History of Philosophy
25 Aquinas on God
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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes explains how **Thomas Aquinas** integrated **Aristotelian philosophy** with **Christian theology** to define the nature and existence of God. Aquinas famously rejected **a priori** arguments, such as those from Anselm and Augustine, favoring an **a posteriori** approach that relies on sensory experience and cause-effect reasoning. His **Five Ways** utilize Aristotelian concepts like **potentiality and actuality** to conclude that God is the necessary, intelligent first cause of the universe. Holmes clarifies that for Aquinas, our knowledge of God's essence is limited and must be understood through **analogy** rather than direct abstraction. The text further explores the **transcendental attributes** of being—truth, goodness, and beauty—viewing God as the ultimate source of all **ontological and propositional truth**. Finally, the lecture addresses the **problem of evil**, noting that Aquinas attributed moral failings to the free will of defective agents while viewing natural decay as part of a greater universal order.

Briefing Document:

Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas's Philosophical Theology: Existence, Nature, and Attributes of God

Executive Summary

The philosophical project of Thomas Aquinas, as detailed in the *Summa Theologica*, represents a systematic effort to modify Aristotelian metaphysics to satisfy the requirements of Christian theology. Central to this project is the rejection of the Averroist "two-fold truth" notion in favor of a complementary relationship between reason and revelation.

Aquinas dismisses *a priori* arguments for God's existence—such as those proposed by Anselm and Augustine—contending that while God's existence is self-evident "in itself," it is not self-evident "to us." Instead, he adopts an *a posteriori* approach, arguing from empirical effects to a first cause. His "Five Ways" utilize Aristotelian premises—potentiality, actuality, and efficient causality—but arrive at a distinctly theistic conclusion: a God who is an all-knowing creator and a "meta-cause" that sustains the universe's existence continuously.

Because God is *sui generis* (a genus of one), humans cannot know his essence through the Aristotelian method of abstraction. Knowledge of God is instead achieved through analogical predication. Finally, Aquinas defines being through "transcendental attributes"—specifically Truth and Goodness—asserting that God is the ontological standard for both. Evil is framed not as a competing force, but as a "privation of good" or a necessary component of the "greater good" within the best possible order of the universe.

The Methodology of Existence: Rejection of the A Priori

Aquinas establishes his position by addressing whether the existence of God is self-evident. This inquiry serves as a direct critique of the Platonic tradition (including Anselm and Augustine) which argued that the knowledge of God is innate or logically necessary.

Rejection of Innate Ideas and Necessary Logic

Aquinas rejects three primary *a priori* claims:

- **Innate Awareness:** He disputes John of Damascus's claim that the knowledge of God is naturally implanted, arguing that humans have only a vague awareness of a supreme being rather than a clear, innate idea.

- **The Ontological Argument:** He rejects Anselm's view that the mere understanding of the term "God" necessitates existence.

- **The Argument from Truth:** He moves away from Augustine's argument that the existence of any truth implies the existence of "Capital-T" Truth (the Divine Logos).

Self-Evidence: "In Itself" vs. "To Us"

Aquinas distinguishes between two types of self-evidence:

1. **Self-evident in itself:** Propositions where the predicate is included in the subject. Because God is his own existence, "God exists" is self-evident in itself.

2. **Self-evident to us:** This requires a prior knowledge of the subject's essence. Because humans do not know God's essence, his existence is not self-evident to human reason and must be demonstrated through his effects.

The Five Proofs (Quinque Viae)

Aquinas's arguments are *a posteriori*, drawing premises from human experience. While the premises are Aristotelian, the conclusions are transformed into a theistic framework.

Proof	Aristotelian Premise	Conclusion
First Way: Motion	All change is the reduction of potentiality to actuality.	There must be a "First Mover" moved by no other.
Second Way: Efficient Cause	There is an order of efficient causes in the sensible world.	There must be a first efficient cause (God).
Third Way: Possibility & Necessity	Things in nature are contingent (possible to be or not be).	There must be a necessary being that sustains all others.
Fourth Way: Gradation	Things are found to be more or less good, true, or noble.	There must be a maximum which is the cause of all perfections.
Fifth Way: Governance	Natural bodies act for an end (Final Causes).	An intelligent being exists who directs all natural things.

The "Meta-Cause" Distinction

Aquinas's proofs do not merely argue for a "horizontal" first mover at the beginning of a chronological series (like a domino effect). Instead, they argue for a "vertical" or "meta-cause." God is the essence of existence who continually imparts being to

contingent things. He is not merely the one who "started the ball rolling," but the one who sustains the existence of the entire causal order at every moment.

