

## ‘The first thing to know about God’: Kretzmann and Aquinas on the meaning and necessity of arguments for the existence of God

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**Abstract:** This paper examines critically Kretzmann’s reconstruction of the project of natural theology as exemplified by Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*. It is argued that the notion of natural theology, as understood and advocated by Kretzmann, is particularly indebted to the epistemologically biased natural theology of modernity with its focus on rational justification of theistic belief. As a consequence, Kretzmann’s view of the arguments for the existence of God and their place within Aquinas’s theological project is insufficiently sensitive to the ontological conception of truth and intelligibility which underlies the argumentation. From his epistemological point of view Kretzmann differs from Aquinas in two aspects. First, he contends that it is not necessary to establish the existence of God with absolute certainty at the outset; one may begin with the hypothesis that there is a God. Second, the arguments do not yet conclude to the existence of *God* in the specific theistic sense; they show at most the existence of a primary explanatory entity, which may be identified with God later on. Both claims are criticized in the light of a discussion of Aquinas’s theological method.

### Introduction

In a small footnote in Kretzmann’s *The Metaphysics of Theism*<sup>1</sup> the author makes a curious remark about Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] which seems highly problematic. According to Kretzmann the famous ‘Five Ways’ at the beginning of *ST* are not essential to the theological project Aquinas is undertaking here and could therefore in principle be dismissed.<sup>2</sup> What Aquinas is doing in his theological *Summa* – expounding systematically the revealed doctrine of Christian faith – does not require, strictly considered, a rational foundation of the belief that God exists in the form of philosophical proof. *ST* is a purely theological work, a ‘textbook of revealed theology’, which makes in a certain sense an unnecessary philosophical start. It is a surprising and provocative view, which deviates from

what is commonly accepted by Thomistic scholars. Traditionally the *Quinque viae* are held in high esteem as the culmination of natural human reason, by which the rational foundation of Christian belief in God is established. Kretzmann, however, claims that it is the proper task of the philosophical discipline of *natural theology* to develop arguments by which the theistic belief that God exists can be rationally justified. Arguing that God exists is a strictly philosophical matter. Now, Aquinas's *ST* is clearly not a philosophical work which proceeds on the basis of 'natural reason'. If one is looking in Aquinas for what could count as 'natural theology', one should turn to his *Summa Contra Gentiles* [hereafter *SCG*], which – at least in its first three books – presents a fully developed philosophical doctrine of theism. It is here that philosophical arguments for the existence of God are to be expected and even required, according to Kretzmann.

In his book Kretzmann is engaged in a critical rethinking of the metaphysical system of natural theology as expounded in the first book of *SCG*. He does not want to limit himself to the scholarly task of interpreting and clarifying the thought of Aquinas; he even wishes to co-operate as philosopher in the project of natural theology along the lines Aquinas drew in his *SCG*. It is thus a book in which Kretzmann speaks for himself, guided and inspired by Aquinas. It is intended as a contribution to the contemporary philosophical debate about natural theology and the rationality of religious belief, in which Kretzmann presents and advocates a metaphysical justification of theistic belief of a Thomist kind.

Although I think Kretzmann's book is an admirable and impressive attempt to meet Aquinas on philosophical grounds and to let him take part in the contemporary philosophical discussion on the rationality of theistic belief, the way he presents Aquinas as philosopher and rational thinker does not convince me in all aspects. His approach to Aquinas seems to me too much influenced by the modern separation between philosophy and theology, as a consequence of which he fails to do justice to the specific character of *theological reason* in Aquinas. It is quite understandable that Kretzmann felt especially attracted by Aquinas's *SCG* I–III, because of the strong presence in it of a typically argumentative and discursive rationality which underlies the philosophical account of a theistic conception of reality. In a certain sense it is perfectly legitimate to distil a system of natural theology from *SCG*, based on natural reason and in disregard of the historical (positive) doctrine of Christian faith. But this attempt to free 'natural reason' from its concrete engagement with a particular religious doctrine is typically modern and, as I will argue, foreign to Aquinas's approach to the 'truth' of faith. The modern separation of reason and faith tends to delegate the tenets of faith to the realm of the positive given, which only count as true within a particular religious tradition.

In what follows I want to focus on the difference between how Kretzmann conceives of the meaning and necessity of arguments for the existence of God and the role those arguments play in the theological understanding Aquinas

seeks to obtain. In my view, in both of his *Summas* the arguments (or ‘ways’) by which the intellect is led to understand the truth that God exists are an essential and necessary part of what Aquinas is proposing to do. They serve a specific theoretical purpose, which is not primarily that of an epistemic foundation, as I will argue. For Kretzmann, the attempt to argue for the existence of God comes down to a search for epistemic justification of the theistic belief that God exists. I think that for Aquinas the arguments for the existence of God are part of a systematically conducted theological consideration which aims at an intelligible determination of the truth of God. Behind Kretzmann’s view about what existence-arguments are about stands a typically epistemological approach to truth and rationality, which differs from Aquinas’s ontological conception of truth as founded in the being of a thing (*ens et verum convertuntur*). One might say that Kretzmann tends to read the Aquinas of *SCG* in the light of post-Cartesian epistemological philosophy, which prevents him from recognizing the ontological orientation of reason.

