

# Saving Natural Theology from Jeffrey Johnson<sup>1</sup>

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## Preliminaries

In the interest of full disclosure perhaps the title for this article should not be merely "Saving Natural Theology from Jeffrey Johnson" but rather "Saving *the Natural Theology of Thomas Aquinas* from Jeffrey Johnson." For me, however, not only does the shorter title work better as a play on the title of Jeffrey D. Johnson's booklet—*Saving Natural Theology from Thomas Aquinas*<sup>2</sup>—but, for the most part, I consider 'natural theology' and 'the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas' to be co-extensive. So, if you will indulge my partisanship, I'll opt for the shorter moniker for my understanding of Aquinas's thinking on these issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an augment of a paper given at a meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society in Denver, CO, in November 2022. A nascent Power Point® treatment of the topic was given at Southern Evangelical Seminary's National Conference on Christian Apologetics in April 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey D. Johnson, *Saving Natural Theology from Thomas Aquinas*. (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Some worry about evangelicals associating themselves with the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. Concerns have been particularly voiced about Southern Evangelical Seminary. Such worries are especially strong among certain contemporary Reformed thinkers. In a video discussion between James White, Owen Strachan, and Jeffrey Johnson regarding the issue of the influence of Thomism on contemporary Protestantism as it started "sublimating Scripture to a great tradition" [*Live from GBTS with Jeff Johnson and Owen Strachan*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO7cynt-SOA>, accessed 11/12/22; time stamp 38:16], White says, "I've been very troubled to hear many people within quote-unquote Protestant circles reengaging in a positive sense—it's one thing to read this material, it's one thing to be aware of what was going on, but to privilege it in the way it's being privileged. I don't know what the source of it has been, but it's a dangerous, dangerous thing. Evidently, we haven't learned anything from the experience of Southern Evangelical Seminary." Some of these worries reach to the extent of thinking that studying Aquinas pushes one toward Catholicism. I suspect White has in mind the departure of certain individuals associated with Southern Evangelical Seminary from Evangelicalism to Catholicism. Such worries undoubtedly arise from an ignorance of what Aquinas's thinking is, particularly regarding his metaphysics. Those who have such worries fail to understand how it is that Southern Evangelical Seminary can be largely committed to the *metaphysics* of Aquinas (which is largely Aristotelian) while denying those *theological* tenets of Aquinas that are distinctively Catholic that stand in opposition to sound Evangelical theology. Certain contemporary Reformed Christians seem to be ignorant of the extent to which the thinking of Aquinas and others in the Scholastic tradition was carried over into the Protestant tradition. It is especially noteworthy that there were those who left Catholicism for Protestantism without seemingly the slightest hesitation to continue in their philosophical thinking along the lines of both Aristotle and Aquinas. See, for example, Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology* in Joseph C. McLelland, ed. and trans., *The Peter Martyr Vermigli Library*, 4 vols., Vol. 4, *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology* (Moscow: The Davenant Press, 2018). See also James E. Dolezal, *All that Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017); Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*:

## Two Aims

I have two aims in my critique of Jeffrey Johnson's work. On the one hand, I want to respond to Johnson's criticisms of Thomas Aquinas that arise out of Johnson's misunderstanding of Aquinas's writings. This is more or less an exegetical issue of interpreting Thomas Aquinas's thinking in its philosophical context. This, as far as it goes, does not prove that Thomas Aquinas's thinking is true. It does show that, if Thomas Aquinas's thinking is false, it will be for reasons other than those criticisms arising out of any misunderstanding. On the other hand, I desire to defend that certain philosophical positions of Thomas Aquinas are in fact true. This article, however, will primarily be concerned only with the first of these two aims.

Jeffrey D. Johnson et al.

Jeffrey D. Johnson is Pastor of Grace Bible Church<sup>4</sup> and President and Professor of Systematic Theology at Grace Bible Theological Seminary in Conway, AR.<sup>5</sup> He stirred up a modicum of conversation and controversy with the publication of his book, *The Failure of Natural Theology: A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophical Theology of Thomas Aquinas*<sup>6</sup> and a follow-up booklet, *Saving Natural Theology from Thomas Aquinas*. While the title of this article is a measure of facetious—if not provocative—play on the title of his booklet, I should like to

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*Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022); Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); and Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Christian University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gbconway.com/who-we-are>, accessed 11/22/22.

<sup>5</sup> <https://gbtseminary.org/gbtseminary-faculty/>, accessed 11/22/22.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Failure of Natural Theology: A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophical Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2021).

interact with both his works on natural theology as well as his work *The Absurdity of Unbelief: A Worldview Apologetic of the Christian Faith*,<sup>7</sup> a video discussion<sup>8</sup> in which Johnson participated with Owen Strachan, the Provost of Grace Bible Theological Seminary and James White, Professor of Apologetics there.<sup>9</sup>

***"You Just Don't Understand ..."***

Regarding the first aim, in my experience one of the most common refrains during back-and-forth debates like this one is something to the effect of "You just don't understand my position"—"You just don't understand Aquinas; or "You just don't understand Van Til;" or Calvin, or Molinism, or simplicity, or whatever. You will no doubt hear that refrain from me, perhaps many times over. But I want to augment the expression somewhat by saying that when or if I protest that Johnson just does not understand Aquinas, I do not at all mean that, if only he did understand Aquinas, he would undoubtedly recognize that Aquinas is right on a given point. Instead, what I mean is, if Johnson did understand Aquinas and he continued to disagree, it would be for very different reasons than the ones Johnson offers. In most places, the specific criticisms and objections that Johnson levels against Aquinas's thinking (or, for that matter, against the thinking of Aristotle and perhaps others) have little intersection with what these thinkers actually hold.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Absurdity of Unbelief: A Worldview Apologetic of the Christian Faith* (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> *Live from GBTS with Jeff Johnson and Owen Strachan* reference in note 3.

<sup>9</sup> <https://gbtseminary.org/gbtseminary-faculty/>.

This is no small criticism I am making. Aquinas has many formidable detractors who would reject my defense of him.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps my reader falls into that category. What is more, there are those who might consider themselves quite sympathetic to Aquinas but nevertheless disagree with my interpretation of him on certain points.<sup>11</sup> But I hope to show that, for the most part, Johnson's critique of Aquinas almost never rises to the level of a sufficiently scrupulous interaction with the sources—either primary or secondary.

### *A List of Grievances*

Dealing with many of Johnson's errors would take much more than a single article. For an idea of the breadth of issues that need correcting from Johnson's critique of Aquinas, a partial bullet list (with some explanation in the notes) would include:

- his erroneous understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture;<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> One notable evangelical philosopher who rejects Aquinas's metaphysics is William Lane Craig. For a panel debate on Aquinas's doctrine of Divine Simplicity with William Lane Craig and Stephen T. Davis (against) and Brian Huffling and me (for), see the "EPS Panel on Divine Simplicity" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWGhWHbvsk&t=8s>, accessed 11/22/22. For more details on Craig's anti-realism and his rejection of constituent ontology, see his lecture "God and the Platonic Host" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVoXs4qQII8>, accessed 11/22/22 based on his book *God and Abstract Objects: The Coherence of Theism: Aseity* (New York: Springer, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> For a summary of the "partisan" divides within academic Thomism, see John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some 20<sup>th</sup> Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 1-31. In the interest of full disclosure, the remainder of Knasas's book is a defense of Existential Thomism. This is the Thomistic interpretation which I hold though my views may not track Knasas in every detail. The term 'existential' here should not be confused with the philosophical system of Existentialism. For an in-depth exploration of Existential Thomism on the question of God, see Knasas's *Thomistic Existentialism and Cosmological Reasoning* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019) and John R. Catan, ed. *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980). Knasas studied under Owens who, in turn, studied under Etienne Gilson of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto. Gilson is the fountainhead of Existential Thomism in 20<sup>th</sup> century North America.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson's view leaves no room for a sound understanding of General Revelation and its role in being able to adjudicate proper from figurative language about God. He says, "I am convinced that the Bible affirms whatever the book of nature teaches us. Scripture goes beyond what natural revelation teaches, but natural revelation does not go beyond what Scripture teaches. If what we believe about God is not taught in Scripture, it must be rejected." [*Saving*, xii-xiii]. Does the Scripture "teach" that trees have hands? Isaiah 55 might seem to some to say so. More seriously, does the Scripture "teach" that God is omnipresent? One might think so according to 1 Kings 8:27 when it claims that the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain God. In that case, what should

- his untenable view on how to interpret the Scriptures;<sup>13</sup>
- his erroneous method of reading Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*;<sup>14</sup>

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one do with 2 Samuel 7:4-7 when God describes Himself as moving about in the wilderness wanderings? It will not do to take the 2 Samuel passage as anthropomorphic and the 1 Kings passages as proper. The Scriptures do not tell us which one is figurative and which one is not. In addition, in Johnson's conversation with James White and Owen Strachan regarding the doctrine of divine simplicity, Johnson says, "I'm getting more and more convinced that they had a variety of opinions about simplicity even in that day [seventeenth century]. I don't think that they had a controversy about it. ... I think that the average pastor held to simplicity about the way that most average pastors hold to it today and they weren't thinking in these Aristotelian metaphysical concepts when they were talking about body, without body parts and passions. Nevertheless, let's, for the sake of the argument, let's say ... that the original framers [of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith] did hold to this Thomistic view of strict simplicity, then I'm going to say: 'Who cares? What does the Bible say?'" [*Live from GBTS*, time stamp 48:00] It is astounding to me that Johnson could think that the philosophical explorations and disputes about divine simplicity can be managed and settled biblically.

