

Faith and Reason: The Synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas*

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IN a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne on November 27, 1999, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger argued that the victory of Christianity over the pagan religions in the Roman Empire was made possible by its recourse to reason, by its reasonableness as well as by its moral doctrine; Christianity, indeed, does not rely on imagination or unverifiable events, but places itself at the junction of faith and reason. By its choice in favor of the primacy of reason in human life it continues to present a rational vision of the world and to encourage scientific research. In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998) John Paul II, dealing more *in extenso* with this theme, examines the relationship between faith and reason, the influence they have exercised on each other, and assesses the current situation of the relation between philosophy and theology. As the pope explains, our reason is not imprisoned in the sensible world but, to a certain extent, it is able to go beyond it. Reason is universal and extends also beyond what is proper to particular cultures. On the other hand the rise and fall of often dangerous and frightening secular ideologies have shown the limits of reason, which can no longer pretend to master nature, science, and progress by itself alone.¹ The encyclical sketches some of the main events of the long history of the coexistence and collaboration of faith and reason in order to highlight the support and benefits each of them

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¹ Cf. St. Thomas, *In Colossianos 2*, lectio 2, where he explains that secular philosophy may lead into error for two reasons: the mistaken views it defends and its faulty reasoning.

derived from it. In section 43 it describes the particular place St. Thomas Aquinas occupies in this history, not only because of the high value of his theology and philosophy, but also because of the dialogue he conducted with medieval Arab and Jewish thought.

St. Thomas Aquinas on Faith and Reason

If we try to analyze the position of Aquinas, we must recall that Thomas was the first theologian to distinguish with great clarity between theology and philosophy. Their difference, he writes, derives from their different sources, from the way they proceed, and from their respective subject matters.² Indeed, differences in the source of knowledge and the way of knowing entail a diversity of disciplines.³ Sacred doctrine receives its principles from divine revelation, namely, the fundamental truths of the faith as expressed in the articles of the creed. Philosophy, on the other hand, acquires its fundamental principles through evident insight into the structure of reality. It proceeds by gathering knowledge through experience—by analyzing and drawing conclusions from what is based on evidence. Sacred doctrine, on the other hand, proceeds in the twilight of the faith, without possessing evident knowledge about the truths it considers. While accepting the creed on divine authority, theologians use concepts, principles, and insights of everyday life and sound philosophy to penetrate further into the meaning of what has been revealed.

In addition to the source and basis of their respective sciences being distinct, the subject matter of sacred theology and that of philosophy also differ: philosophical disciplines study nature, man, and his actions in the light of his end, as well as being *qua* being, whereas sacred theology considers God insofar as he revealed himself and his design concerning man's supernatural salvation. Whatever God has revealed is the subject matter of sacred doctrine.⁴ However, much of what has been revealed lies beyond the reach of natural reason, since it concerns infinite and tran-

² See *Summa contra Gentiles* I, chaps. 7–9.

³ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2: "Diversa ratio cognoscibilis diversitatem scientiarum inducit . . . Unde nihil prohibet de eisdem rebus, de quibus philosophicae disciplinae tractant secundum quod sunt cognoscibilia lumine naturalis rationis, et aliam scientiam tractare secundum quod cognoscuntur lumine divinae revelationis."

⁴ Thomas writes "whatever may be an object of divine revelation" (*omnia quae sunt divinitus revelabilia*) instead of "what has been revealed," probably meaning whatever is somehow contained in what has been revealed, although not explicitly stated, as for instance the *convenientia* of many facts of the history of salvation, such as the time of the Incarnation of Christ. Reflections on the *convenientia* make up a considerable part of the themes treated in the third part of the *Summa theologiae*.

scendent divine being, wisdom, and love,⁵ and God's free decision, but God may also reveal certain basic truths which as such are accessible to reason, in order to make it easier for all to come to know them. As an example one may point to the revelation of the main precepts of the natural law in the Ten Commandments.⁶

But St. Thomas does not stop short at the distinction between sacred doctrine and natural knowledge. He also insists on their harmony. There can be no contradiction between true natural knowledge and the doctrine of the faith, because both have their origin in God who, as the creator of the world and of man, places the principles of our knowledge in our minds, but has also given us revealed knowledge.⁷

Because of the patent incompatibility of certain positions of Averroistic Aristotelianism with the Christian faith (such as the theory of the eternity of the world), some masters of the faculty of arts in thirteenth-century Paris developed the theory of double truth: what is established in sacred theology sometimes contradicts what is true in philosophy, so that a Christian philosopher must accept simultaneously two conflicting theses. However, Aquinas strongly opposes this view. Since all truth comes from God, in whom there is no contradiction, such a position is impossible.⁸ Apparent contradictions originate from erroneous reasoning or from false deductions from the doctrine of the faith.

Grace Builds on Nature and Fulfills It

Instead of opposition and conflict, Aquinas speaks of a harmonious collaboration where the supernatural order presupposes the natural order and fulfills it. In a considerable number of texts Aquinas confirms this position: "The order in which divine providence proceeds does not take away from things what is natural for them, but God takes care of each thing according to its nature."⁹ The order of grace is not even possible

⁵ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 5: "Ista scientia est principaliter de his quae sua altitudine rationem transcendunt, aliae vero scientiae considerant ea tantum quae rationi subduntur." In this connection Thomas lists as lying beyond the range of reason the dogmas about the divine Trinity, the Incarnation, grace, the sacramental order, the resurrection, glorification, and eternal beatitude (*ScG IV*, chap. 1).

⁶ Cf. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 12; q. 32, a. 1; *ScG III*, chap. 47.

⁷ Cf. *In Boetii De Trinitate* q. 2, a. 3: "Impossibile est quod ea quae sunt philosophiae, sint contraria his quae sunt fidei."

⁸ *ScG I*, chap. 7: "Impossibile est illis principiis quae ratio naturaliter cognoscit, praedictam veritatem fidei contrariam esse . . . Quaecumque argumenta contra fidei documenta ponantur, haec ex principiis primis natura inditis per se notis non recte procedere . . . sed vel sunt rationes probabiles vel sophisticae."

⁹ *ScG III*, chap. 85.

without nature, since grace is a state or quality added to it. Thus the divine law presupposes natural law,¹⁰ as faith presupposes man's natural knowledge.¹¹ Indeed, grace is not meant to do away with human nature, but to raise and perfect it.¹² Grace renders nature more perfect. It does so in agreement with nature's basic characteristics. For this reason angels received their beatitude immediately after their initial choice of God, without having to go through the often long period of waiting in faith and hope which makes up the life of Christians on earth.¹³ Likewise grace does not take away imperfections which are inherent to human nature itself, such as the fact that man is a creature.¹⁴ Since nature proceeds from what is imperfect to greater fullness, grace was given first in an imperfect way but later in abundance.¹⁵

Thomas also indicates the manner in which grace perfects nature, namely, by assisting reason in controlling the intellect and the will as well as those lower faculties of the soul which can be controlled by reason.¹⁶ "Since grace does not do away with nature but perfects it, natural reason must be subservient to faith as the natural inclination of the will follows charity."¹⁷ This is so obvious for Aquinas that he even builds an argument on it: from the fact that by his natural inclination man loves God more than himself, it follows that supernatural charity also makes man love God above himself.¹⁸ Sin, on the other hand, causes damage insofar as it obstructs the help of grace and the government of natural reason over man's faculties.¹⁹

What makes it possible for supernatural grace to bring about this effect is the presence in man of a certain potency toward a fulfillment and higher perfection, called the *potentia obedientialis* or *potentia obedientiae*. This potency, as Thomas understands it, is man's very nature insofar as it lies open to God, who can bring about in it whatever he has decided.²⁰ One might describe this potency as a creature's nature being at the

¹⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 99, a. 2, ad 1.

