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The Legacy of Thomas Aquinas

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Preliminary Comments

My interest in philosophy grew out of an interest in Christian apologetics which itself grew out of a crisis of faith as a young Christian at university. As a student in the 1970s, it was the apologetics of several luminaries that helped me reaffirm my commitment in the integrity and infallibility of the Scriptures.¹ Besides the obvious purpose of apologetics to tear down intellectual roadblocks keeping the unbeliever from considering the claims of Christ, I came to appreciate what apologetics could do for one who was already a Christian. These luminaries might remind one of the role that Apollos played in bolstering the faith of the Jewish Christians who were new in their relationship with Christ and who were being stumbled by the intellectual unbelieving Jews. Acts 18:24 and following recount:

{24} Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. ... {27} And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; {28} for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.²

With a growing interest in apologetics, I discovered in the 1980s in the U.S. that there were few options to formally study the subject. I was able to venture to Dallas Theological

¹ Among those are Norman L. Geisler (1932-2019, whom I mention later), R. C. Sproul (1939-2017), and Josh McDowell.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

Seminary and take what classes I could under the most renowned apologist of the day in the U.S., Norman L. Geisler. Sensing my interest in apologetics and my restlessness arising from the fact that there were only a few courses on the subject offered at the seminary, Professor Geisler gave me the best advice I could have received, to wit, to leave the seminary (which I had invariably already done) and return to university to study philosophy. He knew then what I came see later that, while not everything in Christian apologetics is philosophical, a lot of it is. Indeed, I discovered the value of philosophy not only for Christian apologetics proper, but also for theology more broadly considered.

Full Disclosure

This year of 2024 marks the 750th anniversary of the passing of Thomas Aquinas³ at the Cistercian Abbey in Fossanova, Italy; March 7, 1274. In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess my sins that I am a Thomist, which is to say that I subscribe to the essential elements of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. With this, I do not feign neutrality in this paper and hope that my passionate embrace of Aquinas's philosophy—with emphasis on his metaphysics—does not come across as dogmatism.

Both my Master's degree in Philosophy and my Ph.D. in Philosophy are from state—if you will, secular—universities in the U.S. None of my professors was particularly disposed toward Aquinas's thinking. I am reminded of one professor early on in my graduate studies. As I was finding myself inching closer to that slippery slope towards Aquinas's Classical Philosophical Realism, I queried him as to his opinions of the humble sage from Roccasecca. He replied that he really did not like Aquinas because Aquinas seemed to have an answer for everything! Disappointing it might be but perhaps not rare enough to find a philosopher who

³ I have sought disabused myself of calling him St. Thomas Aquinas in as much as all of God's people in the Lord Jesus are saints.

thinks having an answer is unseemly if not detrimental. The eminent twentieth-century Thomist and historian of philosophy Étienne Gilson lamented:

There are countries where no professor of any science could hold his job for a month if he started teaching that he does not know what is true about the very science he is supposed to teach, but where a man finds it hard to be appointed as a professor of philosophy if he professes to believe in the truth of the philosophy he teaches. The only dogmatic tenet still held as valid in such philosophical circles is that, if a philosopher feels reasonably sure of being right, then it is a sure thing that he is wrong.⁴

In my experience, while such an attitude about having the answers might be too common in contemporary—if I may use the word again—secular philosophy, certain Christian philosophers may very well celebrate the answers that sound philosophy might deliver and celebrate the answers given by God in His Word that such sound philosophy might corroborate.

But for my topic today, my being a Thomist might not matter. One could rehearse the legacy of the Devil while at the same time be a most pious Christian. Whether one holds affinity or antipathy, I hope to do justice in highlighting those elements of Aquinas's thinking and influence that has given rise to both sentiments as we direct our attention for the next few minutes to his legacy.

Disagreements

Having begun with my Thomistic *mea culpa*, perhaps I can assuage any concerns by adding that there places where I disagree with Aquinas. Overlooking those areas where we could charitably excuse his antiquated natural science,⁵ there remain nevertheless areas both theologically and philosophically where I conscientiously demur.

⁴ Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), viii.

⁵ As with perhaps most everyone else in the thirteenth century, Aquinas believe that light caused the air to become transparent and that, in human reproduction, the female was 100% passive as a "bed" into which the "seed" from the male was planted.

As a conservative Protestant—we call ourselves 'evangelicals' in the U.S.⁶—it might not be surprising—indeed it is to be expected— that I would have theological differences with Aquinas. First, Aquinas held that Christ's Sacrifice was not absolutely necessary for the forgiveness of sins but only suppositionally necessary. Something is absolutely necessary when it is necessary without qualification. To go from South Africa to the United States, necessarily one will have to move, i.e., that one will have to undergo locomotion. Something is suppositionally necessary when it is necessary given a prior condition. If one is going to fly from South Africa to the United States, then necessarily one will have to board an airplane. But it is not absolutely necessary that one board an airplane to go from South Africa to the United States. It is only suppositionally necessary. One could take a boat instead.

Aquinas maintained that Christ's sacrifice was not absolutely necessary. Characteristic of his scholastic writing style, he entertains objections to any given position he takes. By an appeal to Scripture, one objection to Aquinas's position here insists that Christ's sacrifice was absolutely necessary. Second Timothy 2:13 says "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself."⁷ The objector presses that Christ "would deny Himself were He to deny His justice,

⁶ According to some, Martin Luther used the term 'evangelical' to distinguish Protestants from Catholics. During the Reformation, 'evangelical' distinguished the followers of Luther from those of Calvin who were called 'Reformed.' To some extent, an evangelical in Europe is a mainline Protestant. In the U.S. the term could include any Protestant (Lutheran, Reformed, or otherwise) who is theologically conservative, sometimes to the extent of affirming the inerrancy of Scripture (as in the case of the Evangelical Theological Society, the largest academic society of conservative Protestants in the United States) and places a primacy on evangelism. See Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 583 and John H. Gerstner, "The Theological Boundaries of Evangelical Faith" in David P. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 21–36.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture citations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

since He is justice itself."⁸ Thus, the objection goes, God's justice requires sacrifice if sin is to be forgiven.

