

TWELVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE "FOURTH WAY"

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Each of St. Thomas' Five Ways to prove the existence of God is a severe abbreviation. In his pursuit of brevity, St. Thomas chose not to defend his arguments from objections nor to explain all his premises in concrete examples, preferring instead to outline several arguments capable of fuller elaboration. By word count, the Fourth Way is almost the briefest, surpassed only by the Second Way. But the Fourth Way seems to reach a conclusion more informative than that of the Second Way, and it contains more puzzling steps, making it in many respects the most laconic of the five. In this article I aim to unravel some of the terseness of the Fourth Way a bit by raising and answering twelve questions about it.

The Fourth Way, as I translate it, runs as follows:

The fourth way is taken from the grades which are found in things. For one finds in things something more and less good and true and noble, and so on with other things of this sort. But more and less are said of diverse things according as they approach in different ways to something which is most; just as the more hot is what approaches more to the most hot. There is therefore something which is truest and best and noblest and consequently most a being; for things

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which are most true are most beings, as is said in *Metaphysics* II.¹ But what is called most in any genus is the cause of all the things which are of that genus, as fire, which is the most hot, is the cause of all hot things, as is said in the same book. Therefore there is something which is the cause of being and of goodness and of any perfection in all things, and this we call God.²

There is no shortage of questions . . .

QUESTION I

When St. Thomas says "one finds in things [*in rebus*] something more and less good and true and noble," what does he mean by "true"? The true is found not in things (*in rebus*) but in statements about or understandings of things.³ How does one find true things?

Also, what does St. Thomas mean by "noble"? He lists it separately from "good" as if they meant different things.

¹ *Metaphysics* II.1, 993b25-30.

² *Summa Theologiae* I q. 2, a. 3 C, fourth argument. Here is the Latin text: "Quarta via sumitur ex gradibus qui in rebus inveniuntur. Invenitur enim in rebus aliquid magis et minus bonum et verum et nobile, et sic de aliis hujusmodi. Sed magis et minus dicitur de diversis secundum quod appropinquant diversimode ad aliquid quod maxime est; sicut magis calidum est quod magis appropinquat maxime calido. Est igitur quod est verissimum et optimum et nobilissimum et per consequens maxime ens; nam quae sunt maxime vera sunt maxime entia, ut dicitur II *Metaph.* Quod autem dicitur maxime in aliquo genere est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis, sicut ignis qui est maxime calidus est causa omnium calidorum, ut in eodem libro dicitur. Ergo est aliquid quod est causa esse et bonitatis et cuiuslibet perfectionis in omnibus rebus, et hoc dicimus Deum."

³ See Aristotle's *Metaphysics* VI.4 1027b25: "For falsity and truth are not in things . . . but in thought."

RESPONSE I

By its first meaning "true" is said not of things but of statements about things or understandings⁴ of things. But in a secondary sense each thing is called "true" insofar as it is the foundation of true statements or true understandings about it, or is in some way in conformity with a mind:

A thing is not called "true" except according as it is adequated to an understanding; and so the true is found in a secondary sense in things, but in the primary sense in an understanding.⁵

Where there is found what is most a being, there is found what is most true. Nor is this because being and true are the same in meaning, but because it is insofar as a thing has something of being that it is apt to be adequated with an understanding.⁶

Accordingly, when St. Thomas calls things "true" in the Fourth Way, he is taking "true" in a secondary sense, to mean anything about which one can have a true understanding. Since everything can be an object of a true understanding in some way, it follows that "true," taken in this sense, is one of the transcendental terms, said of all things.

As for "noble," and how it differs from "good," the original sense of the word offers some light. Like the Latin *nobilis*, the original sense of "noble" in English is well-known, famous, highborn, as in "the nobility," the noble class. The nobility are not just supposedly good, but supposedly *better*—they are set apart from the commoners, distinguished by their virtue, wealth, education, office, or whatever excellence. Hence the

⁴ And only some understandings of things are true or false; an understanding of what a triangle is, in the form of a definition, is neither true nor false, since it neither asserts nor denies anything.

⁵ St. Thomas, *De Veritate* q. 1, a. 2 C.

⁶ St. Thomas, *De Veritate* q. 1, a. 1 ad 5.

"noble" gases are "noble" in a different but related sense: they do not combine with other elements to form compounds, a bit like nobles who refuse to mix with the rabble. "Noble," in short, adds to the idea of "good" that a thing is distinguished from inferiors, that it is in a condition of more or less fixed superiority by reason of its goodness.

QUESTION 2

When St. Thomas says "One finds in things something more and less good . . . and noble," does he presume that it is possible to rank things in goodness or nobility in only one way? In fact it often or always happens that if A is better than B in one way, then B is better than A in another way, as gold is better than wood for filling teeth, but wood is better than gold for making a baseball bat. Also, what is good in one way can be at the same time bad in another, as a good lawyer who is a bad husband. Therefore there does not seem to be any real order of goodness or nobility in things, since the order appears to depend entirely on what one chooses to regard about a thing.⁷

RESPONSE 2

St. Thomas is not speaking about ranking the suitability of things for particular human purposes or considerations, but about their natural excellence or nobility. An animal is nobler than a plant, not just for certain human uses, but because animal life is more complete or perfect than plant life: by its senses an animal is in some way able to add to its own form the forms of all other things that it senses, whereas a plant is

⁷ Anthony Kenny raises this question as an objection to the Fourth Way. See *The Five Ways: Saint Thomas Aquinas's Proofs for God's Existence*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1980, Ch. 5, p. 80: "Something may, for instance, be a good F and a bad G (as a man may be a good cricketer and a bad husband) . . ."

limited to its own form alone. A man is nobler than a beast because by his reason man is in some way able to become all things whatsoever.⁸ Since the whole is more perfect than the part, and the beast has a life that is merely a part of the kind of life found in man, and the plant has a life that is merely a part of the kind of life found in an animal, a man is simply nobler than a beast, and a beast than a plant, and a plant than a stone.

It might be true that a plant is in some respects superior to an animal, or an animal is in some respect better than a man, but it will nonetheless remain that the animal is simply better than the plant, and the man than the beast. An eagle, for example, has a power of vision that is superior to human vision, and so an eagle is better than a man in this respect. Nonetheless, since man has a power, namely reason, which is superior to every kind of corporeal vision—in testimony of which every man would prefer to lose his sight rather than lose his mind—he remains superior to the eagle simply speaking. Again, a redwood has greater longevity than a man, and so is superior to man in this respect. Nonetheless, no man would trade all his senses for the longevity of a redwood, which shows the unqualified superiority of sensitive life to mere vegetative life.