My critical examination of how Kretzmann reads Aquinas will concentrate on two points on which he deliberately deviates from what he assumes to be Aquinas’s position. Both points concern the place and value of the arguments for the existence of God within the systematic order of natural theology. According to Kretzmann, it belongs to natural theology to argue for the existence of God. But, contrary to Aquinas, he does not think that the very possibility of natural theology’s discourse on God requires one to begin with establishing the existence of God with absolute certainty. All that one needs to get the project of natural theology started is some probable evidence that makes the proposition ‘God exists’ acceptable as a working hypothesis, which may be reinforced by cumulative evidence in the course of the investigation. And moreover, according to Kretzmann, the assumption that the arguments at the beginning of *SCG* succeed in establishing the existence of *God* must be regarded as premature; they point at most at the existence of a ‘primary explanatory entity’ (which Kretzmann chooses to call ‘Alpha’), which may be identified later with ‘God’ in a specific theistic sense. First, I propose to show why, in Aquinas’s view, the theological understanding of the truth of God cannot start with a hypothetical affirmation of God’s existence; and second, I will go on to explain, now from the perspective of *ST*, why the issue of whether God exists is really the first thing one must know about God and in which sense this first knowledge concerns the truth of *God*, even if it is but the first step in the knowledge of God waiting to be developed more fully and adequately.

### **The ‘necessary foundation’**

The first task of a natural theologian, Kretzmann says, is providing philosophically acceptable evidence to support the proposition that God exists. In this

respect he accepts the traditional order, according to which the question of God's existence is the first topic to be dealt with by natural theology. According to Kretzmann, rational theism requires one to begin by looking for evidence, in the form of arguments, on the basis of which one can rationally believe that God exists, thus taking position against the thesis of Reformed epistemology which says – in the words of Plantinga – that 'it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all'.<sup>3</sup> The term 'rational theism' is used to indicate that natural theology (which is as such conceived of as a purely philosophical undertaking, indifferent to religious doctrine) is employed as a source of epistemic justification for religious theistic belief. Kretzmann thus accepts the requirement of evidentialist epistemology to ground one's cognitive claim that there is a God on independent rational evidence.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Reformed epistemologists, he is not an anti-evidentialist.

Natural theology is therefore supposed to provide rational evidence by which one can justify the belief that God exists. For Kretzmann it goes without saying that the arguments for the existence of God at the beginning of *SCG* are motivated by this same epistemological concern about rational justification. He even detects in Aquinas a more stringent demand of evidence in support of the proposition that God exists than he himself thinks necessary. Aquinas seems to demand a strict demonstrative argument by which the existence of God is established at the outset as a solid foundation of the subsequent development of rational knowledge concerning God.

In this connection, Kretzmann calls attention to an interesting remark at the end of the introductory chapters of *SCG*, where Aquinas states that 'among the things that have to be considered regarding God in himself, there must be set out in advance – as, so to speak, the necessary foundation of the whole undertaking (*quasi totius operis necessarium fundamentum*) – a consideration by which it is demonstrated that God exists' (*SCG*, I, ch. 9). In this passage, Aquinas is explaining the order of treatment: before dealing with issues such as God's nature and His attributes, one must begin with an argument by which it is demonstrated that God exists, since such a demonstration provides the necessary foundation of the rest of the work. The expression 'necessary foundation' is, in Kretzmann's eyes, indicative of Aquinas's rather excessive evidentialism. What Aquinas seems to be claiming here is that one cannot develop a body of rational knowledge concerning God without having established beforehand with absolute certainty that there exists in fact a divine entity.

Kretzmann reads the phrase 'necessary foundation' in an epistemological sense, meaning that the reference of a set of propositions to objective reality remains unfounded as long as it is uncertain whether the subject of those propositions does correspond to something in reality. If one wants develop true propositions about God, one has to make clear first that there exists indeed something like a God. This makes him criticize Aquinas for adopting a too stringent

form of evidentialism. Aquinas is too strict in demanding an absolute proof of God's existence as the foundation of natural theology's knowledge about God. The acceptance of the proposition 'God exists' in natural theology, Kretzmann says, is not really an all-or-nothing propositional attitude that depends solely on arguments offered at the outset. All one need to get the project of natural theology started is some evidence of God's existence 'strong enough to make that proposition attractive as a working hypothesis'.<sup>5</sup> Demanding at the outset a cast-iron proof of the existence of God is demanding too much. It is neither realistic nor necessary. There is in fact no philosophical argument for God that has won universal acceptance by all. Every known argument for the existence of God is the subject of an ongoing dispute. According to Kretzmann, one should recognize this open and inconclusive character of philosophical argument instead of demanding a sort of mathematical proof, by which the question is settled once and for all. In order to start a rational discourse about God, it is sufficient to have some evidence which makes it *probable* that there is a God and thus intellectually acceptable as a *working hypothesis*, from which one may proceed to further investigation.