To this objection, Aquinas counters:

Even this justice depends on the Divine will, requiring satisfaction for sin from the human race. But if He had willed to free man from sin without any satisfaction, He would not have acted against justice. ... If He forgive[s] sin, which has the formality of fault in that it is committed against Himself, He wrongs no one: just as anyone else, overlooking a personal trespass, without satisfaction, acts mercifully and not unjustly.⁹

Thus, in Aquinas's view, as the one offended, God could have just dismissed or forgiven our sins. His justice did not require that there be any punishment. Sacrifice is, therefore, not absolutely necessary to forgive sin. But given that God decided that He would provide Christ as a sacrifice for sins, then necessarily Christ would have to be sacrificed. Thus, for Aquinas, Christ's sacrifice is only suppositionally necessary for the forgiveness of sin.

I know of no Protestant theologian who would agree with Aquinas here. Francis Turretin, perhaps the greatest influence on American Presbyterianism, engages in a lengthy treatment of the question. One of his arguments is labeled "By the glory of the divine attributes" where Turretin says:

Finally, our opinion concerning the necessity of a satisfaction does not derogate from any of the divine attributes. Not from God's absolute power because God cannot deny himself and his attributes; nor can he act in such a way as to give the appearance of delighting in sin by holding communion with the sinner. Not from his perfectly free will because he wills and can will nothing contrary to his own justice and holiness (which would be greatly injured should sin remain unpunished).¹⁰

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, Q46, art. 2, arg. 3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the *Summa Theologiae* are from *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, Q46, art. 2, ad. 3.

¹⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), II, 424.

While they differ on the precise nature of that satisfaction, Turretin echoes Anselm of Canterbury in his *Cur Deus Homo?*—it should be noted that Anselm wrote *Cur Deus Homo?* over 400 years before the Reformation—where he argued:

Let us go back, and see whether by mercy alone, no atonement being made to His honour, it may be fitting for God to forgive sins. ... To remit, is but this: not to punish sin; and since the just treatment of unatoned sin is to punish it: if it be not punished, it is unjustly forgiven. ... But it beseemeth not God to forgive anything in His realm illegally. ... Therefore it beseemeth not God thus to forgive unpunished sin.¹¹

I also cannot abide by Aquinas's commitment to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. In no uncertain terms, he argues:

The error of those who say that the vicar of Christ, the pontiff of the Roman church, does not have the primacy of the universal Church, is similar to the error of those who say that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son. For Christ himself, the Son of God, consecrates his Church and marks it for himself by the Holy Spirit as by his own character and seal. ... And in a similar manner the vicar of Christ, as a faithful minister, by this own primacy and directive care preserves the universal Church subject to Christ.¹²

Other such doctrines that we so readily recognize in contemporary Catholicism with which I (and I suspect many of not all of you) would take issue include the perpetual virginity of Mary¹³ and perhaps other Marian dogmas as well as salvation by faith and works.¹⁴

Since I began by affirming a solidarity with Aquinas's philosophy without mentioning theology, it perhaps might be interesting to note at least one philosophical point where I disagree

¹¹ Anselm, *The Ancient & Modern Library of Theological Literature: Cur Deus Homo?* (London: Griffith Farran Okeden & Welsh, 1889), 25.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum, Opera Omnia* iussu Leonis XIII (Roma) v. 40a, second part, c. 32, 3-13, as cited in Gregory Rocca, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Papal Authority," *Angelicum* 62, no. 3: 472-484 (472).

¹³ "Without any hesitation we must abhor the error of Helvidius, who dared to assert that Christ's Mother, after His Birth, was carnally known by Joseph, and bore other children." (Thomas Aquinas, *ST III*, Q28, art. 3).

¹⁴ [reference?]

with him. Early in my philosophical training, I did my Master's thesis¹⁵ analyzing the medieval Kalām Cosmological Argument¹⁶ as revived in the contemporary conversation by the Christian philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig.¹⁷ I found and still find myself quite enthusiastic about the argument as far as it goes¹⁸ despite the fact that my philosophical hero is quite dismissive of it.¹⁹

Thomas Aquinas: The Philosopher

Who is this Thomas Aquinas and why are so many—especially American, but also South African—Protestants becoming increasingly interested if not enthusiastic about him? Thomas Aquinas was a thirteenth century Dominican friar born at Roccasecca near Aquino in Italy.²⁰

¹⁵ Richard G. Howe, *An Analysis of William Lane Craig's Kalām Cosmological Argument*. Unpublished Master's these at the University of Mississippi, 1990.

¹⁶ This argument was championed in the Middle Ages in Arabic Philosophy most notably by Abu Yusuf Ya'qub b. Ishaq al-Kindi in his work *On First Philosophy* and by Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Ta'us Ahmad al-Tusi al-Shafi'i, generally known as al-Ghazali, in his work *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. See Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics: A Translation of Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi's Treatise 'On First Philosophy'*, with an Introduction and Commentary by Alfred L. Ivry (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1974) and Al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al-Falasifah [Incoherence of the Philosophers]*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1958).

¹⁷ William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: The Macmillian Press, LTD, 1979), republished (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

¹⁸ As of now, my only reservation about the argument is that, despite the fact that it demonstrates the existence of a cause of the coming-into-existence of the universe, it fails to deliver the God of Classical Theism, meaning that, unlike Aquinas's theistic arguments, it does not deliver the traditional Divine attributes such as simplicity, immutability, impassibility, omniscience, and others. I contend that, given his metaphysics, Aquinas's Cosmological Argument not only demonstrates God's existence but also all the superlative characteristics revealed in General Revelation and found in Natural Theology.

¹⁹ For

²⁰ For a detailed look at the life, times and work of Thomas Aquinas see: James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works with Corrigenda and Addenda* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983); Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols., vol. 1 *The Person and His Work*, and vol. 2 *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996). (All references are to vol.1 unless otherwise noted.); M.-D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964).

The date of his passing mentioned earlier (March 7, 1274) is perhaps the most certain date regarding his life. Historians differ on the date of his birth. The usual date given is 1224/1225, making him either forty-nine or fifty years old when he died.

