” In the phrase “believing that God is such and such,” I am relying upon Professor Alfred Freddoso’s translation of “*credere deum*,” which has an ellipsis in the print where I have “such and such.” His ellipsis and my “such and such” capture the thought that the first sense of believing points to believing truths that predicate certain features of God, as for example that “God is just,” that “God is wise,” or that “God is loving.”⁶ This sense of believing pertains to the material object of faith, namely, certain propositional or predication truths about God.

The second sense of believing—namely, “believing God”—pertains to the formal object of faith, the means through which we know the

chism_lt/p1s2c1p4_lt.htm. The following English translation is provided at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P19.HTM: “Human intelligence is surely already capable of finding a response to the question of origins. The existence of God the Creator can be known with certainty through his works, by the light of human reason, even if this knowledge is often obscured and disfigured by error.”

Here it would be a mere dodge for me to point out that the magisterial statements do not use Aquinas’s word “*demonstrabile*,” but instead the phrase “*certo cognosci*,” for, suitably extended, I think I would go on to claim that the existence of God cannot be known “*certo cognosci*” by philosophical analysis.

⁶ <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth3001.html#38852>. Prof. Freddoso’s translation is to be found at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/Part%202-2/st2-2-ques02.pdf>. I have confirmed with him that he intends the ellipsis to be taken in the way I have done—namely, “that God is such and such.”

truths about God to be true as material objects of faith. We know these truths to be true because God has revealed them—we believe God. Presumably, one could have an opinion that these truths are true and yet this not count as knowing them to be true. One might even have a number of other propositional truths one believes, against the background of which one believes these other truths to be true, and even warranted. But in this second sense, one *knows* them to be true because one believes God who has revealed them to be true.⁷ A mundane parallel would be that, materially, I believe and know my father was William Jude O'Callaghan because it is true, and formally, I believe my mother, Mary Ann O'Callaghan who knows it to be true. You may have the opinion that my father was William Jude O'Callaghan, but unless you believe my mother or believe her by believing me, you do not know it to be true and thus do not believe it even materially.⁸ Here, of course, the material object of my belief is distinct from the formal object of my belief, as opposed to the case of God, where the material and formal object are the same.⁹

The third sense—namely, “believing in God”—expresses a relationship the will has to God, where the will is directed to God as an end insofar as he is the material and formal object of the intellect's belief. I do not just believe that God is just, and believe it because God has said so, but I am directed to God and his justice as an end by the adherence of my will desiring and acting to adhere to him and his justice. Here we might notice the difference in ordinary language between saying that I believe that my wife loves me because it is she who tells me so, but beyond that I believe *in* my wife as we act to attain the goal of our marriage. You could believe that my wife loves me, and believe

⁷ Notice here the difference between saying that “one believes that God has revealed them to be true” and that “one believes God who has revealed them to be true.” The first statement suggests that one stands in a particular relation to proposition, while the second suggests that one stands in a particular relation to God. Indeed, it seems that one could believe that God has revealed certain propositions to be true and yet not believe that those propositions are true, since one might not believe that God always or ever speaks truly. It is less clear that one could believe God, who reveals them to be true, and not believe that they are true.

⁸ For an interesting discussion in this context of the logic of knowledge by authority, see Joseph M. Bochenski, O.P., *The Logic of Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 121–124.

⁹ Thus, for Aquinas, the proposition that “William Jude O'Callaghan is my father” is not the material object of faith, but rather makes that object of faith cognitively available to one.

because it is she who tells you so; what you cannot do is believe *in* my wife as I do, directing your will to her as an end as I do.¹⁰

What is characteristic of all three ways of thinking of faith as distinguished into these three grammatical modalities of belief is that the term "God" is used as a proper name in all three.¹¹ In the first, I refer to a particular being with that proper name, as I predicate some feature of it, as I might say, "I believe 'Dave Brubeck soothes the savage breast [*sic*] by his piano playing.'" In the second, I presuppose reference to a particular being when I assert that it is because that very being has spoken that I believe the proposition, as I might say, "I believe Fr. Michael Sherwin that 'Dave Brubeck's piano playing soothes the savage breast.'" In this second sense, I think it is most clear that the term "God" is used as a proper name, for we do not believe what *a* god tells us. On the contrary, those of us who have faith believe what God tells us.¹² In the third, I direct my will to that very particular being I directly refer to in the first, and indirectly in the second, as the object of my desire, as I might say, "I believe *in* Dave Brubeck to soothe my savage breast by his piano playing." A proper name allows me to grab hold of the individual named by it, to describe it, to speak truth of it, and to direct myself to it. The truths assented to in faith and the epistemic and volitional attitudes the person of faith adopts are about *God* in a very direct way, and not simply about *a god*. In general, a proper

¹⁰ By parallel reasoning, it is an interesting question whether Aquinas thinks you can believe that God is such and such, believe it because God has revealed it, and yet not believe *in* God in the relevant sense. I am thinking of Aquinas's response in *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 12, ad 5, in which he argues that one mortal sin necessarily destroys charity in the sinner, while leaving untouched the presupposition of the objection that a mortal sin does not necessarily destroy faith or hope, although it leaves faith lifeless (*'informes'*). Presumably, lacking charity, the will cannot be described as directed to God as an end in the sense of the question on Faith described as "believing in God." But see *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 3, resp., where Aquinas suggests that having one false opinion about God prevents one from having any knowledge about God whatsoever. Presumably, not *believing in God* as the end to which one should direct one's will involves some sort of false belief that God is not one's end. In which case, it would seem, one could not have any knowledge of God constituted by believing that God is such and such because one believes God who has revealed it.

¹¹ See the Epilogue to the present article, section 1, "On 'god' as a Proper Name."