<sup>13</sup> This error arises out of his error of the sufficiency of Scripture. Johnson says, "Rather than allowing Scripture to be self-sufficient in providing its own rules of interpretation, Aquinas interpreted Scriptures, as we shall see, through the lens of his own philosophical theology." [*Failure*, p. 27]. But it is self-refuting to maintain that one could get the rules of interpretation of the Bible from the Bible itself. If one can understand the Bible sufficiently in order to get the rules, then he had sufficient rules to understand before he read the Bible. But if one cannot understand the Bible without the rules, then now could he understand the Bible sufficiently to know what the Bible is saying when it is telling him about the rules? For an in-depth analysis of such issues in biblical hermeneutics, particularly regarding a philosophy of language, see Thomas Howe, *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (Altamont Springs: Advantage Inspirational, 2004). I have no reason to think that Johnson or his church or his seminary is cultic or heretical in any way. Yet Johnson's method sets up the danger of cultic interpretations that are immune to any outside critique; for all one would need to do with such a method is to claim that his eccentric rules of interpretation arose out of his discovery of the Scripture's self-sufficiency.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson says, "I actually, in the process of studying him [Aquinas], I wrote a summary of his *Summa* where I took away all the objections and just go to the heart of each question and made it into a catechism." [*Live from GBTS*, time stamp 25:55.] Why should anyone think that the "heart of each question" resided outside Aquinas's responses to the objections? Where did Johnson get his method? I submit that sometimes the critical aspects of Aquinas's arguments occur in his response to objections that Johnson overlooked. Undoubtedly his method is the reason why Johnson misses Aquinas's demonstration of divine providence in the *Summa Theologiae*. He says that according to Paul (Acts 17:26), "natural revelation reveals that God is the God of providence." [Johnson, *Saving*, 28] To prove this point, he quotes Aquinas's *Compendium of Theology* where Aquinas says, "That there is one God can be proved by reason but that God has an immediate providence over all things ... is a matter of faith." [Johnson, *Saving*, 25] Johnson is quoting from *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. Cyril Vollert, ed. Paul A. Böer, (Edmond: Veritatis Splendor, 2012), 2.246. Johnson is mistaken in several ways. First, he is wrong to say that Aquinas holds that divine providence is revealed only by special revelation. For Aquinas, just because some truth is "a matter of faith" (what Aquinas calls belief) does not mean that it cannot also be demonstrable (what Aquinas calls 'knowledge'). Aquinas says, "There is no reason why those things which may be learned from philosophical science, so far as they can be known by natural reason, may not also be taught us by another science so far as they fall with revelation. [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 1, art. 1, ad. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), p. 1. All citations are from this translation unless otherwise indicated. Hereafter *ST*.] He only maintains that it cannot be both for the same person. One cannot hold something to be true on the authority of God and at the same time hold it to be true by demonstration. As strange as such language might sound to contemporary ears, for Aquinas, one cannot believe what one knows and one cannot know what one believes. It only sounds strange to us, however, because of the specific ways that Aquinas uses the terms. They roughly correspond to some uses of the terms 'faith' and 'reason'.

Second, Johnson should have realized that Aquinas could not have possibly meant what Johnson

- his confusing the philosophical issue of the one and the many with the theological doctrine of the Trinity;<sup>15</sup>

presses the quote to mean inasmuch as Aquinas argues at length in this same source (*Compendium*, 1.123-142) for divine providence, not to mention Aquinas's more thorough treatment in *ST I*, QQ. 103-105. A charitable reading (assuming that Johnson read other parts of Aquinas's *Compendium* or the relevant parts of the *Summa Theologiae*) should have moved Johnson to consider a way to reconcile what might appear *prima facie* to be a conflict in Aquinas's thinking.

Third, perhaps a key to the reconciliation is Aquinas's use of the term 'immediate' (*immediate*). It might be argued (the jury is still out for me) that the fact that God is *ultimately* provident can be known by reason where such providence is mediated through secondary causes while that fact that God is *immediately* provident apart from secondary causes is known by Special Revelation.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson says, "Yet the Bible does not place God's simplicity over his diversity or his diversity over his simplicity. Rather, *the one* and *the many* are equally ultimate in God. God is both simple and diverse." [*Failure*, 158, emphasis in original] In this, Johnson is following K. Scott Oliphint who, in turn, is echoing Van Til. See K. Scott Oliphint, "Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2007), 293. Van Til says, "Of the whole matter we may say that the unity and the diversity in God are equally basic and mutually dependent upon one another. The importance of this doctrine for Apologetics may be seen from the fact that the whole problem of philosophy may be summed up in the question of the relation of unity to diversity; the so-called problem of the one and the many receives a definite answer from the doctrine of the simplicity of God." [Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 10.] In addition he says, "In the ontological trinity there is complete harmony between an equally ultimate one and many. The persons of the trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another and of God's nature. It is the absolute equality in point of ultimacy that requires all the emphasis we can give it." [Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 8.] Elsewhere he comments, "The Trinity, as taught in the Scriptures, gives the most basic description possible of God as the *principium essendi* of knowledge for man. The whole problem of knowledge has constantly been that of bringing the one and the many together. ... The plurality of God is as eternal as the unity of God." [Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith, Vol. V: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 10, emphasis in original.] Though the connection between the Trinity and the problem of the one and the many seems to have gone untreated by Greg Bahnsen (undoubtedly due to Bahnsen's passing early in his ministry), it seems to be increasingly defended by contemporary Presuppositionalists. See, for example, B. A. Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014).

In contrast, it seems that the philosophical problem of the one and the many does not at all track what the doctrine of the Trinity affirms. The problem of the one and the many has to do with the relationship between particulars and universals. Broadly speaking, the different perspectives on the issue fall along the extreme realism (Plato), moderate realism (Aristotle; Aquinas), and Nominalism (Ockham). The persons of the Trinity, however, are not particulars of which the Godhead itself is a universal. The relevant aspect of the Trinity is not a matter of unity (universal) and plurality (many), but rather is a matter of relationship within simplicity. Given that all knowledge begins in the senses and is completed in the intellect, all of our experience of relationships is between different substances or between the parts of a substance (either physical or metaphysical) and the substance itself or between the parts of a substance and other parts of a substance (as in Aristotle's Ten Categories).

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, being cannot be either a universal or a genus. (See Aristotle, *Metaphysics B* (III), 3, 998<sup>b</sup> and Aquinas *ST I*, Q. 3, art. 5.) For Thomistic treatments of the relationship of particulars and universals, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 223-229; Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952); George P. Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 186-211; John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some 20<sup>th</sup> Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 153-154; David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 44-61; Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1963,

- his misunderstanding of Aquinas's doctrine of analogy;<sup>16</sup>
- his unawareness of how Aquinas uses the term 'know', especially regarding Aquinas's claim that we cannot know God;<sup>17</sup>

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reprint, Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, The University of St. Thomas, 1985), 57-65, 235-236; Henry Babcock Veatch, *Realism and Nominalism Revisited*. The Aquinas Lecture, 1954 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1954); and Veatch, *Intentional Logic*, 111-113. For a defense of analytic realism, see James Porter Moreland, *Universals, Qualities, and Quality-Instances: A Defense of Realism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985). For an overall treatment of the subject in the context of contemporary metaphysics, see Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> "When Aquinas said all knowledge of God is analogical, he meant that all knowledge of God is *metaphorical* .... [Johnson, *Failure*, 177] This is an egregious error. Granted Aquinas's doctrine of analogy is difficult to understand, no scholar with whom I am familiar would characterize analogy in Aquinas as metaphor. Edward Feser observes, "The analogy of proportionality is itself divided into two sorts, *proper proportionality* and *improper* or *metaphorical proportionality*. ... The analogy of improper or metaphorical proportionality is not regarded as important for metaphysics." [Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, p. 257.] Aquinas's notion of analogy figures critically in how one should regard the differences between our knowledge of the sensible world in contrast to our "knowledge" of God. (See note 17.) For various perspectives on analogy, see W. Norris Clarke, "Analogy and the Meaningfulness of Language about God: A Reply to Kai Nielsen," *Thomist* 40 (1976): 61-95; Matthew Coté, "Truth's Light and Supereminent Darkness: The Problem of Univocal Concepts in Analogical Predication of God" (PhD dissertation (unpublished), Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2023); Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 256-263; Maurice R. Holloway, *An Introduction to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), 212-227; George P. Klubertanz, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960); E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to "He Who Is."* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), reprinted (North Haven: Archon Books, 1967); Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968); Joseph Owens, "Analogy as a Thomistic Approach to Being," *Medieval Studies* 24 (1962): 303-322; and Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Johnson says, "In Aquinas's reality, then, we don't know anything about God's essence." [*Failure*, 106] This is commonly taken to mean an unacceptable agnosticism. While every Christian with whom I have discussed this will admit that no finite human intellect can fully fathom the infinity of God, Johnson is evidently worried that something worse is happening. It should be noted, however, that there is a difference between knowing God's essence and knowing something *about* God's essence. While Aquinas will deny the former, he most certainly affirms the latter. What Johnson is overlooking here is how Aquinas understands what it means primarily to know a thing. Since God is not a sensible object from which the Form can be abstracted upon one's encounter with it, then God cannot be "known." Aquinas says, "According to the truth of the matter, the first cause is above being inasmuch as it is itself infinite 'to be' [*esse*]. 'Being' [*ens*], however, is called that which finitely participates 'to be,' and it is this which is proportioned to our intellect, whose object is some 'that which is,' [quod quid est]. ... Hence our intellect can grasp only that which has a quiddity participating 'to be.' But the quiddity of God is 'to be' itself. Thus, it is above intellect." [Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, Charles R. Hess, and Richard C. Taylor (Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 51-52.] This, however, does not mean that there are no truths *about* God that most certainly can be known by means of reasoning from effect to cause. The finite human intellect cannot become formally identical with God's essence. But primarily, in Aquinas's definition of knowledge, the intellect becomes formally identical with the object by means of abstracting the Form of the object. Since God is not composed of Form and Matter, but is instead *ispum esse subsistens*—subsistent existence itself—then there is no Form in God to be abstracted. For this and other examples of where Aquinas's thinking is potentially misunderstood because of the likelihood that one will fail to take into account how Aquinas uses certain terms that differ from their usage in contemporary philosophy, see Richard G. Howe, "Discussing Aquinas" at <https://quodlibetalblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/22/discussing-aquinas/>. For a treatment of

Continuing my list with issues I will address in the body of this paper:

- his unawareness of the ancient and medieval usage of the term 'science' (in English translation) in contradistinction to the contemporary usage of the term;
- his unawareness of the differences between modern empiricism and classical empiricism as evidenced by the fact that he thinks Aristotle "set the stage" for Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. I cannot help but point out that Locke and Hume are anything but metaphysical in their epistemology;
- his unawareness of the difference between active potency and passive potency leading to a confusion about God's immobility;
- his complete overlooking how Aquinas's notion of *esse* (the infinitive of the Latin verb "to be") displaces the principles Aristotle assigns to his own metaphysics, which causes:
  - his confusing the god of Aristotle with the God of Aquinas;
  - his misunderstanding of the "chain of being" in Aquinas (thinking it leads to pantheism).