¹¹ *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1.

¹² *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 10: "Ius autem divinum, quod est ex gratia, non tollit ius humanum, quod est ex naturali ratione."

¹³ *ST* I, q. 62, a. 5.

¹⁴ *In Sent.* IV, d. 49.23 ad 3m.

¹⁵ *In Sent.* IV, d. 2.1.4B.

¹⁶ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 11: "Gratia naturam perficit et quantum ad intellectum et quantum ad voluntatem et quantum ad inferiores animae partes obaudibiles rationi."

¹⁷ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

¹⁸ *In Sent.* III, d. 29.1.3.

¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 164, a. 4.

²⁰ *In Sent.* IV, d. 8.2.3 ad 4m: "Creaturae inest obedientiae potentia, ut in ea fiat quidquid creator disposuerit."

disposal of divine omnipotence.²¹ Thomas states it even more explicitly: “In all created things there is a certain *potentia obedientialis* insofar as all created things obey God receiving whatever God has decided to give them.”²² The concept of *potentia obedientialis* is used in the first place to explain the occurrence of miracles. A miracle, such as the transformation of water into wine at the wedding in Cana, is not in conflict with the supreme law of physical nature according to which material things are subservient to spiritual realities. This subordination of created things to God’s power is called their *potentia obedientiae*. In a sense one might even say with Augustine that the nature of things is precisely the use God makes of them.²³ The potency to receive grace is different insofar as grace enhances nature and corresponds to man’s most profound desires, whereas a miracle usually happens in discontinuity with the ordinary inclinations of natural things:²⁴ for example, a dangerous tumor normally keeps growing and damages the organism and a blind person does not suddenly recover his vision. St. Thomas has given a most remarkable illustration of how grace completes nature and is meant by God to fulfill our every desire. He attaches much importance to this point: his use of convincing arguments illustrates how reason can be an aid to theology and how the Christian faith is in agreement with human nature.

The Supernatural Order as the Fulfillment of our Deepest Natural Desires

Assuming that the core of man’s nature is reason, Aquinas argues in a number of texts that our natural desire to know the causes of things and events, and to reach ultimate explanations, can only be fulfilled by the vision of God himself. Since a natural desire cannot be in vain, man must have a certain capacity to be brought by God to this vision, as the Christian faith teaches.²⁵ Man’s thirst to know the truth will be quenched when he is admitted into God’s company.

Together with this desire, man seeks to exist forever and to avoid the destruction of his bodily being. What the Christian religion promises is precisely eternal life with God. To this may be added the following reflection: our soul exists by its nature in a body. It is against the soul’s nature

²¹ *De potentia*, q. 6, a. 1, ad 18: “*potentia obedientiae secundum quod quaelibet creatura Creatori obedit.*”

²² *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3.

²³ Cf. *ST* III, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3: “*divinae potentiae cui omnis creatura obedit ad nutum.*”

²⁴ This point was stressed by L. B. Gillon, “Aux origines de la puissance obédientielle,” *Revue thomiste* 47 (1947): 304ff.

²⁵ Cf. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1; *ScG* II, chap. 55.

to be without a body. But nothing which is against nature can last forever. For this reason the soul must be united again to the body.²⁶

A further natural desire disposes us to whatever we need to live rightly and to fulfill our tasks. This is actually a desire that our life be directed by right reason. In order to attain this goal one must possess the different virtues. A life according to the virtues will find its fulfillment in eternity, when right reason will direct our faculties.

Man desires to be understood by others and to have his merits acknowledged. As to this point St. Thomas observes that the blessed entering the glory of God will find complete satisfaction: their virtuous lives will lie open to others.

Connected to this is the desire to possess and to find delight in things. Now when we are united with God, we shall possess everything. Moreover, our joy will be pre-dominantly spiritual and therefore much more intense than bodily pleasures. In this way grace fulfills our fundamental longings.²⁷

In this connection one may also mention the desire to live together with other human beings. As Aquinas explains, the blessed in heaven constitute one community, which will be filled with delight, because everyone will have all goods together with all the blessed.²⁸ One will love others as oneself and therefore rejoice in the good of others as in that of oneself. For this reason the delight and joy of each will increase to become as great as the joy of all.²⁹

St. Thomas's Confidence in Nature and in Reason

Aquinas has great confidence in the rectitude of nature as it has come from the hands of the Creator. Indeed, nature tends to what is fitting for each thing. We see that man seeks by nature the sort of pleasure which agrees with him. Since man is rational, the pleasure which is becoming for him, is that which is in agreement with reason. Thomas uses this principle to argue that the virtue of temperance is not contrary to the inclination of our nature, but is only opposed to lower tendencies which do not obey reason.³⁰ When an act is performed according to a natural incli-

²⁶ ScG IV, chap. 79.

²⁷ For this list of basic human desires see ScG III, chap. 63.

²⁸ *In Symbolum Apostolorum*, art. 12: In the fourth place the communion of the saints "consistit in omnium beatorum iucunda societate, quae societas erit maxime delectabilis: quia quilibet habebit omnia bona cum omnibus beatis."

²⁹ *Ibid.*: "Diliget alium sicut seipsum; et ideo gaudebit de bono alterius sicut de suo. Quo fit ut tantum augeatur laetitia et gaudium unius quantum est gaudium omnium."

³⁰ ST II-II, q. 141, a. 1, ad 1.

nation and is directed to our end, it is morally right.³¹ Repeatedly Thomas asserts that man must execute the acts to which his nature moves him, but in conformity with right reason.³²

This confidence in reason and the basic goodness of human nature gave rise to the humanism of Aquinas.³³ Man must live in accordance with what is highest in him and integrate the various inclinations, so that they are ordained to his true end. The different virtues bring about this harmony with nature and make human behavior wise, humane, just, and kind to others. Reason helps to establish rules for our conduct, in particular—where faith does not go into details about our duties.³⁴ Basing himself on the need for relaxation, Thomas argues that one can set aside some of one's time for playing.³⁵ It is even allowed, he writes, to devote oneself professionally to entertainment—within the limits of right reason—because of the relaxation one procures for others.³⁶ Reason has a positive role in theology and is essential for determining our moral duties.

The Use of Reason in Theology

When we speak of the use of reason in theology we do not mean so much the use of the concepts of natural knowledge—which is obvious and necessary—as recourse to analysis, reasoning, deduction, and arrangement of the content of the doctrine of the faith. Our Christian faith is based on the authority of God who revealed himself to the prophets and, in the New Testament, revealed himself in Jesus Christ and then to the apostles and their collaborators in the redaction of the writings of the New Testament. We accept and believe the Christian message because of their testimony

However, since this testimony is given to us by men, we must be convinced of their reliability. As Aquinas explains, the miracles wrought by Jesus and the apostles, as they surpass whatever nature can bring about, guarantee the supernatural origin of the message.³⁷ The greatest miracle of all (*maximum miraculum*) is that simple men were able to speak with so much wisdom and force and that people were converted to believe in

³¹ ST I–II, q. 21, a. 1: “tunc servatur rectitudo in actu.”

³² ST II–II, q. 69, a. 4, ad 1.

³³ See Leo Elders, “El humanismo cristiano de Santo Tomas de Aquino,” in *Santo Tomás de Aquino, Humanista cristiano* (Buenos Aires: Sociedad Tomista Argentina, 1998), 9–22.

