



Contemporary Naturalism, God, and the Methodological Relevance of Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This article claims that the strict methodological considerations of contemporary philosophical naturalism do not hinder serious philosophical reference to the thought of Thomas Aquinas because his methodological principles are just as rigorous. The methodology of Thomas Aquinas is not explicitly stated in the *Summa Theologiae*. Therefore, the *Summa contra Gentiles* and *On being and essence* are referenced to clarify what Thomas seems to have thought about relationship between philosophy and theology. The work of Fiona Ellis is an example of how a contemporary philosopher can methodologically justify taking a position of qualified naturalism. Ellis calls this expansive naturalism. This methodology desires to accept a type of naturalistic philosophy. Yet, Ellis holds that expansive naturalism is able to employ theology as a resource for philosophy without falling into the trap of superstition. In order to arrive at this contemporary reflection, there is a very brief sketch of recent intellectual history concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology.

Keywords

Aquinas, God, methodology, naturalism, philosophy, theology

The current scholarship on the question of whether God exists might seem on the surface to have little in common with the thought of Thomas Aquinas as articulated in his *Summa Theologiae* q.2 a.3. From the perspective of the current debate, the thought of Thomas could seem esoteric, unnecessary, and inapplicable. The recent work by Fiona Ellis offers a complex contemporary approach to the question of God. Her work indicates the shifting ground of the debate and the use of an explicit articulation of methodology. The current conversation on the existence of God appears separated from the thought

of Thomas because of both the content and the methodology.¹ This essay briefly highlights one important methodological distinction that might make it possible to relate the thought of Thomas to the current context. It could be possible to introduce the thought of Thomas into the current discussion because the subtle methodological distinctions found in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (*SCG*) can be combined with the *Summa Theologiae* q.2 a.3 reply to objection 2.

The methodology behind the current discussion on the existence of God is influenced by several significant factors.² The historical circumstances that stimulate the current discussion of the existence of God are numerous. These influences partially account for the detachment between the thought of Thomas and the current state of the question on the existence of God. In the history of philosophy, there is the development of modal logic, modern uses of epistemology, Kant, Descartes, Frege, existentialism, and hermeneutics.³ The rapid industrialization, democratization, technologization, and globalization of society has been spurred by a belief in the progress of science. A modern conception of science, a reductionist scientism, has been used by people like Richard Dawkins to argue against the existence of God. More seriously, variations of scientism has been used by philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell and the members of the Vienna Circle. It is possible to glean from this brief survey that many influential thinkers, schools of thought, and movements promoted methodological debates because of the philosophical principles supported by an interpretation of science.

The thought of Thomas is philosophical and theological. The question of God can be addressed by philosophers and theologians because the reality they are addressing is the same. Since the time of Thomas, in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and theology, some significant events are the Reformation, the Council of Trent, the French Revolution, the loss of the papal states, the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, Vatican I, and Vatican II.⁴ These radical developments seem

¹ The purpose of this paper is not to argue for the acceptance of one of the five ways in the *Summa Theologiae*, the presentation in *Summa contra Gentiles* or the understanding of God's existence in *On being and essence*. This does not address different scientific worldviews found in the thought of Thomas and in our own time.

² It would be helpful to examine the thought of Thomas and how his methodology was influenced by Augustine, Neo-Platonism, Aristotle, interpreters of Aristotle, etc. but many works have been written on that topic and that would expand the scope of this essay.

³ This is meant to highlight thinkers and schools of thought that brought about changes in the method and content of philosophy. For example, in Kant there is an idea of analogy, which greatly differs from the Medieval and a moral argument for the possibility of God. In Descartes, there is an attempt to establish the existence of God beyond all doubt with standard of clear and distinct justification.

⁴ Vatican I in *Dei Filius* provides a synthetic articulation of the existence of God and the relationship between faith and reason. "By enduring agreement the Catholic Church

to separate the thought of Thomas from the current discussion.⁵ It is necessary to hold them in mind if it is going to be possible to introduce the thought of Thomas into the current discussion.