He studied philosophy and theology at Paris under Albert the Great.²¹ He served twice on the faculty of the University of Paris as Regent Master in Theology and occupied various posts at Orvieto, Rome, and Viterbo in his order in the service of the Popes. His massive amounts of writings—eight million words as compared to Plato's extant half million and Aristotle's extant one million—were all completed within about twenty years and include theological syntheses, academic disputations, expositions of the Bible, commentaries on Aristotle, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius and Peter Lombard, polemical writings, expert opinions, letters, liturgical pieces and sermons, and more.

In recognizing his tremendous achievements, one would be remiss in failing to mention those whose influence can be seen in Aquinas's thinking; keeping in mind that an influence can be both positive and negative. A partial list would include: Aristotle (384-322 BC); Porphyry²² (234-305); Proclus²³ (410-485); Pseudo-Dionysius²⁴ (late 5th century to early 6th century); Augustine (354-430); Boethius (480-524); Al-Farabi (870-950); Avicenna (980-1037); Anselm (1033-1109); Averroes (1126-1198); Maimonides (1135-1204); Phillip the Chancellor (1160-1236); Alexander of Hales (1170 (80?)-1245); William of Auvergne (1190-1249); and Albert the

²¹ There is also some discussion about whether and to what extent Peter of Ireland influenced Aquinas during his training at (what was later known as) the University of Naples. See Michael Dune, "Peter of Ireland, the University of Naples and Thomas Aquinas' Early Education," available at <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/929/1/12. Dunne - Peter of Ireland.pdf>, accessed 07/21/24.

²² Perhaps via the hierarchy of values and his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*.

²³ Particularly through the later commentary on his thinking, *Liber de Causis*.

²⁴ Specifically, his *On the Divine Names*.

Great (1206-1280). In this list, two stand out as most prominent in their influence. As Professor Geisler used to say, "Aquinas gets his philosophy from Aristotle and his theology from Augustine."

Philosophically, Aquinas, indeed, stands clearly within the tradition of Aristotle. Having said this—perhaps it could go without saying—Aquinas's thinking differs significantly from Aristotle's in several important philosophical and theological points. I shall have more to say about these points in due course.

Thomist scholar Joseph Owens sums it up²⁵ by saying that both Aristotle and Aquinas reason in terms of formal and material logic; actuality and potentiality²⁶; material, formal, efficient, and final causes; and the division of the science into the theoretical, the practical, and the productive.²⁷ Both Aristotle and Aquinas distinguish the material from the immaterial; sensation from intellection; the temporal from the eternal; and the body from the soul. Both Aristotle and Aquinas regard intellectual contemplation as the supreme goal of human striving; look upon free choice [i.e., in the philosophical sense of the expression] as the source of moral

²⁵ Joseph Owens, "Aristotle and Aquinas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 38-59.

²⁶ Aristotle: "'Potency' then means the source, in general, of change or movement in another thing than the thing moved or in the same thing qua other ..." [*Metaphysics*, D (V), 12, 1019^a15 - 1019^a20, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 765]. "Actuality, then, is the existence of a thing not in the way which we express by 'potentially'; we say that potentially, for instance, a statue of Hermes is in the block of wood and the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out ... ; the thing that stands in contrast to each of these exist actually. Our meaning can be seen in the particular cases by induction, and we must ... be content to grasp the analogy, that it is as that which is building is to that which is capable of building ... and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which has been shaped out of the matter to the matter Let actually be defined by one member of this antithesis, and the potential by the other." [*Metaphysics* Θ (IV), 6, 1048^a31 - 1048^b5, trans. Ross].

²⁷ Theoretical science "is concerned with some class of being (for it deals with that kind of substance in which there is a principle of motion and rest)... The principle of productive sciences is in the maker, whether it be intellect or art or some kind of power; but the principle of practical sciences is prohaeresis [moral choice] in the agent, for the object of action and that of choice are the same." [Aquinas's Commentary on Aristotle's, *Metaphysics* VI, 1, 1025^b3, ff, available at <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/Metaphysics6.htm#:~:text=For%20the%20principle%20of%20productive,of%20choice%20are%20the%20same>, accessed 07/20/24].

action; ground all naturally attainable human knowledge on external sensible things [i.e., things knowable by the senses], instead of on sensations, ideas, or language; and look upon cognition as a way of being in which knower and thing known are one and the same in the actuality of the cognition.

As interesting and important as these similarities are, it is the differences that make all the difference regarding how Aquinas turns the pagan philosophy of Aristotle into the Christian philosophy it proports to be. Before I sum up these differences, I should like to say a few words about the specter of Aquinas's Catholicism. Though Southern Evangelical Seminary is not alone among American evangelical institutions that celebrate Aquinas's philosophy (or at least have professors who so celebrate), we were undoubtedly the first. Not surprisingly our philosophical and apologetical DNA is that of Norman Geisler's. Even before he co-founded SES, making this Thomism more visible to a wider audience, he was criticized by some of his evangelical detractors who would sometimes hurl the invective moniker "Roman Geisler."

Framing the issue in a more adult fashion, the question needs to be addressed as to whether Thomism is Catholicism or whether Thomism leads to Catholicism.²⁸ One specific area where this concern is raised is regarding the ethical model known as Natural Law Theory as best exemplified in the thinking of Aquinas. I think the points here apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other areas where Thomism is making inroads into contemporary conservative Protestantism a brief summary of which I will provide in short order.

David VanDrunen, an Orthodox Presbyterian Minister and Professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California argues:

²⁸ See Norman L. Geisler, "Does Thomism Lead to Catholicism?" available at <https://ses.edu/resources/does-thomism-lead-to-catholicism/>.