¹² Of course, it follows from the fact that God is a god that, in believing what God tells us, we also believe what a god tells us. But you see my point, I think.

name, if it successfully refers, is intentional in a very particular way.¹³

But having given his response to article 2 of question 2, Aquinas makes a very curious claim in response to the third objection of the article. The third objection had sought to undermine the distinction that Aquinas will defend in his response by saying that unbelievers cannot be said to have faith. And yet, unbelievers can be said to believe that “God is such and such.” So, the objector claims, believing that “God is such and such” cannot be described as involved in the act of faith. Aquinas’s reply to this objection, given the body of the response, is interesting. He says that unbelievers do not truly believe that “God is such and such.” For they do not even believe that God exists, as he goes on to write, “under the conditions which faith determines.” Finally, he adds that they do not truly believe that God is such and such because (and he cites Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 9), in simple things you either grasp the thing involved or you do not.¹⁴

¹³ Again, if one were to say that ‘god’ is here used as a hidden definite description, it would be important to keep in mind that it must be understood to be used referentially if the manifestly intentional character of what Aquinas is saying is to be preserved. The ordinary analysis of, for example, “the one true god is loving” as “there exists an x (x is a true god and for any y (if y is a true god then y is identical to x) and x is loving)” is not a referential statement because there are no referring terms within it. The logic of the statement alone does not capture the referential intent. To use “the one true god” referentially, one has to intend to use it the way one uses a proper name, referentially directed to a particular being. One cannot intend to use it as one would ordinarily analyze it. The analysis loses the reference. So, one cannot capture what Aquinas is saying with “I believe in God” as directing one’s will to the one true god if one gives the ordinary analysis of “the one true god” as lacking referential force. And it will not do to say that Aquinas could not have had this problem of reference and analysis that accompanies the predicate calculus because he did not have the predicate calculus. The point is that he had reference and must be using the definite description the way he would use a proper name—referentially. The point generally is about reference and what is common to proper names and definite descriptions or any other grammatical objects that may function referentially.

¹⁴ The use of *Metaphysics* 9 here is problematic, since in context, it is talking about grasping the quiddity of things, even in Aquinas’s interpretation of it, not grasping individual things. Thomas makes this point elsewhere about simple apprehension of something as opposed to judgment. A judgment can only be true or false if the subject and predicate have actually managed to grasp something. If they have not grasped anything, then one is not judging truly or falsely, as one is not speaking of anything at all. See, for example, *De veritate*, but particularly his commentary on Aristotle’s *Peri hermeneias*. See also my discussion of the two operations of intellect in this regard in *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame

So, you are either talking about God or you are not. To use a proper name is to have "grasped" or latched onto its referent sufficiently to say something with a predicate of what it refers to. To assert some truth about God, indeed, even to assert some falsehood about God, you must first have latched on to God with a proper name.

I want to suggest that what Aquinas writes here is a very curious thing if, in fact, one can philosophically demonstrate the existence of God. Consider Aristotle. Not only is Aristotle a pagan Greek, but he does not believe that God is just, wise, and loving because God has revealed that he is just, wise, and loving.¹⁵ He certainly does not direct his will to God's justice, wisdom, and love as an end because of believing these things. So Aristotle would seem to be a paradigm instance of an unbeliever in the context of article 2,¹⁶ and thus also in that of Aquinas's response to the third objection.¹⁷

But for the sake of argument, let us suppose, *against* the thesis of my talk, that, if anyone has a philosophical demonstration of the proposition that "God exists," Aristotle does. Now, in one sense of what Aquinas means by belief, it could be said that Aristotle does not believe that "God exists" in the way in which the believer does, "under the conditions of faith," because of what Aquinas thinks about the way

Press, 2003), esp. 253–254. See also the response in *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter, SCG) I, ch. 12, to the objection that to demonstrate the existence of God would require that one know the essence of God, which cannot be known. There Thomas distinguishes grasping the truth of a proposition *deum esse* from grasping the *esse* by which God subsists. The former is what is demonstrated, not the latter. Thus *deum esse* in a philosophical demonstration does not refer to God as *Deum esse* does when speaking of the act by which God subsists.

¹⁵ For a rich and engaging discussion of what Aquinas is doing in this discussion of faith as belief, against the background of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, see Bruce Marshall, "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 353–402; Marshall, "Thomas, Thomisms, and Truth," *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 499–524; Louis Roy, "Bruce Marshall's Reading of Aquinas," *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 473–480; and Frederick J. Crosson, "Reconsidering Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 481–498. See also Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

¹⁶ Aquinas has not yet made the distinction of *ST* II-II, q. 10, a.1, between unbelief as simple negation (not having faith) and unbelief as opposition to faith. So I think his point here should be taken generically and not restricted to an unbeliever who opposes faith.

¹⁷ See the Epilogue of this article, second section, "On Whether Philosophers Prove *deum esse*."

demonstrated knowledge surpasses belief. Belief, as we are told earlier in article 1 of question 2, is an epistemic state that falls short of demonstrated knowledge. In falling short of this standard of knowledge the intellect assents to some truth because the will causes it to assent. In that particular sense of article 1, demonstrated knowledge that *p* is a greater and more perfect epistemic state with regard to *p* than is belief.

But that cannot be what Aquinas means here by asserting that the unbeliever does not believe that God exists in the way in which the believer does, since in response to the objection, Aquinas associates the epistemic state of the unbeliever with failure—a complete lack of grasping anything about God—not with excellence and perfection, as in article 1. The believer grasps God in some sense when he or she speaks of God and what he or she believes in the first sense of believing “such and such.” But according to Aquinas, the unbeliever utterly misses God and suffers a failure compared to the achievement of the believer. So, it is hard to see how the unbelieving Aristotle, even armed with his philosophical demonstrations, would be exempted from Aquinas’s general characterization of the impoverished and failed state of the unbeliever utterly missing God.

However, if one can philosophically demonstrate that “God exists,” surely one has not missed God. Surely one has latched on to God sufficiently to refer to him and predicate existence of him.¹⁸ One has a proper name, “God.” That name refers to a being, namely God. If the name is being used in the same way as the believer uses it, it cannot miss God. It must refer to the same being as the believer latches onto with that proper name. To use the proper name “God” as the believer uses it is already to have latched on to its referent in preparation for saying that “God is such and such,” including that “God exists.”¹⁹

¹⁸ See P. T. Geach on the difference between the non-predicative use of “exists” (as, for example, in “a human being exists”) and the predicative use of “exists” (as in “Socrates exists”) in “Form and Existence,” in *God and the Soul* (1969; repr., South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 42–64. Geach distinguishes the difference between saying “God exists” and ‘something or other is God’ (57). He himself attributes his account to Aquinas. In particular, he cites Aquinas on the difference between the being of a true proposition and the being (*esse* or *actus essendi*) of some object. I think he is correct in that analysis of Aquinas. I disagree with him on the thought that “God” used referentially must always be a definite description (if that is his view), even if it often is.

