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Authoritative Faith's Relation to Reason in the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas

Christianity holds up for its adherents three “theological” virtue: faith, hope, and charity. Now it might seem strange to speak of faith as a virtue if one defines faith as belief without evidence, as is commonly done. The major flaw in this account, of course, is that there is no incentive to believe any appeal to faith, if such appeals mean that there is no evidence in support of the claim. Thus there is a problem in adding faith to any catalogue of virtues unless one is given an account of faith that is distinguishable from blind assent. St. Thomas Aquinas devotes much of his corpus to exactly that. He is quite famously known for reconciling faith and reason in the High Middle Ages, I hope to show in this paper that such a reputation is not unearned. I will seek to give a definition of faith from Aquinas’ work with particular note of its virtuous character. Then I will offer an investigation of the ultimate source of faith (God) in Aquinas’ natural theology. Then I will investigate the epistemological preconditions for accepting a particular message as coming from God. Afterwards, I will end the paper by investigating objections I believe could be raised in criticism of the Thomistic view, and attempt to give a satisfactory answer for each.

Part I: An Interpretation and Contextualizing of Aquinas’ notion of Faith

In order for faith to a virtue at all, it must be grounded in something. That something can not be reason, as Aquinas wants to make a distinction between the intellect’s involuntary assent to a logical demonstration and the voluntary assent of faith. In the former case, the assent derives from the object itself, the latter results from the will on account of the insufficiency of the object to bring the intellect fully to knowledge. (ST II ii q 1 a 4)¹ Furthermore, faith is similar to opinion in so far as both are voluntary assets of the intellect that go further than reason compels,

¹ All quotations taken from the *Summa Theologiae* use the New Advent translation (newadvent.org) all other Thomistic texts used are the translations from the Dominican House of Studies Priory of the Immaculate Conception (dhpriory.org)

however, they differ in that the latter case doubt remains whereas in faith it is alleviated. (ST II ii q 1 a 4) So therefore faith can be distinguished from both knowledge (*scientia*) and opinion, and is truly shown to be a distinct category of belief in the Thomistic model.

Regardless, the mere voluntary nature of the act, and the lack of immediate certainty, do not give any reason for why a rational person could have faith. Rather, it must be both voluntary and reliable especially since it is essential to faith to cast out doubt. Aquinas defends the reliability of faith if and only if one's faith is grounded in an infallible authority, a role only fulfilled by God. In the very first question of the entire *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas affirms that faith is at its core an appeal to authority but also states "Nor does this take away from the dignity of this doctrine, for although the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest, yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest." (a 8 obj 2) So while the objects of faith do not immediately demonstrate themselves to the believer, an authority does tell the believer what is to be believed. Furthermore, the authority on which faith relies is an authority which is more reliable than human reason itself, on account of its divine nature.

Nevertheless, Aquinas does not believe the existence of God is inaccessible to reason, and believes that reason alone can show why God would be a reliable source of truth; reason can offer a preamble to faith. So for Aquinas, while faith is not *scientia*, it is not ungrounded. Additionally, the authority in which it is grounded is not assumed by faith but can be examined under the lens of reason. In so doing, Aquinas avoids circularity, but can legitimately be asked to present his arguments for why any divine authority exists at all, and ultimately be required to support any appeals to faith.

To say that God's existence is to be held on faith, would be circular. In order for faith to escape this its basis must be known by some other means, namely natural theology. Natural

theology is a technical term referring to the investigation of the idea of God without reference to any particular creed. For example, when Aristotle investigates the idea of a First Mover in the *Metaphysics* or when William Paley posits the existence of a “watchmaker” from the complexity of the universe. Neither Aristotle nor Paley are using points of religious doctrine to guide their investigation, but both have taken up God as the ultimate object of their investigation. Thus they are looking into the study of God, but from the point of what humans can naturally (viz. unaided by the divine) know about the world. So this project would be deemed “natural theology” in contrast to what a Catholic would call “dogmatic theology”. The latter takes faith as granted, the former is neutral to it. And it is in respect to the former sense of theology that Aquinas quite famously offered his five arguments for the existence of God.

