

The Perennial Lustre of the Metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

Although metaphysics got its name in the golden period of philosophy, it has been in place before Aristotle and it continued after him through the medieval period. However, drawing strength from Homer and Hesiod, the submissions of Aristotle and Plato influenced the metaphysical discourse of the scholastics; especially as it concerns humanism and theodicy. And one of the scholars that drew enormous strength from the golden age scholars is Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas the *Angelic Doctor* was regarded as a great scholastics because he was a great philosopher. And he was a great philosopher because he was not just an outstanding but also an accomplished metaphysician. This explains why one cannot underscore the growth and development of metaphysics in the medieval era without direct and sustained recourse to Aquinas. It is based on this that this paper in an attempt to interrogate some themes in the medieval era sought to dwell on the metaphysics of Aquinas. The paper employed the critical analytic model from where it became palpable that Aquinas remains the central figure in medieval metaphysics and it was obvious that he drew quite a lot of strength from Aristotle which also made his work enduring though not without some gaffe and some over ambitious metaphysical models that continually exposes his scheme.

Keyword: Metaphysics, Medieval, Scholastics, Soul, Human.

Introduction

In the modern mind, the adjective “medieval” has often been associated with the ideas of darkness, dogmatism, oppression, and barbarity. This should not be surprising, if we consider how modernity came to define itself, precisely in opposition to the medieval tradition, as the renaissance, the re-birth of ancient learning, the reformation of a corrupt church, the enlightenment after an age of darkness, an age of reason after an age of ignorance and blind faith. Even today, this mentality has its visible effects. To the

intellectual reflexes of “the modern mind” referred to above, the very phrase “medieval philosophy” until fairly recently sounded almost like an oxymoron, indeed, so much so that in modern curricula of the history of philosophy the medieval period was barely mentioned, and even nowadays it is skipped by some philosophy departments, boldly leaping from ancient philosophy directly to the study of Descartes.¹

Quite unfortunately, however it is pertinent to note that medieval philosophy was mainly concerned with showing the reasonableness of the Christian faith. For it was an era in which the church converted the whole of Europe; and thus established a new society, dependent on the Gospel, via the making of a spiritual, cultural and political unity for the people living within and outside Rome's ancient boundaries. Consequently, this period gave birth to thinkers who drew many principles from the Bible (Gospel) and this we see in their teachings and writings. Their system of thought is being referred to as Christian Philosophy. Philosophers in this era were Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, William Ockham, Boethius, Anselm, John Scotus and so on,² and among the most notable of them was Thomas Aquinas. It is not new that Thomas Aquinas was regarded as a great theologian cum philosopher. It is also stating the obvious to remark that he was a great philosopher because he was not a great but also an accomplished metaphysician. In the twentieth century, metaphysics was not much in vogue, among either theologians or even philosophers, but with the advent of Thomas the scene was decorated with metaphysical aura. Thomas was a Christian theologian who used philosophy to lead us step by step from familiar truths to unfamiliar wisdom, from what natural reason can know to the divine things it cannot, divine truth that are eternal.

¹. Klima Gyula, etals eds., *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*(Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 1.

². McgradeA. S., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006). 10.

This could explain why Maurice stated that metaphysics as a discipline deals with realities beyond the physical world.³ Interestingly for Aquinas, all other branches of philosophy do not say anything specific about the structure of reality. They only presuppose, it is true that reality is orderly, rational, and knowable. Beyond this they do not venture directly. But the direct and explicit attempt to solve the problem of reality is what constitutes the subject matter of metaphysics.⁴ Thomas Aquinas one of the most profound metaphysician in the history of metaphysics was born into a noble Italian family about the year 1225 in southern Italy about halfway between Rome and Naples. Thomas came under the influence of the newly formed Dominican Order, which he joined sometime around 1244. The Dominican Order are improved preachers and scholars.⁵ Aquinas studied philosophy and theology in Paris, where he came under the influence of the Dominican theologian, Albert the Great. After earning the highest degree in theology, Aquinas spent the remainder of his life lecturing and writing while alternately residing in Paris and Italy, as well as making frequent journey to conduct the business of his order and the church. Aquinas was such an outstanding prolific writer. His works largely consisted in continuing the effort of his teacher Albert the Great to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christianity, establishing a full body of philosophy that do not contradict Christian dogmas.⁶ It is based on the remarkable influence of Thomas Aquinas in medieval philosophy that this paper sets out to examine the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. This is a review of the metaphysics of this medieval scholar and it would be as expansive as possible. The examination will be thematic as the sections below will show.

