

A History of Philosophy

24 Thomas Aquinas' Christian Aristotelianism

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Okay, now let's turn our attention, again, after all a Friday on him, to Thomas Aquinas. Okay, and let me go back briefly into what we were talking about last Wednesday when I was introducing Aquinas' metaphysics. And let me go back to it in this way.

You recall the historical setting, namely that the Muslim philosopher Averroes had taken Aristotle to have the best and last word philosophically. Even though, in the way in which Averroes interpreted Aristotle, there were all sorts of problems for Muslim theology as well as Christian theology. Problems with regard to absolute creation out of nothing.

Problems about individual immortality and so forth. To which problem Averroes had responded with what really developed into a theory of two-fold truth. Namely, that the truth of religious beliefs, truths of faith, are formulated in popular language.

The truths of philosophy are formulated more theoretically, more precisely. And these two are in some sort of tension with each other. Well, that sort of position, obviously, was very troublesome to Christian thinkers as well as other Muslim thinkers.

Typical of the Christian response was Bonaventure, who, as a result, rejected Aristotle altogether and continued with Platonism, as in the Augustinian tradition, developing that line of thought in his own complex way. But on the other hand, Thomas Aquinas wasn't ready to give up on Aristotle. He felt that, regardless of those problems, there was more potential in Aristotle's metaphysics for being compatible with Christianity.

And so he set to, to make appropriate modifications in the light of the Augustinian tradition. Therefore, emphasizing the Logos doctrine with the forms in the mind of God. Emphasizing God's knowledge of and creation of individual natures.

And hence the possibility of individual immortality. In fact, those of you who were there on Saturday morning may have noted that Ronald Feenstra from Marquette University, who incidentally is going to be moving next year to Calvin Seminary, where they're starting a PhD program in theology, including philosophical theology. And he's going to be the philosophical theology man there.

With a name like Feenstra, he's obviously Dutch. Ronald Feenstra commented on Saturday morning in his response to the last paper that it becomes very evident that

the medieval Christian thinkers were starting with an established theological position that they were satisfied with, confident of, and modified existing philosophical positions to suit the needs and requirements of those theological positions. And I think it's fair to say that that sort of procedure is fairly characteristic of medieval thought.

And I would suggest that it's characteristic of pretty well all philosophers. That if they don't start with something like a Christian theology, they start with some other worldview and develop philosophical positions to suit its requirements and needs. The picture of philosophy as being completely neutral and presuppositionalist is, I think, as unhistorical as the picture of science being presuppositionalist or anything else.

But in any case, what was it that Aquinas did then with Aristotle's metaphysics in modifying it to suit the needs of Christian theology? Well, let me list a series of things as I did last week. First, he insists that God is not an essence, a form of all forms, a universal, but that God's essence is to exist. He is the very essence of existence.

He is the source of all being. Now, for the Greeks, you see, the God concept that emerged was of one who's the source of order, or the source of good, or the source of beauty, or the source of intelligibility, but not the source of existence. And Aquinas sees very clearly that in any theistic perception, God is the source of all being as well as of order and goodness.

And he proceeds then to explore, if you like, a metaphysic of creation. And obviously, the doctrine of creation is going to be the prime theological input into metaphysics, which is still the case in the latest review of metaphysics I was looking at just this weekend, Saturday night. There's an article on metaphysical views of creation in the light of contemporary process theology, and in comparison with Thomas Aquinas.

That sort of thing is still going on. Well, Aquinas' point of view then drew in the Logos doctrine that was transmitted from Augustine and the Church Fathers, such that the forms being in the mind of God, God has in mind exemplars, archetypes, for all possible kinds of things. Even for prime matter, distinguishing, as he does, between *materia prima*, prime matter, unformed in any way, and *materia signata*, designated matter.

Matter that's already designated by form, some kind of matter. The conception of prime matter is simply that of pure potentiality, pure potency. In other words, prime matter doesn't exist by itself, but it has the material potential for any kind of thing that is going to exist, that could exist.

And since God knows every kind of possibility, because he knows all forms, he knows then what it's like for there to be pure possibility. And accordingly, God knows prime

matter, even prime matter with its amazing potential for such a creation. Well, in the act of creation, then, what he does is to give existence to what doesn't have existence, but has only potential for existence.

It is not the giving of form; it's not form that causes existence; it's not matter that causes existence, but God giving the act, the actuality of existence, to a combination of form and matter, which otherwise would simply be pure potential for that form of matter. So, God it is who gives existence to what otherwise would not exist, creation out of nothing. And everything that exists then has its own nature, its own nature known by God, its own end, telos, its proximate end, which contributes to the, within the hierarchy of the whole cosmos, contributes to the ultimate end that all creation should imitate and glorify God.

