

THOMAS AQUINAS

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion, edited by Chad Meister and Paul Copan
(London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 128–37. Second edition 2012.

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The necessity of revealed knowledge questioned

Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* opens with a question stunning in its revolutionary character which he was the first to ask, displays the fundamental interpenetration of philosophy and religion in his thought, and forces him to adjust their relations in a way which will have the greatest consequences both for the future of philosophy and religion as well as for the anachronistic representation of their past (Kerr 2002: 12-14). The first article of the first question of the first part of his most influential work, the one where he was able for the first time to give theology what he conceived to be its proper order, is "Whether it is necessary besides the philosophical disciplines to have another teaching." The question assumes a true knowledge based in the natural powers of reason, asks whether this is all humans should and can know, and whether there is need and room for any other kind of knowledge than the philosophical "disciplines."

Sacred doctrine sets herself the task of finding a place and a necessity for herself relative to an assumed natural human knowledge and powers enabling humans to construct a world aiming for, and in an important sense achieving, knowledge even of God. The arguments in the objections used to set up the problem establish what might be called a secular humanism provided by philosophy – this "secular" world would include God as the necessary foundation to and conclusion of right reason. Revealed doctrine must justify herself in the face of an assumed philosophically constructed world. This paradigm Aquinas thus established for the relations between philosophy and supernaturally revealed knowledge is so influential that it has become normal to look at what preceded him through it, an anachronistic distortion.

Because we generally assume a world constructed by what at present corresponds to these theoretical and practical disciplines, it is almost impossible for us to appreciate the shocking character of Thomas' question to a Western Christian in the thirteenth century. The Latin West was still dominated by Augustine and by those self-consciously in his tradition who would successfully oppose Aquinas' innovations during his life (1224-1274) and immediately afterwards, with the result that positions he maintained were officially condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities during and following the last years

of his life (Hankey 2005: 43-5). For the Augustinians philosophy served the quest of faith and love for intellection. When intellection is achieved faith is explicated, it acquires the certainty possessed by reason rather than by authority, and humans intuit the content of faith. Reason had not the kind of independence from revelation which would permit it to say anything other than faith, not even something less. The notion that the teaching based on faith might have to justify itself relative to an autonomously established reason with a complete account of all that is was both unthinkable and frightening.

The first objection, the first argument in the whole system, proposes that whatever is not above reason is sufficiently treated in the philosophical disciplines. "Therefore, besides them, there is no need of any further knowledge." The philosophical sciences providing this complete account are usually attributed to Aristotle, and indeed, the "Philosopher" is spoken of in the second objection where his *Metaphysics* is cited to the effect that there is a philosophical science of God. In fact, however, the philosophical disciplines with a complete account of reality are established over and against what revelation might know because of the systematization of philosophical sciences in the Peripatetic and Neoplatonic schools of later Antiquity, on the one hand, and, because of the Islamic Arabic mediation of Aristotle to the Latins, on the other. Arabic philosophy assumed this systematization and added to it an opposition between the whole content of intellect as known conceptually to the faculty of reason and that same content apprehended by representation, the power which enabled prophecy and imaginative persuasion. As Alain de Libera puts it, the Arabs mediated the texts of Aristotle to the Latins as "a total philosophic corpus, into which the whole of Hellenistic thought, profoundly neoplatonised, had surreptitiously crept" (de Libera 1991: 20).

Within the Islamic Arabic world the last great defender of the need for and certainty of a complete philosophical knowledge of what is was Ibn Rushd, known by Aquinas as Averroes. He called him "The Commentator" because of the authority of his commentaries on the works of Aristotle. The corpus of the Arabic Aristotle as he was received by the comparatively ignorant Latin Christians was capped by works of theology confected by the Arabs out of elements taken from Plotinus and Proclus. It was not until after 1268 (i.e., during the last six years of his life) that Aquinas was provided with a Latin translation of the *Elements of Theology*, from which he detected the Proclean character of his Aristotle, a discovery which does not seem to have disturbed him. During the 1260s and until his death, Aquinas used newly done translations from the Greek of works of Aristotle and of the ancient Neoplatonic commentators on him. These enabled him to get back behind the Averroist Aristotle he had received and which was entrenched in the Faculty of Arts in Paris and assisted his