3. Maurice Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication African, Kolbe Press, 2005), 43.

4. F. Ochieng Odhiambo, *A Companion to Philosophy* (Nairobi: Consolata Institution of Philosophy Press, 2009), 190.

5. Lawhead, *Voyage*, 167.

6. A. R. Lacey, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1976), 16.

Some Critical Features of the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas

From his suppositions and theories, it is palpable that Aquinas aligned with and adopted Aristotelianism for his metaphysics. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Aristotle's work began to be made widely available. He was attractive to anyone who read him seriously for he offered a comprehensive system the medieval world had never seen. But some of Aristotle works contradict the Christian doctrines. For instance, he taught that the world was eternal and uncreated and this seems to deny personal immortality. At this point, Church's authorities became suspicious of Christian philosophers who attempted to make use of the pagan Greek philosophy of Aristotle. Neo-Platonic philosophy of universals held the minds of Christian thinkers for so long that the empirical and naturalistic perspective of Aristotle seemed quite alien and dangerous. However, despite these, Thomas still made use of this Aristotelian philosophy. He did this with the conviction that Aristotelian philosophy could really be Christianised and later could serve as a very rich source for the philosophical and theological speculation of the Christian tradition. The metaphysics of Aquinas then culminates in an account of the divine intellect and theology. Even his teacher Albert the great had made attempts to use Aristotelian philosophy, but Thomas was the chief architect of this new philosophical theological edifice. By merging Aristotle with Christian theology, Thomas thought he could gain a perspective on our human involvement in bodily existence that would be philosophically rigorous and theologically adequate. But Aquinas was of the candid view that as far as the distinctive features of the Christian faith are concerned, Aristotle was in the dark and just like other pagan Greek, was in dire need of divine revelation. In the same line of selection and purification of theories, Aquinas was very quick to reject many of the traditional teachings on Augustinianism, especially the idea of soul as a complete substance (for which he substituted the concept of form). Having said this; the following sections will focus on the metaphysical positions and submission of Aquinas.

Aquinas on Creation

Aquinas reasons that God remains the primary and first cause of the world. This explains why finite and contingent beings owe their existence to the God; these finite beings must proceed from God and only through creation. Moreover, this creation must be creation out of nothing. If creatures were made out of a pre-existent material, this material would be either God Himself or something other than God. But God cannot be the material of creation, since He is simple, spiritual, and unchangeable. God is the only necessary being. God, therefore, is absolutely prior, and if He cannot change, cannot exteriorize Himself in creation, it follows that he must have created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*.⁷ Interestingly, this phrase must not be taken to imply that nothing, nihil, is a material out of which the world was made. Now, when it is said that God created the world out of nothing, it is meant either that first there was nothing and then there was something or the phrase *ex nihilo* must be understood as equivalent to *non ex aliquo*, not out of something. The objection that out of nothing comes nothing, is therefore, irrelevant, since nothing is looked on neither as efficient cause nor as material cause. In creative endeavour God is the efficient Cause and there is no material cause whatsoever. Every creature, by the very fact that it is created, has a real relation to God as Creator. Such a relation in God would either be identical with the divine substance or it would be an accident in God; but the divine substance cannot be necessarily related to creatures, since in that case God would depend in some way on creatures for his very existence, while on the other hand God, as absolutely simple, cannot receive or possess accidents. That God created the world freely, does not of itself show that he created it in time that time had a beginning.⁸ As God is eternal, he might have created the world from eternity. That this had been shown to be an impossible

⁷. Paul J. Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas* (India: Theological Publications Bangalore, 2007), 39.

