

Knowledge & the Transcendent

*An Inquiry into the Mind's
Relationship to God*

Paul A. Macdonald Jr.



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For my parents, Paul and Jan Macdonald

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK is the product of much effort and thought, along with a fervent desire to bring to completion a project whose roots extend as far back as my undergraduate years when I first began my study of philosophy and theology, and began reflecting on the very idea of knowledge of God: how it is possible and what it looks like (or should look like) from within a distinctly western, even more specifically Christian (and as it turns out, Catholic) worldview.

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Diagnosing the Problem

THIS BOOK addresses an important perennial question in philosophical theology, specifically as it intersects with the philosophy of mind and epistemology: how can human persons have knowledge of God, or more specifically, how can God transcend the mind but still remain known to the mind? In addressing this question (or I should say, in providing an answer to this question), I draw on contemporary insights in the philosophy of mind and epistemology in order to interpret classical claims in Christian philosophical theology—and in particular, the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas—about both the *possibility* and the *character* of our knowledge of God.

The first main goal of the book, then, is to inquire into the very idea of knowledge of God, or the very possibility of knowledge of God; and this, in turn, requires that we consider pressing issues pertaining both to human *subjectivity*—at bottom, what it means for us to “know” or have “knowledge”—and to divine *objectivity*: who God is. Perhaps the most basic question we must ask then, to start, concerns our own subjectivity: what does it mean to “know” or have “knowledge”? If we were to answer this question from the standpoint of contemporary epistemology (which views itself as part of a long and distinguished tradition of reflection in the history of western philosophy on what knowledge is or entails), we would begin by analyzing the defining features or conditions of knowledge; that is, we would begin by thinking about knowledge in terms of its various species or com-

ponent parts. For our purposes here, however, we should begin by thinking about knowledge more broadly, under the rubric of *intentionality* rather than *epistemology*.¹ Thus “knowledge,” as I will be employing and defending it to start, denotes not any particular form of knowledge or even an analyzed set of conditions for knowledge but rather a *relationship* that holds between subject and object, or the human person and the object of knowledge: what is objectively real. More specifically, “knowledge” is a success term: knowledge entails that our conceptions of reality (for example, the thoughts and beliefs we have and hold about reality), or our mental life more broadly, actually *bear on* or are *directed on* reality. In other words, knowledge entails that our conceptions of reality are, in fact, “about” reality: there is a relation of directedness or “aboutness” that holds between our conceptions of reality and reality itself—the way the world, and I will argue, God, *really* is.² Thus this relation of directedness or “aboutness” itself entails that our conceptions of reality, when they afford knowledge, do not fall short of the specific aspects or features of reality at which we aim them: they actually reach reality itself; consequently, they conjoin us to reality itself.

There is much more that needs to be said here, and I will spend much of the book unpacking this conception of knowledge in more detail. But for our present purposes, with a basic definition of knowledge in place, we now can consider the other half of the larger question driving the book: how can there be knowledge of *God*? According to the definition of knowledge I am employing, knowledge of God most basically (and minimally) entails having conceptions of (having thoughts or holding beliefs about) God that bear on or are directed on God. But now we must ask, turning from the subjective to the objective, what is the *nature* of the divine reality on which our theological conceptions (thoughts and beliefs) purport to bear? Leaving aside more specific metaphysical questions about the nature of God’s reality, I claim that God’s most defining characteristic, at least according to classical theology in the West (or the majority position in the West), is God’s *transcendence*: by virtue of existing *a se* (and thus enjoying an existence that is necessary) God exists “outside” or “beyond” the natural world. In short, God’s tran-

1. I am not trying to drive a wedge here between intentionality and epistemology; my point is only that questions regarding intentionality (how it is that our cognitive activity can be about anything at all) precede more specific epistemological questions (what knowledge actually looks like in paradigm cases). I address more specific epistemological questions, particularly as they pertain to knowledge of God, in the second part of the book.

2. For a more specific definition of intentionality, see “intentionality,” *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 381.

scendence requires that God's reality be entirely independent of worldly reality, even if worldly reality is not entirely independent of God's reality.³ Having knowledge of God thus seems to require that our conceptions of God bear on or are directed on God's *transcendent* reality.

It is precisely here, however, that we need to pause, because we run into a familiar problem, a problem that seems to force us into inquiring into the very possibility of knowledge of God. One of the main lessons of modern thought is that we should be sharply suspicious of the transcendent, and specifically, of any claims to enjoy epistemic access to the transcendent. More specifically, we should be suspicious of any claims to enjoy epistemic access to anything that transcends what we *experience*—whether that be the world “in itself” or any other supra-empirical reality. On one level, then, we have inherited a certain philosophical conception of the human mind and human cognitive powers as sharply circumscribed, which already restricts what we can claim to know objectively. But we also have inherited a certain theological conception of divine transcendence itself, which not only severs the world's relationship to God, but also severs the human mind's relationship to God. According to this conception, if God is truly transcendent, then God not only exists external to the mind; God transcends the “reach” of the mind altogether and consequently the very cognitive framework or structure that makes knowledge of *anything* possible.

We can picture the problem as follows: if our powers of mind are sharply circumscribed, and God transcends the mind, then God in turn must be placed outside or beyond a *boundary* that separates God from the mind and consequently encloses the cognitive “space” in which we form conceptions of God. In other words, picturing God's transcendence, or picturing the mind's relationship to God, also seems to require picturing or positioning God outside or beyond an outer boundary to the mind. And the attraction or “pull” of the picture is inevitable: if the mind is bounded by what it can know, and God is truly transcendent, then our conceptions of God

3. I recognize that there are alternative models for God's relationship to the world in modern and contemporary thought that do not assume this “classical” definition of divine transcendence. Process theologians, for example, argue that while God is not identical to the world, and indeed transcends the world, God does depend on the world in some sense for God's existence because God is in the process of “becoming” along with the world; hence, God derives some of God's reality from the world. For the purposes of this book, however, I will be relying on and employing a classical definition of transcendence, according to which God transcends the world by enjoying an existence which is necessary, not dependent in any way on the contingent existence of the world.

seemingly cannot bear on or be directed on God. Emptied of any objective content or purport, they inevitably fall short of reaching the divine reality at which we endeavor to aim them. And if our conceptions of God seemingly cannot bear on or be directed on God, it is because they cannot penetrate the boundary: it is the boundary, separating the mind from God, that prevents us from forming conceptions of God that are actually about God. So while it is possible that our conceptions of God may “gesture” at God, and thus perhaps suggest something about the nature of God (given that the picture suggests that there is something beyond the boundary), ultimately they do not extend “farther” than the world or the mind.

What, then, becomes of the very possibility of knowing God, if we accept this particular picture of the mind’s relationship to God? As long as there is an outer boundary in the picture, it seems that knowing God—that is, actually reaching God, cognitively speaking, with our minds—requires that we transcend or “break out” of the very cognitive space in which our cognitive activity takes place, because again (given God’s position vis-à-vis the boundary) that is the only way we can come into genuine cognitive “contact” with God. But of course, given the presence of the boundary in the picture, we *cannot* transcend or break out of the space to which we are confined: to hold that we could do so would be to endow ourselves with Herculean powers of mind. Cognitive activity concerning the divine is, it seems, irrevocably *confined* to the world and to the mind. Moreover, with God outside the boundary and us inside the boundary, the “distance” between the mind and God opens up to such an extent that God seems to be withdrawn from the mind entirely. Thus the picture is subject to a particular instability and distortion: by virtue of transcending both the mind *and* an outer boundary that encloses the mind, God becomes a total *deus absconditus*, completely withdrawn from the mind and hence hidden from the mind’s “view.” And “what is hidden,” Wittgenstein writes, “is of no interest to us,” given that “a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said.”⁴

The threat of God’s withdrawal from the mind, which accompanies the threat of cognitive confinement, brings larger epistemological and methodological questions to the fore: does achieving knowledge of God ultimately hinge on bridging a gap between mind and God? If it does, then the entire enterprise of achieving knowledge of God seems doomed to fail. How can

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter *PI*), trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), §126 and §304.

we bridge the gap, if the gap is untraversable? As long as knowing God, and pursuing theological inquiry more broadly, is conceived of as closing a gap or crossing a boundary—trying to “climb out” of our minds, so to speak, in order to get to God—then we remain susceptible to an interminable *anxiety* surrounding the mind’s already estranged relationship to God. So we find ourselves needing to answer another pressing question: how do we alleviate the anxiety that unavoidably accompanies our efforts to gain knowledge of God?

One obvious way—which may also strike us as the only honest way, insofar as it enables us to embrace the limitations of our own subjectivity—is to abandon our efforts and the entire enterprise of knowing God altogether. Rather than trying to prevent the onset of withdrawal, we should instead simply allow God to recede into total obscurity and thus allow the mind’s relationship to God to be severed entirely. Breaking any remaining bond between the mind and God may provoke some initial anxiety, but once we dispense with the whole idea of knowledge of God and speculative theology along with it, then knowledge of God ceases to be a problem. In short, we overcome our anxiety by forgetting about God altogether.

Of course, simply forgetting about God altogether is easier said than done: while we may delay or offset the anxiety by leaving God outside the boundary and dispensing with our efforts to know God, we cannot eradicate it completely. As long as the boundary is in the picture, then we are forced to acknowledge that there is something outside the boundary: a transcendent referent or reality to which we remain answerable, even if we do not wish to remain answerable to it. And as long as a transcendent referent or reality remains in the picture, then the problem remains how we can gain access to it. Inevitably, the need to overcome our own cognitive confinement and gain access to God (or whatever lies outside the boundary) returns, and along with it, the anxiety that God remains hopelessly inaccessible, outside or beyond our cognitive grasp. Allowing God’s total withdrawal from the mind, therefore, does not alleviate the anxiety surrounding the mind’s relationship to God; it renders it more acute and so only exacerbates it further.

So the question remains: how do we alleviate the anxiety, if not by abandoning any and all efforts to close the epistemic gap separating mind and God? Well, there is a further strategy we can employ here. We can go on thinking about God, using whatever conceptual resources we have at our disposal, but we must remind ourselves that even our best thought about God—what we hold and believe to be true of God—remains devoid of any objective content or purport. We may *hope* that our thought about God re-

ally reaches God—but this is a false hope indeed. Our thought about God allows us to approach the boundary, but it never allows us to get beyond it, let alone peer around it. So once again, coming face-to-face with the boundary, we must honestly embrace the sharp limitations of our own subjectivity. What, then, becomes of the mind's relationship to God on this view? As hard as we may try to think and talk about God, we never can claim to get God "in mind." God still remains distant from the mind; so distant, in fact, that despite our best cognitive efforts, the mind ceases to bear *any* meaningful relationship to the divine.

But perhaps we need not despair. If we cannot trespass or break through the boundary (limited, finite cognitive subjects that we are), then it seems we still can know God by bringing God *inside* the boundary. Once we bring God inside the boundary, we no longer have to identify God as existing independently from the mind or (more broadly) the realm of human subjectivity. God becomes an element or product of our own subjectivity, even if we distinguish God as the highest element or product of our own subjectivity. Consequently, there is no longer any epistemic gap separating the mind from God, and there is no threat that God will withdraw from the mind. God becomes immediately knowable (given that knowledge of God constitutes a mere extension of our own self-knowledge), and the anxiety surrounding the mind's relationship to God, as well as the nagging question whether God can be known, dissipates entirely.

Once again, however, there is a cost: once we bring God inside the boundary, precisely in order to make God epistemically accessible, we empty God of any transcendent, *objective* reality. More specifically, we reduce God to a *subjective* reality—a product of our own making, an invention of the mind—that in turn becomes subject to our own mastery and control. The greater anxiety, then, that accompanies the move to draw God inside the boundary concerns the very reality of God: God ceases to be objectively knowable because God is no longer objectively real. So while we may enjoy provisional comfort in having God at our disposal (again, given that God is now wholly circumscribed within the realm of human subjectivity), ultimately, we have to face up to our own radical subjectivity in which the very transcendent reality of God has been absorbed and eclipsed. Outside or beyond the boundary, which remains in the picture, there lies a vast, empty space where God formerly resided, and as we look towards the boundary, we realize once more that we are confined by our own subjectivity. We remain trapped, as it were, inside the boundary, unable to reach a reality that we did not make and which does not depend

for its existence on our own cognitive activity or mental states. The anxiety, then, concerning whether there can be genuine objectivity in our knowledge of God remains.

Thus I argue that as long as we include the boundary in the picture, or picture God transcending an outer boundary that encloses the mind, we are faced with an intractable dilemma and remain susceptible to an interminable anxiety. If God is left outside or beyond the boundary, God remains objectively unknowable, because God cannot be epistemically accessed by us; on the other hand, if God is drawn inside the boundary, God also remains objectively unknowable, because God is no longer objectively real. *Skepticism* regarding our knowledge of God, on the one hand, and *subjectivism* regarding our knowledge of God, on the other hand, loom. As long as the boundary is left in the picture, therefore, God's distance from the mind, or conversely, God's proximity to the mind, becomes so great that it becomes impossible to intelligibly conceive of the mind's relationship to God at all. The anxiety we experience, then, concerning the possibility of epistemic access to God is a *symptom* that something has gone radically wrong in the way we have come to conceive of the mind's relationship to God: there is a deep incoherence in the picture as we have come to accept it that we in turn need to question and overcome.

My overarching claim in this book is that properly addressing the driving question of if and how God can be known requires completely disarming the threat of God's total withdrawal from the mind and alternatively, the threat of God's total adequation to the mind. Disarming this dual threat requires dissolving or liquidating it completely, rather than merely delaying or offsetting it; that is, it requires *discarding the very model of the mind's relationship to God—itself a form of heterodoxy, I claim—that positions God in relation to an outer boundary that circumscribes the space that human persons, by virtue of possessing minds, occupy*. The solution or “therapy” I offer, therefore, seeks to disarm the dual threat of God's withdrawal and adequation as well as the anxiety that threat generates by challenging the distorted picture of God as transcending an outer boundary to the mind, without of course undermining God's cognitive transcendence altogether. I claim that we can maintain a strong commitment to God's cognitive transcendence *without* having to situate God vis-à-vis any boundary that circumscribes human mindedness. Once the boundary is deleted from the picture, then there is no longer any need to place God outside the boundary or any temptation to bring God inside the boundary. Both the threat of God's total withdrawal from the mind

and the threat of God's total adequation to the mind dissolve, not because we have bridged a gap between the mind and God, or worse yet merged the mind with God, but because we have eliminated the need or struggle to relate the mind and God altogether. In eliminating this need or struggle, we then answer the question of if and how God can be known, by essentially "un-asking" the question entirely, rendering it pointless and hence removing its sting by showing how it is generated by a view of the mind's relationship to God that is not only detrimental but also totally dispensable.

At this point, I should make some of my methodological assumptions clear. There is precedent in the more recent history of philosophy for the sort of activity I am engaging in: using therapy as a way of treating a philosophical—or in this case, *theological*—illness or anxiety. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness."⁵ For Wittgenstein, the goal of philosophy is not to solve or address perennial philosophical problems—for example, how it is that language or the mind bears on the world—by providing new theories or explanations (or new answers to old problems). Rather, the goal of philosophy is to solve or address philosophical problems by changing the whole way we think about or approach those problems, so that we can overcome the temptations we face in thinking about or approaching those problems and thereby dispel the confusion they generate (as well as eliminate the illness or anxiety they generate). In particular, philosophy liberates us from the confusion and anxiety that afflict us by leading us back from the alienated realm of theory to the realm of ordinary life, and the details or practices of ordinary life, where the answers to our questions and problems are readily "open to view."⁶ The goal of philosophy, then, in liberating the philosopher from confusion and anxiety, is instilling *rest* or *peace*. "The real discovery," Wittgenstein writes, "is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question."⁷

The main goal of this book is therefore to lead the philosopher and the theologian (or the reader, more broadly) through therapy on a path from confusion to clarity, or anxiety to peace, first by diagnosing the problem

5. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §255. For a helpful explanation of philosophy as therapy in Wittgenstein, see Marie McGinn, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17–26.

6. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §126.

7. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §133.

of if and how God can be known and then by showing how the problem is generated by profound philosophical and theological misunderstanding concerning the nature of the mind and the mind's relationship to the divine. Now, there is much philosophical and theological work that needs to be done here: the therapy I prescribe (and here, perhaps, I depart somewhat from Wittgenstein) therefore entails doing a fair amount of "theory"; that is, it entails conducting a rigorous and comprehensive inquiry into the mind's relationship with God. But whatever theoretical work I do is aimed at dispelling confusion and directing the reader back to a fundamental conception of the mind's relationship to God that is not susceptible to the debilitating effects of skepticism, on the one hand, and subjectivism, on the other.

In the first part of the book, I locate the origins of the boundary—itsself the root of the problem—within modern religious thought. I also show how the picture of God in relation to the boundary has come to dominate contemporary religious thought, or contemporary reflection on the mind's relationship to God. My real target in the first part of the book is a position I refer to as "theological antirealism," which I claim encompasses any view of the mind's relationship to God that situates God in relation to a cognitive boundary and thus denies (whether explicitly or implicitly) that God can be objectively known. By contrast, I begin to argue on behalf of "theological realism"—the view that there can be objectivity in our knowledge of God, given that our true conceptions of God actually bear on who God objectively is. My purpose in describing and defending theological realism, however, is not to offer a full-blown alternative theory to theological antirealism. Rather, my purpose, insofar as it is therapeutic in nature, is to offer an entirely different way of thinking about the mind and its relationship to the divine, one which allows us fully to *rehabilitate* the mind's relationship to the divine.

This is why the vast majority of my defense of theological realism takes place in the second and third parts of the book, where I continue the project of rehabilitation by describing and defending models for how human beings know God, models for human knowing drawn from Christian thought and practice itself.⁸ In particular, I turn to the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas: in Aquinas's overall philosophical and theological worldview, there

8. This move is also Wittgensteinian in spirit, constitutive of the therapeutic enterprise. My inquiry into Christian thought and practice, and in particular into the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas, is akin to grammatical investigation, insofar as I explore, with Aquinas, forms of knowing that are particular to Christian thought and practice. The goal of this investigation, in McGinn's words, is "to produce a kind of understanding which consists in seeing a pattern

is no boundary or gap separating mind from world or mind from God in paradigm cases of human knowing. Put positively, Aquinas's claim is that in paradigm cases of human knowing, mind and its conceptions of the world and of God bear *directly* on the world and God. As I will show, Aquinas offers a general account of cognition and intentionality that is unequivocally realist and more than that, an exemplar of "direct realism." Aquinas then applies his realist account of cognition and intentionality to what he claims is the paradigm model for knowledge of God: the beatific vision, which is the knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed, who spend eternity with God. On Aquinas's view, our knowledge of God, in its ultimate eschatological form, is utterly direct: empowered by the 'light of glory', we 'see' God directly and objectively, or "as God is."⁹ Moreover, as I go on to show, Aquinas argues that there can be knowledge of God in this life—a knowledge obtained through reason and faith—which enables us to 'intend' God with our minds through *believing* God's truth (discovered by reason and revealed to faith) rather than 'seeing' God's truth directly.

Aquinas clearly did not develop his accounts of knowledge of God in response to any problem (or, for that matter, in order to construct any theory), because he did not share what I argue is the distinctly modern view that God belongs outside or beyond an outer cognitive boundary. Yet I maintain that Aquinas does provide a direct response to the modern problem, given that he argues that (at least in Christian thought and practice) God cannot be positioned vis-à-vis an outer boundary or interface that threatens to sever or complicate the mind's relationship to God. On Aquinas's view, the mind can be and in fact is cognitively *united* to the transcendent God (in different ways), even though it never *comprehends* or circumscribes the transcendent God through that cognitive union. As such, the possibility that God might mysteriously withdraw from the mind, or alternatively, entirely recede within the mind, is unintelligible.

I also realize, of course, that in appealing to Aquinas I am drawing on premodern resources and insights in order to address distinctly modern problems and concerns. This may strike some as unwarranted (or foul play), given that premodern thinkers like Aquinas obviously did not face distinct-

or form in what is there before our eyes, but which we had previously neglected or overlooked" (*Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, 26).

9. Throughout the book, I will be enclosing perceptual terms in single quotation marks when they denote unique dispositions, states, or acts of the mind, particularly in Thomistic epistemology.

ly modern problems and concerns. The uncharitable tendency here, in our modern philosophical and theological milieu, is either to dismiss Aquinas's premodern worldview as totally irrelevant or hopelessly naïve—completely out of touch with and hence unrelated to distinctly modern problems and concerns—or to revere it to such a degree as to be unwilling to bring it into contact with distinctly modern problems and concerns. However, as the reader will discover, returning to Aquinas does not also require reinstating a false innocence, nor does it require burdening Aquinas with problems and concerns that he simply does not share. Aquinas has much to say to us if we will let him; and as we examine his arguments and his texts in the proper hermeneutical light, we will discover that we can bring Aquinas into our own world, precisely in order to help us address our own problems and concerns, without having to extricate him from his own world.

More specifically, we can bring Aquinas into direct contact with recent work in the philosophy of mind and epistemology—some of which is explicitly Thomistic in orientation, some of which is not—so as better to understand and appreciate Aquinas himself. As I interpret him, Aquinas offers penetrating insights into the nature of the human mind as “unbounded” and remarkably “open” to the world as well as the divine, insights that both inform and are informed by insights in more recent philosophy of mind and epistemology within the Anglo-American tradition in particular.¹⁰ It is important to note that the Thomism that emerges here particularly in the second part of the book is distinctly analytic, and I explicitly place my work in those chapters within a subset of Thomistic studies known as “analytical Thomism.”¹¹ However, my goal here, again, is not to propagate a par-

10. I am borrowing the metaphor of “openness” from philosopher John McDowell, and in particular McDowell's *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). I will be exploiting and extending insights from McDowell throughout the book. For a helpful companion to McDowell's work, which I have leaned on somewhat in this introduction, see Maximilian de Gaynesford, *John McDowell* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2004).

11. Most basically, “analytical Thomism” denotes a method of reading Aquinas which aims to retrieve insights in Aquinas in order to address perennial issues within analytic philosophy. The leading spokesperson of this movement is John Haldane, who coined the term; other notable thinkers associated with the movement (who will assist me in my own reading of Aquinas) include Norman Kretzmann, Eleonore Stump, Robert Pasnau, and Anthony Kenny. For a more comprehensive historical treatment of the engagement of analytic philosophers with the study of Aquinas, see Fergus Kerr, “Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies?” in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jim Fodor and Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 119–35. And for a broad collection of contemporary essays in analytical Thomism, see *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue*, ed. Craig Paterson and Matthew S. Pugh (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

ticular bias for recent Anglo-American philosophy, nor is it to mandate that Aquinas be aligned with a specific interpretive school of thought (analytical Thomism). Rather, I aim to show as precisely as possible how Thomistic epistemology allows us properly to conceive the mind-world and mind-God relationships.

The book unfolds as follows. In the first chapter, “Skepticism and Subjectivism in Modern Thought,” I discuss how knowing God becomes a distinctly modern problem and briefly trace the development of the problem in representative thinkers in modern thought. I also show how the problem manifests itself in the work of various theological antirealists in contemporary philosophy and theology, all of whom adopt or modify the modern picture of the mind’s relationship to God and hence adopt the distinctly modern principle that God cannot be objectively known. The second chapter, “Challenging Modern Skepticism and Subjectivism,” is an explicit exercise in therapy. Its central aim is to challenge theological antirealism in all its various forms, by showing how it is based on a deeply problematic epistemology and theology and thus remains susceptible to a distinct anxiety about the mind’s relationship to God—an anxiety that *only* arises when God is positioned in relation to a cognitive boundary. On my analysis, therefore, theological antirealism ultimately suffers as an epistemological enterprise because it cannot coherently conceive of the mind’s relationship to God and consequently propagates and exacerbates, rather than alleviates, the anxiety—an anxiety that we should *want* to be rid of and in fact *can* be rid of by actually challenging modern skepticism and subjectivism directly.

In the third chapter, “Direct Realism and Aquinas’s Account of Cognition,” I begin to develop a more specific realist model for knowledge of God by introducing and explaining Aquinas’s overall realist epistemology. According to Aquinas, it is only by having sense experiences and thoughts that possess definitive *content*—once the senses and the intellect have been suitably ‘in-formed’ by the world itself (and specifically by its sensible and intelligible features or forms)—that we as human cognitive subjects can be credited with occupying *world-intending* sensory and intellective states, in which we experience and apprehend the world directly, as it objectively is. By successfully defending this claim, and thereby offering a viable model of how mind and world are intelligibly related (or how mind ‘intends’ the world), I lay the necessary groundwork for subsequent chapters, in which I show how mind and God in Aquinas are intelligibly related (or how the mind ‘intends’ God) in paradigm cases of *theological* knowledge.

Thus, in the fourth chapter, “Having God in View: Direct Realism and the Beatific Vision,” I build on themes I develop in the third chapter and exposit and defend Aquinas’s account of beatific knowledge of God as a paradigm model of cognition and direct realism in Aquinas. On Aquinas’s view, as I interpret it, the blessed know or ‘see’ God in the beatific state when God impresses God’s self directly on the intellect (or actually ‘in-forms’ the intellect itself), actualizing the intellective capacities of the blessed directly so as to produce in them a content-rich intellective ‘vision’ of God. In the fifth chapter, “Realist Epistemologies of Reason and Faith,” I show how the human mind can attain knowledge of God even in this life. Through both reason and faith we form and hold true beliefs about God, beliefs which are directed on God (even if they fall radically short of furnishing intellective ‘vision’), since they draw their content from what God has revealed of God’s self in creation (which is discoverable by reason) as well as from Christian revelation (which is received or accepted by faith). In this chapter, I also show how the true beliefs formed and held by reason and faith also appear to amount to knowledge from the standpoint of contemporary epistemology, since they are adequately grounded as well as produced by properly functioning faculties that have been given to us by God.

In the sixth chapter, “Rehabilitating Objectivity in the Knowledge of God,” I press Aquinas’s account even further in an effort to retrieve and rehabilitate a robust theological conception of objectivity, specifically as it pertains to the knowledge of God that is available through reason and faith. By locating an element of objectivity in the knowledge of God that we possess through reason and faith, I also show how objectivity (which I argue in the first chapter has been eclipsed in modern and contemporary reflection on the mind’s relationship to God) is a viable and important goal of theological inquiry. Hence, in the seventh and final chapter of the book, “In Defense of a Realist Interpretation of Theology,” I defend theology as a realist discipline of thought. The end of the book, then, really constitutes a new beginning, insofar as it calls theology (and those who profess to do theology) back to its difficult but also noble task of humbly inquiring into the nature, history, and purposes of the divine.

PART I

PITFALLS IN MODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Skepticism and Subjectivism in Modern Thought

THE GOAL of the current chapter is to diagnose further how knowing God becomes a problem—a problem that arises with the advent of a particular form of skepticism and subjectivism within modern thought and continues to plague contemporary philosophical and theological reflection on the mind's relationship to God. In short, the problem can be specified as follows: once God is placed outside or beyond a cognitive boundary (given that God is pictured as transcending a cognitive boundary), then there can be no objectivity in what human persons believe and say about God. The beliefs and assertions we hold and make about God (or, we could say, “aim” at God), can have no bearing on who God objectively is. This leads to *skepticism* regarding our knowledge of God. The alternative to the skeptical position, which in fact turns out to be an extension of skepticism, is *subjectivism*. According to this position, we can think and talk about God in terms of our own religious symbols and experience; or we can think and talk about God in terms of our individual or collective religious responses and practices; but again, we *cannot* think and talk about God “in God's self.” God-thought and God-talk are irrevocably bound to symbol, experience, response, and practice—the subjective or intersubjective realm of symbol, experience, response, and practice—so thinking and talking about God (and hence knowing God), objectively speaking, is impossible.

In diagnosing how knowledge of God becomes a problem in modern thought, I admittedly chart a fairly large and broad trajectory of thinkers

and ideas. This is intentional: the main goal of the chapter is to demonstrate the ubiquity of skepticism and subjectivism in modern thought, not to conduct in-depth analyses of the particular culprits—the skeptics and subjectivists—that I consider. Also, there will be more summary than analysis in the current chapter: my first aim is to establish the emergence and presence of the distinctly modern picture of the mind's bounded relationship to the divine, with the subsequent aim of challenging and dismantling the picture in the chapter that follows. My ultimate goal, then, is to show that what prevents the skeptics and subjectivists—or theological antirealists, as I often call them—of varying stripes from recognizing that there can be genuine objectivity in the knowledge of God is their collective commitment to a distorted picture of human subjectivity and divine objectivity that situates God in relation to a cognitive boundary. Thus their opposition to a genuine theological realism that embraces epistemological objectivity is based in their false presupposition that the only way God can be objectively known is either by transcending or breaking through the boundary to the cognitive space we (qua cognitive subjects) occupy, or alternatively, by drawing God inside the boundary to the cognitive space we occupy. As I will go on to show, theological antirealism has a problem greater than that of undermining epistemological objectivity: it fails on its own terms to offer an intelligible conception of the mind's relationship to God; a conception that is beleaguered by an untenable skepticism and subjectivism.

Erecting the Boundary: The Origins of Skepticism and Subjectivism in Modern Thought

Knowledge of God becomes a problem in the modern world. The tendency of modern thought, as I will now show, is to swerve ineluctably towards (a) a constricted conception of the human mind, which sharply circumscribes the powers of the human mind and binds the reach or scope of human knowledge in particular to what is internal to the mind or appears to the mind; and (b) a suspicion of and agnosticism towards the transcendent, and specifically towards the possibility of epistemic access to the transcendent (especially given the constricted conception of the human mind). The modern problem regarding knowledge of God originates, then, within a specific epistemological framework, or within a specific epistemological agenda that in turn issues a direct challenge to traditional, speculative, and realist theology. This is an important claim, because it is my initial task here to show how *theological* antirealism, which I have already said divests knowl-

edge of God of any objectivity, originates in distinctly *philosophical* reflection on the mind's relationship to God, and specifically on the inherently bounded nature of the human mind. In other words, the picture of God transcending an outer boundary to the mind originates not (at least explicitly) in sustained theological reflection on the nature of God but rather on sustained philosophical reflection about the nature—and hence the boundaries—of the human mind.

René Descartes, of course, lays the groundwork for this sort of thinking. While Descartes does not erect any formal boundary separating mind and world, he certainly lays the foundation for what is now often called the “Cartesian divide” between mind and world, that is, the ultimate autonomy of the “inner” or the subjective from the “outer” or the objective. As is well known, Descartes employs methodical doubt in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* in order “to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations,” that is, from new, indubitable foundations of knowledge.¹ Thus Descartes employs methodical doubt within the *Meditations* with specifically constructive aims: to overthrow the inherited scholastic worldview and initiate what commentator Margaret Dauler Wilson calls “a radical and systematic revision in the contemporary world view.”² In the First Meditation, Descartes first doubts the deliverances of his senses, based on the initial claim that he may be dreaming (“there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep”), as well as the subsequent more radical claim that he is subject to wholesale deception by “some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning,” who Descartes admits also may cause him to be in error both about his empirical beliefs as well as about his most basic mathematical beliefs, which initially seemed to him to be impervious to doubt.³

By marshalling this latter hypothesis concerning a powerful and cunning Deceiver, Descartes therefore generates wholesale skepticism about whether *any* of his beliefs are veridical, given their unknown causal origin. According to Wilson, the central question Descartes raises here—how can I ever know that I am not in error about anything that I believe?—is a “philosophi-

1. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76.

2. Margaret Dauler Wilson, *Descartes* (1978; repr., New York: Routledge, 1996), 9. See also Charles Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61–62.

3. Descartes, *Meditations*, 77 and 79.

cal show-stopper [that] may be characterized without too much hyperbole as the most fundamental Cartesian problem.”⁴ The well-known problem for Descartes becomes explaining how, in a non-circular fashion, he can escape the clutches of the evil demon and wholesale deception: if Descartes’s doubt is all-encompassing, then any resources he might employ to argue his way out of wholesale deception must themselves be doubted.

Regardless, whether he is entitled to or not, Descartes does claim to discover how he can escape the apparently crippling doubt that he experiences in the First Meditation: by retreating inside the recesses of his own mind, where he first locates himself as a “thinking thing,” something about which he thinks he cannot be deceived and about which he can attain absolute certainty (given that he cannot doubt the reality of his own thoughts). This discovery occurs in the Third Meditation:

I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, since this is hardly possible, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless. I will converse with myself and scrutinize myself more deeply; and in this way I will attempt to achieve, little by little, a more intimate knowledge of myself. I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, is willing, is unwilling, and also which imagines and has sensory perceptions; *for as I have noted before, even though the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside of me, nonetheless the modes of thinking which I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me—of that I am certain* [italics mine].⁵

I emphasize this latter claim because by making it, Descartes lays down an important tenet in modern epistemology: that which is most readily known to the mind is that which resides *inside* the mind, namely, “ideas” or “modes of thinking” of which the mind can have immediate awareness. What is less important—and far less easy to establish—is whether anything corresponds to these mental states in extramental reality. And Descartes readily admits this: the most “clear and distinct idea” he possesses which he claims cannot have originated from within himself is the idea of a God who is “infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful,” as well as creator of everything that exists (including himself).⁶ Given that this idea is *of* an infinite reality (even though it resides within a finite

4. Wilson, *Descartes*, 31.

5. Descartes, *Meditations*, 86–87.

6. *Ibid.*, 93.

mind) it must be generated by a cause *with* infinite reality. Thus, ultimately, the only way Descartes validates the veracity of empirical thought and hence the existence of the empirical world is by demonstrating that God exists: a God who ensures that our mental ideas of things are produced by material things existing in reality.

What is most important for our purposes here are not Descartes's claims about the existence and nature of God, or the Cartesian mind's relationship to God, because those claims clearly serve his larger agenda, which is overcoming the doubt and skepticism with which he began his epistemological enterprise. Most important, then, is the fundamental breach between the mental and the material, which Descartes introduces within the context of his own specific epistemological enterprise, a breach which leads Descartes to equate the subjective with what is most certain.⁷ This fundamental breach also appears within the empiricist tradition, and specifically in the philosophy of David Hume. Here, the boundary between mind and world becomes more sharply delineated. For Hume, the mind is clearly bounded in what it can know: that is, there are aspects of reality it simply *cannot* know. The mind may *appear* to be unbounded, Hume admits, especially given its attending powers of creativity—"nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man"—but in fact, Hume says, all thought shows itself to be derived from experience, and thus it is reducible to experience, specifically to contents private to human consciousness, that is, to sense "impressions" or perceptions and the corresponding "ideas" based on and copied from those impressions. He writes, "but though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience."⁸

Hume's further claim is that if all thought about the world is derived from "the materials afforded us by the senses and experience," then all thought about the world is *confined* to those materials: since experience affords us no objective evidence or demonstrative certainty regarding empirical "matters of

7. Bertrand Russell claims that "by inventing the method of doubt, and by showing that subjective things are the most certain, Descartes performed a great service to philosophy." See Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18.

8. David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.4 and 2.5.

fact” (e.g., the sun’s rising day after day or snow’s being cold) then we cannot claim to have any knowledge of those facts. Based on our sensory experience of the world, we can form beliefs (themselves merely “lively” and “forceful” ideas)—through causal inference (what Hume informally calls “custom” or “habit”)—about the continued existence and occurrence of external individual objects and states of affairs that go beyond “the present testimony of our senses or the records of our memory.”⁹ But according to Hume, those beliefs lack any rational justification.¹⁰ In short, any claim to know reality itself, beyond what we experience, is rationally unjustified.¹¹ For example, we may believe, on the basis of sense experience and causal inference (custom or habit), that *snow is cold* or *fire is hot*—given our past experiences of *snow* and *cold* and *fire* and *hot* as “constantly conjoined”—but we have no rational basis on which to believe that those facts will or will not continue to obtain and hence are part of the enduring fabric of the world itself. Hume writes:

That there are no demonstrative arguments in the case [concerning empirical matters of fact], seems evident; since it implies no contradiction, that the course of nature may change, and that an object, seemingly like those which we have experienced, may be attended with different or contrary effects. May I not clearly and distinctly conceive, that a body, falling from the clouds, and which, in all other respects, resembles snow, has yet the taste of salt or the feeling of fire? Is there any more intelligible proposition than to affirm that all the trees will flourish in DECEMBER and JANUARY, and decay in MAY and JUNE? Now whatever is intelligible, and can be distinctly conceived, implies no contradiction, and can never be proved false by any demonstrative argument or abstract reasoning *a priori*.¹²

Thus, even in holding basic empirical beliefs about the world, we simply never can claim to enjoy epistemic access to anything in or about the world

9. *Ibid.*, 4.3.

10. See *passim* in the *Enquiry*, particularly sections 4–5, as well as David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, bk. 1, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). Regarding the role of custom in empirical belief formation, Hume writes, “Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past” (*Enquiry*, 5.6).

11. According to Terence Penelhum, while Hume “does say that our basic beliefs about matters of fact are devoid of rational justification,” Hume is also realistic regarding our inability to refrain from holding those beliefs, given the practical hold those beliefs have on us. See Terence Penelhum, *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 177–203, in particular 178–79.

12. Hume, *Enquiry*, 4.18.

beyond what we experience: a world that may differ radically, in its actual metaphysical make-up, from what we continuously experience it to be. In sum, our powers of mind reach only as far as experience will allow.

Given this skeptical epistemological starting point, and in particular a conception of the mind as bounded on the outside, it is not surprising that theology—insofar as it claims to think and speak about the transcendent—becomes beset by internal difficulties. For Hume, if our powers of mind reach only so far as our experience allows, then either we can think and speak about the divine solely in terms of what we can experience about ourselves and the world we inhabit; or we can refuse to think and speak about the divine in terms of our own experience and hence deny that we or the world bear any specifiable or epistemically relevant relationship to the divine. Now, as Hume points out, both views—which he assigns to a natural theologian and a negative theologian, respectively, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*—are deeply problematic. While the former easily can claim to offer an account of how God can be known, he appears to lower God to the level of human experience; while the latter easily can evade the charge that he is guilty of lowering God to the level of human experience, he must deal with the fact that knowledge of God, on his own account, is vacuous and thus cannot intelligibly be construed as knowledge properly speaking at all. In short, while the former view veers towards *anthropomorphism*, the latter view veers towards *agnosticism*.

The main argument of Hume's *Dialogues* is well known. Using the skeptical philosophical voice of the character Philo, Hume argues that there can be no knowledge of God (or at least no *a posteriori* knowledge of God), given that all knowledge is derived from experience—and experience, limited as it is to the natural world that God transcends, affords no adequate basis for knowledge of God. In fact, after dismantling arguments advanced by the natural theologian Cleanthes, who seeks to demonstrate God's existence as well as to determine God's nature based on empirical evidence, Hume (through Philo) reduces the knowledge of God based on natural theology to the following singular proposition: "*the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.*"¹³ Hume's epistemological skepticism is thus really directed at God's transcendence, or God's objectivity: for the skeptical Hume, who argues that the evidence afforded by experience is both limited and unreliable, there is no reason to sup-

13. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 88.

pose that the ordering of the world is not purely immanent; neither is there any reason to believe that the causal order as a whole needs a transcendent ground. Projecting a transcendent explanatory principle onto the natural order is a superfluous act of mind.

Given this argument, Hume is most often rightly read as offering a full-blown skeptical attack on natural theology itself. For our present purposes, however, the most important element in Hume's thought is not merely his own agnostic conclusions but rather the problem that he creates for theology, construed as a realist discipline that (at least traditionally) aims at achieving knowledge of God. Hume endeavors to generate insurmountable skepticism regarding the very possibility that God can be known, not merely by attacking the reasons or arguments the theologian uses to justify his beliefs about God, or by attacking the truth of those beliefs itself, but more importantly by showing that the theologian himself is incapable of formulating a viable model for knowledge of God that is not undermined by skepticism or subjectivism.

To add weight to this reading of Hume, we need to enter the *Dialogues* mid-stream. The heated debate between the natural theologian Cleanthes and the negative theologian Demea, as Hume develops it, culminates in part 4. In response to Demea's repeated argument that God's nature (which includes God's attributes, mind, will, and existence) is "perfect but incomprehensible," Cleanthes claims:

The Deity, I can readily allow, possesses many powers and attributes of which we can have no comprehension. But, if our ideas, so far as they go, be not just and adequate and correspondent to his real nature, I know not what there is in the subject worth insisting on. . . . How do you *mystics*, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from skeptics or atheists, who assert that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?¹⁴

Cleanthes' basic intuition is that if it is not true that at least *some* of the ideas or concepts that we use to form beliefs and assertions about God do not adequately depict God, or express the divine nature, then surely theology is epistemically on par with skepticism and even atheism. According to Demea, however, Cleanthes' natural theology is equally suspect, given that it challenges the mystical insight that God never can be adequately represented or thought in human ideas or concepts. Demea's more nuanced claim in part 4 is that the divine nature—and specifically, the divine mind—is both

14. *Ibid.*, 28.

immutable and simple, and thus cannot be modeled on the human mind, which (among other things) is subject to change, given that it always reasons discursively or successively. Demea states:

How is [the complexity of our mental life] compatible with that perfect immutability and simplicity which all true theists ascribe to the Deity? . . . He is entire in every point of space, and complete in every instant of duration. No succession, no change, no acquisition, no diminution. . . . He stands fixed in one simple, perfect state; nor can you ever say, with any propriety, that this act of his is different from that other, or that this judgment or idea has been lately formed and will give place, by succession, to any different judgment or idea.¹⁵

In response, Cleanthes simply reasserts his original position that “though it be allowed that the Deity possesses attributes of which we have no comprehension,” it must be true that there are at least *some* facts about (or aspects of) the divine nature that can be known—for example, that God possesses an intelligent nature. “A mind whose acts and sentiments and ideas are not distinct and successive, one that is wholly simple and totally immutable,” he argues, “is a mind which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or, in a word, is no mind at all.”¹⁶ Here, then, we see Cleanthes and Demea at a theological impasse: theology is ostensibly reducible either to anthropomorphism, on the one hand, or agnosticism on the other.

Having witnessed the seemingly irresolvable debate between Cleanthes and Demea, the skeptical Philo concludes that Cleanthes’ move to locate the ordering first cause of the material world in the divine mind—itself modeled on the finite human mind—is both irrational and experientially unjustified. Reason and experience, Philo tells us, make this singular pronouncement: “a mental world or universe of ideas requires a cause as much as does a material world or universe of objects; and, if similar in its arrangement, must require a similar cause.”¹⁷ Cleanthes’ attempt to specify the nature of the divine mind as containing a rational succession of ideas on which the material world is casually dependent thus only invites an infinite regress, or unending need to explain the origin of the ordering ideas that comprise the divine mind. “When you go one step beyond the mundane system,” Philo says, “you only excite an inquisitive humor which it is impossible ever to satisfy.”¹⁸ According to Philo, then, principles of parsimony and philosophical skepticism tell us that there is simply no need to look beyond the mate-

15. *Ibid.*, 29.

17. *Ibid.*, 30.

16. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 31.

rial world itself for an ordering casual explanation—that explanation is immanent to the world itself:

when it is asked, what cause produces order in the ideas of the Supreme Being, can any other reason be assigned by you, anthropomorphites, than that it is a *rational* faculty, and that such is the nature of the Deity? But why a similar answer will not be equally satisfactory in accounting for the order of the world, without having recourse to any such intelligent creator as you insist on, may be difficult to determine. It is only to say that *such* is the nature of material objects, and that they are all originally possessed of a *faculty* of order and proportion. These are only more learned and elaborate ways of confessing our ignorance; nor has the one hypothesis any real advantage above the other, except in its greater conformity to vulgar prejudices.¹⁹

Philo's conclusion, therefore, is that it is "wise in us to limit all our inquiries to the present world, without looking farther. No satisfaction can ever be attained by these speculations which so far exceed the narrow bounds of human understanding."²⁰ Now, the import of this claim cannot be underestimated. While the main aim of Philo's argument here is to expose and refute Cleanthes' anthropomorphism, it also accomplishes something much more profound: it once again points towards the presence of a *boundary*—placed here by Hume himself—in the evolving modern philosophical and specifically epistemological landscape. The major assumption here (which is indeed only an assumption) is that human cognitive powers are bounded on the outside: according to Philo (and really, according to Hume himself), human understanding and the ideas and beliefs that constitute human understanding reach no farther than experience itself, or the material world. Itself conditioned by experience, human understanding can form no adequate idea or belief about any nonempirical entity or reality that transcends the natural world, without of course, rendering that entity or reality intelligible using ideas or concepts applicable only to worldly experience, thereby reducing that entity or reality to an aspect of worldly experience.

Here, then, is the distinctly modern problem that Hume poses for philosophy and theology. With the boundary in the picture, there are only two options available to the philosopher and theologian for conceiving the mind's relationship to God: he can leave God entirely *outside* the boundary, and refuse to speculate at all about the existence and nature of God—this clearly leads to agnosticism. Or the theologian can bring God *inside* the bound-

19. *Ibid.*, 32.

20. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

ary so as to think and speak about God in terms of ourselves and the world we experience—this leads to anthropomorphism. *But anthropomorphism also is reducible to agnosticism*: once we bring God inside the boundary, or the bounded realm of human subjectivity, then we divest our knowledge of God of any objective, transcendent reference. And when we divest our knowledge of God of any objective, transcendent reference, subjectivism—itself a distinct form of skepticism—looms. “God” merely becomes a concept or term we use to think and talk about the world we experience, or in Hume’s terms, a “more learned and elaborate way of confessing our ignorance”—our means of gesturing at but never reaching the unknown. For Hume, therefore, with the presence of an outer boundary in the picture, circumscribing the human mind, the only viable cognitive stance available to assume concerning the divine is total skepticism.

It was, of course, Immanuel Kant who, following Hume, developed Hume’s epistemology and formally introduced the spatial metaphor of the boundary in philosophical discourse precisely in order to deny that there can be knowledge or cognition, properly speaking, of any entity or reality that transcends the realm of human experience. According to Kant, concepts (which owe their existence to human understanding) give structure to sensible intuition, and hence apply to external objects as they *appear* to sensory consciousness (the “phenomena”); they do not however, apply to external objects as they are “in themselves” (the “noumena”). Thus the concepts or categories of the understanding have a strictly empirical or “immanent” use: they help us organize or interpret the empirical data (or “manifold” of sensible intuition) transmitted to sensory consciousness from a blankly external reality—thereby rendering that reality knowable *to us*, even if it remains unknowable *in itself*.²¹

On Kant’s view, then, there is a boundary that separates what is humanly knowable (phenomena, or mere appearances) from what is humanly unknowable (the noumena, or “things-in-themselves”). Since what we know is restricted to what appears to us via sense experience (the phenomena),

21. This is a fairly traditional reading of Kant, and certainly the one that has influenced modern theology most directly. In a representative passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes: “the categories do not afford us cognition of things by means of intuition except through their possible application to **empirical intuition**, i.e., they serve only for the possibility of **empirical cognition**. This, however, is called **experience**. The categories consequently have no other use for the cognition of things except insofar as these are taken as objects of possible experience” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], B 147–48).

we can have no knowledge of the things-in-themselves (the noumena). This does not prevent us, however, from “thinking” what cannot be experienced and known by us: Kant argues that reason furnishes certain purely formal concepts or “transcendental ideas” *a priori* concerning, for example, the human soul, the origin and structure of the world, and God, or the *ens realissimum*, none of which corresponds with anything we encounter in the bounded realm of appearances, but all of which suggest that there is something *outside* the bounded realm of appearances. According to Kant, these transcendental ideas “serve not only actually to show us the boundaries of reason’s pure use, but also to show us the way to determine such boundaries.”²² Thus Kant argues that we should employ the transcendental ideas in order to “think for ourselves an immaterial being, an intelligible world, and a highest of all beings (all noumena), because only in these things, as things in themselves, does reason find completion and satisfaction.”²³ So even though we can “never cognize these intelligible beings according to what they may be in themselves, i.e., determinately . . . we must nonetheless assume such beings in relation to the sensible world, and connect them with it through reason.”²⁴ Through reason, we are able to connect our ideas of transcendent entities such as God (who is conceived, at bottom, to be a supremely perfect being) with the empirical world in which we are situated—but *only at the boundary*, where we think such entities in relation to the empirical world (or think the relation itself), without claiming to have any determinate knowledge of those entities in themselves.

For Kant, the application to natural theology in particular here is clear: while we cannot *know* God using concepts borrowed from the empirical world, we nevertheless can *think* God using concepts borrowed from the empirical world: that is, we can think God with respect to *our experience* of the world. Kant explains this as follows:

If I say that we are compelled to look upon the world *as if* it were the work of a supreme understanding and will, I actually say nothing more than: in the way that a watch, a ship, and a regiment are related to an artisan, an architect, and a commander, the sensible world (or everything that makes up the substratum of this sum total of appearances) is related to the unknown—which I therefore do not, in this

22. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, §57, 4:353, trans. and ed. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57, 4:353.

23. *Ibid.*, 4:354.

24. *Ibid.*, 4:355.

way, cognize according to what it is in itself, but only according to what it is for me, that is, with respect to the world of which I am a part.²⁵

What Kant is making clear here is that we cannot apply concepts derived from experience to the divine directly; we only can apply them “symbolically” or “analogically,” and analogy, according to Kant, does not denote “an imperfect similarity between two things, but rather a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things.”²⁶ The idea here is that we can use specifiable relations of things we know—for example, understanding and willing in human persons—in order to think (or form a concept of) unspecifiable relations of things we don’t know—what we can call “understanding” and “willing” (whatever those may be) as they exist in God. Thus, according to Kant, “there still remains a concept of the supreme being sufficiently determinate *for us*, though we have omitted everything that could have *determined* this concept unconditionally and *in itself*; for we determine the concept only with respect to the world and hence with respect to us, and we have no need of more.”²⁷ In thinking God by means of concepts derived from experience, then, we do not actually reach God or even reach out to God at all with our thoughts; rather, our thoughts extend only as far as the world itself as it exists in relation to God, which allows us to think the world “*in the relation* of the highest cause to the world, not finding the world by itself sufficient thereto.”²⁸

Kant clearly claims to overcome the Humean conclusion that there can be knowledge of God *at all*—complete skepticism—without, of course, endorsing the “dogmatic anthropomorphism” that Hume so viciously attacked. But Kant can only accomplish this task by reinforcing the epistemological divide Hume makes between human subjectivity and worldly and divine objectivity. According to Kant’s “symbolic anthropomorphism,” the

25. *Ibid.*, 4:357.

26. *Ibid.*, §58, 4:357–58.

27. *Ibid.*, 4:358.

28. *Ibid.*, 4:360. On the basis of these and related claims, Peter Byrne concludes that “analogy in Kant is another way of making his point that talk about God is not a means of describing God as such, but a way of providing us with a notion that works for us. . . . Analogical language about God is not a way of bringing together a list of qualities that determines (that is: picks out, characterises) God. What then is such language for? The answer . . . is clear: analogical language serves the purpose of characterising God’s relation to the world or how he exists *for us*. That answer is a further variation of the theme that talk of God serves a heuristic and human purpose, not a descriptive one” (Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* [Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007], 69). In chapter 5, I will show how Aquinas defends analogical language as a way of picking out or locating pure perfections in God.

idea of God, as conceived purely formally *a priori* by reason and further determined by us using concepts drawn from our experience, is completely *our own*; hence it bears no specifiable relation to who God may be in reality. There is, again, the idea of God that is “sufficiently determinate *for us*,” on the one hand, and the “supreme being, as to what it may be in itself, [which] is for us wholly inscrutable,” on the other.²⁹ Based on his understanding of the sharply circumscribed powers of the human mind and scope of human knowledge, therefore, Kant offers and develops a distinctly Humean picture of the mind’s relationship to God that situates God qua noumenal thing-in-itself outside or beyond a cognitive boundary, and thus outside or beyond a boundary to what can be objectively known.

It was also Kant, of course, who declared that in matters theological, “I had to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**.”³⁰ The proper cognitive stance to take, then, towards entities which by very definition transcend the world of experience or appearance is not “knowledge” (*Wissen*) but rational “faith” or “belief” (*Glaube*), namely, “a holding true which is subjectively sufficient, but *consciously* regarded as objectively insufficient.”³¹ Unlike knowledge, faith cannot be based on demonstrative or theoretical grounds, given that faith entails holding something to be true about a supersensible entity for which we cannot attain empirical evidence. However, faith can be based on subjective or practical grounds, so that by holding a certain belief as true we thereby can attain certain ends.³² Faith is therefore rationally justified from a practical point of view; yet, because it lacks any objective ground, faith *never* can achieve the objectivity of knowledge. In fact, Kant insulates knowledge from faith: faith is “completely different from [knowledge] in kind.”³³ Kant concludes: “pure *rational faith* can never be transformed into knowledge by any natural data of reason and experience, because here the ground of holding true is merely subjective, namely a nec-

29. Kant, *Prolegomena*, §58, 4:358 and 4:359.

30. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxx.

31. Immanuel Kant, “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” 8:141, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

32. According to Frederick Beiser, “Kant’s concept of rational faith therefore rests on the possibility of a pragmatic justification of belief. A pragmatic justification is one where, though we cannot demonstrate the truth or falsity of the belief by citing evidence, it is still defensible to hold the belief because it is a necessary or effective means to achieve an end” (Frederick C. Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 609).

33. Kant, “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” 8:141.

essary need of reason (and as long as we are human beings it will always remain a need) to *presuppose* the existence of a highest being, but not to demonstrate it.”³⁴

Rational faith holds a particularly important place in Kant’s moral philosophy. Since all human persons, qua rational moral agents, are required to pursue the “highest good”—perfect virtue and happiness proportional to virtue—then the attainment of that good must at least be possible. The pursuit of perfect virtue requires complete conformity with the moral law (moral perfection); but since “complete conformity of the will with the moral law is . . . a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence,” then it is necessary to “postulate” the immortality of the soul, because it is “only in an endless progress [that] we can attain complete conformity with the moral law.”³⁵ It is also necessary to postulate the existence of God, and thus have rational faith or belief in the existence of God: an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good being both secures the possibility of a postmortem career in which rational moral agents modify their wills in conformity with the moral law and grounds the necessary connection between virtue and happiness in the highest good, something neither a finite will operating in the world (and thus dependent on the world) nor the moral law (which directs the will to achieve the highest good) can accomplish.³⁶ Kant therefore admits that our knowledge of the transcendent is extended by practical reason to include rational belief in the divine. However, the expansion of theoretical reason does *not* allow for theoretical speculation into the nature of the divine. In the end, then, for Kant, “we thereby cognize neither the nature of our souls, nor the intelligible world, nor the supreme being as to what they are in themselves, but have merely unified the concepts of them in the *practical* concept of *the highest good* as the object of our will.”³⁷

We can summarize Kant’s picture of the mind’s relationship to God as

34. Ibid.

35. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5:122.

36. Allen Wood says that it is the pursuit of the second component of the highest good, happiness proportional to virtue, that requires “the existence of a Providence, which does know each one’s desert and ultimately apportions happiness in accordance with it.” See Allen W. Wood, “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 403. See also Allen W. Wood, *Kant’s Rational Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

37. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:133.

follows: if knowledge only extends to the world we experience, and God is not an object in the world we experience, then knowledge of God, properly speaking, is impossible. We nevertheless can think God or the transcendent, even though what we think about God (particularly through symbolical or analogical predication) bears no specifiable or epistemically relevant relation to who or what God may be in reality. Rational faith or belief provides no sure knowledge of God either: while rational faith or belief in the divine is justified from a practical point of view, it furnishes no insight into the nature of the divine. In fact, the actual bearing of rational faith or belief on the divine—that is, whether it directs our mind to God or not—seems to be entirely inconsequential. Thus it is not surprising that Kant is willing to reduce theological reflection precisely insofar as it services morality (and by extension, rational religion) to an absolute minimum. With disturbing candor, Kant concludes,

What is the minimum of theology required for religion? What is the smallest useful cognition of God that can accordingly move us to have faith in God and thus direct our course of life? What is the smallest, narrowest concept of theology? It is that we need a religion and that the concept is sufficient for natural religion. There is this minimum, however, if I see that my concept of God is *possible* and that it does not contradict the laws of the understanding.³⁸

Bolstering the Boundary: Skepticism and Subjectivism in Later Modern Religious Thought

Following Hume's epistemological blueprint, Kant sharply circumscribes the powers of the human mind—restricting knowledge to experience, or the world as it appears to us—and he thereby also sharply circumscribes the scope and reach of what we can know about the divine. If our knowledge of God, informed in this way by these epistemological assumptions, is completely *subjective*—bounded on the outside like the mind itself—then what options remain for articulating the mind's relationship to God? Kant makes two important claims here: (1) we can think and speak of God symbolically or analogically, in terms of our own concepts and language, which help us determine who God is *for us*—this requires drawing God, cognitively speaking, inside the boundary; (2) we must leave God, qua noumenal reality, en-

38. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28:988.

tirely outside the boundary, which means that objective theological speculation about the nature of the divine is entirely undermined. Now, the skeptical and subjectivist religious epistemology Kant offers us here becomes the blueprint for two sorts of later modern responses: according to one picture, God remains completely circumscribed within the boundary, which means that any reference to the transcendent drops out entirely; according to a second picture, God is left completely outside the boundary, which means that a transcendent referent indeed remains in the picture, but we are denied any objective means of gaining epistemic access to it. In order to bring these two different pictures into clearer focus, I will draw on the respective theologies of two representative thinkers: Ludwig Feuerbach and Paul Tillich.

Once God is placed outside or beyond a cognitive boundary, and hence made wholly alien to human subjectivity, then theology—insofar as it claims to think and speak about God—threatens to fall into contradiction. This is Feuerbach's main contention. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach boldly argues against the traditional theological claim that God possesses *any* objective reality, that is, a reality external to human subjectivity and thought. Like Kant, Feuerbach claims that reason possesses an idea of God as the *ens realissimum*, the limitless sum of all reality that is the highest exercise of human reason objectifying itself and is consequently the apex of human thought and understanding:

God as God—as a purely thinkable being, an object of the intellect—is thus nothing else than the reason in its utmost intensification become objective to itself. . . . God is the reason expressing, affirming itself as the highest existence. . . . God is a need of the intelligence, a necessary thought—the highest degree of the thinking power. . . . God is [the] highest idea, the supreme effort of [the] understanding, [the] highest power of thought.³⁹

Unlike Kant, however, Feuerbach argues that when reason objectifies itself, reason does not merely set a boundary for itself, thereby circumscribing its access to the transcendent; rather, for Feuerbach, reason objectifies its own subjective powers, which means that “the reason is not dependent on God, but God on the reason.” Thus, Feuerbach writes, “the reason can only believe in a God who is accordant with its own nature, in a God who is not beneath its own dignity, who, on the contrary, is a realisation of its own nature: i.e.,

39. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1989), 36–38.

the reason believes only in itself, in the absolute reality of its own nature."⁴⁰ Only in an immature state does the mind conceive of God as an externally existing objective entity that is absolutely or essentially different from the human subject. Once freed of this controlling dogma, Feuerbach argues, the mind can see that "what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognised as subjective; that is, what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something *human*."⁴¹

Feuerbach's most radical claim, therefore, is that God's being and nature are constructed entirely out of human concepts, expressed in predicates that alone imbue God qua subject with any meaningful cognizable reality. There is no independently existing entity external to thought picked out by the subject "God," because in Feuerbach's logic, "what the subject is lies only in the predicate; . . . The negation of the predicates is therefore the negation of the subject."⁴² For example, the beliefs and assertions that *God is love*, *God is good*, and *God is wise* do not mean that God is an objectively existing entity in which the attributes of love, goodness, and wisdom are perfectly exemplified; rather, they mean that "God" is only the sum total of the *human* predicates (love, goodness, and wisdom) that we ascribe to God. Of course, on Feuerbach's view, God, unlike individual human persons, possesses an infinite plenitude of human attributes, purified and quantitatively extended by the mind when applied to God. So Feuerbach cannot be construed as advocating a primitive anthropomorphism. And yet, Feuerbach still reduces theology to anthropology, and so is guilty of anthropomorphism, insofar as he argues that there is no *essential* difference in nature between human persons (or the human species) and God. So while it is true that the divine predicates, which again express perfected human concepts and attributes, "are not mere conceptions, mere images, which man forms of God . . . but truths, facts, realities"; nevertheless, "the subject of those predicates is also of the human nature."⁴³ If God is objectively real, then, it is not because God's objective reality subsists independently of human thought and understanding but because God is constituted by predicates, culled from human thought and understanding, which are *themselves* objective.

Thus, while it may appear that Feuerbach eliminates the outer boundary introduced by modern philosophy—a boundary that initially creates an epistemological divide between human subjectivity and divine objectivity—he *in fact only pushes the boundary as far out as it can go*, thereby affirming

40. *Ibid.*, 38.

42. *Ibid.*, 19.

41. *Ibid.*, 13.

43. *Ibid.*, 25.

(even if only implicitly) its presence at the outer edges of human subjectivity. In other words, by denying that God has any objective reality apart from predicates that ultimately express human concepts, Feuerbach champions a picture of the mind's relationship to God that circumscribes God's reality entirely *within* human thought. Feuerbach's claim is that by purifying and infinitely extending human concepts, the mind can achieve an objective knowledge of God; not, of course, because God qua subject is objective (or exists independently of the mind), but because the human qualities predicated of God are themselves objective. So Feuerbach clearly seems to think that by extending the outer boundary to the mind far enough (i.e., to infinity), it becomes possible to claim that God is objectively real *in* human thought, simply because God is no longer positioned *outside* or *beyond* human thought. But on Feuerbach's own account, while human thought—and specifically human understanding—is without *limits*, which in turn makes it possible for the mind to conceive of a limitless being, human thought, and thereby human understanding, is not without *boundaries*.⁴⁴ God still remains an aspect or feature of human subjectivity, even if God is the highest aspect or feature of human subjectivity. That is, even in thinking its “highest thought,” the mind remains bounded to the subjective schemes or space that define human thought, even as it tries to expand those schemes or space quantitatively to infinity.

Feuerbach's humanized God clearly has no place in traditional theology: by placing the human subject, rather than God, at the center of theology, Feuerbach strips God of any objective, transcendent reality. But Feuerbach does not leave us with the only picture of God or the mind's relationship to God in later modern religious thought. In the twentieth century, Paul Tillich famously identifies God as the “ground of being,” “power of being,” and “being-itself.” For Tillich, unlike for Feuerbach, God is utterly transcendent—quite literally beyond being, transcending being as its very ground or power—which means that God cannot be reduced to any particular being, even the “highest being”:

The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others. If God is *a* being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance. Even if he is called the “highest being” in the sense of the “most perfect” and the “most powerful” be-

44. The distinction I am making here between limits and boundaries is not the same distinction that Kant employs in the *Prolegomena*, § 51, 4:352.

ing, this situation is not changed. When applied to God, superlatives become diminutives. They place him on the level of other beings while elevating him above all of them. . . . As the power of being, God transcends every being and also the totality of beings—the world. Being-itself is beyond finitude and infinity. . . . Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being.⁴⁵

Given this powerful picture of God's transcendence, what becomes of the possibility of knowing God and of construing the mind's relationship to God? While Tillich initially allows that statements such as "God is being-itself" mean what they say "directly and properly," he later claims that such statements—which offer minimal content for our knowledge of God—mark a "boundary line" beyond which all knowledge of God becomes indirect, non-literal, and *symbolic*.⁴⁶

If we say that God is the infinite, or the unconditional, or being-itself, we speak rationally and ecstatically at the same time. These terms precisely designate the boundary line at which both the symbolic and the non-symbolic coincide. Up to this point every statement is non-symbolic (in the sense of religious symbol). Beyond this point every statement is symbolic (in the sense of religious symbol). The point itself is both non-symbolic and symbolic.⁴⁷

In believing or asserting that *God is the infinite, or the unconditional, or being-itself*, we place ourselves at the boundary of what we can know about God. What lies beyond that boundary, which we name "rationally and ecstatically" as being-itself, remains entirely unknown to us.

As Tillich goes on to argue, the claim that our knowledge of God is almost entirely symbolic in nature does not entail that such knowledge is entirely vacuous. For Tillich, religious symbols (like all symbols) point towards as well as "participate in" the power or the reality towards which they point, and hence they open us to the power or reality in which they participate.⁴⁸

45. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 235 and 237.

46. *Ibid.*, 238.

47. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 10.

48. For a clear discussion of symbols in Tillich (from which I draw on here), see Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, rev. ed. (1957; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 47–62. In his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 238–41, Tillich grounds our ability to employ finite symbols to think and speak about the infinite in the fact that every finite being participates in the infinite or being-itself: this is the *analogia entis*. As I will argue in chapter five, Thomas Aquinas argues that the *analogia entis* grounds our ability to speak literally, not just symbolically, about God; even though we have to deny that our manner or mode of speaking about God represents God adequately.

So we use symbols such as “God” and the attributes contained therein to express our relationship with God qua the “ultimate,” “unconditional,” “infinite,” and “absolute,” about which Tillich says we are all “ultimately concerned.” However, as Tillich reminds us, any symbolic expression of ultimate concern or of our relationship to the ultimate—whether religious or otherwise—is always finite and conditioned: consequently, in every act of faith, which is the “state of being ultimately concerned,” and thus a “total act of the personal self,” we must beware of elevating the content of our faith to the level of the ultimate, which entails claiming “true ultimacy” for that content.⁴⁹ The specific theological danger here to which Tillich points us is *idolatry*: there is a difference, Tillich claims, between *true* faith and *idolatrous* faith: “In true faith the ultimate concern is a concern about the truly ultimate; while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy.”⁵⁰

It is precisely here, then, that we once again see a cognitive boundary encroaching on our knowledge of God. What prevents us from applying the content of our faith, or ultimate concern, to the truly ultimate itself is a boundary separating God or the truly ultimate from human subjects who symbolically direct or aim their ultimate concern, or the content of their faith, at God. The boundary therefore serves as a protective measure—what Tillich refers to as the “Protestant principle,” a principle of criticism—that prevents us from raising concrete elements of ultimate concern (expressed for example, in Christian creeds, or “infallible statements of the authorities”) to the level of true ultimacy and hence “above the risk of doubt.”⁵¹ Raising the content of faith—even a content informed by the traditional theological symbols of faith—to the level of true ultimacy in effect lowers God to the level of the finite and conditional, bringing God back *inside* the boundary, so to speak. Tillich concludes:

Literalism deprives God of his ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his majesty. It draws him down to the level of that which is not ultimate, the finite and conditional. . . . Faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous! It calls something ultimate which is less than ultimate. Faith, conscious of the symbolic character of its symbols, gives God the honor which is due him.⁵²

49. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1–13.

50. *Ibid.*, 13.

51. *Ibid.*, 32.

52. *Ibid.*, 60.

Given Tillich's Protestant prohibition against idolatry (which I am arguing is Tillich's way of drawing an outer cognitive boundary around the space of human subjectivity, separating mind from God), the question remains whether *any* concrete expression of ultimate concern ever can claim to be non-idolatrous and *true*. Tillich allows for this possibility: the truth of faith is not only subjective, in the sense that it "adequately expresses an ultimate concern" (we could add for emphasis, *for us*); it is also objective, in the sense that "its content is the really ultimate," or is truly *about* the ultimate, directed *on* the ultimate itself. And yet, on Tillich's view, no human person or group ever can claim that a particular faith, or its symbolic content, is objective or "really ultimate," because this would entail idolatrously raising that content to "absolute validity."⁵³ So Tillich writes, "The criterion of the truth of faith, therefore, is that it implies an element of self-negation. That symbol is most adequate which expresses not only the ultimate but also its own lack of ultimacy."⁵⁴ Faith is *most* true, then, when its symbolic content expresses its own *lack* of ultimacy, that is, faith is most true in its own inability to adequately express or bear on the ultimate itself. Here, then, in true Kantian fashion, we see Tillich reaffirming the fundamentally *subjective* character of faith and, more broadly, our knowledge of God: for Tillich, we are most rightly aligned with the transcendent or the ultimate when we negate the symbolic content of our faith and its claim to true ultimacy and hence true *objectivity*. This is also why doubt is an essential element of faith: while we can be certain about *being* ultimately concerned, we never can be certain about *that with which* we are ultimately concerned—whatever it may truly or objectively be. In faith, we could say, we are bounded to our ultimate concern, and so are bounded from the ultimate itself.

Inheriting the Boundary: Skepticism and Subjectivism in Their Neo-Kantian Form

Having canvassed some important forerunners of theological antirealism in modern religious thought, we now turn to the contemporary discussion in order to examine how the subjectivist religious epistemology born within modern religious thought has been interpreted and reworked. We begin by considering theological antirealism in its distinctly neo-Kantian form. Gordon Kaufman adapts the Kantian framework (or at least its founding principle) by making the now infamous distinction between the symbol "God,"

53. *Ibid.*, 112.

54. *Ibid.*

which is a human imaginative construct that serves as an “ultimate point of reference” within our larger understanding and view of the world, and the reality of God, or “ultimate mystery,” which exists independently of the human mind and evades any identification with the symbol “God.” In *God the Problem*, Kaufman claims that the symbol “God” is the “available referent” of God-thought and God-talk; the “real referent” of that symbol, however, remains cognitively inaccessible, given that it lies outside or beyond the purview of our observation and experience of the world. A passage of the book explaining this idea is now well known:

The real referent for “God” is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content. . . . It is part of the profound mystery and meaning to which the word “God” points that man can never claim here adequacy of understanding and certainly no mastery or control.⁵⁵

According to Kaufman, while the real referent for the word “God” cannot be thought or spoken about *at all*, the available God serves as “the most objective or real element of the believer’s phenomenological world.”⁵⁶ So “although *formally* (like any other cultural element) the available God is a human construct, created by men in the process of dealing with the exigencies of life, *materially* he is grasped as the most Real of all realities of experience and the world.”⁵⁷

In his more recent work, *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman continues to distinguish the available God or the symbol “God” from the real referent of “God,” which he more concretely identifies as “the ultimate mystery which grounds all reality.”⁵⁸ Now, however, the symbol “God” both signifies a reality existing independently of the mind and constitutes a reality that exists internal to the mind:

On the one hand, thus, the word “God” stands for something *objectively there*, a reality over against us that exists whether we are aware of it or not: we did not make ourselves; we were created by cosmic evolutionary and historical processes on which we depend absolutely for our being. On the other hand, however, the word “God”

55. Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 85.

56. *Ibid.*, 92.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 296.

functions as a symbol within our minds, in our self-consciousness as beings who are not entirely made from without but who significantly contribute to our own creation, shaping and forming ourselves in accordance with images and symbols to which we are devoted.⁵⁹

By postulating a divide between the symbol “God” and the reality of *God*, Kaufman claims to establish a specific focal point for our overall theological worldview, while at the same time making room for ultimate mystery, to which the images and metaphors we use to give content to the symbol “God” do not apply. So while the symbol “God” is constituted by specific content (for example, the traditional theistic images or metaphors of “creator” and “lord”) and structured by specific motifs (“transcendence” and “humaneness”), God’s symbolized *reality* eludes conceptualization and hence remains inscrutable.⁶⁰

On Kaufman’s neo-Kantian view, therefore, “God” qua symbol and *God* qua symbolized reality remain separated by an impassable cognitive boundary or epistemological divide. A direct consequence of Kaufman’s view is that our cognitive commitments and attitudes, specifically as they pertain to God, do not extend beyond the schemes and worldviews we inhabit, in which the symbol “God,” rather than the reality of God, remains the object of those cognitive commitments and attitudes. Consequently, our theological cognitive commitments and attitudes lack any objective purport, given that they bear primarily and directly, not on God’s objective existence and reality, but only on God’s constructed existence and reality. So while belief in God (generally construed) entails a cognitive commitment to the objective existence and reality of God (and not merely to the existence and reality of the symbol “God”), the beliefs and assertions we hold and make *about* God—for example, that *God is the creator of the world*—pertain only to the symbol “God,” which remains the ultimate point of reference of those beliefs and assertions. Strictly speaking, metaphors such as “creator” give content to the symbol “God”; they do not, however, afford objective content for our thoughts and speech about God. Thus, while Kaufman allows that we can think of or speak about God as “creator,” he denies that we can think of or speak about God as *being* our creator, given that God is not objectively anything like what we, in employing that metaphor (or any other religious metaphors), believe or say God to be.

59. *Ibid.*, 320.

60. See in particular chapter 21, “Functions of the Symbol ‘God,’” in *In Face of Mystery*, 301–21.

Like Kaufman, John Hick adopts the Kantian framework for his own epistemological purposes: primarily, to account for the plurality of religious experience and to defend the integrity of that experience (in all its various forms) as genuinely veridical. Hick argues that while God (or the “Real”) cannot be directly experienced and known in itself (*an sich*), given that God or the Real utterly transcends the mind, the “gods,” which are the proper objects of worship and contemplation, can be experienced and known as phenomenal realities or manifestations of the Real as variously interpreted within the conceptual schemes and worldviews proffered by the world’s religions. That is, for Hick, the Real in itself is a postulate or presupposition of the religious life, “whilst the gods . . . are phenomenal manifestations of the Real occurring within the realm of religious experience.”⁶¹

Unlike Kant, then, Hick affirms that God or the Real can be genuinely experienced and known; in a genuinely Kantian spirit, however, Hick affirms that God or the Real only can be experienced and known as a *phenomenal* and not a *noumenal* reality:

In this strand of Kant’s thought—not the only strand, but the one which I am seeking to press into service in the epistemology of religion—the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness. . . . Analogously, I want to say that the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae*, as I shall call them, are not illusory but empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real.⁶²

Hick stresses that the Real is experienced in a manner *analogous* to sense experience, “namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorical scheme and thus coming to consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience.”⁶³ Thus Hick describes his view as a form of “critical realism,” which holds that within the realm of religious experience there is “a range of cognitive responses, varying from culture to culture, to the presence of a transcendent reality or realities.”⁶⁴

Now, it is not entirely clear on Hick’s own account how far our “cogni-

61. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 243.

62. *Ibid.*, 241–42.

63. *Ibid.*, 243.

64. *Ibid.*, 175.

tive responses” to the Real actually extend: to the Real itself or to our subjective or intersubjective experiences of the Real. In part, this is because Hick himself is not clear whether the “range of gods and absolutes”—that is, the *personae* and *impersonae* that figure as the objects of devotion or contemplation in the world’s religions—are mere appearances (mere phenomena) which purport to represent the Real or whether the range of gods and absolutes are the Real itself revealed (or concealed?) in the varying schemes and worldviews furnished by the world’s religions.⁶⁵ In the passage quoted above, Hick claims both that “the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by human mentalities . . . as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports” and that the gods are “authentic manifestations of the Real.” This seems to suggest that our cognitive responses to the Real extend to the Real itself—albeit as a phenomenal, rather than a noumenal reality. In another passage, however, reflecting on the phenomenal/noumenal divide, he seems to suggest something different:

It follows from this distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. . . . *None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperientiable ground of that realm* [my emphasis]. For whereas the phenomenal world is structured by our own conceptual frameworks, its noumenal ground is not. We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity.⁶⁶

Here, Hick claims that the Real cannot be experienced and known in itself, which means that the true object(s) of our cognitive responses to the Real is (are) not the Real itself, but rather our diverging phenomenal experiences or representations of the Real, to which our varying religious concepts literally apply.

Despite being pressed to commit himself unequivocally to one of the two interpretations just offered (extended versions of the “one-world” ver-

65. George Mavrodes points out this “deep ambiguity” in Hick’s account in “Polytheism,” in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston*, ed. Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 261–86. In the essay, Mavrodes also argues that if Hick is a genuine polytheist then he must endorse the view that the gods are phenomenal realities distinct from the noumenal reality (the Real) they purport to represent. In response, Hick claims that he is “at one level a poly-something, though not precisely a polytheist, and at another level a mono-something, though not precisely a monotheist,” given that he affirms both the existence of the noumenal Real and the veracity/plurality of religious experience. See John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 33.

66. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246.

sus “two-world” interpretations of Kant), Hick continues to reassert what he takes to be mutually compatible theses: (1) the Real makes a genuine causal impact on our religious consciousness; and (2) we experience the Real differently (as a phenomenal, not a noumenal reality), according to the diverging manner in which our experiences of the Real are religiously conceptualized.⁶⁷ Thus, properly interpreting Hick requires showing how these theses can be, in fact, mutually compatible; and this, I argue, requires expounding Hick’s religious epistemology as a form of critical realism, which Hick describes thus:

Critical differ[s] from naive realism mainly in taking account of the conceptual and interpretive element within sense perception. It accordingly acknowledge[s] that the sensory data of which we are directly aware (or which we ‘intuit’) are private to the perceiving consciousness . . . [and] that it is by means of these private contents of consciousness that we are able to live in relation to a physical world transcending our own minds. Thus sense perception is a complexly mediated awareness of the physical world.⁶⁸

The idea here seems to be that we enjoy epistemic access to the physical world via conceptually structured experiences or sensory data that are internal to the perceiving consciousness, even if they are caused by objects that exist external to the perceiving consciousness. So we enjoy epistemic access to the physical world only through the *mediation* of certain conceptualized experiences and sensory data of which we have direct awareness. The religious analog then can be specified as follows: we enjoy epistemic access to the Real via religiously conceptualized experiences of the Real (as the *personae* and *impersonae*) that are internal to the religious consciousness, even if they are caused by the Real, which remains external to the religious consciousness. So we enjoy epistemic access to the Real to the extent that we have certain religiously conceptualized experiences, or have direct awareness of the *personae* and *impersonae* that in turn mediate our epistemic access to the Real.⁶⁹

67. See passim in *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*.

68. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 174.

69. The interpretation I am offering here thus evades ready identification with either a “one-world” or “two-world” interpretation of Hick. Phenomenal manifestations of the Real in the form of the *personae* and *impersonae* are not the Real itself, considered from varying religious points of view (the one-world interpretation); nor are they distinct objects that exist in addition to the Real (the two-world interpretation). Instead, they serve as religious analogs to what James Van Cleve, in interpreting Kant, calls “virtual objects,” or logical constructions out of the experiential states of perceiving subjects. See James Van Cleve, *Problems from Kant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), in particular chapter one.

Like Kaufman, then, Hick binds himself to a robust antirealism regarding the possibility that the Real or God can be genuinely known, since he shares Kaufman's Kantian commitment to an outer cognitive boundary which, in Hick's account, delimits our cognitive responses to God or the Real to our subjective experiences of God or the Real. By explicitly committing himself to the claim that conceptually structured episodes of sense experience are private to the perceiving consciousness and occur inside the human mind, Hick also commits himself to the claim that conceptually structured episodes of religious experience are private to religious consciousness and therefore occur inside the human mind—that is, the private and bounded space that defines human consciousness and mindedness.

Policing the Boundary: Skepticism, Subjectivism, and Postmodernism

The distinctly modern move to render knowledge of God purely subjective in nature is taken to its logical extreme by postmodern thinker Don Cupitt, who abandons any residual theological commitment to objectivity in the knowledge of God or the objectivity of God's reality. According to Cupitt's self-avowed "non-realism," which is Feuerbachian in origin, there simply is no objective reality, divine or otherwise, to which human thought and language is accountable or on which human thought and language bear. Thus, he writes, "our modern experience is that there isn't any objective, fixed, intelligible reality out there, such as may be replicated in our language and invoked to check our theories. We now live wholly *inside* our own history, our language, and the flux of cultural change."⁷⁰ Cupitt makes this point even more bluntly: since *the world* as we describe and understand it is always interpreted by human thought and codified in a human language, then there is really only *our world*, a world built and constituted by human thought and language that is "radically outsideless."⁷¹

And since the world (or again, *our world*) contains religion, Cupitt continues, then religion is itself "radically outsideless," composed entirely of symbols and words (or signs), the most prominent of which is the symbol "God," which we devise and use as "a guiding spiritual ideal, a symbol of the ultimate unity of our values, and a focus of spiritual aspiration."⁷² At points,

70. Don Cupitt, "Anti-Realist Faith," in *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 37.

71. Cupitt, "Free Christianity," in *Is Nothing Sacred?* 53.

72. *Ibid.*, 47.

Cupitt even argues that the very idea of God must ultimately be abandoned, given that all thought and language, including religious thought and language, is self-annihilating, since it is made of “fleeting signs.” This, according to Cupitt, is the message of the cross in Christianity: “Everything is made of signs, and all signs are fleeting. Everything must in the end be given up, even our very selves, even our idea of God. The crucifixion is an awesomely nihilistic image of the absolute nothingness from which we sprang, over which we dance, into which we return.”⁷³

Far from aiming to promote anxiety and despair over the ultimate meaninglessness of a reality constructed solely of fleeting signs, Cupitt’s Christian non-realism is in fact intended to emancipate the religious mind and create the possibility of personal spiritual growth. If God symbolizes our highest spiritual values, then we can appropriate those values (once thought to be possessed by God objectively) for ourselves as we engage in a spiritual journey of “self-transformation” and “self-transcendence.” In other words, once we “take leave” of God (specifically, the God of “objective theism” or “metaphysical theism”), then we become free to autonomously pursue the inner, subjective spiritual ideal that God, once purged of all objective reference, comes meaningfully to represent for us.⁷⁴ With unabashed candor, therefore, Cupitt argues that human persons can progress and evolve as spiritual beings only by recognizing the “radical immanence” of all thought and language (and even being itself), which in turn requires acknowledging God’s own “radical immanence” in the world defined by human thought and language.⁷⁵

Cupitt commits himself to theological antirealism and even nihilism because he endorses a view of the mind generally (or thought and language specifically) as constituting a bounded space, outside of which there is absolute nothingness—a sheer *empty* space. Like Feuerbach, Cupitt claims to have abolished everything that would have forced him to recognize the presence of an outer boundary: “the traditional contrasts between language and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity, between matter and mind, and between the merely-human and the supernatural or divine.”⁷⁶ Yet I claim that by endorsing a view of thought and language as “radically outsideless,” or “radi-

73. *Ibid.*, 57.

74. See *passim* in Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980).

75. Don Cupitt, *The Revelation of Being* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 63–68. In the text I am citing, Cupitt uses the phrase “radical immanence” as a synonym for “outsidelessness” generally; In the current context, I am taking the liberty of using the phrase to describe God’s own “radical immanence” and specifically the “radically immanent” spiritual values God symbolizes.

76. Cupitt, “Free Christianity,” in *Is Nothing Sacred?* 53.

cally immanent,” Cupitt indeed affirms the presence of an outer boundary to thought and language, because it is only by sharply circumscribing thought and language that Cupitt is able to make such a radical distinction between human subjectivity and worldly or divine objectivity (or the “inner” and the “outer”), thereby generating enough skepticism regarding the objectivity of the world and God to warrant rejecting the objectivity of the world and God altogether. So Cupitt does implicitly affirm the presence of an outer boundary because he inevitably confines human cognitive activity to a space expansive enough to *seem* boundless, but which only goes as far as human cognitive activity, itself construed as “radically outsideless,” possibly can extend: the farthest reaches of human subjectivity. Hence, on Cupitt’s account, as I interpret it, reality—whether worldly or divine—becomes wholly circumscribed *within* human subjectivity: both *the world* and *God*, once they are brought inside the boundary, become *our world* and *our God*.

Cupitt’s claim that all human knowing is irreducibly subjective is entirely negative: it leaves no room for objectivity in the realm of metaphysics or epistemology. Yet as Merold Westphal—himself a committed theist—contends, postmodern criticism (broadly construed) also can have positive import within the realm of religion and theology. According to Westphal, the Heideggerian critique of “onto-theology” (as well as the Derridean critique of “logocentrism” and the “metaphysics of presence”) can and should be appropriated for the positive theological purpose of denouncing the idolatrous move to adequate God’s objective being and reality to the human mind, so as to render God completely intelligible to the human mind.⁷⁷ On one level, Westphal understands “overcoming onto-theology” to require abandoning a certain philosophical or metaphysical picture of God as the ultimate, explanatory, unifying cause, solicited by philosophy and metaphysics to underpin its autonomous project of comprehending “being” in its totality as well as “mastering” the “real.”⁷⁸ For Westphal, therefore, overcoming onto-theology does not require abandoning the theistic commitment to the existence of God, or the possibility of thinking and speaking of God as such; it does require, however, thinking and speaking of God other than as a philosophical *causa sui* or *ultima ratio*, as well as employing human thought and speech in order to serve God (in worship and prayer, for example), rather than in order to understand or comprehend God. “What is necessary to overcome

77. See *passim* in Merold Westphal, “Overcoming Onto-theology,” in *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

78. *Ibid.*, 4.

onto-theology,” Westphal writes, “is not the abandonment of theistic belief but the avoidance of this temptation to have God at our disposal, conceptually speaking.”⁷⁹ (According to Westphal, therefore, it is the “how” and not the “what” of theological knowledge and discourse that should be subject to postmodern criticism.)⁸⁰

Unlike Cupitt, then, Westphal is unwilling to dispense with objectivity. However, like Cupitt, he still denies that objectivity should be a goal of philosophical or theological inquiry. On Westphal’s favorable reading of Kant, God alone possesses an objective conception of the world (quite literally a “God’s-eye view”), which provides “the standard of truth, reality, and hence, objectivity,” and is therefore opposed to the perspective on the world irrevocably occupied by human understanding, which is itself “necessarily subjective.”⁸¹ He writes, “The whole point of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves [in Kant] is to distinguish between human and divine knowledge, between the way the world appears to God’s infinite and eternal mind and the way it appears to our finite and temporal minds.”⁸² “This distinction, in some form,” he continues, “would seem to me to be essential to any kind of Christian theism.”⁸³ Westphal further follows Kant in denying knowledge—that is, metaphysical knowledge—in order to make room for genuine faith. Not only does Kant show that metaphysics is both impossible and not necessary; he also shows that it is dangerous, in two main senses. First, formally speaking, metaphysics is dangerous in that it is characterized by “an arrogance that seeks to maintain a dogmatic and despotic monopoly over matters of urgent importance to every person, learned and unlearned.”⁸⁴ Second, substantively speaking, “metaphysics is dangerous because when God has been reshaped to fit the Procrustean bed by which it defines rationality, what remains is both different from and less than the God of faith.”⁸⁵

79. *Ibid.*, 23.

80. “Looked at closely,” Westphal writes, “what postmodern arguments can most accurately be summarized as seeking to show is that we are not God (which is fairly easy) rather than that God is not there (which is considerably harder)” (Merold Westphal, “Postmodernism and Religious Reflection,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38.1–3 [1995]: 135).

81. Merold Westphal, “Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution,” in *Overcoming Onto-theology*, 94.

82. *Ibid.*, 93–94

83. *Ibid.*, 94

84. Merold Westphal, “The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith,” *Modern Theology* 23.2 (2007): 257.

85. *Ibid.*, 259.

Westphal's allergy to objectivity and metaphysics is therefore clearly religiously based. First, Westphal takes it to be a central tenet of Christian theism that human beings are finite; and taking human finitude seriously requires affirming that all human knowing is perspectival or "necessarily subjective." To claim that objective knowledge of the world and God is possible, therefore, is also to claim that human subjects can overcome their own subjectivity (i.e., finitude) and occupy the same cognitive space as God, a claim that any Christian theist should denounce as sacrilege. Second, Westphal denies objectivity because he denies metaphysics: on one level, metaphysics privileges the learned (the philosophers) and thereby denigrates the unlearned (the faithful); on another level, metaphysics distorts (or threatens to distort) the very divine being it seeks to know. Now, this does not mean Westphal dispenses with metaphysics altogether: with Kant, he claims that "faith . . . involves (but is not reducible to) beliefs that would seem to be robustly metaphysical. They surely involve reference to and assert the reality of the supersensible."⁸⁶ The idea here once again seems to be that we are entitled to form and hold metaphysical beliefs about the supersensible—and this is faith—without claiming any knowledge or insight into the nature of the supersensible itself.

On my reading, then, Westphal clearly retains Kant's cognitive boundary as a way of sharply distinguishing the subjective from the objective, faith from knowledge, or the cognitive stances we take towards the divine from the reality of the divine itself. Westphal clearly fears that rendering God knowable also requires closing the cognitive gap separating human beings from God. So quite simply, God must remain outside the boundary, and we must remain inside the boundary. While we can and should think and talk about God from within the boundary (in worship and prayer, for example), we cannot and should not aspire to knowledge of God and specifically to objectivity in our knowledge of God. Thus, along with the rest of the theological antirealists I have identified so far in this chapter, Westphal stands at the boundary, debarring epistemic access to what is objectively real.

Extending the Boundary: Skepticism, Subjectivism, and Religious Practices

In the last two sections of this chapter, we have been looking at contemporary religious epistemologies whose origins we can locate in the skepti-

86. *Ibid.*

cal and subjectivist epistemological assumptions constitutive of the Cartesian, Humean, and Kantian (as well as Feuerbachian and Tillichian) legacies. There is a final strain of skepticism and subjectivism in contemporary religious thought that we need to consider, however, which is based on a somewhat different claim: whatever religious commitments and attitudes we hold are inextricably linked with external religious practices (rather than internal religious symbols or experiences). These religious commitments and attitudes guide the public or confessional actions that most properly define the religious life; hence they retain a primarily practical or performative versus a distinctly cognitive purpose. Adherents of this view draw most heavily on the thought of the later Wittgenstein, although in doing so, they develop their own unique philosophical approaches to religion and theology.⁸⁷

According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of our most basic concepts and words—their specific “sense” or purport—is only given or disclosed in the multifarious “language-games” we inhabit and more specifically in the “grammar” of everyday thought and speech: how we employ or *use* those concepts and words, practically speaking, in ordinary thought and speech. Thus not only are concepts and words only intelligible insofar as they play a role in a given language-game; they simply don’t exist apart from a particular language-game: there is no pure logical space in which thought and language, considered in abstraction, reside. In short, for Wittgenstein, “Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar).”⁸⁸ Thus, on a broadly Wittgensteinian view, it is impossible to decipher the meaning of a concept or word such as “God” (the most central word in a theological vocabulary), without attending to the language or grammar of “God.” By itself, abstracted from the actual language in which it is used, “God” is mean-

87. Note here that my criticism is directed not at Wittgenstein but at contemporary appropriations of Wittgenstein. I have already expressed my reliance on Wittgenstein’s overall method of doing philosophy; and I am highly sympathetic to his efforts to overcome problems and anxieties surrounding the relationship between language, mind, and the world. My main concern, which I begin to develop here and continue to develop in the next chapter, is with the way Wittgenstein has been appropriated or pushed in antirealist directions by contemporary thinkers such as D. Z. Phillips and George Lindbeck. This is not to say that Wittgenstein does not display antirealist leanings: in his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he suggests that religious beliefs, such as belief in the Last Judgment, are guiding principles of life, rather than cognitive states with factual contents. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 53–54. For a fairly comprehensive assessment of Wittgenstein’s writings on religion, see *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (New York: Routledge, 2001).

88. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §373.

ingless: it tells us nothing. In order to discover what “God” means then, we must pay strict attention to how religious believers (or communities) use “God” in what they *do*: precisely how they think and speak about God in engaging in religious practices and performances, which in turn constitute distinct “forms of life.”

The main goal of a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion in understanding the meaning of religious concepts and words (and hence the beliefs and utterances they constitute) is not to begin first with abstract metaphysical speculation—because again, religious concepts and words only retain a sense within distinct language-games—but rather, to conduct an in-depth grammatical investigation of the role those concepts and words play within distinctly religious language-games and forms of life. The idea here is the following: not only does grammatical investigation reveal the meaning of “God,” it also reveals who God *is*. That is, *God* (not just “God”) becomes manifest in language: “*Essence* is expressed by grammar.”⁸⁹ Inevitably then, a Wittgensteinian understanding of meaning and language seems to generate the following conclusion: if grammatical investigation itself provides the meaning of terms such as “God” (by in effect presenting *God* to us), then it seems there can be no single definition or referent for “God” taken in isolation—that is, independently of how “God” appears in any particular language-game. Simply put, God is not the kind of entity that can be ostensively defined apart from any particular language-game. Just as the term “color” has meaning, not because it denotes the essence of color (as if there were one), but because our language manifests our complex and multifarious awareness and understanding of the color system, so the term “God” has meaning, not because it denotes a particular being, but because our religious and theological discourse manifests our multifarious and complex awareness and understanding of God.

Here, I am essentially unpacking the way Wittgenstein has been appropriated by arguably the most influential neo-Wittgensteinian, the late D. Z. Phillips. In his work, Phillips claims repeatedly that to construe God’s existence as a “matter of fact” is mistakenly to assume that “the concept of God is at home within the conceptual framework of the reality of the physical world.”⁹⁰ Phillips does assert that God is a “kind of reality”; what he denies is that the criteria for identifying and determining God’s reality must come

89. *Ibid.*, *PI*, §371.

90. D. Z. Phillips, “Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God,” in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993), 2.

from a conceptual and linguistic framework (such as the language-game of referring to physical objects) that is alien to the religious conceptual and linguistic frameworks in which the concept of God is truly “at home.” “To ask a question about the reality of God,” Phillips writes, “is to ask a question about *a kind of reality*, not about the reality of *this* or *that*, in much the same way as asking a question about the reality of physical objects is not to ask about the reality of this or that physical object.”⁹¹ The grammar of religious belief (and not any antecedent metaphysical convictions concerning the divine nature), Phillips claims, does not permit thinking and talking of God as an “object” or a “being among beings”; thus, it does not allow reducing religious belief itself to a mere theoretical belief in God’s existence:

To ask whether God exists is not to ask a theoretical question. If it is to mean anything at all, it is to wonder about praising and praying; it is to wonder whether there is anything in all that. . . . Praising, thanking, confessing, asking, and adoring before God may have meant little to a man. Suddenly, it means everything to him. He says that God has become a reality in his life. Has this come about by his discovering an object? Hardly. What has happened is that he has found God *in* a praise, a thanksgiving, a confessing and an asking which were not his before.⁹²

Phillips’s contention is that religious beliefs and assertions only retain a sense in the religious practices (or forms of life) in which they are borne and sustained. Therefore, according to Phillips, religious beliefs and assertions are not isolable mental states; rather, they consist in *action*, or our engaging in the activities that constitute the religious life, such as praising, thanking, and confessing.⁹³

Phillips further claims that while believing in God is not a theoretical commitment or a purely cognitive state, it is (more profoundly, in Phillips’s mind) a “spiritual awareness” or an encounter with God’s spiritual reality.⁹⁴ Moreover, this awareness or encounter with God’s reality only occurs *in* the practices of praising, thanking, and confessing—the very practices, Phillips claims, which *themselves* reveal the nature of God. Thus, he writes, “It is only in the context of our responses that sense can be made of the reality of God. Our responses show the character of the God we worship; it may be said that

91. Ibid.

92. D. Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 181.

93. See D. Z. Phillips, “On Really Believing,” in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 33–55.

94. D. Z. Phillips, “Where Are the Gods Now?” in *Relativism and Religion*, ed. Charles M. Lewis (London: Macmillan, 1995), 6.

they reveal his spirit.”⁹⁵ Phillips denies that God’s spiritual reality can be reduced to “the spirit of movement, the spirit of an age, and so on”; he also denies that in speaking of God as Spirit he is “emphasizing something called the expressive side of religion, at the expense of what some philosophers call its captive or ontological dimension.”⁹⁶ Yet Phillips still vehemently denies that God’s spiritual *reality* is intelligible apart from the spiritual *responses* that constitute religious practices. “Acknowledgement of a spiritual reality takes the form, not of a factual assertion, but of a confession: ‘Thou art God’.”⁹⁷ This confession, then, does not entail a cognitive commitment to God’s existence and reality but rather expresses God’s existence and reality *for the religious believer*, which Phillips claims in turn testifies to the “ineradicable personal element in religion.”⁹⁸

Like Phillips, theologian George Lindbeck emphasizes the practical dimension of religious believing and claim-making. On Lindbeck’s proposed “cultural-linguistic” model for religion (which essentially views religion as a culturally structured language-game), a religious system offers its adherents a particular skill set. To become religious, for Lindbeck, is “to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training” by which one acquires a practical knowledge for “how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated.” Thus, “the primary knowledge is not *about* the religion, nor *that* religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways.”⁹⁹

Lindbeck proposes his cultural-linguistic model as an alternative to what he takes to be two other inadequate and hence undesirable models or theories of religion and theological doctrine. The first emphasizes the distinctly *cognitive* dimension of religion “and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities”; the second emphasizes the *experiential* or *expressive* dimension of religion “and it interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.”¹⁰⁰ According to Lindbeck, the former view is inadequate because it overlooks how a religious system, as ordered by doctrine, functions more like a natural language—as actually spoken and enacted by its adherents—than like “a for-

95. *Ibid.*, 12.96. *Ibid.*, 12, 14.97. *Ibid.*98. *Ibid.*99. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 35.100. *Ibid.*, 16.

mally organized set of explicit statements” or propositions that require sheer intellectual assent.¹⁰¹ The latter view is inadequate because it overlooks how a religious system, as ordered by doctrine, does not just symbolize inner religious experiences and attitudes, but actually *shapes* and *structures* inner religious experiences and attitudes.

By contrast, Lindbeck’s model emphasizes that doctrines function “not as expressive symbols or as truth claims” but rather as “communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.”¹⁰² According to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model for religion and religious doctrine, therefore, the *purpose* of indoctrination is to become skilled at playing a certain religious language-game. Doctrines furnish the rules of the game (or the grammatical rules): they instruct the game player in *how* to think, believe, and act in a specifically religious way. But they do not function as straightforward truth claims as they do on the cognitivist model. Accordingly, Lindbeck claims that religious beliefs and assertions, as directly informed by religious doctrine, are true by means of *intrasystematic* coherence on a second-order (theoretical) level and true by means of *ontological* correspondence on a first-order (practical) level. By themselves, divorced from the practices in which they are based, the beliefs and assertions we hold and make about God on the basis of religious doctrines do not correspond to divine reality. It is only when those beliefs and assertions are linked with a particular religious form of life, in which they are actually *performed*, that they intelligibly can be construed as corresponding to “the Most Important, the Ultimately Real.”¹⁰³ Lindbeck writes:

Just as grammar by itself affirms nothing either true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about language, so theology and doctrine, to the extent that they are second-order activities, assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions. These assertions, in turn, cannot be made except when speaking religiously, i.e., when seeking to align oneself and others performatively with what one takes to be most important in the universe by worshipping, promising, obeying, exhorting, preaching.¹⁰⁴

This, then, is perhaps Lindbeck’s most important claim: “this performatory conformity of the self to God can also be pictured in epistemologically realistic fashion as involving a correspondence of the mind to divine reality.”¹⁰⁵

101. *Ibid.*, 64.

103. *Ibid.*, 65.

105. *Ibid.*, 66.

102. *Ibid.*, 18.

104. *Ibid.*, 69.

And yet, on Lindbeck's own account, the correspondence Lindbeck envisions here is not *primarily* cognitive or epistemological: it is "wider," incorporating a whole "way of life." Moreover, the correspondence is only "created" insofar as the religious belief or assertion, as held or made by the religious believer, *becomes* a performance, or an "act or deed." Thus the sort of correspondence to divine reality that Lindbeck envisions does not entail epistemic *access* to divine reality, given that the beliefs and assertions religious persons hold and make about God retain a purely regulative purpose: adherents can only aim them at the practices or life in which they engage. Again, according to Lindbeck, by committing themselves to a religious way of life, and acquiring a specific set of conceptual and linguistic skills, religious believers learn *how* to think and speak about God—which in turn enables them to act on what they believe and say—even though *what* they think and speak about God (the actual *content* of their beliefs and assertions) remains cognitively inconsequential and even meaningless for them.¹⁰⁶ Lindbeck illustrates this point using the traditional theological claim that "God truly is good in himself":

[Classical theists] might say that, despite its informational vacuity, the claim that God truly is good in himself is of utmost importance because it authorizes responding as if he were good in the ways indicated by the stories of creation, providence, and redemption which shape believers' thoughts and actions; or, to put the same point another way, seriously to commit oneself to thinking and acting as if God were good in relation to us (*quoad nos*) in the ways indicated by the stories involves asserting that he really is good in himself (*in se*) even though, as the canonical texts testify, the meaning of the latter claim is utterly beyond human comprehension.¹⁰⁷

The claim "God truly is good in himself" is thus a guide for thinking and speaking about God that *authorizes* the believer to think, speak, and most importantly act "*as if* [God] were good in the ways indicated by the stories of creation, providence, and redemption" (my emphasis); it does not, however (even as believed or asserted), *inform* the believer's thought and speech about God, which remain devoid of any objective content and purport.

On my reading, both Phillips and Lindbeck advance a picture of the

106. Lindbeck claims to be interpreting Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of analogy, according to which (in Lindbeck's own words) "the human mode of signifying (*modus significandi*) does not correspond to anything in the divine being, [although] the signified (*significatum*) does" (ibid.). The way Lindbeck appropriates Aquinas, however, seems to suggest that our concepts (or at least pure perfection terms such as "good") can only be applied to God and creatures equivocally—a claim that I will show later (in chapter five) Aquinas vehemently denies.

107. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 67.

mind's relationship to God that is comparable to the picture we have seen emerge in earlier sections of this chapter. In emphasizing the close (if not indiscernible) connection between religious knowledge and religious practice, Phillips and Lindbeck draw a cognitive boundary that they extend to enclose religious practices, in which all religious believing and claim-making takes place. Their commitment to the boundary is, of course, implicit. But it is there nonetheless. Hence, they also reveal comparable skeptical and subjectivist leanings that I have claimed characterize so much of modern and contemporary religious thought. Phillips claims both that God's reality is only revealed within the sphere of religious practices and that religious practice is divorced from theoretical (cognitive) commitments concerning God. Consequently, Phillips implicitly affirms that God can only be known or reached within the sphere of religious practice and that the locus of God's reality is entirely *within* the practice of religious believing and claim-making itself (or our religious responses, more broadly). Lindbeck claims that the primary knowledge gained through indoctrination (or coming to believe and make assertions about God through enactment or performance) is primarily practical rather than theoretical (or cognitive). Thus Lindbeck implicitly affirms that God remains safely situated *outside* the purview of our religious practices. Furthermore, God's relationship to those practices (or what we do in participating in those practices) is tenuous if not inconsequential. I will develop these claims further in the next chapter; for now, I simply align Phillips and Lindbeck with Kaufman, Hick, Cupitt, and Westphal in their commitment to the claim that God must be situated in relation to a cognitive boundary; hence God cannot be objectively known.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to identify a distinct and widespread trend within modern and contemporary religious thought towards situating God in relation to a boundary that encloses the realm or cognitive space in which human knowing and acting takes place. What I have shown through my treatment of representative thinkers is that as long as there is an outer boundary in place, then the beliefs and assertions we hold and make about God cannot bear on God's objective reality, but only on our own subjectivity: our own religious symbols, experiences, responses, and practices. In other words, once God is pushed outside the boundary (generating skepticism), or alternatively, brought inside the boundary (generating subjectivism), then God's objective reality is eclipsed, and God can no longer be

objectively known. The argument I will be mounting in the remainder of part one of this book in response to these antirealist claims goes as follows: invoking the boundary generates deep confusion about the mind's relationship to God—a confusion that runs so deep as to render the mind's relationship to God hopelessly ambiguous and untenable. Consequently, properly conceiving the mind's relationship to God requires abolishing the boundary altogether. If the space in which human knowing and acting takes place is no longer pictured as bounded on the outside, then it becomes possible to conceive of how we can form beliefs and make assertions about God from within that space that have objective content and purport, since those beliefs and assertions bear or are directed on (and hence are answerable to) who God objectively is. And if our theological beliefs and assertions have objective content and purport, then they can furnish knowledge—at least of a certain sort—of who God objectively is. In order to make this view attractive and intelligible, however, I first need to undermine the deep-seated impulse to retain the boundary. It is to that task that I now turn.

Challenging Modern Skepticism and Subjectivism

IN THE LAST CHAPTER, I identified a deeply embedded picture of the mind's relationship to God, as it has come into focus in modern and contemporary philosophical and theological reflection on the very idea of knowledge of God. According to the picture, given that the mind is bounded in what it can know, and God radically transcends the mind, God therefore belongs outside or beyond a cognitive boundary, insulating God from the mind and thereby preventing the mind from coming to know God objectively. I argued that once the mind is bounded on the outside, and God is subsequently pushed outside the boundary, then God can only be known by filtering God through our own subjectivity—namely, our own religious symbols, experiences, responses, and practices. More specifically, once we place God outside a cognitive boundary, and thereby create an epistemological divide separating human subjectivity from divine objectivity, then the only way we can attain knowledge of God is either to *relate* God to our own subjectivity (still leaving God entirely outside the boundary) or to *reduce* God to our own subjectivity (drawing God entirely inside the boundary). Of course, if we find neither of these options appealing, we also can *relieve* ourselves of any obligation to know God, objectively speaking, altogether (again leaving God outside the boundary).

The current chapter serves largely as an exercise in therapy. Its central aim is to alleviate the interminable anxiety that arises once God is situated in relation to a cognitive boundary, an anxiety that, upon further examina-

tion, proves to be a symptom of a much greater problem and confusion surrounding the mind's relationship to the divine. If God is pushed outside the boundary, and God can no longer be reached or objectively known in thought or language *at all* by human cognitive subjects, then God's distance from the mind and the outer boundary becomes so great that God's presence to the mind is eclipsed entirely, and God's distance from the mind gives way to total withdrawal. If God is brought inside the boundary—precisely in order to make God epistemically accessible—then God can no longer be identified as existing independently from the mind or transcending the mind, and God becomes completely absorbed in the mind. In the former case, God's objectivity is eclipsed because God is rendered completely unknowable; in the latter case, God's objectivity is eclipsed because God is rendered completely knowable, as an aspect or feature of human subjectivity. Thus, with the presence of the boundary in the picture, God's distance from the mind, or conversely, God's proximity to the mind, becomes so great that the mind ceases to bear any intelligible relationship to God whatsoever.

My main argument, then, is that the only way to alleviate the anxiety—and thereby end the perpetual oscillation between these two competing and problematic views of the mind's relationship to God—is to eradicate the boundary entirely. Consequently, my main goal in this chapter is to challenge the cadre of modern and contemporary thinkers that I identified in the previous chapter. I intend to show how each version of theological antirealism they proffer inevitably exacerbates, rather than alleviates, the anxiety, because each version is prone to a level of distortion that proves to be self-defeating. My other goal in challenging modern skepticism and subjectivism is to open up polemical space for proffering an alternative model for the mind's relationship to God, one that refuses to place God in relation to the boundary and hence allows for genuine objectivity in our knowledge of God.

The Problems Afflicting Modern Skepticism and Subjectivism

I argued in the previous chapter that we can locate the origins of the boundary and thus the modern picture of the mind's relationship to God in a distinctly Cartesian picture of human subjectivity in which the mind is seen as an inner realm or space utterly divorced or divided from the external world. In part, this picture emerges because Descartes wedds modern epistemology to skepticism: *beginning* as he does by making methodical doubt central to the modern epistemological enterprise, Descartes puts the very pos-

sibility of knowledge of the external world in question. As John McDowell writes, once Descartes places “subjectivity’s very possession of an objective environment in question,” then it becomes “hard for us now to find Descartes’s purported regaining of the world, in the later stages of his reflections, as gripping as we can easily find his apparent loss of it in the opening stages.”¹

However, as McDowell also points out, the problems Descartes creates for modern epistemology are not solely traceable to his overall project of methodical doubt. Recall that in an effort to achieve new indubitable foundations for knowledge, Descartes turns inward and discovers that “even though the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside me, nonetheless the modes of thinking which I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me—of that I am certain.”² Here, Descartes finds consolation in the fact that even if his knowledge of the external world is in doubt, his knowledge of his own subjective states or modes of thinking is impervious to doubt. This retreat to the inner recesses of subjectivity is problematic, but it is not of itself sufficient to generate total skepticism about the external world. What is so problematic is Descartes’s discovery that the subjective or mental realm is exhausted by facts that he infallibly knows or of which he is certain: mental facts of the sort that the world appears to him a certain way (most notably, through sensory perception). It remains a further fact—completely external to Descartes’s mental state of being appeared to in a certain way—whether the world actually *is* as it appears to him.³ The claim to infallible knowledge or certainty of his inner mental states therefore effectively squeezes out other facts (those that cannot be infallibly known) about the very accessibility of the external world. Thus Descartes in fact renders his inner mental life totally freestanding, and by so doing, generates an untraversable gulf or divide between mind and world. McDowell summarizes this as follows:

1. John McDowell, “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,” in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 237. As McDowell also points out, the modern skepticism Descartes introduces is different from ancient skepticism: “ancient scepticism did not call our possession of a world into question; its upshot was, less dramatically, to drive a wedge between living in the world and (what is meant to seem dispensable) knowing about it” (238).

2. Descartes, *Meditations*, 87.

3. For help in articulating this point, I am relying on Tim Thornton’s exegesis of McDowell in *John McDowell* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 163–64 and 172–76.

We cannot now see the inner and outer realms as interpenetrating; the correlate of this picture of our access to the inner is that subjectivity is confined to a tract of reality whose layout would be exactly as it is however things stood outside it, and the common-sense notion of a vantage point on the external world is now fundamentally problematic. . . . Once we are gripped by the idea of a self-contained subjective realm, in which things are as they are independently of external reality (if any), it is too late for such a move (worthy as it is in itself) to help—our problem is not now that our contact with the external world seems too *shaky* to count as knowledgeable, but that our picture seems to represent us as out of touch with the world altogether.⁴

It is precisely *this* sort of deep and total skepticism that renders the relationship of mind and world so problematic: it not only calls the possibility of knowledge of the world into question; it calls into question our very possession of the world—that is, whether any of our most basic mental states are *about* the world at all.⁵

As we also saw in the previous chapter, the Cartesian divide between mind and world manifests itself in a more explicitly empiricist epistemology that binds our epistemic access to what is presented to us in our experience of the world. Hume introduced this epistemology: for Hume, all thought about the world is reducible to sense impressions and corresponding ideas—the inner contents of our minds—that afford no rational basis for holding beliefs about and hence claiming epistemic access to a world that continues to exist independently of how we perceive it. Kant adopts and strengthens Hume’s epistemological agenda, formally delineating an outer cognitive boundary that forces us to distinguish how the world appears to sensory consciousness, as conceptually structured by us (of which we can have knowledge) from how the world is “in itself” (of which we can have no knowledge).

Thanks to the Humean and more specifically Kantian legacy in mod-

4. McDowell, “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,” in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 241–42. As an alternative to the Cartesian picture, McDowell offers his own “disjunctive” view of the mental: short of the Cartesian picture, according to which infallible knowledge of newly recognized mental facts constitutes “the whole truth” about the subjective, McDowell says that we might say instead that “of facts to the effect that things seem thus and so to one . . . some are cases of things being thus and so within the reach of one’s subjective access to the external world, whereas others are mere appearances” (241). Thus, even if we cannot know for sure which disjunct obtains, we never lose the world entirely, given that we have dispensed with the threat that *all* mental states are “blank or blind” (243).

5. See Thornton, *John McDowell*, 164.

ern thought, we have become accustomed to conceiving of the mind's relationship to the world in terms of what Donald Davidson calls a mental or conceptual "scheme" and experiential "content" waiting to be organized or interpreted by that scheme.⁶ The world puts in its appearance to the mind—this is what Davidson designates as content—which the mind in turn organizes or interprets according to its conceptual framework or scheme. Now there is an almost intuitive plausibility to this view: in our modern and especially postmodern world, we have become quite comfortable with the idea that our knowledge of the world is relative to a scheme, or interpretive framework by which the world, which is present to the mind through experience, is made known to us. And yet, Davidson goes on to argue, the surface plausibility of the scheme-content dualism is betrayed by a deeper lack of intelligibility. On one level, we face pressing questions regarding the very intelligibility of conceptual "scheming": what does it mean for the mind to "organize" experience? What is it exactly—experience, the world, or items in experience and the world—that the mind is supposed to be "organizing"?⁷ On another level, we face even more pressing questions about conceptual *relativity*—the idea that there are multiple, incommensurable schemes that are brought to bear on some "common reference point," whatever that may be.⁸ Davidson rejects conceptual relativity flat out: closer analysis not only exposes a central ambiguity about what it is exactly (the "common reference point") to which our schemes are all supposed to be relative; it also reveals that our schemes do not differ as radically as we might first suppose.⁹ Importantly, Davidson's move here, in part, is to overcome skepticism: once we

6. See *passim* in Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, rev. ed. (1984; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183–98.

7. As Davidson argues, the notion of schemes and the sentences contained therein "fitting" experience doesn't work either: "The trouble is that the notion of fitting the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true" ("On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 193–94). In other words, making schemes answerable to experience only confuses, rather than clarifies, how the contents of those schemes can be true of and hence bear on the very objects they purport to be about.

8. Donald Davidson, "The Myth of the Subjective," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 39.

9. Davidson does not deny the trivially true claim that there are differences of opinion and perspective; he denies the stronger claim that there are more radical, comprehensive differences separating conceptual schemes that render interpretation and understanding impossible. So his point is the following: how could we ever identify an incommensurable scheme that differs so radically from our own? The idea of a scheme forever beyond our grasp is meaningless.

become taken with the idea of conceptual relativity, which is inevitable once we accept the scheme-content dualism, then we become susceptible to skeptical doubts about the very possibility of epistemic access to a world that exists beyond the ways we variously experience and conceive it.

As Davidson goes on to argue, the scheme-content dualism is closely aligned with an even larger dualism—the dualism of “subject” and “object”—that we have already seen is both Cartesian in origin and endemic to an empiricist epistemology.¹⁰ Now again, as Davidson points out, this epistemology offers an obvious explanation for how mind and world relate: through experience, we have immediate access to an unmediated content; and that content not only serves as raw material for subsequent conceptualization—organizing or interpreting the world as it appears to us—it also seems to furnish an epistemic basis for forming thoughts and beliefs about the world and hence constructing worldviews. But once again, skepticism looms:

If the ultimate evidence for our schemes and theories, the raw material on which they are based, is subjective in the way I have described, then so is whatever is directly based on it: our beliefs, desires, intentions, and what we mean by our words. Though these are the progeny of our “view of the world”—indeed, taken together, they constitute our view of the world—nevertheless they too retain the Cartesian independence from what they purport to be about that the evidence on which they are based had: like sensations, they could be just as they are, and the world be very different. Our beliefs purport to represent something objective, but the character of their subjectivity prevents us from taking the first step in determining whether they correspond to what they pretend to represent.¹¹

We can interpret Davidson’s remarks as follows. Once we adopt a picture of the subjective as bounded on the outside, then we must also locate the experiential “evidence for our schemes and theories” on the near side of the boundary, insulated from the outside, objective world. And once we locate experience and its contents on the near side of the boundary, we must also locate the “beliefs, desires, intentions, and what we mean by our words” based on experience and its contents on the near side of the boundary, insulated from the outside, objective world. So with the boundary in the picture,

10. Davidson writes, “Instead of saying it is the scheme-content dichotomy that has dominated and defined the problems of modern philosophy, then, one could as well say it is how the dualism of the objective and the subjective has been conceived. For these dualisms have a common origin: a concept of the mind with its private states and objects” (“The Myth of the Subjective,” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 43).

11. *Ibid.*

the connection or correspondence of our most basic cognitive states to the world becomes suspect, if not severed entirely.

The problem here to start, then, concerns a distinctly modern picture of human subjectivity, or the mind, as bounded on the outside. But as we have already seen, the problem is not just epistemological; it is also theological. Given their commitment to the boundary, or what Hume calls “the narrow bounds of human understanding,” both Hume and Kant share an obvious suspicion and agnosticism towards the transcendent—that is, the world considered “in itself” and, to an even greater extent, God considered “in God’s self.” Once we realize, however, that the theological directive both Hume and Kant offer—total agnosticism towards the transcendent—is rooted in a questionable epistemology that insulates the subjective from the objective, then we can and should begin to challenge the subject-object dualism in theology by first challenging the subject-object dualism in philosophy. Theology is not beholden to any epistemology, let alone an epistemology that is based on what Davidson rightly calls an “essentially incoherent picture of the mind as a passive but critical spectator of an inner show.”¹² Consequently, theology is under no obligation to retain this epistemology or to work from within its parameters. With the subject-object dualism, and hence the boundary, in place, we are inevitably led to picture the mind as self-enclosed and the world as mysteriously withdrawn—an inscrutable world that can only be thought and talked about when it is made comprehensible to us in terms of our own conceptual schemes, and thus brought inside the boundary enclosing the human mind. But in giving up dependence on a mediating scheme and on neutral experiential content, that is, “in giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science,” as Davidson writes, “we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth—quite the contrary. . . . In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.”¹³

The move I am making here at Davidson’s prompting is to loosen the grip that modern philosophy has on what we have to come to think of as “mind” and “world” or the “subjective” and the “objective”—the subjective being whatever is located inside a private mental space and the objective

12. *Ibid.*, 52.

13. Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 198.

being whatever is located outside that space. Doing so not only lets us reconceive and rehabilitate the relationship of mind and world, reestablishing what Davidson calls “unmediated touch” with the “familiar objects” that we encounter in the world; it also enables us to reconceive and rehabilitate the mind’s relationship to God—two tasks, I should add, that await us in the second part of this book. As long as we are in the grip of the dualism, which infects not only philosophy but also theology, we seem forced to embrace a picture of human subjectivity as bounded on the outside, and a picture of extra-mental reality (whether worldly or divine) as wholly inaccessible. But once we loosen that grip, which first requires calling into question the intelligibility of an epistemology based on a bounded conception of the mental, or “the narrow bounds of human understanding,” then we find ourselves less inclined to fall into the familiar philosophical and theological traps that modern thinkers like Descartes, Hume, and Kant have set for us.

For example, Hume’s attacks on natural theology only make sense within his own epistemological framework, in which experience, which is the basis of all thought and belief about the world, lacks any objective purport and hence affords no epistemic basis for what we think and believe about the world. If we accept this framework and begin with Hume’s skeptical epistemological assumptions, then Hume is certainly right in claiming that we have no epistemic basis in experience for drawing any conclusions about the nature of the divine. Moreover, insofar as we do go on thinking and speaking about God in terms of our experience, Hume is right that we bring God down to the level of human experience, which in turn requires making God, like experience itself, purely immanent to the world and the mind, divested of any objective reference. Given this fact, leaving God entirely outside the realm of what we think and experience may seem to be the only proper philosophical and religious response. But once again, we are left with an obvious and untenable skepticism.

Kant, of course, tries to evade Hume’s total skepticism, but insofar as he accepts Hume’s empiricist epistemological assumptions, his own religious thought becomes susceptible to the debilitating effects of that skepticism. In Kantian terms, we relativize God to our conceptual schemes, which in turn allows us to think and talk about God symbolically or analogically (as Kant defines it) in terms of our own concepts and experiences, even if it prohibits us from thinking and talking about God (depicting or characterizing God) in God’s self. Now, it is true that God qua noumenal reality does not drop out of the picture entirely in Kant: we have a practical need, or subjective

basis, to believe in God, and to believe that God possesses certain attributes; but even our rational faith in God never affords us any true insight into the nature of the divine. And how can it? If what we believe about God bears no specifiable or epistemically relevant relation to who God may be in reality—and Kant’s clear restrictions on what we can think and say about the transcendent prevent us from seeing what this relation might be—then rational faith remains epistemically and even practically insignificant. Having faith in the divine or holding certain beliefs about the divine on distinctly practical or subjective grounds does nothing to change our cognitive vantage point on the divine: we achieve no surer cognitive grip on the divine by having faith in the divine than by not having faith in the divine. What, then, is the point of maintaining faith in the divine if, as Kant also concedes, belief in the bare *possibility* of the divine provides a sufficient foundation for the moral and religious life? If rational faith, given its subjective character, is reducible to total agnosticism, then how can it constitute a coherent cognitive stance to take vis-à-vis the divine?

My point in raising these critical questions is to argue that we should reject, rather than accept, this overall epistemological framework as the basis for conceiving the mind’s relationship to God. Once we reject the framework—and again, we are certainly under no obligation to accept it, especially given its own lack of coherence and viability—then we begin to free theology of the skeptical and subjectivist epistemological constraints that the framework imposes on it. Once sundered from the framework, and liberated from skeptical and subjectivist epistemological constraints, God-thought and God-talk are no longer bounded to experience—restrained or domesticated by empirical content—nor are they bounded to incommensurable conceptual schemes. Let me express this positively: once sundered from the framework, and hence liberated from skeptical and subjectivist epistemological constraints, God-thought and God-talk can properly bear on the divine, affording us genuine knowledge of the divine. This is not to say that God-thought and God-talk, once liberated from skepticism and subjectivism, or “unbounded,” are not subject to *any* constraints: “unbounding” the mind’s relationship to God does not entitle us to wild, unchecked speculation about the nature of the divine. (Here, at least, we can honor one of Kant’s central concerns.) But whatever constraints God-thought and God-talk are subject to are derived primarily from theology itself, not from some alien philosophy that denies the possibility of God-thought and God-talk *tout court*.

A discerning objector will now certainly interject: it is not just philoso-

phy, or a particular epistemology, that poses problems for theology. What informs theology's task of properly formulating the mind's relationship to God is not merely a certain philosophical picture of the mind's bounded relationship to the world, or the dualism of subject and object; it is also (and perhaps primarily) a certain picture of the divine itself. Insofar as traditional theology affirms God's transcendence—God's *utterly* transcending both the world and the mind—then it seems inevitable and essential that properly conceiving the mind's relationship to God *require* inserting a boundary separating God from the mind. Contrary to what I am arguing, then, doesn't theology *need* the subject-object dualism in order to protect divine transcendence and hence insulate itself from skeptical attack?

In responding, we need to question the deeper coherence and viability of a specifically *theological* framework that incorporates the subject-object dualism and thus insists on the presence of a cognitive boundary: what does theology, and the knowledge of God that undergirds it, really look like with the boundary in the picture? Once we introduce the dualism and hence a cognitive boundary in theology, then we once again find ourselves asking specifically epistemological questions about how to reconcile the mind and God, or what it means for the mind to be properly related to the divine. Does it really make sense to think and speak about a God who not only transcends the mind, but also transcends a *boundary* that encloses the mind? With the boundary in the picture, what certainty can we have that our thought and speech about God actually reach God, penetrating the boundary itself? If our thought and speech about God cannot penetrate the boundary—and it certainly seems they cannot—then what becomes of our knowledge of God and theology itself?

Note the direction our analysis is already taking: far from escaping the central questions of modern philosophy, we once again find ourselves asking them in a new theological key. Consider again the modern view of the mind. Once we sufficiently distance the world from the mind—rendering the outside world wholly alien to the inner mental world we inhabit—then it seems the only way we can gain access to the world is by rendering it intelligible in terms of our own experience and schemes. In search of indubitable foundations for empirical knowledge, we therefore retreat from the world into our minds in order to begin to construct a view of the world. And what can be more certain, and consequently more authoritative, than bits of experiential intake that are immediately present to the mind? Making appearances the foundation for our empirical beliefs and worldviews seems to be essential:

were the world not to provide us with appearances, we would have no basis at all on which to form beliefs and construct worldviews, and so no basis for thinking and talking about the world *at all*.

However, as we have just seen, the retreat from the world into the recesses of our own minds results in defeat rather than victory: we gain a false security—empirical foundations for knowledge—at the cost of making ourselves susceptible to an even greater skepticism: a skepticism that Descartes and Hume introduced, which Kant stiff-armed but never was able to overcome. And it is a skepticism of a certain sort: the anxiety it breeds is not only that the world “in itself”—presuming there is such a thing—may be radically different than we perceive it to be; the anxiety is also that there simply is no world “in itself,” and that all that is, to which we direct our thoughts and beliefs, are the inner contents of our own minds. The correlate to this sort of gross empiricism in theology is, of course, Feuerbach’s anthropomorphism. Once we sufficiently distance God from the mind—rendering God, in God’s self, wholly alien to the inner mental world we inhabit—then it seems the only way we can gain access to God is by rendering God intelligible in terms of our own experiences and schemes:

if [God] is to exist for me, he cannot appear otherwise than as he does appear to me, namely, as a being with attributes analogous to the human. But this distinction between what God is in himself, and what he is for me destroys the peace of religion, and is besides in itself an unfounded and untenable distinction. I cannot know whether God is something else in himself or for himself than he is for me; what he is to me is to me all that he is.¹⁴

Here, Feuerbach shuns the Kantian distinction between “what God is in himself” and “what [God] is for me” because it is beset by religious and philosophical difficulties. How is it possible to think and speak about something that is so utterly non-human? More than that, why should we want to do so? It is only by abandoning the distinction between “God in himself” and “God for me,” and in turn embracing that “what [God] is to me is to me all that [God] is” that we quell all of the familiar anxieties about knowing God and relating the mind to God.

For Feuerbach, then, bringing God wholly inside the cognitive boundary that defines human subjectivity supposedly provides an indubitable foundation for knowledge of God and hence preserves, rather than undermines,

14. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 16

the “peace of religion.” But now we must ask, what sort of “peace” do we really gain, once we bring God entirely inside the boundary? Rather than truly alleviating skeptical anxieties concerning the mind’s relationship to God, Feuerbach instead only exacerbates those anxieties further: he tries to give us the security that “all [God] is to me is to me all that he is”; but in the end, by confining God within the realm of the subjective, he merely feeds the fear that we have entirely *lost* our cognitive grip on the reality of God, rather than strengthened that grip. (This is why Kant keeps God as a noumenal place-holder in his moral philosophy: he thinks that without such a place-holder, and without the assumption that there is a supersensible entity behind the screens of our own conceptual schemes, rational faith in the divine becomes totally undermined.) Now, Feuerbach also is certainly right to question the Kantian dualism of “God in himself” and “God for me” as an “unfounded and untenable distinction,” but he simply does not go far enough in renouncing the dualism altogether. Instead he embraces *one side* of the dualism and thereby opts for a full-fledged subjectivism. By doing so, he endorses a bounded conception of the mind that is equally unfounded and untenable. As Hume, through Philo, points out, while anthropomorphism may appear to be the antidote to skepticism in theology (this is the claim Cleanthes advances against Demea), in the end, by aligning God with the world we experience (and thus with ourselves), it merely makes theology more susceptible to skepticism—and skeptical anxieties—because it renders our knowledge of God wholly subjective.

Given the pervasive threat of skepticism and subjectivism, then, we once again find ourselves asking the question, why should we endorse a theology that carries with it a bounded conception of the mind? And once again, we hear the answer, this time directed in response to Feuerbach: preserving the boundary is indeed theologically necessary, because it is only by sharply distinguishing the mind and God (on analogy with mind and world) that we are also able to preserve God’s objectivity and transcendence—that is, God’s distinction from the world, the mind, and everything therein. As we have already seen, Tillich’s Protestant principle—the theological correlate to a bounded conception of the mind—serves precisely this purpose. It prevents us from raising the symbolic content of theology and hence the symbolic content of faith to the level of the ultimate (God qua being-itself) because doing so “deprives God of his ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his majesty. It draws him down to the level of that which is not ultimate, the finite and conditional,” and so it fails to give God “the honor which is due

him.”¹⁵ In true Kantian fashion, Tillich does not deny the importance of God-thought and God-talk; however, he does deny that God-thought and God-talk, which is essentially symbolic in character, ever can truly express the ultimate, or bear on the ultimate itself.

Understood as a corrective to absolutism and Feuerbach’s anthropomorphism, Tillich’s Protestant principle clearly has an important place in theology. And yet, understood as a corrective to skepticism—and specifically, skepticism concerning our knowledge of God—the principle is clearly self-defeating. Every symbolic expression of ultimate concern in faith, by which we cognitively aim to relate to the divine, is necessarily defined by its own lack of ultimacy: on Tillich’s view, no human person or group ever can claim that a particular faith, or its symbolic content, is objective, or “really ultimate,” because that would entail idolatrously raising that content to “absolute validity,” thereby denigrating the divine transcendence.¹⁶ Faith is most true and the least idolatrous when it expresses its own *lack* of ultimacy—that is, its own *inability* adequately to express or bear on the divine itself. This is why, for Tillich, we are most rightly aligned with the transcendent not only in faith but also in *doubt*—doubt or disbelief that our own faith truly directs us to the transcendent itself. So now we must ask, haven’t we come full circle? Aligning faith with doubt, precisely in order wholly to distinguish our cognitive responses from the ultimate itself, once again inextricably links theology with skepticism. Moreover, aligning faith with doubt also inextricably links theology with subjectivism, undermining faith as a coherent and viable cognitive posture to assume in relation to the divine. Thus if, as Tillich proposes, we must remain forever in doubt regarding the objective content and purport of what we believe and say to be true of the divine, then don’t we make ourselves susceptible to all of the familiar problems that afflict modern thought, whether in epistemology or more concretely in theology?

We must point out that the real problem here is not Tillich’s commitment to God’s transcendence, but rather Tillich’s commitment to a certain picture of God’s transcendence—or a certain picture of God as the ultimate—that situates God outside or beyond the Great Boundary.¹⁷ If Feuerbach is guilty of bringing God entirely inside the boundary, precisely in order to address problems concerning God’s distance from the mind, or the

15. Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, 60.

16. *Ibid.*, 112.

17. The term “Great Boundary” is taken from Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?” *Modern Theology* 14.1 (1998): 16.

realm of human subjectivity, Tillich is guilty of leaving God entirely outside the boundary, precisely in order to address problems regarding God's proximity to the human mind, or the realm of human subjectivity. By doing so, both end up exacerbating, rather than alleviating, nagging skeptical and subjectivist concerns. Thus, contrary to what Feuerbach and Tillich suggest—and here I am advancing a claim central to this book—the solution to the problem regarding our knowledge of God does not entail positioning God in relation to a cognitive boundary: this is a false assumption of modern thought, itself based on a distorted conception of the human mind. Instead, the solution lies elsewhere: denying the very presence or existence of the boundary itself and hence, as I have been suggesting, denying the skeptical and subjectivist assumptions of modern thought (whether in philosophy or theology) altogether.

The Problems Afflicting Neo-Kantian Skepticism and Subjectivism

We are now in a position to challenge modern skepticism and subjectivism as it manifests itself in contemporary philosophical and religious thought. As we discovered in the last chapter, both Gordon Kaufman and John Hick explicitly adopt the Kantian principle that God cannot be objectively known; they also claim to find ways of rendering God knowable in terms of distinctly human symbols and experiences. Consider Kaufman first. On Kaufman's view, as I interpret it, when we hold beliefs or make assertions about God (or at least think we are holding beliefs or making assertions about God), we really only have the symbol "God" (which again, is a human construct) rather than the reality of God in mind; and this in turn means that the symbol "God," rather than the reality of God, remains the proper object of those beliefs and assertions. More than that, not only is the symbol "God" the object of our beliefs and assertions, it derives its very existence from our beliefs and assertions: "God" is ultimately what we believe and say it to be.

So construed, Kaufman's neo-Kantian epistemology, which also bears some affinities to Tillich's theology, is clearly compatible with total skepticism towards the divine, given that what we know of "God" may or may not have any bearing on who *God* is in reality. But Kaufman will not settle for total skepticism: he also argues that the symbol "God" in some sense represents or stands for the underlying reality or ultimate mystery which he equates with *God*, "that which—quite apart from our own doing—has given us our being

as humans and continues to nurture and sustain us, that without which we would not exist at all.”¹⁸ Of course, here is a crucial problem: if the symbol “God” ultimately is what we believe and say it to be—and what we believe and say “God” to be bears no *specifiable* relation to who *God* actually is in reality—then in what sense can the symbol “God” intelligibly be understood to represent divine reality? In addition, on Kaufman’s account, what reason do we have for thinking that a symbol that we have imaginatively constructed *entirely* in our minds bears any real relation to a completely ineffable reality that exists independently of our minds? For example, it is entirely unclear on Kaufman’s account how we can intelligibly use metaphors such as “creator” to refer to God if God is not really—that is, in *reality*—like anything that we, in using that metaphor, are believing or saying God to be. Kaufman claims that the metaphor “creator” somehow indicates or signifies “something real” and consequently focuses our attention on the reality to which we, in using that metaphor, putatively refer. But precisely *how* we are able to refer to “something real” is left totally unexplained. If God is not *really* our creator, then how can we intelligibly refer to God using the metaphor “creator?” On what basis are we even *entitled* to refer to God using “creator?” Moreover, why should we use that particular metaphor to symbolize or represent God’s reality rather than any others? What is unique about “creator” as a *religious* metaphor that helps focus our attention on God’s reality rather than other metaphors taken from other departments of human life?

There are really two related arguments that I am advancing here, which I need to clarify. The first argument concerns representation or reference, which is, at bottom, a *semantic* issue: how is it that the symbol “God,” and the beliefs and assertions we form and make about “God,” signify *God*, and consequently direct our minds to *God*—the very reality we purport to signify? The second argument concerns justification or entitlement, which is an *epistemological* issue: what basis do we have for thinking that the symbol “God” and the beliefs and assertions we form and make about “God” signify *God*, and consequently, direct our minds to *God*—the very reality we purport to signify? Now, these issues are intrinsically related: if we cannot specify the relation that holds between the symbol “God” and the reality of *God* (and on the neo-Kantian view, we seemingly cannot) then we have no sure basis on which to stake the claim that our knowledge of “God” gives us *any* reliable cognitive insight into who *God* objectively is.

18. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 317.

In order to develop these arguments in more detail, I turn my attention to Hick. At the core of Hick's neo-Kantian epistemology is the following claim: just as we enjoy epistemic access to the empirical world via conceptually structured experiences or sensory data that are internal to the perceiving consciousness, which are caused by objects that exist external to the perceiving consciousness, so we enjoy epistemic access to the Real via religiously conceptualized experiences of the Real (as the *personae* and *impersonae*) that are internal to the religious consciousness, even if they are caused by the Real, which remains external to the religious consciousness. So we enjoy epistemic access to the Real insofar as we have certain religiously conceptualized experiences, or have direct awareness of the *personae* and *impersonae*, that in turn mediate our epistemic access to the Real. As I argued in the previous chapter, I take this to be the most plausible interpretation of Hick; it also renders his view acutely problematic. By explicitly committing himself to the claim that conceptually structured episodes of sense experience are private to the perceiving consciousness and occur inside the human mind, Hick also commits himself to the claim that conceptually structured episodes of religious experience are private to the religious consciousness and therefore occur inside the human mind. Hick can offer no reason why religious experience, like sense experience generally, grants us *any* epistemic access to something objectively real, given that he confines episodes of religious experience, like episodes of sense experience generally, to the private and bounded space that defines human consciousness and mindedness.

The problem is further intensified by Hick's claim that the Real evades any conceptual identification with the various *personae* or *impersonae*—the experience of which is supposed to constitute an authentic manifestation of the Real and hence furnish mediated epistemic access to the Real. As Alvin Plantinga points out, if the Real does not possess any positive non-formal properties of which we have a grasp and to which our positive non-formal concepts apply, then there seems to be no reason to suppose that *any* of the divergent religious experiences we putatively enjoy constitutes an authentic manifestation of the Real, or furnishes mediated epistemic access to the Real. Moreover, there is no reason to privilege *religious* experience as genuinely revelatory of the Real, or capable of furnishing mediated epistemic access to the Real: potentially *any* experience (religious or otherwise) is revelatory of the Real. Plantinga writes, "If we know nothing about the Real, we have no reason to pick the *personae* Hick picks as authentic manifestations of it. The main point is that if the Real has no positive non-formal properties

of which we have a grasp, then, for all we can see, any department of human life is as revelatory of the Real as any other.”¹⁹

Thus the same problem that afflicts Kaufman’s view—how we can intelligibly relate religious symbols (and we can now add, experiences) properly locatable inside the boundary to the putatively symbolized (or experienced) transcendent reality properly located outside the boundary—also afflicts Hick’s view. And neither Kaufman nor Hick provides a sufficient response to the problem. Like Kaufman, Hick claims that there *is* a genuine relation between what lies inside the boundary—our experiences of the various *personae* and *impersonae*—and what lies outside the boundary: the Real in itself, as the putative cause of those experiences. But he cannot specify the nature of that relation with any adequate detail. In fact, he merely restates that while “we cannot, as we have seen, say that the Real *an sich* has the characteristics displayed by its manifestations . . . [we can say that] it is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics.”²⁰ This response merely begs the same question I raised earlier: in precisely *what sense* is the Real the ground of those characteristics (the semantic issue)? Furthermore, if none of our non-formal concepts apply to the Real in itself, on what basis are we entitled to say the Real in itself possesses *any* characteristics that resemble the *particular* characteristics that we (in applying those concepts) assign the various *personae* and *impersonae* as experienced by us (the epistemological issue)? At best, we still have phenomenal characteristics, on the one hand, and the ineffable ground of those characteristics on the other.

My claim, then, is that if one accepts the Kantian framework as the basis for doing religious epistemology or theology, one inevitably has to deal with the problem of how to relate seemingly unrelated items—representations of divine reality on the one hand, and the putatively represented divine reality on the other—which necessarily belong on opposing sides of a cognitive boundary. Hick still insists that

the divine noumenon is a necessary postulate of the pluralistic religious life of humanity. . . . Without this postulate we should be left with a plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* each of which is claimed to be the Ultimate, but no one which alone can be. We should have either to regard all the reported experiences as illusory or

19. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59.

20. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 247. Hick interprets Aquinas as arguing for a comparable position. In chapter five, I will show this to be otherwise, since Aquinas says we can apply some concepts literally (albeit analogically) to God.

else return to the confessional position in which we affirm the authenticity of our stream of religious experience whilst dismissing as illusory those occurring within other traditions.²¹

However, merely postulating a divine noumenon outside or beyond the plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* does not solve the problem because it still begs the question how the divine noumenon and the plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* are intelligibly related. Thus if Hick does not address this problem, it seems he must in fact opt for one of two options he suggests: regarding all reported religious experiences as (at least potentially) non-veridical or illusory, or affirming the authenticity of one stream of religious experience, which in turn requires giving up the phenomenal/noumenal distinction altogether. If he opts for the former, then he undermines his conviction that the plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* are, as experienced, genuine manifestations of the Real. If he opts for the latter, then he undermines his own pluralist hypothesis that the Real in itself “is experienced and thought . . . as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports.”²²

Seemingly, the only other option that is available to the neo-Kantian committed to the phenomenal/noumenal divide is to claim that one must have *trust* or *faith* that there is a real relation that links phenomenal representations of God with God in God’s self, even if it is impossible to verify or know that such a relation actually holds. Hick argues that just as it is a “general principle . . . that it is rational to regard our apparently perceptual experiences as veridical except when we when we have reason to doubt their veridicality,” so “the religious person, experiencing life in terms of the divine presence, is rationally entitled to believe what he or she experiences to be the case—namely that God is real, or exists.”²³ Now, the sorts of reasons to doubt the veridicality of perceptual experience that Hick has in

21. *Ibid.*, 249.

22. *Ibid.*, 242.

23. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 215–16. In a similar Kantian vein, Joseph Runzo argues that “Although we cannot know that what we experience and understand religiously does tell us about the character of the noumenal God, it is a matter of *faith* that one’s theological conceptions, however elemental, and one’s religious experiences, however mundane, do provide the basis for properly referring to, and therefore speaking about, God in Godself. Given the dichotomy between the noumenal God and the God of history [or the phenomenal God], faith in God implicitly involves the trust that one does possess concepts and beliefs which are not only applicable to ‘The’ God of one’s own history, but also to God in Godself, and thus that God in Godself is somehow manifest in one’s own experience of the God one confronts in history” (Joseph Runzo, *World Views and Perceiving God* [New York: St. Martin’s, 1993], 166).

mind are essentially twofold: first, when we are aware of circumstances that could well cause us to be deluded regarding a particular experience; and second, when a particular experience is remarkably discordant with our normal stream of perceptual experience as well as our existing body of perceptual beliefs. However, if we have reasonably judged that it is at least possible for the cause of our perceptual experience to be real (ruling out delusion), and our perceptual experience itself occurs “in a powerful, persistent and intrusive way which demands belief in its reality” (ruling out radical inconsistency), then we are rationally entitled to take such experience as veridical. Analogously, if we have reasonably judged that it is at least possible that God exists, and our putative experience of God occurs with power, persistency, and intrusiveness, then we are rationally entitled to take our putative experience of the divine as veridical.

The move Hick makes here to defend the rationality of religious experience is admirable; and yet, his defense simply does not hold up against the more radical and comprehensive doubt that we have, on Hick's account, *no* reason to hold that *any* of our putative religious experiences are veridical.²⁴ Again, if God or the Real is so ineffable that that none of the non-formal conceptual content of our experiences of the Real (the *personae* and *impersonae*) apply to or are satisfied by the Real in itself, then we have no rational basis on which to hold or even trust that those experiences are veridical. Recall Davidson's remarks above. Characterizing the problems that afflict modern empiricist epistemology (which Hick adopts by prescribing to critical realism), Davidson writes, “Our beliefs purport to represent something objective, but the character of their subjectivity prevents us from taking the first step in determining whether they correspond to what they pretend to represent.”²⁵ We very easily can substitute “religious experiences” for “beliefs” here to get the following: on Hick's account, our religious experiences purport to represent something objective (the Real), but the character of their subjectivity prevents us from taking the first step in determining whether they correspond to what they pretend to represent. And this “first step” surely includes a minimal level of trust that these experiences

24. Against Hick, Paul R. Eddy argues that there is no reason to suppose that phenomenal manifestations of the Real, on Hick's account, contain an extra-subjective element (that is, an element besides our conceptual contribution to those experiences), which would in turn link them to the Real and thus require postulating the Real. See Paul R. Eddy, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal,” *Religious Studies* 30.4 (1994): 467–78.

25. Davidson, “The Myth of the Subjective,” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 43.

correspond to what they represent. Thus until Hick dispels *this* more radical and comprehensive doubt—and it is hard to see how we can do this—then we have no more reason to hold that religious experience on Hick’s view is blank or blind, rather than revelatory of the divine itself.

The real question facing the neo-Kantian, therefore, is whether the trust or faith of which Hick speaks—the sort of trust or faith that holds that our putative conceptions and experiences of God (or the phenomenal God) provide a genuine cognitive basis for thinking and speaking about God in God’s self (or the noumenal God)—is *rational* or in fact *blind*. If such faith is rational, then the neo-Kantian must provide a *reason* why or how our putative conceptions and experiences of God as phenomenally manifest *also* constitute genuine conceptions and experiences of God in God’s self, or the noumenally real God, *given that God in God’s self remains completely hidden outside or beyond the boundary*. If the neo-Kantian cannot provide a reason why or how the relation holds, then the trust or faith that Hick appeals to is blind; and blind faith is *irrational*. In other words, in the absence of explanation, there ceases to be any reason to suppose that the relation holds; and once again, the neo-Kantian is faced with an intractable epistemological quandary.

The Problems Afflicting Postmodern Skepticism and Subjectivism

While both Kaufman and Hick, trailing in Kant’s wake, keep God entirely outside a cognitive boundary that encloses the mind (and hence struggle to relate the mind and God), Don Cupitt, trailing in Feuerbach’s wake, draws God (as well as the world) entirely inside a cognitive boundary that encloses the mind. Recall that according to Cupitt’s self-avowed theological non-realism, there simply is no objective reality, divine or otherwise, to which our cognitive activity is accountable or on which our cognitive activity bears. In defense of non-realism, Cupitt argues that “our modern experience is that there isn’t any objective, fixed, intelligible reality out there, such as may be replicated in our language and invoked to check our theories. We now live wholly *inside* our own history, our language, and the flux of cultural change.”²⁶ Cupitt therefore thoroughly dispenses with objectivity in the realm of metaphysics and epistemology (both religious and otherwise): again, he not only claims that “there isn’t any objective, fixed, intelligible reality out there” (the anti-metaphysical claim); he also claims that “there isn’t any . . . reality out there, such as may be replicated in our language and in-

26. Cupitt, “Anti-Realist Faith,” in *Is Nothing Sacred?* 37.

voled to check our theories” (the anti-epistemological claim). Elsewhere, he reiterates the same point:

The very notion that either science or art or religion can get their justification from their simple accuracy in registering and responding to objective and independent structures “out there” has broken down. . . . The idea of copying has broken down because we can never get into a position in which we can set the copy and the pure original side by side for comparison. We see many kinds of copy, but we never see any original as it is, an objective mind-independent real structure, out there and independent of our systems of representation. We see things only in representation, and never absolutely. We can compare the way things look under different points of view or perspectives, but we do not have any absolute or perspectiveless vision of things that we can use as a standard for testing the accuracy of the various perspectival visions.²⁷

Consequently, Cupitt concludes that if we cannot transcend our own systems of representation and thought in order to achieve a “perspectiveless” vision of reality, then we must both abandon (1) any commitment to a mind-independent reality that does not owe its existence to our conceptions or perspectives of it; and (2) any commitment to inquiring into the nature of a mind-independent reality that does not owe its existence to our conceptions or perspectives of it.

There is an important critical question here, to start, that I argue Cupitt must answer: if we are limited to our own different perspectives of reality (as Cupitt contends), then what epistemological basis do we have for making *any* absolute pronouncements about the objective constitution of reality—most notably, whether it is there or not (or exists independently of us or not)? Cupitt tries to make an intuitive appeal here: “our modern experience is that there isn’t any objective, fixed, intelligible reality out there, such as may be replicated in our language and invoked to check our theories.” But to what collective “modern experience” is Cupitt referring here? Moreover, what is it about our modern experience (presuming we all have it) that indicates that “there isn’t an objective, fixed, intelligible reality out there”? Presumably, Cupitt would remind us that if our knowledge of the world is perspectival, then the world itself must be perspectival: there is really only *our world*, a world *constituted* and *built* by human concepts and language, a world that is “radically outsideless.”²⁸ But just because our knowledge of the world is perspec-

27. Cupitt, “Faith Alone,” in *Is Nothing Sacred?* 24–25.

28. Cupitt, “Free Christianity,” in *Is Nothing Sacred?* 53.

tival, it does not follow that the world doesn't exist independently of our knowledge of it. How could we ever determine *that*—limited as we are to our own perspectives?

There is a further pressing problem here. Cupitt dispenses with epistemological objectivity in addition to metaphysical objectivity because he thinks achieving epistemological objectivity—whether in the sphere of science, art, or religion—requires transcending our own perspectives on the world, precisely in order to check or verify whether those perspectives accurately represent the world. “We see many kinds of copy,” Cupitt says above, “but we never see any original as it is, an objective mind-independent real structure, out there and independent of our systems of representation.” In making this claim, however, Cupitt is already invoking an epistemological divide—the scheme-content or subject-object dualism—that separates how we understand the world from how the world exists independently of our understandings of it. As long as the dualism is there, then it indeed becomes difficult if not impossible to affirm that we can accurately represent the world: representation (or perhaps better, accuracy of representation) in thought seems to require extraordinary effort, or Herculean powers of mind. But again, we need to pose an important critical question here to Cupitt: why must we assume that achieving objectivity in thought, in whatever sphere of inquiry, requires extricating ourselves from our own systems of thought? Might not some (even if not all) our perspectives on the world, limited as they may be, provide a reliable cognitive vantage point—which again, we are locating wholly within those perspectives themselves—from which we can view the world (however briefly and fragmentarily) “as it is”?

I have already argued that what feeds Cupitt's bias against objectivity is precisely his commitment to a cognitive boundary, one that separates the subjective from the objective. In fact, his view only makes sense given this commitment: we cannot choose *our world* over *the world* or *our God* over *God* unless we are working with binary opposites, namely, the “subjective” and the “objective,” which belong on opposing sides of the boundary. Of course, Cupitt does more than merely reject objectivity: in true Feuerbachian fashion, he fully embraces and even deifies human subjectivity. On Cupitt's account, as I interpret it, reality—whether worldly or divine—becomes wholly circumscribed *within* human subjectivity: both *the world* and *God* become “our world” and “our God.” Cupitt claims that “the sense of spiritual liberation that we feel when we grasp all this is astounding.”²⁹ I

29. *Ibid.*, 47.

contend the opposite: once we subsume the world and God entirely within our own systems of thought, language, and experience, then what we feel is not liberation but anxiety and even despair—the anxiety and despair that both the world and God have been lost and that we are utterly free of any constraint or accountability in constructing and orienting our empirical and religious lives. There is also the real anxiety and potential despair that, insofar as we are not constrained by or accountable to any reality (again, worldly or divine) that exists outside of us, we are utterly free to make or fashion the world and God into what we want them to be. Both the world and God become subject to our mastery and control, which we can use for whatever purpose that we wish or please. Absolutism in religion looms.

As I interpret him, Merold Westphal shares this same anxiety: he argues against the project of onto-theology precisely because it seeks to render “the whole of reality intelligible to human understanding” and hence leaves no room for faith in the utterly unknown or religious mystery.³⁰ In direct opposition to Cupitt, therefore, Westphal, like Tillich, emphasizes the complete unknowableness of God: rather than drawing God inside a cognitive boundary, Westphal pushes God entirely outside a cognitive boundary, thereby safeguarding God from being “put at our disposal, conceptually speaking.” And Westphal’s concern is indeed genuine: aligning God directly with our concepts, and hence with our own subjectivity, evacuates God of objectivity. Once God is drawn inside the boundary, then God can no longer be intelligibly identified as existing independently from what we, at bottom, conceive God to be. On the other hand, it seems placing God outside the boundary alleviates and even eliminates this concern: there is no longer any threat that God will be reduced to our concepts, for God remains untouched by our concepts.

However, by placing God outside a cognitive boundary, Westphal trades in one anxiety, one problem, for another. Recall that on Westphal’s favorable reading of Kant, only God possesses objective knowledge or an objective view of the world that in turn is “the standard of truth, reality, and hence, objectivity,” and is therefore “essentially different” from the perspective of the world occupied by the human mind, which is itself “necessarily subjective.”³¹ In deference to Kant, therefore, Westphal makes a fundamental distinction between human knowledge and divine knowledge—the former being necessarily subjective, or perspectival, the latter being objec-

30. Westphal, “Overcoming Onto-theology,” in *Overcoming Onto-theology*, 4.

31. Westphal, “Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution,” in *Overcoming Onto-theology*, 94.

tive and, more than that, absolute or comprehensive. As a result, achieving objectivity in our knowledge of the world or of God not only seems to be an insurmountable difficulty (given that it requires transcending the cognitive space to which we, as human subjects, are irrevocably confined); it also seems to be a reprehensible aim from a distinctly theological point of view.

I share Westphal's objections to onto-theology and understand his reasons for wanting to overcome onto-theology. I disagree, however, with his method for doing so: there are distinct epistemological consequences for trading in objectivity for subjectivity, or in Kantian terms, metaphysical knowledge for faith. If there can be no objectivity in what we believe about God, then faith in the divine once again seems to be reduced to a purely subjective cognitive attitude with no discernible objective bearing. Now, Westphal would surely dispute this: he, like Kant, only denies metaphysical knowledge in order to make room for a defensible faith; and faith is no vacuous state of mind. In fact, "faith . . . involves (but is not reducible to) beliefs that would seem to be robustly metaphysical. They surely involve reference to and assert the reality of the supersensible."³² But in response, we must once again ask a now familiar critical question: if, according to Westphal, all human knowledge evacuated of metaphysical pretenses is irreducibly subjective—based on and limited to what appears to us—then how do we account for faith-beliefs involving any "reference to" and assertion of "the reality of the supersensible?" How can we ever be sure of this, as Westphal supposes? Despite what Westphal contends, we cannot dispense with metaphysics or objectivity in knowledge, and thereby deny ourselves any genuine epistemic access to the supersensible or the transcendent, but then allow ourselves to keep an element of metaphysics and objectivity for faith. Once we abandon metaphysics, and objectivity along with it, the best we can do is to go on thinking and speaking about God (Westphal, like Tillich and Kant, does not deny this) and more than that try to aim our thought and speech at God; but we have no reason to think thought and speech actually reaches God. Despite what Westphal contends, then, a Christian theism that retains what Westphal says is an essential dichotomy between appearance and reality threatens to become eviscerated by a thoroughgoing skepticism and subjectivism.

That said—and here I point towards claims that I will continue to defend—we can follow Westphal in overcoming onto-theology without making theology vulnerable to the dangers of skepticism and subjectivism. Westphal

32. Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," 259.

clearly thinks that the only way to overcome onto-theology is to embrace our own subjectivity and relinquish any desire or need for epistemological objectivity. For Westphal, aiming at objectivity in our thinking about the world or God represents the height of human arrogance and sin: our trying to bridge the gap between creature and Creator, or the human mind and the mind of God. What Westphal fails to consider, however, and what I am suggesting as an alternative, is that overcoming onto-theology does not require jettisoning the central realist assertion that God can be known objectively but only requires jettisoning the misguided idea that knowing God objectively requires transcending human subjectivity—specifically, the particular schemes and worldviews in which we form beliefs and make assertions about God. Against Westphal, therefore, the theological realist refuses to equate objective knowledge of God, in service to onto-theology, with absolute or comprehensive knowledge of God. In other words, according to theological realism, *finally* overcoming onto-theology requires jettisoning any residual commitment to a Kantian divide that requires placing God outside a cognitive boundary that encloses the cognitive space in which our thinking and claim-making about God takes place.