¹⁹ More needs to be done here to talk about proper names and reference when the object referred to does not in fact exist. But that discussion involves familiar problems within contemporary philosophy of language.

Consider a parallel. You say, "William Jude O'Callaghan taught mathematics." I say, "William Jude O'Callaghan did not teach mathematics; he taught philosophy." If you are using the same proper name as I am, we have a disagreement. You are wrong, because the individual being I refer to with that proper name did not teach mathematics. You cannot have missed my father with the proper name, that is, failed to refer to him, and then utter a falsehood *about* him. On the other hand, if you are using a different proper name with the spoken grammatical string "William Jude O'Callaghan," then we have a misunderstanding, not a disagreement. You are talking about some other being than my father, even if you are using a spoken string that sounds identical to the one I am using. It is as if Jackie were to say to John, "I met an interesting Greek last night named Aristotle," to which John responds, "you cannot have; Aristotle's been dead for thousands of years." Jackie's proper response to John is not, "you are wrong," but "you misunderstand me." So, in the case of my father and your statement, for all I know you may be wrong or you may be right, since you may be talking about some other being than my father, a being I do not know and do not refer to with my use of the string "William Jude O'Callaghan."

The function of a proper name is to latch onto to some one particular being, and the particular being latched on to by the use of the same proper name will be the same for all who use it. For you to speak falsely of my father, you must minimally latch onto him with the proper name. So, you cannot be said to have utterly missed him in the way Aquinas's appeal to *Metaphysics* 9 is supposed to suggest that the unbeliever misses God—does not grasp God at all, not even his existence.

To summarize, if an unbeliever like Aristotle has a philosophical demonstration that "God exists" or that "God is just," and so on, and he is using the term "God" as a proper name in the way the believer uses it, he cannot miss God in the way Aquinas suggests he does in response to objection 3. And he cannot have failed to demonstrate, and thus to know, that "God exists" in the way Aquinas suggests the unbeliever fails. Thus, by *reductio ad absurdum*, if Aquinas is right to insist that the unbeliever misses God, and if we want to avoid concluding that Aquinas is incoherent, it seems he must exclude the possibility that *the philosopher* demonstrated that "God exists" when he demonstrated that "*deus est*."

I think that, to make sense of what Aquinas is claiming here, we have to acknowledge that he is making a point about how the unbe-

liever uses the term “god,” a semantic point. The use of a proper name is the “simple thing” spoken of here, as opposed to a predication, which is of course not a “simple thing” but a complex thing.²⁰ A proper name either hits the target or it does not. So, the unbeliever does not use the term “god” in the way that the believer uses it.²¹ In particular, while the believer uses the term “God” as a proper name to refer to the being about whom she believes certain things because that being has revealed those things to her in some way, and to whom the believer directs her will in virtue of what that being has revealed to her, the unbeliever *qua* unbeliever does *not* use the term “god” as a proper name. But of course, if the unbeliever does not use the term “god” as a proper name, then it is quite impossible for him to demonstrate philosophically that “God exists.” *A fortiori*, it is quite impossible for him to demonstrate the truth of the proposition that the believer thinks and knows to be true when the believer says, “God exists.”

We could stop here with a nice “*quod erat demonstrandum*.” But I think there is something very interesting to be learned in thinking of how the unbeliever uses the term “god” and what it means for the dialogue between philosophy and theology. This is particularly so if we acknowledge that, when a philosopher who is also a believer engages in philosophy, he or she is not formally acting as a believer. In particular, there is something very interesting to be learned about what a philosopher does when that philosopher demonstrates that “*deus est*,” as Aquinas clearly thinks he or she is capable of doing. So, perhaps you will indulge me a little longer.

Aquinas and the Philosophical Grammar of ‘god’

What I have said so far has been merely an *ad hoc* argument designed to make a larger point by means of saving Aquinas from incoher-

²⁰ See again my discussion of the first and second operations of intellect as signified by words and as a contrast between the simple and the complex in *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn*.

²¹ This needs to be qualified. Later I will suggest that the unbeliever can intend to use it as the believer uses it. But this will be parasitic upon the community of faith’s use. The unbeliever could use the term parasitically as a contemporary atheist: “I do not believe that *God exists*.” For that to be a denial of what the believer believes, the atheist must intend to use “God” as the believer does. But then, of course, Aquinas’s point stands: the unbeliever does not attain even the existence of God, since the unbeliever’s unbelief consists in the denial of God’s existence. But I am interested here in the thought that an unbeliever like Aristotle, not the contemporary atheist, might demonstrate the existence of God.

ence. However, if we take Aquinas seriously, as I think we should, it should not be a surprise to us that he does not think the unbeliever uses the term "god" as the believer does—that is, does not use it as a proper name. First, let me make a little grammatical point about Latin, namely, that it does not have an indefinite article. Now, a term like "*homo*" can be used either as a common name or a proper name, as in "*homo est species*," on the one hand, "*Socrates est homo*," on the other. But there is no grammatical mark in Latin texts to disambiguate the two uses, as in English we would say, "Socrates is a human being," on the one hand, and "human being is a species," on the other. The Latin reader must figure out the use from context alone. Used as a proper name, of course, it picks out an individual, even if in my example the individual is a species—that is, it refers. Used as a common name it has a descriptive character, making it possible for us to describe what something is or what features it has—it is predicative. A proper name refers to objects we describe with common names.

This fact about Latin grammar turns out to be important for what I am going to argue here.²² So, suppose we turn back to the term "god" that proved so troublesome in the discussion of what the unbeliever does not believe, distinguishing the unbeliever from the believer. I argued that, if what Aquinas says is not incoherent, while the believer uses the term "God" as a proper name in such statements as "God is wise" and "God is just," the unbeliever cannot be using the term "god" as a proper name in that context, at least not the same proper

²² Of course, the situation is much more complicated than this against the background of the semantic question of whether the meaning of a proper name is a hidden description that is often associated with it—as, for example, the claim that "Aristotle" means "the best student of Plato and teacher of Alexander"—or rather, whether the description often associated with it helps to pick out the reference but does not provided the *meaning* of the proper name. A standard example of the problem is where we consider whether it might turn out as a matter of fact that Aristotle was not Plato's best student. On the first account, it turns out that "Aristotle" does not refer to the person we thought it did. On the second account, "Aristotle" continues to refer to the same individual, despite the error of our histories. Aquinas seems to be aware of this problem, although not necessarily in the case of proper names, when he distinguishes "that *from* which a name is imposed" from "that *to* which a name is imposed to signify." "*Lapis*" is his example. "Hurts the foot" is not the meaning of the term "*lapis*," even if that is what we take the name from. Otherwise, as he points out, everything that hurts the foot would be named "*lapis*." If "Aristotle" means "Plato's best student," then whoever was Plato's best student will be called 'Aristotle,' even if not, for example, the teacher of Alexander.

name as the believer uses. What I want to claim now is that the unbeliever engaged in philosophical argumentation uses the term “god” as a common name; in contemporary parlance, his use of the term is predicative rather than referential.