⁸. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy* vol. 2, 364.

supposition St. Thomas refused to allow. He believed that it can be philosophically proven that the world was created out of nothing, but he maintained that none of the philosophical proofs adduced to prove that this creation took place in time, that there is, ideally, a first assignable moment of time, were conclusive, differing on this point from St. Albert. On the other hand, St Thomas maintained, against the Averroists, that it cannot be shown philosophically that the world cannot have begun in time, that creation in time is an impossibility. In willing this universe, God did not will the evils contained in it. God necessarily loves his own essence, which is infinite goodness, and he freely wills creation as a communication of his goodness; he cannot love what is opposed to goodness, namely evil.⁹

Aquinas Doctrine of Participation

Ordinarily, it is apposite that essence/existence composites have existence; whatever an essence/existence composite is, it is not its existence. Insofar as essence/existence composites merely have, but are not, existence, they participate in existence in order to exist. This appears to be Aquinas second fundamental metaphysical teachings: whatever does not essentially exist, merely participates in existence. Insofar as no essence/existence composite essentially exists, all essence/existence composites merely participate in existence. More specifically, the act of existence that each and every essence/existence composite possesses is participated in by the essence that exists. As a definition of participation, Aquinas claims that to participate is to take a part (in) (*partem capere*) something.¹⁰ Flowing from this definition, Aquinas goes on to explain how one thing can be said to take a part in and thereby participate in another; this can happen in three ways. Firstly, when something receives in a particular fashion what pertains universally to another, it is said to participate in that other; for example, a species 'man' is said to participate in its genus 'animal'.

^{9.} Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 39.

^{10.} Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 39

Secondly, a subject is said to participate in the accidents that it has (for instance, a man is a certain color, and thereby participates in the color of which he is), and matter is said to participate in the formal structure that it has (for instance, the matter of a statue participates in the shape of that statue in order to be the statue in question). Thirdly, an effect can be said to participate in its cause, especially when the effect is not equal to the power of that cause. The effect particularizes and determines the scope of the cause; for the effect acts as the determinate recipient of the power of the cause. The effect receives from its cause only that which is necessary for the production of the effect. It is in this way that a cause is participated in by its effect. In all of the foregoing modes of participation, to participate is to limit that which is participated in some respect.

Aquinas and the Ontology of the Physical World: Hylemorphic Suppositions

As it obvious Aquinas aligned with Aristotle, hence he was of the view that the natural world consists of a collection of concrete individual substances. And every material substance must be understood in terms of two basic principles. The first of the principles is the substantial form. The form is the universal aspect of the thing that which all members of a species have in common. The substantial form of humanity, for example is what gives humans those attributes (physical and mental) and differentiate them from plants and animals, it is also this form that causes human to act in characteristically human ways. The other aspect of a substance is its matter. We might be inclined to think that the matter of a tree is the woody, fibrous material we associate with the interior of the tree. However, this matter is already the product of the substantial form, and thus it does not exist apart from the substance of the tree. Aquinas's theory of matter attempts to solve two problems that arise from our common-sense understanding of experience. The first one is the problem of continuity. Since one kind of substance can change into another substance (the tree can

be burned and reduced to ashes), what accounts for our experience of continuity? The second problem is that of individuation.¹¹ How can two substances have identical qualities (such as two identical vases) and still be two different substances? To solve the first problem, Aquinas says that if there is continuity, there must be a more fundamental kind of matter that persists through any sort of substantial change. If the tree turns into ashes, then there must be something that had the potential to be the wood of the tree as well as the matter of the ashes. Postulating prime matter also solves the problem of individuation. Two substances with the same qualities are different because the matter is different. However, when we look about the world, we will not find any examples of prime matter. This is because all matter we encounter is already formed matter and is found only in this or that particular substance. Of course, in Aquinas's Aristotelian universe there are no pure, independently existing forms either, for all forms are only found embodied in substances.