As long as the boundary is in place, it appears that if we are to know God objectively, we must step outside of inhabited schemes and worldviews (“around” the boundary, as it were) so that we may achieve a God’s-eye view of God that is essentially distinct from the perspective (or “knowledge”) of God afforded by those schemes and worldviews. However, once the boundary is eliminated (that is, eradicated altogether from the picture), then it ceases to be idolatrous to claim, in an avowedly realist manner, that God indeed can be objectively *known* (and not merely “known”) from within inhabited schemes and worldviews: no extrinsic cognitive vantage point need be sought or found.

With this definition of objective knowledge of God in place, it also becomes possible to supplement the traditional theological emphasis on God’s incomprehensibility with the equally important traditional western theological emphasis on God’s knowableness. Westphal, for example, argues that the great theologians of the western Christian tradition (including Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth) collectively agree that they cannot worship what they comprehend.³³ What I am suggesting now, however, and will go on to explain, drawing on Aquinas in particular, is that these theologians *also* collectively agree that they cannot worship what they do not know. In

33. See Westphal, “Overcoming Onto-theology,” in *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, 8.

other words, there is room in the classical theological tradition to claim that even if God never can be fully *comprehended*, God indeed can be *known*, and it is this knowledge of God—along with a pious lack of full understanding—that inspires praise and characterizes faith.

The Problems Afflicting Neo-Wittgensteinian Skepticism and Subjectivism

Disenchantment with modern skepticism and subjectivism, which isolates religious thought and language from the very divine object (logically speaking) it purports to be about, and hence renders knowledge of God wholly immanent to the mind, may lead us to relocate religious thought and language in other sources external to the mind, most notably, religious practices. Adapting the later Wittgenstein for his own purposes, D. Z. Phillips argues that it is our religious practices, and the distinctly religious commitments we make within those practices, which reveal the meaning of the term “God” and thus the true character and nature of God. Put more bluntly, on Phillips’s view, the reality of God is only disclosed *within* the grammar of religious believing and claim-making, or the actual activities of praising and thanking God in which religious believers engage. Thus, Phillips claims, “it is only in the context of our responses that sense can be made of the reality of God. Our responses show the character of the God we worship; it may be said that they reveal his spirit.”³⁴ Now by pointing us to particular religious language-games and forms of life in order to determine the purport of our religious beliefs and assertions, Phillips is aiming to alleviate a particular anxiety, namely, that God, in the hands of the metaphysicians (or the philosophers) will become the target of pure, isolated intellectual inquiry and hence will be considered in abstraction, apart from particular religious language-games and forms of life, as an object or thing. Furthermore, by denying that belief in God is a theoretical commitment—that is, a commitment to a particular objective state of affairs, the fact that God exists—Phillips is also aiming to avoid reducing the religious life to something that it is not: a set of beliefs that have no bearing or import in the religious life or the actual lives and practices of ordinary believers.

And yet, much like Westphal, Phillips trades in one anxiety, the fear that God will be reduced to an object amongst objects or a thing amongst things, for another anxiety: that God does not exist independently of our religious

34. Phillips, “Where Are the Gods Now?” in *Relativism and Religion*, 12.

responses and practices; and worse yet, that God is actually shaped, and even wholly determined, by our religious responses and practices.³⁵ Phillips argues, for example, that God is revealed *in* our praising and thanking God; yet it is unclear on Phillips's own account how *God* is revealed in our praising and thanking God, if those responses are merely expressive of *our own* religious commitments and attitudes. Phillips does, of course, claim that religious believers praise and thank *God* (as opposed to any other kind of reality); but he is reticent to claim that they direct their praise and thanks *at* God. Phillips might reply that believers cannot direct their praise and thanks at God because God is not an object or thing; God cannot be pointed to or ostensibly defined. But this only exacerbates the worry that there really is *nothing there* (not merely "no thing" there) outside or beyond the sphere of religious practice itself.³⁶ We could stiff-arm this worry, or alleviate it in part, if we could show how religious responses and practices such as praising and thanking God are rooted in logically antecedent beliefs about God—for example, the basic belief that God exists independently of the mind and the sphere of religious practice. But Phillips denies that belief in God is a theoretical or distinctly cognitive commitment. So on Phillips's account, we once again simply seem unable to extricate God from our own subjectivity, now extended to include the *intersubjective* sphere of religious practices.

The criticism I am advancing here against Phillips can be summarized as follows. Precisely in order to avoid (what he would call) abstract metaphysical speculation of the divine, Phillips draws God *inside* a cognitive boundary that he extends to enclose religious practices, because he believes that God cannot be thought of or talked about apart from those practices. And by drawing God inside a boundary that encloses religious practices, Phillips fuels, rather than deflates, the antirealist assertion that God does not exist apart from religious practices, and more than that, that the reality of God is fully disclosed or exhausted within the sphere of religious practices. The alternative to drawing God inside the purview of religious practices, Phillips thinks, is to leave God outside the purview of religious practices; and leaving

35. William Alston expresses the anxiety this way: "[In Phillips' account] there seems to be no room for any cognitive commitment to a supreme reality that transcends our language-games, would be what it is even if there were no such games, and is that with respect to which our language-games may or may not have it straight" (William P. Alston, "Taking the Curse off Language-Games: A Realist Account of Doxastic Practices," in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr [New York: St. Martin's, 1995], 29).

36. Andrew Moore develops a similar critique of Phillips in *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), in particular 86–92.

God outside the purview of religious practices generates the possibility that God can be epistemically accessed through sheer metaphysical speculation (or individual fiat), apart from participation in particular religious language-games and forms of life. When God is displaced from particular language-games and forms of life and consequently made an object of sheer metaphysical speculation, God is reduced to something that God is not. It is actually realism, then, on Phillips's account, which is guilty of reductionism: "*realism cannot take seriously the central religious conviction that God is at work in people's lives. The reductionism which the realist finds in non-realism, is all too prevalent in the realist's account of believing in God.*"³⁷

Phillips's concern here is valid, but it is also based on a fundamental misconception about a proper realist conception of the religious life. The theological realist does not deny that God is at work in people's lives; he simply denies that God is an aspect or feature of people's lives, or that God is *fully* expressed in people's lives. That is, he denies that the divine life can ever be fully equated or identified with people's lives. Consequently, he is opposed to the sort of reductionism that circumscribes the reality of God within people's lives—or again, the sphere of religious practice, construed more broadly—as the primary locus within which the reality of God is revealed. Of course, the theological realist can and should be equally suspicious with Phillips of any attempt to attain insight into the nature of the divine apart from engaging in the fundamental practices that define the religious life, which would in turn require stepping outside of those practices altogether. However, the realist does have a fundamentally different conception of the purpose of engaging in religious practices: he views religious practices as activities directed towards a distinctly epistemic as opposed to merely "spiritual" aim ("spiritual" being something that Phillips never fully defines): achieving a greater knowledge of the transcendent divine reality to which he directs his thanksgiving and praise, and on which his thanksgiving and praise depend and bear.³⁸

37. Phillips, "On Really Believing," in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 47. See also Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation*, 149–50.

38. A further point of contention between the theological realist and Phillips is whether religious beliefs and assertions are distinct from the religious behavior that follows from them. According to the realist, what gives a belief or assertion its sense is its propositional content; according to Phillips, however, what gives a belief or assertion its sense is the practical context in which it is embedded. A sensible theological realism can hold that a religious belief or assertion retains a sense independently of the religious context in which it is embedded, while at the same time recognizing that the specified belief or assertion is borne and sustained in the context in which it is embedded. For example, Michael Scott and Andrew Moore write, "One can maintain that there is a transcendent divine reality, not contingent on human thought or

Also indebted to the later Wittgenstein, George Lindbeck argues that by acquiring the requisite skills through proper education and training (or indoctrination) religious believers learn how to regulate and hence act on what they believe and assert about God. Thus, in becoming religiously skillful or minded in the manner Lindbeck envisions, believers become more competent at thinking and speaking about God on a practical level—meaning that they become more competent as performers or religious practitioners—even though they do not achieve any sort of knowledge of God on a theoretical or speculative level. In making this claim, which forms the basis of his cultural-linguistic model for religion, Lindbeck hopes to provide a viable alternative to what he takes to be two undesirable models for religious doctrine: an experiential model, which holds that all religious doctrine is based on (and expressive of) a universal, unmediated experience of the divine; and a cognitive model, which holds that religious doctrine furnishes straight-forward propositional knowledge of the divine. The former model is inadequate because it cannot account for the way religious experience is culturally, and thus linguistically, informed and diverse; the latter model is inadequate because it cannot account for the way religious knowledge, as suitably based on doctrine, can grow and change.

Lindbeck claims that his model is fully consonant with theological realism: insofar as doctrine regulates or determines what truth claims believers make about divine, then the *process* of indoctrination itself—in which believers enact or perform what they hold to be true of the divine—can be construed realistically, as conforming the mind and life of the believer to the divine. Thus, even though doctrine itself, considered as second-order discourse about God, is true only by means of intrasystematic coherence, religious beliefs and assertions, as suitably informed by doctrine, *are* true by means of ontological correspondence, *insofar as they are performed or enacted within religious practices*.³⁹ Lindbeck explains this as follows:

action, which is the principal object of religious belief, without requiring that belief in the divine reality precede any religious behavior” (Michael Scott and Andrew Moore, “Can Theological Realism Be Refuted?” *Religious Studies* 33.4 [1997]: 404).

39. Lindbeck is often accused of being antirealist because he holds that religious doctrines (which function more like grammatical rules than truth claims) are true intrasystematically and not ontologically. Alister McGrath, for example, argues that Lindbeck “at points . . . seems to suggest that conceiving theology as the grammar of the Christian language entails the abandonment of any talk about God as an independent reality and any suggestion that it is possible to make truth claims (in an ontological, rather than intrasystemic, sense) concerning him” (Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], 29).

The ontological truth of religious utterances, like their intrasystematic truth, is different as well as similar to what holds in other realms of discourse. Their correspondence to reality in the view we are expounding is not an attribute that they have when considered in and of themselves, but is only a function of their role in constituting a form of life, a way of being in the world, which itself corresponds to the Most Important, the Ultimately Real. . . . a religious utterance, one might say, acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence only insofar as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that correspondence.⁴⁰

This passage is both suggestive and perplexing: Lindbeck's claim is that a religious utterance (or we could substitute, religious belief or assertion) *acquires* an ontological truth value through performance—an “act or deed”—which in turn helps “create” a correspondence between that utterance (belief or assertion) and objective reality. The claim, then, is both that (1) ontological truth is a property that religious utterances (beliefs and assertions), as directly informed by doctrine, simply do not possess, but which they can come to possess, and (2) religious utterances (beliefs and assertions) can only acquire this property in a performative context. But all of this sounds entirely mysterious. How is it that performing or enacting a certain religious utterance (belief or assertion) creates a correspondence between that belief or assertion and objective reality? Is there something intrinsic to the performance or act that enables this remarkable transformation? If so, what might this property be? Lindbeck simply gives no explanation for how ontological correspondence is created and consequently leaves it open to doubt whether this correspondence actually holds.

I raise these initial questions and concerns in order to point towards a more fundamental problem with Lindbeck's account, insofar as it purports to be consonant with theological realism. Even if we grant Lindbeck that performance does indeed yield genuine correspondence (at least in the appropriate contexts), we still need to question the *nature* of the correspondence itself. Recall that the sort of “limited” correspondence to divine reality that Lindbeck envisions does not entail epistemic access to divine reality, since the beliefs and assertions religious believers hold and make about God possess no positive epistemic value. As suitably informed by religious doctrine, their value is purely practical. Lindbeck illustrates this point using the traditional theistic claim that “God truly is good in himself”:

40. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

[Classical theists] might say that, despite its informational vacuity, the claim that God truly is good in himself is of utmost importance because it authorizes responding as if he were good in the ways indicated by the stories of creation, providence, and redemption which shape believers' thoughts and actions; or, to put the same point another way, seriously to commit oneself to thinking and acting as if God were good in relation to us (*quoad nos*) in the ways indicated by the stories involves asserting that he really is good in himself (*in se*) even though, as the canonical texts testify, the meaning of the latter claim is utterly beyond human comprehension.⁴¹

Although it may not be Lindbeck's explicit intent, the tone of this passage betrays a distinctly Kantian ring. The claim that "God truly is good in himself" is a guide for thinking and speaking about God that authorizes the believer to think, speak, and most importantly act "*as if* [God] were good in the ways indicated by the stories of creation, providence, and redemption" (my emphasis); it does not, however (even as believed or asserted), inform the believer's thought and speech about God. Now, one may reply that Lindbeck is simply trying to do justice to the traditional theistic claim that God transcends our concepts and hence the conceptual content of our beliefs and assertions about God. But even if God does transcend that content, that does not render such content informationally vacuous or meaningless, wholly inapplicable to the divine. Even so, on Lindbeck's view, whether such content retains any positive epistemic value is inconsequential: as is clear from this passage, it need not direct us to the divine, but rather simply direct us in living the religious life.

The main problem with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model for religion, therefore, especially insofar as it claims to be realist in scope and intention, is that it is completely compatible with theological agnosticism: one can become deeply religious in the way Lindbeck imagines and still remain completely uninformed about the putative object of one's religious commitments and devotion—divine reality itself.⁴² For example, one could build one's whole religious life around one's belief in God's goodness and act in complete accord with that belief, while gaining no knowledge or insight into the nature of divine goodness itself. Thus, on Lindbeck's model, whether God is, *in fact*, good in the way one believes or asserts God to be good is trivial. All

41. *Ibid.*, 67.

42. Moore claims that for both Phillips and Lindbeck, religious practices are self-sustaining or "self-regulating" and hence autonomous from God, or detached from God as the primary regulator of those practices. See, for example, 98–107 in *Realism and Christian Faith*.

that matters is that one act “as if” God were good: this is what the successful religious life entails. Where, then, does the “correspondence of the mind to divine reality” occur within the religious life, as Lindbeck imagines it? Presumably, there can be some correspondence of the will to divine reality: by properly letting one’s beliefs and assertions about God regulate one’s life, one may come to act in conformity with the divine will, as revealed (for example) in the stories of creation, providence, and redemption. But one’s mind remains strangely closed off to the object of one’s beliefs and assertions: God still seems to remain completely hidden and unknown.

As I began to argue in the last chapter, all of this suggests a distorted picture of the mind’s relationship to God that places God outside or beyond a boundary that encloses the mind—a boundary that in turn obscures the mind’s relationship to God, triggering God’s total withdrawal from the mind. Because he reduces doctrinal beliefs to authoritative rules for action, whose sole purpose is to regulate religious discourse and life, Lindbeck simply cannot articulate or guarantee any correspondence of the mind to divine reality that retains positive epistemological value or import. In short, there is no real (or specifiable) relationship between the mind and God on Lindbeck’s account. And if there is no real (or specifiable) relationship between the mind and God on Lindbeck’s account, then there can be no specifiable relationship between the religious life and God on that account: God remains completely hidden somewhere outside or beyond the mind as well as beyond the purview of the religious life (or religious practices) more generally. Consequently, Lindbeck’s view inevitably generates the concern that the religious life is even related to the divine more generally. This concern is further exacerbated if we hold that the value and purpose of the religious life depends on its being related to God. If no relation holds, then it seems the value and purpose of the religious life—insofar as it purports to be oriented around God—is completely undermined.

In conclusion, what Lindbeck fails to elucidate, from a more robust theologically realist standpoint, is how the beliefs and assertions we hold and make about God, while certainly embedded in religious practices and performances, actually point *past* those practices and performances to the objective nature and reality of the divine. According to theological realism as I will defend it, religious beliefs and assertions, or I should reiterate, *true* religious beliefs and assertions, serve as more than guiding rules for action or principles for successfully navigating the religious life. They constitute cognitive building blocks for an ever-evolving (but of course always partial) “view” of

God. Against Lindbeck, therefore, the theological realist holds that the goal of the religious life is to achieve not only certain subjective or intersubjective practical ends (such as a certain level of skillfulness in applying doctrinal rules) but also objective theoretical or speculative ends—namely, a further knowledge of divine reality to which true religious beliefs and assertions correspond and on which they bear. So while Lindbeck rightly contends that all religious beliefs and assertions are formed and made within the context of religious practices and forms of life (for where else would they be formed and made?), he fails to show how engaging in those practices and forms of life constitutes a distinctly cognitive activity in which we learn to form true beliefs and make true assertions about who God objectively is.

Conclusion: A Preliminary Model for Theological Realism

Our analysis in this chapter has led us to question the deeper coherence and viability of any picture of the mind's relationship to God that invokes the Great Boundary and along with it, the distinctly modern subject-object dualism. With the boundary and hence the dualism in the picture, the mind's relationship to God is subject to profound instability and distortion: either God becomes eclipsed outside the mind, or God becomes eclipsed within the mind. But now, having questioned the need to position God in relation to a cognitive boundary, as well as the debilitating skeptical and subjectivist consequences that inevitably ensue when the boundary is firmly in place, it is worth considering in conclusion—particularly as we transition into the second part of this book—what the mind's relationship to God, and thus our knowledge of God, looks like *without* the boundary. According to a proper *realist* conception of the mind's relationship to God, which I argue is not susceptible to the debilitating skeptical and subjectivist consequences that plague theological antirealism in all its various forms, God does not belong outside or beyond a cognitive boundary, nor does God need to be positioned in relation to such a boundary. Thus, on behalf of theological realism, I argue the following: the Great Boundary separating God and the mind needs to be effaced, not to bring God around the boundary, or to trespass the boundary, but rather to eliminate the need or temptation to think or picture God in relation to any boundary whatsoever.⁴³

43. Consider Nicholas Wolterstorff's formulation of this point: according to a robust theological realism, which does not postulate a Kantian divide between the conceptual and the real, "Kant's use of the metaphor of the boundary now no longer has applicability. . . . So one way we might get God in mind is by the use of definite descriptions. The expression, 'Creator of the

To start, eradicating the boundary allows us to affirm God's transcendence and ontological distinctness from the mind without also having to affirm the inherent bounds of the mind. In other words, we can define God's transcendence without reference to any boundary enclosing the mind. For the realist, God exists; and moreover, God exists independently from the world and hence is not identical with the world or anything therein. So God also exists independently of the mind, as well as the contents of our minds. The basic tenet of theological realism, therefore, is the claim that God's existence, or we could say, the objectivity of God's reality, is not logically dependent on or tied to human subjectivity or to, in particular, the systems of thought and practice in which our cognitive activity and claim-making (specifically as it pertains to God) take place.⁴⁴ That is to say, according to theological realism, God derives God's own existence and reality from God's self and not from any part of the world or from the concepts and words we use to think and talk about God. So in its most basic sense, theological realism is a *metaphysical realism* extended to include divine reality: it affirms that God is *objectively* real and exists independently of what we believe and say God to be.

universe' might pick God out; synonymously: 'The one who brought about all that might not have been'. And secondly, it may be that some human beings have had God in mind as that of which they were aware. For a possibility that we now have to take seriously is that human beings might sometimes have awareness of God" (Wolterstorff, "Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?" 18). Again arguing against Kantianism, Wolterstorff writes: "it is the sublimity of God which limits our understanding, not some epistemological boundary between the phenomenal and the noumenal discovered by philosophical reflections on human nature and its powers" (Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Tommi Lehtonen and Timo Koistinen [Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2000], 166).

44. This is perhaps the most common understanding of theological realism. For example, see Roger Trigg, "Theological Realism and Antirealism," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 214. See also Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith*, 1. For a comprehensive treatment and defense of theological realism as a metaphysical position, see Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003). As we have already seen, however, the problem with theological realism solely construed as a metaphysical position is that it is compatible with scepticism. Byrne actually embraces this scepticism: "Realism thus forces a gap between mind and reality. . . . realism in general always gives room for the scepticism, since by its very nature it cannot allow for the closing of the gap between mind (human representations) and reality. Realism applied to religion must leave the door open for religious scepticism" (71–72). Byrne is right in the sense that neither the world nor God is shaped by or dependent on the activities of the mind; but he is wrong to align realism with scepticism: the more we stress the epistemic gap between mind and world or mind and God, the more it becomes unintelligible how the mind's conceptions or representations of the world and God actually bear or are directed on the world and God. This is the sort of scepticism that I claim is self-defeating: with the gap and boundary in the picture, realism as an epistemological position is undermined.

God's transcendence also certainly entails God's otherness: God transcends the mind, not only in the sense that God exists separately from the mind (so does empirical reality), but also in the sense that God differs radically, in God's essence, from the world, the mind, and everything therein. But even God's otherness—God's infinitely transcending the world and the mind, we can say—does not entail God's total inaccessibility because God ensures that the world and the mind remain related to God. God chooses to reach out to us, even if we choose not to reach out to God: the Great Boundary, I have already argued, was originally erected *by us*. It is an invention of modern thought, born out of modern philosophy and co-opted by modern theology. Since God is utterly transcendent and unique, God does not need a boundary in order to protect God's self from us the way we, for example, need boundaries in order to protect ourselves from one another.⁴⁵ Consequently, God does not need to remain hidden outside any boundary: in fact, God reaches down to the mind in order to lift the mind up to God.

In the second section of the book, I will be developing this latter claim, in particular by articulating and defending Thomas Aquinas's philosophical and theological epistemology; but for the moment, we can say the following: if we can define the transcendence of God without reference to any boundary, then certainly we can begin to define the nature of our knowledge of God without reference to any boundary. The realist therefore not only affirms that God transcends the mind; the realist also holds that God is epistemically accessible by the mind (to varying degrees, of course, depending on our cognitive circumstances) and, more concretely, by human persons qua possessors of minds. That is, the true conceptions we have of God—the true beliefs we form and hold about God in this life and the 'vision' of God that is available in the next life—can and do bear on God's objective reality, since those conceptions possess objective content and purport (again, to varying degrees).⁴⁶ In addition to being a *metaphysical* realism, then, theo-

45. This is because, as Kathryn Tanner puts it, God is "beyond kinds"—that is, not a "kind" of thing at all that has to enter into competitive or contrastive relations with things in the world. See *passim* in Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). Articulating Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of God, Robert Sokolowski says something very similar: "God is the sheer act of *esse subsistens*, the sheer act of existing. He is not confined to being this kind of thing as opposed to that kind. He is not a "kind" of thing at all, only sheer *esse*" (Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* [1982; repr., Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995], 41–42). I make this point again in chapter six below.

46. The theological realist is therefore not committed to the claim that *all* religious beliefs and assertions possess objective content and purport but only to the claim that *true* religious

logical realism also is an *epistemological* realism concerning the general nature and purpose of God-thought and God-talk. Finally, theological realism is also an *alethic* realism by virtue of being undergirded by a robust theological conception of *truth*: by definition, the beliefs and assertions we hold and make about God in this life are true of God if and only if what they depict *about* God actually obtains *in* God or (more broadly) actually is the case *with* God.⁴⁷ A corollary of this is that true beliefs and assertions about God genuinely convey something about God to the mind—however broadly and confusedly—in terms of what God *is* as well as what God *is not* and even what God *does* and *has done* in human history and the world.⁴⁸

Now, the basic model for theological realism I have sketched here clearly requires further elucidation and defense. In the second part of the book, therefore, I further elucidate and defend the model in its distinctly epistemological form by situating it more deeply within the philosophical theology of Aquinas, itself deeply informed by Christian belief and practice. Step one in this process, which I take in the chapter that follows, requires elucidating and defending Aquinas's overall realist account of cognition. By first understanding how mind and world can and do meet in paradigm cases of human knowing (despite what modern philosophy would have us believe), we lay the philosophical foundation for understanding how mind and God can and do meet in paradigm cases of human knowing—most notably, the postmortem beatific vision of God. Once we understand how mind and God can and do meet in the beatific vision, then we can begin to understand better how mind and God also can and do meet in this life.

beliefs and assertions possess objective content and purport. When the antirealist denies that religious beliefs and assertions possess objective content and purport, however, he is not denying that those beliefs and assertions are true (or claiming that they are all false); he is only denying that religious beliefs *can* possess objective content and purport, and hence *can* be true or false in the realist sense of those terms. (Presumably, the antirealist would define theological truth and falsity in some other way).

47. I am borrowing the term “alethic realism” (realism concerning truth) from William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). I will situate a realist conception of truth in Aquinas in the second part of the book. Alston defends a realist conception of truth on behalf of religion and specifically the Christian faith in William P. Alston, “Realism and the Christian Faith,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38.1–3 (1995): 37–60.

48. Even in denying something of God—believing or saying, for example, that *God is incorporeal* (not a body) or that *God is infinite* (not finite)—we think and speak truly about God, in the sense that we have correctly identified what God is not. With the boundary in the picture, we are unable to do even this: negative theology requires that we be able to use concepts in order to deny certain attributes of God.

PART II

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THOMISTIC
EPISTEMOLOGY

Direct Realism and Aquinas's Account of Cognition

IN THE SECOND PART of this book, my goal is to investigate and defend an alternative framework for understanding how human persons know the world as well as God. And this entails considering an alternative thinker, Thomas Aquinas, and the contribution Aquinas makes to helping us understand how human persons know the world as well as God. To start, then, we explore the contribution of Thomistic epistemology within the realm of philosophy. This is no detour, however: in turning to philosophy we do not leave the realm of theology entirely. As the reader will discover, Aquinas's account of cognition does not remain pure epistemology in the way we moderns often have come to think of it: a philosophical discipline isolated from and even antithetical to central theological concerns, hence devoid of any theological application. In fact, in direct opposition to modern thought, Aquinas ultimately puts epistemology in the service of theology (rather than theology in the service of epistemology), which means that epistemology—far from being sublated by theology—becomes elevated and even perfected by theology, as the mind, in its journey from the world towards God, becomes elevated and perfected by God's grace. Consequently, given Aquinas's specifically theological convictions, which ground his exploration in philosophy, whatever philosophical exploration we conduct in this chapter will be done with an eye towards theological application: a task that awaits us in the chapters that follow.

The goal of this chapter is to show how knowledge or *cognition* on its most basic level is a relationship that holds between mind and world and, more specifically, binds mind and world together. On Aquinas's view, mind and world simply belong together: as created by God, the mind is bent on knowing the world—a world that awaits being known by us—which specifically entails cognitive *contact* with the world and the objects contained therein. In the realm of epistemology, then, Aquinas is a realist. Moreover, as I interpret him, Aquinas is a *direct realist* in the following sense: in cases of veridical sensation and apprehension, we as cognitive subjects enjoy direct sensory and intellectual access to objective aspects or features of empirical reality. This means that the world is directly accessible in sense *experience* as well as *thought*, such that in sense experience and thought we are in direct sensory and intellectual contact with extra-sensory and extramental objects and states of affairs. In cases of veridical sensation and apprehension, therefore, mind and world do not meet at an interface: sense experience and thought do not mediate, or intervene in, our epistemic access to the world; they conjoin us to the world.

From a robust direct realist perspective, however, it is not enough to claim that it is merely by having certain sense experiences or thoughts, or being caused to have certain sense experiences or thoughts, that we as cognitive subjects can be credited with genuinely experiencing or thinking about a world that exists independently of our minds.¹ According to the specific form of direct realism I articulate and defend in this chapter, which I locate in Aquinas's account of cognition, it is only by having sense experiences and thoughts that possess definitive *content* or *form*—once the senses and the intellect have been causally 'in-formed' (hereafter 'informed') by the world itself by way of passive reception and intellectual abstraction—that we can be credited with occupying *world-intending* sensory and intellectual states, in which we experience and apprehend the world as it objectively is. In sum, according to the Thomistic model of direct realism that I articulate and defend here, it is by virtue of possessing the requisite content or form—impressed on the senses and abstracted by the intellect—that the veridical sense experiences and thoughts we enjoy and possess bear directly on the world (and specifically, the sensible and intelligible features that constitute the world) and thereby unite us to the world, affording us objective knowledge of the world.

1. Hilary Putnam makes this claim in his Dewey lectures. See Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 3–70.

Sensory Cognition and Direct Realism

Aquinas's account of cognition is based on the cornerstone claim that we, as cognitive subjects, always experience and apprehend the world as formed: for Aquinas, all cognition of external objects is cognition of form, or as I just suggested, cognition of external objects as formed.² According to Aquinas's metaphysics, the "substantial form" of a material thing is its inner structuring or ordering principle, or that which makes a thing what it intelligibly is; so a material thing is a composite of substantial form and matter. In addition, Aquinas recognizes "accidental forms," among which are the sensible features of the external world, or the sensible properties that external objects actually possess. Thus, in cognizing form, we sense and apprehend a material thing (or as cognized, an external object) as it is, as an objective aspect of the empirical world that possesses objectively sensible features or properties as well as an objectively knowable nature or essence (that is, a material thing as a composite of form and matter).³ Now, it is my task in this chapter to explicate how it is that we cognize form, because at the heart of Aquinas's account of cognition is the claim that all cognitive contact with form occurs through a complex process of sensation and intellective abstraction in which the sensible and intelligible features or forms of external objects respectively 'inform' both the senses and the intellect.

On the most basic level, cognition for Aquinas originates, as it does for Aristotle, in sensation, cognitively conjoining us to the sensible features possessed by external objects themselves (which, given Aquinas's realism, exist independently of sensation itself). Aquinas recognizes five basic external sensory powers—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell—all of which he associates with a specific sense organ and all of which he says correspond to "proper sensibles" (*sensibilia*) or qualities such as color, sound, temperature, flavor, and odor, respectively. (Touch is unique in that it has several objects proper to itself: "heat and moisture, cold and dryness, the heavy and light, etc.")⁴ He also recognizes "common sensibles" such as size and shape that

2. Much of this part of chapter appears in Paul A. Macdonald Jr., "Direct Realism and Aquinas's Account of Sensory Cognition," *The Thomist* 71.3 (2007): 343–78.

3. I am thankful to Greg Doolan for pointing out the distinction Aquinas makes in *De ente et essentia*, chap. 2, between *forma partis* (which refers just to the substantial form of a form-matter composite, a material thing) and *forma totius* (which refers to the whole material thing composed of form and matter).

4. *Sentencia libri De anima*, bk. II, lec. 13, sec. 384. Translations of the *De anima* commentary (hereafter *In DA*) are from the *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster

are sensible by more than one sense, and consequently do not make a direct impression on any one sense. Common sensibles (which belong to the category of quantity rather than quality) thus “do not move the senses first and of their own nature, but by reason of the sensible quality”; nevertheless, like the proper sensibles, they still are sensible *per se*, given that they affect the *kind* of impression external objects make on the senses.⁵ For example, Aquinas says, “sense is immuted differently by a large and by a small surface,” or we could say, by a surface that is large and white versus a surface that is small and white.⁶ So while common sensibles do not impress the senses directly, they are sensed by us (and hence remain *per se* objects of sensation) nonetheless. Finally, Aquinas recognizes a third kind of sense object: “accidental” sense objects such as Socrates, who is sensible *per accidens* rather than *per se*, insofar it is accidental or incidental to the *per se* sensible—whiteness—that it also should be Socrates.⁷

My thesis that Aquinas is a direct realist is limited, at least to start, to Aquinas’s claims regarding the cognition of proper sensibles. (I will extend that thesis to include the cognition of common sensibles later in the chapter.) So my exposition of Aquinas begins with Aquinas’s claim that direct cognition of proper sensibles is possible because external objects, qua external *causes* of sensation, impress themselves, and more specifically, impress specific sensible features or forms—that is, proper sensibles—on the senses.⁸ Aquinas therefore understands sensation to be a primarily *passive* act; it is the *reception* of sensible forms (*species*) in the senses: “sense is a passive power, and is naturally immuted by the exterior sensible. Wherefore the exterior cause of such immutation is what is *per se* perceived by the sense.”⁹ The

and Silvester Humphries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951; repr., Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1994). See also the more recent translation by Robert Pasnau, *A Commentary on Aristotle’s De anima* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). The original Latin of Aquinas’s texts, which I consult and sometimes include in a quotation in parentheses, can be found in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Leonine edition, Rome: 1882–). I also make use of the Parma edition of the *Opera omnia* (1852–1873; New York: Musurgia, 1948–50).

5. *Summa theologiae* I.78.3 ad 2. Unless otherwise noted, translations of the *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) are from the translation provided by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province in *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948).

6. *Ibid.*

7. See *In II DA* 13.387.

8. Aquinas explicitly states that color, odor, taste, and tactile qualities “have a fixed and permanent existence in their subjects” (*In II DA* 16.439). Sound, however, exists only *potentially* in external objects; *actual* sound exists in the medium and thereafter the sense organ (or the actual hearing of sound). See *In II DA* 16.441.

9. *ST* I.78.3.

idea here, as Aquinas further explains it, is that the *same* sensible forms that are “naturally” present in external objects of sense are “intentionally” present in the organs of sense: as present in external objects, sensible forms enjoy a “natural existence” (*esse naturale*); as present in the organs of sense, sensible forms enjoy an “intentional existence” (*esse intentionale*).¹⁰

Thus the presence of sensible forms in the senses effects an intentional *change* in the senses themselves:

Now, change (*immutatio*) is of two kinds, one natural, the other spiritual. Natural change takes place by the form of the agent being received according to its natural existence, into the thing changed, as heat is received into the thing heated. Whereas spiritual change takes place by the form of the agent being received, according to a spiritual mode of existence (*esse spirituale*), into the thing changed, as the form of color is received into the pupil which does not thereby become colored. Now, for the operation of the senses, a spiritual change is required, whereby an intention (*intentio*) of the sensible form is effected in the sensible organ. Otherwise, if a natural change alone sufficed for the sense's action, all natural bodies would feel when they undergo alteration.¹¹

Recent interpreters of Aquinas have tried to explain intentional change (here translated as “spiritual” change) relying on the modern taxonomy of “physical” and “mental” in an attempt to understand precisely what sort of event or occurrence sensation is.¹² But on Aquinas's view, intentional change cannot be so neatly defined. For Aquinas, intentional change occurs in the bodily organ of sense (which means that it must be in physical in one sense) but in such a way that it generates an act of sensation or a cognitive act (which means it must also be mental in some sense). Furthermore, Aquinas argues that intentional change occurs in the medium (for example, the air) that separates the organ of sense from the object of sense. (In all other cases besides vision there is both natural and intentional change in the medium: sound,

10. I will be using “intentional” rather than “spiritual” as the proper translation whenever possible to avoid misleading the reader into thinking that “spiritual” denotes something exclusively “inner” only to be associated with a dualistic, Cartesian philosophy of mind.

11. *ST I.78.3*. I have taken some liberties with the translation here in order to make it more readable. See also *In II DA 24.553*.

12. See, for example, D.W. Hamlyn, *Sensation and Perception: A History of the Philosophy of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961); Sheldon M. Cohen, “St. Thomas Aquinas on the Immaterial Reception of Sensible Forms,” *Philosophical Review* 91.2 (1982): 193–210; Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Gabriele de Anna, “Aquinas on Sensible Forms and Semimaterialism,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 54.1 (2000): 43–63.

for example, reaches the ear through vibrations in the air. In the case of visual sensation, however, there is simply intentional change in the medium: color reaches the eye without tainting the air.¹³ Yet Aquinas claims that even as intentionally ‘informed’, the medium does not sense: “intentional” need not denote anything mental. How, then, should we properly understand intentional change in sensation, which Aquinas clearly argues is necessary for the successful operation of the senses?

To start, we should analyze intentional change in sensation (and hence sensation itself) by employing the Aristotelian vocabulary of “matter” and “form,” as well as “potency” and “act,” rather than the modern vocabulary of physical and mental. Most basically, intentional change for Aquinas is the reception of form in the relevant recipient (i.e., the senses or the medium) without matter; and the reception of form without matter is “the recipient being assimilated to the agent in respect of form and not in respect of matter,” or the recipient becoming *like* the agent in respect of form but not of matter.¹⁴ Thus intentional change in sensation, or the reception of form without matter in the senses, is the *cognitive* assimilation of the relevant sensory power to the relevant object of sense. Even more simply: intentional change in the senses—the actualization of a sensory power by a proper sensible—*just is the act of sensation itself*, which cognitively unites the sensing subject to the external object of sense itself.¹⁵

We can strengthen this claim by recalling that in a thoroughly Aristotelian framework, which Aquinas adopts, our powers of sense are nothing more than *capacities* for being ‘informed’ by the sensible features or forms of external objects themselves. Or again, our powers of sense are *potentially* ori-

13. See *In II DA* 20.493.

14. *In II DA* 24.553.

15. I am following Myles Burnyeat, who argues that “receiving form without matter is not a physiological process underlying perceptual awareness. It *is* perceptual awareness of something, a mode of cognition” (Myles Burnyeat, “Aquinas on ‘Spiritual Change’ in Perception,” in *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*, ed. Dominik Perler [Boston: Brill, 2001], 141). Burnyeat therefore agrees that there are (a) “material necessary conditions for perception,” but disagrees that (b) “these necessary conditions are material changes in the sense-organ” (145). On Burnyeat’s reading of Aquinas, we can explain sensation fully as the actualization of a natural potency or power without having to appeal to material or physical processes underlying the act of sensation itself. So while there are indeed material conditions (conditions in the sense organ) that are necessary for a sense organ to function properly, “these are static, standing conditions, not processes or events underlying the act of perception” itself (145). For Burnyeat’s comparable reading of Aristotle, see his “Is An Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? A Draft,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 15–26.

ented towards veridical sensation and as such can only be *actualized* by external objects themselves, when those objects impress their sensible features or forms on the senses. Aquinas writes, "potency is nothing but a certain relationship to act. And without this likeness there would be no necessary correspondence between this act and this potency. Hence potency in this sense is not actualized from contrary to contrary, but rather from like to like, in the sense that the potency resembles its act."¹⁶ So on Aquinas's Aristotelian view, veridical sensible encounter with the world is possible because our external senses are, at bottom, capable of being acted on by proper sensibles, and by common sensibles by way of proper sensibles. Sensory power qua "recipient" and sensible object qua "agent" are linked by way of what we can call a proper *formal* correspondence (sight to color, hearing to sound, touch to temperature, taste to flavor, and smell to odor), or what Aquinas, following Aristotle, calls a correspondence of "like to like."

Commenting on Aristotle, Aquinas goes as far as to say that as suitably 'informed', each of our sensory powers "cannot err" in putting us into cognitive contact with proper sensibles themselves:

what is perceived by one sense and by no other [is that] . . . in respect of which the perceiving sense cannot err; thus it is proper to sight to know color, to hearing to know sound, to taste to know flavor or savor. Touch, however, has several objects proper to itself: heat and moisture, cold and dryness, the heavy and the light, etc. Each sense judges the objects proper to itself and is not mistaken about these, e.g., sight with regard to such and such a color or hearing with regard to sound.¹⁷

The point here is not that the senses are always perfect in their operations: the eye, for example, can see properly only if there is sufficient light illuminating the medium as well as the object of sight, and the eye itself (as well as its component parts) is functioning properly (i.e., is subject to no malfunction).¹⁸ Aquinas says that "the very essence and delineation of each sense

16. *In II DA* 11.366.

17. *In II DA* 13.384. In *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (hereafter *QDV*) 1.9, Aquinas claims that truth is in sense insofar as the senses judge sensible things as they are, even though they do not know the truth of what they sense (unlike the intellect, which can reflect on the truth of its own acts). He goes on to argue that "the judgment of sense about proper sensibles is always true unless there is an impediment in the organ or in the medium" (*QDV* 1.11. All translations of *QDV* qq. 1–9 are from *On Truth*, vol. 1, trans. Robert W. Mulligan [Chicago: Regnery, 1952; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994]).

18. See *In III DA* 6.664. For a more detailed exposition of proper functionality in contemporary epistemology, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

consists in its being naturally fitted to be affected by some such special object proper to itself. The nature of each faculty consists in its relation to its proper object.”¹⁹ Thus the formal correspondence that conjoins sense organ or power with proper sensible (and hence with external objects) is underwritten not by perfectionism but by *reliabilism*, or what we also can refer to as a *natural teleology*, regarding the innate ability of each of the senses to “judge the objects proper to itself”—that is, accurately and truthfully to detect their proper sensible objects, sensible forms, and so external reality itself.²⁰

Ultimately, then, sensation on Aquinas’s view only is explicable in terms of the category of form and what we can now identify as *formal causality*: in sensation, the *same* sensible features or forms that exist in things and are objectively sensible by us are received in the senses, or causally ‘inform’ the senses, thereby activating our senses (already potentially oriented towards sensation) and assimilating our senses (and us) to the world itself. This transaction surely also involves efficient causality: a bodily change in the organ of sense is effected by the presence of sensible form. But this transaction cannot be reduced to efficient causality: the bodily change that occurs in the organ of sense is an act of sensory cognition. And Aquinas explains sensory cognition in terms of the immaterial reception of form, which means formal *and* efficient causality are both at work.

The temptation here, once again, may be to try to reduce formal causality, and thus sensory cognition on the Thomistic/Aristotelian view, to something wholly physical or mental. But as Myles Burnyeat points out, form for the Thomist/Aristotelian is *equally* at home within the world and the senses, and as such, it is equally at home within the physical and the mental:

the form which the sense-organ receives without matter is the very same form as exists with matter in the object perceived. If it was not the same, perception would not reveal objective truth. Form and matter are basic principles of Aristotelian physics. Form’s presence in the sense-organ without matter is therefore as physical a fact as its presence with matter in the object perceived. If its presence in the sense-organ is awareness, and awareness is a mental phenomenon in the modern sense,

19. *In II DA* 13,387.

20. Norman Kretzmann argues on Aquinas’s behalf that in addition to the veridical act of sensation, “a semi-automatic, sub-deliberative kind of judgment occurs . . . in the cognitive process, a judgment that Aquinas assigns to sense itself, an ordinarily unexpressed judgment which, if it were expressed generally would take the form of a crude realism: *Extramental reality here and now is as it appears to be*” (Norman Kretzmann, “Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance,” in *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters*, ed. Richard Bosley and Martin Tweedale [Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1991], 174).

then for Aristotle and Aquinas perception is both physical and mental. . . . Thus both natural and spiritual change fall within the realm of physics, because both involve form.²¹

In this passage, Burnyeat not only clearly underscores the intelligible place of form in Aristotelian physics, and hence a broader, richer understanding of physical reality; he also underscores the Thomistic/Aristotelian commitment to *realism* in sensory cognition. Insofar as the *same* form is present *both* with matter in sensible things (naturally) and without matter in the organs of sense (intentionally), it ensures the *objectivity* and *directness* of sensation itself. Or again: it is because the *same* sensible features or forms that are present in external objects come to be present in the senses that we, as cognitive subjects, can be credited with possessing world-intending sensory states, that is, sensory states whose content is *isomorphic* with—and thus directed on—the sensible features or forms possessed by external objects themselves.

As I interpret him, therefore, Aquinas is a *direct realist* concerning our ability to sense objective aspects or features of the external world: in cases of veridical sensation, our most basic sensory states, as suitably configured by sensible forms, are in direct cognitive contact with objective, external states of affairs. For example, our seeing redness, when our senses (and specifically, visual sense organs) have been impressed by an actual red object, just *is* direct cognitive contact with the redness possessed by the object itself—an objective, external feature of our environment. The epistemic access is utterly direct because our *seeing redness* is isomorphic with (or we could say, formally identical to) the sensed object's *being red*. Put negatively, the isomorphism (or formal identity) of sense and *sensibillum* ensures that no cognitive “gap” or “space” separates our seeing redness from the sensed object's being red. I emphasize this point in order to show how Aquinas, following Aristotle, of-

21. Burnyeat, “Aquinas on ‘Spiritual Change’ in Perception,” 149. In “Is An Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible?” Burnyeat concludes that “Aristotle has what is for us a deeply alien conception of the physical” (26) that is no longer credible in the modern (post-seventeenth century) world, since it appeals to our naturally fitted powers of perception, along with the real secondary qualities at which they are aimed, without further explanation. More specifically, Aristotle's conception cannot account for how those powers of perception emerged over the course of the evolution of life. This is not surprising since, on Aristotle's view, “the power of perception never emerged from anything” (“Aquinas on ‘Spiritual Change’ in Perception,” 151). As Burnyeat further notes, Aquinas has an explanation of sorts: God created animal life with the power of perception intact. Thus, the Thomist need not abandon Aristotelian physics and metaphysics entirely; in fact, he can offer a modified account that incorporates the evolution of life: God creates the world with the *potential* to evolve, so that animal life eventually acquires the cognitive faculties necessary to experience and know the world as God created it.

fers an account of sensory cognition that honors the insight, central to direct realism, that acts or episodes of sensation do not mediate and hence intervene in cognitive subjects' epistemic access to the world; they (as suitably configured or 'informed') conjoin cognitive subjects to the world.

Consequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, Aquinas can and should be read as offering an alternative philosophical framework for understanding sensation, one that refuses to equate sensory acts with "sense-data"—construed as private mental episodes, or what Hilary Putnam calls "mere affectations of a person's subjectivity"—that conjoin us to the world only *causally* but not *cognitively*. Putnam does not employ the distinction between efficient and formal causality, but he clearly targets modern causal theories of perception that reduce sensation to baldly efficient causality. He argues that these theories, which claim to be compatible with direct realism, in fact suffer from the same crucial ambiguity that afflicts traditional empiricist theories of perception. According to such causal accounts of perception, cognitive subjects can and do enjoy direct epistemic access to extramental objects and states of affairs by virtue of standing in the appropriate causal relations with those objects and states of affairs and, more specifically, by having suitably caused sensations of those objects and states and affairs. The problem with this view, Putnam points out, is that it makes a critical assumption regarding the *nature* of suitably caused sensory states, namely, that they are so constituted as to afford the requisite epistemic access. In other words, this view assumes that it is merely by *having* certain sense experiences that cognitive subjects can also be credited with genuinely experiencing the world, and specifically, the external objects causing them to have those experiences.

As Putnam goes on to argue, even if the appropriately caused experiences are identified with brain states—mere physical processes or events that take place within the brain—rather than the more infamous mental sense-data or "qualia," "it [still] has to seem magical that we can have access to anything outside our 'inputs'—those 'qualia' that I thought could be identified with 'physical occurrences'."²² According to Putnam, merely replacing sense-data with perceptual inputs (the functional equivalent of sense-data) does nothing

22. Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, 19. In a similar vein, John McDowell argues that there is a distinct temptation to equate sensory experience and appearances in particular with what McDowell calls a "highest common factor" precisely in order to account for how veridical and non-veridical sensory experience are often qualitatively indistinguishable. See in particular McDowell, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge," in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 369–94. According to McDowell, the problems generated by this view are obvious: when appearances are construed as comprising a highest common factor common to veridical and non-veridical

ing to show how those perceptual inputs are distinctly unlike their classical analogs and hence represent something more than “the outer limit of our cognitive processing [beyond which] everything . . . is connected to our mental processes only causally, not cognitively.”²³ Arguing directly against what he calls the “Cartesian cum materialist” view (to which he used to subscribe), Putnam claims that the attempt to identify sense experiences with brain states fails: there is simply not enough content to the functionalist account (or an even an ideal psychological account) in order to specify what the relationship between sense experiences and perceptual inputs consists in. Putnam’s conclusion, therefore, is that sense experiences are neither reducible to physical states nor something “extra” over and above physical states:

sensory experiences are not passive affectations of an object called a “mind” but (for the most part) experiences of aspects of the world by a living being. Mind talk is not talk about an immaterial part of us but rather a way of describing the exercise of certain abilities we possess, abilities that supervene upon the activities of our brains and upon all our various transactions with the environment but that do not have to be reductively explained using the vocabulary of physics and biology, or even the vocabulary of computer science.²⁴

The particular account Putnam offers here—what he calls “natural realism”—attempts to understand sensory experiences as exercises of “certain abilities we possess” that cannot be reduced to “the activities of our brains,” even if they cannot be explained without reference to those activities. In other words, “successful perception is just a seeing, or hearing, or feeling, etc. of things ‘out there,’” rather than anything that occurs exclusively inside our minds, brains, or skins.²⁵

experience alike, then they are at best *defeasibly* connected with the world—that is, they still “fall short” of the facts—given that they are pictured as lying on the near side of an input interface that separates cognitive subjects and the world. According to a “disjunctive” view of appearances, however, which McDowell advances as an alternative to the “tempting argument” he describes above, appearances are either “mere” appearances, and thus non-disclosive of worldly facts, or they are direct manifestations of how the world truly is, and thus direct manifestations of worldly facts. Thus, in the latter case, sense experience no longer can be understood to be an intermediary that interposes itself between the experiencing subject and the world: in the case of veridical experience or awareness, what is sensed by us is not a highest common factor, but nothing less than the world itself. For similar arguments see McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 395–413 and “The Content of Perceptual Experience,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 341–58.

23. Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, 16.

24. *Ibid.*, 37–38.

25. The particular wording here comes from Hilary Putnam, “Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 91.9 (1994): 454.

The move Putnam makes here both to challenge a reductive physicalism, which reduces sense experiences to mere physical occurrences, and to uphold realism in sensation is thoroughly Thomistic, even if it yields a thesis that is still largely negative: Putnam is much clearer about what successful sensation is *not* than about what it *is*. Moreover, Putnam eschews linking his natural realism with any metaphysical (specifically Aristotelian) commitments.²⁶ But we can extend Putnam's important insight if we begin with the fundamental principle—itsself central to both Aquinas and Aristotle—that “successful perception is just a seeing, or hearing, or feeling, etc. of things ‘out there’” *by cognitive subjects whose sensory capacities* (Putnam’s “abilities”) *for seeing, hearing, feeling, etc. have been actualized* (for Putnam, “exercised”) *by their proper objects: corresponding sensible features or forms possessed by external objects themselves*. Thus, according to the Thomistic view, which explains sensory cognition in terms of efficient and formal causality, veridical acts of sensation conjoin cognitive subjects to the world, not only because they are suitably caused (and here again we are honoring Putnam’s insight), but because they are suitably (i.e., intentionally) configured and ‘informed’ by the very sensible features or forms on which they directly bear.

Before moving on to develop and defend these claims further, I should note that it is indeed true on the Thomistic account that sensory cognition is indirect in one sense: actual *physical* contact between the sensible form and the corresponding organ of sense is always indirect, insofar as the sensible form first received in the medium separating it from the corresponding organ of sense. But this claim in no way compromises Aquinas’s commitment

26. Haldane underscores this point in challenging Putnam’s move to “enjoy the benefits of Aristotelian epistemological realism without accepting aspects of its attendant metaphysics” (John Haldane, “Realism with a Metaphysical Skull,” in *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism*, ed. James Conant and Urszula M. Żegleń [New York: Routledge, 2002], 97–104, in particular 97). In response, Putnam claims that he is not against Aristotelian metaphysics *per se*; in fact, he embraces the Aristotelian principle that the “ways things can be are both worldly—things ‘out there’ *are* some of those ways—and available to thought, contrary to a sharp ‘concept/property’ dichotomy” (Hilary Putnam, “Comment on John Haldane,” in the same volume, 108). So perhaps the rift between Haldane and Putnam is not as large as it might seem. What Putnam does reject is “Aristotelian essentialism” or the “metaphysical fantasy” that “there is a totality of Forms, or Universals, or ‘properties’, fixed once and for all, and that every possible meaning of a word corresponds to one of these Forms or Universals or properties” (Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, 6). Of course, it is not at all clear that either Aquinas or Aristotle (and consequently Haldane) accepts what Putnam deems “Aristotelian essentialism.” One can be committed to the existence of form *without* being guilty of indulging in Putnam’s “metaphysical fantasy.” See, for example, John Haldane, “On Coming Home to (Metaphysical) Realism,” *Philosophy* 71.276 (1996): 287–96.

to direct realism. On the contrary, direct *cognitive* contact with proper sensibles such as colors is only possible given the presence of a medium (in which light, for example, can enter) separating the organ of sense from the object of sense:

An indication of this is the fact that if a colored body is placed upon the organ of sight it cannot be seen; for then there remains no transparent medium to be affected by the color. The pupil of the eye is indeed some such medium, but, so long as the colored body remains placed upon it, it lacks actual transparency. There has to be a medium, say air or something of the kind, which, being actualized by color, itself acts upon the organ of sight as upon a body continuous with itself. For bodies only affect one another through actual contact.²⁷

Without a transparent medium illuminated by light, colors cannot be seen; without a medium filled by vibration and vapors, sounds cannot be heard and odors cannot be smelled. Moreover, the medium ensures the proper transmission of sensory form from the object of sense to the organ of sense: it too is structured by sensory form (via intentional change with or without natural change), so it too serves as a formal cause of sensation. On the Thomistic view, what ensures direct realism is formal causality; and formal causality is at work throughout the *entire* causal process that generates veridical sensory acts.

From a distinctly modern point of view, it may seem strange, at the very least, to locate sensible form in a medium such as air, but this view (or bias) once again wrongly presupposes that sensible form is something wholly extra-physical. Recall that on the Thomistic view, with its basis in Aristotelian physics, matter *and* form are basic principles of physical reality: so just as form's presence in the senses is as physical a fact as its presence in material objects (which we already established), so form's presence in the medium is equally as physical a fact as its presence in material objects. Matter, the senses, and the medium are *all* potencies that stand to be actualized by form; as such, they are all *equally* disposed to be actualized by form. Recall, too, that the Thomist affirms that efficient causality is at work in sensation: sensation is surely inexplicable without appealing to efficient causality and hence to efficient causes (which include physical changes in the medium as well as bodily changes in the senses and the cognitive subject himself or herself). The Thomist merely affirms that additional causal processes—formal causal

27. *In II DA* 15.432.

processes—are at work in sensation and *must* be at work there if the veridicality of sensation is to be upheld.

What is at stake, again, is preserving realism and also finally overcoming epistemological skepticism regarding the objectivity of sensation. As Putnam points out, the tendency in modern epistemology is to reduce sensations to purely subjective states, completely internal to our sensory consciousness, precisely in order to account for their immediacy and certainty: what can be more certain than what occurs inside our own “heads”? But as we have already seen, on such a view, skepticism, if not explicitly endorsed, certainly looms: what confidence can we have that our sensations of redness, softness, or sweetness are not purely subjective? Do they bear *any* connection with external reality? Aquinas’s answer, in part, is that sensation is, by definition, the actualization of a sensory potency or power by an external object: were no external object present, then no sensory experience of that object would occur. But the skeptic may then ask: what confidence do we have that the *original* cause of sensation is an external object, rather than some more proximate cause (e.g., a physical occurrence in the eye, in the ear, or on the tongue)? Here, the Thomist once again has a ready reply: the cause of sensation is not only a sensible object but sensible *form*, which structures the object sensed, the power of sense, and the medium between them. Were mere efficient causality solely at work, there would be no guarantee that the causal genesis of sensation actually lay in an external object: presumably, any number of more proximate points in the causal process generating sensation would be sufficient to account for its occurrence, possibly rendering any appeal to an external object as the originating cause entirely superfluous. But for the Thomist, there can only be *one* formal cause of sensation—sensible form—which originally inheres not in the senses but in external objects themselves. Formal causality, therefore, with its undergirding metaphysics, simply eliminates skepticism as a viable epistemological stance, at least concerning sense experience.

The Metaphysics of Direct Realism

At this point, the epistemological benefits of the Thomistic view of sensory cognition should be clear. But from a distinctly modern point of view, it may still seem that we only can gain such benefits at a significant cost. Thomistic epistemological realism carries with it certain nonnegotiable metaphysical commitments: the actual existence of sensible forms or qualities in things (and more broadly, in the world itself). Aquinas, like Aristotle

before him, is unabashed about claiming that colors, sounds, flavors, and so forth are mind-independent constituents of external reality; but in making this claim, does he reflect a certain naiveté towards what these properties in fact are? Recently, Robert Pasnau has argued that Aquinas should have been more sensitive to the now familiar distinction between primary and secondary qualities and hence to the possibility of reducing secondary qualities (or sensible forms) to primary qualities (e.g., sound as simply a kind of motion), thus eliminating the existence of such “mysterious qualities” altogether.²⁸ Interestingly, Pasnau then goes on to argue that Aquinas’s view can be reinterpreted—dropping the Aristotelian metaphysical distinction between quality and quantity altogether—in order to be made roughly compatible with modern “physicalism,” which is “the view that the objects of our sensation are the various physical phenomena that in fact produce our sensations.”²⁹ On this modified view, which “captures the spirit, if not the letter, of Aquinas’s theory of sensation,” sensible forms remain the causes and objects of sensation, but “whether these features turn out to be irreducibly qualitative or quantitative can be viewed as an empirical, non-essential issue.”³⁰

Pasnau’s interpretation is suggestive, but unlike Pasnau, I argue that there is much to be suspicious about in modern physicalism.³¹ It is by no means obvious—and common experience in fact tells us otherwise—that the familiar sensible qualities things possess can be successfully reduced to mere physical phenomena that produce or cause sensation. If we are already suspicious, as Putnam suggests we should be, of attempts to reduce sensory *experiences* to mere physical occurrences, or perceptual inputs, that bear no cognitive relation to the objects they purport to bear upon, then we should be

28. See Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa theologiae, Ia 75-89* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 184–86.

29. *Ibid.*, 185.

30. *Ibid.*, 185–86.

31. The move to reduce sensible qualities to physical properties is, of course, not unique to modern philosophy. In *Sententia libri De sensu et sensato*, Aquinas notes Aristotle’s criticism of Democritus and other ancient philosophers for reducing proper sensibles to common sensibles and specifically to objects of touch (e.g., size and shape, rough and smooth). According to Aquinas, this would mean that any sensory power would be touch, which is obviously false, “because other senses perceive through an external medium, and touch does not” (10.442a29). The broader argument here (10.442b13) is that since sensory powers are distinguished according to their proper objects, reducing proper sensibles to common sensibles eliminates the distinctness and the hierarchy of the senses (e.g., reducing flavor to shapes makes taste more disposed for discerning shapes than sight is, which is false) (translation from the *Commentary on Aristotle’s On Sense and What Is Sensed and On Memory and Recollection*, trans. Kevin White and Edward M. Macierowski [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005]).

equally suspicious of attempts to reduce sensory *qualities* to mere physical phenomena that purportedly are able to produce the requisite veridical sensory experiences in us. For example, it is not at all obvious how color—construed as mere physical properties of a surface that bear no *formal* relation to our phenomenal experience of color—could produce the requisite veridical experience of color in us. Once we divest or drain external objects of sensible forms—actual *redness* now reduced to merely physical properties (whatever those may be) that cause the sensation of redness in us—then we divest or drain our experiences of those objects of any objectivity. On the Thomistic view, what ensures the objectivity, and moreover the directness, of our most basic sensory states is the formal identity or *isomorphism* of those states with the sensible features or forms that things actually possess. Take away sensible form, and *formal causality* in sensation is no longer at work; and it once again becomes a mystery how mere efficient causality can produce sense experiences that bear on external objects and actually terminate in the sensible features those objects possess.

The shorthand of this is that epistemological realism and metaphysical realism go hand-in-hand: more specifically, what grounds realism in epistemology is realism in metaphysics (or ontology). Or, to put this same point another way, it is the objectivity of sensible forms—that is, the objective existence of real colors, sounds, flavors, and so forth that are qualitatively unique and distinct—that grounds the objectivity of our sensations of those forms. Now, the move here is not to populate the world with what Pasnau calls “mysterious qualities,” and thereby unnecessarily inflate a certain metaphysical picture of reality, in order to offer an explanatory account for realism in epistemology and specifically for sense experience. As we have already seen, while “form” is an irreducibly metaphysical category (sensible forms really do exist in things), it is not *exclusively* a metaphysical category: sensible forms are *equally* “at home” in the world, the senses, and the medium that connects them. Thus, in understanding and explaining sensory cognition, the Thomist does *not* first posit the existence of sensible forms in the world and, then, in a subsequent step, offer an epistemology of how we gain access to those forms. This mistaken move already puts cognitive subjects and the world at a distance: it places the world outside of our cognitive “reach” and thereby indeed threatens to shroud the world itself—and hence the sensible forms or qualities contained therein—in an inaccessible mystery. Instead, the Thomist begins with the *unity* of cognitive subjects and the world in sensation (what modern epistemology in general sunders), thus the *unity* of sense

and *sensibilia* in sensation, and *then* explains that unity in terms of form (and formal causality). Or again: instead of beginning with a metaphysics that makes sensible forms or qualities wholly alien to us and our cognitive grasp, the Thomist *begins* with our cognitive grasp of those forms or qualities in sensation—forms or qualities that are already familiar to us—and *then* explains that sensory grasp in terms of form (and formal causality).³²

This constitutes a partial response to the bias against the real existence of sensible forms (or at least the move to render them inescapably and inaccessiblely mysterious), but more needs to be said. What exactly is the nature of sensible form, and is sensible form at all intelligible from a more modern or contemporary philosophical perspective? According to Aquinas, a sensible form or quality is “actual” in two ways:

(1) So far as the object is actually being sensed, i.e., when its likeness is affecting the sense-organ. In this way a sound is actual when it is heard. (2) So far as the object actually is such that it can be sensed, but is such simply in its own objective being, outside the senses. And in this way the other sense-objects, color, odor, savor, etc., exist actually in colored or odorous or savorable bodies.³³

Two important points emerge from this passage: first, sensible forms are actual in our sensing them, and “in this way a sound is actual when it is heard”; second, sensible forms (minus sound) are actual insofar as they *can* be sensed or perceived by us, even if they are not actually being sensed or perceived by us (e.g., it is the nature of colors to be visible). This may lead us to align Aquinas's view with modern “dispositionalism,” the view that sensible forms are simply dispositions to produce the requisite sensations in us.³⁴ And yet,

32. I am thankful to Tim Noone and others for emphasizing this point in response to a version of this chapter I gave at a meeting of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy (American Catholic Philosophical Association annual meeting), October 2006.

33. *In II DA* 16.441.

34. The dispositionalist position (classically attributed to John Locke) should be familiar to those also broadly familiar with debates in the epistemology and metaphysics of sense perception, although, in expositing and criticizing it, I am relying on Christopher A. Decaen's analysis in “The Viability Of Aristotelian-Thomistic Color Realism,” *The Thomist* 65.2 (2001): 179–222. Among modern commentators, Anthony Kenny may be guilty of equating Aquinas's account of sensory cognition with dispositionalism, even though he is trying to do justice to Aquinas's realism. He writes, “Now a sensory faculty, such as that of taste, is nothing but the power to do such things as taste the sweetness of sweet objects. And the sensory property, sweetness, is nothing but the power to taste sweet to a suitable taster. Thus we can agree that the property in action is one and the same thing as the faculty in operation, though the power to taste and the power to be tasted are of course two very different things, the one in the sugar and the other in the animal. The sweetness of X just is the ability of X to taste sweet. (Of course it is related to

according to Aquinas, while certain sensible forms are indeed able to affect us in certain ways (even when they are not actually being sensed by us), they still enjoy an objective existence (or “objective being”) *apart* from our sensing them. For this reason, sensible forms cannot be defined *solely* in terms of the ways in which they affect our senses, or in terms of their ability to make us sense them in a certain way.

Here, then, is where the incompatibility lies. On the one hand, defining sensible forms as dispositions to produce the requisite sensations *in us* obscures their objectivity and hence their independence from the way in which we sense them. On the other hand, even if we grant the dispositionalist that sensory forms or qualities are objective, defining sensible forms as dispositions still obscures the objectivity of sensation itself, insofar as it once again undermines our confidence that the way in which we sense the world—or are disposed to sense the world—is in fact the way the world objectively is. Redness, for example, really exists in external objects but not only in the sense that it is capable of producing the visual sensation of redness in us. For the Thomist, the redness we see in ordinary visual sensation is the *same* redness that causes the visual sensation of redness in us (which means “redness-for-us” and “redness-in-things” are formally the same). Again, it is the *isomorphism* of our sensory states with external reality that explains and ensures their objectivity.

The move here to define sensible forms as objective, nonrelational properties of objects may seem to lead us back towards physicalism, which defines such forms as purely physical phenomena, or quantitative properties of external objects. But as we have already seen, a strict physicalism that reduces sensible forms such as colors to physical properties—in the case of colors, reflective properties embedded in an external object’s surface—is beset by intractable epistemological difficulties similar to the difficulties that plague dispositionalism. Christopher Decaen effectively makes this point in an article in *The Thomist*:

Once the principle of physicalism is posited—that colors [for example] are nothing more than “physical,” that is, quantitative, properties—it becomes difficult to discern how this view can avoid having an anti-realistic core. Any comprehensive reductionism must eliminate the thing reduced; this would abandon altogether the Aristotelian-Thomistic view of color, where nature is more rich, more diverse, than

various chemical properties and constituents of X; but that relation is a contingent one, to be discovered by empirical research)” (Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* [New York: Routledge, 1993] 35–36).

the metrically oriented physicalist takes it to be. Put another way, if color is in reality a microphysical quality though it does not appear as such, then the physicalist must say that colors are seen but not as colors. Since the color is really the microphysical property, the color is seen only indirectly, *per accidens*, by means of an appearance of an essentially different order—color is merely what underlies an experience. The physicalist, by distinguishing a color from its appearance or phenomenology, is forced to say either that the *per se* object of sight is not the color but the appearance itself, or that vision simply has no *per se* object. Either way color becomes invisible. To Aristotle and St. Thomas, this should be dismissed as patently false.³⁵

In other words, if sensible forms such as colors are reducible to microphysical properties—which makes them undetectable by ordinary empirical observation—then they cannot be sensed by us directly: even in veridical sensation they must remain hidden or invisible. What we see directly would not be particular colors “in themselves” but rather mere phenomenological features that underlie our visual sensations of those colors: the appearances of those colors *to us*. Properly speaking, then, according to a strict physicalism, we don't see colors *at all*: so physicalism not only devolves into a gross anti-realism; it cannot acknowledge the seemingly obvious fact (honored by Aquinas and Aristotle) that we can and do see the true nature of colors themselves.

This is not to say that sensible forms have no place within modern physics. While sensible forms are not reducible to microphysical or quantitative properties, they certainly bear *some* ontological relation to them. According to Decaen, “primitivism” tries to explain this relationship in terms of “supervenience,” so that sensible forms such as colors are ontologically dependent on or correlated with specific microphysical properties.³⁶ But the nature of this relationship suffers from an explanatory ambiguity: *how*, exactly, are colors and microphysical properties (two different orders of qualities) ontologically interdependent or correlative? The answer lies not within modern physics, but within Thomistic metaphysics:

Herein lies the connection between colors as the immediate objects of sensation and the quantitative microphysical properties of surfaces that are correlated with individual species of colors. While the two are essentially distinct from each other, they are related such that the former is to the latter as an accident to its proper subject, as form to matter. This allows Aristotle and St. Thomas to join the primi-

35. Decaen, “Aristotelian-Thomistic Color Realism,” 204.

36. *Ibid.*, 200–202.

tivists in rejecting color's identification with, and *carte blanche* reduction to, microphysical properties, while at the same time giving a greater intelligibility to what the physicalists and dispositionalists criticize as an ad hoc and contingent correlation between color and the microphysical. From an Aristotelian-Thomistic perspective, the notion of supervenience can be replaced by the idea that colors are related to their microphysical subjects as form to matter.³⁷

For Aquinas, external objects are composites of matter and form. Matter exists in potentiality to form, and form is the actualizing principle of matter. Moreover, the form (whether substantial or accidental) of an external object of sense only inheres in matter; such forms cannot exist without matter. Thus, as Decaen also argues, a sensible form (e.g., color), qua physical accident, must include in its definition a particular material principle or subject (e.g., surface and its constitutive microphysical properties) in which it is a present as a form and without which it cannot be found.³⁸ Thomistic metaphysics is therefore inclusive (it makes room for primary and secondary qualities, or quantity and quality, matter and form) without being reductive.

The Common Sense and Phantasms

Having considered Aquinas's account of the role of the external senses in enabling direct sensory cognition of proper sensibles, we are now in a position to move on and consider other key aspects of Aquinas's account of sensory cognition and their specific bearing on interpreting Aquinas as a direct realist. First, we need to consider how far Aquinas's commitment to direct realism extends: does it pertain solely to the cognition of proper sensibles, or does it also include the cognition of common sensibles? Aquinas explicitly states that common sensibles, like proper sensibles, are sensible *per se*; yet he also claims that "strictly speaking, only the special sense-objects are directly perceived (*proprie per se sensibilia*), for the very essence and definition of each sense consists in its being naturally fitted to be affected by some such special object proper to itself."³⁹ It seems, for example, that size is only seen insofar as the colors that inhere in sizable objects are seen; thus, it may appear as if common sensibles such as size only can be seen indirectly, or *per accidens*.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Aquinas says that common sensible objects, like accidental sensible objects (and unlike proper sensible objects), are not sensed

37. *Ibid.*, 206.

39. *In II DA* 13.387.

38. *Ibid.*, 205–6.

40. See *In II DA* 13.388.

infallibly, which leaves room for further error, and lack of veridicality, in the cognition of common sensibles.⁴¹

While these claims may suggest that Aquinas has to modify, if not abandon, his commitment to direct realism regarding the cognition of common sensibles, his further claims show otherwise. He reminds us, first, that “sensation is a being acted upon and altered in some way” and that “whatever, then, affects the faculty in, and so makes a difference to, its own proper reaction and modification has an intrinsic relation to that faculty and can be called a sense-object in itself or absolutely.”⁴² Second, he argues that “an object may affect the faculty’s immediate reaction in two ways”: in one way, in respect to the *agent* or cause of sensation, namely, proper sensibles, that causally ‘inform’ the senses, and consequently differentiate our sensations of colors, sounds, flavors, and so forth; in a second way, in respect to the kind of *impression* that the agent makes on the senses. Aquinas explains this second way as follows:

For as sense-qualities affect the senses corporeally and locally, they do so in different ways, if they are qualities of large or small bodies, or are diversely situated, i.e., near, or far, or together, or apart. And it is thus that the common sensibles differentiate sensation.⁴³

Moreover, in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas argues that the likeness (*similitudo*) of common sensibles, like the likeness of proper sensibles, but unlike the likeness of things sensed accidentally, is present in the senses directly and “of its own nature”:

The knowledge of things by the senses is in proportion to the existence of their likeness in the senses; and the likeness of a thing can exist in the senses in three ways. In the first way, primarily and of its own nature, as in sight there is the likeness of colors, and of other sensible objects proper to it. Secondly, of its own nature, though not primarily; as in sight there is the likeness of shape, size, and of other sensible objects common to more than one sense. Thirdly, neither primarily nor of its own nature, but accidentally, as in sight, there is the likeness of a man, not as man, but in so far as it is accidental to the colored object to be a man.⁴⁴

41. In bk. IV, lsn. 12, sec. 673 of *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, Aquinas writes “for while a sense may make a mistake about common and accidental sense objects, it does not do this with regard to its proper sensible object, except perhaps when the sensory organ is indisposed” (translation from *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan [Chicago: Regnery, 1961; repr., Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1995]).

42. *In II DA* 13.393.

43. *In II DA* 13.394.

44. *ST* I.17.2.

Aquinas's claims here amount to the following. What ensures direct realism in sensation is formal causality, or sensible forms inhering in the senses, thereby conforming our senses to the sensible forms or features that external objects actually possess. This pertains primarily to proper sensibles. But the *impressions* proper sensibles make on the senses—the way in which they actually 'inform' the senses—differ according to the way in which they inhere in external objects; that is, whether they are qualities of objects that are large or small, or are "diversely situated" near or far, together or apart. What properly 'informs' the senses, then, are not sensible forms considered in isolation but the sensible forms *of external objects that are structured by proper sensibles and common sensibles*. For example, what 'informs' the eye, and unites us to a given object of sight, is not *redness* considered in isolation, but the *redness of a large object* versus the *redness of a small object*; or the *redness of a round object* versus the *redness of a square object*. Thus, as suitably 'informed', or impressed, sensations of external objects unite us to the proper *and* common sensibles that external objects possess (even if, as Aquinas claims, we can be mistaken about common sensibles, and not about proper sensibles, even in normal cognitive circumstances). I take Aquinas here to be accounting for an important feature of sensory experience: we don't simply see red things; we see red things that differ in size, shape, and number. Sensible form, whether proper to one sensory power or common to multiple sensory powers, constantly impresses itself on our senses in rich and varied ways; consequently, our sensory experience of the world is rich and varied.

Moreover, our sensory experience of the world is *unified*. Aquinas recognizes this fact: he argues that all sensory cognition of external objects via the five external sensory powers terminates in a further power of "inner" sense, namely, the "common sense," which serves as the "common root and principle" of all of the external senses.⁴⁵ According to Aquinas, the common sense is a sensory cognitive power that both enables us to discriminate between varying sense objects and makes us aware of what we are sensing; through it, for example, one "sees that he sees."⁴⁶ That is to say, through the operation of the common sense, we are able to distinguish white from sweet; through visual sensation alone, we are only able to distinguish white from green. That the common sense enables us to make such comparisons also suggests—as Aquinas explicitly claims—that we can be aware of the very act of sensing, a feat impossible for the external senses alone.

45. *ST* I.78.4 ad 1.

46. *ST* I.78.4 ad 2.

The ability of the common sense to discriminate between the objects of the various senses suggests to Aquinas that there is *one* sensory power that enables us to perceive “simultaneously . . . both objects between which it discriminates.”⁴⁷ For example, there must be one sensory power that enables us to see something white and taste something sweet in a “simultaneous apprehension”—that is, in a singular act of perception—so that it can in turn discriminate between, and hence compare, the sensations of whiteness and sweetness.⁴⁸ The common sense, as the “root and source” of all the external senses, therefore ensures that sensory experience, is not, at any moment, limited to the operation of any one of the external senses. As the terminus of our sensory powers, it unites our disparate sensations of proper and common sensibles into unified *perceptions* of the world and therefore ensures that at any moment of sensation, we concurrently see colors *and* hear sounds, or smell odors *and* taste flavors. And this claim only strengthens Aquinas’s commitment to direct realism: because of the operation of the common sense, our perceptual awareness of external objects is both direct *and* unified. We can speak not only of direct sensory cognitive access to particular sensible forms but also of direct sensory cognitive access to sensible *objects*: objects that possess certain colors, emit certain sounds and fragrances, and display certain shapes and sizes.

It may seem as if the presence of a further power of inner sense, namely, the common sense, in addition to our powers of external sense, is superfluous. But from Aquinas’s point of view,

As nature does not fail in necessary things, there must needs be as many actions of the sensitive soul as may suffice for the life of a perfect animal. If any of these actions cannot be reduced to the same one principle, they must be assigned to diverse powers; since a power of the soul is nothing else than the proximate principle of the soul’s operation.⁴⁹

Clearly, Aquinas thinks that nature has outfitted us not with superfluous powers of sense but with *necessary* powers of sense—both outer and inner—so that we may properly fulfill our intended role or *telos* as cognizers of the external world. The common sense, to start, clearly plays this role: while the external senses fulfill their *telos* by uniting us to their respective proper sensibles, and to common sensibles by way of proper sensibles, the common sense fulfills its *telos* by uniting our disparate sensations of proper and

47. *In III DA* 3.601.

49. *ST I*.78.4.

48. *In III DA* 3.605.

common sensibles into singular acts of perceptual awareness. Were we *not* endowed with this sensory power, our sensory access to the world clearly would be impoverished. Although he wrongly eschews Aquinas's metaphysical commitments, Pasnau rightly identifies the need for the common sense, and offers a promising interpretation:

Imagine what it would be like if the various sensory powers did not have some means for their various impressions to be synchronized. Imagine if, when the ears heard something, an animal were unable to match that auditory impression with the visual impression of the surroundings. Imagine if animals could not discriminate between seeing and not seeing; if they were unable to recognize when they are not seeing what they are looking for, or when their seeing is unproductive because of too little light. Clearly, there must be some capacity within an animal that allows the various sensory impressions to interact. This is why Aquinas postulates a common sense.⁵⁰

More difficult to account for is the cognitive role of “phantasms”—the imagistic “similitudes” or “likenesses” of perceived objects—which are produced by “phantasia,” itself a further cognitive power of inner sense.⁵¹ Aquinas writes, “just as the sensing subject is moved by sensible objects, so, in imagining, one is moved by certain appearances called phantasms.”⁵² Now, while Aquinas is clear that phantasms can be imaginatively produced apart from the reception of form in the senses (but not without the initial aid of the senses), the reception of form in the senses does not occur independently of the production of phantasms: the “movement” Aristotle associates with the natural functioning of phantasia in producing phantasms does not occur independently of sensation, but is “caused by the senses in their act of sensing.”⁵³ Moreover, the sensible form is received *in* the phantasm, given that the phantasm retains and preserves the sensible form: Aquinas says that “for the retention and preservation of these forms, the *phantasy* or *imagination* is appointed; which are the same, for phantasy or imagination is as it were a storehouse of forms received through the senses.”⁵⁴

So on Aquinas's view, while the common sense, qua sensory cognitive capacity, coordinates the various operations of the external senses, thereby ensuring that our sensory access to the world is not only direct but unified, phantasia, qua sensory cognitive capacity, retains and preserves the impres-

50. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 198.