So that in its particular way, every individual thing in creation is made to imitate and to glorify God, in that degree and in that way in which it fits into the goodness of the whole. So then, the act of creation, the telos, the end of creation, and what we have then is a theory of individual natures for all created things, God knowing individual natures, a theory of what is sometimes called substantial forms, and you'll find that term used in the literature, often used without explanation. A substantial form is a form which, with matter, constitutes a particular substance.

So forms are, as in Aristotle, always imminent in particular substances, the substantial form. Other than the substantial forms imminent in particular substances, forms are simply archetypal ideas in the mind of God. But it's by virtue of the act of existence which the creator gives, that corresponding to those archetypes in the mind of God are the substantial forms which give to the created things the natures that they have.

Well, that's the direction it takes. It's Aristotelian imminent forms, yet it's Augustinian archetypal ideas in the mind of God. It is Aristotelian forms of the species, yet it's individualized by virtue of individual acts of creation, actualizing potentials, and so forth.

The tendency of the Greeks was to have a negative view of matter, matter as a lack of. The attitude of Thomas is much more positive. Matter has promise for, potential for, you'll see.

And all of this modification of the Greek metaphysics for Christian purposes. All right, now that summary then of Aristotle's metaphysics is the kind of thing which you have in the reading you're doing for this week, in the little piece at the end of the Aquinas selections entitled The Principles of Nature. This is the thing I've asked you to outline for this week.

You'll notice that there is a lot of terminology introduced, and that's the stuff you need to get clear on. The terminology, potential and actual, or potency and actuality. Potency? Yes, prime matter is the potential for substance.

He speaks about three things that are needed for generation. For generations, yes, for things to become, to be generated. Three things that are needed.

Matter, which is a potential being. Form, through which the matter is able to come to be something substantive. And privation, that is to say, the lack of substantive existence, which precedes the becoming.

So three things are necessary for becoming, for generation. Privation, something needs to become. Potential, prime matter.

Form, you see. Those three things. Now, apart from substantive existence, none of those three things is anything at all.

There's no such thing as bare matter, pure potency. No such thing as bare form, except embodied in matter. No such thing as not existing.

Not existing is not existing. It doesn't exist. So, inasmuch as the act of creation is the creation out of these three things that are needed for generation, creation is out of nothing.

Yes, and elsewhere he points out that in regards to the four causes, and he talks about the four causes in that essay, but in regards to the four causes, the efficient cause of creation is God. The formal cause is the divine logos, the divine reason. The final cause is God, the imitation of God.

The material cause doesn't have any. It's out of nothing, you see. So he plays Aristotle's four causes.

The final cause, of course, is needed in order to explain the end-oriented nature of all processes. The telos. And that final cause is itself explained, how can there be a final cause imminent within things, by virtue of the forms, you see, which provide the end that the potency is going to yield to.

Yeah. Okay, you said that there are three things that we need for generation, which are God and God's creation. Right.

But they don't really exist. Right. But if matter doesn't really exist, and it's just a three-webbed thing, then how are you using it to really create something eminent? The concept of prime matter is something that can be thought, because it's nothing, in particular, and only particulars exist, it doesn't exist.

It can be thought that God thinks it. God thinks of a space-time world of substantive existence of all sorts. You can think of the prime matter, the prime stuff.

But while you can think it, you see, in itself it doesn't exist. It lacks any actuality. So, what he's saying is that form alone doesn't exist and cannot cause existence.

Form alone? Yes, if only forms exist, he'd be a metaphysical idealist. These immaterial entities, that's all that exists. You see.

He's some sort of metaphysical idealist. No, he's a realist. A realist about material existence.

And he wants these hylomorphic composites. Did you hear that word, hylomorphic, rolling around in the conference? It sure was. He wants these hylomorphic composites.

So, how can you bring nothing plus nothing and make something? Well, form is the possibility of something. Matter is the possibility of something. The formal possibility, the material possibility.

And the act of existence is when God brings them together into being. Now, if you say that's wild, you can draw the analogy from reproductive processes. There's no new genetic identity in the sperm or the ovum.

It's not until they meet that you get a new genetic identity. There's no being in the matter, there's no being in the form. It's not until form and matter meet that you get a substantive identity.