³⁴ Cf. Leo Elders, “Bonum humanae animae est secundum rationem esse,” *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 4 (1999): 75–90.

³⁵ ST II–II, q. 168, a. 2.

³⁶ ST II–II, q. 168, a. 2: “ordinatur ad solatium hominibus exhibendum.”

³⁷ ScG I, chap. 6: “quae totius naturae superant facultatem.”

what goes beyond human reason—disregarding temporal goods to gain the eternal.

He adds that there are also arguments tending to make the mysteries of the faith acceptable. But this kind of reasoning is weak and serves to comfort the faithful and to keep their minds fixed on the dogmas rather than to convince nonbelievers.

With regard to the use of philosophy in the elaboration of the science of theology, such Christian authors of the second century as Justin, Tatian, and Clement of Alexandria, who had received philosophical training, resorted to philosophy to defend the Christian faith and Christians against accusations such as atheism. But they knew that philosophers had often mixed truth with falsehoods. Tertullian even called philosophy the cradle of heresies and useless questions. He exclaimed: “Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? Quid academiae et ecclesiae?”³⁸ During the first centuries, the Christian authors used above all elements of Stoic thought, but always insisted on the distance which separated revealed doctrine from human wisdom. In the following centuries, Platonism exercised a strong influence. Plato’s philosophy in its original form and as elaborated in middle and neo-Platonism constitutes a reservoir of philosophical theories which has accompanied Christian thought up to the Renaissance and beyond. Platonism taught that things originate from a common, transcendent source and constitute a well-organized ensemble. The perfection of the First Principle is distributed in the universe according to a certain hierarchy. Furthermore, Platonism insisted on the immateriality of the human soul and its kinship with God. The soul’s real home is with God, and human life must be an effort to imitate God and to prepare for a new existence. Christians, however, corrected Platonism on certain points, such as the pronounced dualism of its doctrine of man, the theory of the pre-existence of the human soul, and an overly pessimistic view of the material world.

For various reasons, recourse to Aristotle was much more limited at first.³⁹ However, in the second half of the twelfth and in the thirteenth century Aristotle’s writings attracted many theologians. This created some difficulties at first because they contained erroneous theories of man, the origin of the world, and moral life. At the University of Paris the use of the *libri naturales* of Aristotle was forbidden for awhile, but later permitted, though with some restrictions at first. The chancellor Eudes of

³⁸ *De praescriptione haereticorum*, VII.

³⁹ See Leo Elders, “The Greek Christian Authors and Aristotle,” in *Aristotle in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lawrence P. Schenk (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 111–42.

Chateauroux complained that certain theologians had sold themselves to the sons of the Greeks and Robert Grosseteste admonished the masters of the faculty of theology in Oxford to remain faithful to the traditional way of teaching theology.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, some theologians attempted to give theology a more scientific character and to arrange the various themes in a systematic order.⁴¹ St. Thomas Aquinas was one of the first masters to present a rigorous organization of sacred theology as a science.⁴² He sets out from the Aristotelian position according to which science is knowledge of what is necessary. In theology the different themes and their causal connections must be considered from the point of view of God's knowledge. Thus creation as well as the Incarnation and Redemption are studied as God knows them, rather than as willed by God, for God's will concerns the individual and contingent.⁴³

The biblical commentaries of St. Thomas contain some interesting remarks on the use of philosophy in the elaboration of theology. Philosophers distinguish themselves by their knowledge of the truth, even if the minds of some of them are obscured occasionally.⁴⁴ They have reached a certain knowledge of the truth, although not all are of the same opinion.⁴⁵ In an argument, based on social and juridical custom, used by St. Paul to show that the New Law has not done away with the Promise, Thomas sees proof that in matters of the faith one may use any truth from any science.⁴⁶ Thomas also refers to St. Jerome who, in a letter to the grand speaker of the city of Rome observed that all Christian doctors wrote *in ornatu philosophiae* and enriched their works with the doctrine and wisdom of the philosophers, so that one did not know what to admire more in them, their profane knowledge or their acquaintance with the Scriptures.⁴⁷ In his systematic works and in several of the *Quaestiones disputatae* Aquinas defends energetically the right of a theologian to make use of philosophy

⁴⁰ See M.-D. Chenu, *La théologie comme science au XIIe siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1969), 28ff.

⁴¹ On these attempts see L. Sileo, *Teoria della scienza teologica: "Quaestio de scientia theologica" di Odo Rigaldi ed altri testi inediti (1230-1250)* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Arironianum, 1984).

⁴² R. Heinzmann, "Der Plan der *Summa theologiae* des Thomas von Aquin in der Tradition der frühscholastischen Systembildung," in *Thomas von Aquino: Interpretation und Rezeption*, ed. W. P. Eckert (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1974), 455-69.

⁴³ *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 8.

⁴⁴ *In Job*, chap. 12.

⁴⁵ *In I Timotheum* 3, lectio 3.

⁴⁶ *In epistolam ad Galatas* 3, lectio 6: "Ex quo quidem habemus argumentum quod ad conferendum de his quae sunt fidei possumus uti quacumque veritate cuiuscumque scientiae."

⁴⁷ *In I Corinthos* 1, lectio 3.

in the elaboration of sacred doctrine, even if resorting to philosophy is not without danger. The study of philosophy is legitimate and even praiseworthy because of the truth the philosophers have found, due to what God has made them understand, but because some philosophers misused their knowledge to attack the faith, the Apostle warns us: "Make sure that no one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some second-hand, empty, rational philosophy, based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ."⁴⁸ If in the writings of the philosophers one encounters statements contrary to the faith, these are no longer philosophy but an abuse of philosophy.⁴⁹ Elsewhere Thomas speaks of the *vera philosophiae principia quae consideravit Aristoteles*.⁵⁰

The Contribution of Philosophy

The subject matter of philosophy coincides partially with the themes studied in theology. The faith presupposes and reason demonstrates that there is one God who is the origin and cause of all things.⁵¹ Several rules of conduct which ethics formulates also fall under theology as, for instance, that fornication is a mortal sin. On the other hand, a good number of questions belonging to faith are of the domain of the philosophy of nature (for example, the fact that the world is not eternal), or of first philosophy (such as the doctrine that divine providence is concerned with what people do).⁵² Aquinas is convinced that almost all of philosophy is ordained to the knowledge of divine things.⁵³ It follows that certain theories can be refuted both by theological arguments and by philosophical demonstration. For this reason, Aquinas writes repeatedly that certain opinions which contradict the faith also contradict philosophy.⁵⁴ However, this does not mean that the mysteries of the faith are subordinated to philosophical reasoning. It would be a sign of great recklessness

⁴⁸ ST II-II, q. 167, a. 1, ad 3. The quotation is from Colossians 2:8. At *In Colossenses* 2, lectio 2, Thomas explains that the wisdom of this world may deceive us in two ways: by incorrect philosophical theories and by sophistic arguments.

⁴⁹ *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3: "hoc non est philosophiae, sed magis philosophiae abusus ex defectu rationis. Et ideo possibile est ex principiis philosophiae huiusmodi errorem refellere."

⁵⁰ *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 3.

⁵¹ *In Sent.* I, d. 2, q. 1, a. 1.

⁵² *In Sent.* III, d. 23, q. 2, a. 4, qc. 2, arg. 3.

⁵³ *In Sent.* III, d. 24, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1: "cum fere tota philosophia ad cognitionem divinorum ordinetur."