51. *STI*.78.4; *STI*.79.4 ad 4; *STI*.84.7 ad 2.

52. *In III DA* 6.656.

54. *STI*.78.4.

53. *In III DA* 6.659.

sions external objects make on the external senses. This is not to negate the obvious and important link phantasms have with occurrent acts of sensation. Following Aristotle, Aquinas suggests that “imagination would seem to be one of those cognitive dispositions or powers by which things are perceived together with their differences” and that “it bears only upon things sensed.”⁵⁵ Moreover, while certainly more subject to error than the external senses (which are infallible regarding proper sensibles), phantasia remains “generally truthful when it arises from the action of the ‘proper sensibles’; I mean, at least so long as the sensible object is present and the image-movement is simultaneous with the sense-movement (*quando motus phantasiae est simul cum motu sensus*).”⁵⁶ And yet, unlike the primary *telos* of the common sense, the primary *telos* of phantasia does not seem to be to enhance or strengthen the cognition of sensible form. It is, instead, to further process the cognition of sensible form—veridical sensory states—into lasting sensory impressions, which in turn serve as a reliable cognitive source or base for gaining *knowledge* of the empirical world.

In order to develop this claim, we need to return to Aquinas’s principal reason for postulating powers of inner sense: we need these powers in order to fulfill our role or *telos* as cognizers of the external world. And here, Aquinas makes an important distinction worth repeating: “for the reception of sensible forms, the proper sense and the common sense are appointed. . . . But for the retention and preservation of these forms, the *phantasy* or *imagination* is appointed; which are the same, for phantasy or imagination is as it were a storehouse of forms received through the senses.”⁵⁷ From Aquinas’s point of view, it seems cognition of sensible form only requires the operation of external senses and common sense; were phantasia also necessary, then Aquinas would not make the distinction between the cognitive role of the external senses and common sense, on the one hand, and the cognitive role of phantasia, on the other. In short, any appeal to a cognitive power in addition to the external senses or common sense in explaining cognition of proper sensibles seems superfluous. Nature already has generously outfitted us with precisely what we need. So even if phantasms are generated with veridical sensation, they are not necessary for veridical sensation.

Interpretive problems loom when we do try to make phantasms necessary for veridical sensation. Eleonore Stump, for example, argues that while phantasia serves on one level as a power of imagination—we can produce

55. *In III DA* 5.638; *In III DA* 6.657.

56. *In III DA* 6.664.

57. *STI*.78.4.

phantasms or images of objects not sensibly present—on another level it contributes directly to the way in which we sense external objects and, more specifically, to the way in which external objects appear to us. “I think,” Stump says, “we should take phantasia as the cognitive power that makes things appear to us or that gives us access to the sensory data taken in by the senses; that is, phantasia is the power that produces the conscious experience which is a component of ordinary sensing.”⁵⁸ Without phantasia, she claims, we would be like blindsight patients who receive visual inputs from the external world through the senses but who report being blind because that input is not available to their sensory consciousness. Consequently, “without the phantasms, the sensible *species* alone would not produce conscious experience of what is being sensed.”⁵⁹ That phantasms are necessary for conscious experience is an interpretive, not a textual claim; but even as an interpretive claim it suffers from difficulties. Even if the external senses are not equipped to produce conscious experience of external objects of sense—and it is by no means obvious that they are not—then surely the common sense, to which Aquinas explicitly affords the power of sensory recognition, is so equipped. Or perhaps the operation of the external senses and the operation of the common sense are jointly sufficient to produce conscious experience of external objects of sense. There seems to be no reason, therefore, to ascribe this capacity to phantasia, or a view of conscious experience to Aquinas more generally.

Furthermore, the more we emphasize the role of phantasia and phantasms in enabling and explaining ordinary sense experience, the more Aquinas’s commitment to direct realism is put in jeopardy. If phantasms are produced in addition to our most basic sensory states, which as suitably ‘informed’ are already directed on sensible form, then they further mediate and hence complicate our sensory access to the empirical world.⁶⁰ If phantasms are the end results of further cognitive processing (i.e., cognitively processed sensory states), then their immediate connection with the world—already established through the reception of sensible form in the senses—becomes less clear and is harder to defend. Aquinas states that since phantasms are generated by the senses in their act of sensing, they are related to such sen-

58. Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas on the Mechanisms of Cognition: Sense and Phantasia,” in *Medieval Analyses in Language and Cognition*, ed. Stan Ebbesen and Russell L. Friedman (Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1999), 390.

59. *Ibid.*, 391.

60. Kenny realizes this: it would be “regrettable” if Aquinas held the view “that external sense-experience was accompanied by a parallel series of phenomena in the imagination” (*Aquinas on Mind*, 93).

sory acts as effects to causes. And “just because effects, as such, are weaker than their causes, and the power and impress of an agent is less and less evident the further away are its effects, therefore imagination is even more liable than are the senses to fall into the error which arises from the dissimilarity between the sense and its object.”⁶¹ If, as Aquinas claims, phantasms are less potent and reliable than ordinary acts of sensation, then how could they strengthen the bond the senses already enjoy with their proper objects? Their role here seems not only superfluous but also potentially dangerous.

The interpretive move I am making here is not to denigrate the veracity of phantasms. The move, instead, is to steer us away from undermining Aquinas's commitment to direct realism by making phantasms necessary components of ordinary sense experience. As I stated above, the primary role of phantasms is not to *enhance* sensory cognition of external objects but rather to *retain* and *preserve* sensory cognition of external objects through further cognitive processing.⁶² Thus we now can say the following: while the external senses and common sense enable *immediate* cognitive contact with the external world, phantasia enables *sustained* cognitive contact with the external world, even when external objects of sense are not sensibly present or acting on the senses. That the phantasms furnish veridical and reliable sustained cognitive contact with the external world is clearly due to their causal connection to the activity of the senses; but this means that their veridicality and reliability—their being “generally truthful”—is linked with their ability *ongoingly* to preserve the cognitive contact we enjoy through the senses, *not* with any special ability to enhance that contact. And nature has ensured this for our own good: were we endowed solely with powers of external sense and a common sense, without the power of phantasia, our cognitive contact with the world would be limited to what is currently impacting our senses. There simply could be no consistent and comprehensive cognitive contact with the world over time.⁶³

Intellective Cognition and Direct Realism

That this sort of consistent and comprehensive cognitive contact with the world is necessary becomes even more apparent when we consider the role

61. *In III DA* 6.664.

62. Pasnau defends this view in *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 278–84. For a further defense, which informs my own interpretation more directly, see also Dorothea Frede, “Aquinas on *Phantasia*,” in *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*, 155–83.

63. Frede writes, “*phantasiai* are an important cognitive source because they remain with us over time. They make us independent of a constant external supply of sensory information that is limited in range and may vary from moment to moment. Our long-term impressions,

of phantasms in enabling and explaining intellective cognition. Here, then, is where we see the true *telos* of phantasia fulfilled. Phantasia furnishes the intellect with a “storehouse” of sensible forms—both received and synthesized by phantasia—from which the intellect (and specifically the “agent” intellect) abstracts intelligible species or forms. Phantasms, then, serve as a bridge between the world of sense (i.e., the external world) and the world of thought. Without the phantasms, the intellect could not fulfill its *telos* of apprehending the intelligibility of material things, since the senses are directed on sensible versus intelligible form in things. That phantasms are particularly suited for serving as a cognitive source for intellective abstraction and the subsequent apprehension of intelligible form is due in part to their greater durability and immateriality (and therefore their closer proximity to the intellect). “Phantasms,” Aquinas says, “differ from things of sense by their immateriality. For as we have shown, the senses receive the forms of things immaterially, and phantasms are nothing but movements started by actual sensation.”⁶⁴ Moreover, insofar as phantasms furnish sustained cognitive contact with the external world, beyond occurrent acts of sensation, they provide a wider and richer base from which the intellect can abstract intelligible form and to which it can return in order to perceive intelligible form (which is universal) existing in particular material things.

We are now in a position to consider the role the intellect plays in enabling us to gain knowledge of the empirical world. So far we have been operating solely at the level of sense experience, but Aquinas also clearly argues that the intellect plays a crucial role in enabling the cognition of form, even as it remains dependent on sense experience. On Aquinas’s view, given that the intellect is immaterial, it alone can apprehend universals, or the natures (quiddities) of external objects abstracted by the intellect from their material and individuating conditions as exhibited by the phantasms:

Our intellect cannot know the singular in material things directly and primarily. The reason of this is that the principle of singularity in material things is individual matter, whereas our intellect . . . understands by abstracting the intelligible species from such matter. Now what is abstracted from individual matter is the universal. Hence our intellect knows directly the universal only.⁶⁵

by contrast, guarantee that the world we see, hear, and feel is a coherent world” (“Aquinas on *Phantasia*,” 165–66).

64. *In III DA* 13.792.

65. *ST I.86.1*. Aquinas’s guiding principle here is that “nothing corporeal can make an impression on the incorporeal” (*ST I.84.6*).

The proper object of intellective cognition is therefore not sensible but intelligible form, which, when abstracted by the agent intellect from our retained experiences of sensible forms, represents particular sensed objects universally. Aquinas therefore awards the intellect the capacity to think abstractly, or to consider and contemplate form apart from matter—a feat which is impossible for the senses, given their material constitution. Yet Aquinas also claims that in apprehending form, the intellect must turn and even return to the phantasms that retain our experiences of particular external objects of sense. Aquinas writes, “In the present state of life in which the soul is united to a passible body, it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms.”⁶⁶ And again, he says, “Our intellect both abstracts the intelligible species from the phantasms, inasmuch as it considers the natures of things in universal, and, nevertheless, understands these natures in the phantasms since it cannot understand even the things of which it abstracts the species, without turning to the phantasms.”⁶⁷

The ultimate goal of intellective abstraction, therefore, is not to direct us, qua cognitive subjects, to intelligible form in itself (considered as a distinct abstract entity), but to direct us to external objects themselves as possessing a certain intelligible form or intrinsic nature.⁶⁸ In an important passage, Aquinas argues:

the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter. . . . Now it belongs to such a nature to ex-

66. *ST* I.84.7.

67. *ST* I.85.1 ad 5. Aquinas's claim here seems to be the following: while the intelligible species furnishes thought with its universal conceptual content, the phantasms tether thought to external objects of sense. In other words, we can think about external objects of sense because our thoughts are indexed with specific phantasms. Anthony Kenny expresses the point this way: “Putting Aquinas' doctrine in modern terms, we might say that our thoughts have the sense they do because of the universal forms in which we think; they have the reference they have to individuals because of the sensory context in which they occur” (Anthony Kenny, “Intentionality: Aquinas and Wittgenstein,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 251).

68. Aquinas insists that the intelligible species is “not what is actually understood, but that by which the intellect understands” (*ST* I.85.2). In this same article from the *Summa*, Aquinas provides two reasons why the intelligible species cannot be the proper object of cognition. First, the objects of cognition, or material things, are also objects of science (*scientiae*); and every science is concerned with objects that exist outside the intellect, not inside the intellect. Second, Aquinas argues that if a cognitive faculty were aware only of its own impressions, then all of its judgments concerning those impressions would be true, even if those judgments were not in harmony with reality. Of course, Aquinas does say that the intellect can apprehend the intelligible species in an act of self-reflection, but this is a separate act of the intellect.

ist in an individual, and this cannot be apart from corporeal matter: for instance, it belongs to the nature of a stone to be in an individual stone, and to the nature of a horse to be in an individual horse, and so forth. Wherefore the nature of a stone or any material thing cannot be known completely and truly, except in as much as it is known as existing in the individual. Now we apprehend the individual through the senses and imagination. And, therefore, for the intellect to understand actually its proper object, it must of necessity turn to the phantasms in order to perceive the universal nature existing in the individual.⁶⁹

Intellective cognition of a quiddity—that is, a material thing—therefore requires that the intelligible species or form be abstracted from phantasms and that the intellect turn to the phantasms “to understand actually its proper object.”

However, intellective cognition also requires that the intelligible species or form, once it is abstracted, also is received by the “passive” intellect. Aquinas states the following:

Let us consider the fact that an external thing understood by us does not exist in our intellect according to its own nature; rather, it is necessary that its species be in our intellect, and through this species the intellect comes to be in act. Once in act through this species as through its own form, the intellect knows the thing itself. . . . [And] we must further consider that the intellect, having been informed by the species of the thing, by an act of understanding forms within itself a certain intention of the thing understood. . . . And because the understood intention is like some thing, it follows that the intellect, by forming such an intention, knows that thing.⁷⁰

According to Aquinas, when the intellect, specifically the passive intellect, is ‘informed’ by an object’s intelligible features or form (the intelligible species, qua abstracted by the agent intellect) it “comes to be in act” and hence also forms an ‘intention’ (*intentio*)—or what Aquinas also refers to as a ‘concept’ (*conceptus*) or ‘inner word’ (*verbum*)—that is itself “like some thing.”⁷¹ So

69. ST1.84.7.

70. *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter *SCG*) I.53. All translations of *SCG* I are from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, vol. 1, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955; repr. as *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

71. As Aquinas argues elsewhere, just as “there are two operations in the sensitive part,” (i.e., impression, which is passive, and the formation of phantasms, which is active), so there are two operations that concern the intellect. “For in the first place there is the passion of the passive intellect as informed by the intelligible species; and then the passive intellect thus informed forms a definition, or a division, or a composition, expressed by a word. Wherefore the concept conveyed by a word is its definition; and a proposition conveys the intellect’s division or

by 'informing' the intellect, the intelligible species also furnishes the basis or source for subsequent conceptualization by the intellect. By forming an intention or conceptually constituted thought of an extramental thing that is *itself* like that thing—bearing the same structure or form of that thing—the intellect “knows that thing” or, we could say, directs itself *on* that thing.

We can summarize the important claims Aquinas has made so far as follows. Through direct experiential encounter with the sensible features or forms possessed by external objects, human cognitive subjects are also able to apprehend, by way of intellectual abstraction, as well as subsequent conceptualization, the intelligible features or forms possessed by those objects—and specifically, the natures of those external objects as form-matter composites.⁷² For example, through direct experiential encounter with the sensible features or forms possessed by a stone (proper sensibles such as color and texture and common sensibles such as shape and size), as preserved in phantasms, we are also able to apprehend, by way of intellectual abstraction, as well as subsequent conceptualization, the specific nature (what we could call “stone-ness”) that makes all stones what they objectively are. Thus, through experiential encounter with external objects of sense (and subsequent intellectual abstraction as well as conceptualization), we are also able to form thoughts (and, as we will see, beliefs and judgments) that correspond directly to the intrinsic features possessed by external objects (e.g., stones) themselves.

We are now in a prime position to extend Aquinas's commitment to direct realism. Just as the senses, as suitably actualized by the presence of sensible species or forms, are conjoined in the acts of sensation and perception (through the common sense) to the sensible features possessed by external objects themselves, so the intellect, as suitably actualized by the presence of intelligible species or forms, and active in forming concepts, is conjoined in the act of knowing to the intelligible features possessed by external objects themselves. As Aquinas puts it, just as “the likeness of a sensible thing is the form of the sense in act,” so “the likeness of the thing understood is the form of the intellect [in act].”⁷³ Or more simply, “the thing actually understood *is* the intellect in act” (my emphasis).⁷⁴ Direct epistemic access is guaranteed

composition. Words do not therefore signify the intelligible species themselves; but that which the intellect forms for itself for the purpose of judging of external things” (*ST* I.85.2 ad 3).

72. Aquinas ascribes powers of intellect to rational beings (e.g., human persons) alone.

73. *ST* I.85.2 ad 1.

74. *Ibid.* Norman Kretzmann puts the point this way: “The guaranteed access is utterly

in both cases because both sensory cognitive acts (sensation and perception) and intellectual cognitive acts (thought or apprehension) are configured by the *same* forms that configure things: sensible species or forms in the first case, and intelligible species or forms, as well as concepts, in the latter case. As respectively configured by sensible and intelligible form, our most basic sensory and intellectual states are isomorphic with and hence formally identical to external objects of sense and thought; and it is by virtue of being isomorphic with and formally identical to external objects of sense and thought that our most basic sensory and intellectual states afford us direct epistemic access to the world itself.

Now, this account itself requires further explanation and defense, which I intend to provide, relying in large part on recent work in contemporary philosophy of mind that is broadly Thomistic in orientation. The specific claim which requires explication and defense, and which expresses the heart of the Thomistic view under consideration, can be expressed as follows:

[For the Thomist/Aristotelian], both intellect and the senses are powers of *receptivity*. In both intellectual understanding and (proper object) perception we submit ourselves to being in-formed (as we still say) by the very objects we receive information about. When a cognitive state is wholly determined by its object, sensible or intelligible, the result is objective truth.⁷⁵

In this passage, Myles Burnyeat not only underscores the Thomistic/Aristotelian commitment to direct realism; he also underscores the importance of *form*, which is the concept driving that commitment. It is because our most basic cognitive states (whether sensory or intellectual) are causally ‘informed’ and thus “wholly determined” by their respective objects, sensible and intelligible form, that those states are objectively true—in the sense that they objectively *conform* or correspond to the world.⁷⁶ Moreover, it is by virtue of objectively conforming or corresponding to the world that our most basic cognitive states conjoin *us* to the world, granting us direct epistemic access to

direct, to the point of formal identity between the extra-mental object and the actually cognizing faculty in its cognizing of that object” (Norman Kretzmann, “Philosophy of Mind,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 138).

75. Burnyeat, “Aquinas on ‘Spiritual Change’ in Perception,” 141.

76. Recall that truth for Aquinas is the “conformity of intellect and thing” (*ST* I.16.2), and it is in this sense that Aquinas says the intellect is “always true” (*In III DA* 11.761), given that it reliably abstracts intelligible species and generates concepts that correspond to the real natures (quiddities) of things.

the world itself. All of this is possible, again, because the senses and intellect, qua cognitive capacities and powers, are causally 'informed' by the world itself—in the first case, by way of passive reception; in the second case, by way of intellectual abstraction, reception, and subsequent conceptualization.

To begin with, then, we need to consider the claim that 'mind' for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, is simply a capacity (and moreover, a natural capacity) for being 'informed' by the world. For example, Jonathan Jacobs and John Zeis write, "[Mind] is a capacity to be informed by what it causally interacts with, and in such a way as to make the individual so informed aware of the object as a specific kind of thing."⁷⁷ Intellectual cognition occurs, therefore, when the intellect is actualized by taking in (and even better, taking on) the form of external objects; and this process is intelligible because objects cause thought to take in or take on intelligible form—which, when suitably processed by the intellect, can be identified as *conceptual* form. Thus the intellect neither extracts conceptual form from sensible form (which is only potentially intelligible), nor does it arbitrarily produce conceptual form. Rather, the intellect generates conceptual form in direct response to an external object's causal influence on the senses, so it is the world, and not the mind, that initiates the cognitive actualization of form.

Moreover, the intellect generates the specific concepts it does in direct response to the world's causal influence on the senses because, on Aquinas's own view, concepts and mind-independent objects (the external causes of thought) are structurally and hence formally identical. So it is because the intellect can generate and subsequently 'inform' thought with the *right* concepts—concepts that correspond to the intelligible features possessed by external objects—that there can be direct and immediate intellectual cognition of the empirical world. Therefore, Jacobs and Zeis conclude:

That human cognition can begin with what is presented by the senses and yet come to an adequate understanding of the structure of the real would be wholly mysterious unless the intellect were in some way naturally capable of constructing intelligible forms *via* reflection on and abstraction from sensible objects. And the construction of such intelligible forms would in no way be adequate to the attainment

77. Jonathan Jacobs and John Zeis, "Form and Cognition: How to Go Out of Your Mind," *The Monist* 80.4 (1997): 545. In a more recent article, Jacobs puts the same point even more strongly: "There is nothing for mind to be except as it is informed by features of reality through the interaction of perception" (Jonathan Jacobs, "Habits, Cognition, and Realism," in *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions*, ed. John Haldane [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002], 114).

of knowledge unless the concepts constructed by the intellect were in some sense identical with objects. And of course, as the Aristotelian/Thomist sees it, there is an identity: it is an identity of form.⁷⁸

John Haldane argues in line with Jacobs and Zeis that if external objects merely efficiently caused cognitive subjects to have certain sensations or perceptions, and did not also formally cause thought to take on their own intrinsic form conceptually, then it would be a mystery how thought could be directly and immediately related to those objects. Given the vast number of causal lines that extend from a thinker to an object even in cases of veridical sensation, none of which obviously determines “a reciprocal semantic relation between thinker . . . [and] object of thought,” it becomes impossible to determine “which could constitute a privileged class sufficient to ground reference.”⁷⁹ Haldane continues his argument thus:

In sensation the sense is (efficiently) caused to change and is formally reordered. But in ‘taking on’ the form of the original object it still does so under material conditions (those of the organ of sense) and so one has particularised qualities: the sensation of redness deriving from that patch of objective redness in the environment. In thought, however, general concepts or universal forms are in operation and . . . this implies that at the intellectual level of information form must be exemplified without empirical instantiation.⁸⁰

According to Haldane, then, central to Aquinas’s understanding of intelligible form is the distinction we have already seen Aquinas make between a natural exemplification of form (*esse naturale*), which occurs when form is individuated by matter, thereby generating a material “case” or “instance” of form, and an intentional exemplification of form (*esse intentionale*), which, in the case of intellectual cognition, “involves the occurrence of the form as such, and not the generation of a case.”⁸¹ Direct intellectual cognition of external objects is possible, then, because “through experience and reason the subject comes to acquire concepts that are intentional counterparts of naturally existing substantial and accidental forms”; and this, in turn, establishes “an intrinsic connection between mind and world.”⁸²

78. Jacobs and Zeis, “Form and Cognition,” 551.

79. John Haldane, “A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind,” *Ratio* 11.3 (1998): 269.

80. *Ibid.*, 270.

81. John Haldane, “Forms of Thought,” in *The Philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 163.

82. *Ibid.* Of course, the “intrinsic connection between mind and world” Haldane speaks of

Intellective Cognition and Formal Causality

In sum, what ensures the success, and more specifically the directness, of intellective cognition is formal causality. But as Haldane points out, it is formal causality of a specific sort. First, it occurs *without* efficient causality (which I have argued is operative in sensory cognition along *with* formal causality). Thus the information received by the intellect via formal causality is universal rather than particular, which means that the intellect, as suitably 'informed', directs itself primarily not at an object's particular sensible qualities or accidents but at its very nature or quiddity, as a certain *kind* of thing (e.g., a man, a dog, a tree, a chair, etc.). It is important to note, however, as Haldane also notes above, that the intellect is also able to acquire intelligible species and hence form concepts of sensible qualities or accidents as well (e.g., red, sweet, round, etc.).⁸³ Second, formal causality in intellective

could not be sustained if concepts (rather than external objects themselves) were the proper objects of cognition. But according to Aquinas's account of cognition, concepts are not objects on which our cognitive activity primarily bears: by virtue of 'informing' the intellect, they furnish thought with presentational *content*—content that makes thought structurally isomorphic with its external formal cause. Thus, as John P. O'Callaghan points out, concepts for Aquinas "do not constitute a third realm of mental things or objects interposed between the mind's activity and external things; they are the informed activity of the mind in uniting itself to those extramental things" (John P. O'Callaghan, "The Problem of Language and Mental Representation in Aristotle and St. Thomas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 50.3 [1997]: 544). See also John P. O'Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Towards a More Perfect Form of Existence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). Among contemporary commentators, Robert Pasnau seems to be the only one interested in disagreeing with this interpretation of the intelligible species. See in particular his *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, 195–219. According to Pasnau, Aquinas implicitly advances an "act-object" account of perception and cognition. That is, Aquinas holds the view that "the act of perceiving an external object takes place through the apprehension of a mental object. . . . The proponent of the act-object doctrine will analyze cognition into a perception-like relationship between an internal cognitive faculty and an internal object representing the external world" (197). Pasnau recognizes that Aquinas's "official" position states that the intelligible species is not properly the object of cognition (unless the intellect reflects on its own act of understanding), but is that "by which" (*id quo*) the intellect apprehends the external world. Officially then, Aquinas claims to be a direct realist: the mind cognizes the objects of the external world directly via intelligible species or likenesses. So while Aquinas is certainly not a "representational idealist" (i.e., he argues against the view that the mind apprehends *only* its own ideas and not the external world), Aquinas still can be interpreted as being a "representational realist": he believes "that species are the things apprehended immediately, leaving the external world to be perceived indirectly" (213). I take Pasnau's minority position to be not only uncharitable but also anachronistic: given his commitment to the formal identity of mind and world in cognition, Aquinas cannot possibly be interpreted as being a representationalist in either sense.

83. We can expand this point as follows: while the primary object of the intellect is a quid-

cognition requires the activity of the intellect, whereas sensation is entirely passive: through abstraction and subsequent conceptualization the intellect receives information about the world—its intrinsic structure—that is not available to the senses. Now, this raises further important questions about the nature of formal causality in intellectual cognition: in what sense does the world itself ‘inform’ thought, if it is the intellect that is active in abstracting species and forming concepts? How can direct realism be maintained if the world itself is not *directly* ‘informing’ the mind, as it does the senses in sensory cognition?

Interpretive problems loom here in rendering Aquinas’s account intelligible. Consider, for example, Victor Preller’s classic reformulation of this account. Preller writes, “The ‘real form’ of the external object does not inform the intellect—the intellect *informs itself*, on the basis of sense experience, of that which sense experience does not actually contain—the nature of the external object.”⁸⁴ According to Preller, while sense experience cannot ‘inform’ the intellect, the intellect can ‘inform’ experience, which it does by forming a concept of external objects in direct response to the impact of those objects on the senses and to the presence of sensible form to sensory consciousness.⁸⁵ In other words, by interpreting the contents of sense experience (or

dity of a material substance, sensible accidents are also objects of the intellect, but in a secondary sense since accidents can be said to have essences in a secondary way. In *De ente et essentia*, chap. 1, Aquinas says, “Because we use the term ‘a being’ absolutely and primarily of substances, and secondarily and with qualification of accidents, it follows that essence is in substances truly and properly, but in accidents in a restricted way and in a qualified sense” (translation from *On Being and Essence*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Armand Maurer [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968], 32). I am thankful to Greg Doolan for elucidating this point for me.

84. Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 42.

85. Preller understands such a system to be one in which the meanings of logical terms can be defined purely in terms of formal or syntactical *use*: thus, the meanings of logical terms can be defined exclusively on the basis of their *role* within the system—“a role that could be entirely described in terms of the axioms, rules of operation, and well-formed statements (both ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’) already unquestionably part of the system” (*Divine Science*, 46). Asserting specified statements and then intelligibly deriving and asserting other statements on the basis of the former is also a purely formal or syntactical matter. The problem for Preller, then, is trying to relate the conceptual system, which is fully developed by itself, to sensory experience. Without specifying precisely *how* the intellect begins to take note of the isomorphism between the “flashes” of mental images (converted from sensory stimulation and projected on the mind), and the corresponding elements of the conceptual system, Preller argues that after repeated stimulation and projection, the intellect is able to relate the content of sense experience to the conceptual system in such a way as to give the elements of the system a referential as compared to a merely syntactical role.

the sensible form preserved in the phantasm) to be isomorphic with external states of affairs, the intellect generates a concept that it takes to be structurally isomorphic with those external states of affairs. This is how Preller defines intellectual abstraction: "To abstract the intelligible species or form which is potentially present in one's experience—to make one's experience actually intelligible—is to express the isomorphism that exists between one's experience and one's conceptual system by *utilizing* that system as a means of consciously perceiving and informing that which one experiences."⁸⁶ That is, while cognitive subjects experience external objects as having a conceptual unity (or a unity of form), it is not because external objects possess that unity in reality, but only because cognitive subjects judge (via an act of intellect) those objects to possess that unity in reality. Thus, Preller concludes:

The unity that we *attribute* to the objects of our experience (that we *judge* them to have) is the unity expressed by an *intelligible form* (an element in our conceptual system), and that is a *logical* or *conceptual* unity. Of course we *know* that there must correspond to that conceptual unity a mode of existential or substantial unity in reality, but we do not *see* or noninferentially *experience* the unity that things 'really' have. . . . Real substances or existent entities have that mode of 'unity' that is appropriate to the world (the *ordo rerum*); we are immediately or noninferentially aware only of that mode of 'unity' that is appropriate to the order of intentionality or conceptual forms.⁸⁷

Although Preller insists that we can know that the objective structure of empirical reality is *in some way* isomorphic with the conceptual structure we attribute to the external objects that constitute empirical reality, he explicitly denies that we can claim to know (or have any guarantee that we know) the objective structure of empirical reality *itself*. A direct consequence of Preller's view, then, is that for human cognitive subjects, who are irrevocably bound to interpret their experience of the world in terms of their own conceptual frameworks, "reality is *entirely* reconceivable."⁸⁸ In other words, "There is, therefore, a risk in 'knowing', or making epistemic claims: it is theoretically possible to reconceive the natures of things."⁸⁹ But if this is true, then Preller poses a serious problem for properly understanding the nature of formal causality: if it is true that "reality is *entirely* reconceivable," and "it is theoretically possible to reconceive the natures of things," then it cannot also be true

86. *Ibid.*, 53.

88. *Ibid.*, 69.

87. *Ibid.*, 63.

89. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

that there is an irreducible relation of formal causality between mind and world.⁹⁰ Preller jettisons Aquinas's main insight, explicated above, that the conceptual content of thought, while indeed generated by the intellect, is also determined by the world itself, given that the intelligibility of the world becomes present to the mind through the activity of the intellect. If Preller's analysis fails, therefore, it is because it does not remain faithful to Aquinas's insight that veridical intellectual cognition occurs when thought is 'informed' by the world itself.

Preller seems to think that if the mind is solely responsible for the cognitive actualization of form, then that activity is totally unconstrained and therefore arbitrary; hence, the world we apprehend changes as our varying conceptions of it change. And this would mean that intellectual abstraction—the cognitive process which enables the intellect to generate concepts—is itself totally unconstrained and hence arbitrary. There would seem, then, to be no explanation for how and why abstraction not only works, but also *succeeds* in working. Robert Pasnau expresses this concern as follows: on Aquinas's own account abstraction seems to require that the intellect abstracts the intelligible species from the phantasm by focusing its attention on the phantasm and then "selecting" or "lifting out" the intelligible, universal features of the phantasm in order to produce an object—the intelligible species—that in turn represents external objects universally. Pasnau finds no explanation in Aquinas of how this process occurs; that is, he claims that Aquinas fails to explain both "how . . . the senses, given their materiality, represent 'the nature of the species' in such a way that this information can be lifted out by a simple process of selective attention" and how "even given that such information is there . . . the intellect know[s] what to focus on, and what to abstract out."⁹¹ Pasnau concludes, therefore, that Aquinas's account of abstraction is hopelessly underdetermined and that when it operates successfully, it "seems to appeal to nothing more than a kind of magic."⁹²

Pasnau's criticism is instructive here, if only because it shows that Aquinas cannot possibly think that the success of intellectual cognition hangs merely on the intellect's both successfully inspecting or introspecting the

90. Jacobs and Zeis put the point this way: "if there isn't an irreducible relation of formal causality between things and thoughts, then . . . there would be no reason why one world version [or conceptual framework] is better than any other world version [or conceptual framework]," which in turn means that "there is a real mystery as to how we can get to things in the world and how we can get those things right" ("Form and Cognition," 550).

91. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 317.

92. *Ibid.*, 318.

contents of the phantasm and consequently producing a concept (or conceptual content) true to the nature of the external object represented in the phantasm, even if abstraction indeed requires some level of reflection. So construed, the process of abstraction is clearly prone to risk and even to failure, as both Preller and Pasnau recognize; consequently, it can seem like no less than a mystery if and when it succeeds in conjoining thought with reality. However, nothing Aquinas says about the abstractive process suggests that it is in any way difficult or mysterious: Aquinas claims that the intellect merely considers the nature of the species apart from its individuating material conditions represented in the phantasm because it “throws light on the phantasm.”⁹³ Moreover, Aquinas explicitly claims that “properly speaking, the intellect is not at fault concerning [the] quiddity [of a material thing],” which means that, through abstraction and subsequent conceptualization, “it knows the specific nature or essence of an object by going out directly to that object.”⁹⁴

How, then, should we make sense of these claims? If the intellect cannot be false regarding its proper object, then the cognitive process that enables the intellect to be veridical or true regarding its proper object *must itself be reliably truth-aimed or founded on truth conductivity*; that is, it must be reliably aimed at conjoining the intellect to the true natures of external objects themselves. On Aquinas's account, then, it seems that intellective abstraction occurs not *solely* via interpretation or introspection but *primarily* via reliable operation or proper functioning, which we have already seen, guides both the senses in cognizing sensible form and phantasia in producing phantasms. As Zeis points out, Aquinas's view of intellective abstraction is therefore primarily “externalist” and “anti-evidentialist” (or at least non-evidentialist) rather than “internalist” and “evidentialist,” as is his account of cognition in general. Zeis explains this as follows:

[Aquinas's view of cognition] is externalist because there is nothing to which the epistemic agent has direct access which is sufficient for warranting abstraction of truth-conducive intelligible species. The active intellect's bias or natural inclination

93. *ST I.85.1 ad 4.*

94. *ST I.85.6; In III DA 8.713.* As already noted, Aquinas's positive claim is that “just so far as the mind bears on an essence, i.e., understands what anything is, it is always true” (*In III DA 11.761*). Interpreting Aquinas's important claims here, John Jenkins writes, “[Aquinas] is making the strong epistemological claim that the ideas of natural, essential kinds formed spontaneously in the [first operation of the intellect] invariably correspond to the essences of things with whose *phantasmata* the intellect is presented” (John Jenkins, “Aquinas on the Veracity of the Intellect,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 88.11 [1991]: 629).

to the truth is not a conscious willing or wishful thinking of any sort, but merely a natural, built-in teleology of the faculty itself, directing the intellect at a pre-conscious level. [This] view is anti-evidentialist because there is no sufficient evidence provided by the senses (or other faculties) which determines the act of conceptualization. As a creative power, the active intellect goes beyond the evidence which it confronts in abstracting the intelligible species from sensible forms.⁹⁵

So intellectual abstraction (and subsequent conceptualization) is not unconstrained and arbitrary: it is world-directed given the intellect's inherent constitution and teleological bent.

We are now in a position to understand how thought can be determined or 'informed' by the world itself, even if it is the mind, and not the world, that is responsible for producing conceptual form. First, the intentional existence of form in the intellect assumes, as an explanatory condition, the existence of form in things. The realism of Thomistic epistemology, whether it concerns sensory or intellectual cognition, is grounded in an uncompromising metaphysical picture of reality (which is why Jacobs and Zeis say that Aquinas offers and defends a "metaphysics of cognition"). Consequently, abstraction is grounded in a metaphysical fact concerning the existence of form in things outside the intellect: the intellect is only able to abstract species and form concepts corresponding to the properties and natures of things *because those things are always already structured by form*. Jacobs puts the point this way: "It is not a lucky coincidence that we are able to make concepts that conform to the world, since our making them at all is explicable in terms of what are the intelligible features of things in the world."⁹⁶ In short, the intellect is able to abstract intelligible form from phantasms because intelligible form really resides in things: the ability to abstract species and generate concepts corresponding to intelligible features in things therefore depends on those things really having those features, or being formed in reality. Contrary to what Preller suggests, then, Aquinas grounds epistemology in ontology, rather than the other way around; and this means that through abstraction and subsequent conceptualization, the world shapes the mind; mind does not shape or create the world.

Second, not only is abstraction qua cognitive process underwritten by a reliabilism or natural teleology bent on obtaining truth; it is also underwritten by direct perceptual encounter with the world in sense experience itself.

95. John Zeis, "Warrant and Form," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 69 (1995): 162. See also Jacobs and Zeis, "Form and Cognition," 550–51.

96. Jacobs, "Habits, Cognition, and Realism," 122.

We could hardly sustain the reliability of intellective abstraction if sense experience itself were unreliable. But as we have already seen, Aquinas commits himself not only to reliabilism but also to direct realism in his account of sensory cognition: through the passive reception of sensible form and the further cognitive processing of sensible form into phantasms, cognitive subjects enjoy direct cognitive contact with sensible features in the world. So while it is true, as Zeis points out, that the contents of sense experience (i.e., the phantasms) do not afford the agent intellect any determinate epistemic basis or warrant for abstracting intelligible form, they nevertheless communicate objective truth about the way the world is—that is, they communicate the truth concerning sensible form, as objectively experienced by us—and provide a basis in reality for abstracting intelligible form. Again, were the senses not able to communicate such truth, on account of their not conjoining us to the sensible features possessed by external objects themselves, then surely intellective abstraction would also fail, or at least be subject to significant cognitive malfunction. The proper functioning of the intellect is therefore causally dependent on the proper functioning of the senses.⁹⁷

Finally—and this helps us understand the mind's natural orientation towards truth in a third main way—thought about the world can be wholly determined by the world itself because mind has been *created* to be 'informed' by the world. Abstraction is a God-given capacity, which means that it has been given to us by God so that we may obtain the truth about God's world.⁹⁸ Thus the reliabilism or proper function that underwrites abstraction qua cognitive process is itself underwritten by a greater theological fact concerning our inherent design: the agent intellect is reliable in abstracting intelligible form from the phantasm and enabling the veridical apprehension of worldly features or form *because it has been designed by God to be reliable in abstracting as well as conceptualizing form and thus in enabling the veridical apprehension of form*. Aquinas argues that on a most basic theological level, the fact that human beings are minded, or possess specifically intellective capacities and powers, reflects something of the image or nature of God

97. Aquinas puts the point this way: "it cannot be said that sensible knowledge is the total and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge, but rather that it is in a way the material cause" (ST I.84.6).

98. Stump expresses this point as follows: "On Aquinas's account, the reliable method or process whose functioning constitutes our knowing is just the natural operation of our cognitive capacities. For Aquinas, then, human knowledge is a function of our using the cognitive capacities God created in us as God designed them to be used in the world God created them to be used in" (Eleonore Stump, "Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge," in *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters*, 148).

in us: “Since man is said to be the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature.”⁹⁹ This imitation preeminently occurs in the activities of knowing and of loving God (a topic we will be pursuing shortly), but it also occurs simply through the possession of a nature fit for the *act* of knowing. The natural light furnished by the agent intellect within us is thus “nothing else than a participated likeness of the uncreated light” through which “we achieve the unchangeable truth of changeable things, and discern things themselves from their likeness.”¹⁰⁰ By using the agent intellect and the natural light it provides, we are able to abstract intelligible form from phantasms and thereby “discern things themselves from their likeness”; or in contemporary philosophical idiom, “cut the world at its joints.” Moreover, by using the agent intellect and the natural light it provides in order to cut the world at its joints, we are able to apprehend the world both as God made it and as God intends us to apprehend it. We could even say that by using the light God gave us, we know the world—in a remote but nevertheless real sense—as *God knows it*.

So understood, Aquinas’s move to ground the reliability of intellective abstraction in theological fact may seem puzzling or odd, in that it threatens to make abstraction look less like a natural cognitive process and more like a mysterious supernatural power. Pasnau, for example, claims that Aquinas’s move to link the light of the agent intellect with the “uncreated light” in which God knows the world forces Aquinas to abandon naturalism (which Pasnau claims “gives out”) and thereby to “take refuge in the supernatural,” leaving the abstractive process itself entirely unexplained.¹⁰¹ But this response reflects a bias more than a criticism on Pasnau’s part: explaining proper function in terms of God-given design merely underscores the reliability of intellective abstraction and the veracity of the intellect generally; it does nothing to render that process less intelligible or more mysterious. *Illumination* is in fact a powerful philosophical and theological metaphor: not only

99. *ST I*.93.4.

100. *ST I*.84.5; *ST I*.84.6 ad 1. Aquinas also points out in *QDV* 1.12 that “the name *intellect* arises from the intellect’s ability to know the most profound elements of a thing; for to understand (*intelligere*) means to read what is inside a thing (*intus legere*).”

101. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 318. Pasnau also raises this objection (or at least points in the direction of an objection) in the chapter “Sense and Intellect” in *The Philosophy of Aquinas*, Robert Pasnau and Christopher Shields (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2004). He writes: “what is striking about [Aquinas’s] account of agent intellect is that he is uncharacteristically silent about the process involved in the abstraction of phantasms, and that he appeals to the divine just where we would expect him to offer a more explanatory account” (190).

does it suggest that the natural light of the intellect is strong enough to penetrate sensory experience and abstract veridical conceptual content; it also reminds us that the natural light of the intellect works not in isolation (again, through conscious willing or choice making) but by way of causal participation (created design) in the most reliable light of all—God's own infallible knowledge of the world. Pasnau's bias against the supernatural also directs us to picture unique cognitive processes such as abstraction as taking place independently of the normal, natural cognitive functioning of our senses, on an isolated cognitive plane either somewhere outside or beyond the natural world, or somewhere inside our minds or heads. We therefore need to insist again in conclusion that 'mind' for Aquinas is not a place or even a thing but a set of capacities—*natural* capacities—given to us by God so that we can, through direct experiential encounter, come to know the world as it objectively is. In this sense, then, there is nothing more natural than intellectual abstraction: it is simply how the mind has been naturally designed to work, as an important and irreducible feature of our intellectual lives.

Intellectual Cognition and Second Nature

In this section of this chapter, I advance a set of interrelated claims in further defending Aquinas's account of intellectual cognition: (1) the activity of the intellect in abstracting intelligible form and producing conceptual form (and hence apprehending material form) is not alienated from the natural world, because it is natural to us as human cognitive subjects and largely constitutive of our *second nature*; (2) as largely constitutive of our second nature, our powers of intellect can interact meaningfully with our powers of sense in one and the same cognitive subject and one and the same cognitive act. I also claim that (3) what the intellect grasps or apprehends about the world, or objective reality—its intrinsic, intelligible features—also fit intelligibly within a scientific (or at least still recognizably naturalistic) description of the world. In order to defend these claims, I first summarize some important insights about the relation of reason and nature offered by John McDowell.

According to McDowell, modern thought has struggled to understand human mindedness and its place in the natural world because it is largely motivated by a duplicitous view of the physical or material and the mental. By virtue of sharing sentience with the animal kingdom, human persons are inextricably a part of *nature*: we are natural beings. But we also possess the unique ability to *reason*: unlike animals, we possess conceptual capacities

that enable us to form thoughts, judgments, and rational arguments about the world we inhabit. According to the distinctly modern view, nature is characterized as the “realm of law,” governed by physical laws comprehensible to modern science. Reason, by contrast, is characterized as the “realm of freedom,” the logical space in which we freely manage our thoughts and construct worldviews. The problem with such a view, however, is not that reason and nature occupy distinct “spaces”; the problem is that reason and nature, dualistically conceived, are each seen as governed by totally incompatible modes of intelligibility: the one claimed by natural science, divested of meaning, the other restricted to distinctly human interaction, characterized as possessing meaning.

McDowell thinks that in order to overcome the dualism properly, we need to conceive of a program that shows how reason can find a home in nature; that is, the natural must be expanded or rearticulated in such a way as to *include* reason. One such program, which McDowell calls “bald naturalism” locates reason in nature by completely redescribing reason in naturalistic terms. In McDowell’s own words: “Bald naturalism is a programmatic conviction to this effect: the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons can be reconstructed out of the conceptual materials whose primary home is the logical space in which empirical description . . . functions.”¹⁰² Bald naturalism thus denies that reason is truly *sui generis*, or logically distinct from nature, because it does not conceive of reason as occupying a space outside of the realm of nature. Interestingly, McDowell empathizes with the bald naturalist project as it seeks to carve out a place for reason in nature; yet he is doubtful that the project, which seeks to domesticate the space of reasons *completely* in the space of nature, can be carried through successfully.

McDowell therefore wants to honor the insight that reason is truly *sui generis*—it sets human beings apart from the rest of the natural world—without succumbing to the tendency to make the logical spaces of reason and nature alien to one another in such a way that the human person is mysteriously bifurcated or metaphysically “split.” McDowell is also wary, then, of what he calls “rampant platonism,” the polar extreme to bald naturalism, which enshrines reason in such a way as to make it appear unnatural, or perhaps better, supernatural, and thus somehow more than human or even inhuman. According to rampant platonism, “It can seem that we

102. John McDowell, “Précis of *Mind and World*,” in *Perception*, ed. Enrique Villanueva (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview, 1996), 235.

must be picturing the space of reasons as an autonomous structure—autonomous in that it is constituted independently of anything specifically human, since what is specifically human is surely natural (the idea of the human is the idea of what pertains to a certain species of animals), and we are refusing to naturalize the requirements of reason.”¹⁰³ Enshrining reason in the way that rampant platonism suggests makes it impossible to locate reason within nature, because reason cannot be articulated in humanly naturalistic terms. McDowell's solution to the problem of how to relate reason and nature is his own “naturalized platonism,” which he claims incorporates the insights proffered by both bald naturalism and rampant platonism but also denies their extremist conclusions. While bald naturalism reduces the rational to the natural, and rampant platonism alienates the rational and the natural, McDowell's naturalized platonism relates the rational and the natural by denying both a conception of the natural, propagated by modern science, that excludes exercises of reason from nature *and* a view of the rational that refuses to naturalize the requirements of reason. McDowell's thought is that if nature is construed in such a way as to include reason, then the *sui generis* character of reason can be preserved, without requiring reason to be banished from nature altogether or introducing a metaphysical split that makes the human person look “peculiarly bifurcated, with a foothold in the animal kingdom and a mysterious separate involvement in an extra-natural world of rational connections.”¹⁰⁴

Specifically, McDowell reconceives the natural by retrieving the notion of second nature, which he says is operative in Aristotle's account of how ethical character is formed. On Aristotle's view, McDowell claims, we develop ethical character, or a second nature (which includes dispositions of the practical intellect), by receiving ethical training and having the appropriate ethical shape given to our lives, with the end goal of acquiring capacities for making right ethical judgments. Analogously, McDowell claims, we develop as specifically *rational* beings, and thereby acquire *reason* as our second nature, by being “initiated” into distinctly *conceptual* capacities (constitutive of what we might refer to as mind) in a process of social and intellectual maturation that McDowell says is best captured by the German word *Bildung*. Thus, as rational animals, “whose natural being is permeated with rationality,” human persons occupy a specific space in nature by virtue of possessing a second nature, which McDowell emphasizes we acquire by strictly natural

103. John McDowell, *Mind and World*, 77.

104. *Ibid.*, 78.

and therefore unmysterious means: namely, by being initiated into a shared language and tradition of specifically empirical inquiry and thought. But again, reconceiving human nature to include second nature requires preventing natural science from “hijacking” nature and reducing it to the realm of law, divested of meaning. So McDowell recognizes that reconfiguring the natural to include second nature does not simply entail reinvesting nature with meaning, in order to regain Aristotle’s innocence. But what it does entail is carving out a space in nature for *sui generis* conceptual capacities, and thus it entails refusing to equate nature as a whole with the realm of law.

Now, we can appropriate these important insights offered by McDowell in order to understand better in what sense the intellect and its attending processes such as abstraction can be intelligibly deemed natural. Following McDowell, if we identify the intellect in Aquinas with a set of capacities that are largely constitutive of *second* nature, then we can affirm what I take to be Aquinas’s central claim that intellectual cognition occurs *within* the natural world, rather than mysteriously outside of the natural world, in a logical space reserved for transcendental exercises of mind or reason. This is not to deny that we are born with certain basic intellectual capacities intact (which is surely part of our God-given design); but as constitutive of our first nature, these capacities remain largely undeveloped and hence largely unactualized. Abstraction, for example, may be operative in our very early cognitive development in an extremely rudimentary way (think of basic face recognition), but it will only be fully operative, and fully reliable, after repeated sensory encounter with the empirical world, language acquisition, and overall cognitive development.

The point here, then, is that we are not born into the world with full-blown intellectual capacities; we have to be initiated into these capacities. These capacities have to be developed and honed, in and by us, and this, in turn, requires receiving the right sort of training and upbringing, which surely (as McDowell suggests) takes place within a shared language and tradition of specifically empirical inquiry and thought. Aquinas might put the same point this way: basic intellectual capacities are further perfected by good *habits* of mind, or internal *dispositions* of mind that direct us in our goal of apprehending empirical truth. And we attain and sustain good habits of mind through positive reinforcement: we must further “grow into” the capacities that we have been given through education, imitation, and practice so that we can fully “grow into” our identity as human cognizers.

Aquinas argues that in our cognitive development, we first learn how to

abstract basic concepts and then consequently learn how to apply, elucidate, and enrich the concepts we abstract in an effort to achieve a surer and deeper knowledge of the empirical world. Thus, according to Aquinas, the end result of intellectual abstraction is not only the acquisition of individual concepts but the acquisition of conceptual capacities: a network or repertoire of concepts that furnish us with the resources we need for making true judgments as well as reasoning through complex, discursive thought about the way the world is. Aquinas writes:

the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension; but it first apprehends something about its object, such as its quiddity, and this is its first and proper object; and then it understands the properties, accidents, and the various relations of the essence. Thus it necessarily compares one thing with another by composition or division; and from one composition and division it proceeds to another, which is the process of reasoning.¹⁰⁵

Aquinas clearly understands the first act of intellect—the apprehension of intelligible features or form—to provide a reliable but nevertheless partial cognitive foundation on which to base subsequent empirical inquiry, and hence subsequent acts of intellect such as composition, division, and reasoning. Empirical knowledge begins with the apprehension of intelligible features or forms, but this pretheoretic “alpha” cognition, as Norman Kretzmann calls it, is both limited and fragmentary, leaving us still largely in ignorance about what Aquinas calls the “properties, accidents, and the various relations of the essence” of things. We only achieve an “omega” cognition or *scientia*—a perfect apprehension of propositional truths concerning the natures of things—through progressive empirical inquiry, which is a “fallible process of reducing the ignorance in the infallible alpha cognition.”¹⁰⁶ The process is indeed fallible, but it is also recognizably natural: it is by engaging in the right sort of inquiry via abstracting, composing, dividing, and reasoning that we more fully “inhabit” our second nature and thereby become cognitively assimilated, in Aquinas’s terms, to the very objects of our inquiry, and thus to the world itself. Cognitive assimilation is possible, then, because

105. *STI*.85.5.

106. Kretzmann, “Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance,” 190. One of Kretzmann’s main goals in this essay is to defend Aquinas against the charge that the intellect cannot be false in *any* of its operations: second and third operations of intellect such as judging and reasoning *are* subject to error and hence are not infallible. Moreover, while the pre-theoretic alpha cognition is free from error, “whatever it delivers *infallibly* leaves us in a state close to *ignorance* about that quiddity” (187).

the intellect and specifically intellectual exercises or processes such as abstraction (so understood as fully operative and reliable) are constitutive of our second nature: as possessors of intellect, or rational animals “whose natural being is permeated with rationality,” we can and do enjoy fallible but nevertheless privileged epistemic access to the world in which we live.

Having expanded our understanding and appreciation of the natural, at least as I am saying Aquinas conceives it, we can now summarily dismiss the charge, raised earlier by Pasnau, that Aquinas can only account for intellectual abstraction by abandoning naturalism altogether in order to “take refuge” in the supernatural. Even if abstraction works primarily according to God-given design, that design surely includes having the right sort of cognitive upbringing in which we are fully initiated into the intellectual capacity for abstraction—a process, we should add, that takes place squarely *within* the natural world. We also can dismiss the related charge (no less important) that Aquinas is guilty of making intellectual cognition itself into something extranatural—a cognitive power akin to intuition—that enables us to look beyond the sensible features of material things in order to achieve a pure perception of bare essences that are otherwise unknown to us. Haldane writes:

In the Thomist scheme . . . , to be a cat [for example] is to be a substance of a certain kind; but in saying this it is not being assumed that the catness of an object is something imperceptible lying beneath or behind its sensible features—something detectable only by an occult form of intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*). Certainly if I see something which is a cat and properly take it to be such then it is true that I do not *see* its catness in the sense that I *see* its colour, or *feel* the softness of its fur. My perception of its nature is an intellectual act involving the existence of a sortal concept, but it is an act whose object is the individual substance: the cat, and not a mysterious imperceptible essence residing within it.¹⁰⁷

We can strengthen Haldane’s claim here by restating that the intellect is a set of natural capacities (themselves largely constitutive of second nature); and if the intellect is a set of natural capacities, then it is difficult if not impossible to sustain the claim that there is something inexplicable going on when we apprehend an external object’s nature. Both the abstraction of intelligible form by the agent intellect and the production of conceptual form by the passive intellect are natural cognitive processes—no less natural than veridi-

107. John Haldane, “Mind-World Identity Theory and the Anti-Realist Challenge,” in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.

cal sensation and perception, on which they are based—whose purpose is to cognitively conjoin us to the actual natures of the *material* things that are veridically experienced by us.

Moreover, naturalism as I am defending it—which indeed incorporates a richer, deeper conception of the natural—not only is hospitable to unique exercises of the intellect (or mind); it is also hospitable to the objects of intellect and intellectual inquiry itself, namely, substantial form and, more specifically, external objects as composites of matter and substantial form. As Haldane points out above, the objects of intellective cognition are not mysterious essences residing within or beneath material things; they are material things *themselves* as permeated by form. From the Thomist/Aristotelian perspective, nature itself is permeated by form, in the sense that it bears and displays, to the perceiving mind, an intelligible, rational structure. Far from being antithetical to a scientific picture of the world (at least a non-reductive picture), therefore, form is actually quite at home within such a picture: in fact, form is precisely what science investigates and hence seeks to know. Jacobs and Zeis write:

Forms are fully within the bounds of scientific sense. In comprehending structure, process and arrangement, we apprehend form. When we articulate, for example, what makes for the elasticity of a material, or the seasonal change of color of a plant's leaves, or the binding of molecules, or the mechanisms of photosynthesis, or the jamming of a radar band, we articulate form. Form isn't some additional thing to be looked for on the basis of empirical inquiry; it *is* what empirical inquiry looks for (and when successful, finds). . . . The point is not to revive a particular idiom; speaking of form would not in its own right be a gain to common sense or science. The point is that in identifying a thing's structural and causal properties, for example, we are identifying form; we are identifying configuration and dynamic dispositions that respectively make the matter of a thing to be *that* kind of matter, and that are the ground of its powers and susceptibilities. To explain what happens in terms of a thing's being made of a certain material, or being subject to a certain load, or being exposed to higher than normal temperatures, and so forth, is to give accounts in terms of form.¹⁰⁸

As Jacobs and Zeis point out, in appealing to form, and locating form within nature, the Thomist/Aristotelian is not trying to laden a scientific or naturalistic worldview with an outdated idiom or metaphysical picture of reality; quite the contrary, he is merely pointing to the various ways in which form, more broadly understood, is exemplified naturally in the world that we in-

108. Jacobs and Zeis, "Form and Cognition," 544.

habit—the very world which science investigates and seeks to understand. Form is, in fact, what science has always investigated and sought to understand.

Once it is outfitted with a notion of second nature, Aquinas's account of cognition can also intelligibly sustain the *interdependence* and *interaction* of intellect and sense, without being forced, when pressed, to set the intellect dualistically over against sense, or to erase the essential distinction between intellect and sense altogether. I have been arguing that abstraction leads to the formation of conceptual capacities attributable to the intellect, capacities that are actualized in secondary and tertiary intellectual acts—most notably, judging and reasoning. But Aquinas also seems to think that those same capacities can be actualized in sense experience itself. Recall that the proper or *per se* objects of sensory cognition are the sensible features or forms of external objects—for example, the color and the softness of a cat's fur. Through the common sense, we enjoy unified perceptions of external objects—for example, *this* cat, as opposed to *these* sensory qualities (color, softness, etc.). The proper objects of intellectual cognition (accessible to human cognitive subjects) are the intelligible features or forms of external objects—for example, the cat qua individual substance that can be thought of and reasoned about independently of our sensory experience of its color and fur and our unified perception of it as a cat.

On one level, then, we can differentiate sensory and intellectual cognition by differentiating their respective objects. But this is not always easy to do: most of the time, we don't typically sense cats *only* in the sense that we see their color and feel the softness of their fur, or in the sense that we perceive cats as sensible objects (in a unified perception). Rather, we perceive cats under the aspect of certain universal nature or concept of "cat." This sort of perception clearly involves the application of a concept that Aquinas says is incidental or *accidental* to the act of sensation itself, but which nevertheless directs us to the natures of *particular* material things *as we perceive them*. It is sensation *per accidens*, therefore, but also a unique form of *per se* perception distinct from the perception afforded by the common sense. It is not purely an act of intellect, nor is it strictly speaking an act of sense: on one level, it is a cognitive act of sensory recognition originating in a further faculty or power of inner sense that Aquinas calls the "cogitative power."¹⁰⁹

109. Aquinas lists the cogitative power among the other powers of inner sense (which also include the common sense, imagination, and memory) in *ST* I.78.4. The cogitative power parallels the estimative power, which exists in animals. The estimative power enables animals (includ-

Given that the cogitative power enables us to sense and apprehend particular objects of sense “as existing in a common nature” and hence according to or under the aspect of a universal—for example, an individual man as “this man” and an individual tree as “this tree”—the cogitative power both “belongs to sensitivity” and “is united to intellect in one and the same subject.”¹¹⁰ Thus the cogitative power (which Aquinas also identifies as the “particular reason”) also interacts with the intellect so as to make comparisons of particular intentions (e.g., “this man” and “this tree”) and thereby help produce particular judgments that also aid in syllogistic reasoning about currently perceived sense objects.¹¹¹

Now, precisely *how* the cogitative power functions on both a sensory and intellectual level would be wholly mysterious if we were not able to position the intellect, and specifically our intellective capacities, within the realm of nature. But given that we *can* place those capacities within the realm of nature—that is, the realm of second nature—then we also can position those capacities alongside our specifically sensory capacities. The unity of intellect and sense “in one and the same subject” and hence in one and the same *act*—perception by way of the cogitative power—is therefore a *natural* unity: the unity of “first” and “second” nature. This unity therefore permits us to see how we can credit sense experience with conceptual content drawn on or actualized *in* sense experience itself, which means that perception by way

ing human beings) to make estimations (non-conceptual perceptual judgments) about sense objects perceived *per se* through the common sense (e.g., animals instinctively perceived as either beneficial or harmful, friend or foe). These estimations or intentions (perceptions of sense objects as advantageous or disadvantageous) are preserved in the memory. The cogitative power in humans interacts with the intellect, enabling it both to recognize and to reason or discourse about particular sense objects.

110. *In II DA* 13.397–98.

111. See *ST I.81.3*. Frede finds the *vis cogitativa* to be “something of an embarrassment for it seems to be an ability that is somehow *in between* sense-perception and thought” (“Aquinas on *Phantasia*,” 170). However, I claim that this unique cognitive power operates well within the context of second nature and plays an essential role in our cognitive lives. Thomas V. Flynn writes, “The Cogitative Faculty is the highest of all sense faculties in man, and is only modally distinct from the Estimative Power in brutes. Its formal object is the material singular as containing something similar to others, and its proper act is to compare such objects. In relation to intellectual abstraction, its act is to give phantasms their *ultimate* remote participation” (Thomas V. Flynn, “The Cogitative Power,” *The Thomist* 16.4 [1953]: 563). Regarding the role of the cogitative power in preparing phantasms for abstraction, see A. Leo White, “Why the Cogitative Power?” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 72 (1998): 213–27. According to White, the cogitative power performs an essential role in determining both which individual acting on the senses should be considered by the intellect for abstraction as well as how that individual should be apprehended (whether generically or specifically).

of the cogitative power unites us to an external object's sensible *and* intelligible features or forms.

In addition to his commitment to the unity of sense and intellect "in one and the same subject," Aquinas even goes so far as to claim that the intellect itself can be directly implicated in acts of sense. Consider the following example Aquinas uses:

not anything knowable by intellect in sensible matter should be called a sense-object incidentally (*per accidens*), but only what is at once intellectually apprehended as soon as a sense-experience occurs. Thus, as soon as I see anyone talking or moving himself my intellect tells me that he is alive; and I can say that I see him live (*video eum vivere*).¹¹²

In this case, we have a sensory cognitive act imbued with specifically *propositional* content—the conceptual form of intellective judgment—which presupposes not only abstraction but also some composition on the part of the intellect. At one and the same moment, Aquinas says, he both sees someone talking or moving *and* apprehends that he is alive. I stress this point in order to show how for Aquinas sensory cognitive acts such as perception by way of the cogitative power as well as the intellect furnish *further* and *deeper* epistemic access to the empirical world. When we not only see a man speaking or moving but also see *that he is living*, we are apprehending, through sense experience as well as the intellect, a fact about the external world itself, namely, *that the person speaking and moving in front of us is living*. This sort of apprehension clearly presupposes significant conceptualization on the part of the intellect and hence the existence of highly developed conceptual capacities. Consequently, it also constitutes a significant cognitive achievement on our part, one that more intimately conjoins us to the very objects we perceive and apprehend through initial acts of sense and intellect.

McDowell actually speaks of sense experiences suitably equipped with conceptual content as being able to "open" us to the empirical world we inhabit:

In a particular experience of the world in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment . . . if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how

112. In *II DA* 13.396.

things are. Thus the idea of conceptually structured operations of sensitivity puts us in a position to speak of experience as openness to the layout of reality. Experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks.¹¹³

The point McDowell makes here is thoroughly Thomistic and Aristotelian: it is because sense experience can, in paradigm cases, bear the same content or form as external objects and states of affairs that cognitive subjects can be isomorphically conjoined in sense experience itself to those external objects and states of affairs. Moreover, those objects and states of affairs can, in sense experience itself, wholly determine *what* we think about the world—the sort of beliefs and judgments we form about the world—presuming we “take the experience at face value.” In other words, the world can exert what McDowell calls a *rational*—or what the Thomist calls a *formal causal*—influence on thought. Here, then, we have come full circle in our exposition and defense of Aquinas's account of cognition: mind and world, thought and thing can be conjoined through veridical acts of sense and intellect because they are *formally* the same. And this means that thought can be conjoined to things *directly*. As McDowell puts it, “there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. So . . . there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world.”¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Our investigation and defense of Aquinas's account of cognition and of his commitment to direct realism have yielded the following conclusion: through a complex but truth-aimed cognitive process that occurs on both the sensory and intellective levels, we as cognitive subjects come to enjoy direct epistemic access to objective aspects or features of empirical reality. The same features or forms that structure material things, and which make them what they objectively are, also come to inhere in the senses and in thought, thereby conjoining the senses and thought—and more broadly, our minds—to those things themselves. Aquinas shows us that although we stand in irreducibly causal relations with perceivable external objects, that relationship is only ultimately explicable in terms of the category of *form*, or efficient and

113. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 26.

114. *Ibid.*, 27.

formal causality. Through sense experience and the veracious activity of the intellect, the world exerts a formal influence on thought: our minds take on the very forms of the external objects we perceive through the senses and consequently are conjoined in the act of knowing to those objects themselves.

The goal of sensory and intellectual cognition for Aquinas, therefore, is to yield *direct empirical knowledge* of *objective* aspects of empirical reality. Empirical knowledge is a paradigm case of cognition and direct realism for Aquinas. However, it is not *the* paradigm case of cognition and direct realism for Aquinas. By virtue of possessing specifically intellectual powers (which distinguishes us in the created order from other animals), we are capable of knowing both the world we inhabit *and* the very cause of the world itself, or the “first cause of things,” which is God.¹¹⁵ Aquinas writes, “For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its principle.”¹¹⁶ In the next chapter, I pursue this claim by exploring and interpreting Aquinas’s account of beatific knowledge, or the knowledge of God possessed by the blessed or beatified in heaven, whose intellectual powers have been fully perfected by God’s glorifying grace. On Aquinas’s view, the height of intellectual actualization, and hence the height of cognition and knowledge, occurs not in this life but in the next life, when we know or intellectually ‘see’ *God* directly “as God is.” A proper investigation of Aquinas’s account of cognition—especially one that prescribes direct realism as I have been describing it—thus requires attending to Aquinas’s greater theological claims regarding the intellect’s direct ‘vision’ of God in the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude. It is to this task that I now turn.

115. *ST* I.12.1.

116. *Ibid.*

Having God in View

Direct Realism and the Beatific Vision

AQUINAS'S commitment to direct realism extends far beyond his account of empirical cognition or knowledge. For Aquinas the theologian, beatific knowledge of God—or the knowledge of God possessed by the blessed in heaven—is itself a paradigm case of direct realism in cognition. Aquinas's remarkable main claim, which I will explicate below, is that in the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude, “the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect.”¹ This means that in beatitude, God is not present to the intellect by means of an intelligible species or form, which in the case of empirical cognition ‘informs’ thought in order to unite mind and world; rather, *God* is directly and immediately present to the intellect in such a way as to unite the mind with God. In short, on Aquinas's broader theological view, it is because God in beatitude is the intelligible form of the intellect that God can be known or ‘seen’ by beatified persons *directly* and *objectively*, or “as God is.”²

1. *ST* I.12.5.

2. As a reminder, I will be using single quotes throughout the chapter when using terms typically associated with acts of sense, which I am extending (following Aquinas) to depict unique acts of intellect in the beatific state. So, for example, while persons see or perceive the world with their senses in their natural state, beatified persons ‘see’ or ‘perceive’ God with their intellects or minds.

My purpose in this chapter is to further articulate and defend this Thomistic claim, and I do so by showing how beatific knowledge of God is a form of intellectual cognition, or a genuine intellectual ‘vision’ of the divine essence. Thus I argue that the ‘vision’ of the divine essence that beatified persons enjoy in the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude, in which God is known or ‘seen’ directly, should be understood on analogy with empirical knowledge of the world, which cognitive subjects enjoy in their natural cognitive state. Direct sensation and apprehension of the empirical world occurs when both the senses and mind, qua cognitive capacities, are ‘informed’ and hence actualized by their proper objects—sensible and intelligible form. Analogously, in the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude, direct knowledge of *God* occurs when the glorified intellect, qua supernaturalized cognitive capacity, is ‘informed’ and hence actualized by its proper object: the divine essence itself. God’s direct presence to the intellect as its intelligible form actualizes beatified persons’ intellectual capacities, yielding distinct intellectual episodes—and specifically, a content-rich ‘vision’ or ‘perception’ of God—that afford beatified persons direct *epistemic* access to the *objective* layout of *divine* reality. It is precisely in this sense that Aquinas commits himself to direct realism in his account of beatific knowledge of God.

Of course, while beatific knowledge of God bears crucial analogies to empirical knowledge of the world, it also utterly surpasses such knowledge and thus is only ultimately intelligible given certain fundamental theological presuppositions. Thus, explicating Aquinas’s account of beatific knowledge requires introducing and incorporating the following premises: first, that God possesses both intellect and will and so possesses the capacity to unite God’s self to the intellect in beatitude; second, that God is not only intelligible to God’s self but also intelligible to the created intellect; and third, that the intellect can be elevated by grace in such a way that possessors of intellect *can* enjoy a direct intellectual ‘vision’ of God. My goal is to use and interpret these premises—offered by Aquinas himself—in order to show how beatific knowledge of God for Aquinas is a supernatural form of cognition that transcends ordinary empirical cognition and yet also bears crucial similarities to ordinary empirical cognition.

The chapter will unfold as follows. In the first section, I exposit Aquinas’s account of beatific knowledge of God as Aquinas primarily presents it in the *Summa theologiae*, *Summa contra gentiles*, and *De veritate*. In section two, I undertake my main interpretive task in the chapter and explicate beatific knowledge of God in Aquinas as an intellectual ‘vision’ or ‘perception’ of the

divine essence that the blessed enjoy when God impresses God's self on the intellect, drawing supernaturally charged intellectual capacities into operation so that the blessed may genuinely know or 'see' God with their minds. Also central to this section is showing how Aquinas answers the pressing question of *how* God can be known or 'seen'. Relying on insights generated in the last chapter, I offer the following answer: *formal causality*. Just as formal causality ensures that thought (or the mind) is immediately directed on the world in standard cases of empirical knowledge, so formal causality ensures that thought (or the mind) is immediately directed on God in the paradigm case of the beatific vision. Hence, Aquinas offers us a realist theological epistemology that weds his account of cognition to his theological convictions about the ultimate supernatural end of human persons.

In the third section of the chapter, I once again deploy McDowell's notion of second nature to explain how knowing or 'seeing' God in the beatific state does not require the use of a superadded faculty or power, but only requires an act of the intellect itself, when the intellect is strengthened and perfected by God's glorifying grace. In the final section of the chapter, I show how Aquinas challenges the distinctly modern assumption that God must be placed outside or beyond a cognitive boundary. Were there such a boundary in place, then God could not 'inform' the intellect directly without doing violence to the mind; at best, God could 'inform' the intellect indirectly by way of a surrogate form. Knowing or 'seeing' God would then be reduced to a vastly uninformed cognitive state (that is, a state causally elicited by God but not 'informed' by God), rather than a direct cognitive encounter with the divine essence itself. Consequently, if the intellect were separated from God by a cognitive boundary, the blessed could not know or 'see' God "face to face." But Aquinas shows how the blessed can and in fact do (or will) know or 'see' God "face to face"; consequently, he provides powerful reasons for dismantling the boundary as well as powerful resources for reconceiving and rehabilitating the mind's relationship to God.

The Beatific Vision as the Cognition of Divine Form

It is of paramount importance that Aquinas begins his discussion of beatific knowledge of God in question twelve, article one of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa theologiae* by asking the central question "whether any created intellect can see the essence of God?" Initially, Aquinas admits, it may appear as if God cannot be known or 'seen': if God is uncreated, then God cannot be known by a created intellect; if God is infinite, then God cannot

be known by a finite intellect; if God is above or beyond creaturely existence (given that it is God's essence to exist), then God cannot be known by an existing intellect that "knows only existing things"; lastly, if there is no proportion between God and the intellect, then God cannot be known by the intellect, because there is an "infinite distance" separating God from the intellect.

However, Aquinas offers an important defense of the claim that the divine essence *can* be known or 'seen':

Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect. . . . Therefore some who considered this, held that no created intellect can see the essence of God. This opinion, however, is not tenable. For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith. For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its principle. Further the same opinion is also against reason. For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void. Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.³

We can unpack this important passage as follows. First, Aquinas claims that our ultimate beatitude, or supreme happiness, consists in enjoying God (the ultimate, true object of human happiness) for eternity—and this is an article of faith, and thus should be taken in faith. Second, he claims that we could not achieve true beatitude—that is, we could not truly enjoy God for eternity—unless we achieved a true intellectual 'vision' of God. Thus finally, on the basis of these two claims, he argues that achieving true beatitude *requires* that we know or 'see' the divine essence. Again, he writes: "For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith." Aquinas also cites another reason why the beatific vision is necessary: ev-

3. *ST* I.12.1.

ery person possesses a natural desire “to know the cause of any effect which he sees.”⁴ If this natural desire were not fulfilled, then it would be “void.” I take Aquinas’s point to be that both faith *and* reason dictate that the divine essence genuinely can be known or ‘seen’ in beatitude: not only should persons of faith claim that God can be known or ‘seen’ “as God is”; but it is also eminently rational (given persons’ natural desire to reach their supernatural end) to suppose that persons *should* desire to know or ‘see’ God “as God is.”

Given Aquinas’s explicitly theological commitments, it may be easy (for a modern reader), to dismiss his claims about the beatific vision altogether as the product of an unreflective faith, including his claim (which he says is a product of reason, not faith) that all human persons desire to know the “first cause” of everything that exists, or every effect, within the created order. It is true, of course, that Aquinas’s claims about the beatific vision are directly informed by faith: “This immediate vision of God,” he says, “is promised us in Scripture: ‘We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face’” (I Cor. 13:12).⁵ But a commitment to the beatific vision on Aquinas’s view is also clearly not a matter of faith alone. As Aquinas expositis more fully, it is rationally grounded in a much broader, deeper *teleological* conception of the created order and especially of created things or agents, whether “intelligent” or “natural,” as directed towards particular, determinate ends—an end being “that toward which the inclination of the agent tends,” (as a physician, for example, tends towards or aims for the health of patients).⁶ For Aquinas, not only do all agents tend towards or aim for a determinate end; they also aim for a last end—that which terminates an action, and brings it to completion (which it must, for otherwise all actions would tend towards infinity, which is impossible).⁷

Moreover, all agents act for a *good* end, that which is “appropriate” for them and also perfects them, in accordance with their own nature.⁸ Consequently, Aquinas continues, all agents act for *one* end, which is the good itself, or God as the “highest good”:

If, in fact, nothing tends toward a thing as an end, unless this thing is a good, it is therefore necessary that the good, as good, be the end. Therefore, that which is the

4. *Ibid.*

5. *SCG* III.51. All translations of *SCG* III are from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, vol. 3, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956; repr. as *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

6. *SCG* III.2.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *SCG* III.3.

highest good is, from the highest point of view, the end of all things. But there is only one highest good, and this is God. . . . So, all things are ordered to one good, as their end, and this is God.⁹

More specifically, all things are directed to God as the highest good not “as to an end *for which* something may be obtained, but rather so that they may attain Himself from Himself, according to their measure,” in order to become more like God, and hence acquire a measure of God’s being and goodness (each thing according to its own measure).¹⁰ For human persons qua possessors of intellect (even if the human intellect is lowest in the order of intelligent substances), this entails becoming more closely united or assimilated to God through *knowledge* or *understanding* and specifically *contemplation* of the divine (*contemplatio dei*) as the highest object (outside of any genus) of the human intellect.¹¹ It is this knowledge alone, Aquinas claims, that will terminate the intellect’s search for its ultimate end (truth itself, as the good of the intellect) and hence satisfy its natural desire, born in wonder, to know the first cause of everything that is. In this way, it will achieve its ultimate happiness or beatitude.

In order to pinpoint the nature of this knowledge in more detail, it is necessary briefly to consider (or remind ourselves of) the basic tenets of Aquinas’s overall epistemology. “Knowledge,” for Aquinas, cannot be univocally defined, given that there are different forms of knowing on the Thomistic schema, which we have already seen is in itself Aristotelian in inspiration and origin. The most basic and broadest form of knowledge, which we explored in the last chapter, is *cognitio*, by which we apprehend, most notably, the sensible and intelligible features of the external world (and, we could add, propositions concerning the sensible and intelligible features of the external world). *Intellectus* is a further form of knowing: it furnishes an immediate, penetrating apprehension or understanding of the basic propositional truths or “first principles” that constitute the various “sciences,” which for Aquinas includes logic and mathematics, as well as the natural sciences. One gains *scientia*, the highest form of knowing, by being able to demonstrate scientific truths (or conclusions) on the basis of those truths already known by *intellectus*. As Scott MacDonald defines it, *scientia* is therefore “the paradigm for knowledge” since it furnishes “complete and certain cognition of

9. *SCG* III.17.

10. *SCG* III.18.

11. See *SCG* III.25; *SCG* III.37.

the truth”—an explanatory knowledge only gained by demonstration and specifically syllogistic reasoning based on at least some propositional truths (epistemic first principles) that are known immediately “of themselves” (*per se*) by *intellectus*.¹²

Knowledge of the empirical world does not end, then, but in fact only begins, with a direct intellectual grasp of the natures of things, as we discovered in the last chapter. By acquiring knowledge (*cognitio*) of the natures of things through the senses, we are also, in turn, able to acquire knowledge (*intellectus*) of first principles (propositions) concerning the natures of those things. Initially, those principles are not known to us by *intellectus* (as they are, for example, in mathematics); but they can be known as such—and therefore form the basis of *scientia*—when we reason (through what Aquinas calls a demonstration *quia*) from beliefs concerning the effects of things to beliefs concerning the causes of things. By discovering the empirical causes of things—hidden to us, initially, by their sensible effects—we are in turn able to reason (through what Aquinas calls a *propter quid* demonstration) from beliefs concerning causes of things (first principles) to beliefs concerning their effects (conclusions). This process entails what John Jenkins calls “cognitive restructuring,” or “a kind of re-arrangement in our doxastic structure, so that the causes, which were formerly less familiar, become more familiar and better known; and the effects, formerly better known, come to be believed on the grounds of our belief in the cause.”¹³ And this process by which something that is “better known in itself” becomes “better known to us” is essential for gaining knowledge (*scientia*) in a specifically realist sense: “it requires,” Jenkins says, “that, in some sense, our doxastic structure comes to mirror the causal structure of the world.”¹⁴

Now for Aquinas, the beatific vision clearly represents the height of creaturely knowledge or the paradigm of human knowing, furnishing complete and certain (even if not comprehensive) cognition of the divine, or of God as the First Truth. The knowledge of God furnished by the beatific vision, then, is not only *cognitio* but also *scientia*, even though it surpasses any form of earthly *scientia* (or scientific knowledge here below). While earthly *scientia* is gained through discursive reasoning (and, in particular, through a

12. Scott MacDonald, “Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 163.

13. John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46.

14. *Ibid.*, 47.

propter quid demonstration whose premises give the cause or explanation of the conclusion), *scientia dei* is gained through the direct presence of God to the mind. In this sense, the beatific vision of God also closely resembles *intellectus*, insofar as the knowledge it furnishes is immediate and non-discursive. Most properly, *scientia dei* is participation in God's own self-knowledge (still according to the finite mode of the intellect), by which God knows all created things directly, as their uncreated cause. Using Jenkins's terms, we can say that in the beatific vision, our minds are subject to massive cognitive restructuring: given God's direct presence to the mind, the nature of God, supremely knowable in itself, also becomes supremely knowable to us.

