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WHAT ROLES DO REASON AND REVELATION PLAY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRINITY, ACCORDING TO ST THOMAS AQUINAS?

Matthew Anslow

1. Introduction

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the mystery of the Holy Trinity is “the central mystery of the Christian faith and life.”¹ The *Catechism* goes on to declare that the Trinity is “the source of all other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them,” and the most essential teaching.² For the Catholic faith, then, the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be overstated; to err on the doctrine is necessarily to err with regard to all Christian faith and life.

This raises numerous questions, among them being the extent to which the Trinity is a mystery to humanity. In other words, what are the limits of our knowledge of the Holy Trinity, and by what means are humans capable of attaining such knowledge? Specifically, are we capable of acquiring knowledge of the Trinity by means of human reason?

Thomas Aquinas’ account of the Trinity remains definitive for Catholic faith and life and is illuminating with regard to the aforementioned questions. For Aquinas, as for contemporary Catholics, “the Christian faith chiefly consists in confessing the Holy Trinity.”³ Indeed, Aquinas goes to great lengths to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. By what means, then, does Aquinas think we can gain knowledge of the Trinity? Does he think that human reason is capable of attaining the knowledge of the Trinity?

Such questions form the focus of this paper, which will seek to articulate the roles of reason and revelation in the knowledge of the Holy Trinity. This articulation will require the provision of some context via a brief outline of Aquinas’ general thought regarding the place

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997), 234, 261.

² *Catechism*, 234.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *De Rationibus Fidei*, ch. 1, trans. Joseph Kenny, accessed 1/05/2020, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Rationes.htm>.

of reason and revelation in the knowledge of God. Having turned our attention to Aquinas' teaching regarding human reason and knowledge of the Trinity, we will illustrate Aquinas' conviction about the knowledge of the Trinity by outlining the way in which he utilises reason and revelation in his explanation of the doctrine.

2. Aquinas on Reason and Revelation in the Knowledge of God

Aquinas' most complete articulation of the place of reason and revelation in the knowledge of God is found in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Early in the work, Aquinas makes clear that, “[i]n those things which we hold about God there is truth in two ways,”⁴ namely faith⁵ and human reason. It is for this reason that Aquinas is able to claim that, though pagan thinkers had not encountered the self-revelation of God to Israel and in Christ, their philosophical investigations were congruent with such revelation, indeed they direct us towards it.⁶

Still, for Aquinas, reason and revelation are not equals. Reason is only capable of understanding the truth of a thing, he says, if it understands the essence of that thing.⁷ Hence Aquinas' assertion: “[c]ertain divine truths wholly surpass the capability of human reason.”⁸ Why is this so? Because reason cannot comprehend God's essence.

There are, for Aquinas, certain truths about God that we can know by reason. God's existence is one example, as reflected in the *Summa Theologiae*'s so-called “five ways” of demonstrating God's existence “through the effect,” that is, through reason.⁹ Other divine

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex, 1993), 1.3.

⁵ William Lane Craig suggests that, with Aquinas, we see the reduction of faith to an epistemological category. In other words, faith loses the sense of trust or commitment, such that a doctrine cannot be both believed (by faith) and known (by reason). It is unclear to me whether this trend begins with Aquinas, but I am inclined to agree with Craig that this “intellectualist” understanding of faith is a reduction of the biblical notion of *pistis*. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 33.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 74.

⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.3.

⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.3.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex, 1993), I, q. 2, arts. 1–3.

attributes can also be known by reason, such as divine eternity,¹⁰ absence of potentiality,¹¹ immateriality,¹² simplicity,¹³ oneness,¹⁴ infinity,¹⁵ and so forth.