⁵⁴ See *De malo*, q. 6, a. 1: "non solum contrariatur fidei, sed subvertit omnia principia philosophiae"; *In Sent.* II, d. 27, q. 1, a. 1: "a dictis sanctorum discordat et philosophiae non convenit"; *ibid.*, d. 28, q. 1, a. 2: "nec fidei nec philosophiae consonant"; *In Sent.* IV, d. 47, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 2: "repugnat enim et philosophiae";

if one would undertake to discuss these mysteries at the level of philosophy.⁵⁵ Since grace perfects our faculties and presupposes nature, the Christian faith presupposes basic natural knowledge.⁵⁶

In his *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, St. Thomas develops his doctrine of the role of philosophy in theology. First he shows that in theology one may use arguments, that is, resort to the resources of reason. Next he deals with the question of whether an authentic science about God and revealed truth, based on revelation, is impossible. Finally, he raises the question of whether in the doctrine of the faith which considers God, one is allowed to use philosophical arguments and refer to authors of acknowledged authority.⁵⁷

With regard to the first point, some texts of the Church Fathers appear to reject the use of philosophy in theology: “Do away with arguments, when you want the faith”⁵⁸; “Faith has no merit, if one lets reason make its object known.”⁵⁹ Aquinas answers that we must seek God with all our powers and live according to what is best in us. Our mind must try to learn more and more about God in conformity with its own way of proceeding.⁶⁰ In the elaboration of theology reason does not provide strict demonstrations of the object of faith; but only presents some probable arguments.

In the second article of this question St. Thomas argues that the knowledge of God which we have received in faith can become a science. Although its starting point is not evident (contrary to the first principles in philosophy), its scientific character is warranted insofar as strict conclusions are drawn from what has been revealed. The difficulty of non-evident first principles is resolved by the subalternation of theology to divine science: the articles of the faith function as do first principles in philosophy. Having shown the scientific character of theology, Aquinas explains the role of

Quodlibet III, q. 5, a. 3: “contra rationem doctrinae evangelicae et contra rationem philosophiae.”

⁵⁵ *De unitate intellectus*, chap. 5.

⁵⁶ *In Sent.* III, d. 24, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1: “Fidei substernitur naturalis cognitio, quam fides praesupponit, et ratio probare potest.”

⁵⁷ *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 1–3. The text dates to the beginning of St. Thomas’s lecturing as a master in sacred theology in Paris. He may have chosen the first chapters of Boethius’s otherwise not very important treatise, to have the possibility to develop an epistemology of theoretical sciences of unequalled depth. For more details see Leo Elders, *Faith and Science: An Introduction to St. Thomas’ Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate* (Rome: Herder, 1974).

⁵⁸ St. Ambrose, *De fide* I, chap. 13, 84 (PL 16:570D).

⁵⁹ St. Gregory the Great, *Homilia* 26.1 (PL 76:1197C): “Fides non habet meritum cui humana ratio praebet experimentum.”

⁶⁰ *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 7.

philosophy in theology. The third article begins by quoting some statements against the use of philosophy. St. Paul reminds us that Christ did not send him to preach according to “the wisdom of language” or “in the terms of philosophy,” in which the Cross of Christ cannot be expressed.⁶¹ St. Ambrose comments: “The mysteries of the faith are free from philosophical arguments.”⁶² This denial of a role for philosophy finds support in the well-known text of *Letter XXII* of St. Jerome. In a dream Jerome is reprimanded by God for the fact that he has been an avid reader of Cicero, whose works he promises never to touch again. St. Augustine in his turn observes that if one finds errors in a publication, it loses its authority. The writings of the philosophers are full of errors and must be discarded.⁶³ One could also say that a science must proceed from its own principles and that, for this reason, theology has nothing to do with philosophy. On the other side, Aquinas quotes a number of texts of St. Paul, Jerome, and Augustine which seem to favor the use of philosophy in theology. In his solution to the question, he argues that the gifts of grace do not destroy the light of natural reason which God has given us. Therefore it is impossible that the truth which is communicated to us by God in the faith contradicts our natural knowledge. It is true that the light of reason is imperfect, but even in what is imperfect there is a certain imitation of what is perfect. In what reason proposes there is some similarity with the knowledge given to us by faith. If philosophy tells us something contrary to the faith, it is no longer true philosophy, but error, and the result of defective reasoning. Thus it is possible to refute such errors on the basis of philosophical principles.

When one uses philosophy in theology there are two ways in which mistakes occur: (a) when one resorts to theories contrary to the faith; and (b) when one measures theological doctrines with the yardstick of philosophy. Rather, philosophy should be measured by the criteria of the faith. It is obvious that the role of philosophy in theology is only a secondary one. Divine Providence arranged things in such a way that at the beginning of the Church, preaching was done in great simplicity, but that later the wisdom of the world rallied to the cause of Christ. Those who use philosophical statements in theology do not add water to the wine, but transform the water of philosophy into wine.⁶⁴ Thus theology can avail itself of the different philosophical disciplines. It does not use

⁶¹ 1 Cor 1:17.

⁶² In reality the text is Peter Lombard's, but a similar statement is found in Ambrose's *De fide* I, chap. 13, 84 (PL 16:570D).

⁶³ *Epistola 28 ad Hieronymum*, chap. 3, 5 (PL 33:413).

⁶⁴ *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3 ad 5. Philosophical terms and insights used in theology are transposed to the level of *doctrina sacra* and integrated into it.

them because of the authority of the philosophers whose words are quoted, but only because of the intrinsic merits of what they said.

The Triple Function of Philosophy in Theology

As Aquinas argues in the article we have just summarized, the things studied in philosophy bear a certain likeness to the realities which are the object of the faith and are sometimes a certain *praeambulum* to them, as nature is to grace.⁶⁵ Consequently the function of philosophy in theology is as follows:

- a. To demonstrate the *praeambula* to the faith which every Christian must know. Thomas means such truths as the existence of God, but also theses on the nature of man, free will, divine providence, and natural law. Judging according to what he does in the first books of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Thomas has a rather broad view of what belongs to these preambles.
- b. To provide a deeper knowledge of the dogmas of the faith by means of certain analogies (*similitudines*). This term includes such concepts as being, person, nature, essence, goodness, truth, unity, father, son, spirit, beatitude, virtue, love, law, etc. Philosophical reflection may also provide certain comparisons concerning the Trinity, grace, the Church, and the sacraments. In order to throw some light on many doctrines one must necessarily refer to the natural order.⁶⁶

In many questions recourse to a principle drawn from philosophy helps to understand the solution. To show how proper the Incarnation is, St. Thomas uses the following principle of the natural order: "What is proper to something agrees with its nature. Since God's nature is goodness itself, it is proper that he communicate himself."⁶⁷ Sanctifying grace and the infused virtues are explained by analogies with the order of nature. To illustrate somewhat the eternal generation of the Son of God; Aquinas resorts to the following principle: "The nobler a nature is, the more united to it is what proceeds from it."⁶⁸ "With regard to the truth of the faith, which can only be known by those who see the divine substance, human reason is in

⁶⁵ *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3: "Continent tamen [ea quae sunt philosophiae] quasdam eorum [sc. quae sunt fidei] similitudines, et quaedam ad ea praeambula, sicut natura praeambula est ad gratiam."

⁶⁶ *ST I*, q. 99, a. 1: "Unde in omnibus asserendis sequi debemus naturam rerum, praeter ea quae auctoritate divina traduntur quae sunt supra naturam."

⁶⁷ *ST III*, q. 1, a. 1.

