

Dedicated to the memory of

**Michael B. Mangini (1958–2016)**

SES alumnus who introduced me to Southern Evangelical Seminary.

## **Is Philosophical Atheism Possible?**

Richard Fafara

Although Étienne Gilson never had a passionate interest in the question whether God exists, towards the end of his life, when already in his eighties, Gilson's curiosity about atheists' reasons for believing there is no God resulted in his writing a short work originally intended as one of two final chapters to his partially unedited manuscript *Philosophical Constants of Being*, which was found among his papers after his death.<sup>1</sup> Realizing that the manuscript might be too long, Gilson left a note for the editor that the two final two chapters, one on atheism and another on metaphysics and demonstrations of the existence of God<sup>2</sup> could be

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<sup>1</sup> Étienne Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l'être*, avant-propos de Jean-François Courtine (Paris: J. Vrin, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Étienne Gilson, "Plaidoyer pour la servante," *L'athéisme difficile*, 2nd ed. (1979; repr., Paris: J. Vrin, 2014), 105-124, published in English as "On

published as a separate book. Gilson developed three versions of the chapter on atheism: an initial version in French, written in 1967; a second version of the original French text “rewritten in English, edited, and published” in 1969 in a volume of *The Great Ideas Today*;<sup>3</sup> and a third completely rewritten version of the original French text completed in October 1970. This last French text represents Gilson’s definitive treatment of this topic. Gilson considered three different titles for his short work—*On Atheism*, *Difficult Atheism*, and *The Difficulties of Atheism*. He finally chose the second title.<sup>4</sup>

### Various Atheisms

Gilson defined “dogmatic and positive atheism” as the “doctrine which, after mature reflection and serious consideration of the problem, concludes as a rational certainty that nothing (no ‘being’) answering to the word ‘God’ exists in reality.” For Gilson, the notion of God must have three characteristics: (1) God must be a transcendent being, that is, a being that exists apart from both me and the world, (2) He likewise must be a necessary being, and (3) He must be the cause of whatever else exists.<sup>5</sup>

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Behalf of the Handmaid,” *Theology of Renewal I*, ed. L. K. Shook (New York 1968), 236-249. Thomas Merton informed Gilson that he agreed completely with this article and reading it moved him to tears (unpublished letter of 8 June 1968 from Thomas Merton to Étienne Gilson, Étienne Gilson Archives, John M. Kelly Library of University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto).

<sup>3</sup> Étienne Gilson, “The Idea of God and the Difficulties of Atheism,” in *The Great Ideas Today 1969*, ed. Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler (New York: William Benton, 1969), 238-274. This version of the text served as the basis of Gilson’s *Toronto Lectures* given in early 1968. See Laurence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 378.

<sup>4</sup> See Henri Gouhier’s preface to Gilson, *L’athéisme difficile*, 41-43. For Gilson’s principal dealings with atheism beginning with his quarrel with Léon Brunschvicg in 1928, see Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht’s “Presentation,” 9-37, *Ibid.*, 9-37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Given this understanding of atheism and the characteristics of the notion of God, Gilson has difficulty finding sound atheism grounded on philosophical reasons. Proofs of the nonexistence of God are scarce and consist in showing that the proofs of God's existence are not conclusive—a different proposition than the nonexistence of God.<sup>6</sup> Gilson summarily dispatches a variety of atheisms from the realm of serious consideration.<sup>7</sup> He begins with the ethical atheism of Friedrich Nietzsche who coined the phrase “God is dead.” For Nietzsche, this really meant not the death of the physical and metaphysical notion of God as creator of the world and man or the God of the theologians, but rather the death of the God of traditional, Christian ethics—the death of the God who imposed transcendent values upon men. The very essence of his atheism, Nietzsche tells us, is immoralism—power, force, the Superman.<sup>8</sup>

Then Gilson discusses “practical atheism” or “atheism of indifference.” With such atheisms, the practitioners do not even know if they are atheists or not, and they do not care to know for fear that they may discover that they are not. But agnosticism and its frequently associated licentious life style do not constitute atheism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Jerry A. Coyne, “The 'Best Arguments for God's Existence' Are Actually Terrible,” *The New Republic* (January 16, 2014), accessed November 7, 2015, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116251/best-arguments-gods-existence-dont-challenge-atheists>.