The example of the good lawyer who is a bad husband misses the point. St. Thomas is not comparing individual substances in the conditions they happen to fall into, but the natures belonging to them and the kinds of perfections of which these are capable. In this way, man is superior to the beasts, even if some men by choice fail to obtain the perfections possible to them and instead become wicked, and in their behavior fall below the dignity of a beast. Despite this, it remains that a good man is nobler than a good beast.

⁸ See Aristotle's *De Anima* III.8 431b20: "The soul is in a way all existing things."

QUESTION 3

When St. Thomas says that "One finds in things something more and less good . . . and noble," does he presume that all things can be fitted into a single linear order or ranking? This seems to follow from his conclusion that God is the single supreme good, by diverse proximities to whom all things have their peculiar degree of goodness. According to this, all goods would have a common measure, and hence would be comparable to each other. And yet this does not seem to be the case—as one writer put it, which is better, a good sunset or a good hippopotamus?⁹

RESPONSE 3

Even when there is a single measure or standard for many things, it does not follow that the many things are all comparable, since they might approximate the standard in different ways. A description of a woman in words, for example, is a kind of likeness of that woman, and the woman herself is the standard according to which one description of her is better than another. The same woman might also be the model for various portraits done in oil, some of which are better likenesses of her than others. It does not follow that a description of her in words and an oil painting of her must be comparable, such that one would be able to say which is a better likeness. Likewise it is possible for one and the same simple divine essence to be imitated by things in diverse ways, so that while some may be comparable in terms of greater and lesser likeness, nevertheless others may be incomparable.

Also, in the Fourth Way St. Thomas is speaking chiefly of substances, since he intends to prove the existence of a substance, and so the question about the "sunset" is not to the point. And all substances do appear to be comparable in terms

⁹ Anthony Kenny, *op. cit.*, p 80.

of more and less nobility and truth, although this is more obvious in the case of the genera than in the case of the species.¹⁰

QUESTION 4

What does it mean to say that one thing can be "more or less true" than another, and that something is "most a being"? These phrases seem unintelligible, since a thing either is true, or else it is not, and if it is true, it is just as true as any other true thing. Likewise a thing either is a being, or else it is not, and if it is a being, it exists as much as any other being. "True" and "being" do not seem to admit of variation of degree.

RESPONSE 4

Although it is true that either a thing is, or else it is not, and either it is true, or else it is not, it does not follow that these things do not admit of degree. Chemical substances are either harmful to swallow, or they are not—and yet among those which are harmful to swallow, some are more harmful than others. What it means for one thing to be more true than another, or to have more being than another, nonetheless needs clarification.

Since St. Thomas says that we find "in things" something which is more true than another thing, he appears to be using the word "true" to mean not the conformity of a mind or a statement to a thing, but the aptness of a thing to be the foundation of some truth, to be grasped by a mind, as I noted

¹⁰ For example, it is easy enough to see that separated substances, if one knows them to exist, are superior to material substances, and that man, among the material substances, is superior to all the rest, and that animals are superior to plants, and plants to non-living substances. It is easy enough to see also that a horse is nobler than a worm. But is one species of worm nobler than another? Which is nobler, the horse or the zebra? It is not surprising that where we are less certain of a difference in kind, we are also less certain of an order of nobility.

before. But it is evident that some things are by their very natures more apt to be understood than others—some things are more intelligible than others.

For example, actual¹¹ causes are more intelligible in themselves¹² than their effects, since causes illuminate the entirety of their effects, whereas effects do not always illuminate the full measure of their causes. An author, who understands himself, understands his own writings perfectly, but even if someone else could understand his writings perfectly, this would not amount to understanding everything about the author himself. So the agent cause is more intelligible than the effects which proceed from it. And the desirability of the end, which is a cause of the desirability of the means, is also more intelligible than what it causes. Why should anyone wish to be cut open with a knife? That is not intelligible until one sees it as a means to an end, such as health.

Again, a whole is more intelligible than its part. An understanding of a whole animal and the order among all its parts is a superior knowledge, a greater truth, than a knowledge of only one part of the animal. In the sense explained earlier, then, a whole animal is "truer" than any one of its parts alone.

Again, things that are not always the same are less intelligible than those that always are, since the only way to know the current condition of a thing subject to change is to experience it with the senses, not simply to understand it. "Socrates is sitting" might be true and in some way intelligible, but it is

¹¹ By "actual" causes I mean things which are causes by their actuality, as opposed to matter, which is a cause by its passive potency to be or become different things. Matter is a kind of cause, but it is less intelligible in itself than the things of which it is a cause, being less actual and complete than they are. The letters of the alphabet, for example, have less intelligibility, not more, than the books which are written with them.

¹² Causes are not usually more intelligible *to us* than their effects. In most of our knowledge, we find ourselves tracking down the cause of some effect that was known to us first, as when we look for the criminal after discovering the crime, or for the cause of a disease after noting its symptoms.

less true than "Seven is prime," since the statement about Socrates is sometimes false, and less intelligible since it cannot be verified by mere understanding, whereas the statement about seven is always true, and does not depend on any particular sense experience to be known.

Again, what is understandable by itself is more true or intelligible than what is not understandable by itself. For example, substance is more intelligible than accident, since substance can be understood by itself, whereas the nature of an accident is to be what inheres in another thing, and hence it cannot be understood without substance. Among accidents, too, one finds an order of intelligibility, since some accidents depend more than others do on things outside their own natures in order to be understood. A stable accident such as shape can be understood without bringing in anything outside itself besides its subject. A motion or time, on the other hand, must be understood not only with reference to its subject, but also with reference to the soul, since it is in the soul alone that motion or time exists as a complete whole made up of parts. Hence fluid accidents like motion or time cannot be or be understood completely without the soul, unlike a number or a shape that can be understood without bringing in the soul. Motion and time are nevertheless more intelligible than privations, such as darkness, or blindness, or ignorance, since motion and time are at least founded on something positive in things outside the soul—the moment or the now—whereas privations are nothing positive outside the soul.

In these ways, then, and perhaps in others, one thing may be more intelligible than another, or truer than another, even if all of them are true and none is altogether unintelligible. St. Thomas himself seems to acknowledge some difficulty in seeing how one thing can be said to have "more being" than another, and hence he concludes to this from something more known to us, namely that one thing is truer or more intelligible than another. To this he adds the premise that a thing's truth derives from its being, from which it follows that one

thing is more a being than another in a way that corresponds to its superiority in truth or intelligibility.

There is, therefore, sense to saying that among true things and beings one thing is truer or more a being than another.