⁶⁸ *ScG IV*, chap. 11.

such a position that it can approach it with the help of analogies. But these are not sufficient to allow the intellect to understand the truth of the faith by means of demonstration or directly by itself.”⁶⁹

- c. To refute arguments and criticisms brought forward against the faith. The *Summa contra Gentiles* is an admirable example of this task of philosophy at the service of the theologian. In this work St. Thomas wants to bring his readers to accept the presuppositions of the faith and to present the supernatural mysteries so as to make them plausible. He also refutes countless errors.

A theologian who resorts to philosophy can err in two ways: by using theories contrary to the faith or by subjecting the dogmas of the faith to the limits and criteria of reason.⁷⁰ Thomas vindicates the autonomy of philosophy while in theology he uses without any hesitation many philosophical concepts, definitions, principles, and analyses, which he recognizes as true. His certitude concerning their truth is based on their intrinsic evidence and on their astonishing harmony with the doctrine of faith. Thus he continues what such Fathers of the Church as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, and others had done before him. The great difference, however, is that Aquinas made use of a complete and coherent philosophy.

St. Thomas and Aristotle

This takes us to our final question. To what extent did Aquinas use Aristotelian philosophy when elaborating the doctrine of faith? Could one use a different philosophy in the study of theology?

Thomas's attitude with regard to Aristotle is complex. Quite often he follows him, but on several occasions he goes beyond what Aristotle says or even corrects and refutes him. Until about the middle of the twentieth century most authors considered the identification of Aquinas's thought with Aristotle's as evident. Certainly, Thomists acknowledged that in certain fields Thomas had gone beyond Aristotle,⁷¹ but they were convinced that he followed the tracks of Aristotle. Augustino Nifo (d. ca. 1538) even wrote: “Expositor Thomas raro aut numquam dissentit a doctrina peripatetica; fuit enim totus peripateticus et omni studio peripateticus et numquam voluit nisi quod peripatetici.” (Thomas as a

⁶⁹ ScG I, chap. 8.

⁷⁰ *Expositio in Boetii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3.

⁷¹ One may recall the ancient saying *Aristotele aristotelior*. In the following I make use of my article “Saint Thomas d'Aquin et Aristote,” *Revue thomiste* 88 (1988): 255–76. For an extensive treatment of this topic, see now my “The Aristotelian Commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 63 (2009): 29–53.

commentator seldom or never disagrees with the doctrine of the Peripatetics, since he was in every way a Peripatetic, studied their thought with great zeal and never wanted to teach differently from the Peripatetics.)⁷² However, in about the middle of the past century certain Thomists began to draw attention to what they called Platonic elements in Aquinas's philosophy. In particular H.-A. Montagne, E. Gilson, and Cornelio Fabro stressed that the doctrines of being and of participation are alien to the theories of Aristotle.⁷³ Carried along by his "discovery" of Thomas's theory of the act of being, Gilson even went so far as to write that he felt inclined to think that the main obstacle for the diffusion of Thomism was the influence of Aristotle.⁷⁴ Gilson's disciple Joseph Owens believes that even the Aristotelian commentaries of Aquinas are influenced by his own theory of being and "a theological concern" which affects the interpretation of a good deal of Aristotle's texts.⁷⁵

When one considers this debate more closely, it appears that Aquinas accepted a great number of basic positions of Aristotle, among which one may cite the following: the object of the sciences is the universal and the necessary, which is abstracted from concrete reality; real things and not *a priori* objects of the mind are the basis of knowledge. In addition to this realism, Aristotle proposed a division of the sciences and assigned the first place to the speculative sciences. His epistemology helped Aquinas to determine the nature of theology, while his logic provided the tools for scientific work. Aristotle's philosophy gives priority to knowledge rather than to desire or feelings. Man's happiness consists essentially in knowledge. The Stagirite is optimistic with regard to man's capacity to acquire real knowledge of things: there is finality in nature and things are, at least to a certain extent, intelligible. The main task of philosophy is the study of the causes of becoming. In this connection Aristotle developed his doctrine of the four genera of causality. The gradual discovery of the

⁷² Quoted from Cornelio Fabro, *Enciclopedia Cattolica* 12:266. The quotation is from the 13th dispute on Metaphysics VII.

⁷³ Some early voices in this choir were C. Huit, "Les elements platoniciens de la doctrine de saint Thomas," *Revue thomiste* 19 (1911): 724–66, and P. Rousselot, *L'intellectualisme de saint Thomas* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1924), with regard to the doctrine of the angels. See also, more recently, R. J. Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism: A Study of Plato and Platonic Texts in the Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1956).

⁷⁴ Etienne Gilson, "Cajetan et l'existence," *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 15 (1953): 267–86, 284.

⁷⁵ Joseph Owens, "Aquinas as an Aristotelian Commentator," in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: Collected Papers of Joseph Owens, CSs.R.*, ed. J. R. Catan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1980), 16.

different causes by his predecessors provided him with a principle for the organization of the history of philosophy. Furthermore, the Aristotelian doctrine of act and potency became the key for deciphering the universe,

The Stagirite also developed the theory of first principles although he failed to apply it to the moral order. Opposing Plato and the Academy he taught the primacy of being with regard to the Good and the One and defined first philosophy as the study of being *qua* being. In this way he laid the groundwork for a theory of the transcendentals which, however, he did not elaborate. While Plato attempted to reduce all of reality to two contrary principles (the One and the Indeterminate Dyad), Aristotle worked out the theory of the categories of being as so many modes of being, irreducible to each other. This, in its turn, prepared the way for the theory of the different senses of being and of analogy.

Substance is the core of reality. The other predicaments as determinations of substance are beings in being or of being. Instead of seeking real being in a world of Platonic ideas, Aristotle asserts that substances, and not the world of the ideas, are the focal points of reality. In the field of the philosophy of nature, Aristotle combated atomism and monism. His definition of nature, the discovery of first matter, the doctrine of hylomorphism, the analysis of movement, place, and time, and his theory of generation and corruption are some of the highlights of his accomplishments. To this one may add the first steps on the road to a scientific cosmology, the study of living beings and of the soul, his theory of sense cognition and intellectual knowledge, and his biological work. Aristotle also made a tentative start in the study of metaphysics and reached the insight that all processes must be reduced to the First Unmoved Mover. The originality and the lasting contributions of the Stagirite to ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics are no less important.

We need not dwell on the introduction of Aristotle's complete writings into the Latin West during the second part of the twelfth century. Thanks to the efforts of such translators as James of Venice, Roland of Cremona, and Michael Scot, Western academies were presented with an overwhelming mass of knowledge.⁷⁶ A reaction set in against certain positions of the Stagirite not in accordance with the doctrine of the faith.⁷⁷ But his writings offered so much insight and provoked such an admiration that

⁷⁶ Roger Bacon writes: "Tempore Michael Scoti . . . magnificata est Aristotelis philosophia apud Latinos." *Opus maius*, 2.13, ed. J. H. Bridges (Oxford: 1897), vol.1:55.