<sup>7</sup> Gilson followed the approach recommended by Frédéric Rauh, one of his professors at the Sorbonne: “Before undertaking to build (*pars construens*) one should first destroy (*pars destruens*)” (Étienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson [New York: Random House, 1962], 28–29).

<sup>8</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 48-58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-61. Gilson also found this type of atheism in Nietzsche: “‘God’, ‘immortality of the soul’, ‘redemption’, ‘beyond’—without exception, concepts to which I never devoted any attention, or time; not even as a child. Perhaps I have never been childlike enough for them? I do not by any means know atheism as a result; even less as an event: it is a matter of course with me, a natural instinct. I am too inquisitive, too *questionable*, too exuberant to stand for any gross answer. God is a gross answer, an indecency against us thinkers—at bottom merely a gross prohibition for us: you shall not think!” (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Ecce*

Very similar to the atheism of inattention is the atheism of distraction, the atheism of people described as being "too busy" to find the time to worry about God. Pascal's notion of man's need for "divertissement" comes to mind—hunting, games, any pastime that can help man to forget both himself and God. Some attempt to identify atheism with abstention from religious practice, but here a wide gulf separates the proposition that there is a God from the decision to worship Him, in a particular way, at certain times, and in certain places. One might love God, but hate the church or organized religion; that is not the same as believing that God is dead.<sup>10</sup>

Scientific atheism, for Gilson, really does not exist because science cannot treat the notion of God. Atheism can be proper to those exclusively interested in scientific problems treated by scientific methods, but that is a personal matter subject neither to demonstration nor refutation. Since man does not think without images, even if he thinks of some object whose very nature escapes imagination, he will form some image of it. For this reason, mythologies are an inevitable phenomenon; even science has them. They are imaginary provisional explanations of reality that seem plausible and are provisionally held while waiting for better ones.<sup>11</sup> Science can update our mythologies, but religions have learned not to be tied to scientific systems, which succeed one another in the world at an ever increasing speed. Believers are willing to accept science as the best notion the human mind can now form about God's work. But God, Himself, remains hidden from us—the invisible cause of the visible world, of whom we only know that He is, what He is not, and how the world He has made is related to Him.

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*Homo*, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Modern Library, 1992], 692-693). Gilson commented, "If such is Nietzsche's spontaneous reaction to the word 'God', one can easily imagine how philosophically superficial the atheism of most atheists is" ("The Idea of God," 247; *L'athéisme difficile*, 60-61).

<sup>10</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 61-68.

<sup>11</sup> "Who doesn't love black holes, the most mythical creatures in the physics pantheon? They've been posited as the basis of time machines, as gateways to other universes and as the seeds from which baby universes are born. These days you can hardly open a physics magazine without seeing an article about the fabulous things black holes may be able to accomplish. . . . [I]t's hard to think of a more historically contentious or more fun area of scientific inquiry" (Margaret Wertheim, "Battling over Holes in the Heavens," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2015, B7).

Even eminent scientists such as Descartes, Leibniz, Pascal, Kant, and Bergson never found in science any reason to doubt the existence of God.<sup>12</sup>

Gilson also takes into account Marxism despite his not considering it to be a philosophy. Thought, for Karl Marx, was only legitimate as a means of action and its truth determined by its efficacious practicality. Marx wanted to transform the world not interpret it. Marx's question is not whether the idea of God is true, but only whether it facilitates or hinders the proletarian revolution. For Gilson, trying to refute Marxist atheism makes no sense because one does not dialectically refute a decision of the will. The decision to turn philosophy into a *praxis* is not—if taken in itself—a philosophical decision. Marxism's arbitrary, revisionist history of philosophy reduces it to a never ending fight between materialism and idealism, summed up in the formula that all philosophy expresses the interests of a well-determined class. If this is really the case, Gilson asks, how then does one explain the interminable philosophical disputes during the Middle Ages among the teaching corps who belonged to the same class? How was it that the philosophy of Aristotle, a Greek citizen, was substantially the same sixteen centuries later as that of the Jew Maimonides and, afterward, of Averroes an Arab in Spain and, in the twentieth century, that of the Christian thinker Jacques Maritain? Marxist atheism is simplistic: saying there is a God is to work for capitalism, and denying there is a God is to work for the proletariat; but one wishes to work for the proletariat; consequently, there is no God. The position is perfectly consistent but devoid of all philosophical meaning.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 69-72. For Gilson's critique of scientism and lifelong opposition to Auguste Comte, see Armand Maurer, "Etienne Gilson, Critic of Positivism," *The Thomist* 71, no. 2 (April 2007): 199-220. Gilson discusses Comte in his "The Idea of God," 244-245.