### General Revelation and Natural Theology

The doctrine of natural theology, by and large, presupposes the doctrine of General Revelation (what Johnson calls *natural revelation*). *General Revelation* is a phrase commonly used to refer to God's revelation of Himself through creation. General Revelation is distinguished from Special Revelation; the latter being God's revelation of Himself through His prophets and Apostles and ultimately through the Lord Jesus—God in the flesh. Special Revelation is what evangelicals now recognize as the Bible. <sup>18</sup>

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the sort of "agnosticism" that obtains regarding God, see Joseph Owens, "Aquinas—'Darkness of Ignorance' in the Most Refined Notion of God" *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 2, Aquinas and Bonaventure (D. 1274) (Summer 1974): 93-110, reprinted in Joseph Owens, *Towards a Christian Philosophy: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 21 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 207-224. For a fuller treatment of knowledge in Aquinas, see Joseph Owens, *Cognition: An Epistemological Inquiry* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1992) and Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

<sup>18</sup> For teaching material on general and special revelation, see Richard G. Howe, *Intro to God's Revelation: Six Week Small Group Curriculum*, workbook and DVD available at <https://resources.afa.net/intro-to-gods-revelation-6-week-curriculum-by-dr-richard-howe>, accessed 11/22/22.



For my purposes here, the term *natural theology* refers to that body of knowledge about God's existence and God's nature that can be acquired by natural human reason as it attends itself to the sensible world (i.e., things encountered by the senses) around us. In other words, natural theology is comprised of truths about God which human reason can derive from General Revelation. Appeals to authority would show that, right or wrong, the view I offer here is not eccentric. Such appeals could include Francis Turretin (1623-1687),<sup>19</sup> Stephen Charnock (1628-1680),<sup>20</sup> Charles Hodge (1797-1878),<sup>21</sup> Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886),<sup>22</sup> Robert

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<sup>19</sup> Francis Turretin, Professor of Theology at the University of Geneva, says, "The Theology of revelation is again divided into natural and supernatural. The natural, occupied with that which may be known of God . . . , is both innate (from the common notions implanted in each one) and acquired (which creatures gain discursively). . . . The orthodox . . . uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions . . . and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively)." [Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R. 1992), First Topic, Question II, §VII (vol. 1, p. 5); First Topic, Question III, §IV (vol. 1, p.6)].

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Charnock, sixteenth-century Puritan, says, "Men that will not listen to Scripture . . . cannot easily deny natural reason . . . . There is a natural as well as a revealed knowledge, and the book of the creatures is legible in declaring the being of a God . . . . God in regard of his existence is not only the discovery of faith, but of reason. God hath revealed not only his being, but some sparks of his eternal power and godhead in his works, as well as in his word. . . . It is a discovery of our reason . . . and an object of our faith . . . it is an article of our faith and an article of our reason." [Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), I.27].

<sup>21</sup> Charles Hodge, Principle and Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, says, "The Scriptures clearly recognize the fact that the words of God reveal his being and attributes. This they do not only by frequent reference to the works of nature as manifestations of the perfections of God, but by direct assertions. . . . I cannot, therefore, be reasonably doubted that not only the being of God, but also his eternal power and Godhead, are so revealed in his works, as to lay a stable foundation for natural theology." [Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975). I, pp. 24, 25].

<sup>22</sup> In his catechetical style, in answering the question, Archibald Alexander Hodge, Second Principle and Charles Hodge Chair of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and son of Charles Hodge, says, "What are the two great departments into which Theology is divided? First, Natural Theology, which is the science which proposes to itself these two questions: (1.) Can the real objective existence of God as a personal extramundane Spirit be established by satisfactory evidence? (2.) What may be legitimately ascertained concerning the true nature of God in himself, and concerning his relations to the universe, and especially to man, by the light of nature alone?" [A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology for Students and Laymen* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 53] Later he adds, "Reason is the primary revelation God has made to man, necessarily presupposed in every subsequent revelation of whatever kind. . . . Hence Reason . . . must be the organ by means of which *alone* all subsequent revelations can be apprehended and received. [Hodge, *Outlines*, 62].

Lewis Dabney (1820-1998),<sup>23</sup> James Petigru Boyce (1827-1888),<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921),<sup>25</sup> and Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949).<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps one will notice the common theme of these thinkers: they are all within the Reformed tradition and, with the exception of Charnock, they are all of the Reformed tradition in nineteenth-century America. I do not parade these luminaries as an illicit appeal to authority

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Lewis Dabney, Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, Virginia (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), says, "Theology is divided into natural and revealed, according to the sources of our knowledge of it; from natural reason; from revelation. ... That there is a science of Natural Theology ... is well argued from Scripture." [Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 6].

<sup>24</sup> James Petigru Boyce, founder of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says, "Natural theology embraces what man may attain by the study of God in nature. This extends not only to what is beheld of him in the Heavens and the Earth, but also in the intellectual and spiritual nature of man himself." [James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 4] Regarding the value of philosophy in the service of theology, Boyce maintains, "The most valuable discussions among the heathen, however, are to be found in the works of the Greek philosophers. ... Confessedly the most important of these Greek writings are Xenophon's Memorabilia of Socrates, and the works of Plato, and Aristotle. ... No human mind can estimate the value of these contributions, nor the influence they have exerted even over those possessed of the Christian Revelation." [Boyce, *Abstract*, 2-3].

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, the last Principle of Princeton Theological Seminary and Charles Hodge Chair of Systematic Theology, says, "These two species or stages of revelation have been commonly distinguished from one another by the distinctive names of natural and supernatural revelation, or general and special revelation ... [General revelation] is communicated through the media of natural phenomena, occurring in the course of Nature or of history ... is addressed generally to all intelligent creatures, and is therefore accessible to all men ... has in view to meet and supply the natural need of creatures for knowledge of their God. [These two species or stages of revelation] constitute together a unitary whole, and each is incomplete without the other." [Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1948), 74-75.

<sup>26</sup> Geerhardus Vos, Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, says, "As a theology—that is, a teaching concerning God—that takes its content and method from nature. ... 'Natural theology' is a knowledge of God that takes its content and method from the world as it presents itself to us as governed by fixed laws." [Geerhardus Vos, *Natural Theology*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Grand Rapids, Reformation Heritage, 2022), 3, 4] Vos goes on, also in a catechetical style, "What value does natural theology still have then [given that it is insufficient unto salvation]? ... It does ... directly teach many things that Scripture does not so much explicitly teach as assume. ... Natural theology owes its position in science to its use in apologetics, for refuting those who have rejected the supernatural revelation of God. ... What is the relationship between natural theology and metaphysics? Natural theology can be viewed also as a part of philosophy, and as such represents the transition between philosophy and theology. ... Metaphysics treats the first principles of *being as such*, while natural theology treats them as they find their unity in God's thoughts and acts." [Vos, *Natural Theology*, 5, 6].

fallacy. I am not suggesting that my view of natural theology is true because I fall more or less in line with such celebrated theologians. But one should notice reading through the writings of Jeffrey D. Johnson and other contemporary Presuppositionalists how marked a departure their writings are from this Reformed tradition,<sup>27</sup> noting especially the nineteenth-century American Reformed thinking on these issues. In my estimation, this is largely due to the unfortunate influence of Cornelius Van Til (1985-1987) on American Reformed thinking.<sup>28</sup>

I should think that there is no need here to defend that there are both General Revelation and natural theology. Johnson seemingly commits himself to these notions:

Revelation includes both the book of nature and the book of Scripture. With that said, I am convinced that the book of nature (i.e., natural revelation) effectually reveals God to the natural man (Psalm 19; Romans 1).<sup>29</sup>

He adds:

Because I believe there is a body of doctrine communicated in natural revelation, I am convinced there is a theology communicated in nature. And it would seem natural to call this body of doctrine *natural theology*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth treatment of this tradition with regard to the controversy before us in the paper, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Regarding what he calls "the point of contact" in contrasting the apologetic methods of Reformed, evangelical, and Catholic, Van Til regards Charles Hodge's thinking as "inconsistent Calvinism" [Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), p. 50, published as *Christian Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003)], thus indicating that Van Til saw his own project as a departure from the Princeton theologians and a restoration of consistent Reformed thinking. For a defense of the thesis that the thinking of the Princeton theologians was more in line with Augustine's "right reason" rather than with (as the standard view would have it) the Scottish Common Sense Realism of Thomas Reid (and, thus, more consistent with Van Til's thinking than Van Til himself realized), see Paul Kjos Helseth, *"Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, x.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, xi, emphasis in original.

These are happy acknowledgements. As a classical apologist, I would like to take what I can get.<sup>31</sup> But what Johnson gives with the one hand, he takes away with the other. Consider what Johnson thinks of this "book of nature." Wherein does the problem lie for him? He goes on:

Presuppositionalists like myself are not against the body of doctrine communicated in natural revelation. We are against pagan philosophers who have suppressed, twisted, and perverted what has been communicated in natural revelation. Greek philosophers did not confess the God of natural revelation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> One should note the different meanings of the term 'classical' in expressions such as classical apologetics, classical philosophy, and classical theism. Classical philosophy is a general term referring to philosophy exemplified by the ancient Greek philosophers, most notably Plato and Aristotle. Consider the use of the term 'classical' in the discussion of classical empiricism beginning on p. 10. Not every philosopher who is a classical philosopher is Christian and not every Christian philosopher is classical in this sense.