⁷⁷ A council in Paris (1210) decreed: "Nee libri Aristotelis de naturali philosophia nee commenta legantur Parisiis publice vel secreta." In 1215 a legate of the Pope, Robert de Courcon, extended this prohibition to the *Metaphysics*.

they began to be used again with the somewhat restrictive approval of the Holy See. After 1260 new problems arose due to the spreading of Averroism. St. Bonaventure, who, when commenting on the *Sententiae*, had been quite sympathetic towards Aristotle, despite his erroneous view of the eternity of the world,⁷⁸ bitterly attacked this and similar errors in his *Collationes*, addressed to the students in Paris between 1267 and 1273.⁷⁹ In his *Hexaemeron*, Robert Grosseteste warned against recourse to the Stagirite: “Non igitur se decipiant et frustra desudent, . . . ne mutuiter tempus suum et vires ingenii sui consumant ut Aristotelem catholicum faciendo, seipsos haereticos faciant.” (They should not deceive themselves and drudge in vain, nor waste their time and use up their wits; when trying to make a Catholic of Aristotle they turn themselves into heretics.)

Aquinas was well acquainted with these difficulties and saw the two roads of philosophical speculation lying open before him, the way of Plato⁸⁰ and that of Aristotle, and he chose the latter. The main reason for his choice is his certitude that Aristotle’s theories are basically correct and his method valid. According to Thomas, Platonism consists essentially in the theory of ideas, which places their essences outside things, and in the second place in the doctrine of participation. Insofar as the Platonists reduced individual things to a bundle of participated forms, their position is erroneous, but understood as expressing the dependence of all beings upon God, it is true, as Aquinas stresses in several places.⁸¹ Even in metaphysics, Aristotle followed a better road than Plato, one that allows us to reach certitude with regard to the existence of immaterial beings.⁸² But Aquinas admits that despite the correct structure his philosophy Aristotle’s theories show a good number of defects.

The Platonists are mistaken because their reasoning starts from concepts (*ex rationibus intelligibilibus*) and considers man’s attributes as

⁷⁸ See Leo Elders, “Les citations d’Aristote dans le *Commentaire sur les Sentences de saint Bonaventure*,” in *San Bonaventura, maestro di vita francescana e di sapienza cristiana* (Rome: Pontificia facolta teologica san Bonaventura, 1976), 831–42.

⁷⁹ On whether one can speak of a critical attitude toward Aristotelianism, see J. F. Quinn, *The Historical Constitution of St. Bonaventure’s Philosophy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973), 854–78.

⁸⁰ See “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et le platonisme,” in Leo Elders, *Au coeur de la philosophie de Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009), 7–32.

⁸¹ See the preface of the *Expositio in librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus* and *ST I*, q. 6, a. 4: “Et quamvis haec opinio irrationabilis videatur quantum ad hoc quod ponebat species rerum naturalium separatas per se subsistentes . . . tamen hoc absolute verum est quod aliquid est primum, quod per suam essentiam est ens et bonum, quod dicimus Deum.” Cf. *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 4: “Quidditates et formae rerum insunt ipsis rebus particularibus.”

⁸² *De substantiis separatis*, art. 2.

many distinct realities. Aristotle, on the other hand, argues from sensible things and this position is correct.⁸³ In anthropology St. Thomas sees an irreducible opposition between Aristotle's doctrine and Platonic dualism. In metaphysics, however, he finds a broad convergence between the Plato and Aristotle, even if he has to elaborate their views in order to show this harmony. Both philosophers agree on the existence of a supreme principle upon which immaterial and material things depend; spiritual things are devoid of matter but are composed of act and potency. He even writes that both philosophers accept divine providence.⁸⁴

Aquinas placed himself within Aristotelianism, but he did so entirely freely. He penetrated Aristotle's doctrine to its core and, using the Stagirite's basic principles, frequently went beyond the conclusions reached by Aristotle himself to establish a greater coherence between the different doctrines, especially in anthropology, ethics, and metaphysics. The thousands of quotations from the *corpus aristotelicum*, in particular from the *Organon*, the *Physics*, the *De anima*, the *Metaphysics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, are proof of the importance he attached to the doctrine of Aristotle, as are his commentaries on twelve of Aristotle's major works. The purpose of these commentaries is to present and to explain the doctrine of Aristotle, to analyze the arguments he uses, to discard interpretations which disagree with the letter of the text or the intention of the Stagirite, to draw attention to certain disagreements with the doctrine of the faith and, finally, to construct a true philosophy of nature, metaphysics, and ethics, fit to be used in the various institutions of learning.

Thomas places the text to be explained in the light of the principles and the entire philosophy of Aristotle. We encounter quite often the expression *secundum intentionem Aristotelis*, which signifies: the meaning of a text as it appears to the attentive reader; but it can also denote a deeper sense which one discovers by reflection and comparison.⁸⁵ It can also mean that Thomas assigns a sense to a text which is not found in it, but

⁸³ *De spiritualibus creaturis*, chap. 3: "Harum autem duarum opinionum diversitas ex hoc procedit quod quidam ad inquirendam veritatem de natura rerum, processerunt ex rebus intelligibilibus, et hoc fuit proprium Platoniorum; quidam vero ex rebus sensibilibus, et hoc fuit proprium philosophiae Aristotelis . . . Consideraverunt Platonici . . . quod quidquid est abstractum in intellectu, sit abstractum in re." Cf. *In Sent.* II, d. 17, q. 1, a.1: reality does not consist in a bundle of logical concepts.

⁸⁴ *De substantiis separatis*, chap. 3: "In quo convenient positiones Platonis et Aristotelis." As he does elsewhere, Aquinas bases his assertion regarding Aristotle on some scattered texts of the latter.

⁸⁵ Cf. *De substantiis separatis*, chap. 14: "Patet igitur praedicta verba philosophi diligenter consideranti quod non est intentio eius."

which he takes from what Aristotle says elsewhere.⁸⁶ Thomas discusses those passages which seem to contradict the faith. Sometimes he shows that when one reads them attentively, the opposition disappears, but in other cases a particular tenet may be irreconcilable with the Christian doctrine. Quite often Aquinas corrects or completes what the text says by means of observations introduced by *sciendum est autem*, *advertendum est autem*, or *considerandum est autem*.⁸⁷ The trend of these commentaries is to replace a neo-Platonic interpretation of Aristotle by a rigorous exegesis based on the principles of Aristotle himself. On the other hand, Thomas also rejects repeatedly the interpretations of Averroes in order to show that the *Commentator* is not always trustworthy.⁸⁸ Aristotle's philosophy is potentially open to what God has revealed.

Aquinas was keenly aware of the opposition of a good number of theologians and ecclesiastics to certain doctrines of Aristotle and a more or less pronounced distrust of him. To refute these interpretations and preconceived opinions, he mentions real or supposed disagreements and provides explanations. An example: In *De caelo* I Aristotle "demonstrates" the eternity of the world. Having explained the arguments of Aristotle, Aquinas concludes with the following remark: Aristotle does not show that the world does not have a beginning; but he establishes only that the world did not begin to exist in the way other philosophers had described. He does show that the world did not begin by a process of generation and that it is not destined to disappear.⁸⁹ This is a benign interpretation, for the proof based on the circular movement of the celestial bodies aims at excluding any beginning. Thomas apparently felt that a simple rejection of these arguments would also have lost some valuable reasoning and might have brought with it the loss of valuable philosophical views and shaken confidence in Aristotle.

Aquinas discards the theory of the divine nature of the first heavens. He writes that in this respect Aristotle expresses himself in the manner Plato did, who used the term "god" for several things,⁹⁰ as if Aquinas

⁸⁶ For example, in *Metaphysics* 12.9, Aristotle denies that the world is an object of divine knowledge since it would make God dependent on what is outside him. Thomas observes that this is not the case when God knows things in himself, which is the case if he is their creator. Aristotle himself acknowledges this, for he writes elsewhere that heaven and earth are dependent in their being on the First Mover.