Now, the knowledge of God that Aquinas claims unites us with God as our last end and source of supreme beatitude clearly surpasses any knowledge of God (*cognitio*) here below. To begin, beatific knowledge of God is "without defect"; consequently, it surpasses the general knowledge of God available to natural reason, which is beset by error and uncertainty. Such knowledge—whether obtained through reflection or demonstration of the *quia* sort, which leads to a very imperfect *scientia*—is also radically incomplete.¹⁵ In possessing this knowledge, Aquinas says, the intellect remains in a state of potentiality (and hence a state ignorance), waiting to be fully actualized all at once, which is necessary for the intellect to achieve its last end and supreme happiness. The knowledge of God available by faith (also *cognitio* rather than *intellectus* or *scientia*), which in some sense surpasses the knowledge of God available to reason since its content lies beyond our powers of demonstration, is also imperfect and hence remains subject to defect: through faith, we hold to truths (through assent or belief) about God which the intellect cannot fully grasp and which therefore remain 'unseen'.¹⁶

In denying that the knowledge of God available here below unites us (and our intellects, more specifically) with God as our last end and source of supreme beatitude, Aquinas provides further rational grounds on which to defend the beatific vision itself as the highest form of human knowing, and hence the source of our supreme beatitude, insofar as it unites us with God. Aquinas's defense of the beatific vision, or the very possibility of beatific knowledge of God, also includes his response to objections, which I highlighted at the beginning of this section.¹⁷ Here, Aquinas makes some impor-

15. See *SCG* III.38; *SCG* III.39.

16. See *SCG* III.40. I deal with the knowledge of God available here below that is obtainable by reason and faith in the next chapter.

17. See *ST* I.12.1 ad 1–4. Aquinas responds to similar objections in *SCG* III.54.

tant distinctions. First of all, he claims that God can be *known*, even though God cannot be *comprehended* (so the beatific vision furnishes *scientia* without *comprehensio*).¹⁸ In other words, Aquinas intimates (and later explicates in the seventh article of question twelve of the *Summa theologiae*) that beatified persons never possess *comprehensive* knowledge of God: to possess such knowledge would be to know God as God knows God's self, with God's own self-understanding. The second distinction Aquinas makes is equally important: God's infinitude is not a barrier to achieving beatific knowledge of God, because God's infinitude does not undermine God's knowableness. According to Aquinas, God's infinitude is the perfection of *form*: God is not only pure *act* (untainted by any admixture of potentiality) but also pure, intelligible *form* (undetermined by anything outside of God's self, not limited by being received into matter).¹⁹ God is infinitely intelligible and thus "supremely knowable."

Aquinas of course recognizes the objection that "what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect."²⁰ But Aquinas flatly denies that this is true in beatitude: again, our ultimate perfection *and* happiness consist in knowing or 'seeing' God. Moreover, in direct response to the final two objections raised in the first article of question twelve, Aquinas claims that God exists above all that exists, not in the sense that God does not exist at all, but rather because "He is His own existence." That is, it is God's very essence to exist, so while God cannot be comprehended, God can still be known by possessors of a created intellect who know only existing things.²¹ Aquinas also contends that a created intellect can be proportioned to the divine mind, because the intellect is "related to Him as the effect of its cause."²² The human intellect, as created by God, is already proportioned to

18. In one sense, the beatific vision is not characterized by comprehension, because the finite human mind cannot "contain" God infinitely. In another sense, however, Aquinas says the beatific vision *is* characterized by comprehension, insofar as the blessed cognitively "attain" God. "And in this way," Aquinas writes, "'comprehension' is one of the three prerogatives of the soul, responding to hope, as vision responds to faith, and fruition responds to charity" (*ST* I.12.7 ad 1). So through the beatific vision, the blessed attain in the next life what they believed, hoped for, and desired in this life: in 'seeing' God, they "possess Him as present, having the power to see Him always; and possessing Him, they enjoy Him as the ultimate fulfillment of desire" (*ST* I.12.7 ad 1).

19. See *ST* I.7.1. In *SCG* III.54, Aquinas says that God's infinitude must therefore be understood negatively, "like a self-subsistent form, not limited by matter receiving it."

20. *ST* I.12.1.

21. *ST* I.12.1 ad. 3.

22. *ST* I.12.1 ad. 4.

God; and this means that possessors of a created intellect can, in principle, share in God's self-knowledge.

So Aquinas begins by defending the principle that human beings have been created by God to know God: there is nothing about the nature of human mindedness, God, or the mind's relationship to God that entails God cannot be known. In fact, *everything* about the mind, God, and the mind's relationship to God suggests that God indeed *can* be known. Aquinas's most important question regarding the beatific vision, however, is not merely *if* it is possible, but precisely *how* it is possible—that is, in what sense it can be considered a form of knowledge. Recall that according to Aquinas's general account of cognition, which Aquinas claims pertains indifferently to empirical knowledge of the world and beatific knowledge of God, "Two things are required both for sensible and for intellectual vision—viz., power of sight, and union of the thing seen with the sight. For vision is made actual only when the thing seen is in a certain way in the seer."²³ Sensory cognition of the empirical world requires, on a most basic level, that the sensible features or accidental forms of an extra-sensory object (for example, color, considered as a sensible feature of an object of sight) impress or 'inform' the senses—albeit immaterially, as sensible species or forms devoid of matter. Once our senses have been suitably 'informed' by sensible species or forms, then we can be credited with possessing world-intending sensations—that is, sensations directed on (or united to) the sensible features possessed by extra-sensory objects themselves.

On a higher level, however, intellective cognition or empirical knowledge of an extramental object's intelligible features, and more specifically its nature or essence (quiddity), requires the operation of the intellect. Just as sensory cognition requires that the sensible features of an extra-sensory object be immaterially present in the senses, so as to 'inform' the senses about the world (and consequently conjoin the senses to the world); so intellective cognition requires that the intelligible features and specifically the intelligible form of an extramental object be immaterially or intentionally present to the intellect, so as to 'inform' the intellect about the world (and consequently conjoin mind to the world). Once our minds have been suitably 'informed' by intelligible species or forms and we have in turn generated concepts based on those forms, then we can be credited with possessing world-intending thought—that is, thought directed on (or united to) extramental objects themselves.²⁴

23. *STI*.12.2.

24. *STI*.85.2 ad 1.

In other words, it is by virtue of having our intellects immaterially or intentionally ‘informed’ by the forms of extramental objects that we enjoy direct epistemic access to those objects: as suitably ‘informed’, our intellects are conjoined in the act of knowing to those objects themselves.

Now, on Aquinas’s wider theological view, it is precisely because the intellect is capable of being immaterially or intentionally ‘informed’ by the essences or forms of extramental objects that it is *also* capable of being ‘informed’ by the divine essence itself—which is, of course, also immaterial. Aquinas’s remarkable claim, then, is that in the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude, “the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect,” which means that “those who see the divine essence see what they see in God not by any likeness, but by the divine essence itself united to their intellect.”²⁵ Thus, in the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude, God is directly and immediately present to the intellect as its intelligible form, and it is because God is directly and immediately present to the intellect as its intelligible form that the intellect enjoys direct, unmediated epistemic access to God. Or put another way: it is because God unites God’s self to the intellect as its intelligible form that the intellect is in turn united to God in the act of knowing or ‘seeing’ God. Aquinas’s main claim, therefore, is that God’s direct presence to the intellect *fully* actualizes the intellect in such a way that persons are able to know or ‘see’ God directly. God’s ‘informing’ the intellect directly is necessary, moreover, because no created likeness or intelligible form (presumably even one offered by God) is capable of ‘informing’ the intellect in such a way as to unite the intellect to God in perfect ‘vision’.²⁶ In their beatified state, therefore, the blessed know God “by way of a simple understanding (*per modum simplicis intelligentiae*):” given that God is directly and immediately present to the intellect, not conceptually (as a created intelligible form), but cognitively—“by presence, essence, and power”—the blessed do not properly ‘think’ God at all. Rather they ‘see’ God, *which means that thought gives way to pure intellective ‘vision’ or ‘perception’*.²⁷

25. *ST* I.12.5; *ST* I.12.9.

26. Aquinas offers three reasons for this: no created likeness or form can adequately represent God because (1) nothing “lower” in the created order can inform the intellect about what is “higher” in the created order, much less about God, who is uncreated; (2) essence and existence are separate in the created order, while united in God; and (3) everything that can be signified or understood by the intellect in the created order is contained preeminently in God, who is “un-circumscribed” (*ST* I.12.2).

27. *ST* II-II.1.2 ad 3; *ST* I.12.11 ad 4.

In order to explicate and defend this claim properly, we need to consider more closely how God unites God's self to the intellect as its intelligible form. Aquinas claims that God is united to the intellect by God's "presence, essence, and power," which means that God 'informs' the intellect (again to utilize Aquinas's Aristotelian idiom) in the way of an intelligible form. It is important to reemphasize this point because the temptation is to picture God's direct presence to the intellect along *spatial* or even *metaphysical* rather than *cognitive* lines. Aquinas considers and corrects this misunderstanding in the following passage from the *Summa theologiae*:

[God's 'informing' the intellect] must not be understood as though the Divine essence were in reality the form of our intellect, or as though from its conjunction with our intellect there resulted one being simply, as in natural things from the natural form and matter: but the meaning is that the proportion of the Divine essence to our intellect is as the proportion of form to matter. . . . As from the natural form (whereby a thing has being and matter) there results one thing simply, so from the form whereby the intellect understands, and the intellect itself, there results one thing intelligibly.²⁸

In question eight, article one of *De veritate*, Aquinas expresses the same point this way:

It is not necessary, however, for the divine essence to become the form of the intellect but only to become related to the intellect after the manner of a form. Consequently, just as one actual being results from matter and a form which is a part of the thing; so, with the necessary differences, the created intellect and the divine essence become one in the act of understanding when the intellect understands and the divine essence is understood through itself.²⁹

And again, later on in that same article, Aquinas says that just as a self-subsisting thing lacking matter, such as the soul, can be the form of matter, so "similarly and in some way or other, and even though it is pure act and has an act of being entirely distinct from the intellect, the divine essence becomes related to the intellect as its form in the act of understanding."³⁰

Aquinas's point here is that the divine essence is the intelligible form of the intellect in a manner *analogous* to the manner in which the soul is the substantial form of the body: just as the body, as 'informed' by the soul, is united to the soul as one thing *metaphysically* (or simply), so the intellect, as 'informed' by the divine essence, is united to the divine essence as one thing

28. *ST* suppl. 92.1.

30. *Ibid.*

29. *QDV* 8.1.

cognitively (or intelligibly). Or we can put the same point this way: just as the body stands to be ‘informed’ by the soul as matter to form, or potency to act, so the beatified intellect stands to be ‘informed’ by the divine essence as matter to form, or potency to act. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas writes: “Now in the intellect we must take the intellect itself in potentiality as matter, and the intelligible species as form; so that the intellect actually understanding will be the composite as it were resulting from both.”³¹ Since “a thing is intelligible in respect of its actuality and not of its potentiality” and “the Divine essence is pure act, [then] it will be possible for it to be form whereby the intellect understands: and this will be the beatific vision.”³² In other words, the beatific vision qua intellectual act is the *cognitive* composite of potency and form, or the beatified intellect and divine essence. In short, in beatitude, God unites God’s self to the intellect as form to matter: “and this will be the beatific vision.”

Now, Aquinas realizes that as possessors of a created intellect, human persons are incapable by themselves of knowing or ‘seeing’ God directly: that is simply not a power we naturally possess. Thus, he writes, “Now since the natural power of the created intellect does not avail to enable it to see the essence of God . . . it is necessary that the power of understanding should be added by divine grace.”³³ Specifically, Aquinas argues that we only can know or ‘see’ God directly by means of a “supernatural disposition” or supernatural increase in our natural powers of cognition—what Aquinas calls the created ‘light of glory’ (*lumen gloriae*)—that strengthens and perfects the intellect. Aquinas concludes: “Therefore it must be said that to see the essence of God, there is required some similitude (*similitudo*) in the visual faculty, namely, the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God.”³⁴ Or again, he writes: “This light is required to see the divine essence, not as a similitude in which God is seen, but as a perfection of the intellect, strengthening it to see God. Therefore it may be said that this light is to be described not as a medium in which (*in quo*) God is seen, but one by which (*sub quo*) He is seen; and such a medium does not take away the immediate vision of God.”³⁵ Aquinas insists, therefore, that although God is only known or ‘seen’ in beatitude by the ‘light of glory’, that light does not interpose itself between the intellect and God since it functions solely to strengthen and perfect beatified persons’ natural intellectual powers.

31. *ST* suppl. 92.1.

33. *ST* I.12.5.

35. *ST* I.12.5 ad 2.

32. *Ibid.*

34. *ST* I.12.2.

It also bears repeating that on Aquinas's view, the blessed never comprehend God fully, even when their created intellects are strengthened and perfected by the 'light of glory'. Even a glorified intellect remains finite; hence, it is impossible for it to attain to an infinite knowledge or comprehension of God. Aquinas reasons as follows:

Everything is knowable according to its actuality. But God, whose being is infinite . . . is infinitely knowable. Now no created intellect can know God infinitely. For a created intellect knows the Divine essence more or less perfectly in proportion as it receives a greater or lesser light of glory. Since therefore the created light of glory received into any created intellect cannot be infinite, it is clearly impossible for any created intellect to know God in an infinite degree. Hence it is impossible that it should comprehend God.³⁶

Thus, while the blessed truly know or 'see' God in beatitude, and indeed know or 'see' *all* of God in beatitude—the divine essence in its totality—they cannot comprehend all that they know or 'see': for example, "he who sees God's essence, sees in Him that He exists infinitely, and is infinitely knowable; nevertheless, this infinite mode does not extend to enable the knower to know infinitely."³⁷ Aquinas does admit that there are degrees to which God can be known or 'seen' in beatitude, not because God is more intelligible to some rather than others, or because God's essence is united to some intellects rather than others, but rather because "one intellect will have a greater power or faculty to see God than another."³⁸ So the ability to know or 'see' more or less of the divine essence depends entirely on the influence of God's glorifying grace.

The Beatific Vision and Formal Causality

Aquinas's reply to the questions of whether God can be known and how God is known issues in some bold claims. Not only does Aquinas affirm that human persons, qua endowed with specifically intellectual powers, are *capable* of knowing or 'seeing' God; he also affirms that human persons, qua endowed with specifically intellectual powers, have been *created* to know or 'see' God. In other words, on Aquinas's view, the final end of all human knowing, and consequently the final end of all human desiring or happiness, is 'seeing' the essence of God directly. Now, to modern ears, these Thomistic claims can sound strange if not offensive: one of the main lessons of modern

36. *STI.12.7.*

38. *STI.12.6.*

37. *STI.12.7 ad 3.*

philosophy, whose origins I have already located in the skeptical philosophy of Hume and the critical philosophy of Kant, is that we must remain agnostic or at least sharply circumspect regarding epistemic access to the transcendent (or the supramundane or other-worldly), given that (it is tacitly assumed) our intellectual powers are inextricably bound up with the natural or sensible world and are hence incapable of furnishing us with knowledge of any reality that exists outside or beyond the natural or sensible world. It is only vain or ignorant philosophy, or perhaps vain or ignorant theology, to suppose that human persons are capable of enjoying knowledge of the transcendent or the divinely real, let alone to suppose that they have been created to enjoy knowledge of the transcendent or the divinely real. And yet, these are precisely Aquinas's claims. Are they intelligible? And equally important, are they defensible? In the remainder of the chapter, we will consider and address these important questions in more detail.

Aquinas's main claim is that the blessed know or 'see' God in beatitude when God unites God's self to the intellect, which is strengthened and perfected by God's glorifying grace, or the 'light of glory'. That is, when the divine essence itself becomes the intelligible form of their intellects, the blessed intellectually 'see' or (we can now say) 'perceive' God in an act of direct and unmediated cognition. I take this point to be paramount for understanding how Aquinas holds to direct realism in his account of beatific knowledge: just as the human intellect, as 'informed' by abstracted intelligible form and generated conceptual form, is actualized as world-intending thought so the human intellect, as 'informed' by the divine essence, is actualized as "God-intending" thought, or the 'vision' of God in God's self: itself a distinct and unique act of intellect that conjoins the mind with its proper object—the divine essence itself. And yet, in making this claim, Aquinas actually *extends* and *strengthens* his commitment to direct realism. According to Aquinas, knowledge entails assimilation of the mind to the thing known, or reality itself; and assimilation requires that the likeness (species or form) of a thing be present to the mind of the knower, so that "the knower be in some way united to what is known." "However," Aquinas continues, "when the thing itself is united through its own essence to the intellect, *the union is more perfect than if it had taken place through a likeness*" (my emphasis).³⁹ Aquinas's provocative claim, therefore—again, a ringing offense to modern ears—is not merely that the mind is cognitively united to God in beatitude; the mind is actually more *strongly* and more *perfectly* united to God in beati-

39. QDV 8.1 ad 7.

tude, given God's direct presence to the intellect. The intellectual 'vision' or 'perception' of the divine essence the blessed enjoy in beatitude is therefore actually *more* immediate and direct than acts of ordinary empirical knowledge here below.

As I will argue shortly, making proper sense of this claim requires once again invoking the explanatory power of *formal causality*; but to begin, we can make better sense of this claim (and hence deal with some initial objections to it) by showing how the beatific vision, as a unique form of postmortem cognition, bears both important differences and important similarities to ordinary, empirical cognition.⁴⁰ As Aquinas points out, since postmortem cognition, broadly understood, occurs when a soul is separated from its body, it may appear to be unnatural (or even impossible), since in this life, knowledge is dependent on sense experience, and particularly on phantasms, which serve as a material source for abstraction. However, he responds as follows:

To solve this difficulty we must consider that as nothing acts except so far as it is actual, the mode of action in every agent follows from its mode of existence. Now the soul has one mode of being when in the body, and another when apart from it, its nature remaining always the same. . . . The soul, therefore, when united to the body, consistently with that mode of existence, has a mode of understanding, by turning to corporeal phantasms, which are in corporeal organs; but when it is separated from the body, it has a mode of understanding, by turning to simply intelligible objects, as is proper to other separate substances.⁴¹

From Aquinas's perspective, there is nothing inherently implausible in postmortem cognition. While in ordinary cases of premortem cognition, the intellect has to turn to the phantasms of sense experience in order to abstract intelligible species or forms (given its attachment to the body), in postmortem cognition (as Aquinas goes on to say) the intellect receives intelligible species or forms directly through divine illumination—in the case of the be-

40. Aquinas holds that immediately after death the human soul occupies a place (heaven, hell, or purgatory) where it will receive reward or punishment based on merit or demerit in this life. He writes: "And since a place is assigned to souls in keeping with their reward or punishment, as soon as the soul is set free from the body it is either plunged into hell or soars to heaven, unless it be held back by some debt, for which its flight must needs be delayed until the soul is first of all cleansed" (*ST* suppl. 69.2). He also holds that the separated soul will ultimately be reunited with the body at the resurrection given that "the state of the soul in the body is more perfect than outside the body, because it is a part of the whole composite" (*ST* suppl. 75.1 ad 4).

41. *ST* I.89.1. For a more extended treatment of postmortem cognition in Aquinas, see *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, art. 15–20 (translation from *Questions on the Soul*, trans. James H. Robb [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984]).

atific vision, through the infusion of the divine essence itself. In each case, cognition occurs “consistently with that mode of existence.”

We also can put this same point even more positively: in this life, it is our cognitive predicament that we confront the world by way of experience; as such, the mind’s directedness at the world in thought is directly dependent on casual contact with the world through experience. In the next life, however, it will be our cognitive privilege to know things, whether other separate substances, natural things, or even some singular things, without the mediation of sense experience, through the direct activity of the divine light on our minds.⁴² Now, Aquinas recognizes that if it is more cognitively advantageous to apprehend intelligible objects without the weight of sense experience, it may seem as if “God should have ordered the soul’s nature so that the nobler way of understanding would have been natural to it, and it would not have needed the body for that purpose.”⁴³ However, since God created a diversified universe, whose perfection “required various grades of being” as well as intellect, it was better that the human soul, and the human intellect (which is the weakest of intellectual substances), be united to a body, so that it would “receive the proper and adequate knowledge of sensible things from the sensible things themselves.”⁴⁴ The idea here is that were the human soul not embodied and received the same species that ‘inform’ the intellects of higher substances (such as angels), its knowledge “would be imperfect, and of a general and confused nature,” given that such species are more comprehensive, and hence deeper and richer in content than what the human intellect can grasp. For our own good, then, God created us with bodies so that we might attain a “perfect and proper” knowledge in a way that is fitting with our own nature.⁴⁵

Thus Aquinas recognizes that postmortem cognition is in one sense unnatural, since the soul is naturally united to the body; but it *also* remains natural both in the sense that “it is possible for [the soul] to exist apart from the

42. Aquinas admits that compared with angelic knowledge, the knowledge enjoyed by the separated soul is general and confused, given that the angelic intellect is superior to the human intellect. See in particular *ST* I.89.3 and *ST* I.89.4. In the beatific vision, however, the mind will know or see all things clearly rather than confusedly in God, by way of the divine essence, rather than by infused species: “Hence, according to the knowledge whereby things are known by those who see the essence of God, they are seen in God Himself not by any other similitudes but by the Divine essence alone present to the intellect; by which also God Himself is seen” (*ST* I.12.9).

43. *ST* I.89.1.

45. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

body” and more importantly because “God is the author of the influx both of the light of grace and of the light of nature.”⁴⁶ Now, this latter claim, which we will investigate further in the following section, is of utmost importance. As long as we remain convinced that the mind is only *exclusively* fitted for its current natural habitat—*this* body and *this* world—then we cannot accommodate Aquinas’s claims that postmortem cognition, and the beatific vision in particular, which requires the ‘light of glory’, is natural in any intelligible sense. But Aquinas clearly does not share this view. His reasoning is clear and solid: if the knowledge we have by way of nature (premortem cognition) and the knowledge we have by way of grace (postmortem cognition) stem from the same divine source, then the knowledge we have by way of grace cannot compete with and hence supplant or violate the knowledge we have by way of nature. God furnishes us with the light of the intellect, with which we are created, *and* the light of grace; consequently, God, as “the author of the influx” of both lights, can raise the mind and influence the mind to know in ways that utterly surpass the way in which it comes to possess knowledge here below. Consequently, the mind (and the human person more broadly) is equally “at home” in its current natural habitat, on this side of eternity, and in the new natural habitat it will occupy in the life to come.

Again, I will defend these claims more in the section that follows; but for the moment, we can highlight the continuity of pre- and postmortem cognition by recalling how in premortem cognition both the senses and the intellect are passively ‘informed’ by the world itself. Thus postmortem cognition, and God’s special act of uniting species and even God’s self to the intellect in the case of the beatific vision, also can be understood along the lines of passive reception. In sensory cognition, sensible form is passively received in the senses: external objects *impress* their sensible features or forms on the senses, and the result is direct sensory encounter with objective, sensible features of the empirical world. At the level of intellectual cognition, intelligible form is passively received in the intellect by way of abstraction: the intelligible form abstracted by the agent intellect is received in the passive intellect, which in turn generates a concept, and the result is direct intellectual encounter with objective, intelligible features of the empirical world. Both sensory and intellectual cognition, therefore, entail the *passive* actualization of a potency or power by form, particularly at the level of sensory cognition. Analogously, we can say that in postmortem cognition and the beatific vision, intelligible species and the divine essence are passively received by the intellect when God respective-

46. ST I.89.1, ST I.89.1 ad 3.

ly *impresses* species and God's self on the intellect: for example, just as the impression of sensible form on the senses yields direct sensory and perceptual encounter with the world (through the activity of the external senses as well as the common sense), so the impression of the divine essence on the intellect in beatitude yields direct intellectual and 'perceptual' encounter with the divine. Like sensory cognition in particular, therefore, beatific knowledge of God is nothing more than the passive actualization of a potency or power by form—the actualization of the glorified intellect by God as pure form or act.

Now, it is important to note that Aquinas clearly argues against the possibility that beatified persons 'see' God using their naturally endowed sensory and visual powers.⁴⁷ Thus if intellectual cognition of the divine essence in beatitude is distinctly 'visual' or 'perceptual', it is not because it possesses phenomenal qualities or properties that resemble the phenomenal qualities or properties that typically characterize sensation or perception here below. Rather, intellectual cognition of the divine essence is distinctly 'visual' or 'perceptual' because it is direct and immediate: it is because the beatified intellect is *conjoined* to the divine essence in a unique, unparalleled act of intellectual cognition that beatified persons are able to 'see' or 'perceive' God. When the soul is not conjoined to the body, this entire cognitive process occurs at the level of intellectual rather than sensory cognition: in the case of the beatific vision, the passive reception of the divine essence by the intellect yields knowledge of God's *intelligible* features or form, and hence *knowledge* of the divine essence itself. Thus, while the intellectual 'vision' of God may indeed possess intrinsic phenomenal qualities or properties (or an intrinsic phenomenal content), those qualities or properties do not distinguish the intellectual 'vision' of God as a unique form of knowledge.

We are now in a position to answer the question of how beatific knowledge of God is possible, drawing on insights garnered in the previous chapter: God is the *formal cause* of that knowledge. Recall that on Aquinas's view, as summarized by Myles Burnyeat,

Both intellect and the senses are powers of *receptivity*. In both intellectual understanding and (proper object) perception we submit ourselves to being in-formed (as we still say) by the very objects we receive information about. When a cognitive state is wholly determined by its object, sensible or intelligible, the result is objective truth.⁴⁸

47. Aquinas claims that "It is impossible for God to be seen by the sense of sight, or by any other sense, or faculty of the sensitive power" (*ST* I.12.3).

48. Burnyeat, "Aquinas on 'Spiritual' Change in Perception," 141.

In the supernatural cognitive state of beatitude, formal causality is at work because the blessed submit themselves to being 'informed' by the divine essence: God unites God's self to the minds of the blessed in the manner of a formal cause, thereby "wholly determining" the supernatural cognitive state that furnishes the blessed direct epistemic access to God. The supernatural cognitive state of beatitude is therefore "wholly determined" by its object, the divine essence, and "the result is objective truth," namely 'seeing' God directly. As the formal cause of the knowledge of God, God not only causally elicits such knowledge, in the manner of an *efficient* cause; God also wholly determines the *content* of such knowledge. And God wholly determines the content of such knowledge because God *is* the content of such knowledge: as the intelligible form of the intellect, God constitutes the very content of the intellect's 'vision' of God; and by constituting the very content of the intellect's 'vision' of God, God *also* constitutes what the blessed 'see' *in* God, namely, the very essence of God itself. God is thus both the *object* and the *content* of the beatific vision: in Aquinas's terms, the divine essence is both "that which is understood, and that whereby it is understood."⁴⁹ The real and wonderful mystery here—and this bears repeating—is that, as Aquinas puts it, "Similarly and in some way or other, and even though it is pure act and has an act of being entirely distinct from the intellect, the divine essence becomes related to the intellect as its form in the act of understanding."⁵⁰ God's direct presence to the intellect is the *same* as the intellect's act of knowing or 'seeing' God.

We can understand this mystery better if we reconsider the nature of formal causality itself. Haldane expresses it crudely but effectively using the following example:

Form exemplified naturally makes the dog to be a dog. Form exemplified intentionally makes my thought of a dog to be a dog-type thought. To this we can add that intentional exemplification has as a condition of its occurrence some prior natural exemplification. My thought is caused to have its content by the form of the dog. There are, then, three cases of formal causation: *within the natural order*, *within the intentional order*, and *between the natural and intentional orders*.⁵¹

To this, we should add two other cases of formal causation: *within the divine order*, and *between the divine and intentional orders*. God exists independently of the mind within the divine order; more than that, God constitutes the

49. *ST* suppl. 92.1.

50. *QDV* 8.1.

51. Haldane, "A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind," 269.

divine order. But God does not, to employ Haldane's idiom, exemplify any form: God *is* God's own form, since God is the *only* case of the exemplification of divine form. The further case of formal causality is the intentional exemplification of form: the created intellect 'informed' by the divine essence itself. Thus the intentional exemplification of divine form yields the beatific vision: *a supernatural intellectual state that is entirely God-formed*. (Because God is not present to the intellect as a created form, it would be inaccurate to say that the intentional exemplification of divine form yields a "God-type" thought.) Finally, formal causality holds between the divine and the intentional orders: the beatific vision is caused to have its content by the divine essence itself. Or put even more simply, God is the form within the divine order that causes the knowledge of God within the intentional order. As the form of the intellect, God formally causes knowledge of God.

Now, if it is true that formal causality holds between the divine and intentional orders, then mind and God are formally conjoined in the beatific vision itself. But the way in which the mind and God are formally conjoined is utterly unique. Knowledge of things here below, at the levels of both sensory and intellectual cognition, is *isomorphic*, in the sense that the same sensible and intelligible features that are in things come to inhere in the senses and the intellect respectively, as species or forms devoid of matter. There is thus a *likeness* present in the senses and the intellect that conjoins those faculties to the world in the act of sensing and knowing. But the cognitive union with God that the mind enjoys in the beatific vision is, as Aquinas says, *more perfect* than the cognitive union with the world that the mind enjoys with the world because God, rather than any likeness of God, is directly present to the mind. Thus it would be inadequate (if not misleading) to say that the mind is isomorphic with God in the beatific vision, given that there is only *one* form, the divine essence itself, by which God is known. If there is only one form by which God is known, then the cognitive union the mind enjoys with God is the most direct type of knowledge attainable by the mind. The relation that holds between mind and God in beatitude is so direct that it actually goes *beyond* isomorphism: it is *supra-isomorphic*.

The consequences for epistemology that follow from this claim are drastically important, and I will be exploring some of those consequences at the end of this chapter and throughout the rest of the book. But first, it is important that we consider the relation that holds between the mind and God in beatitude in more detail, in order to try and capture (even if only inadequately) some of its main features. I have already suggested that the beatific vision

(*visio*) bears features of basic cognition (*cognitio*), understanding (*intellectus*), and scientific knowledge (*scientia*). It is, in fact, the highest achievement of intellect: a direct, penetrating, and complete (however non-comprehensive) apprehension of the divine itself. At the risk of engaging in unnecessary speculation, I think we can characterize such knowledge with the following example. In this life, we can know, for example, *that a triangle has three angles equal to two right angles* with *scientia*, by the way of demonstration, as the conclusion of mathematics (and specifically geometry) qua Aristotelian science. We could say that once we know that truth by way of *scientia*, we ‘see’ *that a triangle has three angles equal to two right angles*: we have complete and certain cognition of that truth.⁵² Now, in the next life, in the beatific vision, the blessed participate in the science of God: given God’s direct presence to their intellects, they know, for example, *that God is perfectly good*. Moreover, it is more proper to say (given that they possess *scientia* of that truth) that they ‘see’ *that God is perfectly good* with complete and certain cognition.

There is a further analogy we can draw here. Recall that in the last chapter, I argued on Aquinas’s behalf (relying on the contemporary work of John McDowell) that conceptual capacities attributable to the intellect can be actualized, not only in judgment and reasoning (considered as second and third acts of intellect), but also within sense experience itself. Sense experience thus can be accompanied by propositional content, the conceptual form of a judgment. In contemporary form, McDowell expresses the same point as follows: in paradigm cases of sense experience “one finds oneself saddled with content,” for “the conceptual contents that are most basic in this sense are already possessed by impressions themselves.”⁵³ Thus McDowell claims that “In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*,” which figures both as the content of the experience and also, if one is not misled, as “a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.”⁵⁴ Again, the point McDowell makes here is thoroughly Thomistic and Aristotelian: it is because sense experience can, in paradigm cases, bear the same content or form as external objects and states of affairs that cognitive subjects can be isomorphically conjoined in sense experience itself to those external objects and states of affairs.⁵⁵

52. In *QDV* 8.2, Aquinas says that we also can know this truth imperfectly on the basis of a “probable reason” such as the testimony of another; but clearly this sort of knowledge falls short of *scientia*.

53. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 9–10.

54. *Ibid.*, 9 and 26.

55. In context, McDowell is drawing on Kant’s insight that “empirical knowledge results

So the analogy I am drawing can be expressed as follows. It is by virtue of possessing sensory and specifically visual cognitive states (for example) configured by distinctively conceptual and even propositional content of the form *that things are thus and so* (passively integrated in the experience itself) that cognitive subjects can be credited with the full sensory cognitive achievement of seeing *that things are thus and so*. For example, in a case where one sees *that it is a chair that is in front of one*, one is (if one is not misled), visually impressed by the perceptible fact *that it is a chair that is in front of one*. There is an isomorphism between the sensory cognitive state, so 'informed', and the world itself. Analogously, I argue that it is by virtue of possessing an intellectual or 'visual' cognitive state configured by content of the form *that God is thus and so*—for example, *that God is perfectly good*—integrated by God in the beatific vision itself, that the blessed can be credited with the full cognitive achievement of genuinely knowing or 'seeing' *that God is thus and so*, or *that God is perfectly good*. In other words, in knowing or 'seeing' *that God is perfectly good*, the blessed actually know or 'see' God's perfect goodness itself (and hence know or 'see' the divine essence itself).⁵⁶ There is an immediate, supra-isomorphic relation that holds between this supernaturally charged intellectual state (and hence the mind itself), so 'informed' and configured by God, and God in God's self.

Of course, I am cautious in drawing the analogy, because I realize that in specifying the sort of content that figures in beatified persons' 'vision' of the divine essence, I am at best *approximating* that content based on the kind of conceptual content that normally figures in higher acts of intellect. For example, for the sake of rendering the mystery of the beatific vision more intelligible, I have been assuming that the content of beatific knowledge of God possesses a propositional form and is expressible in a human language such

from a co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity" (*Mind and World*, 9). However, as should be evident, I am showing how McDowell's claims here also can and should be aligned with Aquinas and Aristotle.

56. According to Aquinas's doctrine of God, God is utterly simple, which means that there is no real distinction between God's essence and God's attributes, nor is there any real distinction between God's attributes. See *ST* 1.3.7. Thus, for example, in beatitude, to 'see' or 'perceive' God's goodness is to 'see' or 'perceive' God's essence, given that God, unlike human persons, is *essentially* good. However, given that there is a rational or logical distinction between God's essence and God's attributes (being and goodness), as well as a rational or logical distinction that God also recognizes between God's attributes, it follows that, for example, in 'seeing' or 'perceiving' God's goodness, the blessed also recognize that God's goodness is distinct from God's essence as well as from God's other attributes. See *ST* 1.5.1; see also bk. I of the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* (hereafter *In SENT*) 36.2.2 ad 2.

as English. Aquinas clearly argues that the beatific vision “will not be by way of a proposition, but by way of a simple understanding.”⁵⁷ As I interpret it, then, Aquinas’s claim here is not that the beatific vision is void of *any* content (which, on my view, would mean that it fails to qualify as *knowledge* of God, properly speaking), but rather that the beatific vision is *uniquely* configured and constituted *by God* in such a way that beatified persons are able to know or ‘see’ God by way of suprapropositional “simple understanding.” I raise this point, of course, not to engage in unnecessary speculation, but only to remind the reader at Aquinas’s initiative that the content that figures in the ‘vision’ of God cannot possibly be specified as long as we are forced to articulate that content using worldly conceptual and linguistic resources.

My overall point here, however, is that the intellectual ‘vision’ persons have of God in beatitude is *content rich*, since it is directly ‘informed’ by the divine essence itself. I argue, then, on Aquinas’s behalf, that our intellectual capacities possess a further mode of actualization: in beatitude, the intellectual capacities of the blessed are actualized in such a way *by God* that the blessed actually ‘see’ the divine essence itself. A key tenet of my argument, therefore, which I will explore in the next section, is that beatified persons genuinely can know or ‘see’ God *because* they possess the requisite capacities—capacities that are uniquely and paradigmatically actualized by God when God unites God’s self to the intellect.

Beatitude and the Glorification of the Intellect

An important assumption I have been making so far is that beatified persons’ intellectual capacities can be directly actualized by God, which is a claim I now need to defend. And this claim is not *prima facie* plausible; in fact, the process it speaks of can seem utterly mysterious: the actualization of intellectual capacities in this life yields distinctively conceptual episodes—primarily acts of apprehension, judgment, and reasoning; the actualization of the intellectual capacities of the blessed in the next life yields distinctively supraconceptual episodes—acts of *pure* ‘vision’ or “simple understanding” directed on God *in God’s self*. Nevertheless, I argue that the claim itself is defensible and that the process it speaks of is intelligible. First of all, while the intellectual ‘vision’ or ‘perception’ of God persons enjoy in beatitude is indeed extrasensory, it is not extranatural, since the capacities that are actualized in beatitude belong to the intellect, and not to some extraordinary or

57. *ST II-II.1.2 ad 3.*

occult cognitive power that is superadded or superimposed on the intellect by grace. Second of all, while it is true that intellectual capacities attributable to the intellect are *supernaturally* strengthened and perfected by the ‘light of glory’ in order that they can be *supernaturally* actualized by God, the *process* by which those intellectual capacities are supernaturalized is still recognizable, in that it bears certain crucial similarities to the process by which we acquire a *second nature* in our natural cognitive environment—that is, the cognitive environment we inhabit in *this* life.

In the last chapter, I defended the idea that the major capacities associated with the intellect are largely constitutive of our second nature, which we acquire through habituation or having the right sort of cognitive “upbringing.” I therefore made an argument on Aquinas’s behalf that the intellect’s abstracting and grasping the natures (quiddities) of things are cognitive activities or exercises of capacities that occur *in* the natural world with the aid of the senses. Thus, according to Aquinas, while the intellect is certainly *immaterial*, in the sense that it is not materially constituted like a sense organ, it is nevertheless not something extranatural—that is, something extra that “floats free” of the natural potentialities or capacities (such as sensory capacities) that we possess by virtue of inhabiting the natural world and which we share with other animal inhabitants of the natural world. Thus, on my own reading of Aquinas, which extends but is also compatible with Aquinas’s own account, we acquire full-blown natural powers of intellect by undergoing the appropriate sort of cognitive development and reform—a process that begins when we are initiated or habituated into a shared language and system of thought and culminates when we gain the ability to be “opened” by the world to the intelligible aspects or features of empirical reality.

Now, the cognitive ability to ‘see’ or ‘perceive’ the divine essence is certainly not natural in the sense that it is intrinsic to the intellect. Aquinas claims that “The faculty of seeing God . . . does not belong to the created intellect naturally, but is given to it by the light of glory, which establishes the intellect in a kind of *deiformity*.”⁵⁸ So the capacity to ‘see’ or ‘perceive’ the divine essence is indeed a supernatural cognitive capacity given to the intellect by God, thereby making the intellect like God in order that it may participate in God’s knowledge of God’s self—without of course, possessing that knowledge itself.⁵⁹ And yet, as I am now arguing, this capacity is *not* ex-

58. *ST I.12.6.*

59. Anna N. Williams argues that while beatific knowledge and God’s self-knowledge share the same object—namely, the divine essence—they still differ radically in the mode in which

tra-intellectual and hence extranatural: that is, it is not given in addition to the already developed natural intellectual capacities of beatified persons, nor does it supersede those capacities. As we saw in the last chapter, the natural light of the intellect is “nothing else than a participated likeness of the un-created light”: it is has been created by God, and more than that given to us by God, so that we can be cognizers like God.⁶⁰ Aquinas also says that the natural light of the intellect is derived from the *same* “first light” as the ‘light of glory’: in furnishing the ‘light of glory’, God builds on and expands what God has already created, further intensifying or “brightening,” we could say, our natural intellectual light.⁶¹ As Anna Williams nicely summarizes, grace in Aquinas’s theology never replaces or does violence to nature; rather, it always elevates nature:

Grace . . . does not add to the human person by creating new faculties and thus changing essentially the structure of the human being but by extending the range of possibility of those faculties the person already possesses. Grace is both foreign to us, in the sense that its effects lie beyond the attainment of our nature itself, and yet natural to us in that it does not violate or alter the composition of our nature, working instead through that nature.⁶²

For the present purposes, I want to take Williams’s interpretation one step further: in receiving the ‘light of glory’, which strengthens and perfects their natural intellectual capacities, the blessed are initiated or habituated into a *glorified* set of intellectual capacities in accord with their *deified* second nature—what I now want to call their *glorified second nature* or *supernature*. So again, this glorified set of intellectual capacities is not merely superadded to the mind, as it were, from outside the realm of second nature, making those capacities seem strangely extrinsic and alien to the natural intellectual capacities of beatified persons. Rather, via an analogous process, which surely includes cognitive development and reform, as well as habituation into a divine system of thought shared by God *and* the community of the blessed,

they are appropriated. She writes: “The creature possesses knowledge according to its own nature; it may be lifted beyond its own capacities, but such grace perfects nature rather than destroying it (II-II.26,13 *sed contra*). God also knows himself according to his own nature, and since divine and human nature are essentially distinct, the mode of this knowledge differs from the creature’s mode of knowledge, even though the object of knowing, God, is the same in each case” (Anna N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 97).

60. *ST*I.84.5.

61. *ST*I.12.2.

62. Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 37.

namely, the true science of God (*scientia dei*), God extends beatified persons' natural intellectual capacities so that they in turn can be actualized by God, thereby enabling beatified persons to 'see' God. Thus the idea here is that 'seeing' God is an exercise of the intellect as perfected by a distinct disposition or habit of mind (the 'light of glory') that the blessed acquire and hence receive from God through something like education, imitation, training, and practice—that is, through submitting themselves to *divine pedagogy*. The goal here, of course, is that through this process of acquisition and development under the direction of God's grace, the blessed fully "grow into" their glorified second nature and hence into their identities as human cognizers of God.

So understood, the acquisition of beatific knowledge of God clearly bears an analogous relation to the acquisition of scientific knowledge here below, which Jenkins claims entails two main levels or stages of "intellectual habituation." First, Jenkins claims, to obtain *scientia*, one must acquire, via discovery or investigation, the requisite full understanding of the natures or concepts within a given science or field of inquiry. As we have already seen, this entails significant cognitive work on the part of the subject, particularly within the natural *scientiae*, given that the natures and causes of things that these sciences investigate can only be discovered via their effects (or by reasoning from effects to causes). It is at the second level of "cognitive restructuring," when one is able to construct a proper demonstration (*propter quid* syllogism) and the effects of things come to be known on the basis of their causes (expressing the very way one has to come to think about the world), that one is also able to achieve the deeper explanatory knowledge of the world necessary for *scientia*. Now, Jenkins's further point is that this entire process of habituation does not occur through isolated intellectual inquiry; it occurs, rather, through *apprenticeship*, or "undertaking a period of training and discipline under the guidance of those more accomplished with the field, so that we may acquire the intellectual habits to apprehend what is *per se notum* as such," and then reason to conclusions from these truths.⁶³

This is especially evident, Jenkins goes on to argue, in the case of *sacra doctrina*, or sacred doctrine, the revealed, subaltern *scientia* that faith investigates and which is based on divine *scientia*. In order properly to attain the beatific vision in heaven, Jenkins says, we must first submit ourselves to the teaching authority of God and accept God's revelation in faith, "just as stu-

63. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith*, 49.

dents accept the teachings of a master in the acquisition of a merely human *scientia*.”⁶⁴ Here, Aquinas says:

man’s ultimate happiness consists in a supernatural vision of God: to which vision man cannot attain unless he be taught by God. . . . Now man acquires a share of this learning, not indeed all at once, but by little and little, according to the mode of his nature: and every one who learns thus must needs believe, in order that he may acquire science in a perfect degree. . . . Hence in order that a man arrive at the perfect vision of heavenly happiness, he must first of all believe God, as a disciple believes the master who is teaching him.⁶⁵

I am extending the argument Aquinas makes here by claiming that even in beatitude, which entails the full acquisition of divine *scientia* according to the finite mode of the intellect, a degree of apprenticeship is required, which extends (while significantly accelerating) the pedagogical process that occurs in this life through faith. In beatitude, I contend, there are stages analogous to the stages of intellectual habituation that Jenkins says occurs here below in the acquisition of a merely human *scientia*—something like an initial, preparatory stage of inquiry and, as I already suggested, subsequent massive cognitive restructuring—as the mind journeys further and further in its knowledge of the divine. My further claim, of course, is that all of this is intelligible as a process in which the blessed acquire and fully inhabit intellectual capacities and powers consonant with their glorified second nature.⁶⁶

Given all of this, we should no longer be tempted to make the deification or glorification of the intellect into something entirely magical—something that suddenly and inexplicably happens to the mind, transforming the

64. *Ibid.*, 68.

65. *ST* II-II.2.3.

66. Extending the notion of second nature here to include supernature also allows us to make room for Aquinas’s claim that “Of those who see the essence of God, one sees Him more perfectly than another” (*ST* I.12.6). Again, as I interpret Aquinas, having one’s second nature deified or supernaturalized by the empowering light of God’s grace and glory is a cognitive *process* in which one is fully initiated or habituated into a glorified set of intellectual capacities. And presumably, this process can be more advanced in the minds of some beatified persons than in others. Aquinas continues, “The diversity of seeing will not arise on the part of the object seen, for the same object will be presented to all—viz. the essence of God; nor will it arise from the diverse participation of the object seen by different similitudes; but it will arise on the part of the diverse faculty of the intellect, not, indeed, the natural faculty, but the glorified faculty” (*ST* I.12.6 ad 3). The suggestion here is that knowing God in the beatific state is habitual: not only is it the product of habit (the “glorified faculty” or ‘light of glory’), it is also obtained *through* habit, broadly speaking; that is, it is obtained through the continual *exercising* of habit and, more than that, the *diverse* exercising of habit within the community of the blessed.

mind into some sort of superterrestrial power. Again, in the beatified state, God does not merely replace already installed cognitive hardware, discarding the old and installing the new; God *perfects* what God has already made, adding to it, raising it to its full, intended potential.⁶⁷ In this extended and enriched (as well as sharply qualified) sense, then, beatification *is* natural to the human mind: a deified or glorified second nature, which the blessed come to possess in beatitude, simply *is* a fully perfected second nature. Thus Aquinas writes that “By the name of beatitude is understood the ultimate perfection of rational or of intellectual nature; and hence it is that it is naturally desired, since everything naturally desires its ultimate perfection.”⁶⁸

As beatified persons are initiated by grace into a new set of glorified intellectual capacities (or we can even say, a glorified intellectual “space”), they also come to possess the cognitive ability to be “opened” by God to God’s very inner life and being. Put another way, by acquiring a new set of glorified intellectual capacities and hence a glorified second nature, the blessed become susceptible to ‘seeing’ God: they learn how to “take in” God’s very reality. Thus, ‘seeing’ God in beatitude requires no cognitive work on the part of the intellect. Unlike the acquisition of *scientia* here below, therefore, the acquisition of *scientia* in the beatific vision, as well as the process of habituation that it entails, is thoroughly nondiscursive. This does not mean, however, that no pedagogy is at work in the process of beatification: what is at work is simply pedagogy of such an accelerated sort that it only requires seemingly passive participation on the part of the intellect: completely unhindered, nondiscursive reflection and acts of intellect that put the blessed completely at the pedagogical disposal of the divine.

Aquinas puts the same point this way: in beatitude, things in God are ‘seen’ “simultaneously” rather than “successively.”⁶⁹ That is, in beatitude, the blessed do not actively need to form thoughts or judgments, or “make up their minds” about what they ‘see’ in God. Quoting Augustine, Aquinas says, “Our thoughts will not be unstable, going to and fro from one thing to another; but we shall see all we know at one glance.”⁷⁰ Neither Augustine nor Aquinas mean to suggest, of course, that ‘seeing’ God in the beatified cognitive state can be reduced to a fixed, static gaze on the divine. Since the beatific vision occurs in eternity, it is not temporally indexed: ‘see-

67. According to Aquinas, “beatitude does not destroy nature, since it is its perfection” (*ST* I.62.7 *sed contra*).

68. *ST* I.62.1.

69. *ST* I.12.10.

70. *ST* I.12.10 *sed contra*.

ing' God simultaneously, therefore, should be properly understood as 'seeing' God continually, without cessation. In other words, in the beatified cognitive state, the blessed 'see' more and more of God—greater and longer stretches of divine reality—as God “opens” or reveals more of God's self to the mind, 'visually' impressing God's self on the mind and drawing perfected intellectual capacities into operation.

The Knowledge of God “Unbounded”

In his *Compendium theologiae*, Aquinas reiterates the claim he makes in the *Summa theologiae* that “God cannot be known through any created species whatsoever, whether sensible or intelligible.” And the reasoning he uses to make this claim is especially illuminating:

since our intellect knows nothing except through the intelligible species of the thing known, the species of one thing cannot disclose the essence of another thing. In proportion as the species, whereby the mind knows, is remote from the thing known, the less perfect is the knowledge our intellect has of that thing's essence. For example, if we should know an ox by the species of an ass, we would have an imperfect knowledge of the essence of the ox, for our concept would be limited to its genus. Our knowledge would be still more defective if we were to know the ox through the medium of a stone, because then we would know it by a more remote genus. And if our knowledge were gained through the species of a thing that did not agree with the ox in any genus, we could not know the essence of the ox at all. . . . Accordingly, if God is to be known as He is, in His essence, God Himself must become the form of the intellect knowing Him and must be joined to that intellect, not indeed so as to constitute a single nature with it, but in the way an intelligible species is joined to the intelligence.⁷¹

On Aquinas's view, the species of an ass, or (even more remotely) the species of a stone, even as present to the intellect (and hence furnishing the intellect the content of a thought about an ox) can at best afford “imperfect” or “defective” knowledge of the essence of an ox; “and if our knowledge were gained through the species of a thing that did not agree with the ox in any genus, we could not know the essence of the ox at all.” Thus Aquinas holds to the following rule regarding knowledge of a thing's essence: the more remote the species used to know the essence of a thing is, the more imperfect the knowledge of the essence of that thing is, and hence the more *distant*

71. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, translation from the *Compendium of Theology* by Cyril Vollert (London: Herder, 1955), bk. I, chap. 105.

(cognitively speaking) from the intellect that thing is. To know the essence of a thing, such as an ox, requires that the species of the ox itself ‘inform’ the intellect directly, because it is only as ‘informed’ by the species of the ox that the intellect can truly know what an ox is. Analogously, to know the essence of God requires that the divine essence itself (and not any created species) ‘inform’ the intellect, because it is only as ‘informed’ by the divine essence itself that the intellect can truly know what God is. If our knowledge of God were gained solely through a created form or likeness, we could not properly ‘see’ the essence of God at all.

Aquinas’s main point, then, is the following. In paradigm cases of empirical cognition, as ‘informed’ by the species of an ox (and not a surrogate intelligible form), the intellect enjoys direct epistemic access to the essence of an ox: there is an isomorphism between the intellect, so ‘informed’, and the ox itself. Analogously, in the beatific state, as ‘informed’ by the divine essence (and not a surrogate intelligible form), the intellect enjoys direct epistemic access to the divine essence: there is an even more immediate relation that holds between the intellect, so ‘informed’, and the divine essence itself. In other words, by virtue of ‘informing’ the intellect directly—disclosing the essence of God’s self to the intellect—God closes any cognitive distance between the intellect and God, bringing mind and God together. I repeat this central claim, which I argue forms the basis of Aquinas’s direct realist account of the beatific vision, precisely in order to show that knowledge of God, on Aquinas’s view, presupposes that there is no cognitive *boundary* or interface separating the mind from God.

But suppose—contrary to what Aquinas suggests—that God does lie outside or beyond a cognitive boundary, beyond what the intellect can know. If we affirm that God properly belongs outside such a boundary (and this is the picture of the mind’s relationship to God that we have inherited from modern thought), then we must in turn deny that the mind can attain the beatific vision. We can explain this as follows. The picture of God transcending an outer cognitive boundary symbolically suggests that the intellect is bounded on the outside: its powers are circumscribed, rendering it simply incapable of knowing God in God’s essence, whether it is made deiform by God or not. And if the intellect is bounded on the outside and thus is incapable of knowing God in God’s essence, then the intellect is so structured that *it cannot be ‘informed’ directly by the essence God*. According to Aquinas, God’s purpose in uniting God’s self to the intellect as its intelligible form is to unite the intellect to God. But if the intellect were circumscribed by an outer boundary, then God could

not unite the intellect to God's self, unless God were to eradicate the boundary separating the intellect from God altogether. Eradication, however, is not an act of elevation: it is an act of violence. Were God to eradicate the boundary separating the intellect from God, God would completely override the intellect's structural limitations, or its inherent "boundedness," at the risk of annulling the intellect's created powers or annihilating the intellect altogether. In short, with the boundary in the picture separating God and mind, God's direct presence or full disclosure to the mind as its intelligible form would completely overwhelm the mind, if not obliterate the mind entirely.

With this picture in place, what then becomes of knowledge of God in the beatific state? With the boundary in the picture, separating the intellect (on the inside) from God (on the outside), God is forced to sustain the mind's knowledge of God from the outside, substituting God's direct presence to the mind with another created and therefore finite form. But if God's presence to the mind, and what God can disclose of God's self to the mind, is reduced to the level of a created and therefore finite form, or a surrogate intelligible form—even a form God might fashion of God's self, or draw from the highest genus—then the mind cannot know or 'see' God in God's essence, since God lies outside every genus. (As Aquinas reminds us, "the species [or form] of one thing cannot disclose the essence of another thing".) Thus, with the boundary in the picture, preventing God from 'informing' the mind directly, the intellect at best can enjoy imperfect or defective knowledge of the essence of God. Or again, with the boundary in the picture, preventing God from 'informing' the mind directly, the intellect at best can know the essence of God *indirectly*.

McDowell argues that if the world is forced to impact what we think and believe about the world from outside or beyond a cognitive boundary—given that the world is pictured on this view as completely exterior to the realm of human subjectivity—then it can seem like a mystery how our thoughts and beliefs about the world can be credited with empirical content and hence be capable of bearing on the world. The mental space in which we form thoughts and beliefs about the world becomes self-enclosed, and a vast stretch of cognitive distance opens up between mind and world, thereby putting the world outside or beyond our cognitive reach. McDowell, of course, thinks that this conclusion is disastrous:

If we conceive what we want to think of as the space of concepts, the realm of thought, in a way that alienates it so radically from the merely material that we seem to be faced with those familiar modern problems of reconciling the subjective

with the objective, we undermine our right to think of it as the realm of thought at all. When we set it off so radically from the objective world, we lose our right to think of moves within the space we are picturing as content-involving. So we stop being able to picture it as the space of concepts. Everything goes dark in the interior as we picture it.⁷²

Moreover, once the realm of thought is alienated from the objective world (by virtue of being circumscribed by an outer boundary), then the world itself threatens to “withdraw,” thereby making it unintelligible how the world can be accessed by thought, or put more bluntly, even thought of at all. McDowell states his argument against what he takes to be the main dilemma that besets modern and mainstream epistemology as follows:

What gives the seeming problems of mainstream epistemology their seeming urgency . . . is a frame of mind in which the world to which we want to conceive our thinking as answerable threatens to withdraw out of reach of anything we can think of as our means of access to it. A gap threatens to open between us and what we should like to conceive ourselves as knowing about, and it then seems to be a task for philosophy to show us ways of bridging the gulf. It is this threat of inaccessibility on the part of the world that we need to dislodge, in order to unmask as illusory the seeming compulsoriness of mainstream epistemology. . . . This allows us to make the parallel between epistemology and religion more pointed. The world as it figures in mainstream epistemology is a counterpart, not to just any idea of the divine as non-human and authoritative, but to the conception of *deus absconditus*, God as withdrawn into a mysterious inaccessibility.⁷³

In this passage, McDowell draws a nice comparison between epistemology and religion, or “the world as it figures in mainstream epistemology” and “God as withdrawn into a mysterious inaccessibility.” McDowell’s aim is to rid epistemology of the “threat of inaccessibility on the part of the world,” which in turn requires overcoming a distorted picture of the mind’s relationship to the world. Consequently, he points to what I claim is an equally distorted way of construing the mind’s relationship to God as exemplified in the beatific state. If God is positioned outside or beyond a cognitive boundary that encloses and protects the intellect, then knowing God in the beatific state no longer can be understood as an act of cognitive and specifically ‘visual’ union with God. As I began to argue above, with God present

72. John McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 409.

73. John McDowell, “Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 110.

to the mind only indirectly, through the mediation of a created form, or surrogate intelligible form, God remains restricted in what God can disclose of God's self to the mind. The actualization of beatified persons' intellective capacities by a surrogate intelligible form can generate a particular intellective state that at best furnishes beatified persons with something *less than* a direct 'visual' cognitive encounter with God. God can sustain the beatific vision safely from the outside—putting in God's "appearance" to the mind, we could say, through the agency of a created form—but God cannot breach the boundary itself and 'inform' the intellect directly. Given that this intellective state "falls short of the fact," it cannot furnish the full knowledge of God that the mind desires.

The picture being considered here, then, is subject to a particular instability and distortion: even in the beatific state, God must remain strangely external to the mind. Operating from outside the boundary, God is forced to sustain or elicit the mind's knowledge of God exclusively in the manner of an *efficient* rather than also in the manner of a *formal* cause, leaving the *content* of that knowledge wholly underdetermined. And if God is forced to sustain or elicit the mind's knowledge of God only efficiently and not also formally, then it remains a mystery how that knowledge can be credited with bearing directly on the essence of God. So if God does not *entirely* shape and form the knowledge of God persons have in beatitude (which God cannot do as long as the intellect remains bounded on the outside), then it becomes a mystery how knowing God in beatitude is ultimately equal to having God really "in view" at all. McDowell argues that if we take worldviews to be constituted solely by mental episodes such as appearances or even beliefs whose bearing on the world remains suspect or unaccounted for (given that they are not rationally connected to or 'informed' by the world itself), then we are forced to picture those worldviews as set over against objective reality, interiorized to such a degree that they cease to be intelligible as offering persons a genuine view of the world at all.⁷⁴ Analogously, I argue that if we take beatific knowledge of God as constituted solely by mental episodes that belong on the near side of a boundary separating the mind and God (given that they do not furnish the requisite 'vision' of the divine), then we are forced to picture that knowledge as set over against God's objective reality, interiorized to such a degree that it ceases to be intelligible as offering the blessed a genuine 'view' of God at all.

74. See McDowell, "Knowledge and the Internal," in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 408–9.

Thus, on the distorted picture being considered here, the blessed simply cannot ‘see’ God in God’s essence at all: their knowledge of God falls short of intellectual ‘vision’, eclipsed by the boundary and hence obscured by darkness on the inside. The image of darkness obscuring our view of the world, which McDowell employs to describe what happens when conceptual schemes recede into a kind of self-sufficiency and detach entirely from the world, is thus particularly apt here and is perhaps even more provocative when we recall that Aquinas incorporates the metaphor of “light” in advancing his account of the beatific vision. Aquinas describes the beatific vision as an infusion of divine light in the intellect that renders God completely transparent to the intellect, thereby enabling us to know or ‘see’ God *truly* “as God is.” But with the boundary in the picture, we simply *cannot* know or ‘see’ God truly “as God is”; and if we cannot know or ‘see’ God truly “as God is,” then we cannot properly attain the beatific vision, our naturally desired beatitude. *But this is antithetical to everything that Aquinas claims about the beatific vision.* Consequently, given his commitment to the beatific vision, which is based in both reason and faith, Aquinas would find any model of the mind’s relationship to God that dualistically opposes the mind and God—especially one that separates the mind and God by a cognitive interface or boundary—to be a philosophical and theological anathema.

Thus Aquinas teaches us the following lesson about the mind’s relationship to God: while God indeed should be pictured as transcending the mind—even *infinitely* transcending the mind—God need not also be pictured as transcending an outer boundary that circumscribes and protects the cognitive space that defines human subjectivity and mindedness. We can maintain a strong commitment to God’s transcendence, and specifically to God’s transcending the mind (again, even in beatitude), without having to situate God in relation to any boundary, thus without having to affirm a view of the mind as autonomously self-enclosed, a view of the mind from which God is conspicuously absent. Once the boundary is deleted from the picture, there is no longer any temptation or need to place God outside or inside that boundary. In fact, the temptation or need to use the metaphor of a boundary to explain the mind’s relationship to God completely dissolves.

I conclude by making this point, not merely in order to emphasize the immediacy with which God is known in beatitude, but also to show how Aquinas challenges the predominant modern philosophical and theological assumption—itself a form of heterodoxy, I claim—that God *does* need to be positioned in relation to an outer boundary that encloses the cognitive

space that persons, by virtue of possessing minds, occupy. As I argued in part one of the book, this assumption is deeply embedded in modern thought, so much so, in fact, that it can seem as if acknowledging or honoring God's transcendence (for philosophical or theological reasons), along with the limitations of the human mind, *requires* locating God in relation to a cognitive boundary. But Aquinas clearly does not share this assumption: as long as God is positioned in relation to a cognitive boundary, on the far side of an interface that separates the mind and God, then God cannot be fully known or 'seen' in beatitude "as God is." The very intelligibility of the intellectual 'vision' of the divine reality that Aquinas defends as *the* paradigm of cognition and the "sublime height" of intellectual actualization presupposes that mind and God can "meet," not merely at a boundary, or (to use another metaphor) at the "edge" of human subjectivity, but "face to face."⁷⁵

So understood, Aquinas also offers us a compelling alternative to the modern view that God's transcendence and incomprehensibility render God ultimately unknowable. According to Aquinas, the only cognitive limitation the created intellect is subject to in beatitude is creaturely finitude: God cannot be known infinitely, and hence cannot be comprehended, because "it is clearly impossible for any created intellect to know God in an infinite degree."⁷⁶ But even though God cannot be known infinitely or comprehensively, God can still be known *directly*—and moreover, *objectively*—given that there is no "region" of the divine reality that intelligibly can be located outside or beyond a cognitive boundary that encloses the intellect, and thus located outside or beyond the scope of the intellect's 'vision' of God. Aquinas very clearly affirms that "God is called incomprehensible not because anything of Him is not seen; but because He is not seen as perfectly as He is capable of being seen."⁷⁷ Or again, he writes, "Therefore he who sees God's essence, sees in Him that He exists infinitely, and is infinitely knowable."⁷⁸ Aquinas's remarkable claim here, then, is that God's infinitude, far from constituting a bounded region of the divine reality from which persons are denied epistemic access, is in fact interwoven into the very fabric or layout of divine reality that is 'visually' impressed on the intellect in beatitude. As I read Aquinas, therefore, God's infinitude, as well as God's transcendence and even God's incomprehensibility are directly and objectively manifest or "in view" for the blessed in the intellectual 'vision' of God they enjoy for eternity.⁷⁹

75. *ST I.12.5.*

76. *ST I.12.7.*

77. *ST I.12.7 ad 2.*

78. *ST I.12.7 ad 3.*

79. I owe this point to Karl Rahner, who argues on Aquinas's behalf that God's incompre-

Conclusion

One of the main conclusions of this chapter, which deserves repeating here at the chapter's end, is that the blessed know or 'see' God because God unites the glorified minds of the blessed (made deiform by God's glorifying grace) to God's self, or actualizes the glorified intellectual capacities of the blessed directly, *not* because God eradicates a boundary that encloses the space in which those capacities are actualized or exercised—an act which I have already said can only do violence to the mind. What I am claiming in conclusion, then, is that God's cognitive distance from the mind, or God's transcending the mind, epistemically speaking, is not contingent on there being a boundary that circumscribes our cognitive abilities and hence encloses human mindedness. Rather, that distance is reflective of the present fallibility of our cognitive abilities, or the mind's status as not yet fully redeemed, awaiting its full perfection in glory. And yet, as I will argue in the next chapter, there is a true cognition or apprehension of God that we can possess in *reason* and *faith*, the latter of which precedes and anticipates the full 'vision' of God the blessed will enjoy in their beatified state. It is to that subject that I now turn.

hensibility must be taken together thematically with God's very intelligibility, because "only in this way do we avoid speaking of the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility as an opaque and unfortunately unavoidable remainder of ignorance in the vision of God." Thus, he concludes, "We must make the incomprehensibility of God a positive content of the vision of God, since this vision is the radical height of the ontological relationship between God and the creature" (Karl Rahner, "Thomas Aquinas on The Incomprehensibility of God," *The Journal of Religion* 58 suppl. [1978]: 113). As I understand Rahner's claim, God's incomprehensibility—better described, perhaps, as God's *sublimity*—figures as a positive attribute of God that constitutes the divine essence and hence is known or 'seen' by the blessed in beatitude.

Realist Epistemologies of Reason and Faith

AS A CHRISTIAN philosophical theologian, Aquinas holds to the scriptural principle that we ‘see’ God “face to face” in the next life; in this life, however, we ‘see’ God, at best, “in a glass darkly.”¹ Thus the following question presents itself: if our ability to think about God or direct our thoughts on God in this life is intrinsically limited and inadequate, then must God also remain *unknown* to us? Aquinas is, of course, well known for answering this question in the affirmative: while in the next life, “we shall see [God] by a form which is His essence, and we shall be united to Him as to something known (*quasi noto*),” in this life, “our most perfect knowledge of Him as wayfarers is to know that He is above all that our intellect can conceive, and thus we are united to Him as something unknown (*quasi ignoto*).”² Thus, on Aquinas’s view, no living human person in his or her current truncated cognitive state can ‘see’ the essence of God; consequently there can be no direct knowledge of the essence of God in this life. In fact, according to Aquinas, we know God most perfectly in this life when we know that God is *beyond* anything we can conceive—that is, beyond anything we can know or ‘see’.

At bottom, then, Aquinas claims that human persons live largely in ignorance of the divine in this life: we walk more in darkness than we do in light. So what does this suggest about the mind’s relationship to God? In

1. I Corinthians 13:12. In this chapter, I will continue using single quotes when using terms that are important in Thomistic epistemology.

2. *ST* suppl. 92.1 ad 3.

the last chapter, I argued that even though Aquinas affirms that God infinitely transcends the mind, he does not place God outside or beyond a cognitive boundary that encloses the mind: the intelligibility of the beatific vision as cognitive union with God prevents us from picturing the mind and God as ever meeting at a cognitive interface in the state of supernatural beatitude. And yet, the question remains whether God can still be pictured as lying outside or beyond a cognitive boundary in *this* life: does human ignorance of the divine also entail that our cognitive powers are bounded on the outside, implying that God must remain, in this life, *totally* hidden and unknown—that is, *utterly* beyond what we can think or believe?

According to Aquinas, the answer to this question is a resounding “no.”³ We can use reason, for example, or our natural intellectual light, to know something of God qua uncreated cause, on the basis of God’s sensible effects in the created order—most notably, that God exists, as well as “what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of things, exceeding all things caused by Him.”⁴ Moreover, we can also know something of God through faith, which operates, not by the ‘light of reason’, but by a “higher” light infused by grace. Thus faith grants us access to revealed truths that cannot be known by reason alone; faith also grants us access to truths that can be known (at least potentially) by reason alone, but which also have been “fittingly proposed” by God through revelation for our belief.⁵ Of course, Aquinas reminds us that even the knowledge afforded by faith does not afford us any knowledge of the divine essence. Even in faith, we remain united to God as to one ‘unknown’.⁶

In advancing these claims, Aquinas points towards a truth and tension that lie at the heart of Christian philosophical theology: whatever knowledge

3. Brian Davies claims that “when [Aquinas] denies that we know what God is he clearly does not intend to suggest that we can claim no knowledge of God at all.” More specifically, what Aquinas denies is that God is something like a material entity that we can single out and define within the conceptual nets of our own understanding. See Brian Davies, “Aquinas on What God is Not,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, 227–28.

4. *ST* I.12.12.

5. *SCG* I.4. As we will see, Aquinas argues that there are indeed some truths about God that can be known by way of rational argument or demonstration, rather than revelation. Aquinas therefore differentiates these “preambles of faith” (*preambula fidei*) from genuine articles of faith (culled from *sacra doctrina*), the latter of which must be believed and cannot be known by way of rational argument or demonstration. See *ST* I.2.2 ad 1; *ST* II-II.1.5.

6. *ST* I.12.13 ad 1. Throughout the rest of the chapter and book, I will be claiming with Aquinas that God is ‘unknown’ (in single quotes) as a way of reminding the reader that knowledge of God, here below, falls drastically short of intellectual ‘vision’, and hence ultimately only bears on God as ‘unknown’.

of God we gain in this life remains shrouded in ignorance, given that God surpasses anything that we can think or say about God. And yet, even though our knowledge of God remains shrouded in ignorance—again, we ‘see’ God, at best, “through a glass darkly”—it remains knowledge nonetheless. We remain *united* to God in our ‘unknowing’, which means that our knowledge of God, limited and impoverished as it may be, nevertheless affords us a genuine, however provisional, cognitive “grip” on who God objectively is, even if it never allows us to ‘see’ or penetrate the divine essence itself. Thus, as I read Aquinas, even though God remains hidden from the mind in this life in the sense that God remains ‘unseen’ by us, God still does not remain hidden outside or beyond a cognitive boundary. Were God so positioned in relation to a boundary—again, even in this life—then *any* prospect of knowing God, whether through reason or faith, would quickly slip away. So the central questions of this book remain: how *can* God be known by us? And given that God can be known by us, how *is* God known by us?

In the last chapter, I answered these questions by explicating and defending Aquinas’s realist epistemology of the beatific vision, itself a paradigm case of cognition and knowledge. In this chapter, I answer these questions by explicating and defending Aquinas’s realist epistemologies of reason and faith. Essentially, I make two interrelated claims: using the language of *intentionality*, I defend the claim that through reason and faith we can and do form and hold true beliefs *about* God that bear on or are directed on God—that is, the transcendent, ‘unknown’ God whom we cognitively attain and hence know in this life by believing what we cannot ‘see’. Using the language of *epistemology*, I contend that the true beliefs about God that reason and faith generate also possess a positive epistemic status, in the sense that they are based on adequate grounds as well as produced and sustained by properly functioning faculties. My main goal in the chapter, therefore, is to show how Aquinas offers us robust epistemological models for how human persons can and do enjoy knowledge of God in this life.⁷ In so doing, I also show how Aquinas offers us powerful resources for continuing to rehabilitate the mind’s relationship to God.

7. The contemporary epistemologist may be disappointed that I never offer necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge; but this clearly lies well outside the scope of my argument. I am content to claim that reason and faith on Aquinas’s view appear from a variety of contemporary epistemological perspectives to offer knowledge.

The Cognitive Mechanics of Reason

Aquinas claims that the knowledge of God available to an embodied intellect in this life is derived from what we know of God's creatures, or material things (sensible objects) as created effects of God. "Hence it must be said simply," Aquinas says, "that God is not the first object of our knowledge. Rather do we know God through creatures, according to the Apostle (Rm. 1:20), 'the invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made'."⁸ Now, to know God through creatures is clearly not to know God in God's self: in this life, unlike in the beatific vision, the proper object of the intellect is the quiddity of a material substance, rather than God. Moreover, "our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause."⁹ If all knowledge of God is through *creatures*, then, which can never attain to direct knowledge of the divine essence itself, how is genuine knowledge of *God* still possible? Here, Aquinas proposes that there is a *triplex via*, or threefold way to God: the way of *causality*, which leads us to God on the grounds that all created things are related to God as effects who owe their existence and origin to their uncreated cause; the way of *negation*, which leads us to God as we deny of God or remove from our conception of God certain creaturely qualities and imperfections, precisely in order to distinguish God qua transcendent cause from the created order; and the way of *eminence*, which leads us to God as we ascribe qualities to God that God possesses preeminently or perfectly, in a manner that utterly surpasses the way those qualities are possessed by creatures:

Hence we know about God's relationship with creatures insofar as He is the cause of them all; also that creatures differ from Him, inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him; and that creatures are not removed from Him by reason of any defect on His part, but because He superexceeds them all.¹⁰

Thus the threefold way forms the basis of Aquinas's theological epistemology for embodied intellects in this life. More specifically, it forms the basis for the negative theological epistemology that Aquinas inherits from Pseudo-Dionysius, the great Christian Neoplatonic theologian and mystic.¹¹ As Greg-

8. *STI*.88.3.

9. *STI*.12.12.

10. *Ibid.* I have modified the translation a bit.

11. Aquinas comments directly on the work of Pseudo-Dionysius in *Super librum Dionysii De divinis nominibus*, although he employs the Dionysian *triplex via* throughout his corpus. For

ory Rocca argues in a recent and thorough treatment of Aquinas's theological epistemology, the threefold way in Aquinas is essentially a *via negativa*: through the threefold way, and hence the *via negativa*, we come to a proper recognition of God's "epistemic transcendence." He continues, "Our sense of God's transcendence requires that the *via negativa* be our method of choice whenever we attempt to discourse about the mysteries of God."¹² In particular, Rocca distinguishes three types of negation in Aquinas: qualitative negations, which absolutely deny that certain creaturely qualities apply to God (e.g., *God is immaterial*); objective modal negations, which deny that a quality applicable to God (given that it is a perfection in God) belongs to God in its creaturely and hence imperfect mode (e.g., *God is eminently good*); and subjective modal negations, which deny of God the usual ways we tend to think of and express God's attributes, given our distinctly human way or mode of signifying by way of propositions (e.g., *God is not wise*, which does not deny wisdom of God, but only the connotation that wisdom exists in God as it does in us, as a nonsubstantive or nonessential property). Now, it is important to note that each of the propositions (and hence beliefs) we form about God by way of negation, as specified by Rocca's interpretation of Aquinas, is *true* in a specific sense: qualitative negations are true because they rightly deny something of God found uniquely in creatures; objective modal negations are true because they rightly deny the creaturely mode of a quality that exists preeminently in God; subjective modal negations are true because they rightly deny attributing a quality to God that we understand imperfectly according to the finite mode of our intellect.

It is important to emphasize this, because a central tenet of my argument, which I will develop more in the sections that follow, is that the *via negativa*, understood as a function of reason (or the natural 'light of reason'), enables us to form true beliefs about God, and more specifically, true beliefs about what God is *not*. Thus, through a distinct cognitive process dictated by reason, we are able to direct our beliefs about God, actually derived from creatures, away from creatures (and ourselves) onto God's objective, *transcendent* reality. In this sense, our knowledge of God obtained primarily through negation is not vacuous; on the contrary, according to Aquinas, it furnishes the

a contemporary translation of Pseudo-Dionysius's works, see *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Jean Leclercq (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987).

12. Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 56. See in particular 49–74.

outlines and contours (however rough and incomplete) of a positive knowledge of the divine essence itself and hence an awareness of transcendent reality itself: “For one who knows something in so far as it differs from all other things,” Aquinas says, “approaches the knowledge by which one knows what it is.”¹³ This is particularly clear in Aquinas’s discussion in the *Summa contra gentiles* of the knowledge of God obtained by way of remotion (*via remotio-nis*), or forming true beliefs about God by way of accumulating qualitative negations, absolutely denying that God possesses certain qualities intrinsic to creatures. Norman Kretzmann deems this the “eliminative method,” and Aquinas employs it towards definitive epistemic ends as follows:

Now, in considering the divine substance, the principal method to be followed is the method of remotion. For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing *what it is*. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing *what it is not*. Furthermore, we approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things from Him. For we know each thing more perfectly the more fully we see its differences from other things; for each thing has within itself its own being, distinct from all things. . . . For example, if we say that God is not an accident, we thereby distinguish Him from all accidents. Then, if we add that He is not a body, we shall further distinguish Him from certain substances. And thus, proceeding in order, by such negations God will be distinguished from all that He is not. Finally, there will then be a proper consideration of God’s substance when He will be known as distinct from all things. Yet, this knowledge will not be perfect, since it will not tell us what God is in Himself.¹⁴

According to Kretzmann’s count, Aquinas employs more than eighty arguments or demonstrations in chapters 15–28 of Book I of the *Summa contra gentiles* in order to eliminate nineteen predicates from the concept of God (or “Alpha,” since Kretzmann thinks that Aquinas has not yet been able to establish that God, properly speaking, exists), including (most notably) temporality, materiality, corporeality, composition, and imperfection.¹⁵

Now, as both Rocca and Kretzmann point out, theological negation (*via*

13. *QDV* 10.12 ad 7 second series. All translations of questions 10–20 of the *De veritate* are from *On Truth*, vol. 2, trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Regnery, 1952; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

14. *SCG* I.14.