struggle against some features of its Aristotelianism. Nonetheless, his most authoritative source of philosophical and theological ideas apart from the Scriptures was Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, a sixth-century mystical theologian writing in Greek, who portrayed himself as converted in Athens by the Apostle Paul and as the heir to his mystical knowledge but who was in fact a conduit of the Neoplatonism of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius. Aquinas was convinced throughout his life that Dionysius and Aristotle had much conceptual ground in common (Hankey 2002a: 161-5). Thomas' Neoplatonic Aristotle was more theological than the original and thus both more easily assimilated to Christianity and more the rival to its revelation.

If Averroes comes to mind in the objections of the first article, Moses Maimonides, his Jewish twelfth-century contemporary also from Cordoba in Spain, appears in Thomas' response. His *Guide to the Perplexed*, which, while accepting both orientations, aimed to deal with what was opposing in the demands on a Jew who was simultaneously a conscientious follower of the Law and had been successful at philosophy (Maimonides 1963: 1, intro.), was known to Aquinas from the beginning of his systematic writing. The problems of the Maimonides' disciple resemble those of the Latin theologian most authoritative for Aquinas, Augustine (he and Dionysius share the prizes for his most numerous citations of Christian theologians). Augustine found himself with two undeniable allegiances after he was converted to philosophy, and was only able to come to true Christian faith after he had completed his journey to what Aquinas recognized was Platonism (Augustine 1993: 3.4-7; 5.14; 7.1-2, 10). Significantly, Plotinus supplied Augustine both with a positive conception of immaterial substance and the way to get it—interior self-knowledge. Aquinas, in contrast, adopts his way for arriving at the same end from Aristotle and from what is Proclean in Dionysius; for all four—Aristotle, Proclus, Dionysius, and Aquinas—the human soul was turned by nature to the sensible and was not capable of immediate self-knowledge (Hankey 2001: 336-41).

The necessity of philosophy for true religion

With Aquinas, for the first time in the Latin Middle Ages, a theologian engaged the philosophers on their own terrain as a separate, limited, subordinate sphere, with its own proper methods and autonomy. Thomas, in opposition both to the Aristotle of Averroes and to the Augustinians, made a humbled but quasi-autonomous philosophy into the servant of revealed theology. Agreeing with Maimonides that what philosophy demonstrated with certainty revelation could not contradict, he agreed equally that, where reason left matters open, Scripture revealed things necessary to reaching the happiness for which God created us (see Aquinas, *Super Sententiis*, lib. 2, dist. 1, q. 1, a. 5. co. and ad s.c. 6;

Maimonides 1963: 2.15). He adopted the approach taken by Maimonides, who faced the same kind of adversaries to his left and his right—namely, Arabic philosophy, on the one hand, and the Islam and Jewish dialectical theology which Maimonides identified as shared by and originating with the Christians (Maimonides 1963: 1.71), on the other. Aquinas judged the demand of his Augustinian adversaries that things only faith could know (e.g., the temporal beginning of the world; a universal, individual, and immediate providence; the Trinity; and the Incarnation—the first two items on this list are also on Rambam’s) be rationally proved only brought destructive disrepute to both theology and philosophy.

Thomas learns from Dionysius and the Platonists that revelation is normally given in sensible symbols, images, and signs wherein sacred intelligible and super-intelligible realities are adapted to the form of our knowing by being veiled (*Summa Theologiae* [ST] 1.1.9 and 1.3.1 ad 1). Thus, revelation comes to believers in scriptural images and narratives which uncorrected deceive them into believing divinity to be multiple, corporeal, composite, subject to passions. Maimonides and Aquinas both inherit the tradition of philosophical theology coming from the pre-Socratic and Platonic criticism of mythic accounts of the gods (for a *locus classicus*, see Plato, *Republic* 379b-381c). Plato’s standards for purifying poetic theology were radically intensified by his Neoplatonic successors, of whom Aquinas is an heir; thus the corporeality, division, mutability, potentiality, causing of evil ascribed to God in scripture must be understood as signifying their opposites. In consequence, the philosophical climb by which we can see the truth about spiritual substance which scripture reveals is both necessary and meritorious. The power of mind is increased corporately and individually by reaching higher levels of abstraction, by our rising to and becoming one with higher levels of reality.