Nevertheless, I believe more relevant to the discussion at hand is the argument found not in the *Summa Theologiae*, but rather his metaphysical work *De Ente et Essentia*. In the work, Aquinas shows that there is a distinction between what a thing is, and that a thing is. So things are composed of two elements: essence and existence. One can give an exhaustive definition of a species without having to indicate whether or not such a species exists. One could describe every detail of what a unicorn would be like, or what a dog would be like, but only members of the latter category have existence. Thus the essence and existence of these sorts of beings are certainly distinct. Aquinas continues

“Now, whatever belongs to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature, as the ability to laugh in man, or comes to it from some extrinsic principle, as light in the air from the influence of the sun. But it cannot be that the existence of a thing is caused by the form or quiddity [viz. essence] of that thing — I say caused as by an efficient cause — because then something would be its own cause, and would bring itself into existence, which is impossible.” (De Ente III)

Thus the totality of being can not be composed only of beings which have a distinction between essence and existence, otherwise one would be forced to affirm self-causality which is a contradiction. But if essence can not precede existence absolutely, then existence must precede

essence. The condition and ground then for all essence-existence hybrids is Existence Itself. Aquinas puts it thusly “it is necessary that there be some thing which is the cause of the existence of all things because it is existence alone”, and furthermore That Which is Existence Itself must be the First Cause, and thus called God (*De Ente* III). It is worth noting also what this entails. Firstly, if God is solely existence, there can be no parts in God. For two parts to exist together in a whole, the two parts must be distinct in some way. However, if both parts are distinct they cannot both be existence alone. Thus if God is pure existence, in the relevant metaphysical sense, He is entirely simple. The consequences of this simplicity lend themselves easily to the proposition that God is a credible authority, as I shall demonstrate later in this paper.

Now even if one grants that Aquinas’s argument does, in fact, show that something which may be called God exists, it does not suggest immediately that such a God is anything like the Abrahamic God, or more specifically the Catholic God whom Aquinas worships. Just speaking about Existence Itself does not even suggest a personal God, and ostensibly not one who could reveal anything, let alone serve as the authority on revelation. One answer is that all of Aquinas’s arguments are to be taken together, and thus the First Cause of *De Ente*’s characteristics are fleshed out by the famous *Quinque Viae*; nevertheless, I will contend that the simple proposition “God is not a composite of essence and existence, but Pure Existence” is enough to establish both that the First Cause is infallible, but also omnipotent, at least within Aquinas’ metaphysics.

A major Thomistic thesis is that “Act, as perfection, is not limited but by potency” (Thesis II “Decree of Approval”) As Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange shows this is found in Aquinas’ discussion of the relation of form and matter, wherein a species can only be differentiated by its material components (which in hylemorphic beings is the principle of potency) which is why Aquinas is committed to affirming that all angels are of distinct species. (Garrigou Lagrange)

That is because for a species like human or triangle to be limited from its universal to its particular, each human must have a particular body, each triangle must have edges. For example, when one contemplates the idea of triangle the concepts of isosceles, acute, and obtuse are all compatible with it. The universal idea is not limited to any of those three examples. Yet all particular triangles are in one of those three categories, and not the other two. So in the particular the universal is limited. Likewise, the species human does not specify sex, height, age etc. thus in the particular individual the universal species that is human is limited by particulars. Angelical species lacking physical bodies to serve as their particulars can not have two members, so they are less limited than hylemorphic substances. This assumes a realist approach to universals ;nevertheless, Aquinas is convinced that is the case. In addition to the respect in which the potency of matter limits the act of form, the potency of essence limits the act of existence. Thus when Aquinas speaks of angels he concedes that they not limited by any bodies, but are nevertheless subject to the universal limit upon all creation “To be circumscribed by local limits belongs to bodies only; whereas to be circumscribed by essential limits belongs to all creatures, both corporeal and spiritual.” (ST I q 50 a 1 ob 3) Granted that matter and essence qua sources of potency, are the limits of act, it would follow that the First Cause (Pure Existence) is unlimited. Understanding this along side a second principle is vital to Aquinas idea of God as truth. The second principle is the principle of sufficient causality. Aquinas puts it thusly:

Now it is plain that the effect pre-exists virtually in the efficient cause: and although to pre-exist in the potentiality of a material cause is to pre-exist in a more imperfect way, since matter as such is imperfect, and an agent as such is perfect; still to pre-exist virtually in the efficient cause is to pre-exist not in a more imperfect, but in a more perfect way. Since therefore God is the first effective cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way. (ST I q 4 a 2)

That is to say, contained within God in some respect is the effects he brings about. When a match is struck, it is because the power of causing flame is in the match before striking. Thus while God does not have an essence Himself, He must contain within Himself every essence

which He causes, and as First Cause that would be the totality. Now Aquinas defines thusly “truth is found in the intellect according as it apprehends a thing as it is; and in things according as they have being conformable to an intellect.” (ST I q 16 a 5) The virtual containment of effects in God qua First Cause is analogous to the containment of ideas within the intellect as Aquinas notes

Since therefore the divine power extends to other things by the very fact that it is the first effective cause of all things, as is clear from the aforesaid (I:2:3), God must necessarily know things other than Himself. And this appears still more plainly if we add that the very existence of the first effective cause--viz. God--is His own act of understanding. Hence whatever effects pre-exist in God, as in the first cause, must be in His act of understanding, and all things must be in Him according to an intelligible mode: for everything which is in another, is in it according to the mode of that in which it is. (ST I q 16 a 5)

Thus Aquinas concludes, God is truth simply since his own existence is identical with his very understanding, and his understanding of his effects is the definition of truth.(ST I q 16 a 5) Furthermore, from what has already been shown, it is evident that God is omnipotent. God is an unlimited cause, and the ground of all things, therefore everything is within his power.

Thus it is evident why Divine Authority should be received on faith. If God’s very existence is identical with truth, any revelation relying on that authority would be credible. However, what remains to be determined is the epistemological conditions under which one can have faith that God has spoken. This where omnipotence becomes relevant. Aquinas argues that revelation can be validated by miracles.

For these “secrets of divine Wisdom” (Job 11:6) the divine Wisdom itself, which knows all things to the full, has deigned to reveal to men. . . . and in order to confirm those truths that exceed natural knowledge, it gives visible manifestation to works that surpass the ability of all nature. Thus, there are the wonderful cures of illnesses, there is the raising of the dead, and the wonderful immutation in the heavenly bodies;” (Summa Contra Gentiles bk 1 ch 6)

Aquinas again mentions this when he speaks about the relationship of miracles to the believers in the *Summa Theologiae*. Speaking of the demons, who believe but have no merit in their action Aquinas makes a crucial distinction. When a prophet speaks revelation, and a miracle

is present to validate that God is the source, the demon is not presented with compelling evidence from the revelation itself, and thus does not assent on account of reason like in a demonstration. However, the demon does assent because it can not deny that that which was spoken by God is to be believed. The saint alternatively believes on account of her will to adhere to the good. Because the saint wishes to believe all that is true, especially if it comes from God, she adheres eagerly and readily to a prophetic message validated by a miracle. (ST II ii q 5 a 2)

More accurately than the virtue of faith is precisely this: the habit of the believer to voluntary assent to the Divine Truths as they are revealed. Thus there are degrees of faith in the believers, even if all have the same habit of affirming what comes from the Divine Authority, nevertheless each varies in the articles which they subscribe to explicitly. (ST II ii q 5 a 4) This also means that reason is not opposed to faith, in the sense that if one were to increase the other would decrease. If it is the habit of believing the Divine Authority on account of the rightness of the act, reason does not take away from the voluntariness of the act. Thus, Aquinas says, the saint receives merit even when reasoning and making arguments for the things of faith unless the reason is being used as a substitute for voluntary assent as in the case wherein a person is already reluctant to believe. (ST II ii q 2 a 10) To use an example that Aquinas himself would have been intimately familiar with, one can look to the twentieth chapter of Gospel account of St. John. In this chapter, Christ has died, and appeared to 10 of the remaining Apostles (Thomas being absent, Judas being dead.) When Thomas first hears from the others that Christ had visited them, he is skeptical and unwilling to believe claiming that “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). Then Christ appears again, and invites Thomas to do exactly that to which

