

2018

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Recommended Citation

Green, Tom (2018) "On the Knowledge of God and the Metaphysics of Aquinas," *Aristos*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/aristos/vol4/iss1/3>

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ON THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND THE METAPHYSICS OF AQUINAS

Tom Green

I. Introduction

The endeavour of the theologian is to discover the meaning of the utterances of divine revelation. But, “keeping his eye fixed upon his own goal, he must additionally take into consideration everything else he knows about the subject under discussion”.¹ For his subject extends to the whole created order, and there are many human sciences which assist in this knowledge. Metaphysics, above all these human sciences, aims to articulate the reasons why of reality as a whole, giving voice about things *as they are*. Therefore, it can be seen that the disciplines of theology and metaphysics have the same subject. When Aquinas, the theologian, begins then, to give a rational account of his Christian faith, he does not err in using his theological beliefs as a platform to his philosophical demonstrations.

This essay, more than anything, is an attempt to determine the credibility of Thomas Aquinas’ metaphysics, particularly as presented in the *Summa Theologiae*. Therein, Aquinas argues that the existence of God must be demonstrated rationally, but he does so on the presupposition that his Christian faith is true. Hence, I will begin by giving an overview of his arguments concerning how humans acquire knowledge generally, for this will help us to see how metaphysical knowledge is possible at all. Then, I will demonstrate how he thinks we can come to know that God, the principle subject of metaphysics, exists. On this basis, I will argue that Aquinas presupposes the existence of God and why that does not discredit him.

II. Human Knowledge and the Possibility of Metaphysics

As a way of proceeding, we shall outline what Aquinas argues regarding human knowledge in general. In this way, we shall see how metaphysical knowledge is possible in his philosophical system. Human beings are composites of body and soul. Thus, a human being apprehends sensible objects through its sense organs as a composite. But this knowledge of sensible objects is only of particulars; the senses cannot account for the apprehension of universals.² For example, dogs, also sensible creatures, can hear the sharp sound of a whistle but they cannot grasp what a whistle *is*. The apprehension of the material through sensation effects an image (phantasm) in the imagination, but this image remains particular and its

¹ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 150.

² Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume 2: Mediaeval Philosophy: Part II: Albert the Great to Duns Scotus*, (New York: Image Books, 1962), 109.

reception passive; more is needed for real knowledge. So how is universal knowledge derived? The rational soul of the human is unaffected by the sensible apprehension of the material. There is needed, therefore, an activity of the soul, since the idea of, say a whistle, cannot be formed passively in the way in which the phantasm is.³ Aquinas does not say how it happens, but only that there is the active intellect which abstracts from the phantasm or image the universal concept.⁴ It is important to underline here, that for Aquinas, there is no innate knowledge for humans; the active intellect awaits the reception of data from without, or the recollection of phantasms already in the imagination, from which it abstracts the universal concept – what a thing really *is*.⁵ Thus, there is no knowledge without the phantasms.

Therefore, according to Aquinas, if all natural human knowledge is derived from the material world through the senses how can we attain knowledge of the immaterial? How can there be knowledge of things which are not objects of sensation, like God? Well, things are only apprehended by the intellect in so far as they are intelligible and things are intelligible only in so far as they are in act. To be in act is to be.⁶ What Aquinas means is that things are only intelligible in as much as they are potencies moving toward their end. This movement is the explanation of what a thing is essentially.⁷ A chair is in as much as it is formed so as to be sat upon. So, a chair is acting as a chair ought to if it is able to be sat upon, and is thus fulfilling its potential. Hence, the intellect has its primary object in being. And so, for the embodied human intellect, the proper object of its apprehension is the material, but this without foregoing its fundamental orientation toward being qua intellect.⁸ Thus, human knowledge may begin with sense data, but is able, in as much as the intellect is ordered toward the apprehension of being in general, to know beyond what is sensible, to know the metaphysical. However, and crucially, since the human intellect can only know through the phantasms sensation produces, knowledge of immaterial things is only possible in as much as they are manifested in material things.⁹

But how does Aquinas account for any positive knowledge of immaterial things? We certainly cannot know of immaterial substances what they are essentially, for it is beyond our intellectual capacity as humans to do so – these are substances which are essentially superior

³ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 110.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), Ia, Q.88, art.1.

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.88, art.1.

⁶ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 113.

⁷ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 113.

⁸ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 113-114.