We see that Kretzmann redefines Aquinas's project of natural theology in accordance with contemporary, more critical and dialogical, standards of philosophical rationality. Instead of the – impossible – demand for a supposed mathematical-like demonstration at the outset, it is sufficient to begin one's inquiry about God with some argumentative evidence by which the assumption that there is a God is justified, as least as a working hypothesis.

Now I do not think a working hypothesis would do for Aquinas, but for different reasons than his alleged evidentialist demand for an absolute proof. Kretzmann interprets Aquinas's project of natural theology in *SCG* in the light of the evidentialist challenge to theistic belief with its demand of sufficient epistemic foundation. But when Aquinas speaks about a 'necessary foundation', he has something different in mind, which has nothing to do with an epistemic foundation.

Let us first try to explain why a working hypothesis would not be acceptable for Aquinas. Considering the proposition that God exists as a working hypothesis would mean that we have good reasons to assume that there is a God (or, as Kretzmann prefers, a 'primary explanatory being', which may be identified with God later on). A working hypothesis is an assumption justified by some probable evidence. It is the result of a reflective judgement, in which the acceptability of a certain proposition is judged in the light of the available evidence. It is not an objective judgement in which the proposition itself is judged to be true by reducing it to its intelligible foundation. Thus, a working hypothesis does not make me understand the truth that God exists; its truth is only conditionally affirmed in relation to the available evidence. Some features of our reality might be interpreted as pointing to the existence of God, that is, a 'primary explanatory

being'. What the hypothesis is about, the intelligible connection between 'God' and 'being', remains undetermined in relation to our knowledge. We may have good reasons to assume that there is a God, but this does not yet mean that the truth of the proposition 'God exists' has received an intelligible determination in our knowledge. Without a demonstration, by which the intellect is shown a determined route to the affirmation of the reality of God, there will be no intelligible foundation on the basis of which God is knowable to us. In the case of a working hypothesis, the reasons that permit us to assume that there is a God are more or less extrinsic to the being of God himself as knowable to us. Those reasons or arguments do not suffice, therefore, to posit the truth of God's being in an intelligible form adapted to our mode of knowing.

For Aquinas the question of existence has a different meaning than for Kretzmann. It is not a matter of knowing whether there is a God (or some absolute entity) 'out there', that is to say, of founding the assumed relationship (of truth) between our belief and external reality. The first thing one must know about God, Aquinas says, is whether He is.<sup>6</sup> It is the first thing to know, because it provides the intelligible foundation of everything else to know about God. Seen from Aquinas's perspective, one cannot simply go on with arguing, for instance, that God must be understood to be intelligent or good, etc. without a prior intelligible foundation. The reality of God must first be posited in an intelligible form, in which its truth becomes knowable to us, in order to be able to show that God must be understood to be intelligent or good, etc. For Aquinas, true knowledge is ontologically founded in a thing's being. The object of knowledge is not the proposition as such, which corresponds to an objective reality 'out there'. It is the thing itself, which is knowable by virtue of its being and which is known to be such and such by means of propositions. And in all the subsequent propositions, in which God is said (or known) to be such and such, the first affirmation according to which God is known to be is presupposed.

Kretzmann seems to associate the logical form of demonstration with a mathematical-like certainty, which leaves no room for doubt and dispute. But in Aquinas the emphasis is not so much on rational certainty as on intelligibility. A demonstration enables one to know, to understand the truth of the demonstrated conclusion as implicated by something else that is known. The point is not so much whether the proposition 'God exists' is true, but whether there can be found an intelligible access (*via*) to its truth. This is not the same as looking for evidence on the basis of which one can rationally believe that God exists. It is conceivable that one has good arguments in support of one's belief that God exists without understanding the truth of the proposition 'God exists'. Probable arguments of all sorts might be useful in order to defend one's theistic conviction against objections and criticism, but they do not necessarily disclose to the intellect the ontological dependency of the world *vis-à-vis* God as the founding principle of its being. For Aquinas, the idea of demonstration is inseparably

connected with the question of how the truth of God's being can receive an intelligible determination from something else that is somehow related to God.

It is characteristic of the epistemological approach to existence-claims that one should admit to oneself the possibility of non-existence. From a 'rational' point of view one's belief that God exists should be regarded at first as yet an unwarranted belief, which is possibly no more than a subjective modification of one's mind without reference to objective reality. One must draw oneself back from the immediate, object-related attitude to reality in order to become aware that one's beliefs and convictions as regards how reality is are but unfounded beliefs. Being a rational and responsible thinker, one should seriously consider the possibility that there is no God and that one's belief that God exists is nothing else than a comforting fiction to which one adheres for non-rational motives. Rationality, in the typical modern sense, requires that one should critically reflect on the evidence on the basis of which one is justified in accepting the proposition 'God exists'. And the rational assessment of the available evidence requires that one should distance oneself from one's personal attachment to a particular religious tradition.

