

The Summa Against the Gentiles (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1259–1264)¹

St. Thomas Aquinas

Book I

Chapter 3

THE TWO WAYS OF KNOWING THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD.

There are two ways of knowing what we hold to be true about God. There are some truths about God that exceed the capacity of human reason—for example the fact that God is three and one. There are also some truths that natural reason can attain, such as that God exists, that he is one, and other truths of this kind. These are truths about God that have been conclusively proved by philosophers making use of their natural reason.

10 It is evident that there are some things to be known about God that completely exceed the capacity of human reason. Since all the knowledge that a person has about a thing is based on his understanding of its substance (according to the Philosopher [Aristotle] the basis for any argument is “what a thing is”),² the way the substance of a thing is understood must determine what is known about it. Thus if the human intellect comprehends the substance of, say, a stone or a triangle, no intelligible aspect of that thing is beyond the capacity of the human reason. However this is not the case for us with God. The human intellect can not achieve the understanding of God’s substance by means of its natural capacity because in this life all knowledge that is in our intellects originates in the senses. Hence things that are not perceived by the senses cannot be grasped by the human intellect except in so far as knowledge of them is gathered from the senses. But the objects of the senses cannot lead the human intellect to the point that in them it can see the divine substance as it is, for they are effects that are not equal in power to their cause. However our intellect is led from the objects of the senses to the knowledge of the existence of God—as well as to other attributes of the First Principle.³ Therefore there are some things that can be known about God that are available to human reason, but there are others that totally exceed its power.

1. The *Summa* or summary defense of Catholicism against the “gentiles,” principally the Moslems, was originally entitled *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith against the Gentiles*. It was written in Paris and Italy as an aid to Dominican missionaries working among the Moslems and Jews in Spain and North Africa.

2. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, II, 3. For medieval philosophy, *substantia* is the underlying reality that distinguishes a thing from others and gives it independent existence.

3. First Principle—God as the Foundation of all creation. For Aquinas’s argument that reason can lead us to the knowledge of the existence of God, see *Summa Theologiae*, I, qu. 2, a. 3 (p. 30).

Chapter 4

TRUTHS ABOUT GOD THAT ARE KNOWN BY REASON ARE ALSO PROPERLY MADE AVAILABLE TO MAN BY FAITH.

20 If it were left solely to reason to seek the truth about God, few men would possess a knowledge of God. There are three reasons why most men are prevented from carrying out the diligent inquiry that leads to the discovery of truth. Some are prevented from doing so because of their physical disinclination—as a result of which many men by nature are not disposed to learning. And so however earnest they are, they cannot attain the highest level of human knowledge which consists in knowing God. Others are prevented from doing so by the pressures of family life. Some men must devote themselves to managing temporal affairs and thus are not able to spend time in leisurely contemplative inquiry, so as to reach the highest point of human inquiry—the knowledge of God. Laziness prevents others. To know what reason can investigate concerning God requires that one already have a knowledge of many things, since almost all of philosophy is directed towards the knowledge of God. This is why we learn metaphysics, which is
30 concerned with the divine, last among the subjects in the field of philosophy. The study of truth requires a considerable effort—which is why few are willing to undertake it out of love of knowledge—despite the fact that God has implanted a natural appetite for such knowledge in the minds of men.

Chapter 7

TRUTHS BASED ON REASON ARE NOT CONTRARY TO THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

Although the truth of the Christian faith exceeds the capacity of human reason, truths that reason is fitted by nature to know cannot be contrary to the truth of faith. The things that reason is fitted by nature to know are clearly most true, and it would be impossible to think of them as false.⁴ It is also wrong to think that something that is held by faith could be false since it is clearly confirmed by God. Since we know by definition that what is false is contrary to the truth, it is impossible for the principles that reason knows by nature to be contrary to the truth of faith.

40 We conclude therefore that any arguments made against the doctrines of faith are incorrectly derived from the self-evident first principles of nature. Such conclusions do not have the force of proofs, but are either doubtful opinions or sophistries, and so it is possible to answer them.

Chapter 8

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE HUMAN REASON AND THE PRIMARY TRUTH OF FAITH.