QUESTION 5

Is it always true that "more and less are said of things according as they approach what is most"? This does not appear to be true in every case. One thing is said to be more evil than another, but it is not true that there is a Supreme Evil by greater proximity to which one thing is more evil.

RESPONSE 5

Among the evils that exist, one or several must in fact be the maximum or the worst. It is something further to say that the worst evil is the cause of all other evils, and this part is not true. In the course of the Fourth Way, St. Thomas asserts that the maximum in the genus must be the cause, but he means this only about a positive maximum.¹³ The brightest spot in the room by the lamp, for example, might be the cause of all degrees of lesser brightness in the room, but one need not look for a separate cause of all the different degrees of dimness or darkness in the room, since these result from their various distances from the same positive cause of brightness.

QUESTION 6

How does St. Thomas know that there must be a maximum? He reasons that "more and less are said of things according as they approach what is most," and "therefore there is something which is truest and best and noblest and consequently

¹³ See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I q. 49, a. 3 ad 3 and I-II q. 22, a. 2 ad 1, *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 6 ad 14 and q. 3, a. 6 ad 8, and *De Malo* q. 1, a. 1 ad 13.

most a being." He seems to presume that the existence of an absolute maximum is evident wherever there is a more and a less. But there is a more and less in numbers, and yet an absolute maximum number is impossible. Although St. Thomas is not speaking of extensive quantity, as in numbers, but of intensive quantity, as in how hot something is, the question remains: why cannot one thing be more hot than another without there being a maximum degree of hotness possible? Perhaps infinite hotness is impossible, and yet every finite degree of heat can in principle be exceeded by another, just as with numbers, from which it would follow that an absolute maximum is impossible. The same might be said of goodness and the rest. And even if it were evident that a maximum degree of goodness or truth must always be possible, how would we know that it must actually exist?

RESPONSE 6

Each of the Five Ways uses universal principles capable of being manifested or supported in many ways. In the Fifth Way, for example, St. Thomas employs the principle that nature acts for an end, offering only one of many possible ways to make this evident, as anyone can see by comparing the Fifth Way with his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*.¹⁴ In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas will often give many arguments not only for his final conclusion, but also for the premises leading to it. In Book I, Chapter 13, for example, when reasoning to the existence of God from motion, he uses a premise found also in the First Way in the *Summa Theologiae*, namely that everything in motion is moved by another. In *SCG* I.13, he proves this premise by three arguments, but in the First Way he uses only the third of these arguments to support that premise. St. Thomas is more concerned about brevity in each question he addresses in his *Summa Theologiae*

¹⁴ Book II, Chapter 8.

than in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, because in his *Summa Theologiae* he aims to cover a larger number of questions, and he is addressing beginners in theology. In accord with this, he will often use a premise in the Five Ways for which he gives little or no reason, although he gives one or more reasons for it when he uses it elsewhere.

That said, there might be more than one correct answer to the question above—there might be more than one way, both true and acceptable to St. Thomas, to see that there must be a maximum being. Before giving my own answer to the question, then, I will summarize the answers usually given by others, since each is worth something, but I will also point out what I take to be their weaknesses.

(1) How does St. Thomas expect us to see that there is something which is most of all true (and hence most of all a being)? In SCG I.13, St. Thomas makes an argument very similar to the Fourth Way:

In *Metaphysics* IV [Aristotle] shows that there is something most true because we see that of two false things one is more false than the other, whence it is necessary that the other is also truer than the one; but this is by approximation to that which is simply and most true. From which it can be concluded further that there is something which is most a being. And this we call God.¹⁵

Here the reason for saying there must be a maximum is explicit: among false things some are more false, and hence some are more true or closer to the truth, and this could not be unless there were something absolutely true and without any falsehood. One difficulty with this is that *things* do not seem to be "false" in any sense that would make this argument work. It is chiefly statements that are false, and although some are more false and hence some are more true, all that follows from this is that some statements are simply true—not that

¹⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.13, second to last argument. See also St. Thomas' commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Lectio IX, n. 659 in the Marietti edition.

God exists. Presumably St. Thomas intends to say that similarly some substances are more "true" (in the sense of "intelligible") than others, and hence there must be some kind of substance which is purely and simply intelligible, with no unintelligibility whatsoever—and hence purely actual, and most of all a being.

This may well be one answer St. Thomas had in mind in the Fourth Way, especially since he reasons from "most true" to "most a being," just like the argument in SCG I.13 does. Nonetheless, some difficulty remains. The argument in SCG I.13 stops upon the arrival at something which is *maxime ens*, whereas in the Fourth Way St. Thomas seems to think it necessary to continue the argument, showing that the maximum being is the cause of all other beings—as if the *maxime ens* in SCG I.13 is clearly God, but the sort of *maxime ens* arrived at in the first half of the Fourth Way is not. This difference is left unexplained on the present interpretation. Besides, it is clear that something purely and simply true must exist when "true" is taken in its original sense, i.e. when it is opposed to false, but it is not so evident that this is so when "true" means simply "intelligible." If some eyewitness accounts of a robbery are truer than others, there must be possible some account which is simply true and free from error. But if some substances are more perfect objects of understanding than others, because more actual, is it equally evident here that there must be some kind of substance that is purely and supremely intelligible, by varying proximity to which all others are more or less intelligible? Perhaps one might find an argument for this more difficult statement elsewhere in St. Thomas, but that takes us into different answers to our question. . . .

(2) A second way one might explain how St. Thomas expects us to see the need of a maximum is to argue that things possessing a degree of perfection less than is possible must possess it through a cause—as St. Thomas says in several places.¹⁶ If the perfection in question is something which all things

¹⁶ For example SCG II.15, and *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 5 C 2nd argument.

possess, or which can be caused only by agents which also possess it, or which involves no imperfection in its definition, then the ultimate cause of the perfection must also have that kind of perfection, and in the maximum degree possible. Therefore to reason from the inferior to the maximum is simply an argument from effect to cause.

Certainly something like this answer is at work somewhere in the Fourth Way, and nothing prevents this answer from being a perfect interpretation of the corresponding argument in SCG I.13, but it cannot satisfactorily explain the first part of the Fourth Way. If in the first part of the Fourth Way St. Thomas expects us to see the very existence of a maximum through seeing that it is a cause, how in the second part can he expect us to see that it is a cause through seeing that it is a maximum? And yet this is what he goes on to do:

There is therefore something which is . . . most a being. . . .
But what is called most in any genus is the cause of all the things which are of that genus. . . . Therefore there is something which is the cause of being . . . in all things.

