

History of Philosophy

24 Thomas Aquinas' Christian Aristotelianism

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines **Thomas Aquinas's integration of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology**. Aquinas sought to counter the "two-fold truth" theory of the Muslim philosopher Averroes by arguing that **faith and reason are ultimately compatible**. While he adopted Aristotle's metaphysical framework, Aquinas modified it to include the **Augustinian doctrine of divine archetypes** and the concept of **creation out of nothing**. The text further explores how Aquinas viewed **natural reason as a limited but capable tool** that can demonstrate certain divine truths, such as God's existence, while supplemental **revelation** provides knowledge beyond human intellect. Ultimately, Aquinas maintains that because all truth originates from God, **philosophical inquiry and religious belief cannot truly contradict** one another.

Briefing Document:

Thomas Aquinas and the Synthesis of Christian Aristotelianism

This briefing document provides a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical contributions of Thomas Aquinas, focusing on his integration of Aristotelian metaphysics with Christian theology. It examines the historical challenges posed by medieval interpretations of Aristotle, Aquinas's unique modifications to metaphysical concepts, and his definitive stance on the relationship between faith and reason.

Executive Summary

The philosophical work of Thomas Aquinas represents a strategic effort to adapt Aristotelian thought to serve the requirements of Christian theology. In response to the "two-fold truth" theory of Averroes—which suggested that religious faith and philosophical reason could exist in tension—Aquinas argued for the ultimate unity of truth. His primary metaphysical innovation was the identification of God not merely as a source of order, but as the very "essence of existence" and the source of all being. By synthesizing Augustinian archetypal ideas with Aristotelian imminent forms, Aquinas developed a "metaphysic of

creation" that accounts for individual natures, the potentiality of matter, and the role of God as the efficient, formal, and final cause of the universe. Furthermore, Aquinas maintained that while human reason is limited by finiteness and the indirect effects of the Fall, it remains a valid tool for demonstrating certain theological truths, provided it operates within a framework where revelation and reason are seen as complementary rather than contradictory.

The Historical and Theological Context

The emergence of Aquinas's thought was a direct response to the intellectual crisis triggered by the Muslim philosopher Averroes. Averroes held that Aristotle provided the final word in philosophy, yet his interpretations created significant friction with both Muslim and Christian doctrines, particularly regarding:

- **Absolute creation:** The concept of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).
- **Individual immortality:** The status of the soul after death.

Averroes attempted to resolve these tensions through a **theory of two-fold truth**, suggesting that religious beliefs are formulated in popular language while philosophy is formulated theoretically, allowing them to remain in tension. While other thinkers like Bonaventure responded by rejecting Aristotle in favor of Platonism, Aquinas sought to modify Aristotelian metaphysics to make it compatible with the Christian tradition, specifically the Augustinian Logos doctrine.

Metaphysical Innovations: Existence and Creation

Aquinas's primary departure from Greek philosophy lies in his definition of God and the nature of being.

God as the Essence of Existence

For the Greeks, the concept of God was often limited to being the source of order, beauty, or intelligibility. Aquinas expanded this, asserting that:

- God is not merely a "form of all forms" or a universal.
- **God's essence is to exist.** He is the "very essence of existence" and the source of all being.
- The doctrine of creation serves as the "prime theological input into metaphysics."

Matter and Form

Aquinas reconciled the Augustinian view of forms as archetypes in the mind of God with the Aristotelian view of forms imminent in particular substances.

- **Logos Doctrine:** Forms exist as archetypal ideas or exemplars in the divine mind.
- **Substantial Forms:** These are forms that, when combined with matter, constitute a particular substance. They give created things their specific natures.
- **Hylomorphic Composites:** Aquinas viewed material existence as a combination of form and matter brought into being by God's act of existence.
- **View of Matter:** Unlike the negative Greek view of matter as a "lack," Aquinas viewed matter positively as having "promise" or "potential for" existence.

The Mechanics of Generation

In his work *The Principles of Nature*, Aquinas identifies three elements necessary for things to be generated (to come into being):

1. **Matter:** Defined as "potential being" or *materia prima* (pure potentiality).
2. **Form:** The means through which matter becomes something substantive.
3. **Privation:** The lack of substantive existence that precedes the act of becoming.