Protestants should not affirm natural law despite being Protestant. They should affirm natural *because* they are Protestant. ... Protestants believe that Scripture is the highest authority for Christian faith and life, and since Scripture clearly teaches the reality and importance of natural law, Protestants must affirm natural law if they wish to be true to their own convictions.²⁹

Stephen J. Grabill, Ph.D. Calvin Theological Seminary, points out:

While evangelicals today (both inside and outside of confessional traditions) may be surprised—even dismayed—by [Peter Martyr Vermigli's] strong affirmation of divine witness through the natural order, the older magisterial Protestant tradition (Lutheran and Reformed) not only inherited but also passed on the doctrines of *lex naturalis* and *cognitio Dei naturalis*, especially the idea of an implanted knowledge of morality, as noncontroversial legacies of patristic and scholastic thought.³⁰

Sources have come out in the past decade or so shedding light on the fact that significant acquaintance and interaction with scholastic thinking including Aquinas existed in the early Reformation period. Richard A. Muller's "Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought"³¹ contains copious references to that end, including Dennis Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology* and John Farthing, *Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Biel: Interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Eve of the Reformation*.³² This would be but an inkling of the sources Muller examines in his four volume set *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and*

²⁹ David VanDrunen, *Natural Law: A Short Companion* (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2023), 11, emphasis in original.

³⁰ Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1

³¹ Richard A. Muller, "Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought" in *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, (2012): 127-150.

³² Dennis Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983) and John Farthing, *Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Biel: Interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Eve of the Reformation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1988).

*Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725.*³³ In concert with these, in the U.S. one can find within the of Reformed community (both Presbyterian and Baptist) thinkers like James Dolezal, David Haines, Travis Campbell, Stephen Duby, and Matthew Barrett and within the broader conservative Protestant community thinkers like Thomas A. Howe, J. Thomas Bridges, Brian Huffling, Benard James Mauser, and Winfried Corduan.

None of this, of course, is an argument for the legitimacy of the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. But it does dispel the all-to-common assumption among a segment of the American Reformed and broader conservative Protestant community that Thomism as a philosophy was repudiated by the Protestants along with the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the exclusive authority of the Catholic teaching magisterium, and salvation by faith and works. Nothing could be further from the truth.³⁴

What Has Aquinas Done Us Lately?

In extolling the legacy of Thomas Aquinas, I do not necessarily mean to claim that those views of his which I celebrate are themselves widespread and obvious today views discussed among Christians and non-Christians. Further, I do not mean to claim that relevant aspects of a given view of Aquinas was without precedence from those who influenced him—both negatively and positively—as if to say that Aquinas can take all the credit for such sound thinking. Rather I mean that (despite trying as hard as I could when writing this paper to remain relatively non-

³³ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

³⁴ For perhaps the most direct yet poorest attempt to refute the thinking of Aquinas, see Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Failure of Natural Theology: A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophical Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2021) and *Saving Natural Theology from Thomas Aquinas*. (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2021). For my critique of Johnson's attempt to refute Aquinas, see Richard G. Howe, "Saving Natural Theology from Jeffrey Johnson," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 17 (Spring 2023): 55-91 available at <http://richardghowe.com/papers.htm>.

partisan and unbiased), for certain theological or philosophical topics and issues which may be more or less widespread and obvious topics of discussion today, those topics and issues find their best defense and exposition in Aquinas's understanding of them. Clearly time and purpose for now will not afford the opportunity to make arguments to that end. Let it suffice to make a few comments about only a few of these issues and topics. My list of which would include:

First, the definition of truth as correspondence to reality³⁵;

Second, the beginning of knowledge as arising from sensible reality with the completing of knowledge of sensible reality in the intellect in contrast to those, especially of the New Age persuasion, who would denigrate our ability to know God's creation through our senses³⁶;

Third, the objectivity of truth with its implications for biblical hermeneutics contra the increasingly deleterious influence of the "truth-is-power"

³⁵ Aquinas says, "Truth is defined by the conformity of intellect and thing; and hence to know this conformity is to know truth." [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 16, art. 2]. He adds, "Our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence naturally it knows only what has a form in matter, or what can be known by such a form." [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 12, art. 11] Further, he maintains, "Our knowledge of principles themselves is derived from sensible things." [*Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 83, §32, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975): II, p. 279].

³⁶ Aquinas says, "Our knowledge, taking its start from things, proceeds in this order. First, it begins in sense; second, it is completed in the intellect." [Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, I, 11, trans. Mulligan, 48, in *Truth* (3 vols), vol. 1 trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); vol. 2 trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); vol. 3. trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954). The three volumes were reprinted as *Truth* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994)] Note how many times God appealed to Israel's ability to see and heard God's demonstration of Himself to prove that He was the only true God among all the false gods Israel was encountering and how many times the apostles appealed to the senses to prove that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

Postmodernism of Michel Foucault³⁷; or the potentially devastating impact of the "truth-is-intersubjective-agreement" of Richard Rorty³⁸;

Fourth, the relationship of Reason and Faith meaning,

- a) the nature of knowledge as conformity of intellect and Form (Reason) and, thus, including metaphysical knowledge as well as the physical knowledge in contrast to the widespread scientism of today of a sophisticated A. J. Ayer or an unsophisticated Richard Dawkins³⁹; and

³⁷ Foucault argues, "There is a battle 'for truth,' or at least 'around truth'—it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted,' but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true,' it being understood also that it's a matter not of a battle 'on behalf' of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays." [Michel Foucault, *Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought with Major New Unpublished Material*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 74].

³⁸ Rorty maintains, "Philosophy is 'edifying discourse' the purpose of which is 'finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking' and 'to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth.'" [Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 360, 377, as cited in William F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: An Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd ed., (Belmont, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 563] Rorty elsewhere explains, "For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can." [Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), as cited in Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery*, 563-564]

³⁹ Such "scientism" undoubtedly got its conatus from the influence of A. J. Ayer's influential *Language, Truth, and Logic* where he claimed, "We mean also to rule out the supposition that philosophy can be ranged alongside the existing sciences, as a special department of speculative knowledge. There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give." [A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), p. 48] One finds a much more unrefined and unsophisticated yet even more popular attitude in writers such as Richard Dawkins who insisted, "The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice—or not yet—a decided one." [Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 58-59.]