Here we do not need to make the point by saving Aquinas from incoherence. We can simply turn to him for guidance. In article 9 of question 13 of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*, Aquinas asks whether the term “god” is a “communicable name” (*nomen communicabile*). His answer is affirmative, but with a qualification. He first makes a metaphysical claim about singular things. Considering a singular existing thing, or in Latin “*res*,” the existing thing cannot be multiplied and is incommunicable. Now, a term can be used to signify a singular thing or *res* as such. When the term signifies a singular thing as a “*suppositum*,” the term, just like the thing it signifies, cannot be multiplied and is incommunicable. Such a term is a proper name (*nomen proprium*). Such a term is incommunicable both as regards the thing signified and, Aquinas adds, according to “*ratio*” or the intellect’s apprehension.

On the other hand, the *ratio* of a nature does not include within it the notion of a singular, but is understood as in abstraction from the singular. So, for example, the *ratio* of “human nature” does not include Socrates, Xanthippe, or Fr. Thomas Joseph White. So, a term imposed to signify that nature, abstracting from any *suppositum*, does not include them within its *ratio*. It is because none of them are included within the *ratio* of the nature that it can be predicated of each one of them. Aquinas thinks this point is true even of a term imposed to signify the divine nature.

Because a term signifying a nature does not include within its signification any particular or singular *res* or thing, such a term is communicable according to *ratio* or the intellect’s apprehension. But here we can divide such communicable terms signifying natures into two types. There may be terms that are communicable according to *ratio* and according to existing things. The term “*homo*” would be such, since it both signifies a nature abstracting from singulars and is divided among many singular things when it is predicated of them—Socrates, Xanthippe, and Fr. Thomas Joseph White, for example. Other terms, however, might be communicable according to *ratio* but incommunicable according to existing thing or *res*. Aquinas gives the example of the Latin term “*sol*,” or in English “sun.” It signifies the solar nature, and so is communicable according to *ratio*. However, for physical cosmological reasons, Aquinas believes there can be only one sun. In that case, the Latin term “*sol*” is communicable according

to *ratio* but incommunicable according to *res* or existing thing.

This notion of being communicable according to *ratio* but not according to *res* is important in one respect for Aquinas because it explains how there can be differences of opinion about the number of things there might be under a term signifying a nature. In particular in the *Summa* discussion, he mentions the opinions of some that there are many suns. The reason why there can be the opinion that there are many suns, even if false, is that the term is not imposed as such to signify the *suppositum*, the singular being that we see in the sky rising in the east and setting in the west. If "*sol*" were a *nomen proprium*, a term incommunicable according to *ratio* as well as according to *res*, then it would be quite absurd for one to enunciate the opinion that there might be many suns. It would be absurd because one would be opining that the individual *suppositum* referred to by that proper name, the sun, could be an individual *suppositum* undivided and incommunicable in itself and, at the same time, many divided individuals, as if to say, "Fred Freddoso is many." It is nonsense to call Fred Freddoso many, even if some students back in South Bend may call him "legion."

Aquinas also thinks that terms signifying the natures of subsisting forms are communicable according to *ratio* but incommunicable according to *res* or existing thing. Recall Aquinas's argument that, in the case of subsisting forms lacking a relation to matter, there can be only one instance of the subsisting form because, in reality, the subsisting form exhausts the species and cannot be divided among many.²³ So, suppose "archangel" is a *species* of angel. Then it is perfectly appropriate to say that "Michael is *the* archangel"—an identity statement. Because of the underlying metaphysics of angels, the predicative classification "Michael is an archangel" implies the identity statement "Michael is the archangel." But while "Michael" signifies the one indivisible *suppositum*, "archangel" signifies the nature of that *suppositum*. And while the term "Michael" is incommunicable according to *ratio* and according to *res*, "archangel" is communicable according to *ratio* but incommunicable according to *res*. For Aquinas, this point is true of any term signifying a nature that in reality can have only one instance.

Notice the parallel between the term "*sol*" and "archangel," given the opinion of many philosophers and theologians disagreeing with Aquinas that there may be many individual angels of any particular species. This opinion that there might be many, false according to

²³ See *ST* I, q. 50, a. 4, resp.

Aquinas, is possible because the term for a species of angel is, like the term “*sol*,” communicable according to *ratio*, even if not according to *res*.

So finally, Aquinas’s claim about “*deus*” or “god” amounts to the claim that it functions the way that terms signifying angelic natures signify, communicable according to *ratio* but incommunicable according to *res*, and that is because a divine nature is like an angelic nature in being a subsisting form.²⁴

The key to all of these semantic claims is that the use of terms is mediated according to the understanding of human beings and is not a simple mirroring of things. Aquinas begins his response to the first article of question 13 by referring us to the opening passages of Aristotle’s *Peri hermeneias*, summarizing that famous passage by stating, “we name as we know.” Proper names signify “supposits” because that is what we intend them to do according to our understanding of things—that is, because of how we impose them in our linguistic practice, given our knowledge of the world. Similarly, common terms signify what they do because of what we intend them to signify—what we impose upon them. In response to the second objection, Aquinas writes, “for names do not follow upon the manner of being which is in things, but upon the manner of being had in our understanding of things.”²⁵ The human manner of understanding of natures does not include within it the singulars possessing those natures, but abstracts from them, so that names that are imposed to signify those natures are not imposed to signify singulars either, not even a term like “god,” despite the fact that there can be only one god, as the reader had just learned two questions earlier, in question 11.