Aquinas' argument here is based on the conviction that effects resemble their cause, and so things received by revelation cannot contradict that which we know by natural knowledge.¹⁶ God's eternity, for example, can be established partly through the knowledge that anything which is brought into being has a cause external to itself and, since God is the first cause, God did not have a beginning whereby he was brought into being.¹⁷

There are, however, certain divine truths that can only be discerned with the aid of revelation. God's essence, after all, cannot be discerned by our senses and exceeds the capability of human reason.¹⁸ As we shall see, it is in this category that Aquinas places the doctrine of the Trinity.

3. Can the Trinity Be Discerned by Human Reason?

The answer to the question of whether, according to Aquinas, the Trinity¹⁹ can be known by human reason independent of faith is unambiguous: no, since "certain things that are true about God wholly surpass the capability of human reason, for instance that God is three and one"²⁰ But what are the reasons that Aquinas gives for this conviction, and what are its implications? This is the task before us.

Aquinas' position on the knowledge of the Trinity distinguishes him from certain other medieval theologians. Brian Davies notes, for example, that the 12th century philosopher and

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.15.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.16.

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.17.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.18.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.42.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.43.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.7.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.15.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.3.

¹⁹ It is helpful to note what it is that Aquinas means by "Trinity." In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas clarifies this: "In its etymological sense, this word "Trinity" seems to signify the one essence of the three persons, according as trinity may mean trine-unity. But in the strict meaning of the term it rather signifies the number of persons of one essence" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 31, a. 1). In other words, "Trinity" here refers not to the one essence of the three persons, but to the number of persons of one essence. See John McDermott, "Is the Blessed Trinity Naturally Knowable? St. Thomas on Reason, Faith, Nature, Grace, and Person," *Gregorianum* 93 (2012): 120.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.3.

theologian Richard of St Victor argued that, since God is love, there must be in God a tending to another, and indeed a tending to a third such that the love of the first two can be shared.²¹ A similar line of thought occurs in Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*.²² But Aquinas does not allow this: “[n]ow it is an article of faith that God is three and one. Therefore, reason is not adequate to perceive this.”²³ What is Aquinas’ basis for this claim against the likes of Richard and Bonaventure?

Aquinas does not follow the path of some other medieval figures who, according to Davies, argued that reason could not attain the knowledge of the Trinity because it had been corrupted by the Fall.²⁴ Aquinas, rather, thinks original sin is irrelevant in explaining reason’s inability to attain the knowledge of the Trinity; the truth is that reason is intrinsically incapable of doing so.²⁵ According to Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*:

[m]an cannot obtain the knowledge of God by natural reason except from creatures. Now creatures lead us to the knowledge of God, as effects do to their cause. Accordingly, by natural reason we can know of God that only which of necessity belongs to Him as the principle of things.²⁶

In other words, what we can deduce about God by reason is what we can deduce from creatures, since effects (in this case, creatures) reflect their cause (namely, the Creator). Such reasoning is based on an Aristotelian understanding of nature, whereby nature is the principle of action.²⁷ For Aquinas, natural theology can tell us, for example, that there is a God, the source of the existence of creatures. This creative power, he says, is shared by the persons of the Trinity,²⁸ and so the fact of creation can only reflect the unity of the persons, not any kind of distinction between them. It is the case, then, that reason can lead us to conclude that there is one God, but

²¹ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 188. Richard is mentioned in *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas quotes him: “I believe without doubt that probable and even necessary arguments can be found for any explanation of the truth” (I. q. 32, a. 1).

²² Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 188.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Faith, Reason, and Theology, Questions I–IV of the Commentary on Boethius’ De Trinitate*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex, 1993), 1.4.

²⁴ Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 189. See also Gilles Emery, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in St Thomas Aquinas,” in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, eds. Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating and John Yocum (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 46.

²⁵ Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 189.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 32, a. 1.

²⁷ Emery, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” 46.