The public debate that was carried on by the “New Atheists” was a result of philosophical principles. One way to articulate the philosophical principles and methodology presupposed by the publicized debates is with the term naturalism.⁶ Fiona Ellis says that a naturalist is “someone who ‘takes it that the universe is a natural realm, governed by nature’s laws’, and who believes that ‘there is nothing supernatural in the universe – no fairies or goblins, angels, demons, gods or goddesses.’”⁷ There are various subtle forms of naturalism. To name only two, a naturalist can be a scientific

has held and holds that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only in principle but also in object: (1) in principle, indeed, because we know in one way by natural reason, in another by divine faith; (2) in object, however, because, in addition to things to which natural reason can attain, mysteries hidden in God are proposed to us for belief which, had they not been divinely revealed, could not become known.” “And, not only can faith and reason never be at variance with one another, but they also bring mutual help to each other, since right reasoning demonstrates the basis of faith and, illumined by its light, perfects the knowledge of divine things, while faith frees and protects reason from errors and provides it with manifold knowledge.” “And it (the Church) does not forbid disciplines of this kind, each in its own sphere, to use its own principles and its own method; but, although recognizing this freedom, it continually warns them not to fall into errors by opposition to divine doctrine, nor, having transgressed their own proper limits, to be busy with and to disturb those matters which belong to faith.”

⁵ It is worth noting that the work of Henri de Lubac, especially in his *Mystery of the Supernatural* was a theological attempt to heal the theoretical and methodological “dualism” that was being espoused between a pure nature and the supernatural. Maurice Bondel articulated a philosophy of action, which was purely immanent, in the attempt to propose the human will as an infinite power which cannot terminate in a finite realm; hence it would extend into the infinite. Raymond Moloney, S.J. *De Lubac and Lonergan on the Supernatural* Theological Studies 69 (2008).

⁶ Philosophers who seriously engage with Naturalism can be found in the volumes of collected essays on the topic. Also relevant are works by Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor because Naturalism is an important concept in the discussion of secularism, as the political application of living in a secular or disenchanting world.

The work of Fiona Ellis has been selected because it is current and it engages with theologians, such as, Karl Rahner, Herbert McCabe, Michael Buckley, and philosophers, such as, John Cottingham, Elanor Stump, Charles Taliaferro, Brian Davies, Akeel Bilgrami, and Mario De Caro. And because she is active in recent engagements on the topic: “2017-18: Supernaturalism and Naturalism: Beyond the Divide, Porticus UK/Heythrop College, (collaborative project with Professor Mario De Caro, University Roma Tre/Tufts) It is a common assumption of contemporary analytic philosophy that supernaturalism is indefensible, and that ‘anti-supernaturalism’ is the starting point of all good philosophy. The aim of this project has been to examine and to challenge this anti-supernaturalist stance, and to explore the limits of a more liberal or expansive form of naturalism.” <https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-philosophy-of-religion/> https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMCjHRs0UcFY84cluZw4eOb3_d7462bRg/

⁷ Fiona Ellis, “Why I am not an atheist; room for God in naturalism.” *The Philosopher’s Magazine* (2014), p. 33.

naturalist or an expansive naturalist. A scientific naturalist forces a choice “between either science or God” because she sees them as competing explanations.⁸ There are variations of expansive naturalism. Expansive naturalists may or may not be a scientific naturalist because some expansive naturalists accept the possibility that science does not offer a complete description of reality. An expansive naturalist might allow for other forms of knowledge to play a part in understanding reality because of the fact of value; in other words, the “value enchantment” of reality.⁹ An expansive naturalist might accept this expansion of value into their reality. Ellis uses this in her work because if it is possible for respected philosophers to admit that naturalism should not exclude value then perhaps it might be intellectually respectable to discuss God. Yet, they might still apply the methodology of scientific naturalism to the question of the existence of God. This distinction among expansive naturalists highlights the importance of methodology for the current conversation because it might be possible to engage a naturalist on the status of reality only when methodological assumptions are explicitly analyzed.

