

Can Atheism be Rational? A Reading of Thomas Aquinas

STEPHEN L. BROCK*

Il n'y a que deux sortes de personnes qu'on puisse appeler raisonnables; ou ceux qui servent Dieu de tout leur cœur parce qu'ils le connaissent, ou ceux qui le cherchent de tout leur cœur, parce qu'ils ne le connaissent pas. (Pascal, *Pensées* §194)

Does St Thomas Aquinas have anything to teach us on the subject of atheism? We might doubt it, even if we share his basic outlook. The reason would be the very fact that in his day there were so few who did not share it. It was, as they say, an age of faith. The profession of some sort of religious belief, indeed monotheism, was virtually universal, not just in Europe but in practically all of what Europeans then knew of the world. No doubt there were individual cases of “godlessness”¹. The learned would also have known something about atheistic philosophies in pagan antiquity. But on the whole, the medievals seem to have had little incentive to take atheism very seriously. It hardly comes as a surprise to find that St Thomas’s own writings contain no thematic treatment of it². Only in modernity does “serious” atheism seem to resurface.

* Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Piazza S. Apollinare 49, 00186 Rome, Italy. A draft of this paper was read at the VII Philosophy Conference of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, *God and the Meaning of Human Existence*, 26-27 February 1998.

¹ “Godless”, or even “impious”, seems to be closer than “atheist” to the sense of the Greek *atheos*.

² There is also very little secondary literature on atheism in Thomas’s thought. What there is concentrates on the contents of the arguments for and against the existence of God. My interest here is rather in what help Thomas can give us in explaining and evaluating a person’s adoption of an atheistic position.

Yet I think it would be wrong to assume that medieval authors have nothing to teach us about atheism. Perhaps they had little direct experience of it and seldom subjected it to direct or systematic investigation. But we should also remember how thoroughly they treated the question of the human mind's relation to the truth about God. As Thomas might remind us, the understanding of a thing and the understanding of its contrary go together. To study the nature of knowledge about the divine is also, in an indirect but still very real way, to study the nature of ignorance and error about it. If it is true that the medievals did not take atheism very seriously, it may yet be true that they had serious reasons not to.

The following pages concern what we might call Thomas's fundamental views on atheism. By this I mean his understanding of its sheer possibility: whether or under what conditions the human mind is capable of deviating so far from the truth about the divine as to deny its very existence. It is a question that has occurred to me after having had occasion to consider side by side a number of scattered texts in Thomas's works. In large part my procedure will consist simply of presenting these texts, together with a few others, and of drawing out some of their implications. This is a first sounding of Thomas on this topic, and there is no pretense of a comprehensive view, either of all the relevant texts or of all the nuances in his doctrine. I do hope to provide an accurate general sketch of it, and to clear up some of the perplexities and misunderstandings that the texts I have chosen might give rise to. I also hope that in the end the exercise will indeed prove to be of more than antiquarian interest.

1. A dilemma in St Thomas about the possibility of atheism

1.1. Ample room for atheism?

It is a well known teaching of St Thomas's that for the human mind, in this life, the existence of a deity³ is not self-evident⁴. Or to be somewhat more

³ I use 'a deity' here, rather than 'God', because in common parlance the name 'God' is used either as a proper name, or (uncapitalized) as a common name normally reserved for pagan deities. By contrast, Thomas's *deus*, even as applied to the Christian deity, has the grammatical character of a common name. He explains that this is because it is the name of a nature (*Summa theologiae* = *STh* I, q. 13, a. 8; cfr. a. 10). The question *an sit deus* has the form of a question whether reality includes at least one instance of a divine nature. It is not like the question whether Socrates exists. From our point of view, it is not self-evident that there cannot be more than one divine being — that there can only be "the" deity (cfr. *STh* I, q. 13, a. 9, ad 2). In the rest of this paper I shall often follow normal practice and speak of "the existence of God".

⁴ For a thorough discussion and bibliography of this doctrine in Thomas and other medieval authors, See L. TUNINETTI, *Per se notum. Die logische Beschaffenheit des*

precise, it is not what he calls a truth known *per se*⁵. This means something that a person sees to be true immediately in light of his or her understanding of the terms involved. Our understanding of what the proposition “there is a deity” means does not, just by itself, make us understand that the proposition is true.

Thomas is quick to explain that this is only the situation *quoad nos*, for us, who do not perfectly grasp what the terms of this truth signify⁶. In itself, the truth that a deity exists is known *per se*. This means that those who have fully assimilated its signification, the “wise”, see its truth immediately. For a deity does exist; and the divine nature, which is what the term ‘deity’ chiefly signifies, is in fact identical with the act by which the deity exists or with what ‘to exist’, in the case of the deity, chiefly signifies (*STh I*, q. 3, a. 4). The predicate is included in the signification of the subject, and it is just this that characterizes a truth known *per se* (*STh I*, q. 2, a. 1). But to conceive the divine nature as it is in itself, and thereby properly to conceive what to exist is for a deity, is a wisdom that no one in this life can boast⁷. We cannot see the divine nature and the divine existence in their real identity, even if we can eventually come to see that such identity must somehow hold.

It is also well known that for St Thomas, the human mind can reach the

Selbstverständlichen im Denken des Thomas von Aquin, E. J. Brill, Leiden-New York-Köln 1996, pp. 111-122.

⁵ *STh I*, q. 2, a. 1. On the difference between “known *per se*” and “self-evident”, see K. FLANNERY, *Acts Amid Precepts. The Aristotelian Logical Structure of Thomas Aquinas’s Moral Theory*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2001, pp. 32-33. Also useful is the discussion of *evident* and *selbstverständlich* as German translations of *per se notum* in TUNINETTI, *Per se notum* (*cit. supra*, n. 4), p. 9.

⁶ In Thomas’s doctrine of signification, it is possible for someone to have a word in his vocabulary and to know quite well “how to use it”, and yet to have a very imperfect grasp of what it signifies. What a word primarily signifies is the essence of the thing that it refers to, and above all the thing’s proper differentia. But someone may know what thing a word refers to, well enough to use the word, without knowing the thing’s proper differentia. See *De veritate* q. 4, a. 1, ad 8: «nomen dicitur ab aliquo imponi dupliciter: aut ex parte imponentis nomen, aut ex parte rei cui imponitur. Ex parte autem rei nomen dicitur ab illo imponi per quod completur ratio rei quam nomen significat; et haec est differentia specifica illius rei. Et hoc est quod principaliter significatur per nomen. Sed quia differentiae essentiales sunt nobis ignotae, quandoque utimur accidentibus vel effectibus loco earum, ut *Metaphys.* dicitur; et secundum hoc nominamus rem; et sic illud quod loco differentiae essentialis sumitur, est a quo imponitur nomen ex parte imponentis, sicut lapis imponitur ab effectu, qui est laedere pedem. Et hoc non oportet esse principaliter significatum per nomen, sed illud loco cuius hoc ponitur».

⁷ *STh I*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2. By the same token, we cannot properly conceive that nature than which no greater can be thought. This is so even if we can make sense of, and know how to use, the expression “that than which nothing greater can be thought”. Thomas seems to hold that Anselm’s fool does not after all have to admit that God “exists in his mind” in the precise way that Anselm’s argument requires: «non enim inconveniens est quolibet dato vel in re vel in intellectu aliquid maius cogitari posse, nisi ei qui concedit esse aliquid quo maius cogitari non possit in rerum natura» (*Summa contra gentiles* =*SCG I.11, §67*; emphasis added).

truth of the existence of a deity in a mediated way, by reasoning about the evidence. Indeed, he thinks there is sufficient evidence to enable us to reach a genuine “vision” of this truth. The existence of a divine being can be seen with the kind of vision reached in scientific knowing, the vision furnished by proof or demonstration⁸.

But Thomas is perfectly aware that demonstrative knowledge about the divine is very difficult. Demonstrative knowledge in general is difficult. It is all the more so when it concerns something so abstract, so far removed from the objects of the senses and the imagination, as the truth about the divine. By no means everyone is capable of grasping the existence of the deity in a scientific way.