15. See Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas’s Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles* I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 118. For the larger discussion, see chapter four, “From Independence to Perfection,” 113–38.

negativa) bears an important relation to theological affirmation (*via affirmativa*). On one level, all negation presupposes a previous affirmation, however minimal and predisposed towards negation that affirmation may be. Kretzmann claims that based on some of his arguments or demonstrations for the existence of God (or Alpha), Aquinas is entitled to hold that God (or Alpha) is “an immutable first cause of everything” that also exists “necessarily, through itself.”¹⁶ Rocca contends that Aquinas “does base the negations upon some primary affirmations which assert that God is pure act and infinite subsistent being; in various ways he claims that God is the infinite positivity of being without knowing *what* the pure positivity is or how it *is* God. Yet, it is from these affirmations that his negative theology lives and moves and has its being.”¹⁷ On another level, negation is always the corrective flip side of affirmation: even our positive predications of God (e.g., goodness, wisdom, life, power), which we ascribe to God given that God is the preeminent source of the qualities they denote in creatures, remain couched within modal negations (objective or subjective).¹⁸ This is so because even as the possessor of these positive qualities, God utterly surpasses or “superexceeds” (*superexcedit*) creaturely existence; hence God superexceeds the way or mode in which these qualities inhere in creatures.¹⁹

wisdom and life and the like are not removed from God as though they were not in him; but because he has them in a higher degree than mind can conceive or words express: and from that divine perfection created perfections come down in an imperfect likeness to it. Wherefore things are said of God . . . not only negatively and causally but also eminently.²⁰

Even Aquinas’s description of divine perfection (again associated with divine eminence), which Aquinas also links directly to his overriding metaphysical conception of God as pure act, or fully realized being (*ipsum esse subsistens*, “subsistent being itself,” in whom being and essence are the same), is couched in negative language and thus is the product of his eliminative method.²¹ “God,” Aquinas writes, “Who is not other than His being, is a

16. *Ibid.*, 115 and 116.

17. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 64.

18. Rocca points out that given the obvious link between God’s transcendence and God’s eminence, the latter also becomes the basis for qualitative negations in Aquinas. See Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 67–68.

19. *STI*.12.12.

20. *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* 9.7. Translation from *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932).

21. Aquinas writes, “to God alone does it belong to be His own subsistent being” (*STI*.12.4).

universally perfect being. And I call *universally perfect* that to which the excellence of no genus is lacking.”²² Reflecting on this passage and chapter from the *Summa contra gentiles*, Kretzmann writes, “if there is any thing that can be identified as being itself, in the sense of a single entity that must figure in the ultimate, metaphysical explanation of any existent thing’s having being, it can’t lack any of the capacities intrinsic to being; it has to be identified as the full reality corresponding to, and explanatory of, all those capacities, as universally perfect being.”²³ In other words, if God is being itself, in whom being is fully realized, then God can’t lack any of the capacities intrinsic to being. God is universally perfect in that God’s excellence includes all specific modes of excellence and therefore is not wanting in any of them.

Here, as we transition to consider Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy, which forms the basis of Aquinas’s positive theological epistemology, we must establish once again that on Aquinas’s view, epistemology is always grounded in ontology: Aquinas constructs an epistemology of reason in light of his basic metaphysical commitment (itself informed by both reason and faith) to divine transcendence and the richness of the divine being. More specifically, as I interpret Aquinas, the threefold way is an essential epistemic method that helps us form and hold the requisite beliefs about the ‘unknown’ God who utterly transcends both the world and the mind. And yet, Aquinas grounds his theological epistemology in ontology in another importance sense. Regarding certain perfection terms—for example, “being,” “goodness,” and “life” that actually exist in God (albeit preeminently)—Aquinas says that we actually can speak (and I argue, believe) truly not only about what God is not but also about what God is substantially, even if we still cannot know or grasp who God is in God’s essence. It is worth quoting Aquinas here at length:

these names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially (*substantialiter*) of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him. Which is proved thus. For these names express God, so far as our intellects know Him. Now since our intellect knows God from creatures, it knows Him as far as creatures represent Him. Now it is shown . . . that God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, being Himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection; yet it

22. SCG I.28.

23. Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism*, 138.

represents Him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excellent principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto, even as the forms of inferior bodies represent the power of the sun. . . . Therefore the aforesaid names signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner, even as creatures represent it imperfectly. So when we say, "God is good," the meaning is not, "God is the cause of goodness," or "God is not evil"; but the meaning is, "Whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God," and in a more excellent and higher way. Hence it does not follow that God is good, because He causes goodness; but rather, on the contrary, He causes goodness in things because He is good.²⁴

In this passage, Aquinas makes the following remarkable claim, which we will unpack further in the pages that follow: we can speak (and believe) truly and substantially about God, based on our knowledge of creatures, since creatures share in a limited but still positive way in the quality or perfection, such as goodness, that God actually possesses "in a more excellent and higher way." Thus, since God has imparted some of God's perfections to creatures through creation, which allows creatures to participate in divine reality, the content of our assertion or belief that *God is good* actually expresses something positive about God, which captures something much more about God than the assertions or beliefs that *God is the cause of goodness in creatures* or that *God is not evil*, both of which are far less rich in content.

Aquinas further specifies how the content of our positive assertions or beliefs express something positive about God. First, since in this life we can only know God through creatures, our intellect only knows or apprehends (*apprehendit*) these perfections in the mode in which they are possessed or represented by creatures.²⁵ And yet, since creatures bear a definitive relationship to God, per the metaphysical order of creation, the knowledge of God we derive from creatures does not bear primarily on creatures; it bears instead primarily on God, given that there is a real referent for our knowledge—the divine perfection itself—in God. Regarding attributing the pure perfections to God in particular, which certainly bears on theological epistemology as well, Aquinas makes an important distinction between the *modus significandi*, the way or mode we creatures have of signifying these perfections, which is imperfect because of our creaturely way of knowing, and the *res significata*, the perfection signified, which is not.²⁶ While the *res significa-*

24. *ST I.13.2.*

25. See *ST I.13.3.*

26. Aquinas writes, "As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to

ta may be in or be God (goodness is in God or God is good), Aquinas denies that the *modus significandi* applies to God, thereby ensuring that the content of our speech and thought does not misrepresent or misidentify God (particularly since God is simple rather than composite). However, Aquinas says that what we say about God when we predicate a pure perfection of God does tell us something that God possesses or that truly exists in God, albeit in a manner that we cannot fully specify or even fathom.

In making the *res/modus* distinction, Aquinas interweaves elements of his negative and positive theological epistemology, but he interweaves these elements most closely in his doctrine of analogy. Precisely in order to protect divine transcendence, and hence God's epistemic distance from the mind, on the one hand, and to avoid total agnosticism, on the other hand, Aquinas first claims that the perfections or names we predicate of God are neither *univocally* nor *equivocally* applied to both God and creatures. The names are not univocal, that is, they do not mean the same thing when they are applied to God that they do when applied to creatures, because when perfections are attributed to creatures (e.g., when we say a man is "wise") that perfection is distinct from that man and distinct from all the other perfections that exist in him. When we apply a perfection to God, however, the thing signified (e.g., wisdom) is not distinct from God (even though our signifying still includes distinction), and yet God is much greater than what we signify and still remains beyond our comprehension: "Thus also this term *wise* applied to man in some degree circumscribes and comprehends the thing signified; whereas this is not the case when it is applied to God; but it leaves the thing signified as incomprehended, and as exceeding the signification of the name."²⁷ Neither, though, are the perfections we predicate of God and creatures equivocal: if they were, then no knowledge of God would be possible and the entire project of inquiring into the divine nature, whether through reason or faith, would be undermined by the "fallacy" of equivocation.²⁸ Additionally, Aquinas has already claimed that there is a likeness between creatures and God due to the fact that God shares God's perfections with creatures. It is this that allows us as creatures to know God and God as Creator to know God's creation (through knowing God's self).²⁹

God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures" (*ST* I.13.3).

27. *ST* I.13.5.

28. *Ibid.*

29. See *QDV* 2.11.

On the basis of these claims, Aquinas concludes that the terms that we positively predicate of God are said of God and creatures neither univocally nor equivocally but *analogically*, according to a certain *relation* or *proportion* (*proportio*).³⁰ Aquinas explains analogical predication in the following passage:

the names said of God and creatures are predicated neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically, that is, according to an order or reference to something one. This can take place in two ways. In one way, according as many things have reference to something one. Thus, with reference to one *health* we say that an animal is healthy as the subject of health, medicine is healthy as its cause, food as its preserver, urine as its sign. In another way, the analogy can obtain according as the order or reference of two things is not to something else but to one of them. Thus, *being* is said of substance and accident according as an accident has reference to a substance, and not according as substance and accident are referred to a third thing. Now, the names said of God and things are not said analogically according to the first mode of analogy, since we should then have to posit something prior to God, but according to the second mode.³¹

Aquinas rejects the first kind of analogy, analogy of “many to one,” because if a term predicated of creatures and also predicated of the divine referred to some third thing, then both creatures and God would bear a relation to some third thing prior to God, which in turn would subordinate God to that thing. Instead, Aquinas adopts the second kind of analogy, analogy of “one to another,” according to which something is predicated of one thing by reference to the other thing in which that something exists more fully. Consequently, pure perfection terms can be predicated of both creatures and God by way of analogy—the analogy of “one to another”—because creatures have a certain relation or reference to God, and there is no third thing to which creatures or God are related or referred.

Here, the example that Aquinas employs is particularly instructive. “Being” applies both to substance and to accident, not only because the being of accident is ordered to and dependent on the being of substance, but also

30. For Aquinas, proportion “is nothing else than a relation of two things coming together with each other in some respect, whether this be by agreement or difference.” See *Super librum Boethii De Trinitate* 1.2 ad 3 (hereafter *In BDT*), translated by Armand Maurer as *Faith, Reason, and Theology: Questions I–IV of his Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987).

31. *SCG* I.34.

because being is in substance in a more fully realized way, as a cause of accident. Something similar occurs in the case of theological predication: pure perfection terms such as “goodness” apply both to God and to creatures, not only because creatures are ordered to and dependent on God, but also because goodness is in God in a more fully realized way (preeminently). Thus the meaning of “goodness” as it applies to both God and creatures is neither univocal or equivocal but analogical since the goodness of creatures is derived from God but is received and modeled in them imperfectly according to the finite mode of being of creatures.

Thus, on Aquinas’s view, we are justified in predicating pure perfection terms of the divine not because of our own conceptual insight into the meaning of those terms as they apply to God (which remains opaque) but because creatures qua effects participate in the being of God qua uncreated cause. As John Wippel writes,

it is the ontological relationship between a creature viewed as an effect and God viewed as its cause which justifies our predicating the name of a pure perfection of God and of the creature. For such predication to be meaningful, this cause-effect relationship must in some way be preserved in our application of the name to creatures and to God. This relationship alone grounds the minimum degree of similarity or likeness which must obtain between the two. . . . And such similitude or likeness in turn renders inadequate any theory of purely equivocal predication of the divine names.³²

The ontological relationship that Wippel cites here is built on a central metaphysical principle: every effect must bear some similarity or likeness, however remote, to its cause.³³ And since God is the First Cause, not only in the sense that God causes everything to exist (efficiently), but also in the sense that God is an exemplar cause of everything that exists, then everything that exists (all creatures) shares to some degree, however limitedly, in God’s being and perfection.³⁴

In what way, however, do creatures bear a similarity or likeness to God?

32. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 559.

33. See *SCG* I.29.

34. God is the first exemplar cause insofar as God creates based on exemplar forms or ideas existing in the divine mind, united in God but manifest diversely in things, which receive their definitive form from God. See *STI*.44.3. God is also, of course, the final cause of all things. See *STI*.44.4.

Aquinas answers that there are varying degrees of likeness, “based upon agreement or communication in form (*forma*)”: two things that share in the same form according to the same formality (or content) and the same degree (e.g., two things that are equally white); two things that share in the same form according to the same formality but not in the same degree (e.g., one thing is less white than another); and two things that share in some form but not according to the same formality, as is the case with non-univocal agents and their effects. In this last case, the form of the agent actually resides in the effect, insofar as the agent always acts according to its own form and, in acting according to its own form, produces something like itself that shares in its own form. Now, there are also degrees of similarity or likeness between agents and their effects. If the agent and effect fall within the same species (e.g., man), the likeness will be in terms of the same formality of the species; if the agent and effect fall within the same genus, the likeness will not be in terms of the same formality of the species, which means that the form of the agent is present in the effect according to a generic rather than a specific likeness (e.g., as the power of the sun is present in things generated by the sun). Finally, if the agent exists outside any genus—and this is the case with God—then the form of the agent exists in the effect not according to a specific or generic likeness “but only according to some sort of analogy.”³⁵ Thus the likeness that creatures share with God is a *participated* likeness, in the sense that all created beings, always in a partial, limited, and imperfect degree, share in God’s uncreated being, “inasmuch as God is essential being.”³⁶ Broadly speaking, then, Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy rests on the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, or the vertical relation of creatures to their Creator, even though He is unlike them. More narrowly, it rests on the fact that God is an analogical cause of the perfections that exist in creatures.

The Epistemology of Reason

Having canvassed Aquinas’s claims about the knowledge of God available through reason, we are now in a position to assess reason as a capacity for knowing God in a more definitive epistemic sense. My main claim in this section is that reason is a naturally endowed capacity for forming true beliefs about God: true beliefs that amount to knowledge, broadly speaking, insofar as they rightly direct us to God and also, it seems, more narrow-

35. *STI*.4.3.

36. *STI*.4.3 ad 3.

ly speaking, in that they are based on adequate grounds as well as produced and sustained by a properly functioning cognitive capacity.

I take it to be fundamental to the Thomistic position that the goal of cognition, in this life or the next, from more basic to more complex intellectual acts, is the attainment of *truth*, and specifically the truth about the *reality* at which our cognition is aimed. And in attaining truth, our minds are conformed to reality itself, as we intend or reach reality itself with our minds. According to Aquinas, truth is by definition the conformity of the intellect or mind to its proper object, or things that exist outside the mind: in short, truth is “the adequation of thought and thing.”³⁷ And what causes or makes the intellect to conform to its proper object—that is, what secures “the adequation of thought and thing”—is the thing itself.³⁸ Thus the truth of the intellect’s conceptions of things depends entirely on those things being, in reality, as the intellect conceives them to be: in this sense, Aquinas offers what we can call a “realist conception” of truth.³⁹ Now, it is also the goal of the intellect to obtain the truth about God, whether in this life or the next; and in this life the intellect does so, in part, through reasoning from creatures to God, or creaturely effects to their uncreated cause. In doing so, it forms beliefs with propositional contents that express the truth about God, beliefs whose truth depends on God being, in reality, as those beliefs present God to be.

As Aquinas makes readily clear, the knowledge of God obtained in this life can never rise to direct knowledge of the divine essence itself; so the true beliefs we form about God by way of reason cannot rise to a direct knowledge of the divine essence itself. Thus there can only be a partial, even minimal, rather than a full correspondence of the mind to God in this life. However, I argue that insofar as the beliefs we form and hold about God do

37. *STI.16.1*. For Aquinas, while truth is found primarily in judgments rather than in the first act of the intellect (apprehension), it also can be found (secondarily) “in [the intellect’s] formation of the quiddities of things” (*QDV.1.3*). Beliefs and judgments are true, then, insofar as they too conform to external reality, even though their conforming to reality depends on their being composed of veridical concepts that the intellect has correctly joined or separated in a secondary act.

38. *STI.16.1 ad 3*.

39. I am borrowing this term from William Alston. A realist conception of truth is also a minimalist “correspondence conception” of truth, insofar as it asserts that true propositions correspond to reality, even if it does not align itself with any one way of specifying the nature of this correspondence. See William P. Alston, *Beyond “Justification”: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 31. In *A Realist Conception of Truth*, Alston defends the realist conception over various other “epistemic conceptions” of truth, which equate truth with a high-level epistemic status.

possess the requisite content, they do bear on the divine itself, even though *what* they bear on remains 'unknown'. Since we have the threefold way, and particularly the *via negativa* that undergirds it, we are able to form and hold true beliefs about God whose content expresses God's absolute *transcendence*: in Rocca's terms, beliefs whose content constitutes a qualitative negation (e.g., *God is incorporeal*), beliefs whose content constitutes a subjective modal negation (e.g., *God is not wise*), and beliefs whose content constitutes an objective modal negation (e.g., *God is eminently wise*). Now, while the content of these sorts of beliefs—in particular the first two—does not express anything about what God is like intrinsically, insofar as it denies (in different ways) the application of a creaturely quality to God, it still properly expresses the ways in which divine reality is utterly distinct from creaturely reality; and hence, in an extended sense, it still expresses the truth *about* God, given that it is God's nature—ontologically, and not just epistemically—to transcend everything that God has created. Moreover, these beliefs purge of us theological error; that is, they direct us away from false conceptions of God, or creaturely idols of the mind, towards the transcendent nature of the true God. In this sense, the threefold way helps us overcome the obvious epistemic limitations that an embodied intellect faces, directed as it is primarily on the quiddities of material, rather than divine, reality. Thus, far from being bound to creaturely experience, the mind is actually able, by reasoning on the basis of creaturely experience, to reach beyond creaturely experience towards the divine itself, as it forms a web of true beliefs that accurately express the ways in which God is utterly transcendent to the world and the mind.

By way of the *via eminentiae*, we are also able to form true beliefs about what God is really like, without, of course, being able to 'see' what God is really like. For example, by forming the beliefs that *God is good*, that *God is wise*, and that *God is living*, we actually intend or cognitively attain a perfection in God (the *res significata*), which God of course possesses simply and preeminently. The content of these beliefs therefore not only broadly corresponds to something about God; it actually corresponds to something *in* God, even though it remains a mystery *how* it corresponds to something in God.⁴⁰ As I will go on to argue, however, it is not necessary to specify the exact nature of this correspondence. All that is necessary is that the requisite ontological relation between creatures and God, which grounds the corre-

40. David B. Burrell underscores this point nicely in *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). See in particular 55–67.

spondence, hold: a relation that God, rather than creatures, establishes and maintains.

So understood, Aquinas provides a basic account of how the mind can know God through reason in a very broad sense, on the basis of a general and largely uninformed but also very real conformity of the mind to God. But we, as moderns, may still remain suspicious: on what basis are we *justified* in holding that the beliefs generated by reason are true? In charting the broad conformity of the mind to God, haven't we already assumed that we are so justified? On what basis should we even trust that reason can afford us the requisite true beliefs about God? These questions, focused as they are on the justification for belief in God, clearly reflect a distinctly modern frame of mind, one which Aquinas simply does not share. However, I do think that we can answer these questions (or perhaps better, "unmask" them) on Aquinas's behalf by conducting an epistemological appraisal of reason in more detail.

In order to orient our discussion, it is helpful to think more broadly about what contributes to the *positive epistemic status* of the beliefs about God that reason yields. And here, we should draw on what William Alston calls various "epistemic desiderata": that is, various features of a belief that afford that belief a positive epistemic status and hence are desirable from an epistemic point of view. For our purposes, since we have already established that the goal of cognition in Aquinas is obtaining truth, we should focus specifically on what Alston calls "truth-conducive desiderata," namely, the following:

1. The subject (S) has adequate evidence (reasons, grounds . . .) for the belief (B).
2. B is based on adequate evidence (reasons, grounds . . .).
3. B was formed by a sufficiently reliable belief-forming process.
4. B was formed by the proper functioning of S's cognitive faculties.
5. B was formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue.⁴¹

Now, Alston notes that the purpose of his approach in locating these various epistemic desiderata is "radically pluralistic," insofar as it refuses to reduce the various desiderata to one central and preeminent desideratum, a reduction that is traditionally popular among those who focus exclusively on the justification of belief as the sole contributor to the positive epistemic status of a belief.⁴² Moreover, Alston denies that in specifying the various desid-

41. Alston, *Beyond "Justification,"* 43.

42. *Ibid.*, 39.

erata, he is aiming to give an account of knowledge, so conceived as something like justified true belief (or true belief plus something else that fills the slot traditionally reserved for justification). In conducting my analysis of the epistemology of reason, as well as the epistemology of faith, I will be following Alston's approach, although my end goal is to show that insofar as the beliefs about God generated by reason and faith do enjoy a certain positive epistemic status afforded to them by some important truth-conducive epistemic desiderata, there is a good case for claiming that those beliefs are true; and true beliefs that possess a sufficiently high positive epistemic status also appear to amount to knowledge in a definitive sense, from a distinctly contemporary epistemological perspective.

To start, one desideratum in particular is relevant in assessing the epistemic value of the beliefs produced by reason: *adequacy of grounds*.⁴³ According to Alston, the ground on which a given belief is based (which also sustains that belief) can be deemed "adequate" if in a large range of (actual and possible) cases the ground (or ones sufficiently like it) would give rise to mostly true beliefs. Or, more technically, "when a belief B is based on a ground that is significantly adequate, that gives B a significantly high probability [of being true] on the condition of being based on that ground."⁴⁴ "Basing" a belief on a specific ground requires taking account of that ground, or being guided by it, allowing the ground to influence and inform the process by which one forms certain beliefs. The "grounds" on which a belief is based may be either "doxastic" or "nondoxastic": doxastic grounds are other beliefs; nondoxastic grounds primarily include experiences (sensory and otherwise), but like beliefs, they also constitute cognitive states that guide the formation of beliefs (as well as sustain those beliefs). Moreover, the probability of the truth of a belief is conditional on that belief being based on a ground with a certain degree of adequacy, and Alston says that conditional probability should be equated with frequency, such that an adequate ground not only does but would generate true beliefs over a sufficiently large and varied number of cases.

What grounds does reason have for forming and holding certain beliefs about God? Because Aquinas says that knowledge of God here below is by way of creatures, and specifically sensible creaturely effects, then at least some of the grounds that reason takes account of and cognitively processes are decidedly empirical, even if reason does not base its beliefs about God di-

43. For further details, see chapter five in *Beyond "Justification."*

44. Alston, *Beyond "Justification,"* 99.

rectly on those grounds. That is to say, reason does not take account of non-doxastic empirical grounds *alone* in forming beliefs about the divine; reason has access to further doxastic grounds beyond empirical grounds that help shape the contents or outputs of those beliefs. More specifically, reason constructs arguments or demonstrations consisting of premises (the doxastic grounds) whose conclusions constitute further beliefs about God. For example, as Kretzmann argues, the eliminative method that Aquinas, using reason, employs in the *Summa contra gentiles* entails utilizing the conclusions of already established arguments about the divine nature (beginning with the premise that God or Alpha, who is the first immutable cause, exists) as premises for further eliminations.

We can demonstrate this by culling a fairly straightforward example from the *Summa theologiae*. There, Aquinas writes:

It is absolutely true that God is not a body; and this can be shown in three ways. First, because no body is in motion unless it be put in motion, as is evident from induction. Now it has been already proved that God is the First Mover, and is Himself unmoved. Therefore it is clear that God is not a body.⁴⁵

Here, Aquinas's first argument or demonstration of God's incorporeality consists in a basic syllogism whose first premise is derived from experience and inductive reasoning: *no body is in motion unless it is put in motion*, or perhaps better (for our purposes), *all bodies are put in motion*. Aquinas culls the second premise from an already established argument about the existence of God: *God is the First Mover, and is Himself unmoved*.⁴⁶ Consequently, Aquinas concludes, on the basis of both premises that *God is not a body*, given that God, unlike bodies, cannot be put into motion. His second argument from the same article, which I am abbreviating, follows a similar pattern: all bodies are in a state of potentiality; there can be no potentiality in God, because God as the First Being cannot be reduced into actuality by another (the conclusion of a previous argument for the existence of God); therefore, God is not a body. Finally, Aquinas argues that God is the most noble of beings (the conclusion of a previous argument for the existence of God) and that it is impossible for a body to be the most noble of beings, given that the body is animated, and hence made more noble, by something else, such as the soul (a premise based on a basic metaphysical principle); therefore, God is not a body.

45. *STI*.3.1.

46. See *STI*.2.

The main grounds, therefore, that Aquinas, using reason, employs in forming beliefs about God are arguments or demonstrations (demonstrations *quia*) whose premises are derived from experience, certain logical and metaphysical principles, the conclusions of earlier arguments, and sometimes the conclusions of other philosophical arguments (most notably, those offered by Aristotle).⁴⁷ The question we now need to consider is if and how those grounds can intelligibly be deemed adequate. Certainly, they only can be deemed adequate on the condition that the premises or propositional contents they contain are true, or at least have a positive epistemic status. Furthermore, the conditional probability of basing beliefs about God on those grounds needs to be sufficiently high: the grounds on which reason bases its beliefs need to render those beliefs more likely to be true than not. Now, it certainly lies beyond the scope of my argument here to defend the truth or positive epistemic status of the sorts of premises or beliefs (for example, *God exists*) that reason relies on in arriving at various beliefs about God; nor is it within the scope of my argument to *prove* that the beliefs reason produces are, in fact, adequately grounded, and moreover, true. However, it is certainly necessary to defend the adequacy of reason's grounds in more detail, because unless we have a good case for thinking those grounds to be adequate, then we cannot defend Aquinas's claim that the beliefs about God that reason generates are in fact true.

To begin our defense, we must return to Aquinas's basic epistemological principle that all knowledge of God in this life begins with knowledge of creaturely effects. Thus, given that the most basic grounds that reason employs in forming beliefs about God are empirical—that is, derived from sensory experience and reflection—then clearly the rational inquirer (or the philosopher, more specifically) is, at bottom, dependent on his senses and intellect for forming true beliefs about the empirical world. Were the rational inquirer not in possession of cognitive faculties (both sensory and intellectual) capable of discerning the truth about God's world, then he would be unable to reason from knowledge of creatures to knowledge of the divine. And yet, as we have already seen, Aquinas offers a compelling account of sensory and intellective cognition: both the senses and intellect, by virtue of being 'informed' by the very sensible and intelligible forms that populate the external world (and more specifically the objects that populate the exter-

47. See Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism*, 115. Kretzmann says this applies particularly to Aquinas's eliminative method, but it also applies more broadly to the way in which reason operates.

nal world), afford us direct epistemic access to the external world and hence provide adequate grounds for forming true beliefs about the external world. Consequently, reason has a reliable basis on which to generate certain foundational beliefs about the external world, or about God's effects in the world, that in turn serve as premises of further arguments or demonstrations. Consider the example from above: in demonstrating that God is incorporeal, Aquinas begins with the basic empirical principle that *no body is in motion unless it is put in motion*. On a most basic level, we have a good case for ascribing a positive epistemic status to this specific doxastic ground given that it is derived from our empirical knowledge of bodies (what they are and how they behave), and our empirical knowledge of bodies is fundamentally grounded in veridical sensory and intellectual cognitive acts.

Moreover, in constructing arguments or demonstrations whose conclusions yield specific beliefs about God, the rational inquirer utilizes forms of reasoning—most notably, deductive inference—that have proven track records as reliable, truth-aimed, belief-forming processes in other fields of inquiry. Now, this fact alone certainly does not establish that the arguments or demonstrations that reason constructs in the field of *natural theology* are adequate; what it does afford us, however, is the opportunity to form well-grounded higher-level epistemic judgments or beliefs about the adequacy of those grounds, and hence distinguish those grounds that are truth conducive from those that are not.⁴⁸ Thus, if in forming those higher-level epistemic judgments or beliefs, we can present a good case that the arguments or demonstrations of natural theology are the product of established reliable belief-forming processes—and we do this by assessing those arguments or demonstrations on the basis of what we know about how deductive reasoning, for example, normally works and yields knowledge—then we also have a good case for claiming that those arguments or demonstrations qua grounds are adequate and hence truth conducive. For example, the argument Aquinas offers above for God's being incorporeal is certainly valid: in making that argument, Aquinas is making a proper deductive inference from already established premises about the nature and movement of bodies and the existence of God qua First Mover to a specific conclusion. Thus, insofar as we can discern that the argument is properly formed according to established rules of

48. As Alston points out, by forming well-grounded higher-level judgments or beliefs of this sort, we do not add anything directly to the truth-conducivity of the grounds under consideration, but we do put ourselves in a suitable position to arrange things in a manner that is favorable to acquiring true rather than false beliefs. See Alston, *Beyond "Justification,"* 43–45.

deductive inference, we also can deem that ground adequate (at least tentatively, until we conduct further analysis of other arguments) for forming the belief that God is indeed incorporeal.

It is also true, of course, that a good case for the adequacy of grounds in natural theology requires a favorable assessment of the content of those grounds—particularly the premises that constitute natural theology’s arguments or demonstrations. But once again we find ourselves in a favorable epistemic position: one of the further benefits of natural theology is that it allows us to form higher-level epistemic judgments or beliefs about (or more broadly, conduct critical analysis of) its baseline propositions or beliefs. For example, in the argument we have been considering, the premise *God is the First Mover, and is Himself unmoved* is itself the fruit of rational inquiry, a demonstration of the existence of God; however, we can (and must) further employ reason in assessing and defending it. And the goal here (perhaps against what Aquinas would explicitly endorse) may not require establishing or proving the truth of a given premise (for example, *God exists*); rather, it may only require establishing the high probability of the truth of that premise, or showing that insofar as it enjoys a positive epistemic status, the probability that it is true is sufficiently high.⁴⁹ In this sense, natural theology is in a similar epistemic boat, so to speak, to that of other fields of inquiry, such as the natural sciences, that depend heavily on the senses as well as reason and specific forms of reasoning in gathering and assessing empirical evidential support for certain propositions or beliefs.

The analysis I have conducted so far may seem to suggest that Aquinas’s epistemology of reason is exclusively “internalist,” since the rational inquirer both bases his beliefs about the divine on arguments or demonstrations that he himself fashions (arguments or demonstrations to which he clearly has access) and possesses the critical leverage to assess those arguments or demonstrations. But here we can expand our analysis and defense by showing how Aquinas’s epistemology of reason (like his account of cognition more

49. Kretzmann argues that while it is true historically that philosophers have found fault with all known arguments for God’s existence, they have also found fault with other arguments aiming to prove the existence of other minds as well as the reliability of sense perception. “That familiar state of affairs,” he says, “has helped to show philosophers that what Aquinas would call ‘probable’ (rather than ‘demonstrative’) argumentation must be the norm in philosophy, which includes natural theology” (*Metaphysics of Theism*, 54–55). Thus, Kretzmann also argues that the foundation of natural theology even in Aquinas’s own thought need not be an airtight proof but rather evidence “strong enough to make that proposition [‘God exists’] attractive as a working hypothesis, to make it intellectually worth one’s while to engage in a philosophical investigation of ‘God considered in himself’” (*ibid.*, 56).

broadly) also is “externalist,” given that not all of reason’s activity lies within or needs to lie within the rational inquirer’s cognitive purview, and so it is partly independent of the inquirer’s awareness.

More specifically, by deploying another truth-conducive desideratum—*proper functionality*—we can claim the following: reason operates the way it does in producing certain beliefs about God because it is functioning properly according to an intrinsic design. According to Alvin Plantinga, who is most well known for developing this concept in contemporary epistemology, proper functioning is linked directly with a property Plantinga calls *warrant*. Thus, on Plantinga’s view, a belief has warrant for S if

(1) it has been produced [in S] by cognitive faculties that are working properly (functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for [S’s] kinds of cognitive faculties, (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true beliefs, and (3) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true.⁵⁰

On Plantinga’s view, cognitive faculties function properly according to a design plan, and specifically, the segment of the design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs. As Alston notes, proper functioning, so conceived, is clearly truth conducive: this is precisely what it means for cognitive faculties to function properly in the appropriate cognitive environment according to the relevant segment of the design plan. Moreover, the concept of proper functioning is unabashedly “naturalistic,” in the sense that it is unabashedly “normative”: the concept of design is synonymous with how a cognitive faculty (like a scientific device or physical organ) *ought* to function. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Plantinga’s epistemology also has a decidedly theistic emphasis. He writes, “naturalism in epistemology flourishes best in the context of a theistic view of human beings: naturalism in epistemology requires supernaturalism in anthropology.”⁵¹ In other words, proper function only ultimately makes sense as God-given design: God designs our cognitive faculties so they function as they ought to (producing true belief) in the specific environment for which they were designed.

Thus the applicability of Plantinga’s epistemology here becomes clear. As we already have seen, on Aquinas’s view, reason is a God-given capac-

50. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 46–47.

51. *Ibid.*, 46. Plantinga defends this claim in chapters eleven and twelve of *Warrant and Proper Function*.

ity, a natural light given to us by God in creation that enables us to discern the truth about God's world as well as (we can now add) the truth about God and the relationship the world has with God. Consequently, I argue on Aquinas's behalf, when reason bases beliefs about God on well-formed arguments or demonstrations, employing methods constitutive of the threefold way, it is functioning properly in precisely the cognitive environment for which it has been designed—*this* empirical world that we inhabit in which there is evidence of God's effects—according to the segment of God's design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs. So, what ultimately guides and grounds reason's discursive activity is its intrinsic, God-given design. Consequently, when reason is functioning properly in the ways just specified, it is highly likely that the beliefs it forms and holds about God are true. Moreover, presuming that there is a high statistical probability that the beliefs produced under the requisite conditions (again, just specified) are true, then the beliefs that reason forms and holds about God are also *warranted*; and sufficiently warranted true belief, on Plantinga's view, is knowledge.

It is important to note that defining reason as a properly functioning cognitive faculty does nothing to undermine the role of grounds in the formation of theological beliefs by way of reason. In fact, I am claiming that reason functions properly *when* it takes account of certain grounds: sensible creaturely effects that furnish the basis for the threefold way and arguments or demonstrations whose premises are true or at least enjoy a positive epistemic status. And this means that we can defend the adequacy of reason's grounds in a third important respect: we have an argument for the truth-conductivity of those grounds based on the fact that the design plan, which is itself truth conducive, includes and even requires employing methods constitutive of the threefold way with the ultimate aim of constructing arguments or demonstrations whose conclusions yield certain beliefs about God.

At this point, the discerning reader will note that I am appealing to certain theological facts—for example, God-given design—in defending rational inquiry as a viable way to form and hold certain beliefs about God. And this, one could argue, is clearly circular reasoning. So on what basis am I (or Aquinas, for that matter) entitled to make such an appeal without furnishing further justification for it? This is an important objection, one which I consider and respond to at the end of the chapter after considering and defending Aquinas's epistemology of faith in some detail. But for the moment, without ignoring the objection entirely, I am going to press further in de-

fending the adequacy of reason's grounds by appealing once again to a fundamental Thomistic principle: epistemology on Aquinas's view cannot ultimately be severed from theology, nor can it be severed from ontology. On Aquinas's view, what ultimately grounds much of reason's discursive activity in forming beliefs about God—metaphysically, and not just epistemically—are certain facts about God and creation: most notably, that God exists, that God is the subsistent act of being itself, and that creatures bear some real likeness to God by virtue of being created by God. Thus, as Rocca points out, these facts, and the judgments or beliefs they inform, form the basis of Thomistic theological epistemology.⁵² Rocca argues that this applies in particular to Aquinas's doctrine of analogy: since God utterly transcends creaturely reality but also transmits God's own perfections to creaturely reality as its exemplar cause, then the names or concepts constitutive of our more specific beliefs about God's attributes (for example, God's goodness) can be neither univocal nor equivocal. If these names or concepts were univocal, then in using them to form beliefs about God we would lower God to the level of creaturely experience; if they were equivocal, then in forming those same beliefs we would gain no knowledge of God at all. Only analogy properly points to the relation creatures have with God while simultaneously upholding God's transcendence and the rich positivity of God's being.

Analogical predication, so understood, is thus squarely situated in Aquinas's theological epistemology. And this epistemology is "top-down" rather than "bottom-up"; that is, it is truth conducive (it enables us to form true beliefs about God) because it is God dependent. It hinges fundamentally not on the viability of our own linguistic and conceptual resources, which we use in order to get to God ("bottom-up"), but rather on God *being*, in reality, as we believe God to be by employing those conceptual resources ("top-down").⁵³ But one may still ask: even presuming that God is, in reality, as

52. Rocca deems these "Aquinas' crucial theological truths," which he discusses in a chapter of the same name in *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 255–88. He discusses their importance for properly understanding Thomistic epistemology, and particularly the doctrine of analogy, in "Analogy as Judgment in Aquinas," especially 173–87. I discuss some of Rocca's important insights in what follows.

53. Kenneth Surin expresses this point nicely: "the language of the world can speak the truth about God precisely because it is the language of the world created by God. . . . The language of the world can speak about God only because this language comes—via God's work of creation—from the being of God" (Kenneth Surin, "Creation, Revelation, and the Analogy Theory," in *The Turnings of Darkness and Light: Essays in Philosophical and Systematic Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 14). As we have already seen, Wipfel argues that "Thomas makes it perfectly clear that it is the ontological situation which provides the

we believe God to be, *in what way* does the positive content of theological beliefs, for example, derived from creatures and formed by way of analogy, apply to God, or remain true of God, if God is truly transcendent? I claim Aquinas would reply to this question as follows: since God is not so different from creatures as to prevent creatures from bearing a real relation (likeness or similarity) to God, then the positive concepts constitutive of our theological beliefs, derived as they are from creatures, are not so *equivocal* as to invalidate their bearing a real *semantic* relation (likeness or similarity) to God; but since God remains sufficiently different from creatures as to invalidate the *univocal* application of such concepts, they still bear an *analogical* semantic relation to God. Aquinas's understanding and treatment of epistemological issues related to analogical predication is inescapably metaphysical.

A recalcitrant skeptic may continue to ask: *in what way* do creatures bear a real relation to the divine or *in what way* does the divine possess creaturely perfections preeminently so as to validate analogical predication? If we cannot fully determine or demarcate the way in which creatures are related to the divine, or how the divine possesses creaturely perfections preeminently, then are we still justified in claiming that the positive concepts we apply to God bear *any* semantic relation to God? God may be, in reality, so entirely different from what we believe God to be as to invalidate analogical predication entirely and so invalidate *any* grounds for forming beliefs about God with such content. Analyzing theological predication in Aquinas, Alston expresses this concern as follows:

if we can't spell out the ways in which this higher version [of possessing a quality or perfection] is like and unlike the lower analogue, how can we even address the question of whether principles that hold of the lower form also hold of the higher form? This difficulty strikes at the heart of the Thomistic theology, for at many crucial points it depends on taking principles (assumed to be) true of human so-and-

foundation for analogical predication. Because a creature is ordered to God as its principle and cause, the name of certain pure perfections insofar as they are realized in creatures may be applied to God, but only analogically, not univocally and not equivocally" (*The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 568). Burrell claims that Aquinas's pre-philosophical stance, informed by Christian revelation, concerning "the distinction" of creator and creatures, requires that human language (including pure perfection terms) be put to analogical use so as to "span 'the distinction' of creatures from creator without collapsing it" (David B. Burrell, "Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005], 78–79). Burrell derives the phrase "the distinction" from Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*.

so's to be true of divine so-and-so's. . . . Thomas would, presumably, reply that the ways in which divine perfections surpass their created counterparts are not such as to invalidate the applications of these principles to the divine case. But, how, on his own principles, can he know this, or even be reasonably assured of it? . . . Therefore, how can he be assured that the dissimilarities are not such as to undermine the application of principles arrived at by a consideration of the creaturely analogues?⁵⁴

Alston takes this criticism to be crippling for Thomistic analogy; but in fact he concedes far too much to the skeptic in unreasonably insisting that Aquinas, or the philosopher more generally, should be able to justify his beliefs (by giving some sort of full account) about "the ways in which divine perfections surpass their created counterparts [so] as not to invalidate the applications of these principles to the divine case."⁵⁵ In reply to Alston, I suspect Aquinas would argue that his doctrine of analogy is based on what he already believes about God and creatures and has claimed to establish about God and creatures (their key differences and similarities) from within his own philosophical and theological worldview, to the best of his ability. I also suspect Aquinas would happily admit it is beyond his rational powers to establish the *precise similarity* between creatures and the divine in full detail. So when pressed, it is sufficient for Aquinas to say in response (flat-footedly, as it were) that God ensures there is sufficient similarity between creation and God, given that God has chosen to share God's perfections with creatures. *Beginning* as he does with a defensible realist metaphysics of creation, Aquinas therefore simply avoids getting deeply entangled in skeptical epistemological questions about how it is even possible for realist theological predication to occur.

54. William P. Alston, "Aquinas on Theological Predication: A Look Backward and a Look Forward," in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 173.

55. Philip A. Rolnick finds Alston's criticisms here "puzzling" for two main reasons: first, Aquinas does give an account of how God is both like and unlike creaturely perfection; second "since Alston would agree that God's ways are higher than our ways, God's thoughts higher than ours, then what is the point of asking a (human) philosopher for a full account of something higher than her own possibility?" (Philip A. Rolnick, "Realist Reference to God: Analogy or Univocity?" in *Realism and Antirealism*, ed. William P. Alston [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002], 220). In a more recent essay (William P. Alston, "Two Cheers for Mystery!" in *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005]), Alston more strongly upholds divine transcendence or mystery, and defends the thesis (which seems to border on being anti-realist) that God-thought and God-talk are "close enough to being strictly true to provide a useful guide to our lives" (112).

From the standpoint of modern philosophy, which we have already seen takes human subjectivity and skepticism as the starting point for epistemological analysis, this move on Aquinas's part to explain analogical predication in light of his metaphysical and theological commitments may still seem grossly unjustified. In Rocca's words:

To our modern way of thinking, born of Cartesian introspection and Kantian criticism, this seems to beg the question: we would automatically tend to place the epistemological questions . . . first, and only afterwards take up the ontological concerns of theology. But Aquinas lived and thought long before the progenitors of the modern age of philosophy, and he saw no problem in basing knowledge on being, epistemology on ontology. He does not beg the question within his own system, for he does not formally or consciously use epistemology as a prolegomenon . . . to the task of establishing the ontological truths of theology, and so he is free to work out the epistemology and semantics of divine predication by reflecting on the ramifications of the truths he already knows about God.⁵⁶

In this passage, in which he is reflecting specifically on analogy in Aquinas, Rocca is not claiming that Aquinas is entitled to base knowledge on being, or epistemology on ontology, simply because he "lived and thought long before the progenitors of the modern age of philosophy." It is not premodern naiveté that undergirds Aquinas's epistemology; rather, it is a conscious awareness that epistemology fundamentally depends on ontology and, moreover, theology. This is precisely why Aquinas employs reason, and hence argument or demonstration, to establish and articulate crucial theological truths concerning the existence and nature of God, as well as the relation of creatures to God. Now of course, those grounds only figure in our cognitive processing as beliefs: clearly, Aquinas's basic metaphysical and theological commitments are reflected in first-order judgments or beliefs about God and creation. Consequently, they serve as doxastic grounds that reason employs in forming other beliefs about God. That is, they serve as primary or foundational theological truths that further inform reason's activity, not claims that need to be endlessly justified by reason's activity to the satisfaction of modern philosophy.

My main point here is that Aquinas does not employ (nor need he employ) reason in order to meet skeptical challenges or biases against theistic belief; he employs it instead in order to establish basic truths that service his

56. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 179–80.

larger epistemological agenda, truths that are constitutive of his larger theological worldview and which also lie at the heart of the Christian faith.⁵⁷ An important conclusion of this part of the chapter, therefore, which in turn points towards claims I make in the second part of the chapter, is that Aquinas's epistemology of reason is constitutive of his larger theological worldview, which is, of course, also informed by faith. Thus, at this point, we need to consider how faith on Aquinas's view also enables us to form true beliefs about God with a positive epistemic status and hence also constitutes a form of knowledge of God that informs and deepens the knowledge of God available to reason. This will entail, first, highlighting the cognitive mechanics of faith and, subsequently, conducting an epistemological analysis of faith.⁵⁸

The Cognitive Mechanics of Faith

We turn now to consider Aquinas's account of faith and specifically the inner workings or mechanics of faith as a cognitive act. Aquinas understands the primary "act" of faith to entail cognitive "assent" to true propositions about God (concerning, for example, the divine nature, providence, and the incarnation) that God has revealed of God's self in Christian scripture, teaching, and the articles of the creeds—sources that collectively constitute *sacra doctrina*. On Aquinas's view, then, faith assents to what is true about God; and what is true about God has been revealed, recorded, and articulated in specifically linguistic and propositional form within Christianity's sacred teachings and texts.⁵⁹ Now, according to Aquinas, the intellect's assent to a given proposition can occur in two ways. In paradigm cases, it is a proper recognition of the truth expressed by that proposition that causes assent, either because the intellect is directly acquainted with (and thus 'sees' or understands) that truth through *intellectus*, or because the intellect comes to have scientific knowledge or *scientia* of that truth on the basis of inference

57. Rocca concludes that Aquinas's faith is presupposed in much if not most of his rational analysis of the basic theological truths concerning God and creation; consequently "we conclude it is his faith more than his reason that inspires and justifies [transcendental] analogy and [theological] epistemology" (ibid., 254).

58. Most of the following section appears in Paul A. Macdonald Jr., "A Realist Epistemology of Faith," *Religious Studies* 41.4 (2005): 373–93.

59. See *ST* I.1.1; *ST* II-II.1.1, 1.2, 1.6, 1.7 and 1.8. Aquinas claims that the propositions of faith have God as their principal referent, even though they consist of propositions that do not speak directly of God but instead speak of other things (for example, the human nature of Christ and the sacraments of the church) that are directly related to God. See *ST* II-II.1.1 ad 1. Recall that in the next life, Aquinas says, the heavenly 'vision' of God "will not be by way of a proposition, but by way of a simple understanding" (*ST* II-II.1.2 ad 3).

from other known propositions, as the conclusion of an argument or demonstration.⁶⁰

In other cases, however, it is not a proper recognition of the truth expressed by a given proposition that causes the intellect to assent (because the truth itself does not move the intellect to assent) but rather the will, which causes the intellect to cleave to the proposed proposition, either in a state of doubt or hesitation or in a state of certainty concerning that proposition. Consequently, in this life, while the formal object of faith, or God as the First Truth—on account of whom the intellect assents in faith—remains ‘unseen’, both because the intellect is not directly acquainted with the First Truth, and because the intellect cannot know the First Truth by reasoning from other immediately known propositions about the First Truth, Aquinas argues that the intellect can and does assent to the propositions of faith with the aid of the will; and when the intellect assents firmly to those propositions with sufficient conviction or certainty (the sort of certainty that normally accompanies *scientia*), then it is said to be in a state of faith.⁶¹

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret Aquinas as making the claim that the will, even if it plays a role in causing or motivating the intellect to assent in faith, is itself the *ultimate* cause of faith. Aquinas clearly argues that faith comes from a *supernatural* inner change: God’s infusing the mind of the believer with the *virtue* of faith, which in turn directs the mind of the believer “aright to God.”⁶² Like the moral and intellectual virtues, then, which serve as the principles of good acts and therefore perfect the power or faculty in which they reside, faith predisposes the intellect to *believe* the truth about God (by way of assent) and therefore perfects the intellect, in which it resides.⁶³ If faith perfects the intellect as a virtue, then, it is because it directs the intellect to divine truth—and divine truth, as firmly believed or adhered to in faith, in turn perfects the intellect by conforming the intellect to God.

60. See *ST* II-II.1.4.

61. See *ST* II-II.2.1. In *ST* II-II 1.5 ad 4, Aquinas states that the certainty that accompanies faith parallels the certainty that accompanies *scientia* in that “what is had by faith . . . is also recognized as not possibly being otherwise” (translation provided by Mark D. Jordan in *On Faith: Summa theologiae, Part 2-2, Questions 1–16 of St. Thomas Aquinas* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990], 44). This is not because the truth that faith believes is evident to the mind but because faith recognizes that the truth to which it cleaves has been revealed by God; and what is revealed by God cannot be false. See *ST* II-II.1.3.

62. *ST* I-II.62.1.

63. *ST* I-II.55.1. According to Aquinas, a habit can be called a virtue when it confers both “an aptness to a good act” and “also the right use of that aptness” (*ST* I-II.56.3). Or more succinctly, “any habit that is always the principle of a good act, may be called a human virtue” (*ST* II-II.4.5).

Thus Aquinas argues that faith, qua supernaturally infused virtue, is a good cognitive disposition or habit (*habitus*) that strengthens the intellect so that it can firmly assent, with the aid and impetus of the will, to divine truth that it does not and cannot ‘see’. And where it cannot ‘see’, the intellect relies on divine authority: the intellect assents to divine truth—and specifically the propositions that express that truth—*because* God has revealed it. Aquinas says, “faith . . . assents to nothing except as it is revealed by God. Faith *begins* from the divine truth as from a middle term” (my emphasis).⁶⁴ And yet, the intellect does not assent to divine truth by reasoning from divine authority (or, for that matter, by way of rational argument or demonstration) but rather by the power of God’s grace, and specifically the supernaturally infused habit or ‘light of faith’, which enables the intellect to *recognize* or *discern*, immediately or non-inferentially, what propositions, proposed as worthy candidates for belief, have been revealed by God and consequently express the truth about God:⁶⁵

The light of faith makes us see (*videre*) what we believe. For just as, by the habits of the other virtues, man sees what is becoming to him in respect of that habit, so, by the habit of faith, the human mind is directed to assent to such things as are becoming to a right faith, and not to assent to others.⁶⁶

Moreover, unlike unbelievers, the faithful recognize or discern that the propositions of faith (again, as proposed for their belief) *deserve* their assent, given that God has revealed them. Thus, Aquinas claims,

Unbelievers are in ignorance of things that are of faith, for neither do they see or know them in themselves, nor do they know them to be credible. The faithful, on the other hand, know them, not as by demonstration, but by the light of faith which makes them see that they ought to believe them.⁶⁷

64. *ST* II-II.1.1, Jordan trans., 33. See also *QDV* 14.7 ad 7; *QDV* 14.9. Aquinas claims that the act of faith consists in believing certain things about God (*credere Deum*), believing God (*credere Deo*), or believing on the basis of divine authority, as well as believing for the sake of God (*credere in Deum*), or believing towards God as one’s desired end. See *ST* II-II.2.2, Jordan trans., 68.

65. John Jenkins discusses the epistemological import of Aquinas’s claims about the infused ‘light of faith’ in *Knowledge and Faith*, 161–212. While I am certainly influenced by Jenkins’s analysis, I also aim to go well beyond it.

66. *ST* II-II.1.4 ad 3. In his earlier work, Aquinas puts the point even more strongly: the ‘light of faith’ “manifests” (*manifestat*) the articles of faith in the same way the light of the intellect manifests the principles of science. See *In III SENT* 23.2.1 ad 4.

67. *ST* II-II.1.5 ad 1. See also Aquinas’s *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos* (hereafter *In HEB*) 4.1, where he argues that the words of God themselves “are efficacious in such a manner that

The 'light of faith' thus takes the place of rational demonstration or the 'light of reason' as the primary means by which the propositions of faith are known. But the 'light of faith' is by no means inferior to rational demonstration or the 'light of reason'; in fact, Aquinas argues that the 'light of faith' "is more capable of causing assent than any demonstration," since, unlike the 'light of reason', it "cannot fail, anymore than God can be deceived or lie."⁶⁸ Hence, the 'light of faith', which is "divinely imparted to the human mind" by God, cannot fail in directing the intellect to assent to the divinely revealed propositions of faith, which must be heard in order to be believed.⁶⁹

It is clear, then, that faith comes from God in two ways: by way of an interior light that leads to assent, and by way of the realities that are proposed from without and that had as their source divine revelation. These are related to the knowledge of faith (*cognitionem fidei*) as the things perceived by the sense are related to the knowledge of principles, for both make our knowledge certain. So just as the knowledge of principles is taken from the senses, and yet the light by which principles are known is inborn, so "faith comes from hearing," and nevertheless the habit of faith is infused.⁷⁰

Just as the inborn 'light of reason' makes possible "knowledge of principles" (or empirical truths), which originates in sense perception, so the infused habit or 'light of faith'—which Aquinas says bears "the faint stamp of the First Truth in our mind"—makes possible the "knowledge of faith," which originates in hearing divine revelation (itself the empirical source for faith) proposed or proclaimed.⁷¹

And yet, in order to direct *and* draw the believer to assent to the divinely revealed propositions of faith, as proposed or proclaimed, the 'light of faith' "does not move us by way of the intellect, but rather by way of the will," which we have seen, causes or motivates the intellect to assent.⁷² In expressing the truth about God, the propositions of faith also express the truth about the will's "end": they depict God as the object of the believer's supernatural beatitude, the guarantor of eternal life.⁷³ Consequently, under the influence of God's grace, and empowered by an infused habit, the will causes or motivates the intellect to assent to the propositions of faith, given that it

immediately the things heard ought to be believed." This and all translations of *In HEB* are from *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Chrysostom Baer (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2006).

68. *In BDT* 3.1 ad 4.

70. *Ibid.*

72. *In BDT* 3.1 ad 4.

69. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.* See also *ST* II-II.6.1 and 8.1.

73. *QDV* 14.1.

is drawn to the “last end” that those propositions depict as a great good. For example, in distinguishing the sort of faith possessed by the faithful from the faith possessed by the demons, Aquinas claims that “Faith, which is a gift of grace, inclines man to believe, by giving him a certain affection for the good, even when that faith is lifeless [i.e., unformed by love]. Consequently the faith that the demons have, is not a gift of grace. Rather are they compelled to believe through their natural intellectual acumen.”⁷⁴ According to Aquinas, while the demons assent unwillingly to divine truth solely on the basis of compelling external evidence furnished by miracles and signs, the faithful assent willingly to divine truth on the basis of being drawn to that truth, and hence to God, or the last end, as a distinct good, that is, as something to be desired. Thus Aquinas concludes that for possessors of the virtue of faith, “an act of faith is related both to the object of the will, i.e. to the good and the end, and to the object of the intellect, i.e. to the true. [So] faith, through being a theological virtue . . . has one same thing for object and end.”⁷⁵

On Aquinas’s view, then, God works in the mind of the believer by way of persuasion rather than coercion, directing and drawing it to assent to propositions to which, under strictly natural epistemic conditions, it might fail to assent:

As regards . . . man’s assent to the things which are of faith, we may observe a two-fold cause, one of external inducement, such as seeing a miracle, or being persuaded by someone to embrace the faith: neither of which is a sufficient cause, since of those who see the same miracle, or who hear the same sermon, some believe, and some do not. Hence we must assert another internal cause, which moves man inwardly to assent to matters of faith. . . . [and] since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God. Therefore faith, as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving man inwardly by grace.⁷⁶

Aquinas again reiterates that the assent of faith is internally rather than externally caused or motivated; that is, it *originates* in a distinctly “supernatural principle” internal to the mind, rather than any “external inducement” such as a persuasive miracle or sermon. Thus, while “seeing a miracle, or being persuaded by someone to embrace the faith” indeed figures as a cause of faith which may dispose one to assent in faith, “seeing a miracle . . .” is not

74. *ST II-II.5.2 ad 2.*

76. *ST II-II.6.1.*

75. *ST II-II.4.1;* see also *ST II-II.4.2.*

sufficient *fully* to motivate one to assent in faith. *God* must “move inwardly” in order to motivate one to assent in faith, which means that God is ultimately the author of faith.

In sum, Aquinas argues that God infuses the virtue of faith in the intellect in order to direct the intellect to God’s self as the First Truth. And God directs the intellect to God’s self as the First Truth by empowering the intellect, through an act of grace or an infused habit, to assent to revealed truths about God, as expressed by the propositions of faith. That is to say, God extends the cognitive “range” of what the intellect considers to be worthy objects of assent so that it is able to assent to divine truth with the aid of the will. Additionally, given that the intellect assents to divine truth (which remains ‘unseen’) with the aid of the will, God infuses a habit in the will, which in turn draws the intellect to assent to divine truth as a desired good. Perhaps most importantly, then, by working *internally* in the intellect as well as the will, *God* ultimately causes or motivates the intellect to assent, by way of directing and drawing the intellect to assent *through the will*, proposing divine truth not as something to be understood or ‘seen’ but as a good to be desired—even if that good cannot be possessed in this life.

We can strengthen this last claim in particular by showing how faith, qua theological virtue, is related to the two other theological virtues, hope and love. As we have seen, on Aquinas’s view, faith directs the intellect to assent to divine truth both as “object,” or what is actually believed in faith, and “end,” as the object of the will’s desire. And yet, divine truth only figures as an end—and consequently as an object of the will’s desire—because it remains ‘unseen’ by the intellect, as a good not yet possessed. Through faith, then, one cognitively adheres to divine truth, and thus God as the First Truth, by believing that truth and hoping or desiring that one will, in the next life, ‘see’ what one currently believes. Interpreting the scriptural definition of faith as “the substance of things to be hoped for,” Aquinas writes that “in us the first beginning of things to be hoped for is brought about by the assent of faith. . . . because we hope to be made happy through seeing the unveiled truth to which our faith cleaves.”⁷⁷ If faith is also the “evidence

77. *ST II-II.4.1.* Aquinas also writes, “Therefore, the first truth is not seen, but hoped for as the end of the will on the way, and consequently as the object of faith, since it has the same thing for end and object. Now, simply speaking, the last end of faith in the fatherland, for which we strive through faith, is beatitude, which consists in the open vision of God. . . . Such is the hope of the faithful. . . . Therefore, the end of faith on the way is the attainment of the thing hoped for, namely, eternal beatitude” (*In HEB 11.1*).

of things that appear not," it is because it is accompanied by the "conviction" (*convictio*) that the truths expressed by the propositions of faith, while indeed 'unseen', nevertheless are worthy of assent.⁷⁸

Through faith, then, the intellect is directed to divine truth (or God as the First Truth) as something to be believed, rather than 'seen'; through faith accompanied by hope, which is infused in the will, the intellect is drawn to divine truth (or God as the First Truth) as a future good not yet possessed, and thus as an object of the will's desire. More importantly, through faith, the mind of the believer is drawn to divine truth (or God as the First Truth) in *love*, which Aquinas claims is the true "form" of faith, insofar as it perfects the act of faith, directed as it is to the will's highest end, God as the Good:

Now it is evident from what has been said that the act of faith is directed to the object of the will, i.e. the good, as to its end: and this good which is the end of faith, viz. the Divine Good, is the proper object of charity. Therefore charity is called the form of faith in so far as the act of faith is perfected and formed by charity.⁷⁹

On Aquinas's view, then, only *formed* faith (*fides formata*)—faith that is linked with a love for God as the Divine Good—is a theological virtue, properly speaking, because without love, the mind of the believer is not ordered to God (its final end) as a good. That is, in order to be able to assent with true faith, not only must the intellect "infallibly tend to its good," which is God as the First Truth; it must also "infallibly be ordered to the last end," or God as the Divine Good, which can only occur in love:

Since believing is the act of understanding assenting under the will's command, two things are required for completing this act. One is that the understanding infallibly tends to its good, which is the truth; the other is that it infallibly be ordered to the last end, because of which the will assents. And both of these are found in the act of formed faith. It is part of the very account of faith that it always carry the understanding to the truth, since the false cannot come under faith. . . . From charity, which forms faith, the soul has it that it is infallibly ordered to the good end. And so all formed faith is a virtue.⁸⁰

By assenting to divine truth under the will's command, the intellect is both conjoined to that truth (as believed) and directed to that truth as its final end (as of yet 'unseen'), which the will both hopes for and loves. (In hope, the will is directed to God as the guarantor of a future good, everlasting life,

78. *ST II-II.4.1.*

79. *ST II-II.4.3.*

80. *ST II-II.4.5*, Jordan trans., 114.

which the will desires to acquire; in love, the will desires God for God's own sake as an intrinsic good.)⁸¹

Aquinas further writes that the believer's desire for his supernatural beatitude, which consists in the full knowledge of God, originates in the inchoate knowledge of God afforded by faith:

nothing can be directed to any end unless there pre-exists in it a certain proportion to the end, and it is from this that the desire of the end arises in it. This happens in so far as, in a certain sense, the end is made to exist inchoatively within it, because it desires nothing except in so far as it has some likeness of the end. This is why there is in human nature a certain initial participation of the good which is proportionate to that nature. . . . For this reason also, for man to be ordained to the good which is eternal life, there must be some initial participation of it in him to whom it is promised. However, eternal life consists in the full knowledge of God, as is clear from John (17:3): "Now this is eternal life. . . ." Consequently, we must have within us some initial participation of this supernatural knowledge (*cognitionis supernaturalis*). *We have it through faith* [my emphasis], which by reason of an infused light holds those things which are beyond our natural knowledge.⁸²

If faith, then, is a form of supernatural knowledge—or an "initial participation" in that knowledge—that surpasses the natural knowledge of God attainable by reason, then, it is because it directs the intellect to God as the object of the believer's supernatural beatitude, and consequently the supernatural good (the Divine Good) that the will desires. More than that, faith is a form of supernatural knowledge in that it *prepares* the mind of the believer for the full knowledge of God—the believer's supernatural beatitude. Without faith, such knowledge could not be obtained. Aquinas writes:

Consequently, since the goal of human life is perfect happiness, which consists in the full knowledge of divine realities (*plena cognitione divinorum*), the direction of human life toward perfect happiness from the very beginning requires faith in the divine, the complete knowledge of which we look forward to in our final state of perfection.⁸³

We are now in a position to understand the distinct role the will plays in causing and motivating the intellect to assent in faith, when the will is infused with hope and particularly love. Once faith is infused in the intel-

81. See *ST* II-II.23.6. Technically, faith precedes hope and love by order of "generation" rather than "perfection"; love precedes both faith and hope by order of perfection. See *ST* I-II.62.4.

82. *QDV* 14.2.

83. *In BDT* 3.1.

lect, and the intellect thereby comes to cleave to at least *some* truths about God as proposed to the intellect for belief (always with the aid of the will), then the intellect is drawn closer to God as an object of supernatural beatitude, and hence as an object of knowledge, as it is perfected by faith. And as the intellect is drawn closer to God as an object of supernatural beatitude in faith, then the will in turn is drawn closer to God as an object of supernatural beatitude—that is, as an object of hope and love. Furthermore, as the will is drawn closer to God as an object of hope and love, the intellect is drawn closer to God in faith—not only as an object of belief, but also (and perhaps primarily) as a final end, as that which the intellect *aims* to ‘see’ by believing in faith. (Aquinas clearly argues that the end towards which the will is directed in hope and love—the believer’s supernatural beatitude—is also the end towards which the intellect is directed in faith.) Thus, by believing in accord with his supernatural end, or, we could say, believing towards that end in hope and love, the possessor of faith *further* cognitively ‘intends’ the truth or object of that end, namely, God, and hence actually comes closer—cognitively speaking—to reaching that end.

The Epistemology of Faith

In exposing his account of faith, Aquinas not only defends the claim *that* faith leads the mind to God; he also explains *how* faith leads the mind to God and, more specifically, how faith leads the mind to assent to the propositions of faith and thereby form true beliefs about God. Thus Aquinas remains unequivocally realist in his theological epistemology of faith: through faith, we form and hold beliefs about God which, by virtue of being true, bear on or are directed on God: in Aquinas’s own words, “when we believe God we reach out to Him by believing.”⁸⁴ Now, the ability to reach God with our thoughts and beliefs about God by way of faith is only possible because God reaches out to us: first, by revealing the truth about God’s self to us in *sacra doctrina*; second by working directly in our intellects and wills (or we could even say, our hearts) by grace in order to enable us to believe that truth.⁸⁵ Thus it should be clear once again how Aquinas bases his epistemol-

84. *ST* II-II 81.5. Or again, Aquinas argues, “the act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in a thing. For as in science we do not form propositions, except in order to have knowledge about things through their means, so it is in faith” (*ST* II-II.1.2 ad 2).

85. So understood, Aquinas’s epistemology of faith is also an epistemology of the heart. Bruce Marshall, for example, argues the following: “Lit by grace, the heart (as we might now say) finds in the triune God of whom this [revealed] teaching speaks its true desire, and so cleaves to this teaching not only as true, but as the first truth. . . . Thus faith’s distinctive

ogy of faith on truth, or the knowledge of faith on God's being: Aquinas takes revelation, and specifically the revelation of divine truth, as the starting point for his epistemological analysis. Rather than discussing *how* the propositions of faith are true, or express divine truth, or *why* he is entitled to hold that they are true, Aquinas simply accepts their truth—because he accepts them to be revealed by God, who is the First Truth—and then proceeds to show it is possible to believe them. Thus he works out his epistemology of faith in terms of his basic theological convictions. Moreover, he is also careful (as always) to safeguard the divine transcendence: even in believing God's truth, and reaching God with our minds, we never 'see' God. The true beliefs we form and hold about God in faith only bear on or are directed on God as the one who remains 'unknown'.

I will unpack some of these broader epistemological claims further in the chapter that follows; but for our present purposes, in line with the overall goals of the current chapter, it is necessary to analyze Aquinas's epistemology of faith in more detail. Now, the goal here, again, is not to establish that the propositions that faith holds to be true of God (the ones specifically constitutive of *sacra doctrina*) are, in fact, true: with Aquinas, we can admit that establishing or demonstrating their truth lies well beyond our powers of intellect in this life. Our goal, then, is to follow Aquinas's lead in working out an epistemology that explains how faith leads the mind to assent to divine truth, thereby giving a defensible account of how faith leads the mind to assent to divine truth. And this, in turn, requires showing how the beliefs we form and hold about God in faith possess a positive epistemic status conferred on them by some important truth-conducive desiderata.

This enterprise is particularly important because it is not initially clear in

certainty. It reposes in the church's teaching as our only way of apprehending in this life, where we must think discursively and in words, the first truth in whom our ultimate good—our salvation—consists. . . . So faith holds to the articles as the most certain statements there could be, even though they seem less obvious to us than many other beliefs" (Bruce D. Marshall, *Quod Scit Una Uetula: Aquinas on the Nature of Theology*, in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 13). Marshall makes the even stronger claim that "Aquinas' epistemology is, at bottom, a kind of theological coherentism," which means that no statement that is logically inconsistent with the articles of faith can be taken as true, and the articles of faith cannot be taken as false on account of their inconsistency with any other statement (16). Hence, the articles (or propositions) of faith enjoy total "epistemic primacy," even over the propositions of natural theology; which means that the latter propositions, and the beliefs they inform, only refer to God insofar as they are believed together with the propositions of faith (17–20). For comparable arguments by Marshall and a defense of these claims, see his "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," *The Thomist* 53.3 (1989): 353–402; "Thomas, Thomisms, and Truth," *The Thomist* 56.3 (1992): 499–524; "Faith and Reason," *The Thomist* 63.1 (1999): 1–48; and *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

what sense those beliefs do enjoy a positive epistemic status. We can explain the problem in the following manner. Aquinas clearly argues that the will plays an indispensable role in enabling the assent of faith, especially when it has been infused with hope and love: it is only because there is a habit infused by grace in the will as well as the intellect that the believer is able—or as I have been suggesting, motivated—to assent to the propositions of faith and thereby form true beliefs about God. But if the motivation for assenting to the propositions of faith originates in the will, and not the intellect, it is not initially clear how the assent of faith, as suitably caused or motivated by the will, could be justified—or perhaps better, as I have been arguing, based on an adequate ground. In other words, if the motivation or ground for assenting to the propositions of faith is extra-intellectual, given that it originates in the will, rather than the intellect, then it seems the motivation or ground for assenting to the propositions of faith is also extra-rational. And if the motivation or ground for assenting to the propositions of faith is extra-rational, then it seemingly cannot confer a positive epistemic status on the assent itself or the beliefs generated by that assent. In what sense, then, do the beliefs constitutive of faith enjoy a positive epistemic status, if at all? Is the assent of faith in fact ungrounded? Perhaps the most important question concerning Aquinas's epistemology of faith, therefore, from a contemporary philosophical standpoint, can be formulated as follows: can the will's causing or motivating the intellect to assent to the propositions of faith constitute a viable epistemic process of the sort that could yield true beliefs about God with a sufficiently high positive epistemic status and consequently (it appears) yield *knowledge* of the divine?

As we have already seen, Aquinas argues that the assent of faith, while indeed caused or motivated by the will, is based on solid intellectual grounds: the authority of God's revealing God's self in and through the propositions of faith, which are seen by the intellect as being worthy of assent, since the intellect also recognizes them as revealed by God. Consequently, on Aquinas's view, there can be no surer ground for the assent of faith than the divine witness, which is itself infallible: God's leading the mind through grace to divine truth, and thus to God's self. From a Thomistic perspective, then, the assent of faith is indeed grounded, and even maximally so, because the believer possesses a distinct ground—God's own witness to the believer's mind—that guides and motivates that assent. I have been arguing on Aquinas's behalf that so understood, the assent of faith is internally caused or motivated (and we can now add, grounded), which means that it results from

the internal influence of grace or “God moving inwardly” in the intellect as well as the will. If the assent of faith is grounded, and adequately so, it is because the believer possesses the requisite infused divine light as well as the requisite motivating affection in the will for making that assent.

It can still seem strange and even problematic that Aquinas chooses to identify *God* as the primary motivation or ground the believer possesses for assenting to the propositions of faith. Surely, it is assumed, the believer must possess epistemic access to intellectual grounds for assenting other than divine authority and specifically God’s own internal witness to the believer’s mind, which would at least show God’s authority and witness to be reliable, and thus provide a surer rational foundation on which the believer could base his assent (or at least his initial assent). Terence Penelhum, for example, argues that Aquinas’s understanding of faith as “a response *to* God, and a movement *towards* God, because of a grace *from* God” displays a kind of puzzling circularity: while it is true that “One cannot accept a given proposition as coming from God unless one believes that God exists and has spoken,” it also seems true that “one cannot (can one?) believe that God exists and has spoken because *these* propositions come from God.”⁸⁶ “Surely at some stage,” Penelhum continues, “one’s assent has to be based on something less explicitly part of faith than this, or how could it all begin?”⁸⁷

In an attempt to render Aquinas’s account more convincing, Penelhum therefore argues that the believer’s assent to at least *some* of the propositions of faith must be based on an authority *other* than God’s own authority and witness—the authority of scripture and the church—which is itself accredited by distinct rational sources and grounds: most notably, “the demonstra-

86. Terence Penelhum, “The Analysis of Faith in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Religious Studies* 13.2 (1977): 133–54, in particular, 141. I take Penelhum’s account to be representative of a distinctly modern reading of Aquinas that struggles with explaining how the assent of faith can be justified if it is *solely* internally caused or motivated. For various other attempts to deal with this (and related epistemological concerns) in the contemporary literature, see, for example, James F. Ross, “Aquinas on Belief and Knowledge,” in *Essays Honoring Allan B. Wolter*, ed. W. A. Frank and G. J. Etzkorn (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1985), 245–69; Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas on Faith and Goodness,” in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 179–207, as well as chapter twelve of her *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 361–88; Louis Pojman, “Aquinas on Faith,” in *Religious Belief and the Will* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 32–40; Timothy Potts, “Aquinas on Belief and Faith,” in *Inquiries into Medieval Philosophy: A Collection in Honor of Francis P. Clarke*, ed. James F. Ross (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), 3–22; and John Hick, “The Thomist-Catholic View of Faith,” in *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (1957; repr., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 11–31.

87. Penelhum, “The Analysis of Faith,” 141.

ble certainty that God exists,” as well as “the evidences that favour the Christian proclamations above others—the history of Israel, the evidences of the life and resurrection of Christ, the history of the Church, the fulfillment of prophecy, the evidences of miracles, and the like.”⁸⁸ Penelhum further argues that the grounds just specified have an epistemic status that is comparable to the epistemic status of scientific demonstrations or conclusions, which means that Aquinas “commits himself unequivocally to the view that the evidences of the authority of the Church are such as can compel assent.”⁸⁹ On Penelhum’s reading of Aquinas, then, the rationality of faith ultimately is grounded in “evidences of the authority of the Church” that are cognitively available to the believer: evidences that furnish compelling reasons for making the assent of faith, even if they do not serve as demonstrations or conclusions and hence cannot generate an assent sufficient to produce demonstrable knowledge of the divine.

Penelhum’s analysis is particularly instructive, since it is representative of a distinctly modern reading (or I should say, *misreading*) of Aquinas that aims to understand the assent of faith, as well as what motivates or grounds that assent, from a standpoint outside or external to the viewpoint of the believer himself. Penelhum clearly finds it puzzling that the assent of faith could be motivated by a strictly internal intellectual ground—the inwardly perceived authority of God—that he assumes is convincing or persuasive only for those who are sufficiently advanced in faith (or who possess the virtue of faith), but which is cognitively absent from and hence cognitively unavailable to those who are beginners in faith (or who possess formless faith). To repeat: Penelhum asks, “Surely at some stage one’s assent has to be based on something less explicitly a part of faith than this, or how could it all begin?”⁹⁰ Penelhum’s question here helps isolate what I take to be a more pressing question in interpreting Aquinas’s account of faith: why isn’t God’s grace sufficient to motivate both the committed believer *and* the new believer to assent to the propositions of faith, insofar as grace points the mind to God in each case as the revealer of those propositions? Or put more pointedly: why isn’t God able to move the mind from a state of relative or even total doubt or non-belief to a state of faith solely by moving inwardly in the mind, directing and drawing the mind to assent to propositions that God proposes as worthy of belief? Aquinas’s answer to both of these questions, I argue, is unequivocal: grace *is* sufficient, and God *is* able to induce faith,

88. *Ibid.*, 144.

90. *Ibid.*, 141.

89. *Ibid.*, 145.

whether by strengthening it in the mind of the committed believer or creating it in the mind of the new believer. Thus, on Aquinas's view, as I interpret it, assenting on the basis of divine authority, and thus assenting on the basis of God's illuminating the mind, is distinctly rational *for one who has had the habit or virtue of faith infused by grace*—no further grounds, even if they are available, need be sought or found.

In order that I may strengthen this claim, consider Aquinas's response to the objection that the believer cannot have a sufficient motivation or ground for assenting in faith and still assent meritoriously:

The believer has sufficient motive for believing, for he is moved by the authority of Divine teaching confirmed by miracles, and, what is more, by the inward instinct of the Divine invitation [*interiori instinctu Dei invitantis*, also translated as "an inward impulse towards God, who invites him"]: hence he does not believe lightly. He has not, however, sufficient reason for scientific knowledge, hence he does not lose the merit.⁹¹

Interpreting this passage, Penelhum claims that the assent of faith on Aquinas's view (again, at least in some cases) is based on external evidences or signs that conclusively establish the authority of the church ("the authority of Divine teaching confirmed by miracles") and consequently furnish reasons that "make it irrational . . . not to believe."⁹² Thus, according to Penelhum, Aquinas fails to answer the objection and show how the assent of faith, on his own view, is in fact meritorious, if it is also compelled. (The demons, for example, assent on the basis of the same evidences available to the faithful; but, moved solely by the rational weight of those evidences, rather than any affection in the will, they do so without any merit.)⁹³

What Penelhum fails to recognize, however, is that the *primary* motivation or ground Aquinas claims the believer possesses for assenting is not the "the authority of Divine teaching confirmed by miracles" (which indeed compels the demons to assent, given their superior intellectual acumen), but rather the "inward instinct of the Divine invitation," or an "inward impulse towards God," which I argue is the only motivation or ground the believer *needs* in order to assent. So again, we need to ask, why does the believer need a motivation or ground other than his inward instinct to believe God, even if there are further rational grounds (for example, evidences establishing "the

91. *ST II-II.2.9 ad 3*. I include Mark Jordan's translation in the brackets (Jordan trans., 90).

92. Penelhum, "The Analysis of Faith," 147.

93. See *ST II-II.5.2 ad 2*.

authority of Divine teaching”) that are available to him, which may (in some cases) partially motivate or ground (but never compel) his assent? Is assenting solely on the basis of that instinct, itself prompted by grace, not entirely sufficient from an epistemic point of view?

If we are uncomfortable answering this latter question in particular in the affirmative, it is because we, as moderns, are hesitant to assign any positive epistemic status to beliefs rooted in an inclination or conviction, such as being inwardly directed and drawn by God, that cannot be objectively measured or universally recognized. Moreover, we are hesitant to assign any positive epistemic status to a belief rooted in an inclination that is properly locatable, on Aquinas’s own account, in the will, rather than in the intellect. Clearly, it is tacitly assumed, any belief that is generated or sustained by a *desire* cannot be justified. There must be some other available motivation or ground—itself untouched or unconstrained by that desire, or salient to the believer independently of his having that desire—that constitutes the appropriate justification for that belief. And yet, I argue that this is not Aquinas’s view at all. In fact, I take Aquinas’s most important epistemological lesson (in this context) to be that the primary motivation or ground the believer possesses for assenting to the propositions of faith—God’s own authoritative witness to the believer’s mind—is epistemically linked with (rather than severed from) the believer’s internal inclination or desire to believe, which originates in the believer’s will. My next task, therefore, will be showing how the assent of faith, on Aquinas’s view, can be both internally motivated *and* grounded and thus also (potentially) furnish knowledge of God, at least according to some mainline contemporary epistemological standards.