The Cosmological Theory of Aquinas

The idea that Aquinas had about the universe is that it is a continuous hierarchy that some have called the '*great chain of being*'. It ranges from inorganic substances at the bottom straight up to God at the pinnacle, the apex. What Teilhard de Chardin will call the *Omega Point*. There is such an enormous variety of substances because God's own creation was made to express his fullness. Aquinas even uses this notion to prove the existence of angels. They are like God in that they are purely spiritual beings, yet they are like humans in that they have potentiality. Thus they fill a unique niche in the chain of being. Although Aquinas did not wrestle with issues of ecology, it is clear that on his view, the disappearance of a species would be unfortunate, for it would leave a gap in nature. Whether or not we accept Aquinas's Aristotelian view of the world, such a metaphysic offers a great

¹¹. Glenn, *A Tour*, 89.

deal of intellectual satisfaction because it assures us that the world is not a meaningless and random hodgepodge of blind processes. Since each species has a form, the world is orderly and intelligible and our minds can know it. Finally, creatures can be ranked as higher or lower depending on how close they are to God on the scale of being. Because there is this objective hierarchy, we would save the life of a human being before that of a snail. This is because humans are higher than the animals and just a little lower than the angels. All of physical nature reflects the divine nature and is important, but humans more fully exhibit the image of God and, thereby, have more dignity and worth.

Aquinas Discourse on Angels

Among creatures, this is the highest degree of perfection, the level of pure spirits, and they are commonly called angels. It is unfortunate that some historians are wont to pass over in complete silence this aspect of the works of Aquinas; some even out rightly dismiss it with a few allusions. But such a disposition appears regrettable based on the fact that Aquinas treatise on angels is not entirely or specifically a theological inquiry. Angels are creatures whose existence can be demonstrated. In certain exceptional cases they have even been seen.¹² Creatures also exist in a series of grades. They participate and represent the goodness of God in various ways. In this world, there are three kinds of substances: mineral, vegetal and animal. These are all bodily substances. We find also in this world the human substance which is not all bodily because man has a spiritual soul. To round out the order of things, there must be some purely spiritual or non-bodily substances thus created substances are; the completely bodily substance, the substance that is a compound of body and spirit, and the completely spiritual substance. Completely spiritual substances are called angels. A bodily substance is composed of two substantial elements primal matter and substantial form. In

^{12.} Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House limited, 1956), 160.

angels there is no compounding of matter and form. Matter does not exist in angels; they are pure substantial forms.¹³ Each angel is the only one of its kind, because substance form makes a creature an existing thing of its essential kind. It means that each angel is a species or essential kind of substantial being. Hence each angel is essentially different from every other angel. The angels are incorruptible substances. This means that they cannot die, decay, break up, or be substantially changed. For the root of corruptibility in a substance is matter, and in the angels there is no matter.¹⁴

Aquinas on the Being of Man: The Union of the Body and Soul

The notion of soul is much wider than that of a human soul, in its wide sense soul is defined as the first act of an organised body capable of performing the functions of life. Thus, like all form, a soul is an act. Like all act, it is not directly known to us. We simply infer it from its effects and affirm it by judgement. The effect to strike the observer first is the presence within it of centers of spontaneous movement.¹⁵ The word 'soul' is by Aquinas like Aristotle in a wide sense to be the life-principle in a living body. The soul actualizes a body as living, and it is the substantial form which makes the living body the specific kind of living body it is: plant, animal, man.¹⁶ The soul of a plant and the soul of an animal are called material souls not as though they were made of bodily organism which they determine and actualize. Like Aristotle, Aquinas uses the word 'soul' in a wide sense.¹⁷ Soul is the first principle of life in living things about us. If we understand the word in this broad sense, it obviously follows that all living things have souls. This would seem ridiculous, of course, if we took the word soul in the sense in which it is usually taken today; but

^{13.} Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 44.

^{14.} Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 45.

^{15.} Gilson, *The Christian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 187.

^{16.} See, Aquinas Thomas, *Summa Theological*, Trans. By Frs of English Dominican (New York: Benzigers Inc.).

^{17.} Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 60.

Aquinas' anima is equivalent to Aristotle's psyche. It is the principle or component factor of a living thing which first makes it a living thing and which lies behind, as it were, all that thing's vital activities.