Christian apologist and philosopher J. P. Moreland observes, "Scientism ... puts Christian claims outside of the 'plausibility structure' (what people generally consider reasonable and rational), which has led to a number of shifts in how our culture processes reality. One of the effects of scientism, then, is making the ridicule of Christianity's truth claims more common and acceptable (which is one of scientism's goals)." [J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 31]

b) the nature of knowledge as reception of revealed truth (Faith) as including theological knowledge which we get from inspired and infallible Scripture⁴⁰;

Fifth, the viability of Natural Theology grounded in of the legitimacy of reason which gives rise to a sound understanding of "Classical Theism" which defends the traditional attributes of God including simplicity, omnipresence, omniscience, immutability, impassibility, and more⁴¹ in contrast of the "Theistic Personalism" so widespread in contemporary analytic Christian philosophy and the more concerning presence of "Open Theism" with its denial of God's knowledge of future contingencies⁴²;

⁴⁰ Aquinas says, "Since man can only know the things that he does not see himself by taking them from another who does see them, and since faith is among the things we do not see, the knowledge of the objects of faith must be handed on by one who sees them himself. Now, this one is God, Who perfectly comprehends Himself, and naturally sees His essence." [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, 154 [1], trans. Vernon J. Bourke, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 239].

⁴¹ See Aquinas's discussion of the divine attributes in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2-25.

⁴² Christian analytic philosopher William Lane Craig insists, "There's absolutely no biblical grounds for this stronger doctrine of divine simplicity [of Aquinas]. In fact, I'm convinced that the strong doctrine is not simply unbiblical. I think it's positively anti-biblical. ... The idea that God has no potentiality seems to me to be obviously false scripturally speaking because God has the ability, the potential to do all sorts of things that He isn't actually doing. So, clearly God has tremendous, unlimited potential." [William Lane Craig, "Divine Simplicity Q&A with William Lane Craig and Ryan Mullins," available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piu1kehXf58>]. Elsewhere, Craig, along with this co-writer J. P. Moreland say, "We have argued that in virtue of his real, causal relation to the temporal world, God must minimally undergo extrinsic change and therefore be temporal—at least since the moment of creation. Moreover, God's knowledge of tensed facts, implied by his omniscience, requires that since the moment of creation he undergoes intrinsic change as well ... Thus God is not immutable in a strong sense." [J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 532-533]

Open Theist Gregory Boyd argues, "Scripture also frequently depicts God as experiencing regret ... disappointment, frustration, and unexpected outcomes ... suggesting that the future is to this extent composed of possibilities rather than certainties. It is, I submit, more difficult to conceive of God experiencing such things if the future is exhaustively settled in his mind than if it is in part composed of possibilities." *Philosophia Christi* 5, No.1, (2003):192]. Elsewhere Boyd explains, "My agnostic father ... asked me why God would allow Adolf Hitler to be born if he foreknew that this man would massacre millions of Jews. ... The only response I could offer then, and the only response I continue to offer now is that this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler." [Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 98].

Sixth, and last as far as my list goes is what I mentioned at the beginning:

Natural Law Theory which is a model of human morality factoring in the notion of human nature and human teleology together with free choice as the source of moral action in contrast to contemporary notions that morality is socially or culturally conditioned.⁴³ I should point out that as an American I am particularly indebted to the legacy of Thomas Aquinas inasmuch as his ethical model known as Natural Law Theory—albeit a somewhat vestigial version of it as one finds in John Locke—was the conatus for the American Revolution. (Just this past July 4th, we celebrated the 248th anniversary of our independence from Great Britain.)

I promised at the beginning that I would point out some of the differences that Aquinas has with Aristotle.⁴⁴ One I should like to merely mention without discussion here and the other to unpack somewhat since it is, in my opinion, the most crucial difference there is between the two. The first difference is one that arises from Aquinas's commitment to the authority of revealed truth in the Scriptures, to wit, that, unique among sensible creatures, the Form of the human—what theologians call the Soul—can survive the death of the body. Such a notion would

⁴³ Aquinas defines Law as an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated." Natural Law is "the participation in Eternal Law by rational creatures by virtue of being rational" where Eternal Law is defined as "God's providential working of the universe" and "the plan by which God governs creation." In this context, Natural Law is "that aspect of the Eternal Law whereby the Creator governs and guides the moral actions of humans such that, when obeyed, it leads humans to their proper end in this world" with the understanding that such participation is discoverable by natural reason. [*Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 90, art. 1-4].

⁴⁴ Having listed Joseph Owen's summary of the similarities, here is his summary of the differences which include the two I am treating. Aristotle has no metaphysical category of existence as such (only a logical distinction) whereas for Aquinas, existence is the actuality of all actualities and the perfection of all perfections. For Aristotle, the highest element in metaphysics is Form, whereas for Aquinas, the highest element in metaphysics is existence (esse). Aristotle holds that for every being, to be is to be a Form whereas for Aquinas, existence is distinct from essence in sensible creatures. For Aristotle, existence and essence are known through the same intellectual act whereas for Aquinas existence and essence are known by different intellectual acts. Last, Aristotle sees no connection between ultimate reality in metaphysics and ultimate reality in religion whereas for Aquinas, God is ultimate reality as pure actuality in contrast to the participatory being of creation. [Joseph Owens, "Aristotle and Aquinas."]

have been completely untenable to Aristotle. The second notion, on which I would like to spend a little time, is Aquinas's notion of existence and the essence/existence distinction. To this end, with your permission, I should like to repeat a few points I made last year in this same conference. Such repetition is quite unavoidable given the import of the subject before us, viz, the legacy of Thomas Aquinas.

Esse

The infinitive form of the Latin verb *sum* (I am) is *esse*, meaning "to be". Though it is an infinitive, it is most often translated into English by the nouns 'being' or 'existence'. It certainly would not be good grammar or syntax to say "I heard a great argument demonstrating the "to be" of God." What is unfortunate with having to use the noun is that it loses the verbal aspect of the infinitive. To compensate when necessary, some Thomists writing in English use the (perhaps awkward) phrase 'the act of being' or 'the act of existing' to try to preserve this verbal aspect. Running the risk of losing a reader who might not be familiar with the Latin, some Thomist writers retain *esse* in some contexts to guarantee that the full infinitive flavor is not otherwise lost. I find myself also using both the English and the Latin terms.