For Aquinas it belongs to our “natural perfection” not to know God except from creatures and by abstraction from sensible things (*De Veritate* 18.2). The ladder of the philosophical sciences constitutes them as preambles by which the human mind gains the strength for proving with irrefutable certainty the existence of God (*De Veritate* 10.12), for knowing both his negative attributes—simplicity, infinity, eternity, etc.—and (in the very limited measure of which it is capable) the divine mysteries standing both above scientific reason and even beyond the metaphysical wisdom toward which reason ascends (ST 1.2 to 1.11; *De Veritate* 14.10). He wonders how we shall understand the words of scripture from and about separate simple incorporeal substance. Revealed theology based on God’s own self-knowledge needs philosophy, not because of what God’s knowledge lacks, but because of our human deficiency. Like his Neoplatonic predecessors, Thomas is always aware that our theology, though valid because it

participates in higher forms of knowledge, nonetheless belongs to human reason. By its labor of abstraction, human science exercises our minds in the knowledge theology needs of intellectual objects separated from matter. Without philosophy, we would not understand divine speech (*ST* 1.1.5 ad 2). When arguing against Anselm and the Augustinians that God's existence is not self-evident, he reminds us that humans have even thought that God was a body (*ST* 1.2.1 ad 2). He begins his treatment of the divine names or attributes with the question as to whether God is a body and uses the knowledge of God at which he has just arrived in his Five Ways to show that he is not (*ST* 1.3.1).

Given that philosophy is necessary for our right understanding of God and that knowing God is proper to him alone, it is not surprising that Aquinas supposes that philosophy is a kind of revelation: "the study of philosophy is in its own right allowable and praiseworthy, because God revealed to the philosophers the truth which they perceive, as Romans 1.19 says" (*ST* 2-2.167.1 ad 3). He understands Aristotle and Plato to teach this so far as they maintain that our knowledge of God is a participation in the divine self-knowing. This doctrine Aquinas finds in the *Metaphysics* as well in as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and he takes it to be the condition of metaphysics as knowledge of divinity (*In Metaphysicorum*, 1.3, 18-20; *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, 10.11).

Preserving nature within grace

In *ST* 1.1.1, Aquinas is concerned with the reasons we need instruction by divine revelation "even in respect to those things about God which human reason is able to investigate." In the *De Veritate*, when he is considering whether it is necessary to have faith, he acknowledges his debt to "the five reasons which Rabbi Moses [Maimonides] gives" (Maimonides 1963: 1.34; *De Veritate*, 14.10; *Summa contra Gentiles* [SCG] 1.4). In their common judgments about the difficulty of theology and about the necessity of keeping it from all except mature students with long preparation both moral and intellectual, Aquinas and Maimonides were following Plato, Aristotle, the curricula of the Neoplatonic schools, and their predecessors in the Arabic philosophical tradition. The abstractness of philosophy generally, and of metaphysics particularly, the weakness of our minds which must be strengthened by mathematical and other studies, the extent of the ground which must be covered to reach it, the length of time traversing this takes, the need for developed moral virtues and the proper temperament, are all reasons why we require the gift of supernatural revelation.