The human soul is a non-bodily substance endowed with intellect and will. In this life the human soul has an extrinsic dependence on the body, but not an intrinsic dependence. It can exist and operate per se¹⁸ even if it be severed from the body. And this means that it is truly a subsistent substance. The plant soul and the animal soul are not subsistent substances. They cannot exist and operate per se without the plant body and the animal body; indeed, it is the complete body, plant or animal, that exists and acts per se. Material souls are incomplete, non-subsistent substances. The human soul is subsistent, yet, while it is a complete soul, it is not a complete human being. The complete human being is a compound of body and soul. As Aquinas argue the immortality of the soul. Plato mistakenly thought that the soul is the complete man, and that the body is a kind of container or prison. But this is not true. Man is a single compound substance made of body and soul; the soul can exist and perform its proper operations even if severed from the body. Therefore, the human soul is a spiritual substance. It is an element of the human compound, but in itself it has no compounding or composition; there is no matter or material in it. It is a substantial spiritual form. It is a spirit.¹⁹

Over the years there appear to be in existence two extreme views of the psychophysical constitution of man. On one hand, it is held that 'real' man is the soul, even simply the mind, which inhabits the body; the latter is seen as an instrument of the soul, the soul's prison house or mortal tomb. This view enjoyed popularity in the works of Aristotle. The spiritual soul of a human being is the substantial form of the living man. It is the spiritual

^{18.} Ibid., 61.

^{19.} Etienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (USA: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1960), 204.

soul which, substantially joined with matter, sets up and constitutes an existing human being. Man's soul is not in his body; it is not united with the body as a Guitarist is in tuned with the musical instrument in producing melodies. These are mere instances of accidental union. And the human soul is joined with its body in substantial union. With its body, it constitutes one substance, the human substance. We must not regard man as a machine inert in itself but with a soul as its motor, this is what Descartes wanted to substitute for Aristotle's notion of living being. So, for Aquinas, aligning with Aristotle, the soul does not first make a body move rather it makes it a body. A corpse is not a body. The soul makes it exist as a body. It is the soul which assemble and organizes what we call today the bio-chemical elements (organic, or even inorganic, elements, but never informs).²⁰

Each human being has his own soul. Some ancient teachers mistakenly believed that there is one universal soul for all men, a general soul. There are as many human souls as there are individual human beings. Each human being has his own soul and it constitutes him as an existing living substance of the human kind. And each man has only one soul. Although man has the three grade of life-vegetal, sentient or animal, and human, man is only one being, one substance. The human soul as Aquinas uses it in a wide sense is in itself or as such a spiritual soul. This spiritual soul, inasmuch as, in the body, it can be the root-principle of bodily functions, is equivalently vegetal and sentient.²¹ We say, in technical words, the human soul is formally spiritual, and virtually vegetal and sentient. The spiritual and intellectual soul of a man is his only substantial form. For a man is one substance; he is constituted as one substance of the human kind by one substantial form. But the human kind is the intellectual kind, not merely a plant or an animal. Hence a man is constituted in his kind by an intellectual or spiritual principle, and this is his one spiritual soul,

^{20.} Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 187.

^{21.} Copleston, *Aquinas*, 159.

his one substantial form. The human soul does not receive its knowledge with its nature when it is created, as is the case with angels. It must acquire its knowledge. And it gains its knowledge through the ministering office of bodily senses.²²

Aquinas on Human Finality: The End of Man

Ordinarily, every agent, by its action, intends an end, works towards an end. For in those things which clearly act for an end, we declare the end to be that towards which the movement of the agent tends; for when this is reached, the end is said to be reached, and to fail in this is to fail in the end intended. This reached, and to fail in this is to fail in the end intended. This may be seen in the physician who aims at health, and in a man who runs towards an appointed goal. Nor does it matter, as to this, whether that which tends to an end be endowed with knowledge or not; for just as the target is the end of the archer, so is it the end of the arrow's flight. Now the movement of every agent tends to something determinate, since it is not from any force that any action proceeds, but heating proceeds from heat, and cooling from cold; and therefore actions are differentiated by their active principles. Therefore every agent acts for an end.²³

Aquinas on Essence and Existence

Essence is the definable nature of anything that exists. The essence of something is that which a thing must have in order to be a thing of that kind.²⁴ Existence is that in virtue of which a substance is called a being. Essence also denote a certain act, for a thing is not said to be (*esse*) by the fact that it is potentiality, but by the fact that it is an act. For Aquinas, essence and existence are in the metaphysical order, two principles of every finite being. Anything that is, is made of essence (its form, definition or nature)

^{22.} Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 62.

^{23.} Copleston, *Aquinas*, 187.