There is a further point to be considered. The objects of the senses on which human reason bases its knowledge retain some traces of likeness to God, since they exist and are good. This resemblance is inadequate because it is completely insufficient to manifest the substance of God. Effects possess a resemblance to causes in their own particular way because everything that acts does so in ways like itself, but effects do not always exhibit a perfect likeness to their cause. Now human reason is related to the knowledge of the truth of faith—which can only be known fully by those who see the divine substance—in such a way that reason can attain likenesses of it that are true but not sufficient to comprehend the truth conclusively or as known in itself. Yet it is useful for the human mind to exercise its powers of reasoning,
50 however weak, in this way provided that there is no presumption that it can comprehend or demonstrate

4. Nature, for Aquinas, is purposive and man's intellect is directed by nature to the knowledge of truth.

[the substance of the divine]. For it is most pleasing to be able to see some aspect of the loftiest things, however weak and inadequate our consideration of them may be.

Book II

Chapter 68

HOW AN INTELLECTUAL SUBSTANCE CAN BE THE FORMATIVE PRINCIPLE OF THE BODY.

In this way a wonderful linkage of things can be seen, for the lowest member of a higher classification (*genus*) is always found just above the highest member of a lower classification. For example, the lowest members of the class of animals are only a little above plant life, such as oysters that are immobile, and possess only the sense of touch, and are attached to the ground. Thus Dionysius says, “Divine wisdom has linked the lowest examples (*fines*) of higher beings to the first examples (*principia*) of those below them.”⁵ This is true of the human body in the classification (*genus*) of bodies. It is an equal composite of two classifications. It touches the lowest level of the next higher *genus* because the human soul is the lowest in the series of intellectual substances, as we can tell from the way in which it acquires knowledge. Therefore the intellectual soul is at the borderline or limit of things corporeal and incorporeal since it is an incorporeal substance that acts as the formative principle (*forma*) of the body.

Book III

Chapter 2

EVERYTHING THAT ACTS ACTS FOR AN END.⁶

When something clearly acts for an end we say that the end is that toward which the movement of the thing that acts tends; when it is reached, we say that the end has been reached, and if it fails to reach it, we say that it has failed to reach its intended end. We see this in the case of a doctor who aims at health or a runner who runs towards a finish line. It does not matter whether the thing tending towards an end is endowed with consciousness or not. A target is both the end of the archer, and the end of an arrow’s flight. When things act for an end the thing beyond which they seek nothing further is said to be their last end. Thus a doctor’s action goes as far as health and once that is achieved he seeks nothing further. And in the action of everything that acts there is a point beyond which the actor does not seek anything further. Otherwise actions would go on forever—which is impossible.

5. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, VII. On the influence on the middle ages exercised by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, a fifth century Christian neo-Platonist writer who was erroneously believed by medieval writers to be Dionysius the Areopagite, a disciple of St. Paul, see Paul E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), ch. 3.

6. Aquinas’s doctrine of ends or purposes in nature and man is central to the structure of his politics and ethics. Like the universe as a whole, man and society possess inherent structures that indicate their purpose and value.

Chapter 3

EVERYTHING THAT ACTS ACTS FOR A GOOD.

An intellectual agent acts for an end that it has chosen for itself, while things in nature that act for ends do not decide on their ends, for they do not know the meaning of an end but are moved to ends chosen for them by someone else. When someone uses his intellect to act, he always chooses an end that he thinks is good because the object of his intellect only moves him when it appears to be a good—and good is the object of the will. Everything in nature moves and acts for an end that is a good since the end of something acting in nature is the result of a natural appetite. Therefore everything that acts acts for a good.

Chapter 25

THE END OF EVERY INTELLECTUAL SUBSTANCE IS TO KNOW GOD.

80 For everything that acts and moves in an ordered way, the purpose (*finis*—end) of the first actor and mover should be the final purpose of all, just as the goal (*finis*) of the commander of an army is the goal of all the soldiers under his command. Now the purpose of the intellect is what moves all the parts of man; the intellect moves the appetites by proposing their objects to them. The intellectual appetite or will moves the sense appetites of spirit and passion. We do not obey the passions unless the will commands, and the sense appetite, once the will consents, moves the body. Therefore the end (goal, purpose) of the intellect is the end of all human actions. The end and good of the intellect is truth. Therefore the ultimate end of the whole man and of all his actions and desires is to know the first truth; namely, God.

90 Furthermore, there is a natural desire in all men to know the causes of what they see. Because men wondered about the underlying causes of what they saw, they first began to philosophize, and when they found the cause they were satisfied. Human inquiry does not cease until it comes to the first cause and we think that we have full knowledge when we know the first cause. Therefore man desires by nature to know the first cause as his ultimate end. But the first cause of everything is God. Therefore man's ultimate end is to know God.