This is one of the reasons, Thomas judges, why God Himself has provided another way of coming to embrace the truth about Him: the revelation of His Word. For those who cannot “see” the truth of the existence of a deity, the supernatural gift of faith still enables them to believe it with certainty.

However, Thomas cannot be of the opinion that the truth revealed in the Word of God is something known to all mankind. If he were, he would hardly be able to explain the widespread errors about God that he judges it another purpose of revelation to correct⁹. In this sense, belief in the existence of a deity through supernatural faith shares something with the understanding of the demonstration of it. They both belong to somewhat special groups of people.

These familiar doctrines of St Thomas all appear very early on in the *Summa theologiae*. It seems to me that in light of them, readers easily can, and in fact sometimes do, form a certain picture of the human intellect’s relation to the truth of the existence of a deity. It is a picture in which there is fairly ample room for denial of that truth. Simply imagine a person of modest (not sub-normal) intelligence, who has had no contact with the teaching of Scripture. The scientific demonstration of the existence of a deity is too difficult for him, and he has not heard the Word of God. In such a person’s mind, would atheism not be a real possibility? By atheism I simply mean the opinion that there is no God.

To be sure, even for such a person, positively to deny that there is a God would be to go beyond anything that the evidence compels him to hold. Even if he does not see that there is a God, neither can he be seeing that there is not. But

⁸ On scientific knowledge as a kind of seeing, see *STh* II-II, q. 1, aa. 4-5. Properly speaking, science is of conclusions, which are seen in light of principles. The principles are seen by their own light and so in a more perfect way. There are also different kinds of scientific demonstrations or “displays”. Thomas teaches that the demonstration of the existence of a deity is what Aristotle calls a demonstration *quia per effectum*, a mere proof of a fact, in light of its consequences or effects. This is different from, and weaker than, a demonstration *propter quid*, which displays the item demonstrated in light of its proper reason or cause.

⁹ See *STh* I, q. 1, a. 1.

what he is strictly compelled to hold about God's existence is not the point. The point is that he might quite easily choose to deny it — or so at least it seems, on the basis of the doctrines we have considered. People hold many opinions that go beyond what the evidence shows or necessarily implies, often with very little difficulty. (Sometimes they are also quite right to do so.) Assuming that a person has no access to either the scientific or the revealed path to the knowledge of God, should we be extremely surprised if, for one reason or another, that person decides to reject talk of the divine as mere fable? The doctrines considered so far have not given us any reason to be.

1.2. No room at all?

However, further reading of the *Summa theologiae* indicates that something must be wrong with this picture. For my purposes, it is especially interesting to turn to a *quaestio* in the *Prima secundae*, concerning the moral precepts of the Old Law. There we find some passages that fly almost directly in the face of the picture.

Speaking of the precepts to love God with one's whole heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself, Thomas says that these two are “first and common precepts of the law of nature” (*STh I-II*, q. 100, a. 3, ad 1). This is a technical expression, explained earlier in his discussion of the natural law. The first and common precepts of the law of nature are those that are known *per se*, not only in themselves or to the wise, but also *quoad nos*, commonly to everyone (*STh I-II*, q. 94, a. 2). A precept of this sort cannot be deleted from the human heart, at least as understood abstractly or universally (*ibidem*, a. 6). It can be deleted only *in particulari operabili*, i.e. when it comes to using the precept or applying it to one's personal acts and choices. In the heat of action, so to speak, someone's appetites may obstruct the consideration of the precept's truth and may lead to conduct, or even to judgments, opposed to it. But there is no one to whom it would not seem true if they subjected it to disinterested or rational reflection. (This is not to say that all are equally disposed for such reflection.)

A related passage from the same *Quaestio* is no less striking (*STh I-II*, q. 100, a. 11). Here Thomas is arguing that the moral precepts of the Old Law, as distinguished from its judicial and ceremonial precepts, have force from the very dictate of natural reason, even without being instituted in positive law. He puts the moral precepts in three grades. The first is what interests us.

«Some [moral precepts] are exceedingly certain and so manifest that they require no instruction at all, such as the dictates about the love of God and neighbor...; whence about these no one can err, when it comes to the judgment of reason (*nullus potest errare secundum iudicium rationis*)».

No one, giving rational consideration to the proposition that God is to be loved above all things, can fail to acknowledge its truth¹⁰.

Other texts from the *Summa theologiae* in line with these declarations could also be adduced, texts concerning the natural love of God in the wills of men and angels¹¹. But I think those cited suffice to render untenable the picture proposed earlier. If the dictate to love God above all is something known *per se* commonly to all, cannot be deleted from the human heart, and is not susceptible of rational denial, how easy can it be for the human mind to deny God's very existence¹²? Indeed, what we now might wonder is whether Thomas can hold

¹⁰ Evidently the expression “judgment of reason” is meant here in a sense in which sometimes such a judgment can err. I believe it is the same as what Thomas describes elsewhere as a judgment formed through a “complete use” of reason, one reached through study and examination of the matter in the light of general principles. This is opposed to judgment “through connaturality”, formed in accordance with one’s appetitive disposition and “taste” (see *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2, discussed below, n. 39). Elsewhere Thomas speaks of judgment *per modum cognitionis* as opposed to judgment *per modum inclinationis* (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3). An especially pertinent text is *De veritate* q. 17, a. 1, ad 4, where he distinguishes between the judgment of conscience and the judgment of choice. The former consists in *pura cognitione* and is formed *speculando per principia*, whereas the latter consists in the application of cognition to one’s appetite or affection. This is pertinent because of course even the judgment of conscience can err. In any case, it seems clear that the thought underlying *STh* I-II, q. 100, a. 11 is very close the distinction between knowledge *in universalis* and knowledge *in particulari operabili* in I-II, q. 94, a. 6.

¹¹ Thomas holds that the wills of the angels possess a natural love (*dilectio*) by which they love God more than themselves (*STh* I, q. 60, a. 5). This natural love is the appetitive side of the corresponding precept of natural law (*ibidem, Sed contra*). (This fits with the correlation between natural inclination and natural law that he sets out in *STh* I-II, q. 91, a. 2, and I-II, q. 94, a. 2.) And this love, like the precept, is genuinely natural: it cannot be altogether abolished, though it can be counteracted by some acquired disposition. In the treatise on grace Thomas indicates that man is in a quite parallel situation (*STh* I-II, q. 109, a. 3). Even after the fall, in the state of “corrupt nature”, man departs from the love of God above all things only “according to the appetite of the rational will” (*secundum appetitum voluntatis rationalis*). It is only the *voluntas ut ratio*, not the *voluntas ut natura*, that can withdraw from the love of God and violate this precept of the natural law.

¹² Can someone think that God ought to be loved above all things and at the same time deny that a God exists? Although perhaps there can be some type of appetitive attitude toward something thought not to exist, “love” hardly seems the right word. At best it would be a very qualified sort of love, similar to a velleity, which is a very qualified sort of act of will (cfr. I-II, q. 13, a. 5, ad 1). It is of the very nature of love to tend toward real union with the one loved. The conviction that the object in question does not exist, and never will, makes a genuine tendency toward real union with it impossible. However, it is important to distinguish between denial of God’s existence and doubt or uncertainty about it. The latter seems to be compatible with a genuine love. It would still allow an unqualified tendency toward union with God, with the *hope* that He exists. Part of the movement toward Him would be the very effort to determine the truth about His existence (an effort which is itself dictated by natural law: *STh* I-II, q. 94, a. 2). The importance of this distinction will emerge toward the end of this study (3.3.).

these things and still allow any room at all in the human mind for a genuine denial¹³. At any rate, there is surely at least an apparent tension between his claim that God's supreme lovability is known *per se* commonly to all, and his claim that God's existence is not¹⁴.

1.3. The real issue

In order to see how this tension might be resolved, we need to define the issue. Doing so will also help us work toward a more accurate picture of the human mind's capacity for atheism, as Thomas sees it.