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 32, a. 1.

it cannot discern any distinction within divinity, since this is not reflected in the cause-and-effect relationship between Creator and creation.²⁹

Indeed, for Aquinas, to attempt to prove the existence of the Trinity by reason ends up detracting from faith in two ways:

[f]irstly, as regards the dignity of faith itself, which consists in its being concerned with invisible things, that exceed human reason Secondly, as regards the utility of drawing others to the faith. For when anyone in the endeavor to prove the faith brings forward reasons which are not cogent, he falls under the ridicule of the unbelievers: since they suppose that we stand upon such reasons, and that we believe on such grounds.³⁰

For Aquinas, reason is crucial for the confirmation of divine truths.³¹ Reason can, however, undermine the Church's witness to the world if it is used in such a way as to appear foolish to those outside the Church, such as when one speculates about the divine beyond one's ability.³² In the case of the knowledge of the Trinity, it is beyond the speculative powers of all people.

4. Reason, Revelation, and the Doctrine of the Trinity

In light of all of this, it might be tempting to conclude that humans have no rational capacity for knowledge of the Trinity whatsoever. Davies notes disapprovingly that, for many, "[t]he doctrine of the Trinity marks the point at which Christian teaching gets really incomprehensible," whereas the idea of one, creating God is relatively clear.³³ Aquinas disagrees with this position on at least two fronts.

First, such a position assumes that the monotheistic notion of God is fairly straightforward, whereas the Trinity constitutes a unique mystery that reason cannot penetrate. As Herbert McCabe recognises, however, for Aquinas, "our reason has already broken down when we talk about God at all."³⁴ That we can prove the existence of God by reason does not therefore mean that God is not a mystery. Rather, all we have accomplished in proving God's

²⁹ Aquinas, *De Trinitate*, 1.4.

³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 32, a. 1.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.6.

³² Aquinas, *De Trinitate*, 2.1

³³ Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 188.

³⁴ Herbert McCabe, "Aquinas on the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999): 268.

existence is to prove the existence of a mystery.³⁵ Hence Aquinas' assertion that, "When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence."³⁶

All of this is to say that, when we speak of the failure of reason with regard to knowledge of the Trinity, we are not therefore implying that God's essence is otherwise comprehensible on the basis of reason. The three-ness of God is not alone in its mystery – God's entire essence is utterly enigmatic to human reason.

This leads us to Aquinas' second disagreement with the aforementioned position. As mentioned, many Christians take the view that the doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible. Such a position assumes that the inability of reason to come to a knowledge of the Trinity implies that the Trinity exceeds all human power in general. But Aquinas never suggests that the *doctrine* is incomprehensible, but rather that it is the mystery to which it points that cannot be attained by reason.

This distinction is crucial, since it accounts for why Aquinas is able to offer a rational explanation of the Trinity, even while denying reason's capacity to discern God's Trinitarian nature. Indeed, according to him, we are even able to say something of God. George Mavrodes is helpful in clarifying this point:

[i]t is worth noting that Thomas is not [in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.3] making the rather innocuous claim that there are some truths about God which exceed the power of human reason. That claim, of course, is almost sure to be true. For that matter, it is very likely that there are some truths about beetles which exceed the power of human reason. But Thomas makes the much stronger claim that there are truths of this sort in what we profess about God. That is, there are truths which are sufficiently within our power so that we are able to profess them, but which lie beyond the power of reason.³⁷

How ought we to explain the claim that at least some of what we profess about God lies beyond our power of reason? Indeed, how is it possible that we profess something at all if it cannot be rationally determined? For Aquinas, it is the relationship between faith and reason that provides the answer. As he says, "[f]aith cannot altogether precede understanding, for it would be

³⁵ McCabe, "Aquinas on the Trinity," 268.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3.