Aquinas's approach differs significantly from this epistemological attitude to one's belief that God exists. His arguments for the existence of God are not so much part of an epistemological programme for the rational foundation of theistic belief. For him, the existence of God is not something that, from a rational point of view, may raise doubt and that therefore demands to be ascertained by rational proof. What Aquinas is after is not rational certainty, but *intelligibility*. For him, philosophy is in the first place a quest for truth and intelligibility, for understanding of what is. At issue in the question of whether God is (*utrum Deum sit*) is the intelligibility of the truth expressed by that proposition. His approach may be characterized as follows: granted that God exists, as we Christians do believe, how then can we come at an understanding of this truth? And understanding means understanding of the intelligible necessity by which the truth that God exists must be affirmed.

In this connection, it is important to note that, in Aquinas's view, the human intellect in its present condition cannot know of God *what He is*. The theological understanding of God cannot proceed on the basis of a definition expressing adequately what God is. Strictly speaking, we do not have any *concept* of God sufficient to ground an immediate cognitive relationship to the divine reality in itself. If one were to possess a definition of God, such a definition would enable one, in principle, to derive demonstratively all truths to be known about God from the concept of His essence, including the truth of His existence. It would enable us, not only to understand that God, for example, is good, but also to grasp the divine goodness itself. But as we do not have perfect knowledge of God's essence by way of a definition, neither do we have any positive insight into God's being (*Dei esse*), because His being is identical with His essence. What we can

know about God is that He is (*Deum esse*), that is to say that our intellect is made to affirm necessarily the truth (of the proposition) that God is on the basis of something else, which stands in some intelligible relationship to God.<sup>7</sup> Although God, like the Sun in Plato's myth of the cave, is in itself in the highest degree intelligible, we can only know Him through the way His intelligibility is indirectly reflected and expressed in the being of the created effects. In other words: the reality the term 'God' stands for can only become intelligible for us in so far as He is the 'truth of the world'.

It is significant that Aquinas always speaks of our 'need' (*indiget*) to resort to a demonstration for the knowledge that God is. For him, it is a sign of the imperfection of the human intellect, which in its sense-bound condition cannot immediately grasp the 'first truth' in itself. Although the intelligible connection between 'God' and 'being' is in itself unmediated and not grounded in any extrinsic or intrinsic cause, our knowledge of that connection requires a logical mediation through a demonstration. Our knowledge of the truth that God is depends therefore on something else which stands in a certain relationship to God, although this truth in itself does not depend on something else, but is 'known through itself' (*per se nota*).

The demonstration at stake here is therefore not a demonstration through which one is led to understand *why* God exists and necessarily must exist by reason of His essence (the so-called *demonstratio propter quid*); it leads the intellect only to understand *that* God exists (*demonstratio quia*), and it does so on the basis of something else which is the effect of God.<sup>8</sup> In this way the existence of God, which is not *per se nota* to us, can be demonstrated from the effects which are known to us. Given the existence of the effect, we must necessarily affirm the existence of the cause, since every effect depends upon its cause. Now, the arguments for the existence of God are all meant to show that material reality, which constitutes the proper domain of human knowledge, has the ontological status of *effect* and is therefore *qua* being not intelligible unless it is reduced to something else as to its cause. In this way, the divine essence, which is not immediately and through itself knowable to us, receives a 'knowable form' in relation to our intellect. God is known by us under the intelligible aspect of first cause of all being.

The suggestion that one might consider the proposition 'God exists' as a working hypothesis betrays a critical awareness of the distance between thought and being. Arguments may be judged to be insufficient to bridge that distance and to reach being in itself. The cognitive approach to reality remains conditional, since reality may be shown up to be different from what we think it is. Even if Kretzmann allows for a cumulative growth of evidence in support of the claim that there is a God, the fundamental attitude of thought, which characterizes his position, remains pervaded by a critical awareness of its difference to being itself. Reason has become a free and critical faculty, unbounded by ontological assumptions

and intuitions as regards the ‘intelligibility of being’. In contrast, the fundamental principle of Aquinas’s philosophy is the assumption that thought is in itself expressive of what things are, of their proper knowability (*ens et verum convertuntur*). The epistemologically biased philosophy of modernity has turned away from the traditional attitude of intellectual receptiveness towards the intelligible order inherent within the whole of reality, which is derived from the divine principle of all being and truth.

### **The question *an sit* in *ST***

We have explained in what sense Aquinas’ project in *SCG* requires a demonstration that God exists. At issue is not a ‘foundation’ in the epistemological sense of the word. What Aquinas has in mind is a necessary foundation of the *intelligibility* of all that must be said of God. The investigation of the truth of God by way of natural reason requires a prior intelligible access to God’s being. The arguments for the existence of God are meant to show that, given the ontological insufficiency of the world of human experience, there is an intelligible route towards a first being, which all understand to be God. In this sense, Kretzmann’s proposal to let natural theology start with the hypothesis of a divine entity will not be acceptable to Aquinas, because for him the arguments should conduct the human intellect to an *insight* into the intelligible necessity by which a first cause of all being must be affirmed. Human reason is thought to be able to reach reality in its proper intelligibility and to argue for a transcendent and self-sufficient ground of the being of all things.

Let us turn now to Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* and consider why he thinks it is necessary to begin the exposition of the *scientia* of sacred doctrine by offering some arguments by which it can be demonstrated that God exists. In what sense is the question of whether God exists the first question to be answered in the *scientia* about God?