If St. Thomas thinks we do not see, until this second part of the argument, that the maximum being is a cause of the inferior ones, then he must not be relying upon causality in the first part of the argument when he asserts that there must be a maximum.

(3) A third way to understand the matter is by supposing St. Thomas is implicitly invoking some doctrine of participation. Where there are things which participate in something in varying degrees, there must exist that which they all participate in; it is impossible for many to share parts of a whole if the complete whole does not exist, in whatever sense we take "part" and "whole." There cannot be many pieces of pie for us to share unless there is (or was) a whole pie. It is impossible for individuals to participate in a species that does not exist (whether separately or within each of the individuals). And the perfection of anything cannot be incomplete

or partial unless there exists a whole and complete perfection to which it compares as a part. Hence where we find more and less perfection in things, this must be "according as they approach in diverse ways to something which is most."

There can be no doubt that St. Thomas adheres to some form of a doctrine of participation.¹⁷ And no doubt this doctrine is intimately connected with the Fourth Way, whether as presupposed to it, constituting it, or as dependent upon it. But exactly how can we know that various things are participating in something? Following St. Thomas, one might argue thus: what is found in something by participation, i.e. what it possesses in a partial way (because only a part of the full perfection is possessed or because the perfection is only a part of the possessor), must be caused in it by that to which it belongs through itself or *per se*.¹⁸

It is certainly possible to reach the conclusion of the Fourth Way by this route. But there is considerable difficulty in reading the first part of the Fourth Way itself as if it relied upon such reasoning:

A. First, because this reasoning uses the idea of causality, which we have already seen is most likely not implied in the first part of the Fourth Way.

B. Second, because St. Thomas does not use the words "participation" or "through itself," or give any sign that he is thinking of this line of reasoning. His terms are "more," "less," and "most."

C. Third, because a non-participated and self-subsisting goodness or truth would clearly deserve to be called "God"

¹⁷ In the *Summa Theologiae* alone, for example, see I q. 3, a. 3 C 2nd argument, I q. 3, a. 4 C 3rd argument, I q. 3, a. 8 C 3rd argument, I q. 6, a. 3 *sed contra*, I q. 44, a. 1 C, I q. 44, a. 3.

¹⁸ St. Thomas uses this principle at *Summa Theologiae* I q. 44, a. 1 C, and acknowledges it again in I q. 44, a. 3 obj. 2 and reply. He illustrates the principle with fire, which is hot and bright through itself. Hence iron, which is not hot and bright through itself, can become so only through fire.

—so if we see that this exists as soon as we say "there must be a maximum," we should stop there, as St. Thomas himself does in *SCG* I.13. But then the second part of the Fourth Way becomes superfluous.

(4) A fourth way to explain how St. Thomas arrives so quickly at a maximum being is as follows. One thing can be more circular than another, but nothing can be more a square circle than another, for the simple reason that a perfect circle involves no contradiction, but a perfect square circle does. Wherever we find in things a greater and lesser degree of some form, therefore, the complete or perfect version of that form, existing by its whole power or to its full extent, must at least be possible; otherwise the lower degrees would be approaching more or less to what is impossible. Hence the existence of more and less true things prove that the maximum truth must be something that can be. But then either it already exists, or else it does not, but at least can come to be. If the second, then how will it come to be? Not by lesser true things, since the more perfect cannot come from the less perfect as such. And not by equal or greater true things, since there are none. Therefore it cannot come to be. Therefore, since it is not impossible for it to be, but it is impossible for it to come to be, it must already exist.

Unlike the other answers, the above does not appear to reason along lines explicitly found elsewhere in the writings of St. Thomas. Whatever its merits, anyone who defends it will be obliged to explain why the more and less we find in perfections requires the possibility of an absolute maximum, whereas the more and less we find in numbers does not. If the answer appeals to the dependence of inferior things upon more perfect ones, we are back in the difficulty of explaining why St. Thomas introduces the idea of causality in the second part of the Fourth Way as if it were something new and additional.

(5) A fifth answer is as follows. Some would have it that "more and less" logically imply a "most," just as a "double"

implies a "half." To be less in intensity *means* to be further from what is most; hence, if there is no most, there is no less, and so if there is a less, there is a most.

This answer appears insufficient. By "less" one can simply mean *less than that thing there which is more*, but which might not be most. To know that one thing is less hot than another, one need not know whether a "most hot" exists at all. If one insists upon defining "more than and less than" as "closer to and further from a really-existing-absolute-maximum," then the doubt is simply thrown back upon the premise "we find in things some more and less good etc." In truth, "less" is correlative to "more," not to "most"—it might be true that there must be an absolute most, at least in some cases, but this is not evident by mere definitions.

(6) My own answer to the question above resembles the last one in making no use of causality, but of a kind of logical necessity. It differs from it by the kind of "most" which it infers from the "more" and "less."

How does St. Thomas know, in the first part of the Fourth Way, apparently so quickly and without explanation, that there exists something which is truest and best and noblest? The same way we know, in a room full of people of varying heights whom we have not measured, that someone (whether one or many makes no difference) must be the tallest. Even if an infinite multitude of people could all exist at one time, there would have to be a tallest person (or persons) among them. But is this tallest person absolutely tallest, or is he merely the tallest in relation to this particular group? Does he have the maximum height possible for human beings, or does he merely exceed all the others to whom he is being compared? The mere consideration that there must be one who is tallest does not enable us to answer that question. A maximum there must be, but what sort of maximum it is—whether relative or absolute—we are left powerless to say thus far.

How, one might ask, can this be the way St. Thomas concludes that there exists something which is truest and best

and noblest? If this thing is possibly only a relative maximum, i.e. not the best possible thing, but only the best thing that happened to exist right now, then it might be no more than man, or the best life form yet to have evolved. That is not enough to conclude that "God exists." But that is precisely the point. That is why St. Thomas does not conclude that God exists just yet—the Fourth Way goes on to show that this really existing maximum must be the cause of all other beings, and only then does it become plain that it is an absolute maximum after all, and hence deserves to be called "God." Elsewhere, when St. Thomas makes arguments similar to the Fourth Way, he either makes use of causality from the very outset of the argument,¹⁹ or else he merely implies it.²⁰ In the Fourth Way, he does not invoke any principles of causality until the second part of the argument, allowing us to reach the existence of God in two distinct steps, each one very certain:

1. Some existing substance must be the maximum in nobility etc.—whatever kind of maximum this may be.
2. But the maximum must be the cause of all the rest, and therefore it is an absolute maximum, i.e. God.

¹⁹ As in *SCG* II.15 second argument, or *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 5 C second argument.