^{24.} Odhiambo, *A Companion to Philosophy*, 190.

and existence (the actuation, realization or concretization). Thus essence stands to existence what potency stands to act. While essence defines existence, existence realizes essence in act (*actu*).²⁵ The immediate question then is how the essence of a thing relates to its existence. In finite entities, essence is that which has existence, something independent of their existence but it is not existence; this is a crude articulation of Aquinas' most fundamental metaphysical teaching: that essence and existence are distinct in finite entities. Therefore, a consideration then of essence and existence in Aquinas metaphysical thought will thus be a consideration of his fundamental teaching that essence and existence are distinct. Aquinas has once again concluded that essence and existence are distinct. This distinction is not present in God, for God's essence implies his existence. Hence, if there is God, his nature is such that he would exist necessarily this sounds very much like Anselm's ontological argument. However, Aquinas rejects this argument because even though we can understand the term 'God' we do not have a direct apprehension of the divine essence. If we did, we would see that his essence is identical to his existence. For God alone is essence and existence identical. For God is *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* (Self-subsisting Being) in an absolute sense. However, lacking this complete knowledge of the divine essence, we cannot argue from it to God's actual existence as Anselm tries to do. This is consistent with Aquinas' epistemology, for he continually insists that reason must work from the materials given to it by sense experience.

The Doctrine of Matter and Form of Aquinas

As an ontological concept, matter is the principle of limitation in an essence. It is potential essence that later realizes the form. Thus matter is pure potentiality. When an essence or form has assumed its matter, it automatically becomes a material substance. And to state that matter exist without a form is to speak of act without act,

²⁵ Iroegbu, *Metaphysics*, 157.

which implies a contradiction.²⁶ Aquinas philosophy therefore uses the hylemorphic theory, earlier enunciated by Aristotle, to solve the problem of the composition of material being. Matter and form make things what they are. They give identity to things.²⁷ The distinction between form and matter in physical substances is one example of a more general distinction between actuality and potentiality. We have said that prime matter is pure potentiality. It is the capacity to take on different substantial forms. Forms are on the side of actuality, for they create a particular shoe, cow or man. Because God is perfect, he alone is fully actualized, for to be imperfect means to have potentialities that are not actualized. Hence, God cannot change.²⁸

Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Quinque Viae

Thomas Aquinas was basically a Christian from the Roman Catholic background before ever he became a philosopher and later a metaphysician. So, he did not just come to believe in God because of his own metaphysical arguments. He already believed in an ultimate reality conceived as possessing the attribute ascribed by Christian to God. In a systematic treatise on theology like the *summatheological*, he not only expounded the content of the Christian faith, but much more importantly, he expressed his conviction on the existence of God. To this effect Aquinas gave five arguments or proofs to the existence of God. The first three appears to be versions of the cosmological argument.²⁹

1. Argument from Motion: The first and most manifest way is the argument from motion. For Aquinas, it is apiori that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is moved is

^{26.} Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*. Trans. By Frs. English Dominican Vol.1 (New York: Benziger Brothers Inc., 1920), Article 66.

^{27.} Iroegbu, *Metaphysics*, 156.

^{28.} Lawhead, *Voyage*, 174.

^{29.} Stephen Evans C and Zachary Manis R., *Philosophy of Religion 2nd ed.* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 68

moved by another, for nothing can be moved except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is moved; whereas a thing moves in as much as it in act.³⁰ And for Aristotle, motion is any change from a potential state to an actual state. This not only includes changes in location but also refers to, a change in temperature or colour. He argues that any change presupposes some agent that brings it about. But if the agent is itself a changing being, it too can be moved only by the action of some other agent. However, such a series of agents cannot be infinite. The whole process of things actualizing the potential in other things needs some ultimate ground. Hence, there must be a first mover, the unmoved mover. A being that is not itself changing but is the ultimate source of the series of changes we observe in the world. How can something cause motion without itself moving? Here, Aquinas is relying on Aristotle's notion that is possible for one thing to move another without the cause itself being in motion. Hence, there must be a first mover, and Aquinas reasons that this unmoved mover is God. The *Summa Theologiae* present the demonstration as follow: It is certain that there is motion in the world because our sense tells us so. Now anything which moves is moved by something. Nothing indeed is moved save according as it is moved. Nothing moves on the contrary, save according as it is in act.³¹ Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, God.