¹³ One might also suspect that in saying these things about the precept to love God, Thomas is merely generalizing from the pervasiveness of religious belief in his own society. But in fact his approach is more critical than this. For one thing, he did know (e.g. from *The Epistle to the Romans*) about societies in which the “religious instinct” was corrupt. For another, he makes a clear distinction between his claim that the precept is universally known and any claim that it is universally efficacious, or even universally considered. In fact he is quite clear that it is neither. Not all consider it: in contrast with the duty to love oneself, the duty to love God has been obscured by sin, to the point that it had to be revealed (*STh I-II*, q. 100, a. 5, ad 1). And it is certainly not always efficacious: he insists that in the state of fallen nature, it is fruitless without grace (*STh I-II*, q. 109, a. 3). To repeat, he is not saying that there can be no error at all about the precept to love God, but only that no one can err about it “according to the judgment of reason”.

¹⁴ It has been suggested that when Thomas speaks of a naturally known precept to love God, he is really only referring to the “implicit” or “confused” sort of knowledge of God that he speaks of in connection with the natural desire for happiness or beatitude (*STh I*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1); see FLANNERY, *Acts Amid Precepts* (*cit. supra*, n. 5), p. 44. In this case, the natural knowledge of the precept would not depend upon awareness of God's existence, because the precept, as naturally known, would in fact not be precisely about God, i.e. the supreme being: Thomas says that to know God in that confused way *non est simpliciter cognoscere Deum esse* (*STh I*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1). It is an attractive suggestion. However, it seems hard to square with the fact that whereas Thomas does not think it possible for someone directly to chose not to pursue happiness, he does think that a person's choices can directly conflict with this natural love of God (and so with the naturally known precept that corresponds to it); see above, n. 11. Moreover, the love of God that is implicit in the natural desire of one's own happiness would be the love of God precisely as the object of one's happiness. This is a kind of *amor concupiscentiae*. But Thomas insists that the natural precept to love God above all also refers to *amor amicitiae* (*STh I*, q. 60, a. 5). This adds something to the love of God as object of one's happiness (cfr. *STh I-II*, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2). The latter is the love of God as providing your own supreme satisfaction. The former is the love of God as the one for whom you and your very satisfaction ultimately exist. Perhaps it could be argued that there is even a sort of implicit *amor amicitiae* of God in the love of oneself. But this still does not seem to be how Thomas understands the precept to love God. He teaches that whereas the natural duties to love God and neighbor were obscured by sin, the natural duty to love oneself was not (*STh I-II*, q. 100, a. 5, ad 1). So it seems that the question of the relation between the knowledge of God's existence and the knowledge of His lovability must be resolved in some other way.

First let us concentrate on the thesis that God's supreme lovability is a truth known *per se*, not only in itself but also *quoad nos*. This already raises a question. Evidently knowledge of this truth depends upon previously acquired knowledge about God. This in turn is reached by way of other things, those that provide the evidence for Him (*STh* II-II, q. 27, a. 3, obj. 2). Is it possible for a truth known *per se* to depend on other knowledge that is not *per se*?

It will help us to break this question down into parts. First, we may ask, can the knowledge of something known *per se*, "in virtue of itself", ever presuppose or depend upon other knowledge of any kind?

Certainly it can. There are many types of dependence and presupposition. The way in which the knowledge of a conclusion depends on that of the premises is only one type of cognitive dependence. This type does of course make it impossible for the dependent item to be known *per se*. The premises contain the middle term by which the terms of the conclusion are connected. The connection is not immediate. The truth of a proposition is known *per se* just insofar as the connection of its terms is immediate. Nevertheless, it is possible that the connection between the terms be immediate, and yet depend upon other knowledge — not in order to effect the connection, but in some other way.

In one way, prior knowledge may be needed as preparation for the apprehension of the terms themselves. It is in this way that all human intellectual cognition presupposes sense-knowledge. The senses provide the material out of which the mind draws its first objects, those providing the terms of its natural, immediate understanding of first principles (see *STh* I-II, q. 51, a. 1).

In another way, the understanding of a particular truth may necessarily include the understanding of simpler, more general truths. For instance, no truth can be understood except together with the principle of non-contradiction. To understand a truth is to see that its subject and predicate are united rather than divided. It is to see that the proposition is fit to be affirmed rather than denied. This could not be seen if one did not at the same time see that it cannot both be affirmed and denied, or that subject and predicate cannot be both united and separated at once. To see this is to understand the principle of non-contradiction. The principle of non-contradiction is not a premise from which all other truths are concluded, but it is nevertheless a presupposition of them all.

The next question is whether a *per se* known truth can presuppose knowledge got by reasoning, knowledge that is not *per se* but rather mediated. In fact there is no great difficulty here either. It does not really matter how the presupposed knowledge is reached: by sense-perception, as an immediate consequence of the understanding of the terms, by reasoning, etc. All that matters is that the knowledge only serve as some kind of indispensable condition of the truth in question, but not strictly as a premise from which it derives. For instance, Thomas takes it as *per se* known (though only to "the wise") that an angel, which is an incorporeal substance, is not contained circumspectively in a place (*STh* I-II, q. 94, a. 2). Knowing this presupposes knowing that there are

angels, and the existence of angels is not known *per se* (even to the wise: an angel's existence is not included in its nature).

There may also be other ways in which knowledge of an immediate truth presupposes other knowledge. But these suffice to show that it is not absurd to say that the precept of the love of God is a *per se* known truth, and that knowing it nevertheless presupposes other knowledge, including knowledge reached by reasoning. As Thomas says, we first come to consider God by thinking about other things, but thereafter we can consider Him immediately¹⁵. And then His supreme lovability, which is the same as His supreme goodness, is immediately apparent. For, in Thomas's judgment, it pertains somehow to the very meaning of the name 'God' that it refers to a perfect, even infinite good¹⁶.

There still remains a difficulty, however. It is that the lovability of God is said not only to be known *per se* but also to be known *per se quoad nos*, commonly to all. It is not knowledge had only by "the wise". If the knowledge of a truth is common, then surely any knowledge upon which it depends must be equally common, or even more so. But this is precisely what the knowledge of God does not seem to be: common. At least, it does not seem to be so if we consider it as something that can be reached only by scientific demonstration or by faith.

Lest the difficulty here seem greater than it really is, we should note that "principles known commonly to all" does not mean principles that absolutely all human beings actually know. For Thomas, there is nothing that absolutely all human beings actually know. We all begin as tabulae rasaæ. But there are things that all are by nature apt to know, or that it is absolutely "normal" to know. They are things that require no special endowment or preparation. They constitute no measure of wisdom¹⁷. However, even so understood, can "principles known commonly to all" include the precept to love God? It is hard to see how, if the only ways to know of God's existence are science and faith. For neither of these is simply "normal" knowledge.

¹⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 27, a. 3, ad 2 (in defense of the proposition that it is possible in this life to love God for His own sake): «cognitio dei acquiritur quidem per alia, sed postquam iam cognoscitur, non per alia cognoscitur, sed per seipsum».

¹⁶ *STh* I, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1: «hoc intelligitur in hoc nomine Deus, scilicet quod sit quoddam bonum infinitum».

¹⁷ As Thomas uses the expression, what is known *per se communiter omnibus* is not opposed to what "not everyone" knows; it is opposed to what is known *solis sapientibus*. See *STh* I, q. 2, a. 1; I-II, q. 94, a. 2. Thomas attributes the distinction to a passage in Boethius's *Quomodo substantiae* (known in the Middle Ages as *De hebdomadibus*), discussed in *lect. 1* of Thomas's commentary on that work. On Boethius's doctrine and its medieval reception, see TUNINETTI, *Per se notum* (*cit. supra*, n. 4), pp. 48-67. On the arts and sciences generally, even those that do not reach to the knowledge of the divine, as qualified instances of "wisdom", see ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* I.1, 981a12-982a1; on wisdom as something difficult, I.2, 982a10.

2. The common knowledge of God

2.1. The imperfection of the common knowledge of God

So far I have confined my discussion to the *Summa theologiae*, the most familiar of Thomas's works. But those acquainted with a certain chapter of the *Summa contra gentiles* (*SCG*) will know that there is more to the story. What we learn from it is that there is a knowledge of the existence of God that is in fact extremely common among human beings. There is, Thomas says,

«a sort of common and confused knowledge of God that is found in almost all men.... For by natural reason man can attain straightway (*statim*) to some sort of knowledge of God. For, seeing that natural things carry on in a definite order, and since there is no ordination without an orderer, men for the most part perceive that there is some orderer of the things we see»¹⁸.