<sup>13</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 72-78. Soviet funerals might be "the definitive modern case against atheism." Today the crusading faith of Totalitarianism—"messianic, hopeful, mobilized and marching . . . is dead, burnt out. . . . [O]nly bureaucracy and cynicism remain. . . . Today the Soviet system, the greatest of all the failed Totalitarianisms, no longer believes in 'anything' . . . It now believes in nothing . . . [a] nothing on eerie display" in the barrenness of the Soviet way of death—a fantastic assertion in massive stone cold settings of "the final primacy of man even after he has become nothing more than embalmer's clay. . . . [A]s

## The True Problem: The Idea of God

According to Gilson, if there really were no God, nobody would waste time demonstrating that God is really dead. No one would speak of Him; great writers like Nietzsche would not drive themselves crazy fighting the illusion of His existence. In October 1968, Gilson came across the obituary of a convinced atheist, Jean Schlumberger, who died in peaceful disbelief, but regretted not being able to complete his projects and write against Pascal. Gilson questioned why, if Schlumberger's disbelief was so peaceful, was he so concerned about writing an anti-Pascal work? Gilson characterized his own faith as so sure that he never had the idea to write a work against Voltaire the great mocker of Pascal's *Pensées* or a work against the poet Paul Valéry to defend Pascal against the bitterness of M. Teste.<sup>14</sup> Why, Gilson asks, if the unbelief of some is so certain, do they continue not only to think about God but also feel the need to destroy the faith of others. The true atheist, if he exists, does not deny the existence of God; he no longer thinks about it. Not only does that seem not to be the case, but losing one's faith is not an easy or happy event or one that is celebrated since the loss is not replaced with something equivalent. The poet Stéphane Mallarmé, for example, wrote a friend that he barely survived an exhausting crisis during which he finally conquered, not without terrible effort,

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Chesterton put it, 'The trouble when people stop believing in God is not that they thereafter believe in nothing; it is that they thereafter believe in anything.' In this century, 'anything' has included Hitler, Stalin and Mao, authors of the great genocidal madness of our time" (Charles Krauthammer, "Chernenko and the Case against Atheism," *Things that Matter* [New York: Crown Forum, 2013], 218-220).

<sup>14</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 78-80. See Paul Valéry, "La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste," *Revue Centaure* (1896), the first of the numerous new editions and supplementary pieces of what would become the "Teste Cycle" that detailed the life of a monster who strives to live by intellect alone and whose whole existence is given up to the examination of his own intellectual process. This work is one of many in which Valéry expresses his absolute hatred of Pascal. Gilson did defend Pascal against Valéry; see Étienne Gilson, "Adieux à Monsieur Teste," *L'européen* (23 octobre 1929), 1. For Gilson's appreciation of Pascal as a Christian philosopher, see Richard Fafara, "Gilson and Pascal," *Studia Gilsoniana* 3 (2014), 25-49.

“that old bird” God. Why, Gilson asked, was there such force of resistance from something that does not exist?<sup>15</sup>

Gilson finds the failure of the various types of atheism to eradicate the notion of God from human minds significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that belief in the existence of some divine being is a fact of nature; mankind does not seem to be able to subsist without it even as an illusion. And, even as an illusion, its generality, persistence, and apparent ineradicability remain remarkable. Instead of evaporating under the scrutiny of reason, belief in the existence of God offers an uncanny resistance to any effort to destroy it. Second, even under heavy social and political pressure, men refuse to give up the notion of God, sometimes for no reason at all, but also sometimes because reason accepts it as acceptable and rationally justified. No other notion presents the same characteristics. As a simple fact alone, that notion is a problem.<sup>16</sup>