³⁷ George I. Mavrodes, "It is Beyond the Power of Human Reason," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 75–76.

impossible to assent by believing what is proposed to be believed, without understanding it in some way.”³⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship between faith and reason that makes the profession of God, including the doctrine of the Trinity, possible? In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas affirms the Augustinian idea that “by faith we arrive at knowledge, and not conversely.”³⁹ This knowledge is the knowledge of God, which can be attained only by faith. This he recognises in the context of speaking about the ways in which reason can be used to establish a point. It is here that Aquinas makes the relationship between revelation and reason as it concerns the Trinity most explicit. There are two ways to employ reason, he says.⁴⁰ First, for the purpose of supplying sufficient proof of some principle, such as rational argumentation proving that God is one. Second, reason can be used not to establish proof of some principle, but rather to confirm some already established principle, what Gilles Emery calls “persuasions.”⁴¹ It is this latter form of reason that can be employed to “prove” the Trinity, not in the sense of demonstrating its existence, but rather simply confirming its credibility, rendering it “more articulate.”⁴² Of course, this latter form of reason is only useful if the principle has already been established, which, in the case of the Trinity, occurs only by way of revelation accepted by faith or, in Augustinian terms, faith arriving at knowledge.

This is why Aquinas rejects the apologetic approach of “necessary reasons” associated with Anselm, Richard of St Victor, and Bonaventure. For Bonaventure, sovereign goodness necessitates “number” in God since goodness must communicate itself – and beatitude, charity, liberality, and joy must be shared – between a plurality of persons.⁴³ Aquinas, however, sees only a form of “persuasive” reason here, merely articulating what cannot be conclusively demonstrated, except by revelation.⁴⁴ Emery summarises Aquinas’ view as being that we ought not to endanger faith by suggesting that Christians believe in the Trinity for such fragile reasons.⁴⁵

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 8, a. 8.

³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 32, a. 1.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 32, a. 1.

⁴¹ Gilles Emery, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, eds. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 419.

⁴² Emery, “The Trinity,” 419.

⁴³ Emery, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” 47.

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 32, a. 1, ad. 2; II-II. q. 1, a. 5, ad. 2.

⁴⁵ Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 24.

In sum: for Aquinas, the doctrine of the Trinity can indeed be comprehended by reason, but only because revelation concerning God's Trinitarian nature has been previously received in Scripture and accepted by faith.⁴⁶ While the doctrine itself can be comprehended, the mystery to which it points, God's Trinitarian nature, remains just that, a mystery – and one that is impenetrable to reason working on its own.

5. The Possibility of Explanation

Emery articulates the problem that faces us with regard to explanation in Trinitarian theology in this way:

[i]f, on the one hand, natural human intelligence has no access to the existence of a Trinity of persons in God (since only faith gives knowledge of it), and if, on the other hand, the speculative reasons advanced by Christian theology are not demonstrations, what could be the value of a speculative discussion which makes use of "reason," and what is the discussion for?⁴⁷

As we have seen, Aquinas does not deny that we can comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity, since some level of understanding is necessary in order to believe. We have also explored Aquinas' insistence that, though we cannot demonstratively prove the existence of the Trinity on the basis of reason, explanation of the Trinity is valuable since we can persuade people of its credibility and render it articulately. More needs to be said, however, with regard to the explanation of the Trinity in order to understand properly how Aquinas thought we could reason in relation to it.

Timothy L. Smith notes the way in which talk of the divine essence and divine persons had, by the time of Aquinas, become problematic:

[t]he difficulties of talking about the divine essence and divine Persons coherently proved virtually insurmountable without denying or calling into question some part of the doctrine itself. Clumsy use of terms implies a multiplicity of Gods, a denial of real distinction between divine Persons, or even a reification of the essence prior to or apart from the Persons.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See Aquinas' biblical commentaries, especially on John and Paul.

⁴⁷ Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 26.

⁴⁸ Timothy L. Smith, *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 158.

Aquinas' explanation of the Trinity occurs in this historical context. He follows Augustine's so-called "psychological model," having divine unity as his starting point before moving to revealed distinctions.⁴⁹ Smith describes Aquinas' theory as being that we name God in the way we know God, that is, through creatures, but also that we do not know what God is, only what God is not.⁵⁰ That is to say, our language about God does not line up with divine reality: "[t]he reason why God has no name, or is said to be above being named, is because His essence is above all that we understand about God, and signify in word."⁵¹ Our reason, then, is always limited by our language.