Before returning to the question of the possibility of atheism, let us try to characterize this common way of knowing of God.

Thomas calls it knowledge by “natural reason”. This is certainly not to be confused with knowledge by scientific demonstration. He goes on to discuss that sort of knowledge in the next chapter of the *Summa contra gentiles*. Here the expression ‘natural reason’ indicates something like rude or vulgar or uncultivated reason. We might almost call it “pagan” reason, thinking of the etymology of that term (though avoiding any pejorative connotations).

As Thomas is quick to point out in the sequel, this common knowledge is very imperfect. It is quite indefinite about who the deity is, about the divine attributes, and even about how many deities there are¹⁹. One of the great merits

¹⁸ «Est enim quaedam communis et confusa Dei cognitio, quae quasi omnibus hominibus adest; ... quia naturali ratione statim homo in aliquam Dei cognitionem pervenire potest. Videntes enim homines res naturales secundum ordinem certum currere; cum ordinatio absque ordinatore non sit, percipiunt, ut in pluribus, aliquem esse ordinatorem rerum quas videmus» (*SCG* III.38). This passage echoes somewhat a text from John Damascene (*De fide orthodoxa* I.1) which Thomas cites with approval in his so-called *Principium, Rigans montes* (c. 1): «cognitio existendi Deum naturaliter omnibus est inserta». In the other places where he cites the Damascene passage, it is as seeming to support the claim that the existence of God is *per se* known to all (*In I Sententiarum* d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, obj. 1; *De veritate* q. 10, a. 12, obj. 1; *STh* I, q. 2, a. 1, obj. 1). Against this, the alternative interpretations that he offers vary; the only one somewhat akin to the *SCG* doctrine is *De veritate* q. 10, a. 12, ad 1: «omnibus naturaliter est insitum aliquid unde potest pervenire ad cognoscendum Deum esse».

¹⁹ For some authors, this means that what Thomas is talking about is not really knowledge of God at all. See for instance N. KRETMANN, *The Metaphysics of Theism. Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles I*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p. 113: even what Thomas proposes as a strict demonstration of God's existence, in *SCG* I.13, concludes to something that «any atheist could accept», namely, «a first, immutable cause, an extraordinary entity the existence and nature of which constitute an ultimate explanation of all change and all existence». Compare Thomas's formulation of the common meaning of the term *deus*: «something standing above all, that is principle of all and remote from all» (*STh* I, q. 13, a. 8,

of the strict demonstrative knowledge of God is that it removes a good deal of the indefiniteness of this “natural” knowledge. So, of course, does divine revelation.

Still, even the common or vulgar knowledge of the divine is not completely indefinite. It at least involves the notions of a mover and an orderer of the things in the world. That is, it involves some sort of general providence, and with that, some supreme sort of goodness.

The *Summa theologiae* contains no strict parallel to the *Summa contra gentiles* passage. But we do find the thought present there. In the *Prima pars*, Thomas indicates that providence belongs to the common understanding of the name ‘God’: everyone “means to call ‘God’ that which has universal providence over things; hence Dionysius ... says that the deity is what sees all with providence and perfect goodness” (*STh I*, q. 13, a. 8). And in the next article he indicates that the notion of God, based on providence, is something very common: the name of God, he says, is formed in view of “an operation proper to Him, which we continually experience” (*STh I*, q. 13, a. 9, ad 3). We have also seen the texts in the *Prima secundae* on the precept to love God. In the *Prima secundae* we are told as well that there is a natural inclination, and a corresponding precept of natural law, toward knowing the truth about God (q. 94, a. 2).

Perhaps the closest thing in the *Summa theologiae* to a parallel of the *Summa contra gentiles* text is a passage from the *Secunda secundae*, in which Thomas argues that offering sacrifice to God is a matter of natural law (*STh II-II*, q. 85, a. 1). He is considering the common recognition of divine providence in its practical application and properly religious dimension. In the *Sed contra*, citing no authority, he observes that “in every age, among all nations of men, there has always been some offering of sacrifices”. In the body of the article he explains that “natural reason dictates to man that he be subject to some superior, on account of the shortcomings (*defectus*) he perceives in himself, in respect of which he needs to be helped and directed. And whatever this be, it is what is called God by all”²⁰.

ad 2; cfr. I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2). Clearly it is an important issue. But what interests me in this paper is Thomas’s view on the denial of the existence of what he himself means by *deus*.

²⁰ It is not difficult to see a connection between these practical considerations about the divine, as providing for human life, and the more theoretical consideration sketched in *SCG III.38*. Surely the experience of common human shortcomings is chiefly in relation to natural things, which often exceed either our understanding or our power, or both. The perception of an orderer of nature itself is the perception of an agent not subject to such shortcomings and so able to provide help. Moreover, among the natural beings that plainly exceed a person’s understanding, there is the person himself. The very purpose of one’s existence is not at all easy to know; and there is a strong natural desire to know it. I mention this in connection with what Thomas seems to regard as yet another “first principle” concerning our relationship with God: the need to learn one’s true purpose in life, as ordained by the author of one’s nature. This need is so common as to occur, perhaps confusedly at first but quite peremptorily, to all who reach the use of reason (*STh I-II*, q. 89, a. 6).

2.2. The naturalness of the common knowledge

To repeat, this vulgar knowledge of God is not a demonstration or a result of strict scientific inquiry. It does not involve certification through rigorous reduction to first principles. It is not quite the “vision” of truth that demonstration provides. Nor does its object have anything like the definiteness or precision of the revealed object of faith. It is a very rude knowledge.

Even less, of course, is it an understanding of a *per se* known truth, an unmediated understanding, such as Thomas explicitly rules out in the case of God. As in demonstration, there is a genuine movement of the mind here, a reasoning. It is an apprehension of God as a cause, an orderer, and hence in relation to the things we immediately see. These provide the starting-point and the middle term.

Still, Thomas repeatedly speaks of it as a “perception”. It is a genuine, if imperfect, appropriation or assimilation of truth. It is not at all mere conjecture.

It seems to me that the language of “perception” here also suggests a more positive sense in which this common knowledge of God is to be regarded as “natural”, and in which the demonstrative knowledge is not “natural”. This is that it “comes naturally” to people. No special training or method is required. The process need not even be deliberate. It is a kind of spontaneous “natural inference”²¹. The movement of thought involved is hardly noticed. It is not analyzed into its elementary steps. It seems “a simple vision of a total situation”²². It is experienced as a perception.

Still, if this common knowledge of God does not simply do away with the need for the scientific sort, at least part of the reason is that there is after all movement involved. The movement is what makes the object somewhat blurry, imprecise. Part of the task of metaphysics or natural theology is to correct this imprecision. It begins to do so simply by calling attention to the movement involved²³, and by undertaking a more rigorous presentation of the path or paths to God’s existence.

The fact of movement is also important in accounting for the possibility of encountering genuine obstacles, serious objections, to the acknowledgment of God’s existence. Nothing can get in the way of an immediate vision, but a

²¹ L. DEWAN, O.P., *St. Thomas, Our Natural Lights, and the Moral Order*, «*Angelicum*», vol. 67, no. 3 (1990) p. 300.

²² *Ibidem*. Thomas’s doctrine of human cognition makes ample space for such spontaneous and barely conscious movements, both prior to and within the properly intellectual level of cognition. It is just the life of the mind. For Thomas’s readers, perhaps the most familiar instances of such non-scientific, natural reasonings would be the so-called secondary precepts of the natural law; cfr. *STh I-II*, q. 94, aa. 4-5; q. 100, aa. 1, 3.

²³ Cfr. DEWAN, *loc. cit.*: «that we do not have to do with an immediate...grasp, as of a principle too clear to allow for clarification, is a judgment pertaining to the metaphysician».

movement can be impeded. Of course it would also be the business of natural theology to address such objections²⁴.