Aquinas could not be any clearer in his position that “god” is a common name than he is when he writes that, strictly speaking, if there is a proper name of God, a *nomen proprium*, it is “likely” what he calls “the Tetragrammaton of the Hebrews.” Notice two points in this claim. First, Aquinas is tentative about even whether the Tetragrammaton itself is a proper name of God, when he couches the point hypothetically, and uses the term “likely.” Perhaps there is no genuinely proper name of God. Second, Aquinas himself observes the

²⁴ Notice that this supports a point I have delivered elsewhere, in an as yet unpublished paper, “Aquinas and Monotheism,” that the argument that there is only one god in *ST* I, q. 11, a. 3 does not distinguish God from angels, since the argument in that article applies to angels as well as to God.

²⁵ “*Nomina enim non sequuntur modum essendi qui est in rebus, sed modum essendi secundum quod in cognitione nostra est.*”

Jewish practice and does not write out the four letters. Presumably, the sacredness of the individual supposit is transferred to the proper name signifying it, just as the metaphysical incommunicability of the supposit is transferred to the semantic incommunicability of the name.

I think we have many reasons to agree with Aquinas that the term "god" is in general imposed to signify the divine nature, and not the *suppositum*, and is thus not a *nomen proprium*. First, common terms are subject to quantification, and plural forms of them, while proper names, are not. A proper name, as Aquinas explains, being imposed to signify the singular as such is only applicable to that singular as such, and we make a kind of category mistake when we ask how many there are of the thing signified by it, as if to ask, "how many Fred Freddosos are there?" There can be only one. Common terms, on the other hand, are paradigmatically subject to quantification and plural forms of them, as in "some human being," "a human being," "a lot of human beings," "twenty-three human beings," and so on.

Certainly, the terms "*deus*" in Latin, "*theos*" in Greek, and "god" in English are subject to quantification and have plural forms. By and large the ancient Greeks were what we classify as polytheists, believing in many *theoi*, as were the Romans, believing in many *dei*. The Pantheon was a temple to all the gods, even if now in Rome, those who enter it genuflect to "the one true god." Notice, in the case of these polytheists, the parallel with the "opinion" of those who hold that there are many suns and those who hold that there are many individuals within any species of angel. They could not hold that opinion, polytheism, if "*theos*" and "*deus*" were proper names.

And of course, Catholics, as monotheists, affirm in every Mass that they believe "*in unum deum*"²⁶—only one god, as opposed to three, for

²⁶ Here we have to be careful. "Polytheism" as a category is of modern vintage. There were ancient figures who would assert their belief "in the one god." What they seemed to have meant by such a phrase was the supreme god among the gods, Zeus, for example. Or they might mean the god that governs the entire cosmos. Thus, the assertion of "the one god" by Christians has to distinguish the assertion that there is one supreme principle governing creation, which Christians and some polytheists affirm, from the assertion that there is no other god than the god of Christian worship, also a claim asserted by Christians, but one denied by polytheists. The former assertion will not distinguish Christians from pagan polytheists who may hold for a supreme governor among the gods.

But see also Aquinas's careful discussion of the analogical use of the term "god" in *ST* I, q. 13, aa. 9–10, namely, how it is said falsely and truly of beings that are not gods as well as of the one true god.

example. So, those of us who are Catholics also use it as a common term. Notice also that the statement from Vatican I, but not that from the *Catechism*, uses “*deum unum*.” Indeed, even God, in his own voice, uses the term “god” as a common name; for, consider the first commandment—“I am the lord, your god. You shall have no other gods before me.” Even God does not seem to use the term “god” as a proper name.

Second, as Aquinas himself notes, one could not charge a pagan with idolatry if the term were not imposed to signify the divine nature and not the *suppositum*, and thus a common term and not a *nomen proprium*.²⁷ To say that someone is an idolater is to say that he or she worships as *a god* what is in fact not *a god*. But suppose that the term “god” were a proper name. If it were a proper name as used by the idolater, what would the accusation of idolatry amount to? If the idolater is using the term “god” as a proper name, and in particular the proper name employed by the Christian when he or she says, “I believe God is just, I believe God, and I believe in God,” then as we saw earlier, the pagan cannot help but refer to the very being that the Christian refers to. So, if the pagan says, “Oh God, you are holy and to be worshiped—I praise you—I adore you—I worship you—I offer these gifts of the field and these fruits of the vine for your great glory,” the pagan cannot help but be worshipping the god whom the Christian worships. If so, the pagan cannot be guilty of idolatry, for he or she is worshipping the one true god, the very god that Catholic Christians claim to worship when, in reciting the Rosary, they affirm in the Apostles’ creed, “*credo in Deum*.”

Finally, acknowledging that the term “*deus*” or “god” is a common term both is confirmed by Aquinas’s “Five Ways” and helps us to understand what it is that he means in claiming that “*deus est*” is “*demonstrabile*.” One objection that is raised about the Five Ways is that they do not demonstrate that there is only one god. For all we know at the end of them, there could be five gods, or even twenty-seven gods, or any number of gods you like. That claim is formally quite right, even if it not a legitimate objection, as we will see. Notice that each of the five ways ends with the assertion that a description has an instance. Then, in the first way Aquinas writes, “*hoc omnes intelligunt deum*,” in the second, “*quam omnes deum nominant*,” in the third, “*quod omnes dicunt deum*,” and in the fourth and fifth, “*hoc dicimus deum*.” Four of these five explicitly end with a semantic claim about what is meant by the term “*deus*,” while the other instance uses it.

²⁷ ST I, q. 13, a. 10, ad 1–3.

Now the first reason we can be confident that the term "*deus*" should be taken for a common noun and not a proper name in the Five Ways is that the meaning of a proper name is not given by a description, whether definite or indefinite. Suppose we say the meaning of "Aristotle" is given by the description, "Plato's greatest student and a teacher of Alexander." It is at least logically possible that the histories are wrong and that the person referred to by the name "Aristotle" was not in fact a teacher of Alexander. Similarly, it is at least historically possible that the person referred to by the proper name "Aristotle" was not Plato's greatest student. In either case, if the meaning of the proper name is given by that description, it would turn out that the proper name "Aristotle" does not refer to the person it in fact refers to. It will turn out that Aristotle is not Aristotle. So we do not want to hold that, when Thomas tells us, "*quod omnes dicunt deum*," he is specifying the meaning of a proper name. Better to take him to be specifying the meaning of a common name, which *is* given by a description.