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.88, art.2.

to humans and therefore cannot be grasped wholly and essentially by that which is inferior.¹⁰ In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas affirms the approach of many natural theologians who spoke of God in the *via negativa* – by way of negating of God the things which are more properly human.¹¹ For example, to say ‘God is infinite’, simply means to say, ‘God is not finite’. Or, when we refer to God as immutable, we are not attributing any positive content to the nature of God, but only that he is not changing. We see that humans change, and they do so as beings moving from potency to act, but God is Pure Act and so there is in Him no change. But in affirming the *via negativa*, Aquinas does not deny the possibility of defining God more positively, that is, he argues for the *via affirmativa* – we can know God and describe him positively.¹² For instance, if we call God wise, we are ascribing to Him a human quality, for it is the only kind of wisdom we have access to naturally. But it cannot be exactly the same, for the wisdom that God would possess would be beyond what we are capable of acquiring and would not be subject to our natural limitations.¹³ So, when we attribute wisdom to God, we are saying that he is more than wise, which has positive content – we know the quality of wisdom in men, but in God the quality of wisdom exceeds what we normally experience it to be in our limited nature and we are incapable of understanding fully what it means.¹⁴ However, “the infinity of...God means that the finite human mind can attain no adequate and perfect idea of God’s nature, but it does not mean that it cannot attain an imperfect and inadequate notion of God’s nature”.¹⁵ Thus, for Aquinas, positive knowledge of the metaphysical, specifically God, is possible to the human mind.

III. Coming to Know God

Arriving at the possibility of knowing God is just the start. In discovering the capability of metaphysical knowledge, we are able to articulate what we might be able to say about God if he existed. But does he exist, and according to Aquinas, how might we arrive at this conclusion? Aquinas articulates about humans that “to know in a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature.”¹⁶ From this, Alvin Plantinga sets up his famous

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.88, art.1.

¹¹ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 115.

¹² Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 115.

¹³ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 115.

¹⁴ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 116.

¹⁵ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 116.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.1.

account of warrant whereby he argues the existence of God is self-evident.¹⁷ Using John Calvin, who supposedly builds upon this quote from Aquinas, Plantinga argues that it is this natural disposition (what he calls the *sensus divinitatis*) by which human beings can come to a basic belief about the existence of God.¹⁸ By virtue of this *sensus divinitatis*, for example, one can gaze at the starry heavens and from this, without inference from any other proposition, be warranted in believing that God exists and that he made it so. And Plantinga presents quite a convincing argument. If we are naturally disposed to know God, and when, gazing in wonder at creation we think of Him, wouldn't that be enough to say that knowledge of God is self-evident?

Aquinas, though, states plainly his position against such notions. He describes two ways in which a thing may be self-evident: "in itself, though not to us [and] in itself, and to us".¹⁹ Propositions are self-evident if their predicate is contained in the essence of the subject, as in the proposition, "water is wet". Thus, for those who know the predicate and the subject, this kind of statement will be self-evident. But if the predicate or the subject are unknown to someone, then the statement will be self-evident in itself, but not to one who lacks that knowledge. In this sense, the proposition, "God exists" is self-evident in itself, for the predicate is contained in the essence of the subject (that is, God's essence is his existence, as Aquinas goes on to argue), but it is not self-evident to us for we do not know the essence of God.²⁰ In Aquinas' reply to the type of objection Plantinga raises, he points out that, though man is naturally capable of knowledge of the divine, this does not mean that we are able absolutely to know He exists, "just as to know someone is approaching, is not the same as to know Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching".²¹ We might have made a lucky guess to say that God exists from gazing into the starry heavens, but we do not know it absolutely. How then do we know that God exists?

The proposition, 'God exists', "needs to be *demonstrated* by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature—namely, by effects".²² [italics mine] A demonstration is performed in one of two ways: either through the cause or through the effect. To argue

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, "Warranted Belief in God," In *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2003), doi: 10.1093/0195131932.003.0006.

¹⁸ Plantinga, "Warranted Belief in God".

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.1.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.1.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.1.

²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.2. All Aquinas means here by "less known in their nature" is that a thing is less intelligible than its cause because it is less perfect. God, Pure Act, is the most knowable substance by nature.

through the cause would be to argue from what is prior in being, whereas to demonstrate from the effect “is to argue from what is prior relatively only to us”. That is, to make a demonstration from an effect would be to argue from what is more knowable to us, as its essence is more apprehensible to the human intellect. And thus, “when an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause.”²³ For Aquinas, this kind of demonstration is applicable to all that is intelligible – we can know all things provided their effects are known to us. For, “since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist”.²⁴ Therefore, God’s existence can be demonstrated from His effects, from creation. In the following article of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas goes on to give his five demonstrations for God’s existence, and thus, portrays not only the possibility for metaphysical knowledge, but indeed that there is One whose existence is the ground of all other existing things.