2.3. The original notion of God

It seems to me that this doctrine of a “natural perception” of the presence of a deity has an important implication for how the very concept or notion of God normally enters the human mind. Certainly it would come at an early age. If it has not already entered the child’s mind through hearing people talk about God and observing religious behavior²⁵, it will enter spontaneously (again, not necessarily very consciously), as a conclusion easily drawn from the observation of the natural order. And in either case, it will go hand in hand with the assumption that such a being really exists.

In other words, it is not that we first learn (or invent) the mere concept signified by the name ‘God’, and then go on to ask whether any such thing really exists. We get the concept and the existence of the concept’s object together. This is true for countless of our concepts, maybe even for most of them; certainly for the first ones. It is true even for many things known in a mediated way. If the name ‘God’ is not quite like ‘water’ or ‘food’ or ‘color’, neither is it like ‘unicorn’ or ‘electron’ or ‘extra-terrestrials’. It is more like ‘king’ (in a nation that has a king), or perhaps ‘heart’ or ‘soul’ (in the sense of vital principle).

²⁴ KRETMANN, *The Metaphysics of Theism* (*cit. supra*, n. 19), pp. 17 ff., offers a very interesting discussion, in dialogue with Alvin Plantinga, of John Calvin’s rejection of “natural theology”. (By “natural theology” Kretzmann means a discipline consisting in, or at least involving, the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God; see p. 11.) Calvin says: «The prophets and apostles do not...dwell upon rational proofs.... If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences...we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit» (quoted by Kretzmann on p. 17, without indication of the original source). Calvin’s opposition would ultimately be based on his belief in a natural, universal *sensus divinitatis*. «This we take to be beyond controversy.... [M]en one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker... From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother’s womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget»; God «daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him» (KRETMANN, *cit.*, p. 18, again without indication of the original source). What is interesting is how similar Thomas’s doctrine of a common knowledge of God is to this doctrine of a *sensus divinitatis*, and how opposed is his evaluation of natural theology. Thomas’s common knowledge is not *quite* Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*. It is a “perception”, but not so perfect as to be an act of “seeing” God in things; and it is natural, but not strictly “compelled” or necessary. There is also some room for “forgetting” it, by the mind’s growing unnaturally “sluggish” (see below, 3.1.).

²⁵ Trying to account for the position of those who say that God’s existence is naturally known *per se*, Thomas says that sometimes they hold this because “from the start” they have been used to hearing about Him and invoking Him; for custom, «especially when it is from childhood, takes on the force of nature» (SCG I.11).

This point may be missed if we attend only to the scientific demonstration of the existence of God. The demonstration pertains to a work of subjecting this truth to rigorous and painstaking examination. It starts solely from what is included in the (questioner's) concept of 'God' (*STh I*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2). Real existence is not included in that concept, and in the scientific approach there is a clear distance between the concept and the affirmation of real existence. But this does not mean that all rational consideration of God must involve such distance. The existence of God may very well already be "obvious" to reason, or nearly so. The existence of water is not included in the very concept of 'water', but the existence of water is quite obvious. In fact it is too obvious to be a matter of serious scientific inquiry at all. But even when the object's existence is less obvious, as in the case of God, the point of examining it scientifically need not be to resolve any serious doubt or uncertainty about it (although it might also serve to address such doubts, if and when they do emerge). Sometimes the aim is only to certify it, by way of bringing the evidence for it into sharper focus and formulating the arguments with greater precision, and this with a view to providing a more rigorous basis for the study of the object's nature and attributes. The idea that reaching the scientific view on a given matter requires a radical overturning or at least suspension of one's pre-scientific conception of it is a typically modern notion, one that Thomas does not share.

In short, it is altogether natural to think that there is a God. And in fact, "always or for the most part" people do. As we saw, Thomas finds it in their behavior. "In every age, among all nations of men, there has always been some offering of sacrifices" (*STh II-II*, q. 85, a. 1, *Sed contra*).

Now we can return to the question of atheism. If there is a genuine sort of knowledge of God that is naturally common to human beings, then the fact that both scientific knowledge and faith about it are somewhat special acquisitions, not held commonly by all, by no means suffices to account for possible atheism. Thomas says that the vulgar knowledge of God is within the reach of "almost all" people. Who, if anyone, is left out? And are they the only ones for whom atheism is a real possibility?

3. Causes of atheism

3.1. Atheism and foolishness

Thomas gives us at least part of the answer in the same *Summa contra gentiles* passage. There is indeed a class of people who fail to attain even the vulgar knowledge of God and who are thereby capable of denying his very existence. It is the class of fools²⁶.

²⁶ «The fact is, Calvin thinks, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position»(Alvin Plantinga, as quoted by Kretzmann, *cit.*, p. 18).

«The stupidity (*stoliditas*) of a man is shown especially by this, that he does not perceive such manifest signs of God; just as one would be reckoned stupid who, seeing a man, did not grasp that he has a soul. Whence the Psalm says, “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God»²⁷.

I know of no place in Thomas's works where he speaks of the denial of God's existence without attributing it to stupidity or foolishness²⁸.

This explanation of atheism would certainly fit with what we have seen up to now about Thomas's view of the human mind's relation to the truth of God. It would be as possible for a human being to deny God's very existence as it is possible for a human being to fall short of what any normal person knows. To do that is to be a fool.

It will seem an extreme judgment. Let me therefore anticipate what I shall try to spell out further on, and note that it does not quite mean that every atheist must be judged to be a *perfect* fool. He may only somehow share in foolishness — namely, just insofar as he is an atheist. The perfect fool does not even perceive the signs of God. There may be others who perceive the signs but, still somewhat foolishly, judge them illusory.

Probably even this seems extreme. Other things could be said to try to mitigate it, e.g. that we are working here with a rather minimal notion of “deity”. Still, sooner or later, I believe we must simply grant that Thomas does judge atheism severely.

However, it would not be fair to Thomas — or, I think, to some atheists — to end the inquiry here. If nothing else, we should at least take a closer look at how he understands “foolishness”, *stultitia*. He does not use this term merely as a gesture of scorn for someone's intellect or opinions. Rather he takes it to signify a certain habit of mind, with a definite nature and definite characteristics. He even breaks it down into different kinds. Seen in the light of Thomas's full account of foolishness, I believe, his judgment on atheism looks considerably more interesting.

²⁷ «Designatur enim per hoc maxime hominis stoliditas, quod tam manifesta Dei signa non percipit; sicut stolidus reputaretur qui, hominem videns, eum habere animam non comprehenderet. Unde et in Psalmo dicitur: ‘dixit insipiens in corde suo, non est Deus’» (SCG III.38).

²⁸ He never dwells on the matter at much length. Here is a passage that seems to spell out a little more what he has in mind in the SCG text. «Inter omnia quae debent credere fideles, hoc est primum quod debent credere, scilicet quod sit unus deus. Considerandum autem, quid significet hoc nomen deus: quod quidem nihil est aliud quam gubernator et provisor rerum omnium. Ille igitur credit deum esse qui credit omnes res mundi huius gubernari et provideri ab illo. Qui autem credit quod omnia proveniant a casu, hic non credit deum esse. Nullus autem invenitur adeo stultus qui non credit quod res naturales gubernentur, provideantur, et disponantur; cum in quodam ordine et certis temporibus procedant. Videmus enim solem et lunam et stellas, et alias res naturales omnes servare determinatum cursum; quod non contingeret, si a casu essent. Unde si aliquis esset qui non crederet deum esse, stultus esset; *Psal.* XIII, 1: Dixit insipiens in corde suo: non est deus» (*Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum*, Article 1).

Thomas devotes an entire question of the *Summa theologiae* to *stultitia* (*STh* II-II, q. 46). Quite logically, he places it immediately after the question concerning the virtue, or rather the Holy Spirit's gift, of *sapientia*, wisdom. For *stultitia*, in his vocabulary, is synonymous with *insipientia* (*STh* II-II, q. 46, a. 1, ad 1). It is the proper contrary of wisdom (cfr. *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 6, ad 1). The comparison between foolishness and wisdom will prove very helpful in drawing out some implications about Thomas's view of atheism.