The order of treatment in Aquinas’s *ST* is unmistakably based on the Aristotelian understanding of *scientia*. Following the *ordo disciplinae*, the order of learning by which one is introduced in the knowledge of a *scientia*, one should begin with the question of God, the subject of the *scientia* of sacred doctrine. Knowledge of God is presupposed by everything else that is treated in this science, since in sacred doctrine all things are treated under the aspect of God (*sub ratione Dei*). Now, the first thing one must know of the subject is whether it exists (*an sit*). After having shown that God exists, Aquinas proceeds with investigating how God is (*quomodo Deus sit*: qq. 3–11), in order to arrive at the knowledge of what He is (*quid sit*). The question *quid sit* asks for the definition of the essence, which is the starting point of the demonstration. But in the case of God, Aquinas specifies, we cannot know *what* He is. The search for a determination of God’s intelligibility must, therefore, be carried out in a negative and indirect way, by

considering how God's mode of being is not (not composed, not finite, not changeable, etc.). The way of negation (*via remotionis*), however, presupposes a prior affirmation of the first cause, since it is *as cause* that God is not like any of His effects.

Kretzmann does not deny that Aquinas is following the Aristotelian paradigm of *scientia*, which entails the necessity of addressing first the question *an sit*. What he does deny, however, is that the specific revelation-based mode of the theological *scientia* should require an apparently philosophical proof of the existence of God. In this respect, *ST* differs from the more philosophical *SCG*. In the latter one might expect arguments for the existence of God, although not necessarily at the most stringent level of proof, but in the theological *Summa* they are, strictly considered, unnecessary and superfluous. *ST* contains a systematic and coherent exposition of 'revealed theology', the foundation of which lies outside the scope of philosophical reason. It may employ philosophical resources and conceptual tools in order to explain the sense of revealed propositions and to elaborate on their implications, etc., but the starting points of theology are 'data of revelation' which are simply to be accepted by faith.<sup>9</sup> In this respect revealed theology can be compared, Kretzmann says, to a positive science, which also may start from a set of unquestioned assumptions and empirical data, with this difference that the 'data' of revealed theology are the so-called truths of revelation, only acceptable for those who believe.<sup>10</sup>

In my view, *ST* is disposed of too quickly by Kretzmann as but a 'textbook of revealed theology'. He fails to recognize the speculative dimension of the idea of *scientia* as applied in *ST*, where it enables Aquinas to develop a specific theological understanding of the 'knowledge of God' based on a metaphysical consideration of reality.

Contrary to Kretzmann, I don't believe there is an essential difference between the two *Summas* with respect to the systematic necessity of starting with the question whether God exists. Although *ST* is definitely not a work of natural theology, which proceeds solely on the basis of natural reason, the speculative interest of reason in the truth is fully given its due in the philosophical manifestation (*manifestatio*) of what is implied in the higher and more comprehensive intelligibility of revelation. In both works Aquinas has set himself to elaborate and develop what one may call a 'theory of God', in which the truth about God is made known, according to the manner in which this truth is knowable to the human intellect. Both *Summas* are characterized by a strong speculative interest in the truth of reality along the lines of the Greek metaphysical quest for the first principle (*archè*) of being.

But in neither of the *Summas* is the metaphysical search for the ultimate truth of reality pursued in its own right, independently from how God is said and believed to be according to the doctrine of Christian faith. The doctrine of faith is itself not philosophy or a theory in the strict sense, but its (supernatural) truth

implies a certain conception of how the world is and how one should think about the origin of the world, which is open to philosophical investigation. The truth of Christian faith is not compatible with any possible philosophical position with regard to the nature of reality and the meaning of human life. In *SCG*, for instance, Aquinas intends to manifest the truth (the ‘truth of the universe’) *as professed by the Catholic faith*.<sup>11</sup> In the first three books he intends to expound and clarify ‘the truth that faith professes and reason investigates, bringing in both demonstrative and probable arguments ... on the basis of which the truth will be confirmed and its adversary overcome’ (*SCG*, I, ch. 9). Aquinas wants to show that the propositions of Christian doctrine concerning God and His relationship to the world can be partly confirmed by what human reason, guided by the best of philosophy, may find out to be true about God, and partly be shown not to be contrary to reason (Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection). This is a specific theological project undertaken for the benefit of the Christian community, which in the thirteenth century was confronted with alternative philosophical views about the nature and origin of the universe. The message of *SCG* to Christians is that sound philosophical reasoning does lead to a conception of the universe which fundamentally concords with the truth of Christian faith.<sup>12</sup>