²⁰ As in *SCG* I.13. Sometimes St. Thomas will make a similar argument using causality explicitly, but very briefly, as in the *Sentences*, where he makes the following arguments: "The third argument is taken by way of eminence in being, and is as follows. Good and better are said by comparison to the best. But in substances we find a good body and a better created spirit, in which nevertheless goodness is not from itself. Therefore it is necessary that there be something best from which goodness is in both." "The fourth is taken by eminence in knowledge, and is as follows. In whatever things it is possible to find more and less beautiful, it is necessary to find some principle of beauty through nearness to which one is called more beautiful than the other. But we find bodies that are beautiful by sensible beauty, and spirits that are more beautiful by intelligible beauty. Therefore it is necessary that there be something from which both are beautiful, to whom created spirits approach more." *Sentences* I D3 Q1 Prologus.

This way of answering the question above has some advantages. It explains why St. Thomas does not stop and say "which all call God" after saying "There is therefore something which is truest and best and noblest . . .", as he does in *SCG* I.13. Also, it explains why St. Thomas concludes so quickly and without much explanation to the existence of a maximum being. It is enough to say "more and less are said of diverse things according as they approach in different ways to something which is most; just as the more hot is what approaches to what is most hot." This "most hot" might be fire, or something absolutely maximum in hotness, or it might be only the hottest thing in existence right now, and a hotter substance than it could be generated by some natural process, as far as this first part of the argument is concerned. St. Thomas does not yet say that the maximum here known to exist must be an absolute one. Perhaps in many kinds of actuality, such as sweetness or stickiness, the maximum now existing can be exceeded by a future thing. What is certain is that there must be a maximum of some kind, whether relative or absolute. Only in the second part of the argument, where he introduces causality, does he mention fire, which is "most hot" absolutely according to St. Thomas, because, according to him, fire was the cause of all heat.

QUESTION 7

St. Thomas concludes the Fourth Way by saying "Therefore there is something which is the cause of being . . . in all things." But "being" is said equivocally of things, and therefore no single nature called "being" can be possessed by all things. Consequently, there seems to be no reason to think that there will be one principle of "being" in all things, since "being" names many things, not something one. Thus, for example, "sharp" is said equivocally of a mind and of a knife, and one does not look for a single principle of sharpness in both, and "hard" is said equivocally of a stone, or of

an exam, or of a heart, and so one does not look for a single principle of hardness in all these things. How, then, can St. Thomas conclude that "Therefore there is something which is the cause of being . . . in all things"?²¹

RESPONSE 7

It is not merely because "being" is said of many things that St. Thomas concludes there is a cause of all beings, but because "being" is said of things comparably (more of some, less of others, and of one thing most of all), and the maximum is the cause of the inferiors. The examples mentioned in the question, on the other hand, are of incomparable equivocals, e.g. this exam is neither more nor less hard than this stone, and this mind is neither more nor less sharp than this knife. As for the principle that "The maximum in the genus is the cause of the others in the genus," see Question 8. As for how we know there is only one maximum being, see Question 12.

QUESTION 8

St. Thomas asserts that "What is most in any genus is the cause of all the things which are of that genus." There are three difficulties with this:

(1) Being is not a genus, and yet it is precisely to "being" that St. Thomas wishes to apply this principle.

(2) The example adduced as evidence for the principle is false, namely that fire, the hottest of all hot things, is the cause of heat in all other hot things. Friction, for example, is also a cause of heat, and the things rubbed together do not contain any fire, despite the medieval "four elements" theory. Hence there does not appear to be a single kind of agent which is the cause of all heat.

²¹ St. Thomas himself raises a similar objection in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.15, at the end of the first argument.

(3) The principle does not appear to be universally true. Man is the "most" or at least the "first"²² in the genus of animals, and he is not the productive cause of the other animals. If anyone objects that man is no more an animal than any other, other examples can be found. A demonstrative syllogism is more of an argument than an induction or enthymeme or example, and yet it is not the cause of these lesser kinds of argument. Human wisdom is the "most" in the genus of intellectual virtues, and yet it is not the cause producing the other intellectual virtues. Perfect friendship based on virtue is the maximum kind of friendship, but it does not cause the lesser friendships based exclusively on pleasure or usefulness.

So how does St. Thomas expect us to understand his principle in light of these difficulties?

RESPONSE 8

To the first difficulty, one can answer that the word "genus" sometimes is used in a strict sense, meaning "what is said univocally of many things other in species, signifying what they are." Other times the word "genus" is used in a looser sense, meaning anything said of many things other in kind, whether it is said univocally of them or at least not purely equivocally, and whether it signifies what they are, or merely some perfection belonging to them. "Good" and "beautiful" and "being" are not genera in the first and stricter sense, but in the second and broader sense they are.²³

²² First not in time, but in the order of excellence and perfection. Sometimes St. Thomas will say that the "first" in the genus is the cause of the rest. For various formulations of the principle, see the following texts: I q. 49, a. 3 obj. 3, I-II q. 22, a. 2 ad 1, SCG I.13 second to last argument, SCG I.42 second to last philosophical argument, *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 5 C second argument, *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 6 ad 14, *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 6 ad 8, *De Malo* q. 1, a. 1 ad 13, *De Malo* q. 2, a. 9 ad 7, Commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* X Lectio 3 n. 1983 Marietti edition.

²³ "Genus" can be taken in two ways. In one way properly, as what

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As for the second difficulty, a false example does not falsify the thing it is supposed to exemplify. To illustrate the principle that elements are more homogeneous than compounds, a medieval thinker might say that water is more uniform in its qualities than wood. Although water is not in truth an element, the principle is not falsified by the false example. Nonetheless, a modern reader would prefer true examples to illustrate the principle, and this takes us to the third difficulty.

Is the principle always true? Is it true that where there is a most or a first within a genus, the first must always be the cause of the rest of the things in the genus? St. Thomas himself does not think that the principle is always true:

It is not necessary that, among all the things which agree in the nature of a genus or of a species, that which is prior be the cause of all the others. And indeed in the same species it cannot be that one is prior to another, properly speaking, by the order of nature, because the species is predicated equally of all the individuals, as is said in III *Metaphysics*. But in genera it is not this way. For among the species of one genus one is naturally prior to and more perfect than another. Now there is in the individuals of one species one before another in time, and although one individual, which is before in time, is the cause of some other one which is after, as the father is the cause of the son (as is touched on in the objection), nevertheless this is not universally true, for not all older people are causes of all younger ones. Similarly also it happens that what is prior among the species of the same genus is a principle and cause of the others, as local motion of the other motions, and two of the other numbers, and the triangle of other rectilinear figures, but nevertheless this is not universally true. For man, who is the most perfect

is said of many things saying what they are, and thus neither good nor bad are genera, but are among the transcendentals, because good and being are convertible. In another way commonly, so that everything is called a genus which by its commonness embraces and contains many things, and thus good and bad are called the genera of all contraries." St. Thomas, *On the Sentences*, II D34 q. 1, a. 2 ad 1.