⁸⁷ Cf. *In VI Metaphysicam*, lectio 1, where Thomas contradicts the text by stating that the subject matter of metaphysics comprises also material beings.

⁸⁸ See Leo Elders, "St. Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on the Physics of Aristotle," in *Autour de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Fac-éditions, 1983), 1: 28–35; idem, "Averroes et saint Thomas d'Aquin," in *Doctor communis* 45 (1992): 46–56.

⁸⁹ *In I De caelo et mundo*, lectio 6, §61–64.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, lectio 7, §75.

wanted to say: one might as well stay with Aristotle despite this error, for Plato too was mistaken. In other texts as well, he associates Aristotle with Plato in order to protect him against unilateral criticisms. For instance, he writes that “Plato, Aristotle, and those who followed them arrived at the consideration of the universal cause of all things, as Augustine says in the *City of God* (VIII, 4).”⁹¹ Thomas makes Augustine guarantee the fact that the principles of Aristotle’s philosophy lead us to accept the creation of the world by God. When evaluating Thomas’s statements about the Stagirite one must always keep in mind the addressees of a given treatise: in order to defend Aristotelianism in the universities Thomas may go to great lengths to justify a certain text or reconcile it with the faith.

On the first page of the *Physics* Aristotle writes that we must always seek the first cause. Thomas uses this affirmation to note that we must indeed continue our analysis until we reach the highest cause. This “adaptation” of Aristotelian doctrine to a Christian philosophy is very remarkable in the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to the Stagirite, man himself is the cause of his happiness, a doctrine which will be condemned by the bishop of Paris in 1277. Thomas notes that Aristotle is speaking of the imperfect happiness of this life and adds that even according to him happiness is a gift of the gods.⁹² In fact, one can read this remark at 1099b12, but Aristotle is perhaps making a concession to a popular way of speaking. However, Aquinas quotes the sentence and, assuming that there must be a perfect coherence between the various parts of Aristotle’s philosophy, uses it to justify an interpretation which goes against the grain of some other texts. One finds several “corrections” of this type in the commentaries on the *Ethics* and the *Metaphysics*. Thomas attempted to remove as far as possible any appearance of opposition to the Christian faith. To give another example, Aristotle wonders if there is a plurality of first movers. Both in his preface and throughout his commentary Thomas maintains the plural form (*primas causas rerum*) and leaves the question of the unity of the First Principle open, apparently for methodological reasons. Only in his commentary on *Metaphysics* XII, chapter 8, does he observe that a series of several movers is not necessary to explain the movements of the celestial bodies.⁹³ He avoids any hasty corrections and respects the need for a patient analysis, what has been called *reverenter exponere*.

In many places Aquinas goes beyond the text in order to reach a higher synthesis. One example is in his preface to the commentary on

⁹¹ *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5.

⁹² *In I Ethica*, lectio 14, §165–76.

⁹³ See Leo Elders, “St. Thomas Aquinas’ Commentary on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle,” in *Autour de saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 1:134–38.

the *Metaphysics*, when he brings Aristotle's differing descriptions of the nature of first philosophy into a higher unity: its subject is being *qua* being, but it also studies the cause of being so that it extends its investigation to the first cause, God. Philosophical theology is part of metaphysics. Likewise Aquinas completes Aristotle's sketch of analogy in *Metaphysics* IV, chapter 2, and weakens the Stagirite's stern condemnation of the Platonic theory of participation. He elaborates the doctrine of the real distinction between the act of being and the essence. He goes further than Aristotle had done in pointing out that the original and first sense of the verb "to be" is to be real in an absolute way.⁹⁴

This "going beyond" Aristotle's doctrine is very much noticeable in anthropology: the soul of man, his substantial form, is immaterial, although it constitutes the body. It is *non totaliter immersa corpori* and it is *aliquid subsistens*. He also explains why the soul is united to the body and defends the doctrine of afterlife, about which Aristotle voiced some doubts.⁹⁵ With regard to ethics, Aquinas stresses more than Aristotle the scientific character of moral philosophy. Ethics is directed not only to action but also to knowledge. The science of morals is not a form of prudence but has its seat in the theoretical intellect (as it was for Aristotle). Moreover, he transposes the theory of the criteria of morality to make them depend on the first principles of the practical intellect. But like Aristotle's ethics, Aquinas's moral philosophy is aiming at man's last end, happiness or beatitude, and at the virtues required to reach and secure this end.

A further question is whether these commentaries present Aristotle's philosophy faithfully or whether they express the thought of Aquinas himself. A first observation is that for Thomas himself these commentaries were philosophical works: to the best of my knowledge there is not a single passage where revelation provides *directly* an interpretation or evaluation of what Aristotle wrote. There is nowhere any confusion between philosophy and *doctrina sacra*. This does not mean that while writing them Thomas was not guided by revelation. What is decisive for our purpose is that his arguments remain at the level of natural reason. The theological viewpoint remains present in the background and leads Thomas to interpret certain statements of Aristotle in such a way as to discover a certain openness toward the doctrine of the faith.

With the exception of a handful of short passages, the commentaries are a faithful, learned, and excellent interpretation of what Aristotle wrote.

⁹⁴ *In Peri Hermeneias* 1, lectio 5.

⁹⁵ Cf. E. von Ivanka, "Aristotelische und thomistische Seelenlehre," in *Aristote et saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1957), 221–28.

Even Joseph Owens must recognize this fact.⁹⁶ One could say that, from a *doctrinal* point of view, they are the best commentaries extant on *the* text of Aristotle. Aquinas succeeds as no one else in introducing us to the thought of Aristotle. Although he did not have the instruments of contemporary philology, his knowledge of the *Corpus aristotelicum* is without equal.

Thomas sometimes goes beyond the immediate context of a passage to base his interpretation on other texts or to argue with the help of principles that Aristotle acknowledged. For instance, he places the agent intellect within the individual soul of each person; he assumes that Aristotle accepts the immortality of the individual soul; he draws a far-reaching inference from such a statement as “the universe is suspended from the First Principle.” While Aristotle himself is not always consistent and scholars such as Sir David Ross and Ingemar Düring speak of slightly diverging lines of thought in Aristotle, Thomas wants to establish total consistency.

In fact, Thomas reads the texts of Aristotle in the light of his own philosophy of nature, metaphysics, and ethics. In many cases the influence of this situation is minimal, because his philosophy is identical to that of the Stagirite. This is especially the case with regard to the *Physics*, and the *De caelo*. In anthropology, metaphysics; and ethics the influence of Thomas’s own thought is more pervasive. Joseph Owens draws attention to Thomas’s own view of being which determined certain passages of his commentaries. Harry V. Jaffa mentions some principles which influenced the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁹⁷ Must we conclude that Thomas transformed Aristotle? The central question is whether the framework in which Aquinas interprets Aristotle is an *alien framework*, foreign to the thought of Aristotle, as Owens claims.⁹⁸ Is there a question of non-Aristotelian principles, as Jaffa says? Our answer is a categorical “no.” Thomistic anthropology, metaphysics of being, and ethics based on the natural inclinations of man are not developments which adulterate Aristotle’s thought. These doctrines are derived from principles posited by Aristotle himself. Aquinas indicates this with regard to the metaphysics of being: those who followed Plato and Aristotle understood the dependence of all beings on God and the real composition of the act of being and the essence in created things.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Owens, “Aquinas as an Aristotelian Commentator,” 16.

⁹⁷ H. V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 101. Jaffa means principles such as “perfect happiness is impossible in this life,” “man is immortal,” etc.