In another methodological undertaking, Ellis intentionally engages with Christian theologians in order to distinguish between the disciplines of philosophy and theology and ultimately to reach a methodological conclusion.¹⁰ Philosophers should not be scientific naturalists. A philosopher can still be an expansive naturalist but not an

⁸ Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 3. e.g. The New Atheists

⁹ Fiona Ellis. *God Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 115. The fact of value phrase is a play on words. Thank to the work of Hilary Putman, as one towering example, many philosophers no longer accept the fact/value dichotomy. Putnam, Hilary. *The Collapse of the Fact/value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. Ellis says, “Some expansive naturalists admit that it is possible to admit value as something which “elude scientific investigation and which demand for their discernment and understanding a rather different approach.” While rejecting any analogously theistic ontology because they see God as a thing like a ghost, all together too “spooky” to be admitted.” “The familiar message is that we must reject the assumption that the scientist has the monopoly on nature and broaden its limits accordingly. The message I have been building up to here is that we must be prepared also to question the assumption that these limits are to be monopolized by the form of expansive naturalism under current consideration. That is to say, we must consider the possibility that there is an intellectually respectable version of the claim that the natural world is divinely enchanted, that our responsiveness precisely *does* have a bearing upon our humanity. Such a position promises to lend justice to the scientific naturalist’s assumption that divine enchantment and evaluative enchantment come as a joint package, although the precise nature of the relation between od and value remains to be seen.” Page 87

¹⁰ Fiona Ellis, *God Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 198-9. “The idea that God is not reducible to the world suggests that we need to uphold a distinction between theology and philosophy, and it is no part of my position that the two disciplines are to be conflated. On the contrary, we can philosophize about things in the world without mentioning God, just as we can take as our focus God Himself. The conclusions we draw in this latter context will be confined to God as He is in relation to

expansive naturalist who excludes God.¹¹ Ellis is offering her work as an example of the methodological relationship between philosophy and theology. It is an example of an expansive naturalistic work of philosophy that is not afraid of engaging with theologians on the question of the existence of God.¹²

In order to articulate this particular form of expansive naturalism, Ellis has to argue that the relationship between philosophy and theology is possible because of particular methodological and ontological clarifications. Ontologically God is not another thing among things, like a ghost or one possible god or goddess among many.¹³ Since God is not in ontological competition with nature, God is not “dualistically opposed to anything within the natural/empirical realm.”¹⁴ Methodologically, this means that science and God are not “explanatory competitors.”¹⁵ Science, philosophy, and theology have their own methodologies. The mutual relationship between God and nature/theology and philosophy is not “closed off at the outset by the imposition of a framework which excludes theism.”¹⁶ For example,

the world, for even if we endeavor to talk about God outside His relation to the world, such talk involves an implicit and irreducible reference to the one who is seeking to comprehend Him in this manner.”

¹¹ Fiona Ellis. *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 202. “Should philosophers be naturalists? The answer is no if naturalism is understood in exclusively scientific terms . . . Should philosophers be expansive naturalists? If this amounts to asking whether they should accept everything that is said by the typical expansive naturalist, then the answer must likewise be no . . . ”

¹² Fiona Ellis. *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 204. “if we allow that theology can enrich philosophy, and that God’s action can enrich nature. This can look like an invitation to bad philosophy, and there are versions of this move which warrant such a complaint. However, the theologian under present consideration is critically astute, . . . At this point, and in the spirit of his expansive naturalist approach, he may be persuaded to enter into dialogue with the theologian. If my conclusions are justified then he can forsake such a task only at the risk of compromising his insights and robbing theology of a fundamental philosophical resource. After all, he offers the prospects for demonstrating that belief in God is intellectually respectable, and that this conclusion can be appreciated by those who have taken on board the lessons of the best naturalistic philosophy of our time.”

¹³ Fiona Ellis. *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 85. God is not a being among other beings in the natural world and yet this does not deny a place for God within a naturalist framework understood in a particular manner just as value can be understood. And 86. That the divine enchantment of the world is not an introduction of ghosts, gods or a being god is analogous to the evaluative enchantment of nature. The scientific naturalist blocks the entry of values into their ontology and analogously blocks God from ontology as if God were a thing like a ghost.

¹⁴ Fiona Ellis. ‘Religious Understanding, Naturalism, and Theory,’ in Fiona Ellis, ed., *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 47.

¹⁵ Fiona Ellis. ‘Religious Understanding, Naturalism, and Theory,’ in Fiona Ellis, ed., *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 49-50.