Classical Apologetics, generally speaking, is the Christian apologetic system characterized by the three-step method: philosophical foundations; the existence of God; the truth of Christianity. With a sufficient foundation for rational communication in place (e.g., rejecting the relativism of truth), one can engage in the question of God's existence and the truth of Christianity. Classical apologetics maintains that the existence of God has to be in place before the evidence of Christianity can be marshalled. This is so because the evidence for Christianity appeals to miraculous events. Since by definition a miracle is (among other things) an act of God, then no event could ever consistently be acknowledged as a miracle in the absence of theism. For a work on classical apologetics, see Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

Classical theism is the view that God has the array of superlative attributes that Christian theologians and philosophers throughout church history have maintained to be true of God, including (more or less) simplicity, immutability, eternity, impassibility, infinity, immateriality, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, holiness, and goodness. Classical theism is to be contrasted with theistic personalism (a moniker assigned by its classical theistic detractors and often rejected by theistic personalists themselves) in terms of which certain of these classical attributes are explicitly rejected; most often simplicity. For information about the contrast between classical theism and a less than classical theism (i.e., theistic personalism), see Dolezal, *All that Is in God* (referenced in note 3) and Norman L., Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenges of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, ix. One can only wonder how the above statements can be reconciled with the comment "I am not convinced that natural theology, as a theological discipline, can be saved. I don't even know if it's a good idea to try to rescue it." [Johnson, *Saving*, xi.] I will let others analyze why Johnson thinks, on the one hand, that there is a body of doctrine called 'natural theology' which "effectually reveals God to the natural man" while on the other hand thinking it might not be "a good idea to try to rescue it." His stated reason is "Natural theology is closely linked to classical apologetics, and classical apologetics, due to the influence of Thomas Aquinas, is so interwoven with Greek philosophy that such associations many never be broken." [Johnson, *Saving*, ix] As a Thomist, I certainly will do everything I can to make sure Natural Theology's associations with (at least certain aspects of) Greek philosophy are never broken. But it seems odd that, not being convinced that it was even "a good ideal to try to "rescue" Natural Theology, Johnson nevertheless expends the energy of writing a book, a booklet, and extended discussions on how it can be done. Be that as it may, I cannot help but contrast Johnson's assessment of these "pagan philosophers" with the thinking of Peter Martyr Vermigli. Vermigli "by his death was widely regarded as the most acute and learned Reformed theologian after John Calvin" [John Patrick Donnelly, "General Preface" in McLelland, ed. and trans., *The Peter Martyr Vermigli Library*, vol. 4, *Philosophical Works*, xiii] when Vermigli said, "These ideas of God naturally engrafted in us are daily confirmed and refined by the observation of created things. Others say, proudly and wickedly, that they have learned these truths from Aristotle or

The rub for Johnson is his conviction that the natural theology of Aquinas cannot go beyond the boundaries of Aristotelian metaphysics according to which Aquinas constructs that natural theology (assuming that his indictment of "Greek philosophy" is largely a repudiation of Aristotle). Johnson makes his contempt for Aquinas quite clear. "I blame Thomas Aquinas for ruining natural Theology."<sup>33</sup> Further he claims, "He has done the most damage in syncretizing the pantheistic notions flowing out of Athens with the distinct and self-contained God who personally revealed himself in Jerusalem"<sup>34</sup> (with the obvious homage to the common, albeit inaccurate, interpretation of Tertullian).<sup>35</sup> Why would Johnson think this Greek thinking was pantheistic? It will have to do with his understanding of the "chain of being." I will revisit this in due course.

In a blog response to Thomist philosopher Edward Feser, Johnson again makes this point:

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from Plato, giving no thanks whatever to God for them. To be sure, these men were agents and instruments, but not authors. They speak much as an Israelite might, saying that he knew the truths of the law not through God but through Moses who was only God's mediator and messenger, relating to the people matters whose author was God. It should be noted that although God is a nature so separated from matter that he cannot be perceived by the senses, yet he regularly declares himself by symbols and what may be called sensible words. These signs which have declared God to us from the beginning are themselves creatures; when natural philosophers [*Physici*] studied them, they were led to knowledge of God on account of the wonderful properties and qualities of nature. Knowing the series of causes and their relation to effects, and clearly understanding that it is not proper to posit an infinite progression, they reasoned that they must arrive at some highest being, and so concluded that there is a God. Plato, Aristotle, and Galen have set forth these matters exceedingly well." ["Commentaries on Romans 1 and 1 Samuel 5" in Vermigli, *Philosophical Works*, 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, xi.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, xi-xii.

<sup>35</sup> Historian David C. Lindberg comments, "[Tertullian's] often-quoted warning against curiosity ... is regularly interpreted as an expression of the opinion that the Christian requires no knowledge beyond that which biblical revelation furnishes. Not only is this a caricature of Tertullian's true position, but it is also not representative of patristic attitudes (although this has proved no obstacle to its wide dissemination). This attitude imputed to Tertullian is at an extreme end of a broad spectrum of patristic opinion. If the pagan learning embodied in the classical tradition appeared dangerous, it also proved indispensable, and the level of hostility expressed by Tertullian in his moments of rhetorical overkill was the exception rather than the rule." [David C. Lindberg, "The Medieval Church Encounters the Classical Tradition: Saint Augustine, Roger Bacon, and the Handmaiden Metaphor" in *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11].

By holding Aristotle's starting point and rejecting Aristotle's conclusion, Aquinas' philosophical theology was filled with all kinds of irresolvable tension.<sup>36</sup>

Keep in mind especially Johnson's point here as we shall come back to it. He is seemingly putting his finger on what he understands to be the foundational problem with Aquinas and his natural theology: Johnson thinks it is impossible for Aquinas to consistently employ the starting points of Aristotle and arrive at the conclusions of his own natural theology which are manifestly in conflict with the conclusions Aristotle comes to with his own arguments. What I will have to say at the end about this misunderstanding will be the most significant point of my analysis of Johnson's work.

#### Johnson's Confusion of Natural Science with a Philosophy of Nature

In his introduction, Johnson employs another serious misunderstanding of Aquinas's thinking. This misunderstanding redounds throughout his treatment of Aquinas. He says,

Instead of building on natural revelation, Aquinas *builds his natural theology on natural science*.<sup>37</sup>

Johnson thinks that, since for Aquinas knowledge begins in the senses, then for Aquinas this

"philosophical science built up by human reason"<sup>38</sup> is rooted in natural science—the study of how motion works in 'sensible' things.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey D. Johnson, "Doubting Thomas Indeed: A Quick Response to Edward Feser," *Reformed Baptist Blog*, Feb. 15, 2022, <https://reformedbaptistblog.com/2022/02/15/doubting-thomas-indeed-a-quick-response-to-edward-feser/>, accessed 11/22/22.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, 1-2, emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson is quoting from *ST I*, Q1, art. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, pp. 13-14.

Johnson repeats this mistaken interpretation in his video discussion with Owen Strachan and James White when Johnson accuses Aquinas of trying to understand who God is "through the lens of *natural science*."<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, Johnson does not understand, or, for that matter, does not even seem to be aware of, the difference between natural science and a philosophy of nature. He confuses the ancient and medieval notion of "science" with the contemporary notion of "science".<sup>41</sup> In English translations of Aristotle and Aquinas, an area of study with regard to their causes is regarded as a science, including those bodies of knowledge and areas of study which we would today consider quite removed from the natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and the like. Thomist and Aristotelian scholar Joseph Owens explains it thus,

In contemporary theories that restrict science to the domain of the measurable or of the verifiable, there can hardly be any regret at excluding metaphysics from scientific status. ... Concern about scientific status for metaphysics, then, can hardly have any serious import within the comparatively recent restriction of the notion "science" to the realm of the measurable. The relevance of the question lies rather within the centuries-long western tradition that goes back to Plato and Aristotle. In this tradition, "science" has a much wider and richer meaning than it has in the popular understanding of the word today. It means knowledge of a thing in light of its causes. It extends to any kind of explanation of things through the causes that account for their nature, their origin, and their function, whether the causes are in the sensible or the supersensible realm. In this tradition "science" or "scientific knowledge" includes mathematics, philosophy of nature, metaphysics, logic, and ethics, as well as the experimental sciences.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Live from GBTS, time stamp 53:54, emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> The English word 'science' comes from the Latin '*scientia*'. On one occasion only (1 Tim. 6:20), the King James Version translates the Greek γνώσεως (the Attic form of the genitive of γνώσις meaning "knowledge) as 'science'. It was perhaps influenced by the Bishop's Bible (c. late 1560s) and the Geneva Bible (NT 1557), which in turn were perhaps influenced by the Latin Vulgate that translates the Greek as '*scientiae*'. Most modern English translations I have consulted translate γνώσεως here as 'knowledge'. In English translations (including the Bishop's, the Geneva, the KJV, and the NKJV), other occurrences where the Latin has *scientia* are translated from the Greek as 'knowledge' including Luke 1:77; 11:52; Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 1:5; and 2 Peter 1:5.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Owens, "The 'Analytics' and Thomistic Metaphysical Procedure," *Mediaeval Studies* 26 (1964): 83-108 (87-88).

Owens goes on to point out that "this traditional use of the word "science" is still alive today, in spite of the way in which the term has been appropriated to the experimental sciences in popular use."<sup>43</sup> This is why you find English translations of both Aristotle and Aquinas using the term. In *Metaphysics* Bk. I, chap. 2 (982<sup>a</sup>1-25, ff.), W. D. Ross translates Aristotle's ἐπιστημῆ (from where we get our philosophical term 'epistemology') as 'science,'<sup>44</sup> despite the fact that the subject matter Aristotle is discussing could not be about "science" as the word is commonly used in contemporary English.<sup>45</sup> In the *Summa Theologiae* I, Q1, art. 2, Aquinas argues that theology is a science—a *scientia*. I would hope that it is obvious even to Jeffrey Johnson that Aquinas does not regard God, the Supreme subject of theology, to be a physical object like those objects that are the subject matter of physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and the like. What is more, in the same context, Aquinas regards philosophy as a science as well.<sup>46</sup> As part of the range of his usage of *scientia*, Aquinas means that these subjects are examples of "intellectual knowledge that is certain, and evident, the opposite of *fides* and *opinio* on the one hand, and of *ignorantia* and *nescientia* on the other."<sup>47</sup>

But this, of course, is exactly what Johnson thinks his own argument is. Because Johnson acknowledges (rightfully, in my opinion) that natural science alone cannot tell us certain

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<sup>43</sup> Owens, "The 'Analytics'," 87.

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (New York: Random House, 1941), 691.

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle says, "And the most exact of the sciences [ἐπιστημῶν] are those which deal most with first principles." (*Metaphysics* Bk. I, chap. 2 (982a25), trans. Ross, 691.