Now, you say that's a bad analogy because sperm and ovum exist before. Yeah, that's why creation is a unique thing. It's creation that's absolute.

Other kinds of generation are not. Yes? I have a question. Does this mean that Aquinas tries to get from God, from the highest form, down to the individual man instead of working with the intermediary form? Yes.

Well said. One of the problems in Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle was that he had all these intermediaries, what is it, a hundred intermediaries in between or something of that sort, and Aristotle didn't want that. Now, that's not to say they weren't there, that God wasn't dependent on acting through them.

There are intermediaries in Aristotle's theory of angels. Intermediaries in the sense that on the hierarchy between God and humans, there are these other immaterial beings, or as he calls them in his writings, non-composite substances. Do you think

Aristotle might have worked that way also, when he said that everything is to look to the good, the stars, all the planets, but it's not a direct involvement? It's not a direct involvement, yeah.

In fact, there's an interesting thing. Some of the medievals talked of the angels riding on the circuits of the heavens as if they were the guiding spirits for the stars. Yeah, in that sort of cosmology, though I don't think that that is Aquinas'.

No, Aquinas sees a direct act of God. And he's fairly clear about that. God is the efficient cause, not some intermediary efficient cause.

Yes, I think then you can trace out that article of Aquinas' and see that as an explication of the Aristotelian dimensions of his metaphysics. Does Aquinas say that God knows individuals because he knows all the possible combinations of forms? Yeah, I think it's Bonaventure who puts it that way specifically. Aquinas' way of putting it is that God knows all of the potential of matter.

So he knows there is potential there for producing even you. So does God know potentialities that aren't actualised in the same way that he knows... Yeah, he knows that the essence of humanness can be actualised in different material, different aspects of matter to produce things as different as you and the rest. Yeah, there's a touch in Aquinas that says that God knows the individual through knowing the form, through knowing the archetype.

Okay, now I said before that the first issue which he takes up in his Summa Theologica, which was written in response to the Averroists, the first issue he takes up is that of reason and revelation, faith and reason. If this is your first time reading Aquinas, you'll find the method that he follows in the Summa Theologica a little bit confusing. You'll find that it is outlined in terms of questions, and within questions, article 1, article 2, article 3, and sub-questions.

In each article, you'll find it begins with a statement of objections, it goes on to say, on the contrary, and I answer that, developing a positive position. Followed by, reply to objection 1, reply to objection 2, reply to objection 3. So that the form of the piece is not exactly that of an essay or a lecture, it's more the form of a manual for debate. Because debate was the form that teaching took in the medieval university.

And what you have here is a manual for debate. Accordingly, it's very condensed. You have to read virtually every word.

He doesn't throw in dozens of illustrations along the way. It's concentrated. And yet it's tremendously rich.

Richard Croner says that it generates simultaneous respect and weariness. It's both exacting and boring, awesome and pedantic, fascinating and tedious. And if you reacted that way to the conference, then maybe it's because it was dealing with the medievals too.

But that's Thomas's style. Now, in his discussion of reason and revelation, you can see fairly quickly what he's trying to do. So let me stick it on this overhead, and we can quickly get his point.

Okay, then. Natural reason has its limits in regard to knowing God. Natural reason, that is to say, reason without the added benefit of special revelation.

The term special revelation refers, of course, to Scripture, the coming of Christ, and so forth. Natural reason is limited in regard to the knowledge of God. Limited in varying degrees, because there is a gradation of intellectual abilities among humans.

Part of the hierarchy of being. Hierarchy by degrees. We're rational beings, but some people more than others.

And so a gradation of intellects, which bespeaks our finiteness, our limitations. So there is a potential for knowing about God by natural means. A potential, but with limitations.

And one of the limitations is that much of our knowledge of God is by way of analogy. And you remember how Aristotle distinguished between univocal and analogical predication. Speaking by way of analogy.

Aquinas makes those distinctions as well in the piece on principles of nature, which you're reading. But we tend to think of God by analogy to other persons. So that we predicate goodness of God by analogy to the goodness of created things.

This is part of the limitation of natural reason. He recognizes that the limitations of human reason are intensified because of our sinfulness. But he does make a distinction between the image of God and the likeness to God in which Adam was created.

The image of God is seen in human reason. In that we are rational beings. A lesser degree of rationality than God's, markedly so.

But it's in that that we image God. The likeness to God is a moral likeness. A moral likeness which was lost when Adam fell.

A moral likeness. And while, therefore, the fall, the loss of that moral likeness, leaves our rationality operative. And the fall does not directly damage human rationality.