Thomas replies “My Lord and my God!” signifying his faith (v. 28). Christ then rebukes Thomas for his reluctance. Aquinas in his lectures on the Gospel of John comments

When Thomas said, Unless I see the print of the nails.... we see how stubborn he was in doubting. It would have been justifiable if he had not immediately believed, for we read, "One who trusts others too quickly is light-minded" (Sir 19:4). But to overdo one's search, especially about the secrets of God, shows a coarseness of mind: (Lectures on the Gospel of St. John, paragraph 2549)

So where as it is not the case that the Apostle can be condemned for wanting some kind of evidence before assenting, but it was wrong that he do so in a stubborn way. As Aquinas says it would even be a vice if Thomas did not want some kind of justification, but the stipulations of such rigorous conditions seem to suggest that in him is no will to believe without some kind of compulsion. One might make an analogy to the unbeliever who refuses to believe unless God himself appears before his or her and writes in the heavens “I exist”. Thus his stubbornness leads to his faith being less voluntary, which in turn deprives it of merit, not the evidence or arguments for his faith.

Part II: Some Objections.

Now there are at least three possible objections I imagine could be taken against this position. Firstly, miracles are absurd. If it is the law of nature, how can it be violated by the author of nature? Furthermore, how would one even know it was a miracle if in turn the lawfulness of nature is sacrificed. I will call this the objection from naturalism. Secondly, one might object that Aquinas’ notion of faith requires finite human beings to know the mind of an infinite God. I shall call this the objection from agnosticism. And lastly, one might object that to work at reconciling faith and reason is a superfluous endeavor, and the seeking of miraculous justification simply defeat the whole point of faith. I shall call this the objection from fideism.

As to the objection from naturalism, Aquinas himself addresses this point in the 105th question of the Prima Pars. He points out that while God does create a lawful ordering of natural

causes (as evident to our senses), God, however, exists on a level more fundamental than any natural cause and thus can without violence to the principal order of causes overturn and render void natural causes. (ST I q 105 a 6) This is derived from the claim already established from the Existential Argument for God, namely that God is the foundation of all beings. A king may order that every day his court assemble in a particular fashion, but those rules bind the members of his court, not him. He is free to change them for his own purposes.

Now it remains to be seen how a miracle could be known to be a miracle. While firstly in relevant discussion, miracles have a specific purpose; to affirm faith. So if one were to witness a prophet healing a blind beggar, this would be a candidate for a miracle as it would confirm the message of the prophet. Thus random lapses or seemingly trivial exceptions to natural causality would not be examples of miracles in the relevant sense. Further, miracles are demonstrations of divine power and authority, thus require an audience. Lastly, miracles should resist explanation by scientific investigation, and thus additional naturalist investigations of a miracle should prove fruitless, or at least less tenable than direct Divine Intervention. If one were to investigate if there was a miraculous nature to the strange healings that happen at Lourdes in France, one should begin with a scientific examination, and only continue to investigate for miracles if no scientific or a very unlikely scientific explanation is offered.