Saint Augustine distinguished three sources of the notion of God: the poets, the city, and the philosophers. Before him, Aristotle, prefiguring Kant, distinguished two such sources: the starry sky above and the moral law within. Today Western man lives in a society where the notion of God comes to him through family and school. Religion is imbedded in our various literatures as well as the many locutions of our language (swearing by a God and hell). We find this elementary religious feeling, the notion of some divine being, and power present in society as soon as we are conscious of belonging to it. This, according to Gilson, is the origin and substance of the future notion of God in the minds of philosophers, as well as of plain believers.<sup>17</sup>

The problem, regardless of the specific explanation of the source of the idea, is that we find in the minds of many men a notion of God so utterly different from that of man. How do men come to form such a notion for which there is no known model in experience? Revelation, for example, tells us that we can know God from His creation, but how, without some preexisting notion, or feeling, of the divinity, did men form the concept of a cause so utterly different in nature from its observable effects? Gilson grants that one can question whether that being—of which we have a notion if not an idea—actually exists or not, but this idea itself is peculiar. One

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<sup>15</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Gilson, “The Idea of God,” 261-263.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 253-254.

cannot think of God otherwise than as existing in reality. Moreover, we are not aware of making up the notion. We find it there. Even if the empiricists are correct and there are no innate ideas, the question of how men form this idea remains. No infinite object is given in any kind of experience. In fact, Gilson sees the burden of proof as lying with the one who denies the notion of God rather than with anyone who affirms it. The problem of the inexistence of God comes first. How could man have formed the notion of a being that is not given in sense experience, and not of his own conscious making, if that being does not exist?<sup>18</sup>

For Gilson, the notion of God is not linked to any particular epistemology (noetic), and there seems to be no way of posing the problem of the existence of God without including the notion among its data. For example, the *a priori* or “ontological” proofs of Descartes and Malebranche conclude that the only possible explanation of the presence of the innate idea of God in the human mind is the existence of its object. Saint Thomas did not consider such proofs valid, but did uphold the view that, speaking of God as taken in himself, we have some notion of what, if it exists, the thing is: “Absolutely speaking,” Aquinas tells us, “that God exists is self-evident, since what God is is His own being.”<sup>19</sup>

Kant maintained that all the proofs of the existence of God imply some hidden recourse to the ontological argument—from the notion of a first cause of empirically given objects, they conclude that this cause exists. Gilson agrees in the sense that even in the concluding phase of Aquinas’ so-called physical proofs, there is no difference between affirming the necessity of positing an absolute and of affirming its existence. All of Aquinas’ celebrated *a posteriori* demonstrations of the existence of God taken from the physical world presuppose in the mind the presence of a confused notion of divinity that is not the conclusion of a demonstration. Each of the five ways begins with a nominal definition of God, without which the mind would not know what it has found at the end of its demonstration. And after each proof and concluding that a prime being exists, Aquinas adds, “And all understand that it is God.” In his *Treatise On Separate Substances*, Saint Thomas goes so far as to speak of an innate knowledge of God, at least in this sense that

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<sup>18</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 78-87.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 90-93. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 11, 1 and *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, 1.

whenever men have reached the notion of a first principle of all things it was innate in them to call it God.<sup>20</sup>

### The Solution to the “True Problem”

Gilson situates the mysterious relation between the notion of God and the notion of being within the order of first principles, the self evident, primary, and necessary truths in light of which all the rest is known that are immediately perceived by the intellect, i.e., without demonstration. In this sense, they are objects of simple intuition. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the first principles of all reality are not innate; but even if one maintains, as they do, that the apprehension of sensible reality is needed so that the intellect can conceive first principles, one has to grant that the mind itself has the power to form them.<sup>21</sup>

Aristotle devoted only a few lines to the problem of the inductive process by which, starting from sense perception, we rise from it to the cognition of principles. In his *Posterior Analytics* Aristotle tells us, "It is therefore evident that induction is what makes us know principles, for it is by means of it that sensation causes the universal in us."<sup>22</sup> An induction is the instantaneous operation whereby, given a sense perception, the intellect forms in itself a concept. According to Aristotle, the formation of principles by the intellect is of the same nature. At this point, Gilson, cites what he was tempted to consider the most important passage in Aristotle's *Organon*:

Since, with the exception of intuition, no kind of cognition is more exact than science, it must necessarily be an intuition that grasps the principles. This follows, not only from the preceding considerations, but also from the fact that the principle of demonstration is not itself a demonstration. So there can be no science of science. If, therefore, we possess some kind of true

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<sup>20</sup> Gilson, "The Idea of God," 268 and *L'athéisme difficile*, 87; Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Separate Substances*, chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, II, xix 100b, 4, trans. G. R. G. Mure, *The Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: W. Benton, 1952), 8, 137 as cited by Gilson in his "The Idea of God," 266.

knowledge other than science, it is intuition alone that is the principle of the principle itself, and science is to the whole of reality as intuition is to the principle.<sup>23</sup>

This passage is demanding: it is dense and, instead of appealing to the syllogistic deductive power of reason, it appeals to the intuitive power of the intellect. Gilson finds it difficult to reformulate more explicitly what Aristotle says because what he is trying to say is located at the intersection of three converging, yet distinct, philosophical problems: the origin of general ideas or universals, the origin of principles, and the origin of the idea of God.<sup>24</sup>

Although the formation of the notion of God is analogous to the problem of universals, and Gilson was intimately familiar with the mediaeval formula that sense knows particulars and the intellect universals, he confessed that, for him, the formation of universals remained a mystery. The objects of sense cognition are particulars, but humans do not perceive particulars as such; they only perceive sensible qualities such as colors, sounds, tastes, etc. It is also true that the objects of intellection are universals, but since men cannot

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 100b, 5-17, cited in Gilson, “The Idea of God,” 266.

<sup>24</sup> “[T]he statement of the *Posterior Analytics* means that this light [the intellect] belongs to a higher order and certitude than that of the principles it makes known. It is not easy to state clearly St. Thomas’s opinion on the subject, but we have to get used to a certain way of not understanding, which is nothing but a modest stance in the face of a purely intelligible object. One who understands everything is in great danger of understanding badly what he understands and not even to suspect the existence of what he does not understand” (Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993), 69). “The progress of the metaphysician consists rather in recognizing that the principles towards which it climbs back up, beginning with science, progressively sinks before his eyes into a sort of haze, as if contrariwise to what occurs in the natural sciences, a sort of unknowing, or unscience, is in metaphysics the summit of knowing.” (Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l’être*, 12 [my translation]). Given the “mysterious” and difficult nature of the few lines Aristotle devoted to the problem of induction, Gilson remarked that “scholars are wise not to worry about them.” The presence of first principles “torments” philosophers: “Their thinking revolves around them like an insect around light with the risk of getting burned.” (Gilson, *L’athéisme difficile*, 97; “The Idea of God,” 266-267 [my translation]).

think without images, sensations leave their mark of origin on every concept.<sup>25</sup> According to Gilson, intellectual cognition and sense experience are “inextricably blended together”—if there is nothing in the intellect that was not first given to the senses, there is also nothing in the senses that is not at the same time in the intellect. When one says, “I see a dog,” “dog” is an abstract concept representing a species; one does not see or touch species. But “the traditional theory of abstraction . . . does not go beyond the mere formulation of a fact. Neither Aristotle nor any Aristotelians explain how sense and intellect operate in that metaphysical chemistry, how the intellect separates, in the particular, the intelligible from the sensible. Neither nominalism, nor realism, nor even “the curious hybrid called ‘moderate realism’ has fully been able to account for the mysterious induction that ends with what sensation gives to the intellect—not a mere sensible quality, but the pattern of sensible qualities one calls a thing.”<sup>26</sup>

The first principles are perceived in the idea of being, which is the formal object of the human intellect and a first principle. Saint Thomas tells us that the two distinct but inseparable operations resulting in the principles of knowledge that we have—the notion of being (in the order of simple apprehension or formation of a concept) and the principle of non-contradiction (in the order of judgment or the affirmative or negative joining of concepts in a proposition)—are intuited in the natural light of the intellect in connection with sense knowledge.<sup>27</sup> What the principles say is given in the material objects

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<sup>25</sup> Gilson agreed with Aristotle who denied first principles are innate because we cannot think without images. See Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 69; “The Idea of God,” 251, 267; and *Constantes philosophiques de l'être*, 18-20. See also Mary Christine Ugobi-Onyemere, *The Knowledge of the First Principles in Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 253-264.