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species of animal, is not the active cause of the other species. Whence it is not necessary that the angel be the productive cause of the soul.²⁴

It is often true that the first or maximum in a genus is the cause of the other species, as locomotion is cause of the other motions, or 1 or 2 is cause of the other numbers, or the circle is cause of the other conics, or the axioms are causes of all other statements known to us, or the desirable end is cause of the desirability of all other things. Nonetheless, this is not always true; sometimes the first or maximum in a genus is not the cause of the other species in the genus. How, then, can St. Thomas rely upon this principle in the Fourth Way?

Aristotle enunciates a related principle in his *Metaphysics* which is more evident than the one we are now examining and also helpful for manifesting it. The principle is this: *if something belongs to two things, but to one of them because of the other, then it belongs more to the cause.*²⁵ This is easily exemplified in concrete things: If being wet belongs to water and to a towel, but to the towel because it belongs to the water, then water is wetter. Or if being hot belongs to the fire and to some place near the fire, but to the place nearby the fire because it belongs to the fire, then the fire is hotter. Or if being sweet belongs to sugar and to the coffee, but to the coffee because it belongs to the sugar, then sugar is sweeter. The same is true in more profound matters: If being desirable belongs to the end and to the means (e.g. to health and to surgery), but to the means because it belongs to the end, then the end is more desirable. Or if being known belongs to the premise and to the conclusion, but to the conclusion because it belongs to the premise, then the premise is more known. So far so good: if something belongs to two things, but to one of them because of the other, then it belongs more to the cause.

²⁴ *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, Quodlibetum Tertium, q. 3, a. 1.

²⁵ See *Metaphysics* II.1 993b23.

It is no great leap to extend this to more than two things. When something belongs to many things, but to all of them because it belongs to one of them, then it belongs to that one most of all. In brief, *the cause of all in the genus is the maximum in the genus.*

The principle in the Fourth Way is the converse of this, namely that *the maximum in the genus is the cause of all in the genus.* When must this be true? Whenever two conditions are met:

1. When the things in the genus need a cause, and
2. When it is not possible for the cause of the things in the genus to be outside that genus.

When these two conditions are met, it *must* be true that the maximum in the genus is the cause of all in the genus. By no. 1, the things in the genus need a cause, and by no. 2, that cause of them all must itself be within that genus.²⁶ By Aristotle's principle, it follows that this cause is the maximum in the genus. Therefore the maximum in the genus will be the cause of all in the genus under these conditions.

It sometimes happens that the first or maximum in the genus is the cause of the rest even when the second condition is not met. For example, locomotion is the first of motions and the cause of all other kinds of motions, even though it is also possible for a cause of all motion to exist outside the genus of motion.

In the case of the Fourth Way, we are speaking about goodness, truth, and nobility. These things are said of all things, or at least they do not involve any imperfection whatsoever in their definitions, and therefore it is necessary for any cause of these things itself to have goodness, truth, and nobility, and more than its effects. In other words, the second condition is met in the case of the perfections named in the Fourth Way, and therefore *the maximum in the genus must be the cause of all the others in the genus.*

²⁶ Taking "genus" in the broad sense explained earlier.

QUESTION 9

St. Thomas concludes the Fourth Way saying that the maximum being must be the cause of being and goodness in all inferior things. The Fourth Way, however, never shows that lesser goods and lesser beings *need* a cause in order to be. Nor is this evident by itself. How does St. Thomas expect us to know this?

RESPONSE 9

St. Thomas explains himself more fully on this point in other places:

Whatever a thing possesses by its own nature, and not from some other cause, cannot be diminished and deficient in it. For, if something essential be subtracted from or added to a nature, another nature will at once arise, as in the case of numbers, where the addition or the subtraction of the unit changes the species of the number. If, however, the nature or quiddity of a thing remains integral, and yet something in it is found to be diminished, it is at once clear that this diminution does not derive simply from that nature, but from something else, by whose removal the nature is diminished. Therefore, whatever belongs to one thing less than to others belongs to it not by virtue of its own nature alone, but through some other cause. Thus, that thing of which a genus is chiefly predicated will be the cause of everything in that genus.²⁷

When something is found diversely participated by many things, it is necessary that it be attributed to all those (in which it is found imperfectly) by that in which it is found most perfectly. For those things which are said positively with more and less have this from a more removed or closer access to something one: for if it belonged to each of the

²⁷ *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.15, translated by James F. Anderson, University of Notre Dame Press edition, 1975.

things from itself, there would be no reason why it would be found more perfectly in one than in another.²⁸

If any perfection belongs to two substances A and B, but more to A than to B, then it belongs to B not merely through itself but through some outside cause. This is especially clear if A and B have the same specific nature. In that case, the nature of B cannot be the whole cause of its perfection, since that nature belongs to it and to A equally, while the perfection belongs to them unequally. Nor can anyone say that the common nature itself belongs to A more than to B, since substance does not admit of variation of degree.²⁹ St. Thomas, following Aristotle,³⁰ also says in the first passage above that the natures of things are like numbers: as soon as you add (or subtract) anything to a number, you get a new number. The same holds true for natures. Hence if the nature of two substances is the same, it belongs to them equally, and so whatever perfection belongs to them unequally does not belong to them merely by that nature.

For instance, since wisdom belongs unequally to men, then it plainly belongs to each not solely by the principles of human nature, but through other causes, such as experience and instruction. Or if grapes are unequally sweet, while no grape is more a grape than any other, then the unequal sweetness is because of some outside cause, such as the sun.

What if A and B have different natures? Then it will still be true that B, the substance to which the given perfection belongs less, must have it through some cause. Otherwise, B would possess the perfection simply through itself. But what belongs to something simply through its being itself must belong to it perfectly, since nothing can be itself in a dimin-

²⁸ *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 5 C, second argument.

²⁹ Aristotle points this out in his *Categories*, and St. Thomas says it everywhere, e.g. I q. 76, a. 4 ad 4, I q. 93, a. 3 ad 3, I q. 118, a. 2 ad 2, I-II q. 52, a. 1 C, III q. 75, a. 7 C.