In his *ST* Aquinas intends to expound systematically the revealed doctrine of Christian faith, for which he has coined the term ‘sacred doctrine’. Sacred doctrine is definitely not the same as the historical and factual teachings of the Christian religion. It does not coincide with any of its human (cultural, historical, dogmatic) mediations, in which it receives a factual and positive form, for instance, the creeds of the Church or the literal contents of the biblical scriptures. Aquinas defines *sacra doctrina* according to the intrinsic and ideal meaning it has in the self-understanding of the Christian tradition. As such it stands for the ‘knowledge of God’, revealed by God himself to man for the sake of his salvation. Being a revealed doctrine (which of course does not mean that all its literal statements are immediately from God), it is set apart from the philosophical disciplines which are based on human reason. The doctrine of faith does not stem from human reasoning and experience, but has its origin in God himself, at least, according to the self-understanding of the Christian tradition. In *ST*’s first article, Aquinas argues that the existence of a revealed doctrine about God, as claimed by the Christian religion, has an intelligible necessity, considering all what we know about the ultimate end of human life and the limited scope of reason with respect to achieving the necessary knowledge of that end. Thus, the assumption that the positive doctrine of Christian faith constitutes a true and genuine revelation of God is not unreasonable. What must be stressed is that Aquinas does not start simply from the ‘positive data’ of revelation; truth is never a simple given, since it relates to the ontological reality of which those data are expressive and which is the proper object of faith. The factual teachings of the Christian faith are supposed to be teachings which tell us something about God, or teachings in which

God Himself is somehow present and revealing Himself. In this sense the *scientia* of sacred doctrine is definitely not comparable, I would say, to an empirical science. For Aquinas, the object of a science is intelligible truth, not empirical facts.

Now if the doctrine of faith constitutes a true revelation from God, it can be regarded as a 'body of true knowledge', the truth of which is grounded in the knowledge God possesses of Himself. Claiming that the doctrine of faith is received through revelation from God amounts to saying that its truth depends on or is derived from the knowledge God has of Himself (*scientia Dei*). This is what has prompted Aquinas to assert that sacred doctrine is a *scientia*, containing true knowledge, that is knowledge about what is true. Being a systematic exposition of a *scientia*, a whole of knowledge, the truth of which is adequately grounded in true principles, Aquinas's *ST* is certainly more than but a 'textbook of revealed theology'. It treats of knowledge about what is true and certain, although formally beyond the reach of human reason (*supra rationem*). From the perspective of modern thought, this may appear very strange and unacceptable. Sacred doctrine is said to be a science, even wisdom, which contains the truth about the world as seen and known by God, but the only way *we* relate to that truth is by faith. Its truth cannot by any means verified by us; we may only hope to see its truth when human life reaches its final fulfilment in the blessed vision of God.

The reason why sacred doctrine is considered to be a *scientia* is in the first place that it concerns true knowledge, knowledge about what is true and certain, and in the second place, that its truth is derived from principles which are self-evidently known in the light of God's knowledge. These two conditions justify in Aquinas's eyes considering sacred doctrine as a subordinated *scientia* in the Aristotelian sense.

Now any science consists of knowledge about a particular subject. According to Aristotle, scientific knowledge of conclusions in which a certain subject is known to be such and such, presupposes a twofold foreknowledge regarding that subject, namely that the subject is and what it is. The question of what a thing is (*quid sit*) asks for the definition of the essence of the subject. Having scientific knowledge of a particular proposition means that the predicate is shown to adhere in the subject in virtue of what that subject essentially is. This is why the definition is said to be the 'middle term' (*medium*) of the scientific demonstration. The knowledge of a thing's essence presupposes the prior knowledge *that* it is, simply because there is no essence except as essential determination of the being of that thing. Only insofar as a thing is a being, is it knowable. Therefore, the first thing one must know about anything is whether it is, since any knowledge concerning a thing has its intelligible ground in the being of that thing. This is why it is fundamentally misleading to take the Aristotelian question *an sit* as a question about existence in the modern sense. The notion of existence has the connotation of factual existence as a modality of a thing that is external to its conceptual content. Taken in this sense, it is possible to consider the concept of a thing even

without knowing whether the object of that concept does exist in reality, because, as Kant has taught us, existence is not included in the concept of a thing. But for Aquinas, something quite different is involved in the question *an sit*. In order to fulfil the role of subject of a science, which is the intelligible foundation of all the knowledge pertaining to that science, a thing must be a *being* (*ens*), since only insofar as it is a being can it be the *subiectum* of a science.

Kretzmann is, of course, familiar with the Aristotelian meaning and context of the question *an sit*. But it seems to me that he misinterprets this question as if it concerns the objective reference of a concept, which should be established before anything can be said about it. This is why he is unwilling to follow Aquinas in his claim that the question *an sit* is the first question to be dealt with. Establishing the existence of God, he says, is clearly not logically prior to all consideration of matters concerning God.<sup>13</sup> One can perfectly well discuss matters concerning God on the basis of an understanding of what could count as God without knowing for certain that there exists in fact a God. A great deal of the philosophical discussion about the nature of a hypothetical divine being and about the rationality of theistic belief takes place under some sort of description of 'God', which as such does not yet require a final proof of His existence. In this sense, the question *an sit* is not absolutely prior. But this is not Aquinas's point. One can, of course, discuss issues concerning how people think about God, their ideas and convictions, whether they make sense and whether they are compatible with human experience of evil and suffering, but there can be no *knowledge* of God without having established before an intelligible access to the reality of God. The question *an sit* must be answered before one can go on with determining the mode of God's being, according to the manner in which it is intelligible to us. The investigation of how God is (*quomodo*) in order to know *what* God is (or what He is not) presupposes that God is, simply because there is no *mode of being* without *being*. Treating the knowledge of God in the form of a *scientia* of which God is the subject requires a prior intelligible access to the reality which human talk about God is supposedly referring to.