¹⁶ Fiona Ellis. ‘Religious Understanding, Naturalism, and Theory,’ in Fiona Ellis, ed., *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 55.

physics or the philosophy of mathematics have their own principles and methodologies which are free from theological implications.¹⁷ A physicist, a chemist, or someone who does abstract mathematics can methodologically exclude the question of God from their calculations. In a particular sense, if they are following the principles of their discipline then they should exclude the questions of theism. In this sense, it is important for each discipline to respect its own ontological and methodological limitations. The ability to respect the limitations of each discipline does not necessitate a denial of theism.

This subtle articulation of methodology is one point of meeting between Thomas and the current debate about God and naturalism. As Thomas articulates it in the *SCG*, there is a philosophical order as distinguished from the theological consideration of the believer.¹⁸ In the philosophical work, *On being and essence*, Thomas articulates the existence of God as the source of being/existence because the essence of God is being/existence.¹⁹ Differing from the *Summa Theologiae*, this

“Clearly it is not enough simply to re-assert, in the face of her skepticism, that nature is God-involving and that she is already open to God. What we can do, however, is to suggest a way of making sense of such a position, making clear that the approach here is invitational and exploratory rather than commanding. We can begin by pointing out that there is a general question of how we are to comprehend the limits of nature, and that once we have resisted the assumption that these limits are to be comprehended in exclusively scientific terms, there are questions of how far we can go, whether there is any scope for moving in a theistic direction, and whether we haven’t already made this move by virtue of acknowledging a level of moral and spiritual awareness.” “...these questions are not closed off at the outset by the imposition of a framework which excludes theism.”

¹⁷ Hans Halvorson, “Does the Universe need God?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDwpTcSEjak> The example is given of a lecture in an upper level mathematics course and a student asks where does God fit into this universe? The response is that if the principles and methodology of mathematics are followed then God is not a variable that is included in the equation. This illustrates the false understanding of God as a competitive source of meaning within scientific/naturalistic disciplines.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* Book 2, Chapter 4: Quod aliter considerat de creaturis philosophus et theologus (THAT THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE THEOLOGIAN CONSIDER CREATURES IN DIFFERENT WAYS): “The philosopher considers such things as belong to them by nature—the upward tendency of fire, for example; the believer, only such things as belong to them according as they are related to God—the fact, for instance, that they are created by God, are subject to Him, and so on.” “But any things concerning creatures that are considered in common by the philosopher and the believer are conveyed through different principles in each case. For the philosopher takes his argument from the proper causes of things; the believer, from the first cause . . . ” “Hence again, the two kinds of teaching do not follow the same order. For in the teaching of philosophy, which considers creatures in themselves and leads us from them to the knowledge of God, the first consideration is about creatures; the last, of God.” <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles2.htm#4>

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *On being and essence*. “78. Now, if we posit a thing which is existence alone, such that this existence is subsistent, this existence will not receive the addition of a difference because it would no longer be existence alone, but existence plus some form. And much less will it receive the addition of matter because it would no longer be a subsistent existence, but a material existence. Whence it remains that such a thing,

articulation of the being/existence of God is not presented in a theological work.²⁰ Thomas on God in *On being and essence* is a perfect example of the philosophical methodology articulated in the *SCG*. In the current context, this methodology can be called naturalistic because it “considers creatures in themselves and leads us from them to the knowledge of God, the first consideration is about creatures; the last, of God.”²¹ In other words, the philosopher is a naturalist in a methodological sense because “the philosopher takes his argument from the proper causes of things; the [theologian] believer, from the first cause.”²² The methodology in the *SCG* for philosophy partially corresponds with the conclusion offered by Ellis.

In the *SCG*, Thomas is articulating a constructive methodology. While, in the *Summa Theologiae*, q.2 a.3 objection 2, Thomas presents the methodological limitations of a naturalistic methodology. Relying only on the *SCG*, the relationship between Ellis and Thomas is not exact because of the distinction in Ellis between scientific naturalism and expansive naturalism. In the *Summa Theologiae*, examined below, it might be possible to find what might be called a scientific naturalist methodology in q.2 a.3 objection 2. This is important for the relevance of Thomas’s methodological thought on the current debate. Because Ellis is arguing that a scientific naturalist

which is its own existence, cannot be but one. 80. And because every thing which exists by virtue of another is led back, as to its first cause, to that which exists by virtue of itself, it is necessary that there be some thing which is the cause of the existence of all things because it is existence alone. . . . It is clear, therefore, that an intelligence is form and existence, and that it has existence from the First Being, which is existence alone. And this is the First Cause, which is God.” <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/DeEnte&Essentia.htm>