Nonetheless, in the course of showing the inadequacies of natural reason for attaining the ultimate human happiness, Aquinas actually strengthens it. As against Augustinians (*ST* 1.1.4, 1.1.7), for him sacred doctrine is not fundamentally practical or affective but theoretical, and we are saved by

knowing truths which philosophical reason unaided by grace cannot know: “We must know an end before we direct our intentions and actions towards that end. Therefore, it is necessary for human salvation that some truths which exceed human reason be known through divine revelation” (*ST* 1.1.1). We are related to an end beyond reason in such a way as to strengthen our reason and will by giving to them truths to know and goods to love higher than their natural capacities reach. The infusion of grace perfects the rational power: “The gifts of grace are added to nature in such a way that nature is not destroyed but is greatly perfected. Hence, even the light of faith, which flows into us by grace, does not destroy the light of the natural reason divinely bestowed on us” (*Super De Trinitate* 2.3; *ST* 1.1.8. ad 2). The light of nature is divinely given to us.

The massive *Second Part* of the *Summa Theologiae*, which describes the human in its desire for happiness, both in terms of what nature understands, seeks, and does, and in terms of what grace might give, is set under the idea of the human as “principle of its own works” because it is “image of God” (*ST* 2-1 prologue). Aquinas places here the foundation on which humans construct their own world, fall away from God, and need a human-divine savior to draw them back to God.

Aquinas places moral virtue and philosophical reason within systematic structures derived by way of lengthy mediation from Porphyry and Iamblichus. In consequence, although the overarching theological and religious framework is for the sake of what philosophy cannot attain, for Thomas as well as for pagan Neoplatonists, philosophy “is still a way of life which transforms us towards deformity” (Hankey 2003: 223). Iamblichus introduces the notion of the supernatural into theology; supernature presupposes nature (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.25). Like Aquinas, the “divine” Iamblichus is all at once a ritualistic priest, a theologian, and a philosopher. Working within the tradition of Neoplatonic systematic theology, Aquinas shares the aim of maintaining the difference, the integrity, and the connection of (1) sacramental practices in which the divine and humans cooperate, (2) human moral discipline, (3) the rational and human work of philosophy culminating in contemplation of God, and (4) our passive yielding to the gracious activity of the divine toward us (Saffrey 1997; Hankey 2003: 211-17).

The final word in *ST* 1.1.1 continues to provide for revealed knowledge without negating the truth and completeness of the human sciences as human, and by further establishing them. First, it grants that the same things can be treated from two different perspectives without one of them cancelling the other; thus there can be two different sciences of God. Second, it provides the basis for the two sciences: one functions through the power of the light of natural reason, the other through the light of divine revelation. Moreover, they can, at least to

some extent, keep out of each other's way because they differ "according to genus." Sacred doctrine is a fundamentally different kind of thing from the theology which is part of philosophy (*ST* 1.1.1 ad 2).

Aquinas preserves the human to the last. Controversially but correctly, Timothy Smith writes about the continuity between the way we know in this life and in the next: building on the way we know now our intellect will become a "'glorified faculty,' made more 'potent' for seeing the divine essence" (Smith 2003: 51). In *ST* 1.12, when treating how we know God, Aquinas begins by arguing that both philosophy and faith demand human vision of the divine essence. Without face-to-face knowledge, faith would be nullified because its purpose is human beatitude. Reason, in its turn, would also be denied. It is fulfilled in the knowledge of the principles and causes. This demand being frustrated, man's natural desire would be vain. Thus both faith and reason require that "the blessed see the essence of God" (*ST* 1.12.1). Later in this question, we find Thomas' notorious doctrine of created grace which he developed in order to explain how we can have the demanded knowledge of God's essence. Much criticized, it is, nonetheless, determined by Thomas' desire to preserve the integrity of human nature until the end even when we are united to God. This he does by connecting our final state to the form of knowing peculiar to us, that by abstraction.

Aquinas confronts grave problems in arguing for human knowledge of the divine essence. These ultimately reduce to the incapacity of the finite creature for the infinite creator—a gulf widened by his Neoplatonic authorities—and the inadequacy of the human mind belonging to an embodied soul for the knowledge of divine and angelic subsistent substances existing separately from both matter and motion. Because of the incapacity of the finite to contain or convey the infinite, God cannot be adequately known through an intermediating likeness: no concept, by nature finite, can convey the uncreated infinity. Beatifying union must be immediate. However, humans have some capacity for knowing separate substance and to this a gracious addition can be made:

Since the created intellect has an innate natural capacity for apprehending individualized form and the concrete act of being in abstraction by means of a certain power to separate out, it is able through grace to be raised so that it can know subsisting separated substance and the separated subsistent act of being (*ST* 1.12.4. ad 3).