The second and perhaps most convincing reason for thinking "god" is not used as a proper name in the Five Ways is that Aquinas thinks that, after he has given them, it remains to be proven that there is only one god, which he sets out to do in article 3 of question 11. The claim that the Five Ways do not prove that there is only one god is only an objection to Aquinas if the demonstrations are supposed to prove that there is only one god. But manifestly they are not supposed to prove that. Aquinas's effort to demonstrate that there is only one god (in q. 11, a. 3) is quite absurd if he has already shown it with any one of the Five Ways nine questions earlier (in q. 2, a. 3). I frequently tell my students the stupendous truth that, "proofs prove what they prove, and do not prove what they do not prove." The objection is an objection from those who are not willing to read nine more questions of the *Summa* or, if they do, think through the implications of question 11. But the important point for us to recognize here is that, because Aquinas thinks he still has to argue that there is only one god—argue, that is, for monotheism—the term "*deus*" in "*deus est*" is not being used as a proper name, but as a common term. To put this into English, none of the Five Ways prove that "God exists." If they are successful, they prove that there is a god. What article 3 of question 11 subsequently does, if successful, is prove that there is only one god.

If, for all the aforementioned reasons, we should agree with Aquinas that "*deus*" is a common term, and if Aquinas's own demonstrations that "*deus est*" do not prove that God exists, then that should give us

pause before claiming that any philosopher can demonstrate that “God exists.” Consider again the three opening propositions of this essay:

- 1) a god exists.
- 2) there is only one god.
- 3) God exists.

It is clear that Aquinas thinks 1) is demonstrable, and the Five Ways set out to do so in article 3 of question 2. It is also clear that Aquinas thinks 2) is demonstrable, and in article 3 of question 11, he sets out to do so. What he does not think is that 3) is demonstrable.

Theology Speaks to Philosophy

Much more remains to be said, and I hope somewhere and someday to say it. There are important philosophical distinctions to be drawn once we introduce the semantics of demonstrative adjectives like “this” and “that,” as well as the definite article “the,” such as between the provability of “a god exists,” “one god exists,” “this god exists,” “that god exists,” “the god exists,” and “God exists.” But I was asked here to say something engaging philosophy with theology. So I should try to conclude by just making a suggestion or two.

Even the simple philosophical clarification I have aimed at in the use of the term “god” should be of interest to theologians, since revelation is made to us in human language and thus presupposes how the terms employed are used in human language. But I also think there are greater philosophical issues of interest to the theologian than these simple semantic issues, issues that nonetheless presuppose the semantics. I no longer have the time to really argue these points, but I will try to summarize them briefly.

First, “a god exists” is not about God. At least it is not about God in the way that “God exists” is about God. We need to distinguish what makes a proposition true, its truth condition, from whether a proposition is strictly about what makes it true. Consider “a human being is speaking.” That is true. Why is it true? Well, I, for one, am speaking. So I at least make it a true proposition in the sense that it stands in a certain relation to my speaking, a relation in virtue of which we call it true. So one might think it is about me. And yet it is not. Why? Well, on the reasonable supposition that some other human being somewhere is speaking just now, the proposition is true, that is, is made true by standing in the right relation to that other person.

Now, notice that the proposition will remain true even if I stop talking and we reasonably suppose that the other human being continues to do so. So, even if my speaking makes the proposition true in some sense, how can the proposition be *about* me if it remains true even when I am not speaking? Compare "John O'Callaghan is speaking." If I cease speaking, that proposition ceases to be true, where "a human being is speaking" remains true. Clearly, "a human being is speaking" is not about me in the way that "John O'Callaghan is speaking" is about me, if the latter can cease to be true while the former remains true. And for the same reason, the proposition is not about the other human being who is speaking, for he may have ceased speaking while I continue, and the proposition will remain true. It is also not about both of us, because it remains true when one of us stops speaking. How can it be about both of us, if it remains true when one of us is not speaking?

P. T. Geach would say the proposition "a human being is speaking" tells us some human being or another is speaking but is not about any particular talking human being.²⁸ He and other contemporary philosophers would say this phenomenon arises because "a human being is speaking" does not involve a referring term, a proper name, a *nomen proprium*, or some other sentential element acting as a proper name in context. I said above that the asserted proposition is true because it stands in the right relation to someone talking. The crucial thing is that, whatever that right relation is, it does not involve the relation of reference, since there is no referring term in the statement.

To have a truth *about* some being, you have to refer to it. Lacking a referring term, "a human being" does not refer to any human being.

²⁸ The semantics of these indefinites can get complicated quickly, and there is a good deal of dispute concerning Geach's treatment of them once one goes beyond the statement itself and into contexts that involve anaphoric pronouns, as in asserting "a man is speaking, and he is loud." There, "a man" would seem to be referring, since something subsequent and additional is said using a referring pronoun, presuming that the referring pronoun "he" refers to a particular man, the one who made the first clause true; not just any man then makes the first clause true if the second is going to be true as well. Medieval commentators worried about their proper interpretation vis-à-vis quantification. Many held that, in general, they ought to be interpreted as involving universal quantification, as in "all men speak." This interpretation might seem odd until we remember the absence of the indefinite article in Latin, which would simply have had "*homo loquitur*." Aquinas disagreed, holding that, in general, they ought to be given an interpretation involving particular quantification, as in "some man speaks." In either case, they were not interpreted as singular propositions.

So you can have true propositions that are not about any existing thing or *res*, even though existing things are the condition of their truth. I think Aquinas recognizes this distinction when, in the *De ente et essentia*, he distinguishes the sense of being that pertains to the truth of a proposition from the sense of being that pertains to the *actus essendi* of a *res*. What is relevant for us is that Aquinas employs this very distinction between the being of a true proposition and the being of a *res* with *actus essendi* in the discussion in the *Summa contra gentiles* of whether “*deum esse*” can be demonstrated, when he responds to an objection by noting that, in demonstrating that “*deum esse*” one does not attain to the being, to the *esse* of God. One only attains to the being of a true proposition.²⁹ The proposition is true because God exists, and yet it does not attain to the existence of God. Not attaining to the existence of God, it cannot be about God.