Aquinas's understanding of existence, i.e., *esse*, though clearly influenced by certain philosophical antecedents, is nevertheless, a profound innovation and serves, according to certain schools of Thomistic thought, as the key to his entire metaphysics—one which makes all the difference between him and Aristotle, despite Aquinas's otherwise great indebtedness to him. That "denomination" of Thomistic thought that sees the primacy of Aquinas's notion of existence has come to be known as "Existential Thomism."⁴⁵ It will be clear, however that the term

⁴⁵ For a treatment of Aquinas's notion of *esse* and its overall place in Aquinas's metaphysics, see Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed., (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952); John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003); Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968); and Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1963), reprint, (Houston:

'existential' (the adjective form of the 'exist') will have nothing to do with the philosophy of Existentialism.

Aristotle's highest category in his metaphysics is Form (or, if you will, essence). To be is to be a Form. For him, Form is the highest level there is regarding the act/potency distinction. While Matter is in potency to Form—constituting a hylomorphic essence of sensible objects—there is nothing to which essence and, for that matter to which Form as Form, is in potency. The thing to notice here is that Aristotle does not have a philosophical category of existence to which Form alone or a Form/Matter essence is in potency. As such, there can be no philosophical distinction in Aristotle's philosophy between essence and existence.⁴⁶

Center for Thomistic Studies, The University of St. Thomas, 1985). From the contours of the metaphysics of Existential Thomism arises a robust model of human cognition—or, if you will somewhat anachronistically, an epistemology. For an explanation and defense of this model see Joseph Owens, *Cognition: An Epistemological Inquiry* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1992). For other subdivisions of Thomism, see Knasas. *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 1-31. For a defense of the epistemology of Existential Thomism against its greatest rival of the Critical Realism of Transcendental Thomism, see Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) and Etienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. by Philip Trower, (Front Royal: Christendom, 1990), reprinted (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011).

⁴⁶ Charles Kahn, classicist and professor of philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, observes, "The upshot is that, although we can recognize at least three different kinds of existential questions discussed by Aristotle, Aristotle himself neither distinguishes these questions from one another nor brings them together under any common head or topic which might be set in contrast to other themes in his general discussion of Being." [Charles H. Kahn, "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy," in *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 10]. According to Kahn, Aristotle is not alone here, for there does not seem to be a distinctive philosophical doctrine of existence as such in any Ancient Greek philosophy, and, thus, no notion of an essence/existence distinction among the Ancient Greeks. In his aptly titled article "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy" Kahn says, "In the extended discussion of the concept (or concepts) of Being in Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle, the theme of existence does not figure as a distinct topic for philosophical reflection. . . . I must make clear that my thesis about the non-emergence of existence as a distinct topic is not intended as a denial of the obvious fact that the Greek philosophers occasionally *discuss* questions of existence. My thesis is rather that the concept of existence is never "thematized": it itself does not become a subject for philosophical reflection." [Kahn, *Existence*, p. 7, 9, emphasis in original]. Kahn then interestingly goes on to observe, "My general view of the historical development is that existence in the modern sense becomes a central concept in philosophy only in the period when Greek ontology is radically revised in the light of a metaphysics of creation: that is to say, under the influence of Biblical religion."⁴⁶ [Kahn, *Existence*, p. 7].

Joseph Owens, commenting on some thoughts of Aristotle, remarks, "From the viewpoint of the much later distinction between essence and the act of existing, this treatment must mean that Aristotle is leaving the act of existence entirely outside the scope of his philosophy. The act of existing must be wholly escaping his *scientific* consideration. All necessary and definite connections between things can be reduced to essence." [Joseph Owens,

The broader context within which Aquinas's doctrine of *esse* finds its significance is how Aquinas unpacks the notion of the essence/existence distinction.⁴⁷ The essence/existence distinction maintains that there is a real distinction in a created thing between its essence and its existence.⁴⁸ A thing's essence is *what* it is. Its existence is *that* it is. Consider yourself as a human being: Your essence is what makes you a human. Your existence is what makes you a being. That essence and existence are distinct in sensible objects is evident from the fact that one can understand the essence of a thing without knowing whether it exists.⁴⁹ Aquinas argues, "Now, every essence ... can be understood without knowing anything about its being. I can know, for instance, what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it has being in reality [*esse habeat in rerum natura*]. From this it is clear that being is other than essence ... unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity [i.e., essence] is its being."⁵⁰

The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics: A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought, 3rd ed. (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), 309, emphasis in original].

⁴⁷ See [In addition to his *Summa Theologiae* and *On the Power of God* already referenced], Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968); *Truth* (De Veritate), trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt, 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from this translation.

⁴⁸ A real distinction is to be contrasted with a merely conceptual distinction as, for example, the distinction between being a human and being an animal.

⁴⁹ As an aside, I should let the reader know that I am aware of the sometimes-robust debate among Thomists as to where exactly in Aquinas's understanding the distinction between essence and existence is known to be real rather than merely conceptual. Note that the debate here is not *whether* this distinction is real—all participating in this "family" dispute agree that it is real—but rather where exactly this distinction is *known to be real*. What is at stake in this debate is how it impacts one's understanding of certain elements of Aquinas's arguments for God's existence. For an interesting back and forth between Joseph Owens and John F. Wippel, see John F. Wippel, "Aquinas's Route to the Real Distinction: A Note on *De ente et essentia*," *The Thomist* 43 (April 1979): 279-295 and Joseph Owens, "Stages and Distinction in *DE ENTE*: A Rejoinder," *The Thomist* 45 (1981): 99-123. Owens revisits the issue in "Aquinas' Distinction at *DE ENTE ET ESSENTIA* 4:119-123," *Medieval Studies* 48 (1986): 264-287.