Aquinas notes that none of these three exist independently. Creation is "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) because God gives the "act of existence" to a combination of form and matter that otherwise exists only as potentiality.

Cause Role in Aquinas's Metaphysic

Efficient Cause God (The primary actor of creation).

Formal Cause The Divine Logos (The divine reason/archetypes).

Final Cause God (The imitation and glorification of God as the end/telos).

Material Cause None (Creation is out of nothing).

The Relationship Between Faith and Reason

Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* provides a structured defense of the compatibility of natural reason and divine revelation.

The Limits of Natural Reason

Aquinas argues that natural reason (reason without special revelation) is limited by two primary factors:

1. **Finiteness:** There is a "gradation of intellectual abilities" among humans; not all are equipped for complex demonstration.
2. **Fallenness:** While the "image of God" (human rationality) was not directly destroyed by the Fall, the "likeness to God" (moral likeness) was lost. This affects reason indirectly through:
 - Prejudice and bias against certain conclusions.
 - Distraction by "other loves."
 - Weakness of will that prevents one from following arguments to their conclusions.

The Synergy of Revelation and Demonstration

Aquinas identifies a significant overlap between what can be known through reason and what is revealed in Scripture:

- **Reasonable Demonstration:** Reason can demonstrate the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.
- **The Utility of Revelation:** Even though these truths are discoverable by reason, revelation declares them so that those who lack the time, the intellectual ability, or the moral persistence can still know them.
- **Truths of Faith:** Certain doctrines, such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, cannot be attained by reason alone. However, once revealed, reason can provide "rational confirmation" to show these beliefs are not self-contradictory.

Rebuttal of Two-Fold Truth

Aquinas firmly rejects the Averroist position of two-fold truth. He maintains that:

- **Truth is ultimately one.**
- Faith and reason cannot be mutually opposed because both proceed from the same source of truth.
- Reason can gain an "imperfect understanding" of the truths of faith, which is the primary work of theology.

Key Terminology

- **Materia Prima (Prime Matter):** Pure potentiality; unformed matter that does not exist by itself but has the potential for any kind of substantive existence.
- **Materia Signata (Designated Matter):** Matter that has already been designated or shaped by a specific form.
- **Substantial Form:** A form imminent in a particular substance which, with matter, constitutes that substance.
- **Univocal vs. Analogical Predication:** Distinguishing between using words in the exact same sense versus using them by way of analogy (e.g., predicating "goodness" to God based on the goodness of created things).
- **The Image of God:** Located in human rationality; remained operative though affected by the Fall.
- **The Likeness to God:** The moral likeness to the Creator, which Aquinas believes was lost in the Fall.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Thomas Aquinas and Christian Aristotelianism

This study guide examines the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology developed by Thomas Aquinas. It explores the historical context of medieval philosophy, the modification of Greek metaphysics to suit theistic requirements, and the intricate relationship between faith and reason.

I. Historical Context and Philosophical Synthesis

Thomas Aquinas operated in a medieval setting where the works of Aristotle had been reintroduced to the West, largely through the interpretations of the Muslim philosopher Averroes. This created a significant intellectual crisis for Christian thinkers due to several points of tension:

- **The Averroist Challenge:** Averroes viewed Aristotle as the final philosophical authority. His interpretations led to conclusions problematic for monotheistic theology, such as the denial of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and individual immortality.

- **The Two-Fold Truth Theory:** To resolve tensions between philosophy and faith, a theory of "two-fold truth" emerged. This suggested that religious truths are formulated for the masses in popular language, while philosophical truths are more precise, even if the two appear to contradict one another.
- **Competing Responses:**
 - **Bonaventure:** Representing the Augustinian tradition, he rejected Aristotle entirely in favor of Platonism to avoid theological errors.
 - **Thomas Aquinas:** He argued that Aristotle's metaphysics possessed deep potential for compatibility with Christianity if appropriately modified.