<sup>46</sup> *ST I*, Q. 1, art. 1, ad. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Deferrari, Roy J., M. Inviolata Barry, and Ignatius McGuinness, *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), s.v., *scientia* (2), p. 998.



distinctives about the God of classical theism (e.g., that there is the causal relationship of the universe to God, i.e., of creation—see note 31 on the expression 'classical theism'), he goes on to erroneously conclude—again, based on his mistaken notion that the "science" of Aristotle and Aquinas is akin to the natural science of today—that when Aristotle or Aquinas employ the notion of causality when speaking of the unmoved or first "mover" they are engaging in a logical leap. Johnson claims,

If God is transcendent and ontologically distinct from the universe, then it's a huge leap to jump from earth to heaven. I'm convinced it's an impossible leap. Yet, Aristotle transitioned from physics to metaphysics by making a philosophical assumption. ... Aristotle assumed that the cause-and-effect relationship between sensible things flowed back to the first cause. That is, he assumed that the *laws of physics* apply to God as much as they apply to sensible things.<sup>48</sup>

Johnson goes on to argue that, while Aquinas denied that such laws applied to God, he does so inconsistently (here is one of the so-called "irresolvable tensions"). Johnson claims,

Aquinas asserted that the rules that apply to finite things in motion do not apply to the unmoved mover...which is true. But Aquinas was not consistent in applying the principle. If God transcends the laws of motion that govern the physical world, why did he base his understanding of God on these laws in the first place?<sup>49</sup>

Being undermined by his misunderstanding that the subject under consideration is "natural science," Johnson completely misses that what both Aristotle and Aquinas are discussing is *metaphysics* not merely physics. They are not at all focusing on "the laws of physics" but specifically the metaphysical principles of act and potency together with causality.<sup>50</sup> It is of the

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<sup>48</sup>Johnson, *Saving*, 31, emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Regarding potency, Aristotle says, "'Potency' then means the source, in general, of change or movement in another thing than the thing moved or in the same thing qua [i.e., as] other ..." [*Metaphysics*, D (V), 12, 1019<sup>a</sup>15 - 1019<sup>a</sup>20, trans. Ross, 765] Regarding actuality (or act), he says, "Actuality, then, is the existence of a thing not in the way which we express by 'potentially'; we say that potentially, for instance, a statue of Hermes is in the block of wood and the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out ...; the thing that stands in contrast to each

nature of the philosophical reasoning of Aristotle and Aquinas that metaphysical truths are expressly knowable from our sensory encounter with the world around us. I will revisit this epistemological point in due course.

Amazingly, Johnson even appeals to the contemporary Thomist, Edward Feser, to bolster his accusation. He says,

One of the leading Thomist scholars of our day, Edward Feser, admitted "I do deny that arguments in natural science alone can get you to classical theism."<sup>51</sup>

Johnson's use of the term 'admitted' is quite tendentious. Not only is Feser not "admitting" anything—as if the point Feser was making was somehow uncomfortable or embarrassing or downright inconsistent for a Thomist to make—but, on the contrary, Feser's point is part of an argument that explicitly explains and defends what, in Feser's view, is triumphant regarding Aquinas's philosophical theology based upon his philosophy of nature. Note the previous quote of Feser in its immediate context in Feser's article:

When I say that we cannot get from the world to God except via premises derived from philosophy of nature, I have a quite specific conception of God in mind. I do not deny that conclusions of a sort that might in *some* sense of the term be called "theological" might be derived from natural science. But I do deny that the arguments grounded in natural science alone can get you to *classical theism*—the conception of God defended by Athanasius and Augustine, Avicenna and Maimonides, Anselm and Aquinas ...<sup>52</sup>

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of these exists actually. Our meaning can be seen in the particular cases by induction, and we must ... be content to grasp the analogy, that it is as that which is building is to that which is capable of building ... and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which has been shaped out of the matter to the matter ... Let actually be defined by one member of this antithesis, and the potential by the other." [*Metaphysics* Θ (IV), 6, 1048<sup>a</sup>31 - 1048<sup>b</sup>5, trans. Ross, in McKeon, ed. *Basic Works*, 826] Bernard J. Wuellner summarizes it nicely: "Howsoever anything acts, it does so inasmuch as it is in act; howsoever anything receives, it does so inasmuch as it is in potency." [Bernard J. Wuellner, *Summary of Scholastic Principles* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1956), 5].

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, *Saving*, 32-33.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Feser, *Neo-Scholastic Essays* (South Bend, St. Augustine's Press), 62, emphasis in original.

One would have hoped that the title of Feser's article—"Natural Theology Must Be Grounded in the Philosophy of Nature, Not in Natural Science"—would have been a clue to Johnson that he was pressing Feser to say or imply something that he was not.

Thus, Johnson (1) accuses Aquinas of illicitly trying to build his theology on natural science; (2) levels the accusation that such a move is quite illicit since it is impossible; (3) cites a contemporary Thomist who "admits" it is impossible, thereby proving in his own mind that Aquinas is inconsistent in not following through with the Aristotelian starting point of natural science—all this only to find that the view that it is indeed impossible to do so was the Thomistic point all along.

Remember that natural science was not Aristotle's starting point anyway. Rather, it was his encounter with sensible objects upon which he brings to bear a philosophical analysis leading to metaphysical conclusions. But much more important, a charitable and conscientious reading of Aquinas should have prompted Johnson to ask the question, "How it is that Aquinas could employ the theistic arguments of Aristotle verbatim and yet come to a radically different conclusion than Aristotle did?" The answer to that shows that what is going on in Aquinas's thinking is anything but an "irresolvable tension." It is my conviction that when one sees exactly what it is that allows—indeed, requires—Aquinas to make such a move, only then is one in a position to understand the key to Aquinas's metaphysics. This will be the most significant point of my analysis to which I will arrive in due course.

I submit to you that Johnson's misunderstanding here cannot ultimately be accounted for by failing to read an immediate context or by a mistaken copy and paste job. Instead, it is because Johnson is completely innocent of any knowledge of the metaphysics of Aristotle and its augmentation by Aquinas and the terminology employed by them in that context. Because he

misunderstands the usages of the term 'science'—Johnson entirely misses exactly what it is about the *sensible* world from which Aristotle and Aquinas come to know certain metaphysical truths.

### Classical Empiricism vs. Modern Empiricism

I must say that I am not always so harsh with someone today who might be puzzled as to how one could think he could derive truths about metaphysics, and, for that matter, logic, ethics, and God—particularly the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—from what he sees, hears, tastes, touches and smells. I often run into a suspicion, if not outright animus, from Christians towards "empiricism." In my experience, many Christians regard "empiricism" as a hothouse for scientism, if not co-extensive with it.<sup>53</sup> In this, they are seemingly unfamiliar with the difference between modern empiricism on the one hand and classical empiricism on the other.<sup>54</sup>

Without diverting into an attempt to unpack all the differences one might identify between the two—and also, while running the risk of oversimplification—let it suffice to make a few observations. Much of modern empiricism seeks to parse out epistemology along the lines

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<sup>53</sup> For an apologetic treatment of scientism, see J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> I am indebted to Ed. L. Miller for introducing me to this distinction when I used his text as a teaching assistant in my first years as a philosophy graduate student. Miller says, "When we call the empiricism of Aristotle and St. Thomas *classical* empiricism, we not only reflect its Greek roots (Aristotle) but we also distinguish it from various forms of empiricism in the modern period." [Ed. L. Miller, *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 226. This work is now in its sixth edition: Ed. L. Miller and Jon Jensen, *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008). The quote is on p. 169 in that edition. While I have come quite accustomed to the expression in referring to the empiricism of Aristotle and Aquinas, two problems present themselves. First, I must admit that one is hard-pressed to find the expression among the branch of Thomism I embrace: the Existential Thomism of Étienne Gilson, Joseph Owens, et al. Instead, since this view of human knowledge is so grounded in the metaphysics, Gilson refers to it as "Methodical Realism" (Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism* (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 1990) reprinted *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011). Second, an internet search will reveal that the expression seldom if ever is applied to anything other than the empiricism of the modern period, which is to say, the British empiricism of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and is, thus, contrasted with contemporary empiricism.

and categories that are themselves epistemological: Locke's "qualities" or "properties;"<sup>55</sup>

Berkeley's "ideas" and "perceiving;"<sup>56</sup> and Hume's "sensations" or "phenomena."<sup>57</sup> The gradual evaporating of the attempt by some philosophers to ground questions of knowing in categories of

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<sup>55</sup> Locke says, "Since *the Mind*, in all its Thought and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but its own *Ideas*, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them. *Knowledge* then seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of the connexion* [sic] *and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*. In this alone it consists." [John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, I, 1, §1-§2, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 525, italics in original] Elsewhere Locke argues:

That the size, figure, and motion of one Body should cause a change in the size, figure, and motion of another Body, is not beyond our Conception; the separation of the Parts of one Body, upon the intrusion of another; and the change from rest to motion, upon impulse; these, and the like seem to us to have some *connexion* one with another. And if we knew these primary Qualities of Bodies, we might have reason to hope, we might be able to know a great deal more of these Operations of them one upon another: But our Minds not being able to discover any *connexion* betwixt these primary qualities of Bodies, and the sensations that are produced in us by them, we can never be able to establish certain and undoubted Rules, of the Consequence or *Co-existence* of any secondary Qualities, though we could discover the size, figure or motion of those invisible Parts, which immediately produce them. We are so far from knowing what figure, size, or motion of parts produce a yellow Colour, a sweet Taste, or a sharp Sound, that we can by no means conceive how any *size, figure, or motion* of any Particles, can possibly produce in us the *Idea* of and *Colour, Taste, or Sound* whatsoever; there is no conceivable *connexion* betwixt the one and the other. [John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, III, 1, §13, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 545, italics in original]

<sup>56</sup> Berkeley says, "For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their esse is percipi, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds of thinking things which perceive them. It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects, have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding ... yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question may ... perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these, or any combination of them, should exist unperceived?" [George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in *The Empiricists* (New York: Anchor, 1974), 152]

<sup>57</sup> Hume says, "By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive that the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit. Nor is this all, when we believe any thing of external existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind. Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it." [David Hume, *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published; Entitled A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 657] Though the *Abstract* was published anonymously, it is considered by many scholars to have been written by Hume.

being—an attempt, if you will, to build an epistemology that is indifferent to any given metaphysics—sets some of modern and, in certain ways contemporary, empiricism apart from classical empiricism. It is no wonder that this trajectory gave rise to the Logical Positivism of A. J. Ayer<sup>58</sup> and Kai Nielsen<sup>59</sup> and eventually to the unseemly step-child of Richard Dawkins' scientism.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast, rightly or wrongly, Aristotle and Aquinas regarded the event of knowing to be a function of the metaphysics of what it is to be a knower and what it is to be a known. In this tradition, a sensible, natural (as opposed to artificial) object is hylomorphic, which is to say that every sensible, natural object is constituted by Matter (ύλη) and Form (μορφή). Form is that by virtue of which a thing is the kind of thing it is. Matter is the individuation of a particular thing of that kind. Form is what it is, say a tree, and matter constitutes this particular tree. Aquinas says

The Philosopher [Aristotle] frequently calls this [essence] 'what something was to be'; that is to say, that which makes a thing to be what it is. It is also called 'form.'<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ayer says, "We mean also to rule out the supposition that philosophy can be ranged alongside the existing sciences, as a special department of speculative knowledge. ... There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give." [A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 48].