<sup>26</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 94-96. Gilson noted that to arrive at the principle of being, intelligibility has to be in that which is sensed so that the intellect can conceive it and, if that is the case, it must be there in the form of a concept: “Il faut bien qu'il y ait de l'intelligible dans le sensible pour que l'intellect le conçoive, mais s'il n'y est pas sous forme de concept, quelle en est la nature?” (Ibid., 95).

<sup>27</sup> “This much is certain, then . . . : the apprehension of being by the intellect consists of directly seeing the concept of being in some sensible

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datum. For the moment, let us try to clarify the nature of what that is that the intellect apprehends when it conceives the first principle. To begin with, we must distinguish two operations of the intellect. The first, which is simple, is the means by which the intellect conceives the essence of things; the other, which is complex, affirms or denies these essences of one another and is called judgment. In each of these two orders there is a first principle: being, in the order of apprehension of essences, the principle of contradiction in the order of judgments. Moreover, these two orders are arranged hierarchically, for the principle of contradiction presupposes the understanding of being. [Here Gilson quotes in Latin a statement of the principle of contradiction from Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Book IV, lect. 6. #605] 'Hoc principium, impossibile est esse et non esse simul, dependet ex intellectu entis.' Thus, the principle which is first in the order of simple apprehension is also absolutely first, since it is presupposed by the principle of contradiction itself. In short, the first principle, in the fullest sense, is being" (Gilson, *Thomist Realism, and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauk (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 197). Throughout his career, Gilson addressed the issue of how the intellect grasps existence in sensation. See, for example, Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism, and the Critique of Knowledge*, 171-215 (originally published as *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1939); *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949, 2nd ed. corrected and enlarged 1952), 190-215; *Christian Philosophy* (originally published as *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1960), 50-51, 68-71; "Trois leçons sur le problème de l'existence de Dieu," *Divinitas*, 5, 1961, 73-87 and a translation and slightly abbreviated version of the third lesson, "Can the Existence of God Still be Demonstrated?" *Saint Thomas Aquinas and Philosophy* (West Hartford: Saint Joseph College, 1960), 1-15; *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, 6th ed., trans. Laurence K. Shook and Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002), 168-174, 299 (a translation of the 6th (1965) and final edition of *Le Thomisme*); the invaluable collection of articles, half unedited and half published from 1952 to 1967, in *Constantes philosophiques de l'être* which prolonged Gilson's reflections as found in the second edition of his *Being and Some Philosophers*; "The Idea of God," 265-268; and Gilson's "Propos sur l'être et sa notion," *San Tommaso e il pensiero moderno*, ed. Pontificia Accademia di S. Tommaso (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1974), 7-17. Detail on Aquinas' indiscriminate use of "conception" (*conceptio*) on distinct levels to explain the same act of the mind's comprehension can be found in Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers*, 216-232. For an examination of Gilson's approach as situated within the context of the positions of Maritain, Fabro and Fr. Donceel, see Joseph Owens, "Aquinas on Knowing Existence," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 29 (1976): 670-90.

that make up the substance of reality, but the principles themselves are immaterial and exist, as such, only in knowing minds. Humans perceive beings, not being. They observe agents and patients, and they call the former causes and the latter effects, but they do not observe causality itself. That there is something mysterious about the knowledge of a principle is not surprising since there is nothing prior to it that can explain it. The principles are the necessary forms of all understanding. “Each one of them is ‘an impossibility-of-thinking-otherwise’ which gives access to a distinct order of intelligibility,” but principles, Gilson tells us, “are not clearly seen precisely because they are precisely what makes us see.” Every attempt to define them implies them. “Principles should be accepted for the light they shed just as, in the darkness, a lamp brightens itself along with the rest.”<sup>28</sup>

The operation by which the intellect affirms the notion of a first cause of the universe is exactly the same nature as that by which it forms the notion of its own principles of knowledge, particularly of its own first principle, i.e., the principle of being, which is another name for God. No doubt, this is why Gilson thinks there is probably not science in the existence of God but intellectual certitude higher than that of the science that it has. That is also why the question of whether there is a God presupposes the notion of God as already present in the mind.