Yet it does affect it indirectly. Inasmuch as a person is prejudiced against certain conclusions. Inasmuch as a person comes at things with biases.

Insomuch as the mind is distracted by other loves. And so on and so forth. All sorts of ways in which the moral condition of a human soul is likely to affect the knowledge of God indirectly.

There is an interplay there. So then, natural reason has its limits both in finiteness and in fallenness. Regarding the knowledge of God.

Yeah. Ben, yeah, Barry. Francis Schaeffer comments about Aquinas on saying that, and he calls Aquinas for saying that rationality, or rational, is not fallen.

Yeah, and technically, he's right in that because of this distinction between the image and the likeness, it's the likeness that is lost in the fall, not the image. But that doesn't mean that the image, I take it back, that the operation of the image, the acceptance of conclusions, and your involvement in the rational activities, not to say that those things are unaffected. They are affected.

While Schaeffer was right in principle, I think he overgeneralized and drew the wrong conclusions. The underlying question, what is the image of God in us, is the crucial question. You see, and that's where it rests.

Schaeffer did not maintain that rationality is destroyed. In fact, I suspect that he, of all recent apologists, has probably stressed the rational more than many. So, in terms of how he proceeded, I suspect that the degree of confidence he had in reason was not unlike that of Thomas Aquinas.

Curiously. Incidentally, the reason that Thomas gets bad press from some Protestants on this matter of faith and reason is not so much due to Thomas as to later Thomists in the later scholasticism of the post-Reformation period. Enlightenment scholasticism, perhaps.

In fact, Bob Roberts' brother-in-law, Arvind Voss, who teaches at University of Western Kentucky, has written a book on Aquinas and Calvin, I think it's called, dealing precisely with their views of faith and reason, reason and revelation, in which he argues that Aquinas' view of reason, faith and reason, is essentially the same as that of John Calvin. And it's a book published by Eerdmans, you can check it out for yourself sometime, if you like. Okay, natural reason then is limited.

Revelation declares what reason can demonstrate. Yes, plainly. Aquinas thinks that reason can demonstrate the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

But these are things which revelation also declares. Why? Well, the reasons are obvious. By virtue of the degrees of rationality, some people are not equipped for such rational work.

It may be possible to demonstrate it, but because of their ability, because of time, they may not be able to do it. Secondly, those who could might find that it takes excessive time and effort, because of the profundity of the topic, or, as he says, because of the distractions of youth. And I suspect if you examine your own lives, you'll know what he means.

Because of the distractions of youth. Third, because of the weakness of will, the weakness of will, that's the effect of sin on the moral likeness, because of the weakness of will affecting the operation of the intellect. The way in which weakness of will affects the operation of the intellect.

You can't stick with it, or you're not willing to follow it to the conclusion. As the case may be. Okay, number three, reason also declares, now let's see, Revelation, I beg your pardon, Revelation also declares what reason cannot by itself attain, like the doctrine of the Trinity, or of the Incarnation.

So you get the popular picture of Thomas saying to us that reason can come so far, and then Revelation meets it there. That's the popular picture. The more actual one, I think, is Revelation meets us there, and reason can follow so far.

That is to say, if Revelation, number two, declares what reason can itself demonstrate, Revelation goes a lot further than in the popular picture. Number four, faith assents to these truths of faith, as they're called, truths of Revelation, faith assents to those truths of Revelation, which may then be confirmed by reasoning. That is to say, by evidence and argument, that makes plain that such beliefs are at least reasonable, even though you may not be able to demonstrate conclusively that they are reasonable.

And that shows the reasonableness of certain truths of faith, that is to say, there's no logical objection to them, nothing self-contradictory, and so forth, that is the work of what nowadays we call philosophical theology. And so if, in the Saturday morning session, you stuck it out to the final paper, you noticed Thomas, Duns Scotus, and Ockham were presented as examining arguments for the resurrection of the body. Thomas maintains that reason can provide rational confirmation, not necessarily proof, but show that it's reasonable, granted the metaphysical framework, which is something that Duns Scotus and William of Ockham were not willing to say.

They felt it was a truth of Revelation which could not be demonstrated by reason. So, illustrating number four. Number five, reason gains an imperfect understanding of those truths of faith.

Yes, after all, people do theology. Imperfect understanding. And then number six, faith and reason are not mutually opposed, because truth is ultimately one.

And that last, obviously, is his rebuttal of the claim to two-fold truth. So, that was his way of responding then to what Averroes had been doing. I'm sorry we ran over time.