At this point, therefore, it is necessary to introduce an alternative reading that does not saddle Aquinas with what I take to be the distinctly modern craving for neutral grounds that allegedly buffer the assent of faith from outside the faith-based outlook in which the assent of faith occurs. On Aquinas’s view, as I am defending it, God’s grace elevates the believer’s cognitive powers in such a way that he is able recognize or discern, in the infused ‘light of faith’ (and hence *within* his faith-based outlook), what divinely revealed propositions deserve his assent. Moreover, he is in turn drawn or inclined by grace to assent to the propositions of faith given that they have been divinely revealed. Now, that the intellect is drawn or inclined to assent to the propositions of faith on the basis of discerning or recognizing those propositions to be divinely revealed is due to the internal influence of grace on both the intellect *and* the will: Aquinas clearly argues that while the intellect indeed

possesses a sufficient ground for assenting, it only can assent with the aid of the will, when it is under the direction or command of the will.

These claims may appear to be contradictory; in fact, it may be objected that if the intellect possesses a sufficient ground for assenting to the propositions of faith, given that it recognizes the propositions of faith to be divinely revealed, then the role of the will in enabling assent is totally unnecessary. On Aquinas's view, however, the role of the will *is* necessary because the assent of faith is not compelled: it remains voluntary and hence meritorious. Here, then, it is helpful to make the following distinction: there is a difference between seeing that a proposition is divinely revealed, and thus true, and seeing the truth of that proposition. Or, more succinctly, there is a distinction between seeing that *p* is true and seeing the truth of *p*. Only the latter recognition, which is achieved through *intellectus* and *scientia* (and which the mind cannot obtain in this life) can compel assent. Seeing that *p* is divinely revealed, and hence true, is equal to the believer's seeing that he *ought* to believe *p*, given that *p* is divinely revealed. But the believer still can (freely) choose *not* to assent, presumably for any number of reasons: because he struggles to apprehend what the propositions of faith declare to be true of God (his mind is beset by intellectual difficulties); or, perhaps more notably, because he is indifferent to the truth of what those propositions declare to be true of God. In the latter case, while his intellect is sufficiently engaged, his *will* is not sufficiently engaged; hence, an act of will remains necessary to enable intellectual assent. A sufficiently engaged will—that is, a will motivated by considerations of the goodness of God—therefore influences the manner in which the intellect perceives the propositions proposed for assent.

We can explain all of this as follows. On Aquinas's view, the object of the intellect and the will is the same: God as the True and the Good. Thus, when the intellect and will are working cooperatively under the influence of God's grace, then the believer recognizes the propositions of faith as expressing both a revealed truth *and* a desirable good. Or more specifically, when grace is at work in his intellect, the believer sees what propositions proposed for his belief have been revealed by God and hence express the truth about God (both as object and end); when grace is at work in his will, the believer also sees that it is *desirable* to assent to the propositions of faith on the distinct ground that they have been revealed by God and hence express the truth about God (both as object and end). Thus, if God persuades the intellect to assent to the propositions of faith, it is not because God renders the truths expressed by those propositions transparent to the intellect but because God

renders those truths *attractive* to the intellect *by working specifically through the will*: under the influence of the will, the intellect sees that divine truth—as of yet ‘unseen’—is *itself* desirable and consequently should be believed or adhered to with certainty.

This psychological process may still strike some as utterly mysterious (or incomprehensible); but we can render it more intelligible by drawing on other insights in contemporary epistemology. I claim that, when his intellect and will are working cooperatively under the influence of God’s grace in the way just described, the believer seems to possess what Plantinga calls a specific “doxastic experience” or “doxastic evidence” that motivates him to assent to the propositions of faith.⁹⁴ According to Plantinga, doxastic evidence (generally construed) is the “inclination to believe, [the] perceived attractiveness, or inevitability, or fittingness” that ineluctably accompanies certain propositions proposed as candidates for belief.⁹⁵ Plantinga not only claims that persons can and often do hold the appropriate beliefs (whether perceptual, memorial, a priori, etc.) on the basis of and in response to such doxastic evidence; he also claims that it is *rational*, and specifically *internally* rational to do so.

Even more specifically, I argue that the believer possesses cognitive recourse to specific doxastic evidence that constitutes an adequate ground for assent. Recall that a ground is adequate (roughly) insofar as it is sufficiently indicative of the truth of the belief that it grounds; consequently, a belief that is based on an adequate ground enjoys a high likelihood or probability of being true.⁹⁶ Now, as I have been arguing, the unique evidence or ground that the believer possesses for assenting to the proposed propositions of faith is the “inward instinct” of divine grace, which God employs both to illumine the propositions of faith as revealed truths and to draw the believer to assent to those propositions as revealed truths (persuading by way of attraction). Presuming that the believer accepts the divine invitation, he then bases his assent (as well as the belief that he forms) on that ground; that is,

94. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 110–13. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga refers to this phenomenal experience or evidence as “impulsional evidence.” See in particular *Warrant and Proper Function*, 190–93. I prefer “doxastic evidence” and will be using it throughout the rest of the chapter.

95. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 192.

96. Alston also conducts a helpful discussion of adequate grounds in “An Internalist Externalism,” in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 227–45. According to Alston, what is most important from an epistemic point of view is that a cognitive subject bases a given belief on an adequate ground, not that the subject have any cognitive grasp of the adequacy of the ground on which the belief is based. I am applying this insight in defending Aquinas’s epistemology of faith.

he takes account of it, allowing it to guide him in making his assent. My further claim is the following: I take it that the believer is *prima facie* internally rational in making the assent on the basis of this ground, *even if he has no further epistemic access to what contributes to the adequacy of the ground*. This is because, on Aquinas's account, the adequacy of the ground is not established by human effort (for how could it be?) but rather by God's direct influence on the intellect as well as the will: the "inward instinct" to believe is an adequate ground because it is implanted in the believer by God, who is the First Truth and whose aim in implanting that instinct is to direct and draw the believer to form true beliefs about God. In order to be internally rational, therefore, the believer need not even be aware that God is at work in him; he simply needs to believe on the basis of the invitation and ground that God furnishes for him.⁹⁷

An objector may argue that if it is not possible to determine whether the unique doxastic evidence or ground the believer possesses is in fact adequate, then the believer should still withhold assent. In fact, perhaps the only viable epistemic attitude to take towards evidence or a ground of this sort, given its distinctly inward and supernatural character, is skepticism. Thus, in response to the objection, we need to explore further why the unique sort of doxastic evidence available to the believer is reliable and hence constitutes an adequate ground for making his assent. As Plantinga points out, it is clear that persons cannot rationally hold beliefs on the basis of just any sort of doxastic evidence: presumably, persons could form false beliefs in pathological response to strong doxastic evidence that is misleading or deceptive but which is nevertheless completely convincing from their point of view. Thus beliefs that are *externally* as well as internally rational are based on the *right kind* of doxastic evidence—that is, the kind of doxastic evidence that is available when persons' cognitive faculties are functioning properly, or functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive malfunction.

97. We should note that according to Plantinga, internal rationality also requires that "you have done your best or anyway well enough with respect to the formation of the belief in question," which includes considering how the belief in question coheres with other held beliefs and ensuring that there are no "defeaters" for the belief in question—defeaters being propositions that we know or believe make certain held beliefs irrational and hence unwarranted. See *Warranted Christian Belief*, 255 and 358. In the most robust sense, then, the beliefs the possessor of faith holds in faith are internally rational if the possessor of faith *also* has sufficiently considered how those beliefs cohere with the other beliefs he holds and if he has done his best (in consultation with those inside and outside the community of faith) to ensure that there are no defeaters for those beliefs. But this process of reflection is not the initial ground on which the believer bases his assent; nor need it be.

What this means is that the believer's cognitive faculties (or simply the relevant faculties, his intellect and will) must be functioning properly—that is, operating under the influence of divine grace—in order for him to become susceptible to the workings of divine grace and hence also be granted the requisite access to the unique doxastic evidence and ground (the “inward instinct” to believe) that would otherwise not be available to him. I argue, therefore, that in a state of true faith, both the intellect and the will of the believer are informed and engaged in such a way that, when susceptible to the divine invitation to believe, the believer possesses a “felt inclination” to assent to the propositions of faith, which convey a unique sort of “fittingness” and “perceived attractiveness” to him since he recognizes them to be divinely revealed and true. In other words, as the possessor of a graced intellect that functions properly, the believer recognizes or discerns the propositions of faith as genuine revelations from God; as the possessor of a graced will that functions properly, the believer is drawn or inclined to assent to the propositions of faith as genuine revelations from God. Perhaps most important, then, under the supernatural influence of God's grace, and supernaturally illumined by the ‘light of faith’, the believer possesses cognitive recourse to specific doxastic evidence that constitutes both the requisite motivation *and* ground he needs in order to assent rationally to the propositions of faith.

Furthermore, if his graced faculties are functioning according to their intended design (attaining divine truth) in the environment for which they were designed (when the believer hears the truth about God in *sacra doctrina* proclaimed to him), then the believer's assent to the propositions of faith on the basis of the divine invitation (that unique evidence and ground) is entirely *warranted*. Thus the assent of faith on Aquinas's view, in addition to being internally as well as externally rational, is also warranted, in the sense that it is generated by supernaturally heightened faculties functioning properly in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth.⁹⁸ According to John Jenkins's philosophical analysis of Aquinas's account of faith, the assent of faith is warranted because

98. See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 46–47. On Plantinga's own model of faith (which he attributes directly to John Calvin, and indirectly to Aquinas), persons of faith form true beliefs about God via the “testimony” or “instigation” of the Holy Spirit. More specifically, persons of faith form Christian beliefs (immediately or non-inferentially) in specific response to doxastic evidence provided by the Holy Spirit; thus, such beliefs are internally rational (at least in part). Given that those beliefs are produced by the Holy Spirit via a supernatural process that functions properly, they are also externally rational. In addition (and perhaps most important), given that all necessary conditions for warrant are met, the internally and externally rational

(A) the individual's cognitive faculties have been heightened so that they have acquired a design with which he can discover the truth about putative divine revelations (i.e. as to whether or not they are genuine) and because (B) the individual's assent to the articles was produced and is sustained by such heightened cognitive faculties when operating properly. This interpretation is *externalist*, for the individual has no privileged access to whether his cognitive faculties have the appropriate design and were operating properly in producing his assent. It is also *supernaturalist*, for the cognitive abilities in question are . . . divinely given graces over and above his [natural cognitive abilities].⁹⁹

According to Jenkins's "supernatural externalist" interpretation of Aquinas, when one's supernaturally heightened cognitive faculties are functioning properly, one assents to the propositions of faith, illumined by the infused 'light of faith', on the basis of non-discursively grasping those propositions according to or under the idea (*ratio*) of *being divinely revealed*. Thus, in the infused 'light of faith', one sees that the propositions of faith "are *to be believed* and that for no reason is one to deviate from adherence to them."¹⁰⁰

Jenkins's analysis is helpful because it shows how faith, in Aquinas's rich epistemology, can in fact be interpreted along *both* epistemically externalist and internalist lines, and thus, like his epistemology of reason, cannot be neatly categorized as exclusively externalist or internalist. The process by which the believer comes to see that the propositions of faith are genuine revelations from God indeed operates independently of the believer's awareness, or *external* to his cognitive purview. (That the believer is not aware of this process seems inconsequential.) And yet, when the believer's supernaturally heightened cognitive faculties are functioning properly according to

true beliefs held in faith also furnish knowledge of God. See in particular chapter eight of *Warranted Christian Belief*. For a penetrating critique of Plantinga's theory of warrant, particularly as it applies to his religious epistemology, see John Zeis, "Plantinga's Theory of Warrant: Religious Beliefs and Higher Level Epistemic Judgments," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72.1 (1998): 23–38. According to Zeis, justification in addition to warrant is an important epistemic desideratum, because it enables us to identify those of our beliefs that are warranted. In the case of Christian beliefs, this justification or evidence is furnished by natural theology, the church, scripture, and the fruits of the Spirit. More recently, Zeis offers a "foundherentist" picture of the justification of religious belief, according to which religious beliefs (whether formed by reason or faith) are justified both by cohering with (and hence supporting) one another as well as being based on certain evidence from outside the network of those beliefs, such as divine testimony and mystical experience. See John Zeis, "A Foundherentist Conception of the Justification of Religious Belief," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58.3 (2005): 133–60.

99. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith*, 197.

100. *Ibid.*, 193.

the new design plan they have acquired (we can add, in the epistemic environment for which they were designed), that process yields the requisite *internal* access, by way of illumination and invitation, to the unique doxastic evidence or ground (a divinely given *ratio*) that the believer needs for basing and making his assent. Following Plantinga and Jenkins, I also claim that the beliefs formed and held in faith, unlike the beliefs formed and held by way of reason, are *basic*—that is, arrived at immediately or noninferentially, without being based on any other beliefs—even if they are based on doxastic evidence or grounds made uniquely available to the believer by God. It should be noted that Plantinga nowhere asserts that doxastic evidence (of any sort) constitutes a *ground* for believing; it merely plays a causal role as part of the design plan in generating belief.¹⁰¹ And yet, as I have been arguing, I do think that the unique sort of doxastic evidence that is available to the believer in faith can and does serve as an adequate ground for assenting to the propositions of faith.

We still, however, need to make the requisite room for the will in the epistemological model I am offering here on Aquinas's behalf. Unfortunately (and here I am making an addition to Jenkins's account), by focusing specifically on Aquinas's epistemological externalism, and thereby leaving the internalist dimension of his epistemology of faith underdeveloped, Jenkins downplays the distinct role the will plays in enabling the assent of faith. He assumes that if the believer's heightened cognitive faculties (or his heightened powers of *intellect*) are functioning properly, then the believer will assent to the propositions of faith merely on the basis of seeing those propositions to be divinely revealed. The will, and specifically a good will, is only needed because "it permits us to see clearly and impartially that truths which are beyond our understanding, and which may demand much of us, nevertheless have been revealed by God and are to be believed."¹⁰² While I think that this claim is interesting, and clearly aims to fill an interpretive gap, I do not think it fully reflects Aquinas's own view. According to Aquinas, as I interpret him, the believer assents to the propositions of faith not only because he sees "clearly and impartially" that those propositions have been revealed by God; he assents because he sees that assenting to divine revelation is desirable—that is, something he *wants* to do because he is being inwardly drawn by God to do it. Thus, were the intellect not predisposed by the will to see that assenting to the propositions of faith is desirable, then the intel-

101. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 258–59.

102. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith*, 208.

lect would not (or could not) assent: that the intellect is motivated to assent is due to the internal influence of the will on the intellect. The assent of faith reflects a cooperative effort on the part of both the intellect and the will.

To appreciate Aquinas's rich epistemology of faith fully, therefore, we have to focus more closely on the distinctly *epistemic* role the will plays in causing and motivating the assent of faith. As we have already seen, the will's desire for its divine good, which is intensified by hope and love, draws or inclines the intellect to assent to the propositions of faith as revelations from God, thereby strengthening and deepening the motivation or ground for making that assent. And yet, on Aquinas's view, we can also say that the will's desire for its divine good (or God as the Good) manifests itself more broadly—especially when it is perfected by hope and love—as a broader motivation that *aims* at achieving knowledge of God and specifically the intellective 'vision' or full knowledge of God that is promised to the believer as a future supernatural good. In other words, the believer's graced desire for supernatural beatitude, which begins as a habit in the will and is intensified in hope and love, habituates the believer into the practice of assenting to the propositions of faith and thereby forming true beliefs about God in faith, with the ultimate goal of habituating him into knowing or 'seeing' God fully. Of course, on Aquinas's view, this epistemic process does not end in this life: it ends in the next life, when faith gives way to pure intellective 'vision' of the divine. Thus, given Aquinas's commitment to the beatific vision as the end of faith (both as goal and completion), it seems that *both* the faculties (the intellect *and* the will) that enable the believer to assent and form true beliefs about God in faith in this life must function properly in order to ensure that the believer successfully reaches his intended cognitive destination—the beatific vision of God—in the next life.

There is a final important analogy, therefore, that I argue can be drawn between Thomistic faith and *intellectual virtue*, whose exercise yields a high proportion of true beliefs. Here, then, we can apply another epistemic desideratum listed above, as explicated by a prominent virtue epistemologist. According to Linda Zagzebski, intellectual virtue is "a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person" that consists of both the motivation for achieving knowledge (or what Zagzebski prefers to call "cognitive contact with reality") and reliable success in achieving knowledge.¹⁰³ On Zag-

103. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 137. See in particular 165–84. In order to show how the knowledge gained through acts of intellectual virtue

zdzewski's view, the *success* the person of intellectual virtue enjoys in achieving knowledge is directly rooted in his *motivation* for achieving knowledge: it is the motivation for achieving knowledge that guides the person of intellectual virtue as he follows certain rules and belief-forming processes or practices (mainly through imitating other persons of intellectual virtue) that he and his epistemic community hold to be both reliable and truth conducive. Once an intellectual virtue has been sufficiently inculcated, then the person of virtue is reliably and consistently able to reach his desired end of achieving knowledge.¹⁰⁴

Zdzewski's virtue epistemology thus furnishes a further explanatory model for Thomistic faith that allows us to ground the assent of faith in the believer's graced desire for his supernatural beatitude and hence in the proper functioning of his will and in the proper functioning of his intellect.¹⁰⁵ That is, on analogy with intellectual virtue (at least as Zdzewski depicts it), the theological virtue of faith can be shown to have both a *motivational* component and a *success* component. Formed faith in particular, we can say, is driven by the broader desire to know or 'see' God fully in the next life; and this desire in turn leads the possessor of such faith to follow specific belief-forming pro-

is qualitative as opposed to merely quantitative, Zdzewski often substitutes "cognitive contact with reality" for "knowledge." The sorts of intellectual virtues Zdzewski has in mind are open-mindedness, trust, integrity, and responsibility, which one acquires "by imitating persons who have these qualities to an exemplary degree" (151). For a more specific treatment of Aquinas as a virtue epistemologist, see Thomas S. Hibbs, "Aquinas, Virtue, and Recent Epistemology," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52.3 (1999): 573–94. John Lamont also advances a broadly Thomistic epistemology of faith that is based in a robust virtue epistemology and epistemology of testimony. See John R. T. Lamont, *Divine Faith* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 187–216.

104. Alston thinks that what secures truth-conducivity in at least some virtue epistemologies (those offered by Ernest Sosa, Alvin Goldman, and Zdzewski) is an undergirding reliabilism, and "none of it from the intellectual-virtue frosting" (*Beyond "Justification,"* 161). However, Zdzewski convincingly argues that motivation, rather than reliability alone, figures in the acquisition of knowledge and hence is also truth conducive. Also, despite what Alston contends, reliability (and hence truth-conducivity) remains central in Zdzewski's account, even if reliability alone is not sufficient for knowledge.

105. Zdzewski distinguishes her view both from reliabilism and from Plantinga's theory of proper function, both of which she argues neglect to take full account of the motivational and hence voluntary aspects of human knowing. However, Zdzewski admits that her view could be adapted to resemble externalist theories like Plantinga's theory given that "the notion of virtue might look a lot like proper function"; conversely, her view could be adapted in the opposite direction to resemble internalist theories, if "an intellectual virtue is defined solely in terms of virtuous motivations and the success element is removed" (330). For an excellent recent attempt to align Plantinga's proper function epistemology with an epistemology of virtue, see Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood "Proper Function, Emotion, and Virtues of the Intellect," *Faith and Philosophy* 21.1 (2004): 3–24.

cesses or practices (most notably, believing on the basis of the inward instinct or divine invitation) that are conducive for forming true beliefs about God in this life and whose main aim is consequently to enable him to reach the anticipated ‘vision’ of God in the next life. Thus the motivation the believer possesses for achieving the ‘vision’ or full knowledge of God promised to him in the next life guides him as he follows particular belief-forming processes or practices, which, at least for those members of the community of faith (who possess the virtue of faith), are truth conducive—that is, reliably aimed at cognitively conjoining the mind to divine truth.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps most importantly, then, once the habit or virtue of faith has been infused by grace, and faith in turn is deepened by hope and love, the believer learns to form true beliefs about God in a reliable and consistent way and thereby *begins* to come into “cognitive contact” with *divine reality*.

Having applied relevant insights in contemporary epistemology in order to explain and defend Aquinas’s realist epistemology of faith, we should now briefly attend to how that epistemology can be applied to ordinary epistemic circumstances, in which the assent of faith actually occurs. Aquinas argues that faith comes through *hearing*—and specifically, hearing the contents of the Christian faith (as contained in *sacra doctrina*) presented or proclaimed. Thus, he writes, “Now ‘faith is through hearing’ (Rom. 10:17). Hence some things must be proposed to be believed by man, not as seen, but as heard, to which he assents by faith.”¹⁰⁷ On Aquinas’s view, therefore, the person of faith generally assents to the propositions of faith and thereby forms true beliefs about God in specific contexts or on certain occasions when he “hears” *sacra doctrina* proclaimed to him: for example, when listening to a homily, reciting or reading a particular liturgy or sacred text, attending to sacred images, or even by witnessing or participating in specific ecclesial practices. As a way of generalizing the numerous possible scenarios in which the person of faith might “hear” *sacra doctrina* proclaimed to him, therefore, we can make the following claim on Aquinas’s behalf: under normal epistemic circumstances, the person of faith assents to a proposition of faith *p*, and consequently forms the true belief that *p*, on the occasion of “hearing” it proclaimed (audibly and/or visually) that *p*.

An example here proves helpful. By virtue of witnessing his priest con-

106. In line with my analysis above, I certainly don’t think that members of the community of faith need to be aware that the unique belief-forming processes and practices they follow are truth conducive; what is most important is that those processes and practices *be* truth conducive.

107. *ST II-II.8.6.*

secrate the Eucharistic bread (or sacrament of the altar), which includes listening to his priest speak certain words and perform certain actions with respect to the bread, the person of faith “hears” the priest proclaim that *the true body of Christ is present in this sacrament of the altar*.¹⁰⁸ Assuming that the person of faith is not deceived about what he “hears” proclaimed to him, then on Aquinas’s view (as I am interpreting it) the person of faith also is in a suitable epistemic position to *assent* with conviction to the proposed proposition that *the true body of Christ is present in this sacrament of the altar* and consequently form the true belief that *the true body of Christ is present in this sacrament of the altar* (a belief that is true presuming that the true body of Christ is *in fact* present in the sacrament). Moreover, when certain epistemic conditions are met—most notably (1) the belief is formed on the basis of the right sort of doxastic evidence or adequate ground (the God-given “inward instinct” to believe God that God is truly present in the Eucharistic bread, or the perceived attractiveness of that claim); and (2) the belief is produced by properly functioning faculties (including his intellect and will, or the virtue of faith more broadly) in line with the graced design plan they have acquired, which entails assenting to true propositions about God in precisely this sort of epistemic environment on the basis of the available supernatural ground—then that belief can be credited with possessing a sufficiently high positive epistemic status and thus also, it seems, with furnishing knowledge that *the true body of Christ is present in this sacrament of the altar*.

Conclusion: An Important Objection Considered

The goal of this chapter has been to offer defensible models located in Aquinas’s philosophical theology—realist epistemologies of reason and faith—for how human persons can know God in this life. But at the chapter’s end, the following question surely still remains for many: have I established anything more than the mere *possibility* that human persons know

108. I use this example deliberately, since Aquinas says that “The faith of the believer is not directed to such and such accidents of bread, but to the fact that the true body of Christ is under the appearances of sensible bread, when it is rightly consecrated” (*ST* II-II.1.3 ad 4). I realize that not all Christian believers recognize or endorse the doctrine of the real presence, although many if not most certainly do (even if they remain metaphysically agnostic about what the real presence entails), and the early Christian tradition, it seems, weighs heavily in favor of it. J. N. D. Kelly, for example, argues that the common Eucharistic teaching (however it was variously interpreted by early Christian theologians) “was in general unquestioningly realist, i.e., the consecrated bread and wine were taken to be, and were treated and designated as, the Saviour’s body and blood” (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958], 440).

God in this life? The Thomistic models I have offered are among many that could be offered. So on what basis should we prefer the Thomistic models over any others? If I haven't established that these models have any basis in reality and that knowledge of God in the way Aquinas envisages it *actually* occurs then why should the reader be persuaded to accept these models as more than mere possibilities?

Now, in response, I have done more than offer mere possible models for how human persons enjoy knowledge of God in this life. First, following Aquinas's lead, I have offered very plausible models that have a high degree of explanatory power. In fact, I began this endeavor in the previous chapter, when I showed how Aquinas offers a compelling realist epistemology of the beatific vision based on his compelling realist account of cognition. In this chapter, I argued that Aquinas offers a compelling theological epistemology that shows, on one level, how it is possible to form true beliefs about God by way of reason and faith and hence direct our minds on God through rational inquiry and faith, without closing the requisite epistemic distance between our minds and God. Through reason, we are able to form a web of beliefs about God that properly express the divine transcendence: both what God is not and also what perfections God possesses preeminently. Through faith, we are able to form a web of beliefs about God based on what God has revealed of God's self to us in *sacra doctrina*—the God who, even as truly believed, remains 'unseen'. I also have shown how the beliefs we form and hold about God by way of reason and faith are likely to be true given that they possess a positive epistemic status conferred on them by some mainline truth-conducive epistemic desiderata. Given that reason bases its beliefs about God on arguments or demonstrations which are themselves formed by way of paradigm, truth-conducive belief-forming processes (sense perception and deductive inference), and that it does so qua properly functioning cognitive capacity (one aimed at the truth), there is a good case for claiming that the beliefs about God that reason generates are true. Given that faith bases its beliefs about God on God's own internal witness to the mind and movement in the will, when the mind and will are functioning properly (and hence rightly aimed at the true and the good), there is a good case for claiming that the beliefs about God that faith generates are also true. Thus, while I have not definitively established that there is, in fact, knowledge of God by way of reason and faith, I have certainly offered good reasons for thinking that reason and faith, properly interpreted, furnish knowledge of God.

This may still strike some as too large of a concession: the goal of a gen-

uine theological epistemology should be to establish definitely that human persons actually obtain knowledge of the divine. But in immediate response, I ask: is this a reasonable expectation to set for *any* epistemology? For example, establishing that we have actual knowledge of the empirical world—which we *prima facie* claim to possess—would require establishing that the faculties that yield our basic empirical beliefs are reliably bent on furnishing us with empirical truth. But determining whether these faculties are reliably truth-bent is itself a matter of empirical investigation, so in assessing and determining whether those faculties are reliable, we are dependent on those very faculties and the information they furnish. Therefore, as Alston points out, any investigation we, or the scientific community in particular, might conduct in determining the reliability of those faculties will be infected by epistemic circularity, to greater or lesser degrees.¹⁰⁹ But this fact does not and should not thwart scientific investigative efforts: it merely reminds us that there is ultimately no non-circular argument that science can offer on behalf of the reliability of sense perception. Science is inescapably dependent on the very empirical sources of belief under scrutiny and investigation in assessing whether sense perception is reliable.

Extrapolating this argument, Alston claims

And so it is in the realm of religion. Just as it is an empirical question whether standard, perceptual belief-forming mechanisms are reliable, so it is a theological question whether the Bible or the church is a trustworthy source of belief, and whether practices of forming beliefs on their basis are reliable. If we want to know whether, as the Christian tradition would have it, God guarantees the Bible and the church as a source for fundamental religious beliefs, what recourse is there except to what we know about God, His nature, purposes, plans, and actions? And where do we go for this knowledge? In the absence of any promising suggestions to the contrary, we have to go to the very sources of belief credentials of which are under scrutiny. Epistemic circularity is no more avoidable in this matter than it is in the assessment of basic secular sources of belief.¹¹⁰

Here, Alston is defending his own reliabilist religious epistemology, but we can further extrapolate his argument for our purposes as follows: in assessing

109. See in particular William P. Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) and *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 102–45.

110. William P. Alston, “Knowledge of God,” in *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, ed. Marcus Hester (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 41–42.

whether reason and faith are reliable sources of true belief about God, we ultimately have to rely on the tools constitutive of philosophical and theological inquiry and more specifically what philosophy and theology tell us about the divine. In other words, we have to rely on reason and rational forms of inquiry in assessing the arguments or demonstrations that reason marshals on behalf of certain beliefs about God; and we have to rely on faith, and what faith holds to be true of God, in assessing the grounds on which faith is based and the way in which our faculties of intellect and will function in producing and sustaining certain beliefs about God. This process is clearly epistemically circular; but here, philosophy and theology are in the same epistemic position as empirical or scientific inquiry, and arguably other fields of inquiry as well.

Now, philosophical and theological inquiry, like scientific inquiry, is certainly not stymied by epistemic circularity. The charge remains for the philosopher and the theologian to continue to show how knowledge of God by way of reason and faith is not only possible but also actual. I claim to have taken up this charge in this chapter, but more work certainly needs to be done. And here, we can see how reason and faith can be mutually supportive. For example, we can appeal to reason, and thus to the arguments or demonstrations furnished by natural theology concerning the existence and nature of God, in defending the claim that reason and faith both operate according to God-given design (thereby ensuring that the appeal to God-given design is not blind faith). We can appeal to faith and to the sources on which faith is based (scripture, Christian tradition, and the church) in strengthening the claim that God shares God's perfections with creatures, which in turn makes analogical predication possible. Of course, all of this constitutes an ongoing process—the process of defending not only the possibility but also the actuality of knowledge of God—whose conclusions will always require further investigation and defense. But here again, philosophy and theology, or philosophical theology (which I claim is the enterprise that Aquinas carries out so effectively) is no different than any other discipline: progress can only be measured incrementally.

Someone may further object that carrying out a successful defense of Aquinas's theological epistemology requires comparing it with alternative religious epistemologies in order to show how it is superior: only when we have carried out such a successful comparison can we take seriously that knowledge of God as Aquinas envisages it is not only possible but also actual. In response, I certainly agree that the project of defending Aquinas's

epistemology over and against other epistemologies is valuable. One of the main goals of this book has been to show how Thomistic epistemology is superior to many modern epistemologies insofar as it coherently and convincingly explains the mind's relationship to the world as well as the mind's relationship to God and thereby avoids getting trapped in the pitfalls of modern skepticism and subjectivism. I disagree, however, that carrying out a successful defense of Aquinas's theological epistemology requires comparing it with *every possible* epistemological alternative. The onus is on the skeptic (that is, one skeptical of Thomistic epistemology) to furnish an alternative religious epistemology and articulate it in some detail, showing how it is superior to Thomistic epistemology. Once specific alternatives have been proffered, and specific objections have been raised, then we can defend Thomistic epistemology, and the actuality of knowledge of God from the Thomistic perspective, in more detail.

In the remaining chapters of this book, I continue to defend Thomistic epistemology by considering further objections and thereby making some further important applications and conclusions: most notably, that the knowledge of God we claim to possess here below by way of reason and faith is objective, even if it is not direct or comprehensive; and that theology, so undergirded by faith as well as reason, should be interpreted realistically, as furnishing objective insight and discovery into the nature of the divine. It is to these final important tasks that I now turn.

PART III

APPLICATIONS IN THOMISTIC
EPISTEMOLOGY

Rehabilitating Objectivity in the Knowledge of God

THE MAIN purpose of this chapter is to continue to defend claims I advanced in the previous chapter and so to further explicate and support what I take to be Aquinas's theologically realist understanding of knowledge of God here below. First, I address what I expect is the most pressing theological suspicion or concern raised by my analysis so far: by emphasizing (or perhaps *overemphasizing*) our ability to gain knowledge of God here below by way of reason and faith, I have blurred the essential epistemological distinction between knowledge of the 'unknown' God here below and the intellectual 'vision' of God afforded to the blessed. Not surprisingly, I think the objection, while indeed important, is misguided, since it reflects a distinctly modern bias and tendency to compartmentalize our knowledge of God here below in an effort to reduce that knowledge to a purely subjective and vacuous cognitive attitude or state of mind—a move I argue Aquinas would find to be theologically abominable.

My response to this objection, then, goes as follows: the knowledge of God we enjoy here below only appears to be in danger of being conflated with the knowledge or 'vision' of God enjoyed by the blessed if we presuppose that there is an "absolute conception of God" with which beatific knowledge of God can and should be identified. If we refuse to entertain the idea that there is such an absolute conception of God, given that it (on

analogy with an “absolute conception of reality” or “God’s-eye view” of the world) can be shown to be unintelligible, then the knowledge of God afforded by reason and faith, while certainly analogous to beatific knowledge of God insofar as it directs our minds on God, ceases to threaten to overtake such knowledge, for it refuses to be dualistically set over against it. Moreover—and this is my most important claim—by refusing to equate beatific knowledge of God with an absolute conception of God, we can locate an element of *objectivity*, previously thought to be the exclusive property of beatific knowledge of God, in the knowledge of God we enjoy here below by way of reason and faith.

In the second part of the chapter, I consider a further objection to my view, an objection which denies that knowledge of God here below is possible given that human persons (and minds) are irrevocably situated in the natural world. In response, and in line with claims I advanced in the fourth chapter, I argue that achieving knowledge of God does not require transcending the natural world or our own human subjectivity in order to reach some alien state of mind; rather, it requires inhabiting our own human subjectivity more fully and hence acquiring the requisite cognitive capacities by becoming more fully (rather than less) humanly minded. Becoming more humanly fully minded requires receiving the right sort of upbringing as well as pedagogical training within the requisite communities of reason and faith. Thus we are able to know God by way of reason when we have acquired (or grown into) an *elevated second nature*; we are able to know God by way of faith when we have acquired (or grown into) a *graced second nature*. Perhaps most importantly, if we refuse to set “nature” dualistically over against “supernature,” or “nature” dualistically over against “grace,” then we can affirm that knowledge of God is obtainable within the natural world, given that nature is itself always already incorporated within supernature and hence always already graced.

In the final section of the chapter, I return to reemphasize a fundamental theme from Aquinas’s philosophical theology: in this life, God is both known—in the sense that reason and faith really direct the mind to God and thus afford us a true apprehension of God—and ‘unknown’, in the sense that the true apprehension reason and faith afford, on Aquinas’s eschatological scale, is characterized more by darkness than by light. And yet, even on this side of the beatific vision, human knowledge of God here below is *not* bounded. In this life, we truly remain cognitively *united* to God as to one ‘unknown’.

The Absolute Conception of God in Theology

Through our investigation of modern philosophy and theology in part one of this book, we came to see how as moderns, we naturally have learned to distinguish and separate how the world *appears* to us, within our particular perspectives and points of view on the world, from how the world *really is* “in itself,” apart from how it appears to us from within those perspectives and points of view.¹ According to this distinctly modern view, then, there is the *subjective* realm of appearances, from which the world is perceived (or believed) to be a certain way, and then there is the *objective* realm of reality, which only can be conceived in itself independently of how it appears to us from within our multifarious perspectives and points of view.

The problem here, of course, is that once we make the now infamous distinction between the “subjective” and the “objective,” and consequently polarize appearance and reality, we inevitably extend the conception of the world as it is in itself, thereby introducing an absolute conception of reality or God’s-eye view of the world—what Thomas Nagel famously calls the “view from nowhere.”² Nagel explains the polarity of the subjective and the objective as follows:

At one end [the subjective] is the point of view of a particular individual, having a specific constitution, situation, and relation to the rest of the world. From here the direction of movement toward greater objectivity involves, first, abstraction from the individual’s specific spatial, temporal, and personal position in the world, then from the features that distinguish him from other humans, then gradually from the forms of perception and action characteristic of humans, and away from the narrow range of a human *scale* in space, time, and quantity, toward a conception of the world which as far as possible is not the view from anywhere within it. There is probably no end-point to this process, but its aim is to regard the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its contents.³

1. Over the next two pages, I essentially exposit an argument against the absolute conception of reality proffered by John McDowell in “Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 112–30. The main target of McDowell’s criticism is Bernard Williams, who appeals to the absolute conception of reality throughout his own book, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978).

2. See Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

3. Thomas Nagel, “Subjective and Objective,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 206.

The idea here is that achieving objectivity broadly understood, whether to understand the world better or ourselves, requires *transcending* the particular, parochial perspectives on the world that we, as human beings situated in the world, occupy—precisely in order to achieve an absolute conception or God’s-eye view, “a conception of the world which as far as possible is not the view from anywhere within it.” This absolute conception or God’s-eye view, as determined paradigmatically by modern scientific inquiry, claims to have critical leverage over the various subjective perspectives, given that it guarantees (by means of progressive inquiry) transparent access to the objectively real. In short, the absolute conception guarantees *objective* knowledge of the world: a knowledge that we *cannot* possess based solely on how the world appears to us, or how we perceive (or believe) the world to be. Thus, according to this view, if we are to make room for knowledge—or perhaps better, “knowledge”—of the external world based on appearances, then we have to assume it is “comprehensibly related” to the absolute conception of reality, so understood.⁴

Furthermore, once we introduce an absolute conception of reality that is dualistically set over and against our irreducibly subjective perspectives on the world, then it becomes impossible to affirm that what is objectively real can figure into those perspectives on the world. Colors, for example, figure into our particular experiences of the world as properties belonging to external objects; and yet, colors cannot be understood or described without appealing to those experiences in which they appear. From the assumed standpoint furnished by the absolute conception of reality, however, colors are not (or cannot be) objectively real: what they are, in fact, are mere reflections of subjective responses projected onto an objectively external and colorless reality. The assumption, therefore, is that we can only determine or *really know* what colors are (objectively, that is) apart from how they appear in particular experiences of color.

But here is precisely where problems with the absolute conception of reality arise. Once we extricate certain properties such as colors from the commonsense view or perspective on the world that represents those properties as belonging to external objects, precisely in order to explain what they ob-

4. According to McDowell, Williams uses the phrase “comprehensibly related” to affirm the commonsense idea that we know, for example, that *grass is green*, while denying that such knowledge is *objective* (in Williams’s sense of *absolute*), or puts us into cognitive contact with how the world really is. This is why it is more accurate to say, on Williams’s own view, that we “know” that *grass is green* (which reminds us that our knowledge of that “fact” is always based on our irreducibly subjective experiences of it).

jectively are, then we immediately lose touch with and cease to understand precisely what it is (properties which no longer intelligibly can be identified as colors) that we are supposed to be explaining. There is a real doubt, therefore, about the ability of the absolute conception of reality to divest properties such as colors of their phenomenal qualities in order to make them objectively graspable (in the modern sense being considered), that is, intelligible *as they are* in themselves apart from *how they appear* to us. In other words, in order to render properties such as colors objectively graspable, it seems that we have three options: we can (1) reduce our experiences of colors to something with which they resist being equated (e.g., purely physical occurrences or affectations of our subjectivity purged of any phenomenal content); (2) dismiss our experiences of color as altogether illusory; or (3) expand objective reality to include colors, which requires ignoring the initial problem of how we can incorporate colors within a conception of the world that seemingly cannot accommodate them.⁵ But if none of these options appears promising or appealing, then what? Nagel provides the following answer:

The only alternative to these unsatisfactory moves is to resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that our understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception. *Perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible. Perhaps reality should not be identified with objective reality* [my emphasis].⁶

In calling us “to resist the voracity of the objective appetite,” and suggesting that “reality should not be identified with objective reality,” Nagel is not telling us to abandon objectivity altogether; he is telling us to abandon the *illusion* that *all* of reality must be identified with objective reality and consequently that obtaining cognitive contact with *all* of reality requires “transcending oneself as far as possible.” I want to push Nagel’s insight even further: we should renounce *altogether* the idea that achieving objectivity requires transcending one’s own view on the world and embracing an absolute conception of reality, or “a single more comprehensive conception” of reality that is “centerless” and hence radically external to the view on the

5. Nagel argues that “if one wishes to uphold that everything real must be brought under an objective description, there seem to be three courses available with respect to any recalcitrant subjective aspect: reduction, elimination, and annexation” (“Subjective and Objective,” 210). I am using colors as an example of the “recalcitrant subjective aspect” Nagel has in mind.

6. *Ibid.*, 211.

world one already possesses. The further doubt I am expressing here, then, is whether achieving an absolute conception of reality is desirable or even possible, given that it presupposes an “Archimedean point”—which again, in the modern world, scientific inquiry in particular is ultimately expected to provide—that transcends all appearance and perspective, and hence furnishes an unobstructed outlook from which all genuine truth about the world can be surveyed and understood.⁷ The skepticism we should have regarding the Archimedean point and modern science in particular, therefore, is not whether scientific inquiry makes convergent progress in showing us the world, but whether it finally can provide us with a composite metaphysical picture of *all* of reality, which strikes us as being something far richer than science has the capacity to describe.⁸ In short: we need to affirm, against a prevailing scientism, that objectivity can be achieved in ordinary, everyday experience and thought.

To continue, it seems obvious that the theologian should be equally skeptical that scientific inquiry ever could usher us towards embracing an absolute conception of reality, given that the theologian, at least of a classically orthodox sort, holds that there are divine truths—truths about God—that transcend what scientific inquiry alone can detect. And yet, there is a real temptation for theology, once it has forced science to abdicate its role of producing an absolute conception of reality, to assume that role itself, albeit in a different form. That is, while the theologian may agree that there is certainly no Archimedean point from which to discern all genuine truth about the world and our relationship to it *scientifically* speaking, he may nevertheless contend that there is an Archimedean point from which to discern all genuine truth about God and our relationship to it *theologically* speaking. Therefore, it becomes the job of the *divine science*, or the “higher” science of God possessed by God and the blessed in heaven to furnish that Archimedean point. So while scientific inquiry surely cannot yield a conception of an Archimedean point, the divine science can, at least within its own sphere. When we introduce the absolute conception of reality and an Archimedean point in theology, then, we equate God with what is objectively real in the modern sense. That means, moreover, that God can only be objectively known (we could add, “as God

7. The appeal to an Archimedean point is also Williams’s.

8. As we will see below, McDowell’s eventual move here is to make room in reality, broadly understood, for certain value properties (goodness, for example, as it is perceived in a person we call “good”) that are only perceivable from a distinctly ethical standpoint by those who have acquired the appropriate ethical concepts and sensibilities.

is”) from an Archimedean point *external* to the perspective on God we are afforded here below by reason and faith, which are distinctively human forms of knowing. So if we are to make room for “knowledge” of God afforded by way of reason and faith, then we have to assume it is comprehensibly related to the “absolute conception of God,” so conceived.

As read through a distinctly modern lens, Aquinas himself can appear to endorse a theological version of the absolute conception of reality. Victor Preller, for example, argues on Aquinas’s behalf that “knowledge” of God here below and the knowledge God possesses of God’s self, and consequently shares with the blessed, are constituted by two entirely different conceptual schemes. The content of our thought and language about God here below succeeds in directing us to God, or at least gesturing at God, only insofar as there are conceptual and linguistic analogues for such thought and language (analogues that play a role that is “syntactically isomorphic” with our thought and language) in a conceptual and linguistic system that is radically unlike the one we possess here below:

Thus, to say that God ‘exists’ is to say that there is another conceptual system (an ideal language) in terms of which a syntactical move isomorphic in usage with our syntactically significant existential assertion (‘_’) could be used in conjunction with an entity radically unlike the entities which are existentially assertable in our language. . . . The term ‘existence’ applies affirmatively, substantially, and properly to God with regard to that which it names or signifies in *his language*, but it does not apply to him *at all* with regard to what it names or signifies in *our language*.⁹

Furthermore, only God’s conceptual system is marked by intelligibility, which in turn enables (or would enable) the one who possesses it to think and speak intelligibly or meaningfully about God. Our thought and talk about God here below, however, is marked by a decided *lack* of intelligibility or meaning, so such thought and talk remain, from our point of view, entirely vacuous. Preller writes the following concerning the attributes we predicate of God using reason in natural theology:

All of the attributes of God that are ‘known’ on the basis of natural theology follow analytically and vacuously from the analogical proposition that there *exists* an un-

9. Preller, *Divine Science*, 173. Preller thinks he is doing justice to the distinction Aquinas makes between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi*, but as we will see shortly, he excludes the possibility that we genuinely can direct *our* thought and speech on God, both within the realm of natural theology, and also, it seems, by way of faith.

known and incomprehensible intentional context in terms of which the intelligibility of all reality *could* be seen if one could share that radically different conceptual point of view. The ‘modus significandi’ of such attributes—the syntactical meaning that they would have *in God*—remains unknown.¹⁰

Preller clearly aims to protect the divine transcendence by denying that our natural conceptual systems, bent as they are on interpreting the empirical world, are adequate for forming beliefs and assertions about God with intelligible contents. So he concludes: “All the language of natural theology is language about that which is sought after but unknown. It is incapable, therefore, of conforming the mind to that which is sought. It conveys no *knowledge* of God—even of an imperfect sort—and it terminates in the judgment that there is that of which we have no knowledge.”¹¹

Faith, too, can only be considered “knowledge” (what Preller calls a “knowledge-by-*faith*”) because it is efficiently and finally caused by the *scientia dei* shared by God and the blessed, even though it bears no intelligible resemblance to the *scientia dei* shared by God and the blessed:

The formal *scientia dei* shared by God and the *beati* is the principle or cause of the intentional state of the believer *in via*; that intentional state is itself the immanent cause of the believer’s ordination to the *visio dei*. The knowledge of God and the blessed is thus the efficient and final cause of the faith of the believer. Since, however, the believer does not possess the *lumen gloriae*, he does not comprehend the Science of God. In place of an intelligible science, the believer possesses only nonintelligible ‘articles’ of faith, which he believes to be created analogues of the knowledge shared by God and the blessed. Although he cannot himself see how the articles of faith are true of God, he believes that they express the proper intentional state of one whose mind has been directed to God, and in some fashion conformed to his nature. He *hopes* to see, *in patria*, how his present ‘state of mind’ when he assents to the articles of faith is intelligibly related to the eternal essence of God.¹²

Thus, according to Preller’s reading of Aquinas, faith is cognitive assent to revealed propositions about God that are unintelligible from the standpoint of faith but are nevertheless believed or taken to be syntactically analogous to the intelligible principles of *scientia dei* that comprise the divine mind and, by extension, the minds of the blessed. By themselves, the propositions of faith, even as believed and consequently held to be true, do not refer the

10. *Ibid.*, 165.

11. *Ibid.*, 180.

12. *Ibid.*, 233–34.

mind to God; it is God who, by an act of grace, and in the place of understanding, supplies the ‘intention’ needed to direct the mind to God. Preller thus concludes, “it is God who makes the propositions [of faith] refer to their supernatural objects.”¹³ Or again, he argues, “Man ‘apprehends’ because grace *makes* him apprehend in a new and unique way.”¹⁴

What is clear from Preller’s analysis is that our unintelligible modes of thought and language about God bear only a minimal—if not a totally equivocal—semantic relation to the radically alien conceptual system possessed by God and the blessed. The danger here, then, is that Preller’s account borders on—or even embraces—agnosticism: Preller threatens to widen the epistemic gap between our “knowledge” of God here below and the knowledge of God possessed in heaven to such an extent as to reduce such “knowledge” to an entirely vacuous state of mind, rendering it *incapable* of directing us to the divine. Preller basically concedes this in the case of natural theology; for example, on Preller’s account, we cannot properly apply “existence” to God even analogously because that term only applies to God *in God’s own language*. Quite simply, then, since we do not possess or speak the divine language, we cannot refer to God. We can only refer to God in our *own* language, which does not apply to God *at all*. Thus reason’s inquiry into the nature of the divine is interminably bound to the process of “seeking an intelligibility that it cannot understand” and in which it never terminates.¹⁵

Now, Preller does claim that faith, operating by an infused light or intention, really does conform the mind to God, unlike reason. But on Preller’s view, the content of faith also remains entirely vacuous, only extrinsically related to the contents of the divine mind and the minds of the blessed. What remains ambiguous on Preller’s account, therefore, is how *we* can ‘intend’ and hence know God in any meaningful sense—even in faith—as long

13. *Ibid.*, 246. Later, Preller identifies this “new kind of intentionality” as the “Gift of Understanding” (*donum intellectus*), which Aquinas discusses in *ST* II-II.8. (I discuss the importance of this gift in the next chapter). This sort of ‘understanding’, however, does not make the propositions of faith any more intelligible to human understanding; it simply underscores, and hence enables the believer to recognize, “*that* there corresponds to his faith-propositions a reality in God” (261–62).

14. *Ibid.*, 241. Preller further argues, “In order, however, to refer us to a nonpropositional object which we can take to be salvific, the propositions of the language of faith must contain at least one straightforward and nonproblematic empirical referent”—that is, something communicated *ex auditu* that the ‘light of faith’ can judge “to be a cause of salvation and thus a proper object of formal faith” (246). This empirical referent is the humanity of Christ.

15. *Ibid.*, 179.

as *we* remain uninformed about God: it simply remains a mystery how the knowledge possessed by God and the blessed, which remains extrinsic to our minds, actually confers any “referential or descriptive power” (Preller’s language) on the propositions we believe here below because that is a property that those propositions, even as revealed by God, simply do not possess.¹⁶ Once again, on Preller’s analysis, we seem to remain completely confined to our own *subjective* point of view of the divine: what we believe to be true of God in faith communicates nothing to our minds about who God is—even if, *objectively* speaking (from the objective standpoint occupied by God and the blessed) we are somehow, but still inexplicably, ‘intending’ and hence reaching God with our minds. So were we to inhabit this radically alien state of mind, we would recognize the correspondence between our vacuous “knowledge” of God here below and the knowledge of God we possess in heaven. As Preller puts it, the person of faith *hopes* to see, in the next life, how his present “state of mind” is intelligibly or comprehensibly related to the essence of God, when he finally comes to possess *scientia dei* himself. The implication, however, is that the only way the believer *can* achieve genuine knowledge of God herself is to transcend his present “state of mind” in order to inhabit the objective state of mind shared by God and the blessed. On Preller’s view, then, it seems that *scientia dei* furnishes what I have been calling an absolute conception of God, or an eschatological Archimedean point from which the believer not only hopes to ‘see’ God but also hopes to ‘see’ how the “knowledge” of God he possesses in faith has in fact, “in some fashion,” conformed his mind to the divine nature.

Kenneth Surin offers a more favorable and accurate view of knowledge of God in Aquinas. Unlike Preller, he bolsters natural theology in particular in Aquinas because he rightly recognizes that our thought and language about God here below, even if it is based on our knowledge of creatures, still succeeds in directing us to God insofar as there is a likeness to God that creatures possess by virtue of being created by God. Thus, he argues, “we are justified in applying to God terms that apply primarily to mundane objects because there is an ‘isomorphism’ of being, established by Aquinas’s metaphysics of creation, between God and such objects.”¹⁷ Now, Surin recognizes that this is not a *strict* isomorphism of being: creaturely participation in divine reality is “necessarily flawed and distorted.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, “Aquinas’s

16. *Ibid.*, 262.

17. Surin, “Creation, Revelation, and the Analogy Theory,” 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 15.

ontological conception of God's creative act can furnish us with an analogy theory that is a viable theo-logic, that is, a language that really is *about* God."¹⁹ Unlike Preller, therefore, Surin rightly recognizes that natural theology in Aquinas is also based on revelation, insofar as creation itself is an arena of divine revelation; hence, he honors the Thomistic insight that our thought and language about God, even though drawn from creaturely experience, still manages to refer us to God and so bears on God objectively.

And yet, Surin still finds a way of importing the absolute conception of reality into Aquinas's theological epistemology. Like Preller, Surin argues on Aquinas's behalf that faith is cognitive assent to propositions about God that cannot be established or verified until we attain to the beatific vision in the afterlife:

Aquinas maintains that since revelation yields knowledge of the inner life of God, the final attainment of this knowledge must await the beatific vision (*visio beatifica*) in the afterlife. It follows from this that the articles of faith, which are established by deriving them from the content of God's mind, will be *eschatologically verified*: their truth, unlike that of the propositions of 'natural theology,' cannot be inferred here and now from the reality of the world. When we attain to the beatific vision, that event will verify or falsify the articles of faith, and to this extent these articles only stand provisionally: they cannot be established by our natural cognitive powers in this life.²⁰

What is striking about this passage is not Surin's claim that we cannot verify the articles (or propositions) of faith using our natural cognitive powers but rather his implicit suggestion that the beatific vision furnishes us the eschatological Archimedean point we *need* in order to verify the articles (or propositions) of faith. The further lesson Surin draws here is the following: while God has created the world in such a way that we will, at the consummation of history, come to know God (and hence all genuine truth about God) as God has revealed God's self in creation, because there is an *analogia entis*, we cannot in this life know God by way of the *analogia entis*. In this life, the *analogia entis* is for us an *analogia fidei*. He writes, "Now since the final revelation of the precise nature of this *analogia entis* must await the consummation of history, to this extent it is also an *analogia fidei*: we have to accept it, in this life at any rate, as an article of faith."²¹ There are, then, two different perspectives on analogy: "analogy from the divine perspective is analogy

19. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 17.

20. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

of being, analogy from the human perspective is analogy of faith, and the two are complementary because the human creature has his or her being, through God's act of creation, in the being of God (the *imago Dei*).²²

Now, by grounding the *analogia fidei* in the *analogia entis*, Surin claims to show how knowledge of God here below constitutes a genuine theo-logic, even if such knowledge does not afford us the divine perspective on creation. Thus we should *believe* that our knowledge of God here below really bears on the divine, even if we do not as of yet 'see' how it does so. But now we must ask, insofar as we already believe this to be true, why do we need further eschatological verification for it? Furthermore, what sort of benefit or insight do we hope to gain by attaining the divine perspective on creation—what we now properly can identify as an absolute conception or God's-eye view of creation and the *analogia entis*? Even though Surin claims that only the articles (or propositions) of faith need to be eschatologically verified, it is clear that in occupying the absolute conception of and with the divine, we will be able to make eschatological pronouncements on everything we believe, whether by reason or by faith, about God here below. And this means that *all* truth about God will be subject to eschatological verification. More specifically, the absolute conception will provide some sort of *objective* verification of what we claim to know about God here below. But according to Surin, this also seems to entail the possibility of *falsifying* what we claim to know about God here below. So from the eschatological Archimedean point, we may see that what we formerly believed to be true of God in this life was not only vacuous but in fact *false*: that is, true from our subjective point of view in this life, which means that such "truth" is only provisional, but false objectively speaking, according to the divine perspective or absolute conception possessed by God and the blessed.

Both Preller and Surin employ what I am calling the absolute conception of God for its explanatory power: the absolute conception furnishes objective knowledge of God; consequently, any "knowledge" of God we possess in this life—even if it is unintelligible or stands in need of eschatological verification—must be comprehensibly based on the absolute conception. But now we need to ask, is the absolute conception of God even intelligible? The questionable assumption here is that what we believe to be true of God here below, which includes the propositional contents of our beliefs, is completely unintelligible or can be verified to be true—that is, as communicat-

22. *Ibid.*, 18.

ing something real about who God is—only from an external cognitive vantage point (the eschatological Archimedean point) that *completely* transcends the perspective in which those propositional contents are *actually* thinkable or believed by us. So rather than affirming the absolute conception of God and its explanatory power, therefore, we should instead question its intelligibility: were we to abandon the perspective on God we possess here below in order to understand or verify the content of what it is we actually believe, then presumably we would also lose any cognitive grip on what it was that we were supposed to be understanding or verifying. In other words, there is surely something mysterious (perplexing or odd) about the claim that understanding or verifying the propositions we believe here below requires transcending the very state of mind in which those propositions figure as the contents of our beliefs, by inhabiting an alien state of mind in which they do not.²³

Consider the following example. From the perspective on God we have here below, as informed by reason and faith, we believe it to be true that *God is good*. But those who enjoy the absolute conception of God afforded by the beatific vision presumably *do not* believe it to be true that *God is good*: having transcended their earthly perspective altogether, they presumably ‘see’ something objective in God that no longer can be identified as “goodness”; something that differs radically from what we, from within our own earthly perspective, believe God to possess. So how is it, then, that once *we* attain the absolute conception of God afforded by the beatific vision and entirely abandon the perspective on God we possess here below (along with the beliefs about God that constitute that perspective), we suddenly will be able to understand or verify the truth of our *former* belief in God’s goodness—a be-

23. Preller clearly tries to circumvent this objection by insisting that the propositions of faith are syntactically analogous to the supernatural principles of *scientia dei* that exist in the divine mind and the minds of the blessed. This may appear to suggest a way of redeeming the absolute conception of God. But the whole point of appealing to the absolute conception, from a theological point of view, is not to reconcile *scientia dei* with our “knowledge” of God (or establish an epistemic link between them), but to alienate *scientia dei* from such “knowledge,” which Preller seems determined to do. As I have been arguing, by insisting that the intentional state we occupy *in via* is only *causally* or *externally* (rather than *cognitively* or *internally*) related to the intentional state that the blessed occupy *in patria*, Preller fails to show how the intentional state of mind we occupy *in via*, particularly in faith, is even remotely connected to the intentional state of mind that the blessed occupy *in patria*. Moreover, he seems to commit himself to the view that the intentional state we do occupy *in via*—as infused by God from outside our minds—is not properly speaking our own. If, in a state of infused faith, we ‘intend’ or think God in any meaningful sense, it is not because *we* really ‘intend’ or think God, but because God (or grace), in effect, is doing the ‘intending’ or thinking for us.

lief that we have come to see to be deeply misleading and quite possibly false and which we no longer can be intelligibly credited with holding? It is not at all obvious, and in fact seems implausible, that we will be in a better position, epistemically speaking, to understand or verify a truth (or “truth”) that we have given up and no longer believe.

I make this point not to challenge the central Thomistic claim that in this life the truth of what we believe about God here below remains ‘unseen’ (given that God remains ‘unseen’) but rather to challenge the claim that the truth of what we believe about God here below remains completely (however provisionally) unintelligible or stands in need of eschatological verification. If it is true that God has *already* revealed God’s self within creation (which means that the truth about God can be discovered by reason) as well as within *sacra doctrina* (which means that the truth about God can be received by faith), then God has already ensured *by the very act of revelation itself* that what we believe to be true about God by way of reason or faith amounts to genuine knowledge, broadly speaking. There is no need, therefore, to hold such truths to be unintelligible or provisional, in the sense that they await eschatological verification, *given that those truths have been revealed by God to us and thus already have been verified by God as true*. Consequently, the truths we discover using reason or accept in faith *already* express something about God—however imperfectly, according to our finite mode of understanding—and hence even as believed by us communicate something to our minds about who God is. Thus, as I interpret Aquinas, by forming true beliefs about God here below by way of reason as well as faith, we actually come closer, cognitively speaking, to *who God is*—not some eschatological Archimedean point that lies outside or beyond the world and our present state of mind. Moreover, and this is my most important point, by forming true beliefs about God by way of reason and faith, we actually *begin* to know who God is. That is, we begin to know God *objectively*, or “as God is.”

There is a further, more general doubt, therefore, whether it is the task of the divine science to lead us outside or beyond the perspective on God we have here below to an eschatological Archimedean point, where we will finally attain an absolute conception of God. Just as there is a tendency for natural scientific inquiry to claim the idea of the Archimedean point as its own in order to arrogate to itself exclusive authority in offering objective knowledge of the world, there is an analogous tendency in theology to incorporate the idea of the Archimedean point within its conception of the di-

vine science (or *scientia dei*) in order to grant this higher, alien science exclusive authority in offering objective knowledge of God.²⁴ The scientism that infects theology is problematic, therefore, *not* because it holds that all genuine truth about God has been revealed to us by God (and hence has been transmitted to us by God through revelation, whether in creation or in *sacra doctrina*), but because it holds that all genuine truth about God only *really* can be known by us once we reach an eschatological Archimedean point and achieve an absolute conception of God that is merely extrinsically related to the perspective on God we possess here below.

In other words, importing the Archimedean point into theology inevitably requires that we equate *objective* knowledge of God with an absolute conception of God that is necessarily opposed to the particular *subjective* perspective on God we assume here below. *In patria*, we enjoy an absolute conception of God; *in via*, however, we are confined to the purely subjective perspective on God afforded to us by reason and faith. Thus, even if our perspective here below is comprehensibly related to the absolute conception of God, in this life that absolute conception must be processed through our own subjectivity and ultimately reconfigured as a distinct conceptual scheme or cognitive space within which we think and make claims about God. On such a view, whatever cognitive resources we have for knowing God in this life are internal to an already specifically theological outlook we accept in reason and faith, and as such are unequipped to provide the requisite absolute conception of God that furnishes genuine knowledge of God. So in order to know God objectively, it seems, we must transcend or break out of the very conceptual scheme or cognitive space in which our cognitive activity directed on God takes place, because (again, given our commitment to the eschatological Archimedean point) that is the only way we can come into genuine cognitive contact with God. But of course, given our inherent subjectivity, we *cannot* transcend or break out of the conceptual scheme or cognitive space to which we are confined. We are restrained by our own subjectivity and beliefs about God which, once divested of any objective element, cease to be recognizable as knowledge in even an extended sense. Such a subjectivist understanding of knowledge of God here below, therefore, which dualistically opposes human subjectivity and divine objectivity (and hence estranges mind and God), unnecessarily insulates the cognitive activity asso-

24. In this paragraph and the next, I am building on a claim McDowell makes in "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World," in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 129–30.

ciated with what we believe about God here below from the very divine reality on which it purports to bear.

Without the Archimedean point in theology, however, we can distinguish an objective component *within* the perspective on God we enjoy here below itself that is inescapably our own, giving up the aspiration to locate that objective component *exclusively* in an absolute conception of God that is not our own.²⁵ In other words, without the Archimedean point, we make room for the possibility that there can be genuine objectivity in what we *believe* about God through reason and faith. And this means that reason and faith afford a genuine form of knowledge of God—what I have identified, following Aquinas, as a true apprehension of God. The point here, again, is not to insist that the knowledge of God here below should be elevated to the status of the divine science, which would mean conflating such knowledge with beatific knowledge of God. Rather, the point is to find a means of dispensing with the fantasy that the divine science, on which theology and all reasoning and believing about God here below is based, furnishes an absolute or objective conception of God that utterly transcends what we claim to know of God in this life. So if we abandon the aspiration to secure objectivity in our knowledge of God by establishing an eschatological Archimedean point, and in turn embrace the possibility that we can and do *begin* to know God objectively (in the sense that we *believe* in or about God objectively) from within the perspective on God we possess in reason and faith, then we can confidently understand reason and faith to furnish a genuine mode of epistemic access to God, without feeling like we are propounding a mystery or trespassing a boundary.

The main claim I am making here, then, is that we human persons ultimately come to know God not by transcending our own subjectivity, *but by being led by God, and the 'lights' of reason and faith, to inhabit our own subjectivity more fully and intensely, thereby becoming more deeply minded about God.* Nagel makes the powerful suggestion that once we “resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception” then we will come to see that “perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible.”²⁶ I

25. I am employing language utilized by McDowell in “Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 128–29.

26. Nagel, “Subjective and Objective,” 211.

embrace and extend Nagel's suggestion in the current context: perhaps the truest "view" of God is afforded to those who follow the 'lights' of reason and faith in forming true beliefs about God. My overall argument, then, which I will continue to defend, is that it is by having our human subjectivity shaped and elevated—that is, by being initiated and habituated into new cognitive capacities as well as into an overall "view" of God here below afforded by reason and faith—that we begin to enjoy awareness of who God really is in a way that transcends ordinary ways of knowing.

Second Nature and Grace

Our next task in this chapter is to consider a further objection to my claim that the knowledge of God we enjoy here below is objective. And we can formulate the objection as follows: in what sense can human beings, who are irrevocably situated in the natural world, enjoy knowledge of a reality that transcends the natural world and hence is distinctly *supernatural*? Doesn't gaining such knowledge once again require overcoming our own subjectivity, or natural identity, in order to cognitively attain divine objectivity? And how can we do this, firmly bound as we are by our own natural identity? Now the objection, as formulated in these questions, once again reflects a distinctly modern bias: if there is such a thing as the "supernatural," it must be opposed to the "natural," and whatever we call the "natural" must be opposed to the "supernatural". So the mode of thinking here, to start, is clearly dualist, and with the dualism intact, we must either deny that our knowledge of God here below directs us to a reality that truly transcends the world (a strict *naturalism*), or assert that such knowledge is constitutive of a state of mind that is wholly extranatural, divested of any recognizably natural and hence human constitution (a strict *supernaturalism*). But there is an alternative here, which I mean to defend: refusing to opt for "naturalism" or "supernaturalism" as opposing explanatory frameworks, or even more strongly, refuting the dualism outright—in other words, denying the nature/supernature dichotomy *altogether*. By denying or refuting the dualism, we can make room for genuine knowledge of the transcendent without having to domesticate the supernatural within the natural or to abandon the natural in favor of the supernatural.

In refuting the dualism of "nature" and "supernature" or "nature" and "grace"—so firmly entrenched in modern thought—I explicitly claim to be following Aquinas's lead. As we have already seen, Aquinas insists that human beings are destined for a distinctly supernatural end: the beatific vision

of God.²⁷ Thus there is, in some sense, a distinctly *natural* desire for God. And yet, since this desire extends beyond the horizon of this world, it cannot be fulfilled in this life. The ultimate fulfillment of this desire requires the *supernatural* intervention and influence of divine grace and, more specifically, the infused theological virtues (and ultimately, the *lumen gloriae*), which properly direct the mind and will of the human being on God, who alone can elevate the human being so that he can finally ‘see’ God. So, in short, we have a natural desire to obtain a happiness that lies beyond what we can obtain by nature alone. And this means that nature in Aquinas is something that cannot be ultimately contrasted or opposed to supernature. For example, concerning the beatific vision, Aquinas writes:

The beatific vision and knowledge (*scientia*) are to some extent above the nature of the rational soul, inasmuch as it cannot reach it of its own strength; but in another way it is in accordance with its nature, inasmuch as it is capable of it by nature, having been made to the likeness of God.²⁸

The beatific vision is both “above” and “in accordance” with our rational nature: we cannot obtain it on our “own strength” (we require divine aid), but we are, in some sense, still naturally capable of acquiring it, insofar as we are created in the image of God. In what sense, then, can the desire for God in this life intelligibly be deemed natural? If the fulfillment of this desire is above our nature, then in one sense, it cannot be strictly natural. However, insofar as we have been created by God and for God, it is intrinsic to our nature to desire God and hence our own supernatural beatitude, however implicitly. Where, then, does the desire for God, and the basic orientation or “openness” of the human being to God, fundamentally belong? Should we locate it in the realm of nature or the realm of supernature?

As Denis Bradley notes, Aquinas’s seemingly competing claims and texts about whether the desire for God is natural *or* supernatural have historically vexed his interpreters; and yet “Aquinas himself does not attempt to harmonize these texts, which suggests that he did not find them contradictory.”²⁹

27. See *ST* I.12.1.

28. *ST* III.9.2 ad 3.

29. See Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 458. See also Anna N. Williams, “Argument to Bliss: The Epistemology of the *Summa theologiae*,” *Modern Theology* 20.4 (2004): 505–26 for a provocative interpretation of how Aquinas’s treatment of intellectual virtue in the *Summa* orders human knowing towards heavenly bliss and hence “proves to be a sign of the larger epistemology of the *Summa*, an epistemology marked by its close intertwining of nature and grace” (506). The locus classicus for these sorts of readings

And if Aquinas did not find these texts contradictory, it is because, as Bradley contends, Aquinas constantly affirms “the complementarity of nature and grace,” which means that Aquinas “himself was unaware of any such dualism” (of nature and grace).³⁰ That the dualism of nature and grace is simply unintelligible within Aquinas’s unified theological worldview is evident in his affirmation of the mystery of the human person as someone “who by nature implicitly desires a supernatural end that he cannot naturally achieve.”³¹ So Bradley concludes: “Is the desire to see God natural or supernatural in this life? Aquinas, we should admit straightaway, says both. The temptation of the interpreter, however, is to say one or the other, and in doing so dissolve the paradox that Aquinas saw as inherent in human nature.”³²

Aquinas’s claims about the natural desire for supernatural beatitude here below, which reveal his total unwillingness to buy into any dualism of nature and grace, or nature and supernature, also bear directly on our concerns about knowledge of God here below. I take Aquinas to be arguing something like the following: with the dualism of nature and supernature in place, we are forced to picture nature as blankly external to the “space” of supernature, and as long as nature is pictured as blankly external to that space, then our knowledge of God, like our desire for God, can only be misidentified as purely natural (given that the natural has no place within the supernatural), or purely supernatural (given that the supernatural cannot incorporate or accommodate the natural). However, if we refuse instead to exteriorize nature from the space of supernature, which requires divesting nature of grace, then we can locate our cognitive activity directed at the divine, like our desire

of Aquinas can be found in Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (1946; repr., Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991) and *Le mystère du surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965). See also the translation of the latter: Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

30. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*, 461.

31. *Ibid.*, 460.

32. *Ibid.*, 461. Some contemporary interpreters of Aquinas who claim that there is a sharp distinction in Aquinas between the desire for God rooted in nature and the desire for God inspired in grace include Jean Porter, “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 47.1 (1986): 48–68 and Stephen A. Long, “Obediential Potency, Human Knowledge, and the Natural Knowledge of God,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37.1 (1997): 45–63. See also the recent exchange between Charles Mathewes, who claims that Aquinas, like Augustine, refuses to oppose nature and supernature (“Agency, Nature, Transcendence, and Moralism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28.2 [2000]: 297–328; and “Reply [to Bowlin],” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28.3 [2000]: 478–81), and John R. Bowlin, who in response to Mathewes (“Comment [on Mathewes],” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28.3 [2000]: 473–77) says quite straightforwardly that in Aquinas “nature does not dispose us to supernatural ends” (474).

for supernatural beatitude, squarely *within* nature, given that nature, on the view I am propounding on Aquinas's behalf, is *itself graced*, or always already "shot through" with grace. The move, here, then, is not to domesticate the supernatural within the natural (which is clearly a reductionist enterprise), but rather properly to locate or ground the natural within the supernatural, which means that we are situating nature within supernature, rather than the other way around.³³ By doing so, we do not undo the integrity or identity of the natural, for this would require opting for "supernaturalism" rather than "naturalism" and hence buying into the dualism that I vehemently oppose. Quite the contrary, we uphold the integrity and identity of the natural, affirming its causal link to the transcendent and its heightened and privileged status as a creature of God.

We can also think about these issues, then, even more broadly in terms of the world-God relation. On the classical theological view I am propounding, while God remains independent from the world, the world does not remain independent from God. Or again: while God transcends the world, the world does not transcend God, because the world itself is a created effect of God, and hence always already radically related to and dependent on God. To deny, therefore, that creation itself is a grace, and evacuate creation of grace, requires claiming creation and the natural as our own, that is, as something that properly belongs to us and does not come from God. Thus the gratuitousness of creation—the fact that the world is a gift to us from God—is a feature of its ultimate dependency on God, rather than its ultimate autonomy from God. We may *think* that the world retains some sort of ultimate autonomy from God and that there is some sort of Great Boundary separating the world from God (this is another lesson of modern philosophy), but that is not only to misunderstand the status of the world as a creature of God and graced by God; it is also to misunderstand the nature of the divine itself. Here we return to a point I made in the first part of the book. Since God is utterly transcendent, God is simply not the kind of thing that the world *can* define itself over and against: God is quite simply "beyond kinds." Consequently, God is also beyond whatever distinctions or

33. The move here is, in John Milbank's words, to "supernaturalize the natural" rather than to "naturalize the supernatural": that is, to deny a "two-tiered" conception of the cosmos and such a thing as "pure nature" completely independent of God (specifically of God's grace) and hence of the order of supernature. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 207. Milbank cites de Lubac as a modern Catholic thinker who, in defending the "integralist" position (nature as always already infused with grace), properly "supernaturalizes the natural."

boundaries we may draw in order to separate ourselves from God. What this means is that a pure naturalism—that is, a conception of the natural as utterly divorced from the supernatural, or the world as utterly divorced from the divine, by virtue of being bounded on the outside—is a theological impossibility.

Thus, on the richer view of the natural I propose (again following Aquinas's lead), the world itself, rather than being bounded on the outside, is in fact "open" to the divine and hence hospitable to genuine knowledge of God. Since the world itself is a created effect of God, gaining knowledge of God by reasoning from created effects to their uncreated cause elevates the mind beyond the merely natural—directing it on the transcendent—without abandoning the natural altogether. Since the world itself, including the mind, is always already graced, and hence always already open to the influence of the divine, then the mind also can be further supernaturally elevated by grace—God's direct action on the human mind—so as to gain knowledge of God through faith. So once we cease to conceive of nature as fully independent from supernature and instead adopt a view of nature as fully circumscribed within supernature (itself an all-encompassing space), then we can effectively abandon the distinctly modern and secular view that divine truth and reality (even if it exists) must remain mysteriously inaccessible to human persons fully situated in the natural world.

In order to defend this claim further, we once again need to deploy McDowell's notion of second nature, which McDowell uses to reconceive and reinvest the natural with specifically rational significance for human beings. As we have already seen, McDowell argues that completely overcoming the dualism of reason and nature requires undermining a modern scientific view of the natural, which he claims disenchant and dehumanizes the natural and consequently "hijacks" the very idea of the natural. McDowell claims that it is only when we abandon the notion that nature is wholly alien to human subjectivity, or what McDowell calls the space of reasons, that we can begin to embrace a view of the natural world as the proper home for reason or *logos*, and potentially permeated by reason or *logos*. According to McDowell, this is a hard-won insight with direct application not only in the philosophy of mind but also in ethics and specifically moral psychology: once we recognize that nature is not independent of reason or *logos* but in fact the proper home for reason or *logos*, and potentially permeated by reason or *logos*, then we can see how acquiring a second nature—and specifically, acquiring practical reason or *logos* by way of moral education and ethical upbringing

ing—can occur *within* nature, itself now more broadly conceived as capable of bearing distinctly ethical significance for possessors of reason or *logos*. McDowell writes:

To use the rhetoric of ethical realism, second nature acts in a world in which it finds more than what is open to view from the dehumanized stance that the natural sciences, rightly for their purposes, adopt. And there is nothing against bringing this richer reality under the rubric of nature too. The natural sciences do not have exclusive rights in that notion; and the added richness comes into view, not through the operations of some mysteriously extra-natural power, but because human beings come to possess a second nature.³⁴

McDowell's main claim in his moral psychology, which constitutes the heart of his "ethical realism," is that it is precisely by acquiring a second nature, which includes "the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities" through receiving the right ethical upbringing (and hence being initiated into an entire ethical worldview), that one is able to 'see' the world aright, and consequently form true ethical judgments about the world.³⁵ In other words, in acquiring a second nature, one also acquires the ability to be "opened" by the world to wider reasons for acting, reasons that are discernible from within a richer worldview and grounded in a richer *reality*—a reality suffused with ethical meaning and value—that transcends what modern science, with its disenchanting and dehumanized view of the world, traditionally has granted as objective or factual. So once again McDowell leaves us with an attractive insight:

What it is for the practical intellect to be as it ought to be, and so equipped to get things right in its proper sphere, is a matter of its having a certain determinate non-formal shape. The practical intellect's coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities: a process that takes place in nature. The practical intellect does not dictate to one's formed character—one's nature as it has become—from outside. One's formed practical intellect—which is operative in one's character-revealing behavior—just is an aspect of one's nature as it has become.³⁶

34. John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 192.

35. McDowell defines an Aristotelian ethical upbringing "as a process of habituation into suitable modes of behavior, inextricably bound up with the inculcation of suitably related modes of thought" (John McDowell, "Might There Be External Reasons?" in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 101).

36. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 184–85.

As I understand it, therefore, attaining genuine knowledge of God does not require transcending the natural in order to inhabit some totally alien state of mind. Rather, it entails having the right sort of upbringing, which (to start) occurs squarely *in* the natural world: being initiated and habituated into a new, shared language (the respective languages of reason and faith) as well as a new, shared set of cognitive capacities. Now this sort of upbringing, or process of cognitive habituation, surely also entails receiving the right sort of pedagogical training. More specifically, it entails learning how properly to reason about God, which in turn requires being trained in how to follow the *triplex via* and to make the requisite inferential moves in constructing arguments or demonstrations whose premises yield certain conclusions. The cognitive capacities and exercises associated with reason are therefore constitutive of what we can call an *elevated second nature*, that is, a philosophically trained mind capable of reasoning effectively within the field of natural theology from knowledge of creatures to knowledge of the divine.