Divine grace gives a higher light to the creature in order, by an addition to its power to know, to raise its natural created capacity beyond its natural scope which, in humans, is forms in matter. Grace continues—even at this absolute limit of creaturely existence—to conform itself to the specific nature of the

creature. Put another way, the knowledge of God given by the light of glory far beyond our natural limits adapts itself to the way humans naturally participate in God's uncreated light so that, in accord with a law of mediation (which Aquinas says applies to both nature and grace and which is owed to Iamblichus), every difference is maintained and every extreme is mediated (Hankey 1997: 59-60). We shall be made like God without ceasing to be human.

Proving God's existence

The "five ways" (*ST* 1.2.3), which provide the foundation for the rational side of his philosophical and revealed theology, are roughly based in Aristotle's four causes; however, they do not conform closely, and the individual proofs have many sources including Aristotle's *Physics* and Avicenna's metaphysics (Hankey 2000 [1987]: 37-56, 139-42). The literature contains endless discussions about their validity and purpose, and no summary is possible here. Three points are worth making.

First, it is important that there are proofs. Some Neoplatonists thought God was too immediately given to need proving, and both submitting the divine to proof and placing its highest level within being was a diminution of God (e.g., Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 1.3). Aquinas is dealing with similar attitudes when he confronts both Augustinian theologians who think that God's existence is self-evident and Dionysius, Eriugena, and other thinkers strongly under the influence of apophatic Neoplatonism.

Second, the proofs must be evident to humans, and, in consequence, Thomas' view as to what proofs will work depends upon his understanding of the human and especially of how we know. When he is comparing the Platonic way and Aristotle's way, he writes that Aristotle's reasoning "by way of motion" is the "more manifest and certain" when dealing with the existence of intellectual beings (*De Substantiis Separatis* 2.8). This matches what he says in the *ST* at the beginning of the Five Ways and explains why he begins with the proof from motion there. He discovered the comparison between Plato and Aristotle in the great Neoplatonic commentator Simplicius, who had also judged the Aristotelian way to have a more persuasive necessity in virtue of its relation to sense (*Simplicius prologus*, 8, lines 74-79). It is essential to this "way of motion" that it starts with sensibly known corporeal existence, the knowing for which Aquinas judges us to be naturally suited (Hankey 2002a: 169, 173-4).

Third, Thomas's sense of the limits of the human capacity for knowing separate substance, of the inadequacy of the effects by which we know God to their cause, and of the excess of the divine infinity in respect to all creatures means that he is fundamentally an apophatic theologian. The demonstration of God's existence takes place in the context of a Neoplatonic opposition between

the knowledge that God exists and the knowledge of what God is (*ST* 1.2.2). After the Five Ways and as he is about to begin treating the attributes, Aquinas reminds us that we do not know what God is but what he is not (*ST* 1.3 prologue). The first circle of questions on the unity of the divine which in imitation of Dionysius is separated from and prior to the treatment of the divine Trinity begins with simplicity, revealing again the strength of the Neoplatonic influence on his theology. Simplicity is for him a negative characteristic, the denial of all composition. Nonetheless, the very simplicity of God requires that we cannot know God's existence without some apprehension of his nature. It turns out that the Five Ways produce a considerable knowledge of God in what follows.

God's being

Not only the *Summa* as a whole, but also particular treatises within it, describe the Neoplatonic structure of remaining, *exitus*, and *reditus* by which all things except the One return upon their principle (*ST* 1.2 prologue; Hankey 2000 [1987] *passim*). The first circle (Questions 3-11) is constructed when, beginning with simplicity, we arrive back at unity by way of the existence of God in all things. The circles succeeding it (i.e., those described by the internal operations, by the Trinity, by the creation, and, ultimately, by salvation) return back to the principle by way of more and more differentiated processions. We have a unification of the Platonic dialectic of the one and the many with Aristotle's logic of activity as *entelecheia* in a Neoplatonic hierarchy (Hankey 1999: 397-408). Moreover, the Neoplatonic figures determine content as well as form.