One might object that, according to Aquinas, the *scientia* of sacred doctrine depends on a set of principles or basic truths, which are not self-evidently known but believed. Why not consider the existence of God as just one of those basic truths to be accepted in faith? It would be perfectly legitimate, according to Kretzmann, to accept the proposition 'God exists' as a fundamental truth, taken directly from revelation, from which the *scientia* of revealed theology starts to argue. When God, from the standpoint of religion, is said to make Himself known through revelation, this certainly would include the fact of His existence. Now we see, in fact, Aquinas referring, immediately preceding the presentation of the Five Ways, to a passage in the Bible, where God in person declares Himself to exist.<sup>14</sup> The question of whether God exists is determined by an authoritative appeal to God's self-revelation to Moses. From the perspective of the modern separation

between reason and faith, this ‘argument’ may seem very odd and even misplaced. The rational enterprise of demonstrating the existence of God should put the ‘truths’ of revelation and of the religious tradition within brackets. One cannot of course assume the truth of what is written in Scripture about God as long as the objective reference to the reality of what religious discourse is about is not established independently from a (putative) revelation. From the standpoint of modernity one must choose: either follow the way of reason and prove the existence of God without appeal to religious texts, or follow the way of faith and accept the existence of God on the authority of the Bible.

But, from the perspective of Aquinas’s theological method, the reference to a passage in the founding scriptures of Christian religion in the context of the question whether God exists makes perfectly good sense. What he is saying is like this: although there are several objections to the assumption that God exists which should be taken seriously, we Christians firmly hold, by the authority of Scripture itself, that God is existent even in the highest degree. Granted that this is true, as we believe it is, let us then try with the help of arguments provided by the philosophical tradition to show how this truth can be made understandable, how reason can find some route that makes one affirm that God is.

This appeal to philosophical reason in order to demonstrate the intelligible truth of God from his effects is an example of what Aquinas calls *manifestatio*. The theologian, in treating sacred doctrine’s knowledge about God, must become, so to speak, a philosopher and bring in philosophical reason, not in order to prove the truth of what sacred doctrine is about – since its truth is *supra rationem* – but in order to make its teachings more manifest (*ad maiorem manifestationem*).<sup>15</sup> Although the propositions of faith are in themselves true and certain by reason of their being grounded in God himself (*prima veritas*), there is a *human* need for manifestation and understanding which demands the use of philosophical reason. Philosophy may serve the theological understanding of the truth of revelation by way of *manuductio*. The Five Ways in the beginning of *ST* must be understood in the light of this *manuductio* of the human intellect to the ‘higher’ truth of sacred doctrine. In the exposition of sacred doctrine the resources of philosophy must be deployed, Aquinas says, because of the *imperfection* of the human intellect, ‘which is more easily led (*manuducitur*) by what is known through natural reason to that which is above reason’.<sup>16</sup> This is a crucial statement, which has to be interpreted very carefully. The need of a *manuductio* explains why Aquinas treats the doctrine of Christian faith within an overall metaphysical framework, in which God (or what people are naming ‘God’) receives an intelligible character as ‘first principle of the being of all things’. The upward movement of *manuductio* is the reverse of the top-down movement of *revelatio*. The *manuductio* aims at a specific theological understanding of the ‘truth about God’. What God has revealed about Himself is received in the human intellect by the habit of faith. The object of faith is the ‘first truth’ (*prima veritas*),

that is, the truth of God as known by God Himself and communicated to others by revelation. By the habit of faith the intellect reaches out to a truth beyond the grasp of its reason. Through revelation the human intellect is given to 'know' something in the light of the first truth. This means that the habit of faith establishes the human intellect in an immediate relationship to the first truth. Now, the possibility of such an immediate relationship to the first truth presupposes that the operation of the intellect extends to being and truth taken universally. Because the intellect considers reality in the light of universal being, it will not rest until it has succeeded in reducing any secondary and derived instance of being to the first and unconditioned cause of all being and all truth. The human intellect is said to be 'imperfect' in the sense that it must bring its metaphysical orientation towards an unconditioned and first truth to fulfilment by way of reason. Being imperfect, the human intellect needs to develop a metaphysical consideration of reality, reducing the whole of finite being to a first principle of being, in order that it may be led more easily to what faith teaches about God. So the *manuductio* appears to refer to the metaphysical movement from the material reality of human experience upwards to a first principle of all being, in the light of which the descending movement of *revelatio* can be actually understood as a movement coming from God.