<sup>59</sup> Consider Nielsen's extended discussion of how both ostensive definitions and definite descriptions (at least one of which is necessary for meaning in his view) are impossible for the traditional Judeo-Christian notion of God. See J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 48-56, republished, *Does God Exist? The Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1993), 48-56.

<sup>60</sup> Dawkins says, "The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice—or not yet—a decided one. ... There is an answer to every such question [about God and miracles], whether or not we can discover it in practice, and it is a strictly scientific answer. The methods we should use to settle the matter, in the unlikely event that relevant evidence ever became available, would be purely and entirely scientific methods." [Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 58-59].

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, I, §4, trans. Armand Maurer, 2nd revised ed. [*Mediaeval Sources in Translation I*] (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 31. "What something was to be" (Latin, *quod quid erat esse*) is the literal translation of Aristotle's Greek τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι (to ti ēn einai).

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, the event of knowing a sensible thing happens when there is a formal identity of the intellect of the knower and the sensible thing that is encountered.

Aquinas says,

Truth is defined by the conformity of intellect and thing; and hence to know this conformity is to know truth.<sup>62</sup>

Further, he says,

The knowledge which we have by natural reason contains two things: images derived from the sensible object; and the natural intelligible light, enabling us to abstract from them intelligible conceptions.<sup>63</sup>

One should bear in mind that 'conceptions' here are the quiddities of the known sensible objects that exist in the intellect of the knower of the sensible objects as the intellect of the knower abstracts the Form of the sensible object. To abstract here means to take out the Form while "leaving behind" if you will, the individuating aspects of the sensible object. The same Form is both in the sensible object and in the intellect of the knower. In the sensible object, the Form is a particular. In intellect of the knower, it is a universal or concept which is to be found (metaphysically) in every particular of that kind. Conceptually, one knows what a tree is apart from any individuating aspects of a tree such as being evergreen or deciduous; tall or short; fruit bearing, flower bearing, or neither; well or sick; here or there; now or then. In short,

Our knowledge, taking its start from things, proceeds in this order. First, it begins in sense; second, it is completed in the intellect.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *ST I*, Q. 16, art. 2, pp. 90-91.

<sup>63</sup> *ST I*, Q. 12, art. 13, p. 59

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, I, 11, trans. Mulligan, 48, in *Truth* (3 vols), vol. 1 trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); vol. 2 trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); vol. 3. trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954). The three volumes were reprinted as *Truth* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

Given that Johnson seemingly is unaware of classical empiricism, it is no wonder that he is unable to notice the metaphysical reasoning going in Aristotle's and Aquinas's thinking.

I begin my philosophy course at Southern Evangelical Seminary with an exploration of truths one can know while out camping with a dog. These truths are metaphysical conclusions that arise out of the observations of the sensible world around us. They form the basic elements of the metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas. Without any details or defense here, the list of metaphysical conclusions include:<sup>65</sup> substance/accident; ten Categories; universal/particular; form/matter; teleology; act/potency; four causes (efficient, material, formal, final); and essence/existence. From these, the Thomist is able to construct the cosmological argument for God's existence as well as a robust defense of the classical attributes of God: simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, omnipresence, immutability, eternity, unity, omniscience, truth,

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<sup>65</sup> The procedure goes like this: One will notice the dog, the color of the dog, and the sitting of the dog. One can conceive of his dog as a member of a group of dogs. He can notice the oak tree nearby as a member of a group of trees. He can fondly remember how much his dog has grown since its days as a puppy and all the effort it took, both from him and from within the dog, to make that happen. He can imagine how long it must have taken for that towering oak tree nearby to grow from the small acorn. Last, he might sadly remember his old dog that is no longer with him and contrast that with how much longer it might take before that oak tree is no longer around. I submit to you (without the necessary accompanying arguments) that these straightforward observations give rise to some of the basic elements of the metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas. The dog is a substance; a thing that exists in its own right and not merely *in* another. In contrast, the color of the dog needs the dog in order to exist as a color. It would seem that the dog is real in a different way than how the color of the dog is real. This is the substance/accident distinction. As with the dog/color distinction, it would seem that the dog is real in a different way than how the sitting of the dog is real: another substance/accident distinction. But notice that the color of the dog and the sitting of the dog are real in different ways from each other. These are three of the ten categories of Aristotle: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state or habitus, action, and passion. They are (at least) ten "ways" or "modes" of being in the sensible world:

A three-foot <sup>Quantity</sup> German Shepherd <sup>Quality</sup> dog <sup>Substance</sup>, much taller than <sup>Relation</sup> her puppy, was lying <sup>Position</sup> in my yard <sup>Place</sup> yesterday <sup>Time</sup> on a leash <sup>State (Habitus)</sup>, biting <sup>Action</sup> her paw, completely unaware that she was being fed <sup>Passion</sup> by me.

This one sentence contains all ten categories. When one adds to the scenario the question of existence (a dog that used to exist but no longer does), noticing that the concept or definition of 'dog' does not change between the two conditions, we now have the augmentation of the essence/existence distinction of Aquinas. Other things could be pointed out in the scenario.



life, will, love, justice, mercy, providence, and omnipotence.<sup>66</sup> Again, all of this is the cumulative effect of our encounter with, and reflection upon, the sensible world around us.

It is quite fair to challenge the metaphysics that Aristotle and Aquinas have come to embrace upon their respective observations and philosophical analyses of the world around them. What is more, it is quite fair to challenge certain conclusions about the rest of reality based on their arguments grounded in their metaphysics. Unfortunately, Johnson does neither of these in his works. And, if I may, it is no wonder that some Presuppositionalists like Jeffrey Johnson insist that only the presupposition of God can deliver one from the impasse that has befallen certain aspects of modern and contemporary thought.<sup>67</sup> He says,

Only by presupposing the God of the Bible is ultimate truth possible. ... In order to maintain a cohesive worldview, we must presuppose the God of the Bible.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> ST I, QQ. 3-25. See also Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Further, in my research of Presuppositionalism, I have identified a number of philosophical "problems" or "challenges" of modern or contemporary thought, many of which do not arise in classical philosophy and for which I believe classical philosophy in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas has the correct response. These include: the problem of induction; the problem of the uniformity of nature; Hume's skepticism of our knowledge of causality; the egocentric predicament; the problem of the correspondence of thoughts to things; the problem of our knowledge of external reality (a.k.a., the Matrix problem); defining knowledge as justified, true belief; explicating; epistemology and knowledge in terms of belief rather than being; the fact/value dichotomy; the naturalistic fallacy; brute facts; and the problem of the one and the many. With the exception of the last one, these are largely the product of modern and contemporary philosophy.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *The Absurdity of Unbelief*, 46, 266. Despite ardent protests to the contrary, some Presuppositionalist continually blur the distinction between the ontology of these issues and the epistemology of the issues. Granted that God is the necessary condition for anything outside Himself (ontology), the *presupposition* of God is not always so. One cannot breathe without the oxygen in the air. But one does not have to *presuppose* the oxygen in the air in order to breathe. Seeking to show how and why it is that God is necessary for anything outside of Himself is *ipso facto* to do classical apologetics.

Given the details of what Johnson thinks about natural revelation (many details of which I have not treated in this paper),<sup>69</sup> it is no wonder that he finds himself quite confident in his own views about God's nature and has no problem with summarily dismissing the conclusions of theologians and philosophers who have gone to great lengths to explain their reasons for their views and yet who come to different conclusions than Johnson does.

#### Immobility, Passive Potency, and Active Potency

Perhaps Johnson's criticism of Aquinas that first riveted the attention of some Thomists had to do with what Johnson calls God's "immobility." While the term is not found that often in the literature, it is a synonym for immutability.<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere, Johnson uses the term 'immovability' for the same notion. It is what he calls "the fatal flaw." He says,

The fatal flaw of the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas is the foundation of his natural theology—divine immobility, the idea that God cannot move himself. ... This is the basic problem even the confident Angelic Doctor could not overcome. Divine immobility cannot be reconciled with the God of the Bible because it is inherently incongruent with the God of the Bible.<sup>71</sup>

Elsewhere Johnson argues:

The Bible does not teach divine immovability. Of course, the Bible affirms that God didn't create himself. He didn't come into existence or need any external power to actualize any passive potency within him. ... He is self-existent and needs nothing outside himself to be who he is and to do what he wills to do. Yet God's aseity, independence, and absoluteness do not mean that God can't choose to exercise power or

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<sup>69</sup> Some of those details include that natural revelation is efficacious, immediate, and infallible. See Johnson, *Failure*, 10-16 and *Saving*, 5-11.

<sup>70</sup> For an important treatment of Aquinas that uses the term, see Joseph Owens, "Immobility and Existence in Aquinas" in Catan, *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God* cited in note 11. Owens' paper was originally published in *Mediaeval Studies* 30 (1968): 22-46.

<sup>71</sup> *Failure*, 114.

refrain from exercising power. The biblical doctrine of divine simplicity and immutability does not mean, as Aquinas believed, divine immobility.<sup>72</sup>

Clearly Johnson is unaware of Aquinas's distinction between passive potency and active potency. Passive potency is a potency within a thing in terms of which it can undergo change, which is to say that the potency is actualized by some actuality either within some other part of the same thing that is already actual (as an animal's legs can actualize the potential of the rest of the animal's body to move) or from some actuality outside the thing (as heat can melt ice). In contrast, active potency is the capacity or power of a being to cause changes in something else or, in the case of God alone, to cause something to exist *ex nihilo*. To say that God has no passive potency that can be actualized—which is to say that God is immutable or immobile—is not at all inconsistent with God's active potency to act or refrain from acting in any way He chooses and to cause changes in other things.<sup>73</sup>

#### Aquinas's Doctrine of Esse

The most serious misunderstanding Johnson has of Aquinas—indeed, the one misunderstanding that is the cause of nearly every other misunderstanding—is that Johnson is completely unaware of Aquinas's doctrine of *esse* and its import for most everything Aquinas argues in his metaphysics, especially about God.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Failure*, 137

<sup>73</sup> William Lane Craig exhibits the same ignorance of Aquinas's distinction when he says, "There's absolutely no biblical grounds for this stronger doctrine of divine simplicity [of Aquinas]. In fact, I'm convinced that the strong doctrine is not simply unbiblical. I think it's positively anti-biblical. ... The idea that God has no potentiality seems to me to be obviously false scripturally speaking because God has the ability, the potential to do all sorts of things that He isn't actually doing. So, clearly God has tremendous, unlimited potential." [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piu1kehXf58>, accessed 11/26/22] In response, the fact that God has "the ability, the potential to do all sorts of things that He isn't actually doing" is not at all inconsistent with Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity which denies that God has passive potency. Simplicity does not deny that God has active potency. For more on act and potency, see note 50.