²⁰ Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God; The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), pp. 37-9. “Throughout history, the Five Ways have received widely different interpretations and evaluations. To some, they belong to the most valuable of Thomas’ contributions to philosophy . . . to others they may be regarded as nothing more than a preliminary clarification of what the notion of ‘God’ stands for in the context of Christian faith. The significance to be attached to the demonstration of God’s existence in the context of the *Scientia* of faith is a matter of discussion. One can say that, mostly, the arguments of the Five Ways are approached from a distinctly philosophical viewpoint . . . Recently, however, one sees in the literature a growing awareness of the place and the role of the Five Ways within the theological project of Thomas’ *Summa*. . . I want to argue in this chapter that the question as to whether God exists is first and foremost a matter of finding an access (via) to the intelligibility of God. The real issue for Thomas is not whether God exists as a matter of fact, or even whether we may consider ourselves rationally justified in believing that God exists. His focus is in a certain sense not epistemological at all; . . . What Thomas is looking for is not so much rational certainty as intelligibility, to wit the intelligibility of the truth expressed and asserted by the proposition ‘God exists.’”

²¹ *Summa contra Gentiles*, *ibid*.

²² *SCG*, *ibid*. For example, the philosopher discusses the nature of human language and arrives at conclusions based on the evidence of experience in a method similar to the empirical scientist. If the theologian is considering language then she argues from God as the cause of meaning, perhaps relating it to the use of *Logos* in the Gospel of John.

can become an expansive naturalist and that a expansive naturalist could allow for the world to be God-involving. As Ellis says,

“I am a naturalist, but I am not a scientific naturalist because I see no reason for concluding that science is the sole measure of reality. I am not denying, of course, that it is *a* measure and an exceedingly important one at that. The naturalism I endorse is not co-extensive with atheism. It has room for God. This does not mean that God is a mere part of the world, nor is it a decisive proof for His existence. No such proofs are to be had. It does mean, however, that we must question the assumption that the naturalist disengages from the theist’s ground of debate, a welcome conclusion given that this ground is inescapable.”²³

The expansive naturalist philosopher who does not accept scientific naturalism’s limitation of method and reality can be led from considerations from within philosophical disciplines to questions about the knowledge of God (theism). In other words, for both Thomas and Ellis, it is possible for the philosopher to have a specific naturalistic method because it is proper to the realm of philosophy without being isolated from theism.

Ellis is also claiming that the expansive naturalist philosopher is open to theological considerations of theism. Ellis says, the expansive naturalist can “enter into dialogue with the theologian. . . . After all, [the expansive naturalist] offers the prospects for demonstrating that belief in God is intellectually respectable, and that this conclusion can be appreciated by those who have taken on board the lessons of the best naturalistic philosophy of our time.”²⁴ Thomas says, “But any things concerning creatures that are considered in common by the philosopher and the believer are conveyed through different principles in each case.”²⁵ The philosopher following the principles of expansive naturalism can demonstrate that the claim that God exists can be intellectually respectable in light of and not contrary to naturalistic philosophy. In the words of Thomas, “Hence, also, [the doctrine of the faith] ought to be called the highest wisdom, since it treats of the highest Cause; . . . human philosophy serves [the highest wisdom] as the first wisdom. Accordingly, divine wisdom sometimes argues from principles of human philosophy.”²⁶ The articulation of the methodological relationship between philosophy and theology in Thomas and Ellis shares a great deal in common. Their methodological similarities become clearer when the *Summa*

²³ Fiona Ellis, “Why I am not an atheist; room for God in naturalism.” *The Philosopher’s Magazine* (2014), 40.

²⁴ Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 204. See ft. 22; it might be possible to argue for a parallel between Te Velde’s criteria of intelligibility and Ellis’s idea on intellectually respectable.

²⁵ *SCG*.

²⁶ *SCG*.

Theologiae is incorporated. This provides the final piece which indicates that the methodological understanding of Thomas is apt for the current conversation about the existence of God.