Aquinas's *ST* is indeed a work of 'revealed theology'. But this is not a reason to consider *ST* as somehow dogmatically closed off in its own particular truth, immune to all philosophical engagement with truth and intelligibility. The Five Ways are, in my opinion, essential to the theological enterprise of *ST*; they do not aim at a rational foundation of the truth of the revealed doctrine about God, but they are part of the necessary *manuductio*. Considered as such, the arguments are variants of the metaphysical resolution of finite beings to the first and universal cause of their being. They are different articulations of the metaphysical insight of what it means for a thing to be finite in its mode of being: to depend on something else as its cause. In the theological setting of *ST* they are the first step by which the intellect is led to an understanding of that primary and unconditional reality to which the sayings of Christian religious doctrine must be taken to refer if they are to be about *God*. They are but the first step. One might say that what they prove is not so much the existence of the specific Christian God or of a less specified theistic God ('a supernatural, knowing, universally governing, personal entity'). The fundamental aim that underlies the arguments for God is not to show (and this is very important to realize) that the theistic belief of Christianity is in fact a true belief – in other words, that there really exists a divine entity which has those characteristics attributed to it by the theistic doctrine of Christian faith. It is not a matter of arguing that the theistic representation of the divine is a true representation, depicting reality as it is in itself (that is, what one may call 'truth' in an epistemological sense), but of showing the truth (in the ontological sense) of what is represented and conceived of by the doctrine

of Christian faith as God. The conclusions to which the arguments come – a ‘First Unmoved Mover’, a ‘First Efficient Cause’, etc. – are different effect-related qualifications of that primary instance of being (*primum in entibus*) to which any theistic representation of God must refer if it is to be understood as a representation of *God*.

As we have seen, Kretzmann is very reluctant to identify that primary being which is posited at the beginning of natural theology’s investigation with God in the specific theistic sense. Identifying such a primary being as God requires further argumentation to show that this absolute entity has in fact the theistic characteristics attributed to God by the great monotheistic religions. The term ‘theism’ is often used as a common designator of how God is represented in the monotheistic religions. Not every religion represents the divine in a theistic manner, as a personal and transcendent being, but at the least Christianity in its main creeds does. And Aquinas, standing in the Christian tradition, would not hesitate to accept Kretzmann’s theistic description of what may count as God. But at the same time, one should, from Aquinas’s perspective, make a distinction between a theistic representation of God and a speculative conception of that reality to which the name of God refers, and which is in a certain way represented by the religious tradition. As we said, Aquinas does not aim to show that God is in truth as He is represented by the Christian religion. His main formula which expresses how God’s mode of being must be understood on the basis of His effects is ‘subsistent being itself’ (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*), which is hardly a theistic characterization. Aquinas’s metaphysical inquiry as to what it is to be divine does not so much result in a ‘theistic’ God (a supreme being with such and such characteristics); Aquinas’s procedure should be seen as examining and determining ontologically that kind of reality to which Christian belief and its theistic representations must be taken to refer if they are to be understood as referring to *God*.

## Notes

1. My discussion of Kretzmann’s approach of Aquinas’s thought will be limited to the first volume of his *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas’s Natural Theology in Summa contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), [hereafter *TMOT*]; for a more general assessment of Kretzmann’s reading of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, see my review article, ‘Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*: a metaphysics of theism?’, in *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales*, 65 (1998), 176–187.
2. *TMOT*, 56, n. 5: ‘Theoretically, the inclusion of the famous Five Ways near the beginning of ST should constitute a digression from the project Aquinas is undertaking there.’
3. Quoted in *ibid.*, 55.
4. From Kretzmann’s point of view it would be preferable to speak of ‘whether there exists a divine entity’ instead of using the odd formulation ‘a God’. I will argue that, for Aquinas, the question is from the beginning about God.
5. *TMOT*, 56.
6. Compare the general principle formulated in the *sed contra* argument of ST, Ia, 2, 2: ‘primum enim quod oportet intelligi de aliquo, est an sit’.

7. See *ibid.*, Ia, 3, 4 ad 2: the question *an sit* does not result in knowledge of the 'being' of God (*esse Dei*), which is identical with his essence; what is known and affirmed is the truth of the proposition that God is (*Deum esse*).
8. See *ibid.*, Ia, 2, 2.
9. *TMOT*, 24.
10. *Ibid.*, 34.
11. *SCG*, I, ch. 2: 'Propositum nostrae intentionis est veritatem, quam fides catholica profitetur, pro nostro modulo manifestare, errores eliminando contrarios.'
12. For a more detailed interpretation of the nature and purpose of *SCG*, see my article 'Natural reason in the *Contra Gentiles*', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 4 (1994), 42–70.
13. *TMOT*, 56.
14. *ST*, Ia, 2, 3: 'Sed contra est quod dicitur Exodi 3, 14, ex persona Dei: Ego sum qui sum.'
15. *Ibid.*, Ia, 1, 5 ad 2: 'haec scientia accipere potest aliquid a philosophicis disciplines, non quod ex necessitate eis indigeat, sed ad maiorem manifestationem eorum quae in hac scientia traduntur'.
16. *Ibid.*, Ia, 1, 5 ad 2: 'Et hoc ipsum quod sic utitur eis, non est propter defectum vel insufficientiam eius, sed propter defectum intellectus nostri; qui ex his quae per naturalem rationem (ex qua procedunt aliae scientiae) cognoscuntur, facilius manuducitur in ea quae sunt supra rationem, quae in hac scientia traduntur.'