It is much too complicated for our purposes here to also explain why “only one god exists” is no more about God than is “a god exists,” and it does not get us where we want to go. It comes down to the fact that quantification does not introduce reference where none was present before. Typically, you only get reference out of a common name if you introduce a demonstrative adjective like “this” or “that,” as in “this god” or “that god,” or the definite article “the,” as in “the god.”³⁰ But of course, according to Aquinas, we cannot introduce

²⁹ SCG I, ch. 12, no.7. Both here and in *ST* I, q.2, a.2, ad 2, Aquinas grants the objection that we do not know the essence of God and, so, cannot demonstrate God's existence. But in *ST*, the response is different because the objection there had been the lack of a middle for demonstration if one did not know the essence. So, Thomas responds that “*deum esse*” is demonstrated through effects serving as the middle, and thus “*demonstrando deum esse per effectum, accipere possumus pro medio quid significet hoc nomen deus*”—that is what the word “god” means, its nominal definition or descriptive content.

³⁰ This is not quite true. One can simply use, for whatever reason, a common noun as a proper name of some individual. Consider a lion named Leo. One might respond to the question “who is the lion in the zoo? Samson?” by responding, “Leo is the lion.” In Latin that might be “*Leo est leo*,” although “*Leo est*” would be simpler. But in the Latin, the “Leo” there would be functioning as a proper name, not a definite description, even though “*leo*” is, in general, a common name in Latin; think also of the pope Leo the Great. An even more interesting example in this context is, “Adeodatus,” the name Augustine gave to his son. It is, as used by Augustine, a proper name, and it refers just like any other proper name refers, in no need of descriptive content to do so. And yet, it is a general description meaning “given by God.” Presumably Augustine would say that, as a general description, it applies to every human child. And yet it is made by him to function as a proper

demonstrative adjectives like “this” and “that” in the case of God. To do so requires direct epistemic engagement with the being one refers to with the demonstrative, and that is not philosophically available to us concerning God in this valley of tears. We have to argue for the existence of a god from such a being’s effects.³¹

Well, why not “the god” then? First, notice that “a god exists” is semantically different from “the god exists.” If “a god” was already referential, it is difficult to see how the substitution of the definite article for the indefinite article in “the god” could make a difference to its content. Now, if I am a mathematician I can demonstrate that “there is a cube root of the number 27.” That existential statement is not referential. I can go on to demonstrate that “there is only one cube root of 27.” That is still not referential. But I can, having done these things, then engage in a referring act by introducing the definite article “the” in the description “the cube root of 27” and then assert that “the cube root of 27 is a prime number.” Because there is only one cube root of the number 27, my referring act is guaranteed of success—it will hit the target. Epistemically, I am justified in introducing the reference by the prior uniqueness proof. But the proof does not itself constitute the reference.³²

The mistake is to think that I could then go on to demonstrate the existence of *the* cube root of 27. On the contrary, that there is a single cube root of 27 was presupposed to my referring act in introducing “the,” even if not referred to when I demonstrated that there is only one. By parity of reasoning, I have not demonstrated the existence of anything when I introduce “the god” as a referring phrase and say,

name. In that case, it loses its descriptive content as its meaning, although it may remain associated with that descriptive content. One could insist, by a parity of reasoning with the claim made about “god” above, that because it is a general description, “*adeodatus*” could only be used as a hidden definite description as applied to Augustine’s son. But then one would have to say that every use of “*adeodatus*” in the *Confessions* has to be understood as Augustine saying “the one given by god,” as if, unbelievably, he never gave his son a proper name. And yet, Augustine could say without triviality, “*Adeodatus a deo datus.*”

³¹ See the Epilogue of this article, second 1, “On Whether Philosophers Prove *deum esse*, in which I respond to Fr. Sherwin’s example of the guide dog and his presupposition of direct acquaintance in the example.

³² Although I do not know whether they would agree with the way I put it here, I am grateful to my colleagues Paddy Blanchette and Jeff Speaks for helping me think about the relationship between uniqueness proofs and the referential character of definite descriptions.

“the god exists,” even having first argued that there is only one god. I have presupposed that a god exists and that only one god exists in order to introduce the definite description “the god.” In such arguments, “the” introduces nothing new vis-à-vis the notion of *existence* at play within them.

Now, let me be clear. Once the philosopher has introduced this referential act to “the god,” or better, “the one god,” he can then proceed to make statements that are about that one god. And because, in fact, that one god is identical to God, whatever the philosopher says about the one god is being said about God. However, the philosopher is speaking ignorantly about God when he says these things about the one god. Consider the parallel of an astronomer who does not know that Vesper is Lucifer. And yet he says many true things of Vesper. Well, because Vesper is Lucifer, whatever true thing he says about Vesper is truly said of Lucifer. However, he does not speak knowingly of Lucifer; he speaks knowingly of Vesper and ignorantly of Lucifer until he comes to understand that Lucifer is Vesper.

Finally, what about “God exists,” using “god” now as a proper name? First, we have to address whether that use is not utterly incoherent, having argued above that “god” is not generally a proper name. I think it is clear that Aquinas thinks that the use of the term “*deus*” as a proper name is in some sense improper. Not faulty, but improper. Properly, like the term “*sol*,” it is a common term that is incommunicable according to *res*. But consider another grammatical phenomenon in Latin. How does a Latin speaker assert, “the sun rises in the east?” That English statement involves “the sun” acting referentially in place of a proper name, and to do so it modifies “sun” with the definite article “the.” But, not only does the Latin speaker not have an indefinite article like the English article “a,” he lacks a definite article like the English “the.” So, the Latin speaker, in order to say what the English speaker says with “the sun rises in the east,” will say, “*Sol oritur in oriente*.” Considered apart from context, that Latin sentence could be translated either as “a sun rises in the east” or as “the sun rises in the east.” Context makes it clear to the Latin speaker which statement is made. And, of course, the truth conditions for the two possible translations are different. The first requires that some sun or other rise in the east. The second has that truth condition, but adds the truth condition that there is only one sun. So, we know that the two statements are not equivalent. Similarly, “a god exists” has different truth conditions from “the god exists.” And as we have seen, both have different truth conditions from “God exists.”

What the example of “*sol*” in “*Sol oritur in oriente*” shows is that the common term “*sol*,” which is not a *nomen proprium*, can be used as a proper name in a context, particularly in a context in which one thinks there is only one sun.³³ In that respect, we might say its use is *improprie*, by which we do not mean faulty or incorrect, but just not ordinary. So, in a context in which one thinks there is only one god, it is also legitimate, if not ordinary, to use the term “*deus*” *improprie*, as if a *nomen proprium*. That is why it is not incoherent for Aquinas to use the term “*deus*” as a proper name in the context of the article on Faith when he speaks of believing that “God is such and such,” “believing God,” and “believing in God.” Good readers should and will pay attention to context.