This does not mean, as one might be led to expect, that human language cannot describe the divine substance. On the contrary, Aquinas thinks our language can signify the divine substance, but only analogously, as well as imperfectly.⁵² This is because, as mentioned above, we know God from creatures, those that represent God in an imperfect way (though they do possess some of God's perfection).⁵³ Since we name the divine substance according to imperfect creatures, our language is therefore also an imperfect signification of the divine substance. This principle, combined with Aquinas' commitment to apophaticism, means that, for him, to say that "God is good" is not to say that "God is the cause of goodness," or that "God is not evil." Rather, it is to say that, "[w]hatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God," and in a more perfect way.⁵⁴

To what part of creation, then, should we turn in order to find what ought to be said of God? Aquinas is clear: God is above all, so we ought to look not to the lowest creatures – bodies – but to the highest creatures, namely, the intellectual substances.⁵⁵ In other words, spiritual nature most closely resembles the Triune God, who is Spirit (John 4:24).⁵⁶ There is, for Aquinas, then, an analogy between divine and human persons.⁵⁷ This analogy is by no means "demonstrative" of divine substance, but merely an equivocal profession, made according to reason, but utterly reliant on divine revelation.

⁴⁹ Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 150.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology*, 158–159.

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 13, a. 1, ad. 1.

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 13, a. 2.

⁵³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 13, a. 2.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 13, a. 2.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 27, a. 1.

⁵⁶ Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, 154.

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 29, a. 4, ad. 4.

6. Aquinas' Use of 'Person'

One of the crucial convictions of the Church concerns the three 'persons' of the Trinity. This application of language to God is useful here as an illustration of what we have been saying about Aquinas' view of how we speak of God.

Aquinas' understanding of the divine persons is complex and cannot possibly be addressed here in a comprehensive way. In short, he views the divine person as a "subsistent relation."⁵⁸ This means that the three persons are distinguished by their relations (and the relations, in turn, are distinguished by the procession of each).⁵⁹

From where does the word 'person' originate? It is, as Aquinas himself says, not found in Scripture.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, he sees the word as signifying that which is affirmed of God in Scripture – a new word "to express the ancient faith about God."⁶¹ The origin of the word, however, is found in nature. For Aquinas, following Boethius, 'person' signifies "what is most perfect in all nature – that is, a substantial individual of a rational nature."⁶²

But this creates a problem. 'Person,' as it relates to humans, refers to an individual subject, "a distinct centre of consciousness."⁶³ As we have seen, though, Aquinas sees "person," when applied to the Trinity, as signifying relation. This disparity speaks to the imperfection of analogy. By using "person" in relation to the Trinity in this way, Aquinas reformulates the notion of "person" in order to have it signify what has been made known by revelation.

Aquinas' use of 'person' in relation to the Trinity represents the kind of "persuasive" reason of which we spoke previously. He seeks to articulate, as clearly as possible, what has been revealed about God's Trinitarian nature, and persuade others as to the credibility of the

⁵⁸ Emery, "The Trinity," 419.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.2–26.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 29, a. 3, ad. 1.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 29, a. 3, ad. 1.

⁶² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 29, a. 3.

⁶³ McCabe, "Aquinas on the Trinity," 282. Although, it is worth noting Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove's claim that, today, "There is a tendency to almost exclusively define persons in terms of their relations to others partly in reaction to modernity's too individualistic outlook" (Declan Marmion and Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 205).

doctrine of the Trinity.⁶⁴ And yet, the language employed takes on meaning that is distinct from its normal usage, precisely because of what has been revealed about God in Scripture.⁶⁵ If Boethius' definition of 'person' is a substantial individual of a rational nature, the 'persons' of the Trinity are, as McCabe points out, "not individuals, not substances, not rational and do not *have* natures."⁶⁶ The word must be redefined. The use of 'person' in relation to the Trinity, then, holds a certain explanatory power in Aquinas' work, while simultaneously implying, by its own analogical imperfection, the mystery of God. In a sense, Aquinas' use of 'person' is, in itself, an embodiment of the relationship between reason and revelation in the knowledge of the Trinity, and in works of theology more generally.