³⁰ Who, in this instance, is following Plato, who is in turn drawing upon the Pythagoreans.

ished way. If Socrates were wise, for example, just by being Socrates, then he would have (or else *be*) perfect wisdom, since he in no way falls short of being Socrates. Hence St. Thomas says "when something is found diversely participated by many things," this must be caused in them by something one, "for if it belonged to each of the things from itself, there would be no reason why it would be found more perfectly in one than in another."

It is especially clear that a subsisting perfection could not be in any way diminished or imperfect. A piece of metal can have imperfect circularity, because metal is not circular just through being metal, or through itself. If circularity itself subsisted, on the other hand, then it would be circular through itself, and it would have to be perfectly circular. How could circularity itself be anything less than (or other than) perfectly circular? If it were, it would not be pure circularity after all. And how could goodness itself be less good than anything else, since each thing is good precisely by its share of goodness? Thus St. Thomas says "it is manifest that if something hot did not have the total perfection of the hot, this is because heat is not partaken in its perfect nature: but if heat were subsisting by itself, there would not be lacking in it anything of the power of heat."³¹

Accordingly, whenever something has a perfection less than other things have it, or less than it is possible to have it, it is clear that this thing possesses its perfection at least partly due to some cause outside the principles of its own nature.

QUESTION 10

When St. Thomas says that the maximum in a genus is "the cause of all the things which are of that genus," what kind of "cause" is he speaking about?

³¹ *Summa Theologiae* I q. 4, a. 2 C.

RESPONSE 10

Consider again the converse principle enunciated by Aristotle, namely "when something belongs to two things, but to one of them because it belongs to the other, it belongs more to the cause." This principle applies to all four kinds of causes. Sugar is sweeter than things made of sugar, and it causes them to be sweet as a type of material cause in them. The soul is nobler than the body it animates, and it causes the body to be noble as a type of form in it. Fire is hotter than the water it heats, and it causes the water to be hot as an agent. Health is more desirable than surgery, and it causes surgery to be desirable as an end causes things.

The principle of St. Thomas, too, applies to every genus of cause. So what kind of cause does he have in mind in the Fourth Way? What kind of cause of all beings have we proved to exist? Since it is the maximum in goodness and truth (as opposed to sweetness or some other thing), it must be the maximum in perfection and actuality, and therefore it is not a material cause, since every matter is, as such, in potency to something more perfect than itself. Nor can it be an end which is to be brought into existence by various means (like Hegel's "God"), since the agent is nobler than the patient, and so any end which can be realized is inferior in perfection to some preexisting agency. Nor can it be a form inhering in anything, since an inhering form does not have being or operation of its own, but rather these belong to the composite it constitutes, which is therefore something more complete and perfect than its own form,³² whereas the cause we are speaking of is supreme in perfection. This leaves agency, which implies no imperfection, and therefore the Fourth Way proves the existence of an agent cause of all inferior beings.

There is also such a thing as an exemplar cause, which informs an agent and is outside the product which he forms,

³² See *Summa Theologiae* I q. 3, a. 8 C 3rd argument.

in imitation of which he makes his product. For example, a sitting model is an exemplar cause of her portrait which an artist paints. Since an exemplar is a model for an intelligent agency (or for agencies directed by intelligence), it becomes clear that there is an exemplar cause of all things³³ when it becomes clear that God has understanding, as happens in the Fifth Way.

There is also such a thing as an end which is not brought into being by the things that exist for the sake of it,³⁴ but which perfects them once they become conjoined to it or conformed to it in some way. Nothing prevents God from being a cause of all beings in this way, too—but it becomes clearer that he is such a cause³⁵ when it is seen that all things seek their own perfection, and that all things arrive at this by achieving some kind of likeness to or union with God.

The Fourth Way, then, is principally about some kind of agency, although with a bit more work one might also see that the maximum being is a cause of all beings as an exemplar and as an end, making all things in imitation of his own perfection and for the sake of spreading and manifesting it. All of this is more distinct, however, than the Fourth Way requires us to be: it is enough, for the Fourth Way, to see that the maximum being is in some way the cause of all beings other than itself.

QUESTION 11

St. Thomas concludes "Therefore there is something which is the cause of being . . . in all things." When St. Thomas

³³ See *Summa Theologiae* I q. 44, a. 3.

³⁴ See Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, XII.7 1072b1ff.: "That a final cause may exist among unchangeable entities is shown by the distinction of its meanings. For the final cause is (a) some being for whose good an action is done, and (b) something at which the action aims; and of these the latter exists among unchangeable entities though the former does not." Translation by W. D. Ross, from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, Random House, New York, 1941, p. 879.

³⁵ See *Summa Theologiae* I q. 44, a4.

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speaks in this way, is he presuming that there is only one cause of all beings? He nowhere shows this in the course of the argument. For all the argument shows, there might be ten maximum beings, each one of which is the cause of only ten percent of the other beings in existence.

RESPONSE 11

That there is only one individual divine being, and that it is impossible for many first beings of the same nature to exist, St. Thomas does not aim to prove until I q. 11 a. 3. Nevertheless, in the course of the Fourth Way, St. Thomas does imply that there is only one *nature* which is divine, one kind of maximum being, whether this one nature be communicable to many individuals (as humanity is) or not. Does anything in the argument of the Fourth Way warrant this conclusion? The maximum height in the room might belong to many different individuals—could not the maximum degree of being belong to many different but equal natures? In that case, taken all together they would cause all inferior beings, but each singly would be a cause not of all beings, but only of those which partook of its proper perfections, much as the principles of geometry as a body generate all its conclusions, but each singly generates only those conclusions which fall under its power.

But this is unlikely on the face of it, since the natures of things are like numbers, in which difference is always attended by inequality:

Formal distinction always requires inequality: because as is said in the eighth book of the *Metaphysics*, the forms of things are as numbers, in which species are varied by addition or subtraction of unity. And so in natural things species appear to be ordered in grades: as mixed bodies are more perfect than the elements, and plants than mineral bodies, and animals than plants, and men than other animals; and within each of these one species is found to be more perfect than

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another. Therefore just as the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things for the perfection of the universe, so too of the inequality.³⁶

Formal differences in the natures of substances comes about by adding or subtracting various perfections such as life, sensation, understanding, and so on. With natures, accordingly, as with numbers, it is not possible to have two different ones without inequality. Therefore there is only one nature which is supreme or maximum in its degree of being, intelligibility, and goodness, and this nature is the cause of all other things, which are inferior to it. Whether this nature belongs to many individual substances, or to one only, is a later question.