⁵⁰ *On Being and Essence*, IV, §6, p. 55. Elsewhere Aquinas argues, "Everything that is in the genus of substance is composite with a real composition, because whatever is in the category of substance is subsistent in its own existence, and its own act of existing must be distinct from the thing itself; otherwise it could not be distinct in existence from the other things with which it agrees in the formal character of its quiddity; for such agreement is required in all things that are directly in a category. Consequently everything that is directly in the category of

In his metaphysics, every created thing has its existence distinct from its essence. Every created thing has existence only as it is continuously being given existence by God. The punchline, if you will, is that in God there is no essence/existence distinction. Aquinas says, "To God alone does it belong to be His own subsistent being. ... for no creature is its own existence, forasmuch as its existence is participated."⁵¹ This is known as God's simplicity. Simplicity is not so much an attribute of God as it is a way in which the attributes of God must be understood.⁵² The full import of the essence/existence distinction together with the notion that the essence/existence distinction does not obtain in God is easily missed until Aquinas's notion of "existence as such" is unpacked. There one should begin to see its profound implications for the existence and attributes of the God of Classical Theism.

Several aspects of Aquinas's understanding of *esse* should be noted. First, for Aquinas, existence or *esse* is an act. For created objects, existence is something that essences "do" or, more accurately, something that essences have done to them. Existence is something that created essences "have."⁵³ This relationship between the act of existing and the essence of a thing is the

substance is composed at least of the act of being and the subject of being." [*Truth*, XXVII, 1, ad. 8, trans. Schmidt, v. 3, 311-312].

⁵¹ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, art. 4.

⁵² Thomist David B. Burrell suggests that, properly speaking, simplicity is not an attribute of God. He says, "The best way I know to put this is to remind ourselves that simpleness is not an attribute of God, properly speaking... That is, we do not include 'simpleness' in that list of terms we wish to attribute to God—classically, 'living', 'wise', 'willing'. It is rather that simpleness defines the manner in which such properties might be attributed to God. When we say God is simple, we are speaking not about God directly but about God's ontological constitution; just as when we say that Eloise is composite, we are not predicating anything about her in any of the nine recognizable ways of Aristotle." [David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 46]. I think that Burrell makes a good point. For the sake of convenience in this paper, however, I may reference simplicity in the context of the rest of God's attributes without any further reference to Burrell's point.

⁵³ For treatments of the relationship of God's act of creating with the essence He creates, see: Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

relationship of act and potency that Aquinas gets from Aristotle. Potency or potentiality is the capacity in a thing for change. The potency is made actual. Act, or actuality is to be real. Joseph Owens summarizes: "When existence is considered in relation to the thing it makes exist, it may be regarded as actualizing the thing and, accordingly, it appears as the actuality that gives the thing existence."⁵⁴ Aquinas puts it this way: "Wherefore it is clear that being as we understand it here is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections."⁵⁵

Second, Aquinas's notion of existence entails that the existing of a created thing is continuously being caused. He says, "As the production of a thing into existence depends on the will of God, so likewise it depends on His will that things should be preserved; for He does not preserve them otherwise than by ever giving them existence; hence if He took away His action from them, all things would be reduced to nothing."⁵⁶

One should see the direction his line of thinking is going. From here, it is but a short walk to a full-on cosmological argument. Since creation has existence given to it, there must be a being whose existence is entirely due to its very nature. The Creator *is* existence itself—*ipsum esse subsistens*. To repeat, Aquinas argues, "To God alone does it belong to be His own

⁵⁴ Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence*, 51. But with Aquinas, there is another aspect of actualizing that is completely apart from any metaphysical aspect of potency, viz., creation. In his discussions of the various kinds of potencies or possible, Aristotle observes, "The possible, then, in one sense, as has been said, means that which is not of necessity false." [*Metaphysics* Δ (V), 12, 1019^b30, trans. W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941)] Aquinas employs this distinction in his discussion of creation ex nihilo. "Before the world was it was possible for the world to be: but it does not follow that there was need of matter as the base of that possibility. For it is stated in *Metaphysics* v, 12, that sometimes a thing is said to be possible, not in respect of some potentiality, but because it involves no contradiction of terms, in which sense the possible is opposed to the impossible. Accordingly, it is said that before the world was it was possible for the world to be made, because the statement involved no contradiction between subject and predicate. We may also reply that it was possible by reason of the active power of the agent, but not on account of any passive power of matter." [Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, I, Q3, art. 1. ad. 2].

⁵⁵ *On the Power of God*, VII, 2, ad. 9, v. III.

⁵⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 9, art. 2.

subsistent being. ... for no creature is its own existence, forasmuch as its existence is participated."⁵⁷ Here, then, is one profound departure from Aristotle; indeed, from all of ancient Greek thought. There is no notion of creation *ex nihilo* to be found before the impact of Christianity. Such an impact was profound indeed.⁵⁸

Last, not only does Aquinas's notion of *esse* entail his cosmological argument, but it also entails all the classical attributes of God. For Aquinas, existence as such contains all perfections. He argues, "... the perfections following from God to creatures ... pre-exist in God unitedly and simply, whereas in creatures they are received, divided and multiplied."⁵⁹ Further he says, "All perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly."⁶⁰ For now, a full argument and explanation of this notion is not possible under our time constraints. Let it suffice to make a few short points. First, the notion of perfection here is not exclusively moral. While moral perfection can be (indeed, *must be* according to Aquinas) parsed out within this category, here 'perfection' is a broader notion.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, art. 4.

⁵⁸ [include a reference to Gilson's *God and Philosophy*]

⁵⁹ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, art. 4.

⁶⁰ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, art. 5.