2. *Argument from Cause:* The second way is an argument from the ontology of efficient cause. It is palpable that naturally, one event is caused by another event that was itself caused by yet another event. There is absolutely no way a thing can be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is not possible. Now, in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate cause is

^{30.} Anton C. Pegis, *Introduction to St Thomas Aquinas* (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 25.

^{31.} Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 59-60.

the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. A moving cause is just that which actualizes some potentiality and therefore, in a sense, just reduced to an efficient cause.³² Now to take always the cause is to take away the effect. To illustrate, imagine a long chain hanging in the air. There is no problem in explaining the cause of link 1 being suspended, because we can see that it is supported by link 2, and this one, in turn, is supported by link 3, and so on. However, at some point the entire series of links must be supported on something else. Without a self-supporting point on which the whole chain depends, the entire chain will never be supported. This established the principle of a primary cause and according to Aquinas, the first cause is God.

3. *Argument from Necessity and Contingency of Being:*

Ordinarily, things come into existence and pass out of existence. (Their existence “to be” and non-existence “not to be” are both possible). It is impossible, however, that everything has being of this sort. If something can fail to exist, there must have been a time at which it has failed to exist. Therefore, if everything could fail to exist, there would have been a time at which nothing existed. But, if there had been such a time, there would not be anything in the world now, for something can begin to exist only if brought into existence by something that already exists and/or necessarily exists. Therefore, if there once had been nothing in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to come into existence, and there would be nothing now. Therefore, not every entity can fail to exist; there must be something in the world that exists of necessity. But, if something exists of necessity, either this necessity is or is not caused by something else. And the series of necessary beings whose necessity is caused by another cannot possibly go back to infinity. (The reasons are those that were used to show that the series of efficient causes cannot go back to

³². Eardley S. Peter, and Carl, N, *Aquinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 20.

infinity). We must therefore posit something that is necessary per se, something that does not own its necessity to anything else but which causes the necessity of other things. And this is God.³³

4. *Argument from the Degree of Perfection:* This argument stems from the degree of perfection that we perceive in existence. It starts from the existence of degrees of value or perfection and claims that they imply the existence of a supremely perfect being as their source. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like.³⁴ Different kinds of finite things possess different perfections in diverse limited degrees. Aquinas then argues not only that if there are different degrees of a perfection like goodness there is a supreme good to which other good things approximate but also that all limited degrees of goodness are caused by the supreme good. And since goodness is a convertible term with being, a thing being good in so far as it has being, the supreme good is the supreme being and the cause of being in all other things. Therefore, there is something which is the cause of the being and goodness and of every perfection in all other things; and this Aquinas called God. Aquinas refers to some remarks of Aristotle in the metaphysics; but this argument puts one in mind at once of Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*. And the Platonic doctrine of participation seems to be involved. Aquinas was not immediately acquainted with either work, but the Platonic line of thought was familiar to him from other writers. And it has not disappeared from philosophy. Indeed, some of those theists who reject or doubt the validity of the 'cosmological' arguments seem to feel a marked attraction for some variety of the fourth way, arguing that in the recognition of objective value.

5. *The Argument from Design:* The logic of the last argument is

^{33.} John Perry, Michael Bratman, John Markin Fischer, ed., *Introduction to philosophy: Classical and contemporary reading*, 5th edition (New York: Oxford university Press, 2010), 45.

^{34.} Pegis, *Introduction to St Thomas Aquinas*, 26.

hinged on the evidence of design in the world. Aquinas remarked that most of nature is blind and unintelligent, yet it seems to be orderly towards achieving a purposeful end. Technically, see the world as a teleological system. However, an end that does not yet exist cannot direct its own realization. Only if the final goal is contained in the mind of an intelligent being by whom all natural things are directed to their end. In the *Contra Gentiles* he reasons that, it is impossible that contrary and disparate things should be in accord and reconciled within the same order, either always or very often, unless there exists a being governing them and causing them, collectively and individually, to tend towards one determined end. Now, we observe that in the world, things of different natures are reconciled within one and the same order, not merely from time to time and by chance, but always or practically always. There must then exist a being by whose providence the world is governed, and Aquinas called this being that is the ultimate and principal designer, God. In the *Summa Theological* he argues in precisely the same manner but specifying that this providence which orders the world, by which all things are disposed towards their end, is an intelligence; and one might in the end come to the same conclusion by following different ways, notably by reasoning and logically from human acts.³⁵ Whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end, and this being is God.³⁶

Culminating Reflections

A cursory examination of the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas would reveal a certain continuity and unified trajectory of beings, which begins with simple creatures and moves to other higher beings. At

^{35.} Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 75.