<sup>74</sup> For a thorough treatment of Aquinas's notion of being, see the references in note 15 to the works of Feser, Gilson, Klubertanz, Knasas, Owens, and Veatch. For a treatment of Aquinas's notion of *esse* in contrast to

'Esse' is the infinitive of the Latin verb "I am," *sum*. Though it literally means "to be," such a translation is often awkward in English. It sounds odd for one to talk about the "to be" of God. As such, it is variously translated into English as a noun such as 'existence' or, though closer to the infinitive meaning, the, perhaps also odd sounding, 'act of existing'. Often in the literature of Thomist philosophers, the Latin *esse* is retained and left untranslated.

Admittedly, a sufficient exploration of Aquinas's understanding of *esse* would require much more than could fit into the last part of a single article. I hope, however, to be able to say enough here to show (1) how Aquinas's doctrine of *esse* is absolutely necessary to enable one to understand the rest of his metaphysics—indeed, his entire system—and; (2) that Jeffrey D. Johnson never considers *esse* and how it enables Aquinas to transform the pagan philosophy of Aristotle into the Christian philosophy Thomists celebrate.<sup>75</sup>

Aquinas's understanding of *esse*, though clearly influenced by certain philosophical antecedents,<sup>76</sup> is nevertheless a profound innovation and serves, according to certain schools of Thomistic thought, as the key to his entire metaphysics—one which makes all the difference between him and Aristotle, despite Aquinas's tremendous indebtedness to him.<sup>77</sup> Thomist and

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certain contemporary views of existence, see Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 57-90.

<sup>75</sup> Some of what follows is from my unpublished paper "Antecedents to Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity" delivered at a joint panel session of the Evangelical Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Religion meeting in Denver, CO. Nov. 19, 2018. The other interlocutors were my colleague at Southern Evangelical Seminary, Brian Huffling, who defending simplicity with me; and William Lane Craig and Stephen T. Davis who rejected Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity.

<sup>76</sup> For an exploration of one such influence, see Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

<sup>77</sup> There are certainly other elements in Aquinas's philosophy the overlooking of which will lead to vast misunderstanding of Aquinas. Perhaps second in importance to *esse* is Aquinas's doctrine of analogy. See note 16. For a summary of the similarities and differences in Aristotle and Aquinas, see Joseph Owens, "Aristotle and

historian of philosophy, Etienne Gilson, (see note 11) deftly states the significance of Aquinas's understanding of existence over above Aristotle's.

In order to metamorphose the doctrine of Aristotle, Thomas has ascribed a new meaning to the principles of Aristotle. As a philosophy, Thomism is essentially a metaphysics. It is a revolution in the history of the metaphysical interpretation of the first principle, which is "being."<sup>78</sup>

This is precisely why Johnson says what he does (repeating a quote I gave at the beginning):

By holding Aristotle's starting point and rejecting Aristotle's conclusion, Aquinas' philosophical theology was filled with all kinds of irresolvable tension.<sup>79</sup>

The upshot is this: Johnson is right that Aquinas does reject Aristotle's conclusions about God. The god of Aristotle bears almost no resemblance to the God of the Bible. But Johnson is wrong to think that Aquinas is being inconsistent. There are no "irresolvable tensions." The longer quote of Gilson makes it manifest when he puts it this way—the reader should note that every one of the points that Gilson iterates is explicitly *not* Aristotle's view:

Thomas uses the language of Aristotle everywhere to make the Philosopher say that there is only one God, the pure Act of Being, Creator of the world, infinite and omnipotent, a providence for all that which is, intimately present to every one of his creatures, especially to men, every one of whom is endowed with a personally immortal soul naturally able to survive the death of its body.<sup>80</sup>

Gilson goes on:

The best way to make Aristotle say so many things he never said was not to show that, had he understood himself better than he did, he would have said them. For indeed

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Aquinas" in Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38-59.

<sup>78</sup> Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 365.

<sup>79</sup> Jeffrey D. Johnson, "Doubting Thomas Indeed." See note 36.

<sup>80</sup> Gilson, *History*, 365.

Aristotle seems to have understood himself pretty well. He has said what he had to say, given the meaning which he himself attributed to the principles of his own philosophy. Even the dialectical acumen of Saint Thomas Aquinas could not have extracted from the principles of Aristotle more than what they could possibly yield. The true reason why his conclusions were different from those of Aristotle was that his own principles themselves were different.<sup>81</sup>

Johnson only sees tensions that are "irresolvable" because, again, he is completely innocent of any knowledge of the metaphysics of Aristotle (not realizing that Aristotle is doing metaphysics and not merely physics) and its augmentation by Aquinas of *esse*, the act of existing.

### ***Unpacking Esse***

What can be said about *esse*? Why might I refer to it as an augmentation of Aristotle's metaphysics? How does the innovation of *esse* give rise to Aquinas's natural theology? A few observations are in order. First, one should note that for Aristotle, the highest level in his metaphysics is Form. To be real is to acquire Form. Aristotle has no separate philosophical doctrine of existence. In sensible, hylomorphic objects, Form actualizes matter. To be the highest of beings is to be pure Form. As an act, to be pure Form is to be pure actuality—*actus purus*. For him, the gods were pure actuality.

I characterize *esse* an extension of Aristotle's metaphysics inasmuch as in it Aquinas extends Aristotle's act/potency schema beyond Form. Aquinas adds a "layer," if you will, to the metaphysics. While acknowledging that Form actualizes Matter and that the Form/Matter hylomorphism of a sensible object constitutes its essence, Aquinas recognizes that this essence itself must be actualized by existence (*esse*) for it to be real. Joseph Owens, says,

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<sup>81</sup> Gilson, *History*, 365.

For Aristotle, to be actualized meant to acquire form. For Aquinas, it meant to be brought into existence, since for him existence is the actuality of every form or nature.<sup>82</sup>

But the essences of sensible objects and, for that matter, the essences of the pure Forms themselves—the gods of Aristotle but the angels for Aquinas—can only exist by being actualized by *esse*. All such objects, if they are real, are only real because they are given existence. Existence is not something that is true of them because of their essence. This is the essence/existence distinction in Aquinas. Creatures can only exist inasmuch as they are given existence by that being whose very essence is *ipsum esse subsistens*—subsistent existence itself. Aquinas says,

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<sup>82</sup> Joseph Owens, "Aquinas and the Five Ways," *Monist* 58 (January 1974): 21. Elsewhere Owens argues,

From Aristotle's own point of view, then, nothing more can be said about this type of being [Being *per accidens*]. But what is it that the Stagirite is so summarily dismissing from his philosophical consideration? From the viewpoint of the much later distinction between essence and the act of existing, this treatment must mean that Aristotle is leaving the act of existing entirely outside the scope of his philosophy. The act of existing must be wholly escaping his *scientific* consideration. All necessary and definite connections between things can be reduced to essence. ... In a word, Aristotle does not for an instant deny existence. ... But he does not seem even to suspect that it is an act worthy of any special consideration, or that it is capable of philosophical treatment. ... The difference in viewpoint can readily be seen in the commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on this question. St. Thomas takes great pains to show that the contingent as well as the necessary must be immediately caused by the Primary Being. [Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics: A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), 309, emphasis in original]

Owens goes on,

"In a philosophy conditioned by this fundamental doctrine of Being [in Aristotle], the absence of any treatment of existence *is inevitable*. But this deficiency becomes apparent only when Aristotelian thought is regarded from a later historical viewpoint. What can be known and contemplated for the Stagirite is form, even though understood as act. Determination and necessity and finitude are requisite. The contingent and the infinite have no place in this contemplation. What is not form, or reducible to form, has no interest for the Primary Philosophy." [Owens, *The Doctrine of Being*, 466-467, emphasis in original]

For an in-depth discussion of Aristotle's doctrine of being (existence), see the Owens source reference above. For a discussion of the fact that there does not seem to be robust notion of existence as such in any ancient Greek philosopher, see Charles H. Kahn, "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy," in *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parvis Morewedge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 7-17.

God is supremely being ... He is being itself, subsistent, absolutely undetermined.<sup>83</sup>

To God alone does it belong to be His own subsistent being. ... for no creature is its own existence, forasmuch as its existence is participated." <sup>84</sup>

This being is pure actuality—*actus purus*. For God there is no essence/existence distinction. Because Aristotle has no notion of existence beyond Form itself, the *actus purus* of Aristotle is not at all the *actus purus* of Aquinas. The latter is He who Aquinas and others before him recognized as the great "I Am" of Exodus 3:14.<sup>85</sup> Clearly Johnson is completely unaware of this distinctive in Aquinas. He says

There is the premise, this presupposition behind Thomism that shapes basically how he understands Scriptures that there is the "chain of being" between God and creation; and because it's Aristotelian philosophy that doesn't have a clear distinction between God and creation because there's no creation out of nothing in Aristotle. The Bible has creation as coming out of nothing and it's not God; creation is not God. That is a huge biblical foundational presupposition. Now, Aquinas will affirm it verbally, but working off the matrix of the chain of being, which leads to pantheism if you're consistent. And so, this method is how he's understanding God and it leads to a hyper view of simplicity ..."<sup>86</sup>

In differing amounts of detail, one finds the notion of the chain of being (even if the phrase is not used) in Plato (*Timaeus*, 28<sup>a</sup>, ff), Aristotle (*History of Animals*, VIII), Plotinus (*Enneads*), Augustine (*Confessions* IV, 10), and Aquinas (*Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, 11). Of these,

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<sup>83</sup> *STI*, Q. 11, art. 4.

<sup>84</sup> *STI*, Q. 12, art. 5.

<sup>85</sup> See E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study of Traditional Theism* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1943). Gaven Kerr puts it this way. "A further reflection on the congruence between the Mosaic and Thomistic conceptions of God is worth considering. The author of the biblical text was no trained philosopher; he did not display that characteristic flair of reasoning necessary in philosophical matters. So his statement that the God of the Hebrews is He Who Is is not a conclusion made on the basis of philosophical reasoning. But consider the latter along with the fact that the Mosaic conception of God as He Who Is had no known predecessor of which we can tell. So it seems that without any deep metaphysical insight nor with any explicit prior determination as such, the author of the biblical text has managed to offer an expression of God that just happens to be in accord with some of the most profound metaphysical reasoning about the nature of God and His relation to the world in the history of Western thought." [Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God*, 169]

<sup>86</sup> *Live from GBTS*, time stamp 53:55.