⁶¹ In my judgment, that moral perfection (but not the moral virtues as attributed to God) must be parsed out in the category of the actualization of potencies, is the essence of Natural Law Theory, despite certain voices of the "New Natural Law Theory." John Finnis, for example, argues "Nor is it true that for Aquinas 'good and evil are concepts analysed and fixed in metaphysics before they are applied in morals'. On the contrary, Aquinas asserts as plainly as possible that the first principals of natural law, which specify the basic forms of good and evil and which can be adequately grasped by anyone of the age of reason (and not just by metaphysicians), are *per se nota* (self-evident) and indemonstrable. They are not inferred from speculative principles. They are not inferred from facts. They are not inferred from metaphysical propositions about human nature, or about the nature of good and evil, or about the function of a human being nor are they inferred from a teleological conception of nature or any other conception of nature. They are not inferred or derived from anything." [John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 33-34] In contrast, I agree with Edward Feser who maintains "It is widely assumed that the analysis and justification of fundamental moral claims can be conducted without reference to at least the more contentious issues of metaphysics. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Thomas, for whom natural law ... is 'natural' precisely because it derives from human nature, conceived of in Aristotelian essentialist terms." [Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World), 174] For a very helpful summary of this,

Second, for Aquinas, to perfect something is to actualize the potencies in a thing, sending it towards fully becoming what it is. Aristotle used the terms actualize and actuality (ἐνεργάζομαι, ἐνεργεία) interchangeably with perfection (ἐντελέχεια).⁶² That 'perfection' is an apt word to use in this context is argued by Joseph Owens.

An alternate word for actuality in this respect is "perfection" (*entelecheia*). It was used by Aristotle along with actuality to designate the formal elements in the things. These perfected the material element in the sense of filling its potentiality and completing the thing. Since existence is required to complete the thing and all the formal elements and activities, it may be aptly called the perfection of all perfections.⁶³

While more needs to be said here regarding *esse*, I should like to bring this section to a close as I bring our entire discussion of the legacy of Thomas Aquinas to a close. These notions of continuing (or current) causality (i.e., existence as an act) and existence as possessing all perfections are crucial to understanding the whole of Aquinas's metaphysics.⁶⁴ Their value is

especially regarding God's relationship to the matter, see Edward Feser, "Does Morality Depend on God? (Updated)" at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/07/does-morality-depend-on-god.html>, accessed 05/29/23. See also Richard G. Howe, "Morality as Based on Natural Law," in *The Morality Wars: The Ongoing Debate Over the Origin of Human Goodness*. Lanham: Lexington, 2021. For more in-depth discussions, see J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); R. S. Clark, "Calvin on the *Lex Naturalis*," *Stulos Theological Journal* 6, no. 1 and 2 (1998): 1-22; Jesse Covington, Bryan McGraw, and Micah Watson, *Natural Law and Evangelical Political Thought* (Lanham: Lexington, 2013); Austin Fagothy, *Right Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice Based on the Teachings of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed. (Charlotte: Tan, 1959); Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); John T. McNeill, "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers," *The Journal of Religion* 26, no. 3 (July 1946): 168-182; and David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); David VanDrunen, "Medieval Natural Law and the Reformation: A Comparison of Aquinas and Calvin," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (Winter 2006): 77-98. Much of the above is against the backdrop of Aristotle and Aquinas. For them, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q 1-114, especially his *Treatise on Law* (Q 90-144, sometimes published separately). Finally, it should be noted (without at this point much supporting argument) that the reason the actualization of a potential is a perfection, or, more to the point, is an actualization of a thing's good, is because in Aquinas's thinking, the terms 'being' and 'good' are convertible. For a discussion of this, see Jan A. Aertsen, "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas." *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 449-470.

⁶² It is interesting to note that the word ἐντελέχεια (perfection) arises from the root words ἐν (in) + τέλος (end, goal) and ἔχειν (to have).

⁶³ Owens, *Interpretation*, 52-53.

⁶⁴ This not to say that there are no other essential elements of Aquinas's philosophy. Along with Aquinas's accounting of existence, one must also have a proper application of Aquinas's notion of the analogy of being. For a

how they philosophically deliver for Aquinas both the existence of God and all of the classical attributes of God except those attributes contained exclusively in revealed truth like, for example, the Trinity.

Conclusion

While Aquinas owes much to Aristotle and some to other of his predecessors, he nevertheless has pressed his metaphysics into the service of his Christian faith in many ways. We were only able to mention without detail Aquinas's notions of the correspondence theory of truth; our knowledge arising from sensible reality and completed in the intellect; the objectivity of truth; the relationship of Reason and Faith; the viability of Natural Theology; and Natural Law Theory. Next, we had what was undoubtedly an all-too-abbreviated treatment of his profound doctrines of existence and the essence/existence distinction. Perhaps there is no better way to end than with this extended quote from Etienne Gilson.

Thomism was not the upshot of a better understanding of Aristotle. It did not come out of Aristotelianism by way of evolution, but of revolution. Thomas uses the language of Aristotle everywhere to make the Philosopher say that there is only one God, the pure Act of Being, Creator of the world, infinite and omnipotent, a providence for all that which is, intimately present to every one of his creatures, especially to men, every one of whom is endowed with a personally immortal soul naturally able to survive the death of its body. The best way to make Aristotle say so many things he never said was not to show that, had he understood himself better than he did, he would have said them. For indeed Aristotle seems to have understood himself pretty well. He has said what he had to say, given the meaning which he himself attributed to the principles of his own philosophy. Even the dialectical acumen of Saint Thomas Aquinas could not have extracted from the principles of Aristotle more than what they could possibly yield. The true reason why his

varied discussion of this admittedly difficult topic, see W. Norris Clarke, "Analogy and the Meaningfulness of Language about God: A Reply to Kai Nielsen," *Thomist* 40 (1976): 61-95; George P. Klubertanz, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960); E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to "He Who Is."* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), reprinted (n.c.: Archon Books, 1967); Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968); Joseph Owens, "Analogy as a Thomistic Approach to Being," *Medieval Studies* 24 (1962): 303-322; David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004); and Matthew J. Coté, PhD dissertation, *Truth's Light and Supereminent Darkness: The Problem of Univocal Concepts in Analogical Predication of God*, Southern Evangelical Seminary, forthcoming.

conclusions were different from those of Aristotle was that his own principles themselves were different. ... In order to metamorphose the doctrine of Aristotle, Thomas has ascribed a new meaning to the principles of Aristotle. As a philosophy, Thomism is essentially a metaphysics. It is a revolution in the history of the metaphysical interpretation of the first principle, which is "being."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1955), 365.