QUESTION 12

St. Thomas concludes the Fourth Way, saying "There is something which is the cause . . . of any perfection in all things, and this we call God." But he also said that "the most in a genus is the cause of all the things which are of that genus." So if God is the cause of every perfection, and it is the maximum in any genus of perfection which is the cause, does it follow that God is the maximum in every genus of perfection? Then God would be the hottest being, and the stickiest, the most sour, and the one with the keenest sense of smell, and so on, which is plainly absurd.

RESPONSE 12

Many perfections can be caused by something outside their genus and superior to it, as noted above in the Response to Question 8. This can happen, although it does not always happen, when a perfection is particular (i.e. not said of all things) and inferior (i.e. not as good as other things, or involving some kind of imperfection). For example, heat is not

³⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I q. 47, a. 2 C.

said of all things, and some things surpass it in the universality of their power, and hence it is not impossible for something to be a cause of heat although it is not itself hot. Human reason can cause heat by its knowledge of the natural principles of heat, and yet reason is not physically hot, or at least does not cause things to be hot in virtue of being physically hot. Hence it is conceivable that the cause of all heat might not itself be hot, but might have another perfection generically superior to heat and able to cause it.³⁷

But when a perfection is said of all things, as "being" or "good," it is not possible to find a cause outside its genus, and hence the cause of all must be the maximum within the genus. It is not possible to find a cause of any being which is not itself some kind of being, or which causes in virtue of something other than the kind and degree of being that it has.

Again, when a kind of perfection involves no imperfection, and somehow contains or embraces all perfections within itself, it will not be possible to find a cause superior to the whole genus, and hence the cause of all the things in that genus must itself be the maximum within that genus. For example, "knowledge" is a perfection which, although not said of all things, nonetheless involves nothing imperfect or limited in its definition. To know is to include in oneself the being of other things while retaining one's own being—and the more one does this, the more all-inclusive and complete a being one is. Therefore, simply speaking and leaving aside what is accidental,³⁸ it is always better to know than not to

³⁷ This, incidentally, was St. Thomas's notion about the sun, which was, according to the theory of his day, a universal cause of all heat, although it was itself neither made of fire nor hot.

³⁸ In an accidental way, certain kinds of knowledge can be bad. For example, it is bad to have whole phonebooks memorized, because in man this knowledge cannot be had except at the expense of much more necessary knowledge. It is also better not to be aware of things which might tempt one into committing base acts. It is sometimes better not to have an imperfect knowledge of certain things for people who would

know, and hence no cause is superior to all knowledge as such. Therefore any first cause of all inferior knowledge must itself have (or be) knowledge.

Accordingly, God must be the maximum in being, goodness, nobility, knowledge and the like. But must he have the maximum sense of smell, since he is the cause of that perfection in animals? This is not necessary, because the sense of smell is not found in all things and it is inferior to some things, such as vision, or reason, or wisdom. It is possible, then, to find perfections which are not smell, and which surpass it in power, and therefore it is possible that God might cause smell to exist in animals not in virtue of his own sense of smell, but in virtue of some superior perfection in himself.

More than this, one can see that the particular perfection which is the sense of smell essentially involves limitations, since it is a power of knowing some things (odors) but not others (colors, geometrical demonstrations). It does not seem likely that the maximum being, over and above its total perfection, would possess imperfect and limited faculties. The investigation of the divine simplicity immediately following the Five Ways in the *Summa Theologiae* makes this plain.

It does not follow, of course, that God simply lacks the inferior perfections. St. Thomas asks whether the perfections of all things are found in God,³⁹ and the short answer is "yes," although he does not possess such perfections in the same limited way in which they are found in creatures. It can happen that a superior power can contain in itself all that is desirable in many diverse and lesser perfections, in a simple and uniform way without their diversity or opposition, and in a nobler way without their peculiar limitations.

Something like this happens in the case of human reason as

fail to see the imperfection of their knowledge, and then be drawn into error or pride—in such cases, no knowledge might be better than a little knowledge. In all these examples, however, it is not the knowledge as such that is bad, but certain other things accidentally connected with it.

³⁹ *Summa Theologiae* I q. 4, a. 2.

compared to the various instincts of the animals. The instincts of each animal enable it to attain its specific goods in more or less specific ways appropriate to it, but do not generally enable it to appreciate or attain the goods of other species, or to attain its own goods by the means employed instinctively by other species. A spider that instinctively knows how to build a web has no instinctive knowledge of where and when it is good for some species of bird to migrate, and vice versa. A male cardinal that instinctively recognizes the female of its species is incapable of recognizing the female salmon, and vice versa. Human reason, however, can recognize all these things, and also provide for human needs by mimicking the means employed by animal instincts whenever this suits it. And yet human reason is a single power, not a mere aggregation of all the instincts of all the animals. Reason contains the powers of all the instincts (at least in principle) without being instinct, and in this way contains many opposite kinds of power without any opposition.

God, the most perfect being, contains all lesser and more specific kinds of perfections in himself simply and uniformly, without diversity or opposition, and without their attendant limitations or imperfections. It is for this reason that one may speak of God's perfection in two ways: superlatively, as when we say that he is the *most* in any genus as containing its perfection pre-eminently, and negatively, as when we say that he is *beyond* any genus. St. Thomas often shows that God is not in any genus, and yet in the Fourth Way he chose to speak as if God were a maximum in the "genus" of being, rather than speak of him as a maximum which is outside all genera. When explaining the words of Dionysius,⁴⁰ St. Thomas says that

⁴⁰ Or "Pseudo-Dionysius," for those who prefer it. Of course, the author of *The Divine Names* chose "Dionysius," not "Pseudo-Dionysius" as his pen name.

there are two kinds of excess: one within the genus, which is signified by the comparative or the superlative; the other outside the genus, which is signified by the addition of the preposition *beyond*, as when we say that fire exceeds in heat by the excess that is within the genus, and whence it is called *most hot*; but the sun exceeds by an excess that is outside the genus, and so it is not called hottest but *beyond hot*, because heat is not in it in the same mode, but more excellently. And although these two excesses in caused things might not be found together, nevertheless one says about God both that he is most beautiful and beyond beautiful; not because he is in a genus, but because all things which are of any genus are attributed to him.⁴¹

When we say that God is "beyond being" or "beyond intelligent," we are acknowledging that he is outside every genus; we are, as it were, acknowledging that it is in some way an insult to use the same word "intelligent" to describe both him and some human being. On the other hand, when we say that he is "most intelligent," we acknowledge that all that is perfect in what we term "intelligence" is found also in God, albeit in a super-eminent way.

⁴¹ Commentary on *De Divinis Nominibus*, Ch. IV, n. 343 Marietti edition.