Chapter 27

HUMAN HAPPINESS DOES NOT CONSIST IN BODILY PLEASURES.

100 In the order of nature, pleasure is the result of a function and not the reverse. Therefore if a function is not the ultimate end, the pleasure that results from it cannot be the ultimate end, or accompany the ultimate end. Now it is clear that the functions that are followed by the (bodily) pleasures mentioned above are not man's ultimate end but are directed at certain specific ends—for instance eating at the preservation of the body, and sexual intercourse at the procreation of children. Therefore these joys are not the ultimate end, nor do they accompany the ultimate end. Therefore (ultimate) happiness is not located in such pleasures.

Chapter 32

HAPPINESS DOES NOT CONSIST IN THE GOODS OF THE BODY.

The soul is better than the body—which needs the soul to live and to possess these goods. Therefore a good of the soul, such as understanding and the like is better than a good of the body. Therefore the good of the body is not man's highest good.

Furthermore these (bodily) goods are common to man and to other animals. But happiness is a good proper to man alone. Man's happiness therefore does not consist in the things mentioned above.

Moreover, many animals surpass man in the goods of the body. Some are speedier, some stronger, and so on. If the highest good of man were in these things man would not be the best of the animals—which is obviously false. Therefore human happiness does not consist in the goods of the body.

Chapter 37

MAN'S ULTIMATE HAPPINESS CONSISTS IN THE CONTEMPLATION OF GOD.

110 Man's ultimate happiness consists in the contemplation of truth for this operation is specific to man and is shared with no other animals.⁷ Also it is not directed to any other end since the contemplation of truth is sought for its own sake. In addition, in this operation man is united to higher beings (substances) since this is the only human operation that is carried out both by God and by the separate substances (*angels*). Through this operation too man is united with those higher beings by knowing them in a certain way.

Chapter 48

MAN'S ULTIMATE HAPPINESS IS NOT IN THIS LIFE.

Man's ultimate end fulfills his natural appetite in such a way that once he achieves it he desires nothing more. If he is still moved towards something else, he has not reached the end which satisfies him. This cannot happen in this life because the more someone knows the more his desire for knowledge increases. And this occurs by nature...

120 Everyone agrees that happiness is a kind of perfect good, since it satisfies the appetite. Now a perfect good is one in which there is no admixture of evil. A thing that is perfectly white has no admixture of black. It is not possible for man in this life to be wholly free from evils—not only from those of the body and the flesh such as hunger, thirst, cold and so on, but also those of the spirit. There is no one who is not sometimes upset by disorderly passions, who does not sometimes exceed the virtuous mean either because of excess or deficiency,⁸ who is not deceived for one reason or another, or at least is not ignorant of things he would like to know, or doubtful about things of which he would like to be certain. No one therefore is happy in this life.

7. On the contemplative life as man's highest and happiest pursuit, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7–8.

8. On the doctrine that virtue lies in the mean or intermediate point between excess and deficiency of a quality, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6–9.

Chapter 51

HOW GOD MAY BE SEEN IN HIS ESSENCE.

130 Since it is impossible for a natural desire to be frustrated—which would be the case if it were not possible to arrive at the understanding of the divine substance that all minds naturally desire—we must conclude that the substance of God can be seen through the intellect, by both the separate intellectual substances (angels) and our souls. How God can be seen is clear from what has been said. We have proved that the divine substance cannot be seen by the intellect through any created thing (*specie*). Hence if God's essence is to be seen it must be seen in itself so that in that vision the divine essence is both the object of our vision and the medium through which we see it.

Chapter 53

A CREATED INTELLECT NEEDS THE INFLUENCE OF (DIVINE) LIGHT IN ORDER TO SEE GOD IN HIS ESSENCE.

The divine essence is a higher form than any created intellect.⁹ In order for God in his essence to be known by any created intellect as is required for the divine substance to be seen, the created intellect must be elevated by action from on high...

140 Since we come to the knowledge of intelligible things from the objects of the senses, we transfer the terms we use for sensory knowledge to intellectual knowledge. This is especially true of sight which is the most noble and spiritual of the senses and the one that is most akin to the intellect. Because bodily vision is not possible without light, we call what makes intellectual vision possible "light" as well...Accordingly the action by which a created intellect is elevated to the intellectual vision of the divine substance is appropriately called the light of glory.

Chapter 63

IN THAT FINAL HAPPINESS EVERY HUMAN DESIRE WILL BE FULFILLED.