In fact it is already of some help, at least at a terminological level, in explaining why Thomas associates atheism with "foolishness". The truth about the deity — the supreme being, the "highest cause" — is the very business of wisdom (*STh* I-II, q. 66, a. 5). So it only makes sense that the corresponding error should be the business of wisdom's opposite, whatever that is. And it even makes sense that the name for this disposition signify something dishonorable or shameful. Wisdom constitutes a cognitive level distinct from and superior to what is "naturally and commonly known to all". Its opposite must be at a level below. Wisdom is honorable, something excellent and outstanding. There is nothing outstanding about knowing what everyone ought to know²⁹. There is only something shameful about not knowing it — that is, about being a fool³⁰.

Thomas's account of *stultitia* is in three articles. In the first (*STh* II-II, q. 46, a. 1), he determines the kind of opposition existing between it and wisdom. Wisdom, he explains, is a kind of refinement of spiritual taste, a special aptitude or promptness for making judgments in tune with the highest cause. Drawing upon an etymology of Isidore, he describes foolishness as a kind of interior sluggishness resulting from *stupor* or insensibility. It involves a dullness (*hebetudo*) of the heart and blunting (*obtusio*) of the spiritual sense. He distinguishes this "stupidity" differs from what he calls *fatuitas*, which is the total lack of spiritual sense³¹. Whereas *fatuitas* opposes wisdom as its sheer negation, foolishness opposes it as its contrary. I would suppose that the fatuous person is not even able to deny God's existence. He cannot give God even the kind of consideration required in order to deny Him³². Talk of God would mean nothing to him.

In the next article Thomas asks whether foolishness is a sin. He answers

²⁹ This is not to say that the knowledge commonly held by all does not already involve a kind of beginning of and share in wisdom. It does, because even though it is not rooted in the apprehension of God himself, it does rest on the apprehension of something "proper" to Him (as a proper effect), namely, *ens commune*. See *STh* I, q. 66, a. 5, ad 4 (cfr. II-II, q. 2, a. 3); see also the *Rigans montes* text quoted below, n. 38.

³⁰ Cfr. *SCG* III.38: to lack even the vulgar knowledge of God is *vituperabilis*. On the shamefulness of error about what it is natural to know, see *STh* II-II, q. 154, a. 12 (a text that also has much to do with a chief cause of foolishness).

³¹ Thomas seems to draw almost the same distinction in *STh* II-II, q. 15, a. 2, but using the expression *caecitas mentis* instead of *fatuitas*.

³² «Sic ergo hebetudo sensus circa intelligentiam importat quandam debilitatem mentis circa considerationem spiritualium bonorum; caecitas autem mentis importat omnimodam privationem cognitionis ipsorum» (*ibidem*).

with a distinction. The spiritual insensibility involved in foolishness may have natural or physical causes, as in the demented. This pathological sort of foolishness is not a sin. But the insensibility may also be the result of a moral or spiritual disposition. Someone may have gotten so absorbed in earthly or carnal pursuits as to have become “inept at perceiving divine things” (*STh* II-II, q. 46, a. 2). (We note the reference to “perception” again.) This disposition is a sin. Such people have voluntarily corrupted their minds, blinded themselves to intelligible reality, by their vicious conduct. They are fools of their own making.

Most probably, Thomas judges, the motive is sensual pleasure. The foolishness that is a sin is chiefly a “daughter of lust”, *filia luxuria* (a. 3). This sin more than any other dulls the spiritual sense, causing the mind to cling to a particular type of sensible images. This obstructs its work of penetrating to and abstracting the intelligible principles of bodily things, by which it masters them and orders them to their ultimate causes³³. The mind grows superficial and slavish. This too fits the contrary of wisdom³⁴.

3.2. Foolishness by “connaturality” and by “reasoning”

Thomas’s treatment of *stultitia* concludes with this assertion of its kinship with carnal vice. Is the treatment sufficient? Are there no other types of foolishness, types that are not the result of either pathology or lasciviousness? If we are supposed to consider atheism as in every case an exercise in foolishness, then probably we shall wish to look for other types. Does it not seem implausible to hold that all atheists are either sick or debauched? I am certainly not going to argue that they are. Nor do I think that Thomas’s discussion of *stultitia*, read in its full context, favors such a view.

Thomas is considering foolishness as the proper contrary of wisdom. To appreciate fully his treatment of foolishness, it helps to keep in mind his treatment of wisdom. What seems especially important for us is that ‘wisdom’, for Thomas, signifies many things.

For instance, there is a false or evil form of wisdom. In fact there are several of them: worldly, animal, and diabolical (*STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 1, ad 1). These differ from true wisdom in that they judge “well” according to a false “highest cause”, i.e. a false supreme good or last end³⁵. There are also true but

³³ Cf. *STh* II-II, q. 15, a. 3.

³⁴ Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* I.2, 982b28.

³⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 1, ad 1. Along the same line, Thomas says that «someone is called a fool by the fact that he judges perversely about the common end of life; and so [foolishness] is properly opposed to wisdom, which makes for right judgment about the universal cause» (*STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 6, ad 1). That true wisdom should have to do with God is obvious; the very notion of wisdom refers to the knowledge of the first and highest causes. And we should remember that there are several types of cause, first among which is the final cause. It is upon God precisely as the ultimate end and supreme good that true wisdom chiefly bears.

qualified wisdoms within particular fields of knowledge or action (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 6). And there is more than one type of true and unqualified wisdom.

These last types are all dispositions to judge and order rightly according to the true last end of life as a whole, the divine good. One is an intellectual virtue, acquired through study and confined to what can be known about God through the creatures that are manifest to us³⁶. Another is also a matter of study, but it extends to what God has communicated about Himself through revelation³⁷. Yet another is an effect of charity and a gift of the Holy Spirit³⁸.

Thomas makes it clear that of all the wisdoms found among men, it is this last, the gift of the Holy Spirit, that is wisdom in its highest sense³⁹. And, except

³⁶ *STh* I, q. 1, a. 6. From the description of it, this would seem to be first philosophy or metaphysics.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, corp. & ad 3. This is the wisdom that St Thomas calls *sacra doctrina*. It is not easy to fit this wisdom into Thomas's scheme of virtues and gifts, i.e., to classify it as a perfection of the human mind. Unlike the wisdom that is merely a human intellectual virtue (metaphysics), this wisdom is both speculative and practical (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 4; cfr. I-II, q. 57, a. 2, and II-II, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1). Yet it is not the wisdom that is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but rather something taught and learned in a human way, a matter of reasoning and study (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 2, and a. 6, ad 3; cfr. II-II, q. 45, a. 1, ad 2). Nor can it be identified with the special and more perfect mode of the theological virtue of faith that befits those whose office it is not only to hold the truths of the faith but also to teach them (*STh* II-II, q. 2, a. 6); this too would not square with *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 1, ad 2, in which faith as a whole is distinguished from both infused and acquired wisdom. Perhaps the answer is that it is an intellectual habit of essentially the same type as metaphysics, but differing from it and exceeding it in dignity by the fact that its principles are revealed and held by faith. It would be a human science that in some way "participates" in the perfection of supernatural truth. This would fit with Thomas's characterization of it as a "subalternate" science (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 2), and it would suffice to explain how it can be both speculative and practical (cfr. *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1).

³⁸ *STh* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3; II-II, q. 45, a. 1, ad 2; a. 2. Although the true wisdoms differ, they can all be seen as more or less perfect shares in the wisdom of God himself. In the *Rigans montes* passage mentioned earlier, the common knowledge of God is also presented as a share in God's wisdom (though perhaps not such as to properly deserve the name 'wisdom'): «Sunt enim quaedam alta divinae sapientiae, ad quae omnes pervenient, etsi imperfecte, quia cognitio existendi Deum naturaliter omnibus est inserta, ut dicit Damascenus, et quantum ad hoc dicitur, *Job XXXVI: omnes homines vident eum unusquisque intuetur procul*. Quaedam vero sunt altiora, ad quae sola sapientum ingenia pervenerunt, rationis tantum ductu, de quibus, *Rom. I: quod enim notum est Dei, manifestum est in illis*. Quaedam autem sunt altissima, quae omnem humanam rationem transcendunt; et quantum ad hoc dicitur, *Job XXVIII: abscondita est sapientia ab oculis omnium viventium*; et in *Psalmo: posuit tenebras latibulum suum*. Sed hoc per spiritum sanctum qui scrutatur etiam profunda Dei, *I Cor. II*, sacri doctores edocti tradiderunt in textu sacrae Scripturae; et ista sunt altissima, in quibus haec sapientia dicitur habitare».