The *Summa Theologiae* is an example of how Thomas, as a Catholic theologian, addressed the question of the existence of God as it arises in the “divine science” of theology. In q.2 a.3, Thomas articulates a methodological and ontological objection to the existence of God. Keeping in mind the methodological distinctions from the *SCG* and the argument from *On being and essence*, Thomas says,

“Obj. 2: Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God’s existence. Reply to Obj. 2: Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.”

The first important point to notice is how Thomas uses the term nature. The use of nature in this objection is, “all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature . . . therefore there is no need to suppose God’s existence,” compared with the *SCG*, “For the philosopher takes his argument from the proper causes of things; the believer, from the first cause.”²⁷ The philosopher can argue from the proper causes of natural effects concerning natural causes. This is methodological naturalism. Objection two states that “we explain natural effects by natural causes.”²⁸ This is the objection of scientific naturalism.

²⁷ *SCG*.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae; Questions on God*. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24-27. Compare with a different translation and it becomes clear that Thomas is addressing the different concepts: things in nature and nature itself.: “Objection 2: Moreover, anything that can be caused by few principles is not caused by many. But it seems that we can fully account for everything we observe in the world while assuming that God does not exist. Thus we explain natural effects by natural causes, and intentional effects by human reasoning and will. So, there is no need to accept that God exists. Reply Objection 2: Since nature acts for definite ends under the direction of a higher cause, its effects must be traced to God as the first of all causes. Similarly, even things done intentionally must be traced back to a higher cause than human reasoning and will, for these are changeable and lacking. And, as I have said, we must trace all such things back to a first cause that cannot change and is intrinsically necessary.” <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/FP/FP002.html#FPQ2OUTP1>

Thomas does not contradict scientific naturalism as the methodology that is properly applied to “everything we observe in the world.” Instead, in the reply to the objection, Thomas alters the terms of the debate. The move is from “everything we can see in the world” and “all natural things” to nature or the natural itself as a whole. In the reply, it is nature that “acts/works” towards a definite end. Thomas is not considering the effects of natural things and their causes but transitions to a metaphysical consideration of the world. In other words, the methodology of scientific naturalism can apply to “everything we observe in the world,” just as, “the philosopher considers such things as belong to them by nature.”²⁹ But the limits of a naturalistic methodology have been reached when considering the totality of “nature” as an abstracted whole.³⁰ The whole of nature cannot rely upon itself as its own source.³¹ The principles and methodology proper to understanding natural things and their causes cannot be used to consider the entirety of nature. This important methodological distinction is presupposed by Thomas in his methodological distinction is presupposed by Thomas in his reply to objection 2.

The question of the existence of God has implications for philosophy and theology. The current discussion has gravitated towards a methodological debate. This debate fueled by the distinction between disciplines and the developments of science can become misleading when assumptions of methodology lead to partial conclusions. The work of Fiona Ellis is helpful for comprehending recent explicit articulations of methodology. The expansive naturalist position which accepts a value-enchanted and God-enchanted worldview has some similarities to the methodological understanding of Thomas. When the methodology of *SCG*, *On being and essence*, and *Summa Theologiae* q.2 a.3 reply to objection 2 are combined then it is possible to comprehend how the methodological distinctions employed by Thomas can be related to the current conversation about the existence of God. This study could benefit from a more profound explanation of the current debate, a detailed explanation of assumptions in Thomas, the theological debate about the relationship between the natural and supernatural, and a more detailed and wider survey of analyzed material. A detailed survey of the history of the thought of Ellis would help to expound on the value of her work in relation to the work of other recent philosophers, such as some of those mentioned in passing in the footnotes. While Ellis relies on the

²⁹ *SCG*.

³⁰ Simply speaking, the methodology and principles of mathematical disciplines do not consider mathematics as an abstracted whole.

³¹ This immediately raises the concern that as Fiona Ellis says, “we must consider what follows on a proper understanding of the idea that God is the source of nature.” *God, Value, and Nature*, 115.

work of some theologians, she does not reference Thomas directly. There could be many reasons for this. It would be interesting to see if the methodological similarities between Thomas and Ellis could result in a direct engagement between Thomas and Ellis, between Thomas and the current debate as articulated by Ellis, and between Thomas and the current debate of which Ellis is only one voice. That being said, this paper highlights the methodological subtleties in the thought of Thomas which are intellectually respectful enough to be introduced into the current conversation on the existence of God.

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