II. The Metaphysics of Creation

Aquinas transformed Aristotelian metaphysics by integrating the Augustinian "Logos doctrine," which posits that forms (archetypes) exist within the mind of God.

Key Metaphysical Concepts

Concept	Definition and Application in Thomism
God as Existence	Unlike the Greeks, who saw God as a source of order or beauty, Aquinas defines God's essence as existence itself (<i>ipsum esse subsistens</i>). God is the source of all being.
Materia Prima	"Prime matter" refers to pure potentiality. It does not exist independently but represents the material potential for any kind of substance God might create.
Materia Signata	"Designated matter" is matter that has been unified with a specific form to create a particular substance.
Substantial Forms	Immanent forms that, when combined with matter, constitute a particular substance. These correspond to the archetypal ideas in the mind of God.
Creation Ex Nihilo	Aquinas argues that creation is not merely the giving of form to pre-existing matter, but the act of God giving existence to a combination of form and matter that otherwise has only the potential to exist.

The Three Requirements for Generation

Aquinas identifies three elements necessary for things to "become" or be generated:

1. **Matter:** The potential being.

2. **Form:** That through which matter becomes a specific substance.
3. **Privation:** The lack of substantive existence that precedes the act of becoming.

The Four Causes in Creation

Aquinas adapts Aristotle's "Four Causes" to explain the act of creation:

- **Efficient Cause:** God (the agent who brings the world into being).
- **Formal Cause:** The Divine Logos or Reason (the pattern/archetype).
- **Final Cause:** God (the ultimate end or *telos* is the imitation and glorification of God).
- **Material Cause:** None (creation is "out of nothing").

III. Reason and Revelation

Aquinas addresses the relationship between faith and reason primarily in his *Summa Theologica*. He rejects the "two-fold truth" theory, asserting that because all truth is ultimately one, faith and reason cannot be mutually opposed.

The Limits of Natural Reason

Natural reason—reason utilized without the aid of special revelation (Scripture)—is limited by two factors:

1. **Finiteness:** Humans are rational, but their intellects are finite and exist in a hierarchy of varying abilities.
2. **Fallenness:** While the "Image of God" (human rationality) remains operative after the Fall, the "Likeness to God" (moral likeness) was lost. This affects reason indirectly through biases, prejudices, and "distractions of youth."

The Interaction of Faith and Reason

- **Demonstrability:** Reason can demonstrate some truths that revelation also declares, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.
- **Necessity of Revelation:** Revelation is necessary even for things reason *could* prove because many people lack the time, the intellectual equipment, or the strength of will to reach these conclusions through philosophy alone.
- **Surpassing Reason:** Some truths, such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, cannot be attained by reason alone and must be accepted by faith via revelation.

- **Rational Confirmation:** Once a truth is accepted by faith, reason can provide "imperfect understanding" or rational confirmation, showing that the belief is not self-contradictory or logically impossible.

IV. Quiz: Short Answer

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences based on the source context.

1. What was the primary concern medieval Christian thinkers had regarding Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle?
2. How does Aquinas' view of God's essence differ from the traditional Greek concept of deity?
3. Explain the difference between *materia prima* and *materia signata*.
4. According to the text, why is "privation" necessary for the process of generation?
5. Why does Aquinas conclude that there is no "material cause" in the act of creation?
6. Describe the literary structure of an article within Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.
7. How does the Fall of Man affect human reason according to Aquinas?
8. Why did Aquinas believe that truths detectable by reason (like the existence of God) should still be included in Divine Revelation?
9. What is the role of "philosophical theology" in relation to the truths of faith?
10. How does Aquinas respond to the "two-fold truth" theory proposed by some medieval thinkers?

V. Answer Key

1. Averroes suggested that Aristotle's philosophy was the ultimate truth, which led to conclusions that contradicted Christian and Muslim theology, such as the denial of individual immortality and absolute creation out of nothing. This created a tension that some resolved with the "two-fold truth" theory, which Aquinas sought to reconcile.
2. While the Greeks viewed God primarily as the source of order, beauty, or intelligibility, Aquinas argued that God is the source of existence itself. He posited that God's very essence is to exist, making Him the source of all being.