³⁹ It judges and orders most perfectly according to the true last end. On this point see also the discussion of the gift of understanding in II-II, q. 8, a. 5 (and cfr. q. 45, a. 2, ad 3); it is one thing to grasp in an abstract or theoretical way what the true last end is and what it entails, and another to adhere firmly and constantly to it, savoring all that is in harmony with it. (On the true last end as that which seems best to the one who has the best "taste", which in turn

for the places in which he explicitly indicates otherwise, it is of the gift that he is speaking throughout II-II, q. 45⁴⁰.

Now, if there are several types of wisdom, presumably there are also several types of foolishness. In fact we have already seen that Thomas distinguishes between one type that is a pathological state, and another that results from vice. He also refers to what we might call a sort of false foolishness, corresponding to the false wisdom mentioned earlier. This is the foolishness that despises the things of this world (*STh* II-II, q. 46, a. 1, ad 2).

I do not know whether a perfect parallel can be set up between all the types of wisdom and all the types of foolishness. Still, I see no reason not to suppose that there is a type of foolishness corresponding in some way to the wisdom that is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and a distinct type corresponding to the wisdom acquired by study. It would be with the former that St Thomas is mainly concerned in *STh* II-II, q. 46, as the proper contrary of wisdom in the highest sense. The wisdom that is a gift of the Holy Spirit results from a special affinity with the divine good, the affinity that is charity. Directly at the opposite extreme is the foolishness that results from special affinity with the lowest of creaturely goods, sensual pleasure⁴¹.

Thomas seems to see this foolishness as corrupting even the affinity with spiritual things that is natural or normal for human beings⁴². It obstructs the

involves having the best appetitive disposition, see *STh* I-II, q. 1, a. 7.) The gift is superior, notwithstanding that the intellectual virtue of wisdom, not the gift, is said to judge «according to a perfect use of reason» (*STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2). Here the contrast is with judgment «by a certain connaturality with the things that must be judged about at once (*iam*)». The inclusion of *iam* indicates something of the superiority of the gift. Reason is slower, more pedestrian. (The mention of “things that must be judged at once” also calls to mind again the distinction mentioned in connection with the precepts of natural law, between knowledge held *in universali* or *in particulari operabili*. Even though wisdom is not primarily a practical knowledge, the consideration and enunciation of speculative truths, right here and now, can also be a need or a duty, and one which the disposition of one’s heart may either favor or impede.)

⁴⁰ See *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 4: «sapientia de qua loquimur».

⁴¹ See *STh* II-II, q. 153, a. 5 (on the whole bevy of *filiae luxuria*): «per luxuriam maxime superiores vires deordinentur, scilicet ratio et voluntas. Sunt autem rationis quatuor actus in agendis. Primo quidem, simplex intelligentia, quae apprehendit aliquem finem ut bonum. Et hic actus impeditur per luxuriam, secundum illud *Dan.* XIII, *species decepit te, et concupiscentia subvertit cor tuum*».

⁴² By “affinity”, I mean what Thomas has in mind when he speaks of judgment by inclination, connaturality or *compassio* (*STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2; cfr. I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3). As mentioned earlier, we are in the domain of judgments formed in light of one’s end (see above, n. 35). Also pertinent here is *Super I Cor.*, cap. 2, lect. 3 (on *I Cor.* 2.14): «Spiritus etiam sanctus accedit affectum ad diligendum spiritualia bona, sensibilibus bonis contemptis, et ideo ille qui est animalis vitae, non potest capere huiusmodi spiritualia bona, quia Philosophus dicit in IV *Ethicorum* quod qualis unusquisque est, talis finis videtur ei». It should be noted although the appetite plays a decisive role here, the immediate aptitude for the judgment involved is seated in the intellect (*STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2; cfr. q. 60, a. 1, ad 1 & ad 2). Nor is the

aptitude for perceiving the evident signs of God in nature and the need for God in one's own heart. It kills the savor of spiritual things. Even if this sort of fool can still attach a sense to terms like 'God' and 'soul', he has no taste for them⁴³. They only bore or disgust him⁴⁴.

But if there is another type of foolishness, corresponding to the wisdom acquired through study, it seems that there could also be another type of atheism. The wisdom gained through study is a less perfect wisdom than that which results from supernatural love. The corresponding foolishness would not be such an extreme defect of mind as the one just considered. It would not be the result of utterly *sub-human* dispositions. It would be a less superficial, more "serious" foolishness. Like the corresponding wisdom, it would pertain to the realm of study and reasoning. It might even have a kind of philosophical quality⁴⁵.

But of course the reasoning would be defective, sophistical. Nor would it be surprising to find this sort of foolishness coinciding with the other sort, not only in the negative judgment about the divine, but also in the conception of the

judgment entirely without reasoning, even though it is not the result of scientific or "perfect" reasoning (above, n. 39); it can involve the "application of rules" (*STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 4; q. 60, a. 1, ad 2). Hence I see no strong reason against regarding the "perception" of the existence of God described in *SCG* III.38 also as a kind of judgment "by connaturality". It would be the affinity resulting from our natural inclination *toward* wisdom. This seems even more plausible to do so if we see the perception as moved in part by the "religious impulse" (see above, n. 20). The need for more than human help would be what prompts us to look for and be sensitive to the signs in nature that such help *is* available. There is a certain natural affinity of our mind with the mind governing nature; it is at once an affinity of like with like and of effect with cause (the latter being one with our natural *need* for God). But I suggest this only as a hypothesis.

⁴³ As noted earlier, it is not that he is incapable of any judgment at all. It is that his judgments are extremely superficial. His mind's eye has lost nearly all aptitude for "penetrating" beneath sensible appearances to their intelligible source (cfr. II-II, q. 10, a. 1 ; q. 15, a. 2).

⁴⁴ «Dum nimis detinetur carnalibus delectationibus, non curat pervenire ad spirituales, sed fastidit eas» (*STh* II-II, q. 153, a. 5).

⁴⁵ Among the philosophies that Thomas was aware of, those of the pre-socratic "physicists" especially come to mind. Aristotle presents these thinkers as genuinely doing philosophy, even "first" philosophy, insofar as they were seeking the principles of all things (*Meta.* I.3, 983b6; cfr. *STh* I, q. 44, a. 2). But, as Thomas puts it, they were ignorant of the "power of intellect" and unable to distinguish between intellect and sense; for this reason they could not conceive of anything not sensible or imaginable (*STh* I, q. 50, a. 1), and they judged natural kinds to be the result of chance rather than intellect (*STh* I, q. 16, a. 1, ad 2). Thomas is following Aristotle's treatment of them, particularly that of *Meta.* IV.5, 1009a22-1010a16. (Interestingly, Aristotle includes Anaxagoras here, though elsewhere he reports Anaxagoras's doctrines that things result from intellect and for the good rather than from chance, and that intellect is "unblended" with matter: see *Meta.* I.3, 984b15-19; *De an.* III.4, 429a18. Aristotle seems to think that Anaxagoras did not fully understand what he was saying and used intellect as, so to speak, a mere *deus ex machina*: *Meta.* I.4, 985a18.)

last end⁴⁶. Perhaps it would propose a somewhat more rational pursuit of that end⁴⁷.

3.3. Rational atheism?

So Thomas provides at least implicit grounds for acknowledging the possibility of a reasoned, perhaps even “serious” atheism. He does not, however, seem to allow the possibility of an atheism that is not foolish. Even if it is reasoned, it cannot be rational. This will not be merely because it is false. As we saw in the discussion of the precept of the love of God, a “judgment of reason” might be false⁴⁸. What makes it “of reason”, rational, is that it results from a disinterested use of reason’s natural principles. The use might be disinterested and nevertheless faulty. Can atheism ever be such a result?