Because we know that something exists, there is necessary being; actual reality is necessary by right while it is. The only question still to be asked about it is this: in all that necessary being, what has a right to be called God?<sup>29</sup> A thought that moves within

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Gilson’s “sharp ingenuity” in interpreting Aquinas’ position on existence, which defies representation but is accessible to the human mind’s understanding, has been recognized even though his views “may seem contradictory throughout the years of his development of them” (Ugobi-Onyemere, *The Knowledge of the First Principles*, 155-158 and 140-141). For Gilson’s account of his “l’intuition de l’être,” his personal encounter with being when he was fourteen or fifteen years old, see his *Constantes philosophiques de l’être*, 145-149.

<sup>28</sup> See Étienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 77.

<sup>29</sup> “As soon as it comes into touch with sensible experience, the human intellect elicits the immediate intuition of being: *X* is, or exists; but from the intuition *that* something is, the knowledge of *what* it is, beyond the fact that it is something, cannot possibly be deduced, nor is it the task of the intellect

being also moves within actual existence from the very first moment of its inquiry; similarly, it moves within necessity, proceeding as it does from conditioned necessities to absolute necessity, from relative to absolute, and, as Aquinas noted, “the impossibility to go on to infinity.”<sup>30</sup> There cannot possibly be any doubt prior to any

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to deduce it. The intellect does not deduce, it intuits, it sees, and, in the light of intellectual intuition, the discursive power or reason slowly builds up from experience to a determinate knowledge of concrete reality. Thus, in the light of immediate evidence, the intellect sees that something is, or exists; that what exists is that which it is; that that which it is, or exists, cannot be and not be at one and the same time; that a thing either is, or it is not, and no third supposition is conceivable; last, but not least, that being only comes from being, which is the very root of the notion of causality” (Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 313-314). See Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l'être*, 80-81.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, art. 3. The impossibility to go on to infinity regarding the cause of a certain mode of being could go on to infinity were it not for the intellect that stops the reasoning process because it sees everything in the light of being and unity—gathering a multiplicity into unity. The proper function of intellect is not to demonstrate but to see. Intellect looks for a cause of all causes and, at the term of its reasoning, finds the very notion that released the process because it sees everything in the light of being and unity. It realizes that the very principle that set the whole operation in motion is also the true answer to the problem. “Each of the Five Ways [of Saint Thomas], then, proceeds, through rational argumentation, from the sight of a principle to the sight of the same principle” (Gilson, “Can the Existence of God Still be Demonstrated?,” 9); see also Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l'être*, 167-168 and Montague Brown, “Infinite Regress Revisited,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 74 (2000), 201-213. Aquinas uses first principles copiously and “is justifiably ‘the man of principles’ among the schoolmen,” but he does not proceed in a systematic, organized elaboration of those principles and affirm their sense “in a completely explicit way.” Hence, Thomists disagree about the formulations, names, and order among first principles. See E. Trépanier, “First Principles,” *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. William J. McDonald (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 5, 938-940; and Ugobi-Onyemere, *The Knowledge of the First Principles*, 66, 69-73, 100, 119. For example, Gilson, who adhered closely to the texts of Saint Thomas and also feared that idealism might plague some formulations of the principle of sufficient reason accepted as a law of thought, but of thought unrelated to extra mental being, interpreted this principle as leading back to the principle of

demonstration that if God is being, God is; God is necessarily existent. It is impossible to think of being as not existing. The question is knowing within the necessary whether there is one that we should call God? The certitude that if God is being then God exists drives men on in their quest until an absolutely first term is reached, which, as such, necessarily is and—since its being is necessary—is God. Reason would not begin to look for a first cause of motion, of change, of necessity, or of being were it not for the power inherent in the intellect to conceive an absolute first cause, or, what is the same, unconditional necessity and absolute being.<sup>31</sup> The necessity of the conclusion in a demonstration of God's existence leads right back to the necessity of the principle itself.

To underline the point that the notion of God is firmly anchored in the human mind, Gilson also examined the thought of Kant who in his *Critique of Pure Reason* concluded that no metaphysical knowledge—including the existence of God—is possible. But after reaching that conclusion, Kant went out of his way in his *Critique of Practical Reason* to demonstrate that his indemonstrable conclusion remained a truth nonetheless. The existence of God is true as a postulate of practical reason because, otherwise, the necessary character of moral duty, which for Kant is a fact, would be impossible.