In the case of faith, pedagogical training entails submitting oneself to the teaching of the Christian church, as the custodians of *sacra doctrina*, as well as the leadings of God's grace, through participation in the sacramental life of the church.³⁷ The cognitive capacities and exercises associated with faith are constitutive of what we can call a *graced second nature*, which is itself infused via a larger process that we have already seen includes a radical shift in the believer's motivational and intellectual orientation, or the determination of the believer's distinctly supernatural end—his coming to believe in God as the True and coming to desire God as the Good. The end result of this process in this life is habituation into all of the theological virtues and thus full initiation into a theological worldview in which the believer learns to believe (as well as desire) God aright. In short, it is by coming to possess an elevated and graced second nature that we also become open—even if only in a limited and fragmented way—to a richer and wider reality than what is normally “in view”: divine reality itself.

Now, a recalcitrant objector may still be thinking the following: in advancing all of these claims, am I not guilty (first) of a blatant metaphysical fantasy—stretching reality unnecessarily to include the supernatural—and (second) of a blatant epistemological fantasy—constructing a conception of mind as conveniently “fit” for the supernatural or divinely real? There is an

37. Again, I am not going to define the parameters of the Christian church, but I have the ‘catholic’ (universal) and historical church in mind: those in the Christian community that claim allegiance to traditional Christian orthodoxy.

analogy here with ethics that we can draw: don't theological realists, like ethical realists, make room in reality for some sort of special truth and hence "help themselves" to that truth without first having to *earn* it? And in doing so, don't they also end up propagating an "unattractive intuitionistic realism that populates reality with mysterious extra features and merely goes through the motions of supplying an epistemology for our supposed access to them"?³⁸ So an objector may once again insist that I, arguing on behalf of Thomistic epistemology, have allowed human persons all too easy epistemic access to divine truth and reality without fully accounting for why we are *entitled* to enjoy such privileged access.

Now, in one sense, the objection simply does not stand: rather than posing any threat to the position I am defending, the objection once again betrays an obvious and trenchant bias within modern secular thought. This worldview not only unfairly prohibits us from defending or embracing the possibility that divine truth and reality exist; it also unfairly prohibits us from defending or embracing the possibility that cognitive contact with the divinely true or real can occur—that is, take place not only from within the worldview persons inhabit in reason and faith, but also from within the natural world, broadly understood.³⁹ But in another sense, the objection still stands: if we claim to enjoy epistemic access to divine truth and reality by way of reason and faith, then our right to make such a claim must surely be earned. That is, establishing the objectivity of what we believe about God in reason and faith indeed requires engaging in critical reflection and scrutiny; and yet—and here again I reiterate a point I made in the previous chapter—I contend that this critical process, like any other, can only occur from *within* the philosophical and theological worldviews that we inhabit.

Within the sphere of ethics, McDowell argues that we can work our way towards embracing a full-fledged ethical realism, which would mean really

38. John McDowell, "Projection and Truth in Ethics," in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 157. In this essay, McDowell challenges both "intuitionism," which grants unearned epistemic access to ethical truth, and "projectionism," which holds that ethical truth is projected on the world by human subjects. Instead, the position he describes "aims, quite differently, at an epistemology that centres on the notion of susceptibility of reasons" (162), or earning ethical truth by articulating and defending the stances (beliefs or judgments) we take towards that truth.

39. From McDowell's point of view, it is a distinctly modern bias and illusion that "one could not achieve a justified conviction of objective correctness, in thought about anything, from within something as historically contingent as a conceptual scheme" or that "what is required [to achieve a justified conviction of objective correctness] is to break out of a specific cultural inheritance into undistorted contact with the real" (John McDowell, "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology," in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 37).

earning, and not merely borrowing, the notion of ethical truth, by securing the status of ethical verdicts and judgments as rational responses to the way the world is. But we must do so from within an already ethical worldview, thereby allowing ourselves full access to the “world-describing conceptual resources” that we already claim to possess. So while McDowell certainly admits that we cannot determine in advance whether we can meet the threat “that there is not enough substance to our conception of reasons for ethical stances,” his conclusion is that “We have no vantage point on the question what can be the case, that is, what can be a fact, external to the modes of thought and speech we know our way around in.”⁴⁰ Analogously, earning divine truth and the right to enjoy epistemic access to it in the realm of philosophy and theology requires employing the very conceptual and linguistic resources that we already possess, with the ultimate aim of scrutinizing and securing the status of the cognitive stances we assume in reason and faith as genuine points of epistemic access to objective reality—that is, the divinely true and real.

Of course—and this is precisely Aquinas’s unique insight, I claim—earning divine truth and the right to enjoy epistemic access to it is not a burden that we are expected to bear alone: that burden is borne ultimately, instead, by God’s *grace*. Not only has God already revealed God’s self in creation and *sacra doctrina*, but God has also furnished us with the requisite ‘lights,’ whether based in our created nature or infused more directly by grace, that guide us in fully acquiring the very cognitive capacities we need in order to obtain epistemic access to that truth—capacities that we are initiated and habituated into as we become fully clothed in our elevated and graced second natures. Thus the very critical tools we have at our disposal in order to evaluate the cognitive stances we assume in reason and faith—tools that are unique to philosophical and theological inquiry itself—ultimately come from God, even if we acquire and develop those tools through interacting with other members of our philosophical and theological communities. The argument here is certainly circular, but as McDowell suggests, it is virtuously, rather than viciously circular: if God is the author of our knowledge of God, then the very “modes of thought and speech we know our way around in,” which are specific to the philosophical and theological worldviews we inhabit, are not properly our own, but are grounded in God and in the abilities God grants us to enable us to think and speak truly about God. And this

40. McDowell, “Projection and Truth in Ethics,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 160 and 164.

should inspire confidence rather than invoke suspicion or concern: if the burden for acquiring knowledge of God comes from God, given that God is the First Truth who enables us to discern and receive the truth about God, then the critical project of evaluating such knowledge (and specifically the cognitive stances that constitute it) is not based exclusively in our own finite and fallible efforts but is itself guided by God's own infallible 'light' and inexhaustible grace.

Knowing and 'Unknowing' God Objectively

I have expended considerable effort in this chapter and the previous chapter defending reason and faith as objective means of knowing God. But as we press towards fully embracing this conclusion, the argument I have offered may continue to strike some as self-defeating. As we have already seen, Aquinas himself asserts that in this life, "our most perfect knowledge of [God] as wayfarers is to know that He is above all that our intellect can conceive, and thus we are united to Him as to something unknown (*quasi ignoto*)."⁴¹ Aquinas continually reminds us that no human person in this life can know or 'see' the essence or "whatness" of God; consequently there can be no knowledge of the essence of God in this life, properly speaking. So perhaps we should be more detailed about some other important ways in which the knowledge of God we enjoy here below is objective, if we wish to remain true to the letter and spirit of Aquinas's thought.

As we already saw in chapter three, Aquinas says that in our cognitive development, we first learn how to abstract basic concepts and then consequently learn to apply, elucidate, and enrich those concepts in an effort to achieve a surer and deeper knowledge of the empirical world:

the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension; but it apprehends something about its object, such as its quiddity, and this is its first and proper object; and then it understands the properties, accidents, and the various relations of the essence. Thus it necessarily compares one thing with another by composition or division; and from one composition and division it proceeds to another, which is the process of reasoning.⁴²

Aquinas clearly understands the first act of intellect—the apprehension of intelligible features or form—to provide a reliable but nevertheless partial cognitive foundation on which to base subsequent empirical inquiry and

41. *ST* suppl. 92.1 ad 3.

42. *ST* I.85.5.

hence subsequent acts of intellect such as composition, division, and reasoning. Empirical knowledge begins with the apprehension of intelligible form, but this pre-theoretic alpha cognition, as Norman Kretzmann calls it, is both limited and fragmentary, leaving us still largely in ignorance about what Aquinas calls the “properties, accidents, and the various relations of the essence” of things. We only achieve an omega cognition or *scientia*, a perfected and complete knowledge of empirical truth, through progressive empirical inquiry, which is a “fallible process of reducing the ignorance in the infallible alpha cognition.”⁴³

Now, there is an important analogy that we can draw here. The knowledge of God that we enjoy here below is something like the alpha cognition that in ordinary cases of empirical knowledge genuinely puts us into cognitive contact with the natures of things, but which nevertheless is “unanalyzed, confused, imprecise, characterized by ignorance more than by cognition.”⁴⁴ The alpha cognition thus gives us genuine insight into the natures of things, even if it remains shrouded in ignorance. At the risk of undoing Aquinas’s commitment to direct realism, we could even say—fairly, I think—that through the alpha cognition alone we remain united to the true natures of things as realities still largely ‘unknown’ to us. Analogously, I argue the following: the alpha cognition of the divine we gain through reason and faith indeed affords us genuine insight into the nature of the divine, but it remains shrouded in ignorance: through that alpha cognition we still remain united to God as to one ‘unknown’.

And yet, as Aquinas writes, we do not remain content with our ‘unknowning’: given that knowledge of God here below terminates in belief, rather than sight, the mind “thinks discursively and inquires about the things which it believes, even though its assent to them is unwavering.”⁴⁵ According to Aquinas, then, we consequently refine and develop our partial and fragmentary knowledge of God gained through the alpha cognition by engaging in subsequent rational inquiry and theological reflection. The goal of our inquiry and reflection—like the goal of empirical inquiry generally—is to obtain an omega cognition of the divine, or the full knowledge of God, which is already enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. It is, of course, impossible to achieve the omega cognition in this life: the perfected and complete knowledge of divine truth, which comes through pure intellectual ‘vision’ of

43. Kretzmann, “Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance,” in *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters*, 190.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *QDV*14.1.

the divine essence itself, cannot be obtained by us, but only can be given to us by God, when God is the very form by which we know or ‘see’ God. In this life, then, the contents of our true beliefs about God are like the concepts we acquire through intellectual abstraction: they collectively constitute, in Norman Kretzmann’s terms, a “full, unopened package” that “confusedly contains” the truth about God. That package can be partially opened for us in this life; but it can only be fully opened for us by God in the next life.

In this life, then, we remain in a state of ‘unknowing’: our epistemic access to God occurs not through pure ‘vision’ but through true belief or assent, both of which remain radically imperfect modes of knowing God. Human knowledge of the divine in this life is therefore characterized more by darkness than by light, comparatively speaking, insofar as we remain wayfarers on the road towards achieving our ultimate beatitude. And yet—and here I am reiterating an important argument I have been making on Aquinas’s behalf—if human knowledge of the divine is characterized more by darkness than by light, it is *not* because our cognitive powers are bounded on the outside. One of the main conclusions of my analysis in this chapter as well as the previous chapter is that through reason and faith we really do ‘intend’ and hence reach God with our minds, and we really do gain a true apprehension of divine reality itself. But it is indeed a dim apprehension at best: it remains darkened and obscured, not by any cognitive boundary, but by the natural weakness of the mind, or the mind’s status as not yet fully redeemed and glorified.

There is another important way, then, in which the knowledge of God we enjoy here below is objective: informed as it is by propositional contents that express the mystery of the divine—that is, what God is not, what God possesses preeminently, and what God has more directly revealed the mystery of God’s self to be, both eternally and in relation to creatures—such knowledge directs us well beyond our own subjectivity, or the conceptual nets of our own understanding, onto God’s ontologically and epistemically transcendent reality. Hence, even if such knowledge is objective, it does not make God into an object: Thomistic epistemology as I am defending it is by no means a form of onto-theology. As we saw in the first section of the book, onto-theology, in Merold Westphal’s words, “seeks to render the whole of being intelligible to human understanding with the help of the highest being.”⁴⁶ But this is clearly not the goal of Thomistic epistemology, philosophically or theologically. In

46. Merold Westphal, “Aquinas and Onto-theology,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80.2 (2006): 184.

defense of Aquinas, Westphal argues that Aquinas overcomes onto-theology in four main ways. (1) Aquinas's God is not merely an abstract metaphysical principle or *causa sui*: although God is clearly the First Cause and Being itself, God is also defined scripturally, and hence (2) Aquinas's God is knowable not only by reason but also by faith (by means of Christian revelation and grace). (3) Rather than seeking to render the whole of God's being intelligible to human understanding, Aquinas repeatedly and "emphatically insists upon the ineliminability of mystery."⁴⁷ Hence, (4) Aquinas's God is "not religiously otiose" but remains worthy of praise and devotion.⁴⁸

The question remains, though, how we can be true both to the letter and to the spirit of Thomistic epistemology and truly overcome onto-theology, while retaining what I take to be Aquinas's theologically realist commitment to objectivity in our knowledge of God, even here below. Westphal writes:

But if in this life we do not apprehend the essence of God, our cognition of God does not meet the adequation test and "we are united to Him as to one unknown." Or, to put it more starkly, strictly speaking, all our beliefs about God are false. None of them passes the adequation test nor satisfies the correspondence notion of truth. . . . This does not mean that we might not speak of those predications about God which are most appropriate to human knowers as "true" in some lesser sense. . . . Like Kant, Aquinas distinguishes the way God knows God from the way we know God, the divine thing in itself from its appearance to us, noumenal Truth from phenomenal truth.⁴⁹

Like the other expositors of Aquinas we have looked at in this chapter, Westphal is clearly underscoring a truth that lies at the heart of Aquinas's theological epistemology: there can be no adequation of the mind to God in this life, properly speaking, not only because God is not the form of the intellect in this life by which we know God, but also because we know God through creatures and hence creaturely concepts, which cannot possibly adequately represent God to the mind. Thus, since knowledge and truth go hand-in-hand in Aquinas, and truth is the adequation (*adaequatio*) of mind and reality, it seems that we cannot know God objectively, at least in this life. Objectivity seems inextricably linked with onto-theology.

While I respect Westphal's defense of Aquinas against the crimes of onto-theology, we still need to be careful about equating objectivity with onto-theology. The tendency here, which Westphal exemplifies, is to evacu-

47. *Ibid.*, 187.

48. *Ibid.*, 190.

49. *Ibid.*, 188.

ate our knowledge of *any* objectivity out of fear of falling into the idolatry of onto-theology. And this is clearly antithetical to Aquinas's thought. As should now be obvious, it is patently false that on Aquinas's view "all our beliefs about God are false" and that "none of them passes the adequation test nor satisfies the correspondence notion of truth," which means that they are "true' in some lesser sense." Even if the mind is not *fully* conformed to the divine in this life, so that there can be no *full* adequation or correspondence of the mind to the divine in this life, properly speaking, it is certainly not the case that there is *no* adequation or correspondence of the mind to the divine in this life. If even a broad conformity of the mind to God were not possible in this life, through reason or faith, then on Aquinas's view, no knowledge of God would be possible. But in defending his doctrine of analogy, for example, Aquinas explicitly asserts that such knowledge, constituted as it is by true judgments or beliefs about God, *is* possible; this is why Aquinas rejects the idea that the positive terms that we predicate of God are said either univocally or equivocally. Consequently, Westphal's reading of Aquinas cannot be right, not only because it does not leave room for Thomistic analogy, but also because it undermines Aquinas's robust commitment to theological truth, which is cognitively attainable by reason as well as faith.

As should also be clear, Westphal's reading of Aquinas in the passage above is infected by the classic modern and specifically Kantian epistemic divide between appearance and reality, or what is "true" for us phenomenally and what is True of God noumenally. But why should we straightjacket Aquinas with this woefully inadequate epistemological frame? If we reject, rather than accept the modern and specifically Kantian divide between the phenomenal and the noumenal (which I have prescribed as the proper course of action), then we are no longer forced to align Aquinas's theological epistemology with subjectivism, on the one hand, or objectivism (or onto-theology) on the other hand. So we can dispense entirely with the Kantian categories of "true" for us, subjectively speaking, and True for God, objectively speaking. There is simply *one* truth about God, which is received in this life through the natural or graced mode of the intellect, yielding true beliefs about God by way of reason or faith, and in the next life through the glorified mode of the intellect, yielding pure intellective 'vision'. Thus objectivity is present in part in our knowledge of God here below and fully in the knowledge of God we will enjoy in the life to come.

At this point, it is helpful to employ what is by now a familiar metaphor for understanding the mind's relationship to God in this life: through reason

and faith, the mind is “opened” to God; so while the mind may be sharply limited in what it can know of God in this life, and hence may remain in a state of ignorance and darkness, it nevertheless remains opened and hence oriented towards God in reason and faith, awaiting its full perfection in glory. And this means that the mind is so structured, as created by God, as to be opened to God by (1) the natural ‘light of reason’, which enables us to discover some truths about God based on God’s revelation of God’s self to us in creation; (2) the ‘light of faith’, which enables to accept some truths about God through God’s revelation of God’s self to us in *sacra doctrina*; and finally, (3) the light of ‘glory’, which enables us to ‘see’ God directly. Even as created by God, then, the mind is opened on the outside, waiting to be ‘informed’ by and united to the world and, even more importantly, ‘informed’ by and united to God. Now, of course, the way in which the mind is opened to God in this life differs radically from the way the mind is opened to God in the next life: while in the next life, the mind will be opened to God in direct ‘vision’, in this life, the mind can only be opened to God through true beliefs formed and held by reason and faith—sharply truncated cognitive states that open us not only to the reality but to the utter *mystery* of God, who remains transcendent and ‘unknown’.

Objectivity, then, is not simultaneous with pure intelligibility in this life; in fact, if our knowledge of God is truly objective, then it *must* direct us on the God who radically transcends the mind, even if God does not transcend a boundary that encloses the mind. Thus it is true to say that we both know and ‘unknow’ God objectively, in the sense that the true beliefs we form and hold about God only bear on or are directed on God as ‘unknown’. We can illustrate this as follows. As Denys Turner argues on Aquinas’s behalf, properly defending the knowledge of God available to reason requires reconceiving (or rediscovering) reason as a God-given capacity which, when “stretched to the end of its tether” and put into the service of its highest end—achieving the truth about the existence of God—ushers the mind into a new realm of knowing, or what Turner calls ‘unknowing’, where it confronts, paradoxically, the unknowability or incomprehensible mystery of the God it seeks to demonstrate or prove. Turner writes:

For Thomas, what lies at the end of reason’s tether is a demonstrated unknowability, an opening up of possibilities of knowing, not a closing down of those possibilities, not a final truth—for how could a truth be known to be ‘final’ except from a standpoint which is already on the other side of it? On this side of its limits reason knows only the existence of a mystery whose depths it knows—demonstrates—it cannot

know, for its character as mystery consists in its lying beyond reason's reach. In that 'unknowing' lies reason's self-transcendence as intellect. And the act by which it thus self-transcends is proof of the existence of God.⁵⁰

Central to Turner's defense of the rational demonstrability of the existence of God is his claim that on Aquinas's view, reason is remarkably open to the transcendent. It is a capacity not for comprehension but for contemplation and wonder, a capacity which, when suitably actualized in contemplation of and wonder at the contingency of the world as a whole (or the effects of God in creation), leads the mind ineluctably towards something which exists and answers to the term "God" and more specifically "Creator of all things out of nothing," the causal ground of all that is.

For Turner's Aquinas, then, reason, at the height of its actualization, asks a question it is compelled to ask—"why is there something rather than nothing, or anything at all?"—from within language and thought; but in doing so, it points to an answer which cannot possibly be contained within language and thought: a transcendent referent or reality that reason can demonstrate and name but never comprehend.⁵¹ Here, Turner says, Aquinas unites the cataphatic and the apophatic in his theological epistemology of reason, an epistemology which therefore cannot be equated, on the one hand, with the idolatry of onto-theology *or*, on the other, with Kantian agnosticism. Regarding the latter, Turner says the following: "whereas Kant's agnosticism is the proposition that God is unknowable to reason in the sense that no speculative inference from the world could get you to God, Thomas's apophaticism begins with the proposition that God can be demonstrated to exist, but that what such inference to God succeeds in showing is precisely the unknowability of the God thus shown."⁵² Aquinas's strategy, then, in demonstrating the existence of God through reason is from the start inescapably theological. Fergus Kerr puts the same point this way: "From the start,

50. Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 88. For Turner's excellent exposition of mysticism in other key Christian figures, see also *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

51. Turner argues—rightfully, I think—that Aquinas's method in proving the existence of God "is shaped by the force of the 'Why anything?' question" (*Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 236–37). John Haldane (quoted by Turner) concurs: "The core issues in these proofs are those of existential and causal dependence. Such themes place them firmly within the tradition of cosmological speculation as to why there is anything rather than nothing and what the source of the universe might be." See J. J. C. Smart and J. J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 133.

52. Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 254.

the 'theistic proofs' are the first lesson in Thomas's negative theology. Far from being an exercise in rationalistic apologetics, the purpose of arguing for God's existence is to protect God's transcendence."⁵³

In conclusion, I am arguing on Aquinas's behalf that we can protect God's divine transcendence in theological epistemology by equating objectivity with openness: the more objective our knowledge of God is here below, the more the mind is opened to the divine mystery. On one level, then, objectivity ensures that the knowledge of God we acquire here below by way of reason and faith actually entails a form of cognitive union: the bearing of such knowledge on God, given the broad conformity of the mind to God. On another level, objectivity ensures that the knowledge of God we enjoy here below is not an exercise in comprehension, or cognitively circumscribing the divine, but an exercise in 'unknowing' the divine or cognitively confronting the utter mystery of the divine: being truly united to God as to one 'unknown'.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to make significant strides in rehabilitating and retrieving a robust theological conception of objectivity, specifically as it pertains to the knowledge of God that persons possess by way of reason and faith. The three main obstacles that intervene in achieving this goal, are (1) a false conception of objectivity that forces us to equate objective knowledge of God with an atemporal, ahistorical absolute conception of God; (2) a false conception of the natural that prevents us from locating knowledge of the transcendent within the natural world; and (3) a false equation of objectivity with the idolatry of onto-theology. By exposing the absolute conception as illusory, we can locate objectivity as a property within the perspective on God afforded by reason and faith; by retrieving the notion of second nature, and a concept of the natural as always already charged with grace, we can explain how the mind can attain knowledge of the transcendent without having to extricate itself from the natural world; finally, by properly overcoming onto-theology, we can align objectivity not only with what we know of God but also with what we 'unknow' of God. Knowing God objectively is therefore a journey that begins in this life by forming true beliefs about God by way of reason and faith and ends in the next life, when the faithful—once welcomed into the community of the blessed—finally know or 'see' God fully or "face to face."

53. Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 58.

In Defense of a Realist Interpretation of Theology

THE MAIN aim of this book has been to overcome what I have argued is a distinctly modern, skeptical anxiety concerning whether God can be known by the mind; an anxiety that is generated by a distorted and consequently unintelligible conception or picture of the mind's relationship to God. The first step in overcoming this anxiety required locating the origins of the picture and its variations in modern and contemporary religious thought, which has struggled to relate mind and God given the presence of the Great Boundary in the picture. The second step in overcoming this anxiety required challenging the picture and then abandoning it entirely in order to rehabilitate the mind's relationship to God. Rehabilitating that relationship in turn required exploring and defending an alternative philosophical and theological framework offered by premodern philosophical theologian Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas convincingly shows how mind and reality (most broadly) and mind and God (more specifically) can and do meet (or "come together") in paradigm cases of human cognition and knowledge. Consequently, Aquinas provides a way for us to bring mind and God back together again, without having to compromise God's transcendence, *or* having to ignore or violate the inherent limitations of the mind.

In conclusion, it is worth briefly considering what the methodological implications of rehabilitating the mind's relationship to God are for doing theology or pursuing theological inquiry more broadly. I argue that once

we finally overcome anxiety about whether there *can* be objectivity in our knowledge of God and actually begin to embrace the possibility that there *is* objectivity in our knowledge of God, then we are also in a position to embrace what I argue is Aquinas's approach to the study of theology more generally: humble and unreserved inquiry into the very nature, history, and purposes of the divine. If, as Aquinas argues, faithful adherence to divine revelation and rational reflection provides an objective foundation for thinking and speaking about God, then the goal of theological inquiry, insofar as it is guided by faith and reason, must be construed as inescapably *normative*: to make dogmatic, realist truth claims about who God is (as well as what God has done and will do), based on our knowledge of who God is (as well as what God has done and will do). In other words, rehabilitating the mind's relationship to God, which allows us to rehabilitate objectivity in the mind's knowledge of God, also allows us to rehabilitate the noble task and goal of theology itself. Put another way, once we eradicate the boundary separating God and the mind, we also eradicate the boundary separating God from theology. Theology itself, properly understood as a realist discipline—"unbounded," as it were, on the outside—provides a reliable epistemic means for gaining and strengthening our knowledge of God.

In order to defend this claim properly, we need to consider and rebut a final objection that prevents us from treating (and, I would argue, rehabilitating) theology as a realist discipline of thought. In the final chapter of his recent book, *God and Realism*, philosopher Peter Byrne issues this objection, in the form of an argument, as follows:

1. All disciplines of thought that can be interpreted realistically show the accumulation of reliable belief.
2. Theology does not show the accumulation of reliable belief.
3. Therefore theology cannot be interpreted realistically.¹

Crucial to this argument is the claim that theology, unlike science (and the natural sciences in particular), is not open to "real-world influences" or guided by rational processes necessary for ascertaining or "tracking" the truth. According to Byrne, if a discipline of thought is successfully tracking the truth that it investigates, then it will show the accumulation of reliable belief, that is, belief that is widely recognized and held as true by practitioners

1. Peter Byrne, "A Realist Interpretation of Theology?" in *God and Realism*, 155–78, in particular, 162. Much of this chapter appears as Paul A. Macdonald Jr., "In Defence of a Realist Interpretation of Theology," *Religious Studies* 44.1 (2008): 23–42.

within a given discipline of thought over time. Since theology does not show the accumulation of reliable belief—there has been no discernible increase of insight and discovery within theology over the major course of its history, and there is widespread disagreement in theology itself about what constitutes the truth about God—then it cannot be interpreted realistically. Consequently, Byrne concludes that theology “deserves a non-realist hermeneutic.”² Byrne does not specify what this nonrealist hermeneutic should be, but his point is that if theology cannot be interpreted realistically, then it is ultimately compatible with skepticism: it offers no basis or provides no method for inquiring into the true nature of the divine.³

My main task in this final chapter is to challenge Byrne’s argument above (specifically its major premise) and to defend Christian theology in particular as a discipline of thought that can and should be interpreted realistically. Aquinas, of course, remains an influence and guide, but in making my defense, I also draw somewhat on other themes and thinkers in the history of Christian thought. My defense consists of three main parts. In the first part of the defense, I argue against Byrne that theology, when conceived as grounded primarily in faith, is productive of rationally formed true beliefs about God, which means that theology is capable of successfully tracking the truth within its own sphere. Theology also possesses internal sources and norms for distinguishing true belief from false belief. In the second part of the defense, I claim that theology is capable of yielding ongoing insight and discovery into the divine—a greater, more mature *understanding* of the divine—even if it does not show the accumulation of reliable belief over time and even if there remains significant disagreement within the community of faith itself about many of the beliefs that are held by practitioners as true. Thus it remains possible that the insight and discovery that accumulate in theology are both unobservable to those outside the community of faith and not shared by all within the community of faith.

2. Byrne, *God and Realism*, 157.

3. Byrne does consider some versions of a nonrealist hermeneutic—in particular, the pragmatic, constructivist theologies advanced by Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague—but he finds them to be unsatisfactory, insofar as they reduce the theological enterprise to a “grand exercise in wishful thinking” or truth-making (172). They therefore deny what is central to “innocent realism,” the philosophical position that I have already noted Byrne defends in his book: there is an epistemic gap separating reality, whether worldly or divine, on the one hand, from the claims we make about reality, on the other. Innocent realism, therefore, is compatible with a particular form of skepticism that Byrne endorses: if there is an epistemic gap separating our truth claims from the reality those claims purport to be about, then we remain open to the skeptical possibility that reality (or at least significant stretches of reality) forever remains beyond our cognitive reach.

In the third part of the defense, I continue to defend a realist interpretation of theology by accounting for the observable fact of theological disagreement and division. I argue that there are two barriers in particular that prevent the faithful from achieving more widespread consensus in theology: first, the inherent difficulty of inquiring into a reality that transcends both the world and the mind; and second, the noetic effects of sin, which stymies theological inquiry and fractures theological unity. However—and here is the final claim I make in the chapter and the book—insofar as theology is guided by the divine itself through *faith seeking understanding*, practitioners of theology should not give up the *hope* that there will be ultimate eschatological resolution of theological disagreement and division.

The Argument against a Realist Interpretation of Theology

Byrne argues that the main hallmark of realist disciplines of thought is the ability to accumulate “insight and discovery” into the real itself and that this insight and discovery is to be understood in terms of accumulated *reliable* belief, which Byrne understands to be belief that is widely held as true by practitioners over time. According to Byrne, reliable belief is rational in that it is “acquired through awareness of evidence, reasons and the like, and/or after due reflection.”⁴ But reliable belief also is rational insofar as the mechanism or process yielding that belief—gathering evidence, obtaining reasons, engaging in due reflection—is “open” to the truth, or successfully “tracks” the truth. Thus there is a normative link between the rationality of beliefs and the truth of those beliefs. Byrne writes, “There is an inbuilt tendency for rational beliefs to be true, for they are the product of processes which open the human mind up to the influence of grounds and reasons—things which are *prima facie* indicators of truth. It is through the influence of truth-indicators that the mind is open to real-world influences on what it thinks.”⁵

Science—and the natural sciences in particular—is therefore a paradigm case for a discipline of thought that can be interpreted realistically. Byrne writes, “We have a very strong reason to interpret the disciplines of natural science realistically because science does show the clear presence of the accumulation of insight and discovery. It can be said . . . that, thanks to the development of natural science, human beings know much more about their world than they did 200 or 300 years ago.”⁶ Byrne recognizes that even

4. *Ibid.*, 158.

6. *Ibid.*, 159.

5. *Ibid.*

with remarkable theoretical change within the history of science, science has shown “the ability to test and reliably confirm or disconfirm existential [as well as theoretical] statements about the world,” which means that “reliable beliefs as to what things, stuffs and structures there are accumulate.”⁷ Science’s ability to track the truth about the world also hinges on its being governed by standards (“norms of proof and evidence”) that are widely if not universally recognized, both inside and outside of the scientific community. And it is these standards that “enable scientists to be open to real-world influences.”⁸

With this understanding of realist disciplines of thought, Byrne launches his skeptical attack on theology. While science shows the accumulation of genuine insight and discovery, or reliable belief, over the course of its history, theology does *not* show the accumulation of genuine insight and discovery, or reliable belief, over the course of its history: “the stock of reliable beliefs about the Christian God, about its attributes and plans, has not increased one iota.”⁹ Moreover, unlike science, which is guided by real-world “influences from physical reality” that put their practitioners in cognitive contact with that reality,

Theology has not possessed intellectual traditions and modes of discovery of an analogous kind to enable its practitioners to be open to influences from divine reality and its practitioners have not been put in cognitive contact with divine reality. The academic discipline of theology is simply not productive of reliable beliefs about God—or anything else for that matter. It cannot be understood realistically. QED.¹⁰

Byrne’s argument, then, is that while science shows real evidence of intellectual progress—we really do know more about the natural world now than we ever did before—theology does not show evidence of such progress. Theology is stuck with the same small stock of basic beliefs that its practitioners held nearly 2,000 years ago.

In order to defend this claim, Byrne draws further contrasts between science and theology. While science is guided by modes of investigation and inquiry that incorporate evidence, reasons, and argument, theology is most often guided by modes of investigation and inquiry that do *not* incorporate evidence, reasons, and argument. In direct contrast to scientific inquiry, theological inquiry often shows itself to be markedly *irrational*. Many dis-

7. *Ibid.*, 160.

9. *Ibid.*, 162.

8. *Ibid.*, 161

10. *Ibid.*

putes in Christian history—Byrne cites the Arian controversy and the rise of orthodoxy as an example—were settled not by rational argument (as some might think), but rather by an imposition of power. Moreover, Christian history itself and Christianity as a religion are marked by sectarian divide. Unlike science, then, which is bound by universally approved modes of investigation and inquiry, theology lacks any “shared rule of faith across sectarian divisions.”¹¹ And if there is no “shared rule of faith across sectarian divisions,” then there is no shared rule for accumulating reliable beliefs about the divine. On behalf of skepticism in theology, therefore, Byrne concludes:

Theology displays reason and argument. But it lacks the means for establishing which arguments are cogent and which are not. It is perpetually doomed therefore to interminable discussions of the same issues. It is thus constitutionally incapable of yielding any reliable beliefs about its putative subject matter.¹²

Byrne may be guilty of an overstatement here, but his main point is not that theology is not *productive* of at least some reliable beliefs about God (he seems to concede at times that it is); it is rather that theology does not show the *accumulation* of reliable beliefs about God. “Regardless of whether the Christian God exists,” Byrne writes, “we can see that the discipline of Christian theology is not *building up* reliable beliefs about that God” (my emphasis).¹³ According to Byrne, there is simply no way of determining if or when theology adds to the “stock” of its most basic beliefs. For example, Martin Luther claimed on scriptural grounds (along with genuine argument) that human beings are justified by faith alone. Here, Byrne concedes, theology potentially showed the accumulation of reliable belief, insofar as it was guided by processes that were “minimally rational.”¹⁴ And yet, even here, Byrne says, theology cannot necessarily be interpreted realistically. As Christian history confirms, Luther’s theological reflection, like all theological reflection, was marked by interpretation and hence subject to disagreement: the sort of *internal* disagreement lacking in science that makes convergence within theology difficult if not impossible. Once again, skepticism looms.

Before moving on to the next section, we should also note that Byrne considers an important response to his argument, to which I return and which I develop below. Citing Christian thinkers such as Karl Barth in theology and more recently Alvin Plantinga in philosophy, Byrne says that theology can perhaps be interpreted realistically if it is viewed from inside Chris-

11. *Ibid.*, 163.

13. *Ibid.*, 166.

12. *Ibid.*, 165.

14. *Ibid.*, 164.

tianity itself as undergirded and driven by *faith*—itself a gift of God that generates true beliefs about God. Thus, from this point of view, “the divine itself can establish the truth of theological claims.”¹⁵ Byrne admits, then, that one way of rebutting the objection that theology does not possess standards for sorting out true and false belief (in order to generate reliable belief) is to make theology a product or expression of faith and God the guarantor of the mechanism or process that leads to the production of true beliefs in faith. “What we have in the above line of thought,” he says, “is the prospect of getting the divine cavalry to ride to the rescue of Christian theology.”¹⁶ And yet, Byrne replies, “even those who think that the Godhead does implant theological beliefs into people will have to concede that the process has not worked to establish an increasing stock of reliable beliefs about this God.”¹⁷ The process may have worked for some time to establish some *basic* stock of reliable beliefs about God, says Byrne, but not an *increasing* stock of reliable beliefs about God.

There is a further problem here. Even if we concede that a divinely authored process yields true beliefs about God, it becomes impossible to determine *which* theological beliefs so qualify. Byrne takes this to be a crippling problem for theology: since there are no independent means of determining whether the “undetected” mechanism or process generating theological beliefs is really provided or guided by the divine itself then there is no way of determining *which* theological beliefs that Christian practitioners hold are true beliefs. Byrne again cites what he takes to be a central problem: even within Christian faith and theology itself there are sectarian divisions and hence competing truth claims about the divine. On what basis, then, Byrne asks, can we determine which truth claims are veridical (and hence afford genuine knowledge of the divine) and which are not? He concludes, “The root problem in dealing with divine aid in the guidance and direction of true theology is that God has been notably lax in establishing some cast-iron, external signs for distinguishing . . . the fruitful, authentic lines of theological enquiry from those which are not. God could make the truth about the divine more manifest, but God chooses not to.”¹⁸

Byrne’s argument against theology as a realist discipline can be summarized as follows. Unlike disciplines of thought that can be interpreted realistically (such as science), theology does not deserve a realist interpretation

15. *Ibid.*, 166.

17. *Ibid.*, 167.

16. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

because (1) it is not the case that theology shows the accumulation of reliable belief; which means it cannot be the case that (2) theology is guided by intellectual traditions or modes of discovery that allow its practitioners to be open to influence from divine reality and hence put into cognitive contact with divine reality; and it cannot be the case that (3) theology yields ongoing insight and discovery into the nature of divine reality. Claim (1) is further evidenced by the fact that (4) theology is beset by internal disagreement and division concerning which theological beliefs are true. In the section that follows, I argue first that (1) does not necessarily entail the negation of (2) or (3). More specifically, I defend (2) and (3) as essential to a realist interpretation of theology. In the third section of the chapter, I also give a plausible account of (4) in order further to defend theology against a nonrealist hermeneutic.

Theology Grounded in Faith

To begin, we need to question Byrne's claim that theology cannot be interpreted realistically if it does not show the accumulation of reliable belief, which suggests to Byrne that theology does not successfully track the truth. The main hallmark of a realist discipline, I too contend, is that it successfully tracks the truth and yields ongoing insight and discovery into reality itself. However, I do not agree with Byrne that it follows that a realist discipline must also show the accumulation of reliable belief—that is, belief that is not only true but is also held to be true by most if not all members of the theological community. As I will now defend it, theology, specifically Christian theology, can be interpreted so that it both successfully tracks divine truth and yields ongoing insight and discovery into divine reality—and thus deserves a realist hermeneutic—even if there has not been a significant increase in reliable belief over time within theology (as there has been in science, for example) and even if there remains profound disagreement and division within theology regarding what constitutes true theological belief.

The goal, then, to start, is for theology to show in what sense it contains its *own* intellectual traditions or modes of discovery that enable it to be interpreted realistically. As Byrne points out, there is a long and venerable tradition in Christian theology (which Byrne simply does not give its proper due) for rooting theological activity in faith, construed as a gift of God that guides theology to its intended end, which is the truth about God. In recent analytic philosophy of religion, Plantinga has given the most robust articulation and defense of this model, but as we have already seen, Aquinas offers

us a model that we can draw on as well. Recall that on Aquinas's view, faith, qua supernaturally infused virtue, is a good, enduring habit (*habitus*) or cognitive disposition that rightly directs the intellect to God. More specifically, the habit or virtue of faith directs the intellect to divine truth (as revealed in propositional form in *sacra doctrina*) by way of the *lumen fidei* or inner 'light of faith' that actually illumines the intellect regarding what it should believe—that is, what true propositions have been revealed by God and hence deserve to be believed.¹⁹ Now this inner light also moves the intellect to assent by way of the will: when the will is also under the influence of God's grace, it draws or inclines the intellect to assent to those true propositions that the intellect recognizes as divinely revealed—propositions that, from the perspective of the intellect in this life, depict divine truth and hence God as a good (the Divine Good, taken as a final end) to be desired and, more specifically, hoped for and loved.

Also recall that we interpreted Aquinas's account of faith realistically as follows. As the possessor of a graced intellect, the person of faith rightly recognizes or discerns the propositions of faith to be genuine revelations from God; as the possessor of a graced will, the person of faith is rightly drawn or inclined to assent to the propositions of faith on the distinct ground that they are genuine revelations from God. Aquinas says the following: "The believer has sufficient motive for believing, for he is moved . . . by the inward instinct of the Divine invitation (*interiori instinctu Dei invitantis*): hence he does not believe lightly."²⁰ On my interpretation, this "inward instinct" constitutes a truth-indicative ground given that it furnishes the sort of evidence (what Plantinga calls doxastic evidence) that is sufficiently indicative of the truth of the propositions of faith, or the status of those propositions as genuine revelations from God. So under the influence of God's grace, and guided by the 'light of faith', the person of faith possesses cognitive recourse to a truth-indicative reason or evidence (the divine illumination that fills the mind and moves the will) that constitutes both the requisite motivation *and* the ground the person of faith needs in order to assent *rationally* to the true propositions of faith that God has revealed.

Here, then, we have a model for how theology, as founded on faith, can

19. Again, Aquinas writes, "The light of faith (*lumen fidei*) makes us see (*videre*) what we believe. For just as, by the habits of the other virtues, man sees what is becoming to him in respect of that habit, so, by the habit of faith, the human mind is directed to assent to such things as are becoming to a right faith, and not to assent to others" (*ST II-II.1.4 ad 3*).

20. *ST II-II.2.9 ad 3*.

be interpreted realistically: under the influence of grace, the mind of the Christian believer becomes open to the divine itself, and thus it comes to be guided by an adequate (i.e., truth-indicative) ground in forming true beliefs about God. Now, Byrne would surely object that Aquinas, like Plantinga, is guilty of invoking an undetectable, supernaturalist epistemology for explaining how faith (and consequently theology) is productive of true beliefs about God and is therefore capable of putting its practitioners into cognitive contact with the divine. There is simply no way of determining whether the cognitive machinery operative in producing those beliefs is reliable (in the sense that it can be relied on to produce true beliefs)—that the machinery is reliable is, we could say again, a matter of faith. But against Byrne, we need to ask, why is it necessary that the machinery and the process it generates be detectable? And detectable to *whom*? The reliability of Aquinas's *lumen fidei* as well as the operations of grace on the will in directing the intellect to divine truth are guaranteed by God, not by the ability of the faithful (or that of anyone else) to determine their reliability. (This is one of the benefits of externalism in epistemology.) Moreover, the assent of faith—or forming true beliefs about God in faith—is hardly blind. In fact, as I have already argued, from the point of view of the person of faith, the assent of faith is eminently rational: what more rational grounds do the faithful need for holding to the truth about God, or making truth claims about God, than the divine witness itself—God's "moving inwardly" in the mind and the will, leading the person of faith to believe and even proclaim the truth about God that God has revealed?

I stress this point again in order to refute Byrne's claim that "theology has not possessed intellectual traditions and modes of discovery of an analogous kind to enable its practitioners to be open to influences from divine reality and its practitioners have not been put in cognitive contact with divine reality." Using Aquinas as an example, I have shown that theology—and specifically, those who profess to do theology—*do* have recourse to such intellectual traditions or modes of discovery. Byrne may retort that we once again have brought in "the divine cavalry to ride to the rescue of Christian theology." But again, if the onus is on theology itself to show how it can be interpreted realistically, then appealing to the divine itself as the source of faith and hence the source of theology is not a rescue mission, nor is it some sort of blind acceptance of divine authority. It is precisely the move one would and should expect theology, and those who profess to do theology, to make.

Byrne's real issue with faith-based theology, however, is not merely that

its intellectual traditions or modes of inquiry cannot be shown to be rational and truth-conducive from a particular theological perspective. Rather, his issue is primarily that the intellectual traditions or modes of inquiry of faith-based theology cannot be *publicly* shown to be rational and truth conducive, so as to enable us to distinguish genuine lines of theological inquiry from fraudulent ones. It is worth quoting Byrne here again:

The root problem in appealing to divine aid in the guidance and direction of true theology is that God has been notably lax in establishing some cast-iron, external signs for distinguishing between the fruitful, authentic lines of theological enquiry from those which are not. God could make the truth about the divine more manifest, but God chooses not to. That is an aspect of divine hiddenness. God chooses not to make the truth about God obvious, when presumably, God could.²¹

In response to Byrne, however, we once again need to pose the following critical questions: why do we need independent means, or “cast-iron, external signs” for determining whether theological inquiry is being guided by God? Furthermore, why should God be responsible for furnishing these means or signs? Shouldn’t faith in God itself be sufficient—faith, that is, that God *is* reliably guiding theological inquiry, when it is informed by faith? Moreover, God has hardly been “notably lax” in providing the requisite tools for theological inquiry. In fact, God has given theology all that it needs for successfully inquiring into the divine: the gift of revealed truth in Christian scripture and creeds, the gift of the *lumen fidei* or the Holy Spirit that illuminates the faithful about that truth, the gift of reason for inquiring further into that truth, and the gift of the community of faith itself—Christian tradition and the church—as the interpreter and custodian of revealed truth.

Consider, for example, the role of reason within theology. I have already shown, drawing on Aquinas, that reason, like faith, furnishes true beliefs about God that are adequately grounded and produced by a properly functioning cognitive capacity. In a less epistemically defined sense, then, theology is rational insofar as many of the truths on which theology is based—most notably, that *God exists*—are also truths that can be known by way of reason, on the basis of the demonstrations of those truths that reason provides. Reason, then, provides further grounds for believing certain truths that are held in faith (even though believing a truth on the basis of rational demonstration is not the same as believing a truth on the basis of faith). These truths or

21. Byrne, *God and Realism*, 167.

preambles of faith (*preambula fidei*), while not counted by Aquinas among the principle propositions or articles of faith, nevertheless are presupposed by faith, which means that “faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature.”²² Moreover, while reason cannot pronounce on many of the truths believed in faith by furnishing demonstrations for them, it still can aid in furnishing “persuasive arguments” for them and thereby clarify and support the beliefs they inform.²³ Even though theology is primarily grounded in faith, therefore, it also remains firmly grounded in reason: theology can draw both on the knowledge of God that reason provides and on the tools of analysis and argumentation that reason provides.²⁴

Despite all of this, Byrne clearly thinks that “cast-iron, external signs” are necessary in order to determine which lines of inquiry *within theology itself* are truth conducive, especially given the tendency of theology to veer towards sectarianism. Here, Byrne casts suspicion on the claim that theology, undergirded by faith in the way I have discussed, has a divine source: the presence of theological disagreement and division and hence competing truth claims within theology is reason to doubt whether theology is divinely guided by truth-oriented mechanisms or processes. Were theology, and all those who claim within theology to have faith, genuinely guided by such mechanisms or processes, then theology presumably would not display “an inveterate tendency to sectarianism.”²⁵ In other words, if there is such a thing as divine truth, shouldn't it be obvious to all and thus agreed upon by all, at least by all who claim to have faith?

I do not think the answer to this question is at all obvious: again, the fact that there is theological disagreement and division over what constitutes divine truth does nothing to undermine the claim that there is such a thing

22. *ST I.2.2 ad 1.*

23. *ST II-II.1.5 ad 2.*

24. A realist interpretation of theology, therefore, also seems to hinge on a realist interpretation of philosophy. Drawing on the papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, written by Pope John Paul II, Romanus Cessario argues that “Realist philosophy and metaphysics provide an absolutely indispensable foundation for the appropriation of sacred truth and in the development of both systematic and moral theology” (Romanus Cessario, “*Duplex Ordo Cognitionis*,” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter [New York: T&T Clark, 2005], 328). For example, Cessario argues, if we can know nothing about human nature (if being is unintelligible), then we can make no sense of the doctrine that God, in Christ, assumed a human nature in order to redeem it; and the very intelligibility and communicability of sacred doctrine becomes undermined. For a further defense of the role of philosophy in theology from a Thomistic (and particularly analytic) perspective, see Paul O’Grady, “Philosophical Theology and Analytical Philosophy in Aquinas,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 416–41.

25. Byrne, *God and Realism*, 167.

as divine truth and, moreover, that the faithful can and do genuinely enjoy epistemic access to it. All this fact suggests is that those who claim to possess faith and to do theology are liable to fall into error; it suggests that the inherent weakness or fallibility of the mind and will, as well as the presence of sin within the mind and the will, can impede and at times even undermine the truth-oriented mechanisms or processes that are necessary for forming true beliefs about God and hence engaging in “authentic, fruitful lines of theological inquiry.” (I will develop this argument further below.) So the problem is not, as Byrne suggests, whether *any* believe rightly or *all* believe wrongly. Disagreement over what constitutes divine truth and our means of access to it—whether it occurs within the Christian tradition or between the Christian tradition and other religious traditions—just as easily can (and, I argue, does) arise because some rightly believe and some wrongly believe or because some rightly claim to have access to divine truth and others wrongly claim to have access to divine truth.

Now, Byrne once again could press his point: even if some of the lines of inquiry in theology are truth-conducive—and we can concede that there are some—how can we ever determine which lines of inquiry amongst all lines of inquiry so qualify? In the absence of “cast-iron, external signs,” how can we ever sort out true belief from false belief? Here, Byrne thinks that science once again has a leg up on theology: “There are agreed standards of good work and good reasoning in science and those standards are productive of beliefs which everyone, in or outside the community of scientists, can rely on. They enable scientists to be open to real-world influences.”²⁶ But despite what Byrne claims, theology can make comparable or analogous claims: it has its own set of widely recognized standards of “good work and good reasoning,” at least within the community of faith itself, on which many if not most members of the community of faith can and do rely. These sources and norms of inquiry, just specified above (scripture, reason, church, etc.), provide theology with all it needs to produce true beliefs about God; they also provide theology with all it needs to determine “authentic, fruitful lines of inquiry” or to distinguish orthodox beliefs from inauthentic, fraudulent lines of inquiry or unorthodox beliefs. These standards may not be recognized by those outside the community of faith; but surely they can be interpreted (as I am doing now) to show how they can be rational (and hence productive of true belief) from an epistemic point of view inside the community of faith.

26. *Ibid.*, 161.

Of course there is also disagreement—at times profound disagreement and controversy—within theology itself surrounding what constitutes “authentic, fruitful lines of inquiry” or orthodox beliefs. But that disagreement and controversy need not subvert inquiry or the ability to arrive at orthodox beliefs; in fact, it often is the very means by which divine truth is obtained. Byrne cites the Arian controversy as an example in Christian history of how theology, unlike science, is guided by *irrational* formative processes: “what we now style orthodoxy was not the result of canons of argument meeting objectively established evidence. It was the outcome of power, both ecclesiastical and political.”²⁷ This is a highly disputable claim, and by no means demonstrably true. While the rise and victory of orthodoxy certainly was shaped in part by ecclesiastical and political forces, it by no means was determined entirely by those forces: for those who profess mainstream, orthodox Christian faith, it was also shaped by intense *intellectual* and *spiritual* (i.e., Spirit-driven) argumentative debate between leaders of the burgeoning Christian church. What arose out of orthodoxy, therefore, were central true beliefs regarding God as Trinity and the divinity of Christ, beliefs which (with some variation) continue to be held and proclaimed by the vast majority of Christians across the globe today.

This brings us to a further point, to which I alluded earlier. We need to question how deeply divided theology is along sectarian lines. Byrne claims the following:

A noted feature of Christianity, and of all religions, is its ability to split into sects once doctrinal issues surface. Safe in their own sects, theologians are free from the danger of having their opinions refuted by evidence and argument. Each sect will tend to have its own way of weighing up theological evidence and its own approved methods of argument. There is no shared rule of faith across sectarian divisions.²⁸

Byrne’s characterization of Christianity here is potentially misleading. Clearly, Christianity is ecclesially *diverse*—the Christian church is no monolith—but it is not so sharply divided as *completely* to relativize standards for assessing true and false belief. Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox practitioners and theologians who claim any allegiance to classical, orthodox Christianity *do* have a “shared rule of faith” constituted by the sources and norms discussed earlier that inform and steer theological inquiry towards its intended end, which is the truth about God. Certainly, theological reflection

27. *Ibid.*, 162–63.

28. *Ibid.*, 163.

varies, and there is diversity of belief across these traditions, and this poses problems (which I will subsequently address) for how theology can be interpreted realistically, but the stock of shared beliefs that underwrite that reflection does not.

Theology as Faith Seeking Understanding

We are now in a position to get to the heart of Byrne's argument. According to Byrne, theology cannot be interpreted realistically, not simply because it cannot yield *any* reliable beliefs about divine reality, but also and primarily because it does not show the *accumulation* of reliable beliefs about divine reality. During the course of Christian history, Byrne says, "many theological theories have come and gone in Christian thought, but there has been no accumulation of insight and discovery whatsoever. The stock of reliable beliefs about the Christian God, about its attributes and plans, has not increased one iota."²⁹ Here is the objection in perhaps its most virulent form: "It is not just that theology has not had sufficient time to develop the intellectual traditions and methods which will enable it to start accumulating reliable beliefs about the divine. There is rather something structural and endemic about its non-cumulative character."³⁰

In response to this objection, we need once again to remind ourselves of the main hallmark of a realist discipline: the accumulation of *insight* and *discovery* into the nature of reality itself. Taking science as a model, Byrne argues that the accumulation of such insight and discovery is marked by the accumulation of reliable belief. But need we limit ourselves to this way of thinking about the way in which insight is gained and discovery is made, especially in the realm of theology? The accumulation of reliable belief as a model for scientific insight and discovery certainly makes sense: science rightly prides itself on achieving observable, quantifiable results through empirical investigation. But this model simply doesn't fit theology. The insights and discoveries made in theology simply cannot be observed and quantified the way they can in science, and to say that they can be so quantified is to assume that theology operates exactly like science: its modes of inquiry, when successful, yield observable, quantifiable results. But theology's subject matter is by nature unobservable and unquantifiable. So why should we expect theology to defer to modern science by showing the empirically demonstrable or verifiable accumulation of reliable belief? Now, surely if theology

29. *Ibid.*, 162.

30. *Ibid.*, 163.

is to be interpreted realistically, then it needs to provide ongoing insight and discovery into the nature or reality of the divine. But I am now suggesting that we can and should measure the *progress* that theology makes in some other way, other than by the scientific standard of the accumulation of reliable belief.

How might we think about the nature of the insight gained and discovery made within theology? Reflecting for a moment on a recent development within Christian history will help. In 1999, on the heels of a remarkable and unprecedented resurgence in ecumenical dialogue between Catholic and Lutheran Christians, leaders from the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, and thereby expressed a common commitment to a basic Christian truth: *God justifies human beings by grace through faith in Christ*. In order to articulate this common commitment further, it is worth quoting the document here directly:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.³¹

The significance of this statement cannot be underscored enough. Here, Catholics and Lutherans—who for centuries had been divided ecclesially and theologically over the issue of justification—demonstrate that “a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics” and that consequently, the earlier mutual doctrinal condemnations brought against one another on this issue no longer apply.³²

How should we interpret what happened here? We could say that Catholic and Lutheran Christians (finally) accumulated a true belief about the nature of justification, or how God rightly relates human beings to God. This belief was formed by a truth-aimed, rational process (the guidance of the Holy Spirit along with theological argument and debate) and based on

31. The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), section 3, number 15.

32. *Ibid.*, section 5, number 40.

truth-indicative, rational grounds (biblical evidence as illumined by the divine witness and viewed through the lens of tradition). But the document suggests something more:

The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church have together listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture. This common listening, together with the theological conversations of recent years, has led to a *shared understanding* of justification [my emphasis]. This encompasses a consensus in the basic truths; the differing explications in particular statements are compatible with it.³³

Here, Catholics and Lutherans jointly claim to have achieved a “shared understanding” of the good news concerning the justification of sinners by God, and thus a “consensus in the basic truths” concerning it. Now, while this language is not technical or philosophical (nor is it intended to be), it still points to an important feature of the nature of the theological discovery that has been made. In the document, Catholics and Lutherans do not claim to have acquired a new belief about God. They claim, instead, to have reached a shared *understanding* of the truth of what they already believe; or a new insight into the truth of what they already believe that clarifies, sharpens, and hence more closely aligns what they already believe. What is that shared understanding? Salvation is an act of the triune God alone: we are justified by grace, through faith in the saving action of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, which we receive and share through the power of the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father.

This claim about the nature of justification represents a real advance in theology—genuine insight into divine truth—that has enabled Catholics and Lutherans (and presumably other Christians as well) to overcome the impasse at which they traditionally have met: the emphasis is not on the saving efficacy of *faith*, or on the saving efficacy of *works*, but rather on the saving efficacy of *Christ* and, more broadly, on the way in which the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—effects our salvation. Now clearly, the shared understanding reached here requires further theological elaboration. (The Declaration says as much.) But it furnishes a starting point for such elaboration; it also constitutes a point of contact between Catholics and Lutherans as well as other Protestant and non-Catholic Christians, enabling them to overcome other ecclesiastical and theological differences and divides.

33. *Ibid.*, section 3, number 14.

All of this lends support to a realist interpretation of theology: the shared understanding gained through joint Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, as expressed in the 1999 Declaration, is evidence that theology *is* capable of accumulating insight and discovery into the nature of the divine, even if that insight and discovery is equated with something other than reliable belief. I claim, then, that theology can and should be interpreted realistically when it is properly viewed not merely as an exercise of faith but also as an exercise of “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*).³⁴ As we have already seen, on one level, we can interpret theology realistically insofar as it is undergirded by faith, because faith furnishes adequately based and properly formed true beliefs about God—beliefs that derive their content from basic truths about God that God has revealed. But on another level, we also can interpret theology realistically insofar as it aids in elucidating, expounding, and deepening the knowledge of God that is available through faith, or the true beliefs about God that are held in faith. Theology therefore not only aims at the production of true belief; it also aims at understanding—a further, more penetrating grasp of the divine truths to which faith cleaves.³⁵ It is understanding, then, that furnishes genuine insight and discovery about the divine, the sort of insight and discovery that *increases* through ongoing reflection, attention, argument, and debate, all of which constitute the heart of theological activity, conceived as a realist discipline of thought.

Clearly, then, understanding is engendered by specifically rational inquiry: discursive practices that members of the theological community employ in order to analyze and assess faith’s truth claims. There is a further level of understanding, however, that is not generated by reason but by the work of the Holy Spirit: according to Aquinas, graced understanding is a gift of God and a habit of mind that complements faith.³⁶ Aquinas discusses two gifts in

34. This method of doing theology is most often located in Anselm, although its true origins lie with Augustine. I locate Aquinas in this tradition as well.

35. Note that the sort of understanding gained here is speculative and not just practical. I make this distinction because Byrne argues that philosophy (which Byrne concedes to be nonrealist as well) furnishes understanding in a practical, rather than a speculative or theoretical sense: philosophy constitutes a second-order activity whose chief aim “is to clarify and keep sharp the conceptual tools that first-order activities, such as physics, employ” (176). Theology, on the other hand, as I defend it, remains a first-order activity whose chief aim is to further our knowledge of God or the divinely real through through faith as well as rational inquiry and subsequent understanding.

36. See *STI-II.68.3*. Aquinas defines the spiritual gifts as “higher perfections, whereby [one is] disposed to be moved by God.” He continues, “These perfections are called gifts, not only because they are infused by God, but also because by them man is disposed to become amena-

particular that complement faith: the ‘gift of understanding’ (*donum intellectus*) and the ‘gift of knowledge’ (*donum scientiae*). Now, the purpose of these gifts is not to supplant the virtue of faith, which perfects the intellect by disposing it to assent to divine truth, but to strengthen and deepen the virtue of faith by further perfecting the particular faculty in which each gift resides: thus, the ‘gift of understanding’ perfects the “speculative reason,” or the intellect’s capacity to apprehend divine truth; the ‘gift of knowledge’ perfects the “practical reason,” or the intellect’s capacity to judge correctly concerning the truth that the intellect apprehends through the gift of understanding. Aquinas writes:

And so in order that the human mind completely assent to the truth of faith, two things are required. Of which one is that it healthily grasp the things that are proposed, which belongs to the gift of understanding. . . . The other is that it have certain and right judgment about them, namely, discerning what is to be believed from what is not to be believed. And for this the gift of knowledge is necessary.³⁷

By ‘grasping’ Aquinas clearly does not mean knowing or ‘seeing’ with full understanding (which is possible only in the state of perfect beatitude, not faith): to ‘grasp’ the propositions of faith is to further “penetrate” the truth of those propositions—literally, “to read inwardly” (*intus legere*)—by means of a further infused supernatural light or habit that further disposes the intellect to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit in enabling such understanding.³⁸ Having ‘grasped’ the propositions of faith that are proposed as candidates for belief, the person with gifted faith then forms “certain and right” judgments about those propositions, namely, that they are worthy of his belief and that they are true. In this sense, the person of faith is gifted with *scientia*, analogously understood.

The ‘gift of understanding’ is particularly important to Aquinas’s complete view of faith because it affords the person of faith a cognition or ‘perception’ of divine truth that surpasses but also strengthens and deepens the cognition persons of faith enjoy under normal epistemic circumstances, when they assent to the propositions of faith under the direction of the will. Thus, Aquinas writes, “Faith implies merely assent to what is proposed but

ble to the Divine inspiration (*inspirazione divina*)” (*ST I-II.68.1*). Following scriptural precedent (Isaiah 11:2–3), Aquinas names seven gifts: understanding, counsel, wisdom, knowledge, piety, fortitude, and fear. See *ST I-II.68.4*.

37. *ST II-II.9.1*, Jordan trans., 170.

38. *ST II-II.8.1*, Jordan trans., 150–51.

understanding implies a certain perception (*perceptionem*) of the truth.”³⁹ Or again, he claims, “The gift of understanding is about the first principles of that knowledge which is conferred by grace; but otherwise than faith, because it belongs to faith to assent to them, while it belongs to the gift of understanding to pierce with the mind the things that are said.”⁴⁰ This is why the gift is (primarily) “speculative” rather than “practical”: it denotes “a certain excellence of apprehension (*cognitionis*) penetrating to [the] inner things” of faith.⁴¹ (By contrast, Aquinas argues that the ‘gift of knowledge’ affords certitude of judgment regarding the propositions of faith—or “human things” rather than “divine things”—given that “faith itself is something temporal in the mind of the believer.”)⁴² The ‘gift of understanding’, however, does not afford the person of faith any knowledge of the divine *essence*—its ‘light’ simply does not extend that far. Rather, it furnishes *enough* knowledge of divine *truth* so that the person of faith “ought not to depart from matters of faith.”⁴³ More specifically, the ‘gift of understanding’ provides the person of faith with a true apprehension or “right estimate” of his last end (or the object of his supernatural beatitude), which is God, in particular the truth about God, “to which the right will needs to tend.”⁴⁴ The idea here is that the ‘gift of understanding’ *increases* the believer’s cognition or apprehension of divine truth, and it is this increased apprehension that enables the believer both to assent to divine truth and to continue to cleave to divine truth in faith.⁴⁵

39. *ST II-II.8.5 ad 3.*

40. *ST II-II.8.6 ad 2.*

41. *ST II-II.8.1 ad 3*, Jordan trans., 152. Aquinas qualifies this claim by noting that the gift of understanding extends to “good actions” and consequently also can be deemed practical. See *ST II-II.8.3.*

42. *ST II-II.9.2 ad 1.* Compare this to the gift of wisdom (*sapientia*), which affords a “knowledge (*cognitio*) of Divine things . . . by a kind of union with them” (*ST II-II.9.2; ST II-II.9.2 ad 1*). Like the ‘gift of understanding’, then, the ‘gift of wisdom’, which affords right judgments regarding divine things, resides in the speculative reason. See *ST I-II.68.4.*

43. *ST II-II.8.2.*

44. *ST II-II.8.5; ST II-II.8.4.*

45. Jenkins, for example, argues on Aquinas’s behalf that “What the believer understands through the Gift of Understanding, then, is not the nature of the Triune God or of the Incarnate Christ. What he understands is that the articles are to be adhered to on divine authority even in the face of considerations which seem to render them implausible (e.g. a being cannot be both three and one, or God cannot or would not become incarnate in His creation). This is understood in a non-discursive intuition of the first operation of the intellect in the process leading to the assent of faith” (*Knowledge and Faith*, 194). Thus, according to Jenkins, the gift of understanding plays the primary role of strengthening the nondiscursive intuition of the first operation of the intellect that occurs in the ‘light of faith’, which we have seen enables the

The ‘gift of understanding’, therefore, is a further source of insight into the nature of the divine. Its specific purpose—insofar as it supports and strengthens faith—is not only to support and strengthen theological inquiry, but also (we now can add) to *unite* theological inquiry and to *unite* those who engage in such inquiry. Now, to a theological outsider like Byrne, the sort of insight gained and discovery made through understanding—like the shared understanding that was gained in the 1999 Declaration, whether by reason or by grace (or both)—may seem like a minimal advance when compared to the sort of advances made in science, especially since significant theological disagreement remains. But again, this is to misunderstand a central feature of the way theology works. Unlike empirical knowledge, knowledge of God—the ultimate goal of theological inquiry—cannot be measured in terms of the accumulation of reliable belief, even if (as I have already argued) acquiring true beliefs is essential for gaining knowledge of God. From a more classical theological point of view, which I am articulating here, knowledge of God is measured not only by the *quantity* of the knowledge gained, but also by the *quality* of that knowledge and by the love it inspires. As we come to hold true beliefs about God in faith as well as reason, and subsequently inquire into the content of what we believe in an effort to achieve a greater understanding of that content, our knowledge of God increases not only in *breadth* but also in *depth*: faith leads to subsequent understanding; and in the next life, faith and understanding give way to pure intellectual ‘vision’ of the divine: the beatific vision itself.

This brings us to a final important point. From a distinctly eschatological perspective, which locates theological inquiry on a trajectory that extends into the next life (and thus eternity with God), theology qualifies as a quintessentially realist discipline of thought—the true queen of the sciences. As we have already seen, Aquinas argues that the science of God (*scientia dei*) is paradigmatically practiced not by the faithful in this life but by the blessed in the next life—those scientists, who, fully redeemed and perfected by God, practice the science of God by way of direct participation (according to the finite mode of the intellect) in God’s self-knowledge. The knowledge of God possessed by

person of faith to recognize or discern that the propositions of faith constitute genuine revelations from God. In “‘Gifted Knowledge’: An Exception to Thomistic Epistemology?” *The Thomist* 63.2 (1999): 173–90, Carl N. Still argues on Aquinas’s behalf that supernatural understanding is “a mode of cognition working with images of nonmaterial things” that enables the person with gifted faith to “see far enough through such images to grasp something of the character of those things themselves” (189).

these scientists is so direct that it indeed constitutes a genuine 'vision' of the divine—actually 'seeing' God "as God is."⁴⁶ Thus, properly interpreting theology as a science in its own right requires looking beyond the horizon of this world and hence beyond what natural scientific inquiry investigates. The science of God, which begins (however incompletely and imperfectly) in this life in faith and subsequent understanding, ends not in skepticism, as Byrne supposes, but in pure, uninterrupted, unmediated, and ongoing insight and discovery into the nature of the divine in the beatific vision. Unlike the sciences of this world, then, theology qua the science of God has no end: there is no end to the science of God because there is no end to God.

The move I am making here at the end of this section to situate theology properly within an eschatological framework may once again strike the skeptic as foul play: a convenient and highly dubious way of casting theology within a distinctly realist light, or (in Byrne's words) calling in the divine cavalry at the last minute in order to rescue theology from a non-realist hermeneutic.⁴⁷ But again, if the onus is on theology to show in what way it can and should be interpreted realistically—and this is the challenge Byrne has issued to theology—then those who practice theology are entirely within their rights to draw on whatever resources theology has (whether scriptural, intellectual, spiritual, or ecclesiastical) in order to defend such an interpretation. Furthermore, the theologian makes such claims about the proper end of theological inquiry, not from the end point of history itself (or from some Archimedean point of absolute knowledge), but rather from the standpoint of faith and, even more specifically, of *hope* and *love*. It is faith, along with hope and also love—the classical theological virtues—that looks to the future in anticipation of a time when theology, qua the science of God, fully comes into its own: when the 'vision' of God of which we enjoy a foretaste in this life through faith and (to an even greater extent) through shared understanding unites us not only to God but also to one another.

The Problem of Theological Diversity

Having defended an alternative model for understanding theology as a realist discipline of thought, I turn now to consider the seemingly intractable problem of diversity of belief within theology. The fact that theology is beset

46. See in particular *ST* I.1 and *ST* I.12.

47. More specifically, my move here (once again following Aquinas's lead) is to locate epistemology within eschatology: knowledge of God, from a Christian point of view, bears a distinctly eschatological mark.

by such seeming widespread disagreement, both historically and in its present form, seems to undermine the possibility of offering a realist interpretation of theology from the start. Surely, Byrne asks, if theology is beset by such striking internal disagreement and competing truth claims about the divine, then how can we reasonably interpret it as divinely guided, as an exercise of faith seeking understanding, and hence capable of furnishing genuine knowledge of God? If there is genuine faith and if there has been genuine accumulation of understanding within theology, it should be more widespread: as in science, consensus seems to be our most reliable guide in determining whether the truth really has been obtained. And such consensus in theology is clearly lacking. Consequently, it seems that theology cannot be interpreted realistically.

One line of response to this argument, which I began above, is simply to question how deeply divided theology as a discipline really is. As I have been defending it, classical orthodox theology, to which adherents in the main branches of Christianity (Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox) subscribe, furnishes a full stock of true beliefs about God which many if not most Christians throughout Christian history have held in faith. But at the cost of simply ignoring other observable theological divides, we can only carry this line of response so far. Even if certain sects within Christianity (for example, the Arians) no longer exist, since (from a mainstream theological perspective) they were shown to possess false beliefs about the divine, the problem of theological diversity and division remains. We could point out any number of beliefs held by Christians and subject to reflection by Christian theologians, concerning, for example, God's attributes, providence, salvation, and God's presence in the church and the sacraments which remain open to debate and dispute. So we now need to offer a plausible explanation for why theology doesn't show a greater *convergence* of belief and understanding about its putative subject matter.

First, we need to note an obvious fact about the nature of theology's subject matter that differentiates it from science's subject matter (which, to his credit, Byrne notes as well). God utterly transcends the world and the immanent empirical realities that science investigates; consequently, God remains hidden from the mind in ways that the world does not. Now, God does not remain *completely* hidden from the mind: despite what Byrne contends, theology is not reducible to skepticism or agnosticism. From a theological point of view, God has graciously reached out to the mind to reveal God's self to the mind, transmitting to the mind (by way of human authors) a scriptural record of God's presence and work in human history, from creation through

the incarnation into the very early church, a record that received subsequent clarification and interpretation with the emergence and establishment of orthodoxy. Given its divine source, this record and the truths contained therein provide a basis for genuine speculation into the nature of the divine—what Byrne refers to as God’s “attributes and plans.” God also has revealed God’s self within the created order, which means that philosophy and natural theology have a source from which to draw in engaging in warranted, rational reflection about the divine.

And yet, even given its basis in divine revelation, theology simply cannot claim the same sort of ready, ongoing epistemic access to divine reality that science can claim regarding empirical reality; and to suggest that it can or should possess this sort of access is simply unfair. Consequently, the amount of insight and discovery that has accumulated in theology over the course of its history, acquired through faith seeking understanding, cannot possibly be compared to the amount of insight and discovery that has accumulated in science over the course of its history. Nor can there be the sort of consensus of belief in theology that exists in science concerning the reality it investigates. The distance of God from the mind, which underscores the frailty and finitude and thus the fallibility of the mind, leaves ample room for widespread error in theological reflection: the sort of error that darkens the human mind, preventing more widespread convergence of belief as well as subsequent shared understanding of what is believed.

Second, we can explain the presence of diversity and particularly division within theology by pointing out the noetic effects of sin, or the way in which sin darkens the mind as well as the will, thereby impairing the graced capacity for believing and ideally ‘perceiving’ the truth about God.⁴⁸ In its broadest sense, sin is alienation from God and from other human beings; sin ruptures the relationship that God has with human beings as well as the relationship that human beings have with one another. Consequently, sin infects and thwarts God’s efforts to bring human persons (and more specifically, the mind and the will) into right relationship with God through faith and the other theological virtues. Sin also infects and thwarts God’s efforts to bring human persons into right relationship with one another, which explains why the faithful, who always remain susceptible to the effects of sin, veer towards sectarianism (or separation) rather than theological unity in

48. For a more detailed examination of the noetic effects of sin, see Merold Westphal, “Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 200–26.

holding and practicing what they believe. Grace, of course, is the antidote to sin: it not only raises up the mind and will so that the Christian believer can, through faith, reunite with the divine, thereby enabling the believer to know and love God better; it also purifies and repairs the mind and will so the believer can reunite with others, thereby enabling the believer to know and love others better. But on this side of the eschaton, sin remains, and more than that, sin perpetuates itself—within theology, particularly through human error and pride. This is why theology, as infected by sin, can veer towards idolatry: given the noetic effects of sin, theology remains susceptible to generating false conceptions of the divine—false gods that demand exclusive belief and worship and hence lure those who do theology into false or misguided beliefs as well as practices.

Now, neither divine transcendence nor human sin is a permanent block or barrier for achieving convergence of belief and understanding within theology. Were theology itself entirely in human hands (as Byrne seems to think), then clearly the path towards God that theology seeks to chart would be hopelessly ambiguous and divided. But theology is not entirely in human hands: as an exercise of faith seeking understanding, it is guided by the divine itself. Consequently, despite being constrained by human finitude (smallness of mind confronting the greatness of God) and frustrated by human sin (which further misdirects the mind and will towards idolatry), realist theological inquiry, and the insight and discovery it seeks to generate, remains possible because God chooses to direct it. In fact, realist theological inquiry only remains possible because God chooses to *renew* and *reform* it by the transformative power of God's grace. Anselm, who along with Augustine aligns theological inquiry with faith seeking understanding, eloquently expresses this point in his *Proslogion*:

I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I may remember You, think of You, love you. But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' [Isa. 7:9].⁴⁹

49. See Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter one, 87.

Anselm clearly recognizes the reality of his own finitude and sin; but given his faith in the transformative power of God's grace, which will renew and reform his capacity to remember, know, and love God, he remains confident *in God* that he may achieve some understanding of the divine and, more specifically, that he may attain the divine truth his heart already "believes and loves."

There is a further hope implicit here that we need to draw out. If theology is truly guided, renewed, and reformed by God, then surely God, in overcoming the effects of finitude of sin on the minds and wills of theological practitioners and granting the understanding that faith seeks and desires, will eventually achieve *unity* of belief and understanding and thereby also achieve *eschatological* resolution of theological divides. From a distinctly eschatological point of view, the goal of theological inquiry remains, then, to obtain the sort of *shared* faith and understanding that crosses and overcomes theological divides, uniting Christian believers across those divides. I have already mentioned that theology, qua the science of God, culminates in the direct 'vision' and knowledge of the divine. What this suggests is that theology qua an exercise of faith seeking understanding will further give way in eternity to a *unified* 'vision' and knowledge of the divine: a 'vision' that unites the faithful not only to God but also to one another.

Our skeptic may reply, here at the end, that the realist theologian is once again relying on a blind hope, or wishful thinking at best, in pointing towards some future state of affairs that has not yet obtained as a way of confronting the problem of division within theology. But in fact, this hope is not blind. As I have already pointed out, there is recent evidence in the history of Christianity for the sort of theological unity that can be achieved through shared understanding: the sort of understanding about the divine that we now can say *enables* convergence of belief across previous theological divides. Based on the shared understanding that was achieved through ecumenical dialogue, Catholic and Lutheran Christians now affirm *together* their belief in the saving power of God's grace through faith in Christ. Had Catholics and Lutherans achieved not shared understanding but rather something less—something like mutual admiration and respect for theological differences, or agreement to disagree—then it would be difficult to affirm that genuine consensus had been achieved. But the authors of the *Joint Declaration* state explicitly that shared understanding and consensus *have* been achieved, despite whatever theological differences remain. Therefore, given this remarkable recent development, the hope for *further* resolution of theological divides, and hence further convergence of belief through shared un-

derstanding, remains firmly grounded, even if it remains (on this side of the eschaton, anyway) a hope that has not yet been fully realized.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to defend a realist interpretation of theology. Theology, undergirded by faith in the way I have described it, can show that it is properly or adequately guided and grounded, and thus it can show that it is capable of producing true beliefs about God, thereby putting its practitioners into cognitive contact with divine reality. Furthermore, theology indeed possesses a shared rule of faith—its own internal sources and norms—that enable it to determine which theological beliefs are true and which are not. As evidenced by remarkable recent events in Christian history, theology is also capable of accumulating insight and discovery into the nature of the divine: the sort of insight that is gained and discovery that is made through shared understanding rather than reliable belief. Finally, theology is paradigmatically realist not only because of its divine origin but also because of its divine end. The scope of its inquiry is not limited to this life but extends into the next life, when it ceases to be guided by faith and gives way to pure intellectual ‘vision’ of the divine: the convergence of all theology on divine truth.

There is a final practical application to be drawn here. Lest the skeptic think I have glossed over an important fact about theological inquiry in this life—we ‘see’ God, at best, through a glass darkly—I must emphasize that theology as a discipline (both academic and ecclesiastical), if it is ultimately to be interpreted realistically, must aim at unity. Reaching internal agreement over matters of faith through shared understanding *is* an important goal of realist theological inquiry. But agreement will not be reached without argument: the answer to sectarianism (however deep it runs), therefore, is not to abandon making dogmatic truth claims about God, or to give up on divine truth altogether, in an effort to avoid genuine theological disagreement. The answer is to make dogmatic truths about God more boldly—to proclaim and profess that truth with the aim of stimulating argument and debate. If the goal of theology is to ascertain and understand divine truth—and it is one of the main conclusions of this chapter and book that it is—then those who profess to do theology should be vigilant in their efforts to attain it and confident that, by the power of God’s grace, they can attain it. On such a view, theological argument and debate are not a roadblock for tracking divine truth; rather, when such argument and debate is divinely guided through faith (or faith seeking understanding), they are the very means by which we track it.

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