There is a certain desire in man, as an intellectual being, to know truth. Men achieve this by pursuing the contemplative life. This is fulfilled in that vision of the First Truth through which everything that the intellect naturally desires to know becomes known to it...

150 Secondly, there is a certain desire in man for a basis on which to order all lesser things. Men achieve this by pursuing the active life in society. This is principally the desire of man to order his whole life according to reason, that is, to live in accordance with virtue, since the end of the action of any virtuous person is the good of virtue itself, just as that of a brave man is to act bravely. This desire will be completely fulfilled when reason is at its fullest strength, illuminated by the divine light so that it cannot depart from what is right.

There is a third desire of man that he shares with animals—to enjoy pleasure. Those men who live lives of voluptuousness achieve this goal but because of lack of moderation they become intemperate and incontinent. But in that ultimate happiness there will be perfect pleasure—a more perfect delight of the senses than that which animals enjoy, since the intellect is higher than the senses. That good in which we will delight is greater than any sense good. It is more intimate and continuous as well as more pure because it is not mixed with sadness or worry that it may be disturbed...

9. The essence of a thing is its ultimate unchanging nature, its defining characteristics.

160 Therefore it is clear that through the vision of the divine, intellectual substances attain the true happiness in which all desire is at rest—which is the full sufficiency of all goods that Aristotle says is required for happiness¹⁰...Nothing is as similar to this perfect ultimate happiness in this life as the life of contemplation of truth, as far as is possible in this life. Therefore philosophers who could not have full knowledge of that ultimate happiness have said that the ultimate happiness of man consists in the contemplation which is possible in this life.¹¹

Chapter 64

GOD GOVERNS THE UNIVERSE BY HIS PROVIDENCE.

From what has been said above, it has been sufficiently proved that God is the end of all things. From this we can further conclude that he governs and rules the universe by his providence.

170 Whenever things are ordered to some end, they are subject to the direction of the one who is principally concerned with that end. Thus all the parts and activities of an army are directed as their ultimate end to the goal of the general, which is victory, and therefore the general commands the whole army. In the same way an art which is concerned with an end controls and lays down rules for an art which is concerned with the means to an end. The art of government directs the military, the military art the cavalry, and navigation shipbuilding. Therefore since all things are ordered to the Divine Goodness as to their end, God who is that Goodness substantially possessed, and known, and loved, must be the one who governs all things.

Chapter 81

ORDER AMONG MEN AND IN RELATION TO OTHER THINGS.

180 Relative to other intellectual substances, the human soul is lowest in rank because when it is created it only receives knowledge of the order of divine providence in a general way. The (human) soul must acquire a full knowledge of the individual aspects of that order from the particular ways in which the order of divine providence is expressed. Consequently the human soul needs bodily organs to derive its knowledge from bodily things. But because of the weakness in the light of its intellect it cannot acquire from them a perfect knowledge of the things that concern man without the help of light from higher spirits. For God has directed that lower beings should be perfected by higher spirits...But since man has some share in intellectual light divine providence has decreed that brute animals that have no share in it should be subject to him...Since brute animals, although they lack intellects, have a certain kind of knowledge, by divine providence they are over plants and other things which are without knowledge...Since man possesses an intellect, senses, and bodily powers, divine providence has decreed that these should be ordered to one another in a way that is similar to the order in the universe. The power of the body is subject to the powers of the senses and the intellect, carrying out their commands. The power of the senses is subject to that of the intellect and is limited by its control.

190 In the same way we find an order among men. Those of superior intellect are the natural rulers while those who are less intelligent but have stronger bodies seem to be made by nature to serve, as Aristotle says in the *Politics*¹²...

10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 8.

12. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 5. For fuller statements in the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas's view of slavery which differs in important respects from that of Aristotle, see S.T. I, qu. 96, a. 4; S.T. II-II, qu. 57, a. 3, and qu. 104, a. 5.

Just as in the case of an individual man disorder results if the intellect follows the senses, or if because of an indisposition of the body the senses are drawn by the motion of the body, as occurs in the case of someone with a limp, so in human government disorder results when someone rules not because he excels in intellect but because he has usurped power by physical force or because someone has been given authority to rule because of sensual affection...

It is evident therefore that divine providence imposes order on all things. Thus what the Apostle [Paul] says is true, "Whatever things are are ordained by God."¹³

[St. Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*, trans. and ed. Paul E. Sigmund (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 3–11.]

13. Romans, 13:1.