^{36.} Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*. Trans. By Frs. English Dominican, Vol.2, Article 3, Question 2.

the peak of this trajectory are those beings that are capable of reason, that are morally responsible, that are free to make choices, and are ultimately able to lead a spiritual life. This goes to demonstrate that, Aquinas embarked on a synthesis of a pure physical universe and highlighting its spiritual dimension. The background of this is the neo-Platonic dualism and the tradition of Augustine that were popular at the time which attempted to relegate and renounce the existence of the physical world. This line of thought was also evident in the anthropology of Thomas Aquinas where the human person was seen only as the soul and as not connected to and with the body. Against Platonic idea, the human body is good and important if we must understand the world and operate within its principles. These positions highlighted the fact that Thomas Aquinas enthroned some sort of humanism, which provoked later science, politics, arts and these are not impossible in a Platonic and in an Augustinian setting. Underscoring the fact that; “not only are we spiritual beings with an eternal destiny, but we are part of nature as well.”³⁷

From his mode of operation, one can say that Thomas Aquinas was a scholar who sincerely and genuinely sought for the truth wherever it could be found. It does not really matter who is in possession if it, whether it is a pagan or whoever. What matters to Aquinas is that the truth should be found. This seem to put in perspective why Aquinas would not and did not hesitate to crystalize and synthesize the theory of Aristotle, a pagan philosopher which led Thomas Aquinas to the unknown. Although, Albert the Great who was his teacher and master was afan and an exponent of the doctrines of Aristotle but it can be said that classical philosophy attained its most envious height with the pen and intellectual prowess of Aquinas. This stems from the fact that Aquinas systematized the principles of Aristotle to create a solid and a systematic philosophic and theological system of thought. This is irrespective of his other influencers like his Jewish

³⁷. William F. Lawhead. *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. 194.

and Arab predecessors (Avicenna and Averroes, including Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius, but these ones were more or less supplementary at those times when Aristotle's view deviated from his ultimate goal). And one of the fundamental principle of Aristotle that was obvious and fundamental in Thomas Aquinas's scheme is the theory of act and potency. Just like Aristotle, Thomas, appreciated the interplay of act and potency in the accidental and substantial changes immanent in the physical world and that was why it was easy for him to argue for the existence of God as the pure act of creatures in potency, for nothing can be reduced from potentiality to act, save by the agency of that which is in act.³⁸ Despite these marks, it is notable to state that one of the most significant and original contribution of Thomas Aquinas to the metaphysics of being is the doctrine of the Act of Existence. Aquinas went further to make a distinction between essence and existence, though this was coloured with religious explanations and the reasons are obvious. In all, the greatest achievement of Thomas Aquinas was that he brought together the insights of classical philosophy and Christian theology this is notwithstanding the disposition of secular scholars to Aquinas's philosophical reflections. Metaphysical is at times given a derogative connotation. A view is termed metaphysical if it is abstract, speculative and seems not to have any direct bearing to everyday life. The way some philosophers have proceeded to explicate their views has actually given some credence to this position. Such philosophers have been too abstract and have never bothered to show the relevance of their views to day to day life. In truth, theory and practice, as well as the abstract and the concrete are related. A theory that does not point to practice is irrelevant, and practice without theory is blind. Looking critically at Aquinas metaphysics, we see Aquinas attempting just like Aristotle to make metaphysics not just practical but existential too. This is blatant when he insisted that

³⁸. Copleston Frederick. *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. 424.

we cannot rigorously and rationally demonstrate the absurdity of an eternal world; and faith should not be smuggled in to rescue the philosopher from what he cannot obtain by natural reasoning.

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