3. *Materia prima* (prime matter) is pure potentiality and does not exist on its own; it is the "stuff" that has the potential to become anything. *Materia signata* (designated matter) is matter that has already been combined with a form to create a specific, individual substance.
4. Privation is the "lack of substantive existence" that must exist before something can become. It represents the state of "not-yet-being" that precedes the act of generation or creation.
5. In Aristotelian terms, a material cause is the pre-existing matter from which something is made. Because Aquinas adheres to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), there is no pre-existing matter, and therefore no material cause for the universe.
6. The *Summa Theologica* is structured as a manual for debate, beginning with a specific question and a list of objections. It then offers a counter-statement ("on the contrary"), develops a positive position ("I answer that"), and concludes with specific replies to each of the initial objections.
7. Aquinas distinguishes between the "image of God" (rationality) and the "likeness to God" (moral character). While the Fall destroyed the moral likeness, human rationality remains intact but is hindered indirectly by biases, a weakened will, and a mind distracted by "other loves."
8. Aquinas argues that while reason *could* prove these truths, revelation ensures they are known by everyone. This accounts for people who lack the intellectual capacity, the time for deep study, or the moral persistence required to reach these truths through logic alone.
9. Philosophical theology uses reason to gain an "imperfect understanding" of truths accepted by faith, such as the Trinity. Its goal is to provide rational confirmation and show that these doctrines are reasonable and contain no logical contradictions.
10. Aquinas rejected the "two-fold truth" theory, asserting that truth is ultimately one and unified. He maintained that natural reason and divine revelation cannot truly contradict each other because they both originate from the same source of truth.

VI. Essay Questions

Instructions: Use these prompts to develop deeper arguments regarding the synthesis of Aristotelianism and Christianity.

1. **The Synthesis of Traditions:** Compare and contrast the ways Thomas Aquinas utilized Aristotelian "immanent forms" and Augustinian "archetypal ideas" to create his metaphysical framework.
2. **The Concept of Potentiality:** Analyze the role of *materia prima* in Aquinas' theory of creation. How does his definition of matter as "promise" or "potential" represent a shift from the typical Greek perspective?
3. **The Hierarchy of Being:** Discuss how Aquinas' views on the "gradation of intellects" and the "hierarchy of the whole cosmos" inform his understanding of the purpose (telos) of individual created things.
4. **The Anatomy of the Summa:** Evaluate the "manual for debate" format used in the *Summa Theologica*. How does this pedagogical style reflect the intellectual culture of the medieval university?
5. **Reason and the Will:** Explore the relationship Aquinas establishes between the human will and the human intellect. How does a "weakness of will" serve as a barrier to the successful exercise of natural reason in seeking God?

VII. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Act of Existence:** The specific act of the Creator that gives actuality to a combination of form and matter.
- **Averroism:** The philosophical school following the interpretations of Averroes, often associated with the "two-fold truth" theory and views of Aristotle that conflicted with Christian doctrine.
- **Efficient Cause:** The agent or force that brings something into effect; in creation, this is God.
- **Final Cause (Telos):** The ultimate purpose or end toward which a thing moves; for Aquinas, all creation's final cause is to imitate and glorify God.
- **Formal Cause:** The pattern, structure, or definition of a thing; in creation, these are the divine archetypes/Logos.
- **Hylomorphic Composite:** A being composed of both matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*).
- **Image of God:** For Aquinas, this refers specifically to human rationality, which distinguishes humans from other created beings.

- **Likeness to God:** The moral character and orientation toward God that Aquinas believes was lost during the Fall.
- **Logos Doctrine:** The theological concept that the forms or ideas of all possible things exist eternally within the divine reason or mind of God.
- **Natural Reason:** The human capacity for logic and discovery independent of supernatural aid or special revelation.
- **Privation:** The absence or lack of a quality or existence that should naturally be present.
- **Special Revelation:** Knowledge of God obtained through supernatural means, specifically Scripture and the Incarnation of Christ.
- **Substantial Form:** The essence or nature of a particular thing that makes it what it is when combined with matter.
- **Two-Fold Truth:** The theory that something can be true in philosophy while its opposite is true in theology.