The Nature and Knowledge of God

Knowing the nature (essence) of God presents a unique philosophical challenge. In Aristotelian science, knowledge is usually gained by "abstraction"—observing various members of a species to identify a universal form.

The Problem of Abstraction

Because God is *sui generis*, there are no other members of his "species" from which to abstract an essence. Consequently, humans cannot have perfect knowledge of God's essence through experience.

Knowledge via Analogy

To speak of God, Aquinas utilizes "analogical predication," falling between univocal (same sense) and equivocal (different sense) language. He identifies two forms:

- **Analogy of Degrees:** Extrapolating qualities like goodness to their infinite, greatest conceivable degree.
- **Analogy of Proper Proportionality:** Recognizing that being, goodness, and truth exist in God in proportion to his necessary existence, just as they exist in humans in proportion to their contingent existence.

Transcendental Attributes: Truth and Goodness

Aquinas identifies certain "transcendental attributes" that apply to all being. These attributes—Goodness, Truth, and Beauty—transcend species and genera.

The Twofold Nature of Truth

Aquinas distinguishes between two types of truth:

1. **Epistemic Truth:** A property of propositions; the "equation of thought and thing."
2. **Ontological Truth:** The "truth of a being," or being "true to type."

He argues that truth resides first in the Divine Intellect (the archetypes/Logos) and then in created things. Therefore, God is the source and standard of all truth; all truth is "God's truth" because it corresponds to the divine mind.

Goodness and the Problem of Evil

Aquinas maintains that "all being is good" to some degree. He addresses the problem of evil by categorizing it as a "privation of good" rather than a substance.

- **Moral Evil:** Attributed to the "defect of the agent" (Free Will argument). God allows this to exist to bring good out of it.

- **Natural Evil:** Corruption (e.g., an apple rotting) is seen as part of the "good of the order of the universe." The rotting of one thing provides the seeds for the next, serving the greater good of the whole.

- **The Best of Possible Worlds:** Aquinas asserts that while God could have made different worlds with different orders, this specific world is the "best possible" for the things that currently exist within it. God can make a person "better" (more virtuous), but he cannot make a man "better" than the essence of being a man.

Study Guide:

Aquinas on God: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide examines the philosophical synthesis of Thomas Aquinas as he navigates the relationship between Aristotelian metaphysics and Christian theology. It focuses specifically on his arguments for the existence of God, the nature of divine knowledge, and the problem of evil.

Part I: Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. **What was Thomas Aquinas's primary motivation for modifying Aristotle's position?** Aquinas sought to respond to the Averroist interpretation of Aristotle, which was incompatible with Muslim and Christian theology. He modified Aristotelian metaphysics to satisfy the needs of Christian theology and to demonstrate the mutually complementary nature of reason and revelation.

2. **Why does Aquinas reject a priori arguments for the existence of God, such as Anselm's ontological argument?** Aquinas rejects a priori arguments because he adheres to an Aristotelian, empirical tradition rather than a Platonic, rationalist one. He believes that human knowledge begins with experience (a posteriori) rather than innate ideas or logical necessities independent of empirical evidence.

3. **Explain the distinction Aquinas makes between something being "self-evident in itself" and "self-evident to us."** Aquinas argues that the proposition "God exists" is self-evident in itself because God's essence is his existence. However, because humans do not naturally possess a clear, innate idea of God's essence, the existence of God is not self-evident to us and must be demonstrated through his effects.

4. **How do Aquinas's "Five Ways" utilize Aristotelian premises to reach non-Aristotelian conclusions?** Aquinas uses Aristotelian concepts like potentiality, efficient cause, and final cause as premises for his proofs. However, while Aristotle's God is a distant "unmoved mover" acting only as a final cause, Aquinas's conclusions point to a theistic God who is an active efficient cause, an all-knowing creator, and the source of all goodness.

5. **In the first proof regarding motion, what is the difference between a "horizontal" and a "vertical" movement?** A horizontal movement refers to a "domino effect" where God is simply the first cause in a chronological series. Aquinas instead argues for a vertical or "meta-cause," where God is the necessary being who continually maintains and sustains the existence and motion of the entire causal order at every moment.

6. **According to Etienne Gilson's interpretation of Aquinas, what is the significance of the divine name "I am that I am"?** Gilson argues that this name indicates that God is the very "essence of existence" rather than just an

essence that happens to exist. It signifies that God is a necessary being who does not just start existence but continually imparts it to all contingent things.

7. **Why can human knowledge of God not be achieved through the process of "abstraction"?** Abstraction works in science and nature by observing various members of a species or genus and extracting a universal principle. Because God is *sui generis* (the only member of his genus), there is no class of gods from which to abstract an essence, making it necessary to know Him through analogy instead.