Clearly the disposition involved in the kind of foolishness that Thomas examines in *STh II-II*, q. 46 excludes a “rational” judgment. This sort of fool is virtually incapable of giving disinterested attention to questions that involve any significant amount of abstract consideration, spiritual questions. His carnal appetites impede him from even facing the question of the existence of God squarely. It need not be that he positively wants there to be no God; perhaps even that leaves him indifferent. It is simply that he has no relish for such matters.

But what about our more serious atheist? Can his judgment that there is no God be a rational, objective sort of judgment? We are supposing that he has some capacity or even taste for abstract matters. He can still acknowledge the

⁴⁶ In this connection the philosophy that come to mind is Epicureanism. The Epicureans are in fact Thomas’s standard example of philosophers who denied providence. (See, e.g., *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 1; *Q.D. de veritate*, q. 3, a. 1; *In De divinis nominibus*, cap. 3, lect. un.; *Super Lib. De causis*, lect. 20; *De articulis Fidei*, pars 1; *SCG III.95, §16*; *STh I*, q. 22, a. 2, & q. 50, a. 1.) They did speak of “gods” (corporeal ones), but for Thomas the denial of providence would make this practically indistinguishable from atheism (cfr. above, n. 28). And their principal teaching was that beatitude, for man or “god”, consists in a life of sensual pleasure as free as possible from pain. (See *In Sententiarum*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 3, c.; *SCG III.27, §11*; *Super Psalmo 32, §11*. On the gods, see *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 1; *Super Lib. De causis*, lect. 20.) Thomas calls attention to their not judging even “shameful” pleasures to be intrinsically bad (*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lib. 10, lect. 4, §6; cfr. *In Sententiarum*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 3, a. 4, qc. 3, c.; *STh I-II*, q. 34, a. 2).

⁴⁷ Thomas points out that the Epicureans did cultivate virtue, as the best means to the life of pleasure. He is illustrating Aristotle’s remark that some of those who place happiness in the life of pleasure are serious, *gravissimi* (*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lib. 1, lect. 5, §3). Whether or not an atheistic philosophy could coherently propose a more noble end is not clear to me. Some modern atheisms — Nietzsche’s or Marx’s, for example, or Heidegger’s — do seem to long for something more noble, though leaving its nature very indefinite. Could they propose anything more definite and still be coherent? Others, such as Sartre and Camus, seem convinced that they could not.

⁴⁸ See above, n. 10.

signs that seem to point to a God. But for one reason or another he judges them false. He has some reasons, of course not demonstrative but nevertheless serious, for thinking that after all there is no God⁴⁹. Must even this sort of judgment be infected somehow by an irrational disposition?

On the basis of the texts we considered earlier, coherency on Thomas's part seems to require him to say that atheism is always to some degree irrational. If it could be rational, then surely the denial that God is to be loved above all things could be rational as well, whereas Thomas declares this impossible. To be sure, he does not draw the conclusion explicitly. But what I wish to suggest is that for Thomas, it is in fact right here that the inevitable irrationality of atheism would lie: with respect to the love of God. Even serious or "reasoned" atheism can exist only where the love of God has been previously, and unreasonably, set aside⁵⁰. In the remainder of the paper I shall try to explain this suggestion.

Now, assuming that God does exist, the evidence to the contrary cannot be conclusive. The grounds for atheism are not demonstrative. Embracing it is therefore a matter of choice. The choice may have its reasons, but they are not compelling. And it is a genuine choice, because there will always be other alternatives: continuing to study the matter, or at the very least, suspending judgment and awaiting future developments.

In some cases, of course, it is possible that someone choose to believe something that turns out to be false, and that the choice nevertheless be reasonable. For example, it was reasonable of Thomas to believe that the heavenly bodies were incorruptible. It was reasonable of Duncan to believe that Macbeth was loyal. But can it ever be reasonable to believe that there is no God?

Thomas's approach to wisdom, and to foolishness, brings to the forefront God's role as ultimate end for the universe and for man. What makes God the ultimate end, or the supreme good, is the very universality of his goodness. All other goods depend upon and are ordered to his. Thomas also holds that all who have reached the use of reason have caught at least a dim glimpse of this all-embracing good. The question of the rationality of atheism, then, would be something like this: given that everyone has some conception of such a good, and that initially there are at least strong indications that it does exist, can it ever be reasonable to accept, without utterly conclusive evidence, that after all it does not? Can it ever be reasonable to leave off seeking for such a good, until one is absolutely certain that it is not to be found?

If Thomas has a way of answering affirmatively, I do not know what it

⁴⁹ Thomas is perfectly aware of such reasons. They form the various objections that he lists against the existence of God.

⁵⁰ In putting the point this way I am assuming that the love of God does not absolutely depend upon belief that God exists and may instead take the form of a desire for a God hoped to exist (see above, n. 12). Perhaps love cannot *begin* without belief in the existence in its object; but surely it can continue even in the face of subsequent doubts.

would be. It seems to me that the words of Pascal express well the kind of view Thomas's doctrine invites us to take.

«There are only two sorts of people that can be called reasonable: those who serve God with all their heart, because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart, because they know Him not» (*Pensées*, §194).

To illustrate the point, let me refer to a page from a recent book by an undeniably serious contemporary atheist, Thomas Nagel.

«I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that»⁵¹.

His candor is striking. Even more striking is the strength of his concern lest his mere desire distort his evaluation of the evidence. He wants to be rational and objective about the question, and he strongly encourages his fellow atheists to have the same attitude. In fact the passage is part of an essay aimed at defending the existence of an objective, intelligible order in the world. Nagel wants to remove what for many is an obstacle to acknowledging any such order, the very “fear of religion”. And yet, it seems to me, along the way he does betray a certain irrationality — not directly about the question whether God exists, but about his own desires in the matter.

It is not that he does not know why he wants there to be no God. Evidently he does. It is the idea of a “cosmic authority”, as he puts it, that repels him. I do not think that believers should find this particularly surprising — especially with the value set today on freedom — or even particularly hard to sympathize with. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”!⁵² But is the kind of authority that a God would enjoy a truly satisfactory reason for wishing there not to be one? I mean, is it a sufficient reason for wishing that there not be the kind of goodness, the lovability, that only a God could have?

On this Nagel is silent. At least in these pages, he takes his wish as a sheer given, not worrying about its justification⁵³. And of course, even if he will not let

⁵¹ T. NAGEL, *The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, chap. 7 (“Evolutionary Naturalism and the Fear of Religion”), p. 130.

⁵² *Hebrews* 10:31. Also to the point is a remark by C.S. LEWIS in *The Problem of Pain*, The MacMillan Company, New York 1948, p. 10: «We desire nothing less than to see that Law whose naked authority is already unsupportable armed with the incalculable claims of the Numinous».

⁵³ He does mention the question of its (and its contrary's) origin, whether “Oedipal” or otherwise, but quite reasonably he sets this aside (*ibid.*, n. 8).

it impair his objectivity about the evidence, he does let it induce him to adhere to atheism so long as the evidence allows.

I do not mean that Thomas's doctrine would be that all atheists positively want there not to be a God. But in any case they accept the proposition without definitive proof, and so by choice. It is just this that cannot be fully rational.

Obviously such a judgment will not meet with universal assent. I would only stress that the claim is not at all that atheists cannot have a real wish to be rational. On the contrary, I am assuming that at least some of them do. My interest has been in the help that Thomas might give us in isolating the point about which it might be most fruitful to reason with them.

I conclude with a corollary, probably less controversial: atheists and theists cannot have entirely the same views about what it is rational or irrational to love. Here my text from Thomas has to do with the second commandment, the love of neighbor. Nowadays some idea of universal love is readily embraced by believers and unbelievers alike. But, as has often been pointed out, what the second commandment enjoins is not a mere general love of "mankind". It is also the love of every individual with whom you do or could have personal dealings. This includes even those who may be hostile to you, enemies. From an atheist's point of view, can a universal command to love one's enemies really make sense? Must it not in fact seem ... foolish? On this Thomas is terse, but explicit. "For loving one's enemy, the reason is God alone"⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ «Dilectionis inimici solus Deus est ratio» (*STh* II-II, q. 27, a. 7).