As to the objection from agnosticism, Aquinas does not require that any believer have access to the mind of God, let alone comprehend it as a totality. Rather, faith is merely an assent to that which God reveals. The only part of the relation fulfilled on the part of the believer is assent. Thus all doctrines depend on the authority of God Himself, not on any ability of the human mind to directly access the mind of God. Alternatively, one might make a stronger objection by making the claim more fundamental. For Aquinas to justify faith, he makes some

observations about the world and extends them backwards to the position that God exists, but more so that God exists in a certain way. This would seem problematic. If God is supernatural, he must definitionally be beyond nature. Yet all our observations and reasoning seem to derive from nature. Thus there would seem no justification to apply the inferences of the argument to God. However, this objection starts from the wrong angle. If one begins by saying that if God was one way, that the world would be as it is today, and conclude that God must be that particular way, the criticism would carry a lot of weight. For example if the argument was that a good God would create humans, there are humans, thus there is a good God. Since human beings are not in the position to know this about God immediately, the argument is weak. God's ways cannot be directly known by a human being in the same way human beings can directly observe the ways of a stone or a tree. However, if one observes that the world is lacking as a necessary condition something outside of it, or that the world exists in such a way that something dissimilar to it in that respect must also exist, the whole error is avoided. This is exactly how Aquinas reasons. He begins by observing how the world is, and say if the world is this way there must be something unlike the world in this respect otherwise it would be inexplicable. In this paper what was presented was Aquinas' existential argument for God's existence. The beginning of the argument is that the world is composed of beings which are composed of both essences and existences. Yet such beings can not exist of themselves, thus there must be a being which is not a mixture of both elements but simply Being. Now such a being is required, in Aquinas' argument, whether or not one fully comprehends that being, and even whether or not the name God is given to that being. One only has to grant that self-causation is impossible for all beings who have a distinction between their essence and existence to conclude that there is a being who is different from them in respect to this composition. Yet all of the former category are, in fact, beings of the

world. Therefore, one does not have to directly apply the rule to God directly, but only extrapolate from the rules as applied to the world, that a being unlike anything in the world exist. Thus one avoids any objections about assuming the nature of God first, and then reasoning back to it.

Lastly, one might take up the view of a fideist and object that to speak of faith as the assent to Divine authority is itself too rationalist. Faith requires blindness to be faith in this reading. However, I would contest that in no way is such a reading of faith any different from an appeal to desire (if one assent on account of perceived peace or reward for belief in God) or an appeal to fear (if one dreads hell). Aquinas is not interested in using either of these when he speaks of the assent of faith. Furthermore, it would be impossible to say what faith is virtuous and what faith is not. If all faith is blind, adherent to abusive cults which exploit the trust of their followers would be more virtuous as a well thought out and researched decision to convert to a particular creed. Additionally, on this blind reading of faith there is no way in which a believer can provide any support for their beliefs, nor can they be critically examined as a result. Therefore, religion becomes either unsupportable or unquestionable, both of which would seem problematic especially on a societal level. For example, if a Muslim woman requests that she be allowed to cover her hair when taking a passport or driver's license photo, there ought to be some way to distinguish her claim to such a privilege from a pastafarian, who in his pursuit of discrediting religion, claims he has equal right to wear a strainer upon his head. Now it is not necessary that one believe in Islam, merely that the Muslim woman can give an account of why she believes Muhammad was speaking on behalf of God that is quantifiably different than the pastafarian's feigned credence. While there may be a discussion about what the cut-off is, the burden of proof is on the believers of each religion to provide a case that at least makes it

probable that a reasonable person would believe their prophet was speaking from a place of authority. This shifts the credentials of religious exemptions from mere assent (which the pastafarians have taken advantage of) to the actual reasonableness of the creeds.

Conclusion

Therefore, the definition of faith stands as the voluntary assent of the mind to to the Divine authority. God's credibility can be established by moving from His absolutely simple existence to His necessary identity with His ideas, and therefore God is truth. If God is truth, God *qua* a source of revelation is always and everywhere reliable. Thus if God demonstrates the approval of revelation through miracles, it entails that that revelation is to be accepted on His authority. This, however, does not negate the general existence of lawfulness in the world, but rather affirm the primacy of God *qua* First Cause and Ground of Being. Furthermore, assent to God's revelation does not entail human comprehension of God's ways but merely the apprehension of His reliability, and the insufficiency of the world as a closed system. Lastly, the theory and arguments for the reliability and justification of the assent of faith are necessary to avoid making a virtue of appeals to desire or fear, or worse misanthropic cults.

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