⁹⁸ Owens, “Aquinas as an Aristotelian Commentator,” 10.

⁹⁹ *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5: “Plato, Aristoteles et eorum sequaces pervenerunt ad considerationem ipsius esse universalis et ideo ipsi soli posuerunt aliquam universalem

St. Thomas does not restrict his comments to the interpretation of the *prout iacet*, but he delves deeper into its very roots and so connects it to the principles of Aristotle and the *veritas rerum*. The truth contained in a passage appears in its full meaning through being brought into relationship with a more encompassing ensemble.¹⁰⁰

Aristotle's writings are intended to be a faithful reflection of our experience of reality and to avoid, as much as possible, subjective points of view. Consequently they possess a high degree of truth and that is why they lend themselves to the in-depth study which Aquinas carries out. Aquinas has no equal in penetrating the meaning of the text and all its implications. He accepts Aristotle's conclusions insofar as they are based on an exact analysis of reality. But he delves deeper into the intelligibility of things and uncovers structures which Aristotle has not discerned. So he is able to present a more coherent doctrinal ensemble. The truth present in the text is saved, but the doctrine is developed with the help of Aristotle's own principles.

Aristotle's philosophy shows a surprising capacity for this kind of systematization because of its basic conformity to reality. As John Henry Newman wrote, "While the world lasts, will Aristotle's doctrine on these matters last, for he is the oracle of nature and truth. While we are men, we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great Master does but analyze the thoughts, feelings, views and opinions of humankind. He has told us the meaning of our own words and ideas, before we were born. In many subject matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle; and we are his disciples, whether we will or not, though we may not know it."¹⁰¹

Is the doctrine of the commentaries still that of Aristotle? In the vast majority of those more than five thousand pages of comments, yes, we do find Aristotle's historical doctrine. In some passages, Thomas presents a doctrine *secundum intentionem Philosophi*, an expression which may mean

causam rerum, a qua omnia alia in esse prodirent." In the *Summa theologiae* he restricts this breakthrough to a few later philosophers, excluding Plato and Aristotle (I, q. 44, a. 2): "Et ulterius aliqui erexerunt se ad considerandum ens in quantum est ens: et consideraverunt causam rerum, non solum secundum quod sunt haec [Aristotle] vel talia [Plato], sed secundum quod sunt entia."

¹⁰⁰ Cf. W. Kluxen, *Philosophische Ethik bei Thomas von Aquin* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), 104, states this as follows: "Es kann nur wiederholt werden, dass Thomas den Aristoteles nicht historisch, sondern in der wahrheitsgebenden Offenheit des Verstehenshorizontes orten will, in dem erst die eigentliche Wahrheit seiner Aussage hervortritt."

¹⁰¹ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1947), 97.

that we are dealing with conclusions drawn from Aristotle's principles, more or less removed from what is expressed in a particular text.

Can the commentaries be used as a source of St. Thomas's own philosophy? The answer to this question is also affirmative, because Thomas professes the same philosophy based on the *veritas rerum*. This applies above all to those texts where the exposé is attributed to the *Philosophus*. An analysis of a great number of texts where this title is used shows that according to Aquinas, we are dealing with a philosophical truth which is above individual opinion. On the other hand, when he writes *secundum opinionem Aristotelis* or *hic Aristoteles supponit*, etc., he intimates that we are dealing with a particular opinion one may disagree with. By the same token, the numerous passages beginning with *considerandum est autem*, *sciendum est autem* or *advertendum est autem* contain critical remarks which correct or complement the exposé of Aristotle himself. Finally, to find out whether Aquinas subscribes to a certain point of doctrine, one must read the entire commentary. For instance, to know what he thinks of a plurality of first movers, one has to consult the last part of the commentary on the *Metaphysics*. This is not surprising, for one cannot consider a difficulty raised at the beginning of an article of the *Summa theologiae* the definite doctrine of Thomas himself. If one keeps these methodological principles in mind, the Aristotelian commentaries become an inexhaustible deposit of wisdom containing the treasures of Thomas's own philosophy.

But what should we think of the mass of mistaken theories about natural phenomena, in particular in physics and cosmology, which mar the works of Aristotle and which Aquinas seems to accept without hesitation? Because of the presence of these theories, Aquinas's philosophy of nature has been depicted as totally antiquated and useless, with the exception of a number of conceptual analyses, such as those of place and time. As is known, in Aristotle's treatises on nature, elements of what for us is natural science go together with philosophical considerations and are almost inextricably combined with them. However, a careful study of the commentaries of Aquinas shows, at least in a number of cases, that Thomas was well aware of a distinction between both and considered the cosmological system of Aristotle a hypothesis which may be replaced by a new one which explains the observed phenomena differently: "Although the phenomena are accounted for with the help of these hypotheses, one should not say that these assumptions are true, for one can perhaps explain what is observed in the celestial bodies in a different way which has not yet been conceived by man."¹⁰² Aquinas writes that one may use

¹⁰² *In II De caelo*, lectio 17, §451. See also *ST* 1.32.1 ad 2m; *In I De caelo*, lectio 3, §28.

these hypotheses as long as they do not run into difficulties.¹⁰³ He even felt the theory of the *four* elements to be an assumption, whereas the fact that there must be elements is definitely true. The philosophy of nature, however, aims at indubitable knowledge. The task ahead of us is to search the commentaries for indications of this distinction between assumptions based on insufficient observation and ascertained conclusions and of the hypothetical character of certain theories.

Can One Use Just Any Philosophy in Elaborating Theology?

The explanations given above show that, contrary to an opinion fairly widely held after the Second Vatican Council and advocated by Karl Rahner, one cannot use just any philosophy in the study of theology. If a main part of the task of a theologian consists in finding analogous structures in the natural order to explain and illustrate the mysteries of the faith, it is obvious that the theologian should have a correct grasp of reality. By means of created things, as they come forth from God, he must try to explain revealed truth, which has also been given to us by God. The more subjective, time-bound, and partial philosophical thought becomes, the less fit it is to function in theology. The history of theology shows how time and again orthodox interpretations were abandoned because theologians resorted to mistaken philosophical theories.¹⁰⁴ This applies also to the task of demonstrating the preambles of the faith and refuting false interpretations of Christian doctrine. In his apostolic letter *Lumen Ecclesiae*, Paul VI rejects the frequently proposed view according to which theologians should incorporate contemporary philosophical trends into theology, as Aquinas had done with Aristotle. Paul VI writes that this is impossible because we are dealing with ways of thinking which cannot be compared at all.¹⁰⁵ In a remarkable discourse at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, on November 17, 1979, John Paul II reminded his audience that many dissenting views in theology are caused by a crisis of philosophical thought. He insisted that one cannot resort to just any philosophy: some philosophies are so limited and closed that they exclude the translation of revelation into human language.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *In I Meteor.*, lectio 11, §68.

¹⁰⁴ See Leo Elders, "Le rôle de la philosophie en théologie: Aide nécessaire et abus. L'influence de catégories philosophiques sur l'expression de la foi," in *Nova et Vetera* (1997): 34–68.

¹⁰⁵ *Lumen Ecclesiae* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria editrice vaticana, 1974), §29.

¹⁰⁶ *Insegnamenti Giovanni Paolo II* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria editrice vaticana, 1979), IV 2, 1418ff.

In conclusion we can say that the respect St. Thomas had for reality, the absence of personal views and preconceived ideas, and his concern to grasp reality as it is make his philosophy the best and safest instrument to develop and to construct the science of theology. **N·V**