IV. The Crucial Presupposition

If we have paid due attention to the chain of Thomas’ arguments presented here, we will notice something peculiar to his philosophical method. Of particular note is the argument expressed in the preceding paragraph wherein he states that the existence of God ought to be demonstrated and how so. We demonstrate God’s existence, says Aquinas, by arguing from what is better known to us to what is less known to us; by arguing from the effect, the existence of the cause.²⁵ But a cause is *prior* to its effect. So, in performing a demonstration of this kind, the philosopher presupposes the existence of the cause about which he makes his conclusion. Aquinas does not shy away from such an admission, for he himself quotes St Paul saying, “for the invisible things of [God], from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; his eternal power also, and divinity” (Rom 1:20).²⁶ According to the account of human knowledge and its capabilities that we have explored above, this method is true not only for demonstrations of God’s existence but about immaterial substances in general, for he claims that the knowledge of these, far surpassing the limitations of the human intellect, are manifested to us in their effects.²⁷ So, in the *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas presents

²³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.2.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.2.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.2.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.2, art.2.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q.88, art.2.

an account of deriving metaphysical knowledge which presupposes the existence of the causes, the Cause, about which he wants to draw conclusions.

How problematic is this to metaphysics? Ought we not presume rather the opposite – that God does not exist, or at least that we do not know whether there is a first cause? When Aristotle considers the science which is to be the first among the sciences, he remarks pertinently that “if there is an immovable substance, the science of this must be prior and must be first philosophy, and universal in this way, because it is first. And it will belong to it to consider being qua being—both what it is and the attributes that belong to it qua being”.²⁸ Metaphysics begins then, at least in the Aristotelian mould of which Aquinas is preeminent, on a conditional. If there is a first cause, then the knowledge of this must be first among philosophical investigations, because by it we are more readily able to explain the reasons why of things in general. So, then, it is not erroneous of itself to presume that there is a first cause – it is in fact, according to Aristotle, *helpful* as a starting point for all philosophical enquiries.²⁹ Now, this quotation does not presuppose that God exists like the quotations above from Aquinas seem to, but it does allow the possibility of such an approach.

Which is why when we consider Aquinas, the theologian, it becomes apparent why he argues in the way he does. Every philosopher must begin his enquiries, his pursuit of wisdom, with an assent of faith, whatever its content. For example, Descartes places his faith in the acuity of human reason. Aristotle, on the other hand, gives his assent, not only to reason, but to the intelligibility of what lies before him in reality. Aquinas accepts Aristotle’s approach, but he does not stop there.³⁰ For he also gives his assent to the Christian faith; that God has indeed revealed Himself in the manner that that tradition articulates. There is a certain symmetry, a harmony, between the science of first philosophy and theology.³¹ For, as Aristotle points out in the quotation above, the first philosophy gives us an understanding of reality as a whole and man’s place in it. Theology, particularly the revelation of God in the Christian faith, also gives us an explanation of reality as a whole and man’s place in it.³² The latter does so from a God’s-eye-view, so to speak, while the former, from the point-of-view of man and his natural capabilities. So, what bars the philosopher from beginning his philosophical endeavour with a particular world view, as Aquinas does? If his account of things from this point-of-view does not contradict what we can know naturally, then it hardly matters. One need not agree

²⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 6.1

²⁹ Ralph McInerny, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, (London: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 130.

³⁰ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 148.

³¹ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 149.

³² Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 149-150.

with everything he says, but it is hardly reasonable to do away with his whole endeavour based on the point from which he starts. One would need first to demonstrate the incompatibilities of the two movements to truth. Aquinas demonstrates the opposite.³³

V. Conclusion

Thomas Aquinas presents in his seminal work, the *Summa Theologica*, a grand scheme of reality as a whole and the place of man within it. More specifically, he shows how man is able to know things, to know the world around him and thus to engage with it and within it. But he also demonstrates that there is a possibility of knowing things above his nature, of knowing the metaphysical, of knowing God. And while his demonstration may depend on the presupposition that God exists, this does not have a deleterious effect on his philosophical enterprise. For when we consider reality as a whole in metaphysics, the only thing that separates us from the theologian is our point of view. For both try to give a holistic account of the world and man's place therein. Aquinas demonstrates laudably the harmony of both; that what God has revealed about Himself and the world is a good starting point for man to begin to wonder.

³³ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 151

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