Gilson found the obstinacy with which Kant insisted that the conclusions of the second *Critique* leave intact the conclusions of the first *Critique* remarkable. Kant remained sure that there is a God after demonstrating that it is impossible for speculative reason to prove it. And Gilson did not think Kant contradicted himself. However Kant arrived at the certitude acquired by practical reason, it is, by definition, a rational certitude. In short, the certitude that there

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contradiction. Jacques Maritain did not and accepted it simply as a first principle. See Desmond J. FitzGerald, "Gilson and Maritain on the Principle of Sufficient Reason," in *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing*, ed. Douglas A. Ollivant (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 120-127. For a discussion of the deeper, more general question of why, given the spontaneous, intuitive, and self-evident nature of our knowledge of the first principle being as an absolute necessity of thinking, some philosophers reject it as philosophical sterile and some begin from another aspect of being such as the one, the good, etc., see Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l'être*, 15-51.

<sup>31</sup> Gilson, "Can the Existence of God Still Be Demonstrated?" 13.

is a God both precedes and survives intact the demonstration that it cannot be demonstrated. As Gilson commented, “More brilliant homage was never paid to the rational indestructibility of a notion whose intrinsic certitude remains unaffected by the demonstration of its indemonstrability.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Conclusion: The More Things Change. . . .**

For Gilson, the idea that contemporary positions on atheism are new is an illusion. There is nothing new about materialism. Saint Augustine himself had first been a materialist, and today he might well be a Marxist; but if he were, he would again ask matter, along with all the goods it contains including the social and economic, “Are you my God?” And with a loud voice they still would answer, “We are not your God.”

Augustine then would perhaps ask Kant, “Is the voice of duty my God?” But moral conscience too would answer with a loud voice: I am not your God; for indeed in what light do I see what is right and just, and how is it that every man, consulting his own reason, spontaneously agrees with other men as to what is true and false, morally right and wrong? If there is anything above man, Augustine asked, shall not we agree that it is God? Yes, Nietzsche would say, and that is the Superman who is God. But the Superman does not take us far beyond man, and so our end is in our beginning. If God is a strictly transcendent being, even the false gods we are being offered witness to the true one.

According to Gilson, “true atheists are not scarce; they do not exist” because “true atheism—that is, a complete and final absence of the notion of God—is not only difficult, it is impossible.” For Gilson, “the problem of the existence of God remains for the human mind a philosophical inevitability.”<sup>33</sup>

In the companion essay to his brief study of atheism, Gilson, who was well aware of the degree of philosophical sophistication needed to recognize and understand that human reason naturally produces the notion of divinity at the heart of all philosophical

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<sup>32</sup> Gilson, “The Idea of God,” 269-270. Gilson provides an in-depth comparison of Kant and Saint Thomas in “Can the Existence of God Still Be Demonstrated?” 1-15.

<sup>33</sup> Gilson, “The Idea of God,” 273; *L’athéisme difficile*, 104.

demonstrations of God's existence, acknowledged that philosophy frequently speaks to the deaf because it cannot "convince unmetaphysical minds of the cogency of metaphysical demonstrations." Gilson recognized that some consider philosophies such as nominalism, Kantian and Hegelian idealism, and even positivism, as contributing to a certain understanding of the faith. One could update Gilson's list by adding postmodern radical hermeneutics to it. Somewhat surprisingly, but in accord with his great respect for the liberty of others, Gilson states,

I should go so far as to say that, if it helps them to believe, and no better philosophy is intelligible to them, those who find satisfaction in such doctrines should not be disturbed in their peace of mind. . . . Had I to submit a personal opinion about them, I should say that each of us should be entitled to his own proofs of the existence of God; they are all good inasmuch as they all express a valid experience in the order of the natural religiosity of the human mind. . . . [A] Thomist is willing to let every man go to God as best he can even though many are unwilling to let anyone go to God the way Saint Thomas recommends and the Church prefers. . . . Were it not that the issues at stake were so all-important, one might find more than one comical side to the situation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, 113, 120-121, n. 1; "On Behalf of the Handmaid," 242, 247 n. 6.