Now, because in English we have indefinite and definite articles, we do not ordinarily say such things as “sun rises in the east.” We say such things as “the sun rises in the east,” where the phrase “the sun” functions referentially in place of a proper name. Notice that we speak this way even though we now think Aquinas was wrong and that there are in fact many suns. But we do not speak falsely if we use “the sun,” since we think context determines the correctness of the use. Similarly, in English we may say, “God exists” even without the use of a definite article used in “the god exists.” This use is not incorrect or faulty, so long as we keep context in mind.³⁴

And what is the context? Here a clear asymmetry between the philosopher and the theologian shows up. The theologian knows that

³³ To insist otherwise—that is, to insist that “*sol*” cannot be used as a proper name—is to insist that Latin speakers could simply never use “*sol*” referentially on its own, lacking the definite article. In order to speak about the sun, they would always have had to use demonstrative adjectives, as in “this sun” (“*hoc sol*”) or “that sun” (“*ipse sol*”). But demonstrative adjectives function to distinguish referentially multiple instances of a kind from one another, a need no medieval Latin speaker like Aquinas would have felt. Consider again my earlier point in the footnotes about Augustine’s use of the general phrase “*a deo datus*” as the *nomen proprie* of his son, a general phrase that is strictly, speaking, no more a *nomen proprie* than either “*sol*” or “*deus*.”

³⁴ Indeed, it strikes me that this a prime instance in which an ordinary Christian would think it wrong to say that, in using the term “God,” he or she is really using a definite description. Consider the difference between saying to a friend who is close to despair, “the god loves you,” versus “God loves you,” or between saying, “the god is love,” versus “God is love.” It strikes me at least that there is a great difference between these two sets of statements in the lives of Christians. Consider a similar phenomenon appearing in the two statements “the mother loves you” and “Mother loves you.” Perhaps the latter pair is a better example for those who do not share Christian faith.

"God exists," that "God is the just and merciful creator of all that exists other than himself originating all things, governing all things, redeeming all things." She knows these things because God has revealed them and she believes God. Whether a theologian believes *in* God is another story. But she believes God. What her believing God allows the theologian to do is to consider what the philosopher has achieved with his demonstrations and ask, "is God the god of the philosophers?" And she can answer that question affirmatively because of what she knows of what God has revealed. We see Augustine engage in just this sort of identification when, in book VII of the *Confessions*, he identifies the one god of the Platonists with God whom he has come to know through revelation and in his heart.³⁵ The philosophers argue that there is only one being that is the creator and originator of all things other than itself. The believing theologian knows that God is such because she believes God and believes that God has revealed these things. Therefore, the believing theologian concludes that "God is identical to the god of the philosophers." But keep in mind that this conclusion is an identity statement that the theologian proves, not an existence statement. By showing that "God is identical to the god of the philosophers," she has not shown that "God exists." She has presupposed it.

How does the philosopher fare on this same identity question, "God is identical to the god of the philosophers"? Nothing prevents the philosopher from intending to use the term "God" as the theologian uses it. In doing so, his ability to so intend is parasitical upon the referential use of the community of faith he relates himself to. Even an atheist can use the term in that fashion when he says in his heart "God does not exist," just as someone who has never met Dave Brubeck can use the name as I do when he says, "I want to meet Dave Brubeck, because I do not believe that anyone can play the piano to soothe the savage breast," only to be told, "that is too bad; Dave Brubeck is dead."

What the philosopher cannot do is simply attach the proper name "God," as used by the believer, to the being he has referred to with the phrase "the one god" and then go on to assert that "the one god is God" or "God is identical to the god of the philosophers." He needs to demonstrate that identity, just as the theologian must. That is, just like the theologian, the philosopher has to engage in an identity proof

³⁵ I owe this point to Fred Crosson, "Reconsidering Aquinas as a Post-Liberal Theologian," cited above.

to demonstrate that "the one god is God." But that he cannot do. Why? Because, formally, as a philosopher he does not accept as true for his arguments what has been revealed about God.³⁶ To perform the identity demonstration, it is not sufficient just to intend to refer to the being the theologian refers to with the term "God."

For the philosopher intending to argue the identity proof, it is necessary to know to be true what the theologian holds true of God as revealed by God, at least those things the philosopher on his side of the Tiber has demonstrated of the one god. He then has to argue that those features believed by the theologian to be possessed by God are indeed identical to the features of the one god to which he is referring. But to know those things to be materially true of God, the philosopher would have to believe God—*credere deum*. God would have to be the formal object of his belief. In so doing, he would cease to be acting formally as a philosopher and would have taken up the cross of theology; anything he would prove from that point on would not be a philosophical demonstration. In that respect, it is worse for the philosopher than we thought. Not only can he not philosophically demonstrate the existence of God, as I claimed in the beginning. He cannot even philosophically demonstrate that what he talks about when he speaks of "the one god" is identical to God. He is like the astronomer who can do only dusk astronomy but not dawn astronomy. In addition, as I argued above about "the one god," anything true that he says about the one god will be true of God, because God is the one god. And yet the philosopher's saying of these things of God without knowing it will be nothing other than an expression of his ignorance of God. If you insist that he knows God because he knows the one god, at best we might credit him with an ignorant knowledge of God—an unknowing knowledge of God. As Aquinas had said, he does not even get that God exists.

I'll just stop now with the following summary statement. Philosophers prove nothing knowingly about God, and when they speak about the one god, they speak ignorantly about God. As a Thomistic philosopher, my advice to them would be to take Wittgenstein as their model—that about which they cannot speak, they ought to

³⁶ At best, he could give a conditional proof along the lines of: "if the beliefs of the Christian are true, then . . ." But of course, that is not a demonstration in the sense enunciated at the beginning of the essay because it is precisely his not asserting the antecedent to be true that constitutes his formal unbelief as a philosopher.

remain silent. My advice to theologians who believe God and believe in God would be to use in their reflections whatever the philosophers ignorantly but truly say about God, but then take Augustine and his *Confessions* as a guide if they would knowingly lovingly speak of and to God, believing *in* God. N·V