The implication of all of this is that we can, in fact, make some sense of the mystery of the Trinity, insofar as it has been revealed to us.⁶⁷ McDermott, reflecting on Aquinas' understanding of the Trinitarian mystery, articulates this astutely: "[Thomas] recognizes that a supernatural mystery cannot be utterly beyond reason; it must have some foundation in human experience lest it be unintelligible. Unintelligibility would be contrary to God's revelation since God's revelation is addressed to human beings in human words."⁶⁸

7. Conclusion

We have seen that Thomas Aquinas does indeed see a role for human reason in the knowledge of God. Reason is able to demonstrate certain divine attributes on the basis of the cause-and-effect relationship between Creator and creature. However, certain divine truths elude human reason, on account not of humanity's fallenness, but rather of the fact that there are no empirical means to access knowledge of the divine essence. God, thus, remains a mystery, and what we know of God's essence can be known only by revelation accepted by faith.

⁶⁴ Or, alternatively, to "confute heretics." Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 29, a. 3, ad. 1.

⁶⁵ For example, McDermott suggests Boethius' definition of "individual" – whose principle is matter, which does not pertain to God – is revised, such that "individual" comes to signify incommunicability. Likewise, Boethius' "substance" is reinterpreted as "to exist through or in itself." John McDermott, "Is the Blessed Trinity Naturally Knowable?" 126–127.

⁶⁶ McCabe, "Aquinas on the Trinity," 282 (author's emphasis).

⁶⁷ McDermott goes as far as to say that "Thomas considers the divine processions and relations naturally knowable; supernatural revelation is required only to identify the relations." McDermott, "Is the Blessed Trinity Naturally Knowable?" 149.

⁶⁸ McDermott, "Is the Blessed Trinity Naturally Knowable?" 147.

For Aquinas, the Holy Trinity falls into this category since it is a part of the divine essence that finds no reflection in creaturely existence. We may indeed conclude that God is one by deducing from the existence of creation the need for a first cause, but the fact of creation reflects only the unity of divine persons, not any kind of distinction between them.

There does, however, according to Aquinas, remain a role for reason with regard to the Trinity. First, what has been revealed about God must be comprehensible by human reason, at least to the extent that we can understand it in some way and profess it, even if such profession speaks of that which is a mystery, and one that ultimately lies beyond the power of reason.

Second, reason is able to offer arguments in support of the existence of the Trinity, even though it is known only by revelation. Such arguments are unable to *demonstrate* the existence of the Trinity, though they can offer persuasions regarding the credibility of such existence, and can render the doctrine of the Trinity articulately.

These persuasions, however, will only ever be provisional since they rely on language that is analogous and imperfect, and because they only ever confirm a principle already established by revelation and that requires faith.

We saw how all of this was reflected in Aquinas' use of "person" in relation to the Trinity. This term has the normative definition: "a substantial individual of a rational nature." Such a definition, however, does not apply to God. The word, then, must be redefined in light of revelation. Thus, the word has explanatory power for Aquinas, though it is also analogous and imperfect, and must be understood in a distinct way in light of what has been revealed and accepted by faith.

Aquinas' understanding of the roles of reason and revelation with regard to the Trinity is no doubt complex, but they form a masterful and nuanced treatment of the central mystery of Christian faith, one that cautions us to remain both faithful and humble in our work to understand what has been made known by revelation. Such caution, I would suggest, remains relevant today, not least in light of the rise of social Trinitarianism, though that is a subject for another time.

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