8. **Distinguish between univocal, equivocal, and analogical predication.** Univocal predication uses a word in the exact same sense for different things, while equivocal predication uses a word in entirely different senses. Analogical predication, which Aquinas applies to God, uses a word in a similar sense, allowing us to describe God through degrees of perfection found in the hierarchy of being.

9. **What is the difference between "epistemic" truth and "ontological" truth?** Epistemic truth is a property of propositions or thoughts that correspond to an extra-mental state of affairs (the equation of thought and thing). Ontological truth refers to the "truth of a being," meaning a thing is "true" insofar as it conforms to the archetype or essence intended by God.

10. **How does Aquinas explain the existence of "natural evil," such as a rotting apple?** Aquinas views natural evil as a corruption that is necessary for the "good of the order of the universe." For example, an apple must rot to release its seeds for new trees, suggesting that God allows specific defects to occur for the sake of a greater, interwoven good within the creation.

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Modification motivation:** To reconcile Aristotle with Christian theology against Averroist views; to show reason and revelation are complementary.

2. **A priori rejection:** Based on his Aristotelian empiricism; he believes knowledge must be dependent on experience (a posteriori).

3. **Self-evident distinction:** "In itself" refers to God's nature where essence and existence are one; "To us" refers to human limitation in knowing that essence without proof.

4. **Aristotelian/Theistic synthesis:** He uses premises like potentiality/actuality but concludes with a knowing, efficient cause (a theistic God) rather than Aristotle's detached final cause.

5. **Horizontal vs. Vertical:** Horizontal is a chronological start (deism); vertical is a meta-cause sustaining the whole order simultaneously.

6. **I am that I am:** Signifies God is necessary existence itself; He is the sustainer of all contingent beings.

7. **Abstraction failure:** Abstraction requires a species/genus; God is unique and has no species, so analogy must be used instead.

8. **Predication types:** Univocal (same sense), Equivocal (different sense), Analogical (similar sense/proportional).

9. **Truth types:** Epistemic is propositional/intellectual; Ontological is being true to the divine archetype/essence.

10. **Natural evil:** It is a privation allowed for the "greater good" or the "good of the order of the universe" (e.g., seeds from rot).

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Synthesis of Faith and Reason:** Discuss how Aquinas's rejection of the "two-fold truth" notion of the Averroists shaped his metaphysical approach. How does he balance the use of Aristotelian "rational undertakings" with the requirements of Judeo-Christian revelation?

2. **The System-Dependency of the Five Ways:** Dr. Holmes suggests that Aquinas's proofs are "system-dependent." Analyze how the validity of the Five Ways relies on an acceptance of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics (such as the reduction of potentiality to actuality).

3. **The Role of Analogy in Divine Language:** Explore the limitations of human language when describing God according to Aquinas. Why must we use

analogical predication rather than univocal or equivocal terms, and how do "transcendental attributes" make this possible?

4. **Truth as Ontological and Epistemic:** Compare and contrast the two definitions of truth provided in the text. How does Aquinas integrate Augustine's "Logos" concept—where archetypes exist in the mind of God—with the Aristotelian definition of truth as the "equation of thought and thing"?

5. **Theodicy and the Greater Good:** Evaluate Aquinas's dual approach to the problem of evil. Contrast his use of the "free will argument" for moral evil with the "greater good" or "natural corruption" argument for natural evil.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
A Posteriori	Knowledge or arguments derived from or dependent upon empirical evidence and experience.
A Priori	Knowledge or arguments that are independent of experience, often based on innate ideas or logical necessity.
Actuality	The state of being fully realized or complete; in Aristotelian thought, the end goal of motion.
Analogy of Degrees	A method of describing God by extrapolating perfections (goodness, truth) to the highest conceivable degree.
Efficient Cause	The agent or force that brings something into being or initiates change; the "hand that moves the staff."
Final Cause	The end, purpose, or goal toward which a natural process or being moves.
Ontological Truth	The degree to which a created being conforms to its essential nature or the archetype in the mind of God.
Potentiality	The inherent capacity of a thing to change or be moved toward a state of actuality.

Privation	The absence or lack of a good that should be present by nature; Aquinas defines evil as a privation of good.
Sui Generis	Latin for "of its own kind"; used to describe God as being the only member of His own genus.
Transcendental Attributes	Properties like goodness, truth, and beauty that apply to all beings regardless of their specific category.
Two-Fold Truth	The Averroist theory that something could be true in philosophy but false in theology; a view Aquinas repudiated.