Aquinas's view is unique. The being which is God is not univocal to the being of creation. God is subsistent being itself. Creation is caused being. It should be clear that it is absolutely not the case that the chain of being in Aquinas's view is anywhere close to pantheism.

Herein is what causes Johnson's interpretations of Aquinas to entirely miss the mark. While observing that Aquinas is employing the metaphysics of Aristotle but then completely missing Aquinas's replacing Aristotle's principles with his own principle of *esse*, Johnson comes to the wrong conclusion that the god of Aristotle—most definitely not the true God—has to be the God of Aquinas despite Aquinas's claims otherwise. Johnson thinks that Aquinas can make his claims about God demonstrated by his philosophy only by being inconsistent. As we have seen, there is no inconsistency whatsoever.

To illustrate all the more that Johnson completely misses how Aquinas differs from Aristotle here, consider his response to Feser even, after Feser clearly pointed out how Johnson missed the point.

It is strange to me that he thinks I missed this point, when I explained in detail what Aquinas meant by defining God as "Pure Act." Aquinas believed God was "supreme in active potency." This is the very meaning Aquinas assigned the phrase *actus purus*. I didn't miss explaining this about Aquinas. How could I have missed this point? It is crucial to my own theses against Aquinas. *Aquinas accepted Aristotle's foundation that God is the unmoved mover, but Aquinas did not embrace Aristotle's logical conclusion [emphasis added] that God could not have been the moving cause of the universe. ... As I explain in my book, Aquinas was unable to show how God could be Pure Act (unmoved mover) and, at the same time, the moving cause (effectual cause) of a world that was made out of nothing.*<sup>87</sup>

The reason Aquinas does not "embrace Aristotle's logical conclusion" is, as Gilson pointed out, Aquinas assigned new principles to Aristotle's argument. The reason it seems to Johnson that "Aquinas was unable to show how God could be Pure Act (unmoved mover) and, at the same

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<sup>87</sup> Johnson, "Doubting Thomas Indeed."

time, the moving cause (effectual cause) of a world that was made out of nothing" is entirely because Johnson misses how Aquinas's notion of *esse* completely changes the philosophical meaning and content of Aristotle's argument. This is especially true regarding "Aristotle's foundation" as Johnson puts it. Because he is not aware at all of Aquinas's metaphysics, he cannot catch the misunderstanding that Feser was pointing out that Johnson had. Johnson then erroneously repeats the same mistake in thinking he has rebutted Feser's correction.

### *Implications of Esse*

Given this metaphysical innovation of *esse*, what, then are the implications? I have pointed out that, for Aquinas, in any created thing, there is a fundamental distinction between its essence (what it is) and its existence (that it is). As I have said, for anything to exist other than God, it must be given existence by God. This, however, is not making reference exclusively to a thing coming into existence. It also means that a creature has to be sustained in existence, which is to say, that it has to be continually caused to exist by God as long as it exists.<sup>88</sup> Aquinas says,

Now since God is very being by His own essence, created being has to be His proper effect ... Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being ...<sup>89</sup>

By way of illustration, if you saw a statue, you might well ask where the statue came from. When you discover that it was made by a local artist, you would consider the question answered. This, even without knowing whether the artist was still alive. In contrast, if you were hearing music, you would not ask where the music came from. Instead, you would ask where is

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<sup>88</sup> Aquinas's understanding here makes his cosmological argument indifferent as to whether the universe ever began to exist. For Aquinas, the universe would still need God to account for its existence even if it had existed from forever. Of course, Aquinas held that the universe had not existed from forever. However, he regarded this a truth knowable only by faith and not demonstration. See *STI*, Q. 46.

<sup>89</sup> *STI*, Q. 8, art. 1.

the music *coming* from. You realize that, as an act, the music is only music as long as it is being caused to be music. Once the cause of the music stops causing the music, the music ceases to exist. As an illustration, this gets at Aquinas's understanding of existing as an act. God is subsistent existence itself. Creation has existence only as God is continually causing it to exist. Colossians 1:16-17 says,

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.<sup>90</sup>

Since God is His own act of existing—His attribute known as simplicity—all the classical attributes of God cascade inexorably.<sup>91</sup> How is this so, in Aquinas's thinking? Aquinas maintains that existence as such contains all perfections. Note that 'perfection' here is not

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<sup>90</sup> *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982). 'Consist' translates συνεστηκε from συνιστάμι, one meaning of which is "continue, endure, exist, hold together." [Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. by Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v., συνιστάμι, p. 791.

<sup>91</sup> A partial list of figures, creeds, and confessions that affirm simplicity (even if it is not the full-blown view we find in Aquinas) include: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* II, 13; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5, xii, 78-82; Origen, *De Principiis* 1.1.6; Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, VIII, §43; Basil the Great, *Letter 234*; Augustine, *Letter to Bishop Euodius*; Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, Caput I, §IV; John of Damascus, *An Exposition on the Orthodox Faith*, chap. 8; Anselm, *Proslogium*, 18; and Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, Bk. 1, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, 8.3 (23).

exclusively a moral one.<sup>92</sup> While moral perfection can be (indeed, *must be* according to Aquinas) parsed out within this category, here 'perfection' is a broader notion.<sup>93</sup> Aquinas says,

Wherefore it is clear that being as we understand it here is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections.<sup>94</sup>

Creatures participate in the perfections of existence to the extent of and according to the contours and limits of their essences. As existence actualizes essence, it does so in that way. Since God is

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<sup>92</sup> That moral perfection (but not the moral virtues as attributed to God) must be parsed out in the category of the actualization of potencies is the essence of Natural Law Theory. For a very helpful summary of this, especially regarding God's relationship to the matter, see Edward Feser, "Does Morality Depend on God? (Updated)" at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/07/does-morality-depend-on-god.html> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016). See also "God and Morality" at [http://richardhowe.com/index.htm\\_files/GodandMoralityPaper.pdf](http://richardhowe.com/index.htm_files/GodandMoralityPaper.pdf) (accessed 11/22/18) where I summarize Feser's article and nest the discussion in a summary of Natural Law Theory. For more in-depth treatment, see J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); J. Daryl, Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); R. S. Clark, "Calvin on the *Lex Naturalis*," *Stulos Theological Journal* 6, no. 1 and 2 (1998): 1-22; Jesse Covington, Bryan McGraw, and Micah Watson, *Natural Law and Evangelical Political Thought* (Lanham: Lexington, 2013); Austin Fagothy, *Right Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice Based on the Teachings of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Charlotte: Tan, 1959); Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); John T. McNeill, "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers," *The Journal of Religion* 26, no. 3 (July 1946): 168-182; and David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); David VanDrunen, "Medieval Natural Law and the Reformation: A Comparison of Aquinas and Calvin," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (Winter 2006): 77-98. Much of the above is against the backdrop of Aristotle and Aquinas. For them, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aquinas's *ST I-II*, Q. 1-114, especially his *Treatise on Law* (Q. 90-144, sometimes published separately). Finally, it should be noted (without at this point much supporting argument) that the reason the actualization of a potential is a perfection, or, more to the point, is an actualization of a thing's good, is because in Aquinas's thinking, the terms 'being' and 'good' are convertible. For a discussion of this, see Jan A. Aertsen, "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas." *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 449-470. For a broader treatment of being and goodness (also including an entry by Aertsen), see Scott MacDonald, ed. *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>93</sup> For the most part, to perfect something is to actualize the potencies in a thing, sending it towards fully becoming what it is. Aristotle used these terms interchangeably (ἐνεργάζομαι, ἐνεργεία: actualize, actuality; ἐντελέχεια: perfection). It is interesting to note that the word ἐντελέχεια arises from the root words ἐν (in) + τέλος (end, goal) and ἔχειν (to have)—thus *to have the end in*. That 'perfection' is an apt word to use in this context is argued by Joseph Owens. "An alternate word for actuality in this respect is "perfection" (*entelecheia*). It was used by Aristotle along with actuality to designate the formal elements in the things. These perfected the material element in the sense of filling its potentiality and completing the thing. Since existence is required to complete the thing and all the formal elements and activities, it may be aptly called the perfection of all perfections." [Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968), 52-53]

<sup>94</sup> *ST I*, Q. 13, art. 5.

not an essence that is itself actualized by existence, but instead is an essence that is existence itself—*ipsum esse subsistens*—, God has all the perfections of existence without limit. The effulgence of creation's characteristics and qualities splayed out before us is but a finite fleck of the truth, goodness, and beauty of the infinite God, its maker. From these splayed-out attributes, reasoning from effect to cause, the Thomist can demonstrate the existence and attributes of the God of classical theism. It should be manifest, therefore, that there is absolutely not the slightest hint of pantheism here. Creation is not the being of God. There could be no stronger Creator/creature distinction than the God whose essence is subsistent existence itself and the Creation whose participated existence is given and sustained by God.

As I have acknowledged several times, it is completely fair to dispute Aquinas's views and/or my interpretation of them anywhere. There is no shortage of philosophical views regarding existence.<sup>95</sup> For that matter, even granting a view of existence which might be considered by some to be Thomistic, it might not be the view advocated by Existential Thomists such as I. But what is not acceptable in one's dispute with Aquinas is the complete absence of a conscientious engagement of what Aquinas actually means by existence. The failure to do so prevents one from a fair examination of the extent to which Aquinas's conclusions about natural theology follow from his principles.

### **Conclusion**

Revisiting my list of grievances will remind one of other problems with Johnson's critique of Aquinas's natural theology:

- his erroneous understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture;

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<sup>95</sup> See the Parviz Morewedge source reference in note 82.

- his untenable view on how to interpret the Scriptures;
- his erroneous method of reading Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*;
- his confusing the philosophical issue of the one and the many with the theological issue of the Trinity;
- his misunderstanding of Aquinas's doctrine of analogy inasmuch as he regards analogy as metaphor;
- his unawareness of how Aquinas uses the term 'know', especially regarding Aquinas's claim that we cannot know God.

I deal with them to an extent in the notes. I hope to develop a more in-depth treatment of Johnson's critique of Aquinas. I have said it several times, but let me say it one last time. It is quite fair to challenge Aquinas's thinking and anyone's interpretation of his thinking. After all is said and done, it might turn out that Aquinas is wrong. But if he is wrong, I hope I have shown that it is not for any of the reasons Jeffery D. Johnson gives with which I have dealt in this article.