For example, a concept taken from Proclus, that incorporeal substances have complete return upon themselves, enables the *Summa's* progress from the circle described by simple *esse* returning to itself as unity in the questions on the divine operations of knowledge, will, and power. These operations determine the emergence of the trinitarian processions (which Aquinas also calls emanations) within the essence, and the emanation outside it, creation. From Aristotle, by way of a profound transformation among the Arabs, especially Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, Aquinas takes the law of spiritual emanation, "from the one, nothing except a one can come." It determines how the processions of the divine Word and Spirit occur; they are distinguished as necessary, natural, and prior *vis-à-vis* the voluntary emanation of creation. Another figure, by which the Neoplatonists reconciled Plato and Aristotle, the idea of motionless motion as characterising the activity of the perfect, enables Aquinas to call God living and is manifest in the trinitarian circumincession. Another such figure, taken from Proclus via Dionysius and the *Liber de causis*, provides the structure for the

consideration of all spiritual substances from the soul to the divine: they have essence, power, and act.

It is within the divine simplicity that the identity of existence and essence appears for Thomas. This identity belongs to God who “is essentially form” and “form subsisting through itself” (*ST* 1.3.2). The identity with existence is therefore not an exclusion of essence. The divine *esse* is dynamic so that the diverse predicates emerge out of the plenitude of the simplicity. God is “essentially good” (*ST* 1.3.2), a goodness by its nature infinitely diffused within the existence of things. Yet the divine *esse* is also immutable, eternal, and one. It is both the unity essential to beings and one in itself (*ST* 1.11). This doctrine descends to Aquinas by way of the Neoplatonic notion of God as pure being, which probably has its origins in Porphyry’s modification of the Plotinian One (Hankey 2000 [1987]: 3-6; 2005: 49-50; Narbonne 2001: 41-70, 222-44).

God is unknown to us in this present life and, crucially, philosophy understands its own ignorance. Combining two Neoplatonic strategies, (1) the relation between the grade of a substance in the hierarchy and its way of knowing, with (2) the systematic analogy between the ways of knowing and the grades of being, Aquinas develops his particular doctrine of analogy in order to prevent all our judgments about God being false. As against both Moses Maimonides and Dionysius, who may be taken to stand for an extreme negative theology, Aquinas argues that we rightly make affirmative and proper predications of God—because God possesses the qualities predicated most properly, the qualities are not ascribed to God only as the cause of what is in creatures (*ST* 1.12.4; *ST* 1.13.1 *co.*, ad 2 and ad 3; *ST* 1.13 articles 2, 3, 5, 6, 12; see Hankey 2000 [1987]: 88-95). The correction of the mode of our knowing of God by comparing it to the mode of his own being requires that we are simultaneously looking at reality in a human way and also looking at our place in the cosmos from the divine perspective. This capacity to look at ourselves from beyond ourselves is consequent on our participation in the higher knowing of separate substances. This participation is as much a fact about the psychological and ontological structure of the cosmos—and thus about the constitution of our nature and how it functions within its hierarchically situated place—as it is something vouchsafed by revelation. The distinction, meeting, and fundamental interpenetration of two movements, one up from creatures which constitutes the theology which is for Aquinas a part of philosophy, the other down from God which constitutes for him revealed theology, is from beginning to the end what characterizes Aquinas’ teaching.

See also Christianity (Chapter 6), Islam (Chapter 7), Augustine (Chapter 8), Ibn Sina/Avicenna (Chapter 10), Moses Maimonides/Rambam (Chapter 11), The

cosmological argument (Chapter 32), The problem of religious language (Chapter 39), Catholic philosophical theology (Chapter 43), Theology and religious language (Chapter 48).

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Further reading

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