

## **A Philosophical Cum Religious Extrapolation of the Cognitive Postulates of St. Thomas Aquinas**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This research focuses on analytic evaluation of St. Thomas Aquinas' gnoseological debate, which is extrapolated from his philosophical and religious/theological views. Plato's epistemic tradition championed by St. Augustine held sway seemingly in the entire medieval epistemic discourse before the arrival of Aquinas on the epistemic rostrum. The epistemological preamble, which verifies the value of our knowledge, was not ignored by Aquinas when he came on board to philosophize and theologize. After St. Augustine toed the line of Plato in his epistemic positions, Aquinas adopted the style of Aristotle in his epistemic postulates. As a churchman, Aquinas parted ways with Aristotle in almost all his gnoseological conclusions. Similarly, Aquinas did not subscribe to St. Augustine's idea of illumination and employed Aristotle's theory of abstraction as the way knowledge can be derived. Aquinas based the truth of knowledge as evidence of being on objective condition unlike St. Augustine who anchored the truth of knowledge on certainty or any subjective disposition. This radical shift by Aquinas from the position of his predecessors is construed in this study as a way of cognitive expansion and solidification and not a problem as such. In this work, historical, textual, contextual, and analytic methods were adopted proximately or remotely.*

**Keywords:** Cognitive Debate; Cognitive Expansion; Solidification; Medieval Epistemology.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Medieval epistemology articulated by Christian scholars like St. Thomas Aquinas primarily has a religious cum philosophica undertone and Christocentric in approach. Their works are characterised by reactions to the postulations of the ancient Greek philosophers and those of the Middle Ages mostly on either the works of Plato, or Aristotle. In this research, gnoseology and epistemology are employed interchangeably. Cognitive debate within the context of this work means one and the same thing with epistemic or gnoseological debate. Though St. Augustine (354-430) lived in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, medieval epistemology began with St. Augustine up to the time of William of Ockham. St. Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian and his epistemology toed the line of Aristotle. He set out to Christianise Aristotle's philosophy. This Churchman did commentaries on Aristotle's works including his epistemological positions. Coming from the background and understanding that philosophy is an ancillary to theology, one would find some theological underpinnings in Aquinas' cognitive ideas.

It is apparent that there is interconnectivity between Aquinas' epistemology and his psychology. Those who wish to separate Aquinas' epistemology from his psychology do so out of convenience. It is important also to note that Aquinas did not key into Aristotle's view on every issue. Expectedly, just as it has been a tradition in philosophy he differs from Aristotle on some positions. As articulated by (Omoregbe, 2003):

“God does not know the world, because God is infinitely perfect while the world is imperfect. If God were to know the world, Aristotle argues, it would become part of him. This would mean that imperfection is part of God, because the world

is imperfect. Aquinas, however, did not follow Aristotle on this point. On the contrary Aquinas maintains that since God is the author of the world, by knowing himself, he knows the world since the world came from him” (p. 74).

This epistemological disengagement is an eye opener to the kind of epistemic mission and vision Aquinas sets out to pursue and accomplish. This attitude of epistemological shift is not uncommon in philosophy right from the earliest times. It is indeed a way of *cognitive expansion and solidification*. Among the scholastics, St. Thomas Aquinas’ contributions marked a significant turning point in the history of medieval philosophy and theology in general and epistemology and religion in particular. Aquinas differentiates various kinds of cognitive experience (knowledge). Apart from his ideas of abstraction as the source of knowledge, knowledge of God, for him, is the most detailed of all knowledge.

### **A BRIEF PROFILE OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**

St. Thomas Aquinas was born (1225) at the castle of Roccasecca, near Aquino which was a city between Rome and Naples (Wadell, 2009). He was fondly called by his friends, “the great dumb ox”, yet seen by his teachers as the “dumb ox”, that will make his impact to the utmost part of the earth (Wadell, 2009). One of his teachers that is said to have made the greatest influence in his life was the German philosopher Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great (Theiss & Grüsser, 1994). Aquinas’ nickname, the dumb ox” many have said, perhaps, may have come about as a result of his slow manner and stout figure. He was also reputed as a man of high spirituality and robust intellectual energy. He was the greatest philosopher of the middle ages and was popularly known as the angelic doctor because of his unique contributions in Catholic theology. As an Aristotelian, his epistemology followed that of Aristotle.

His parents who were well-to-do wanted to give him an ecclesiastical career. He was therefore sent to the Benedictine Abbey at Monte Cassino for early education and went from there to the University of Naples in 1239. At Naples, he came under the influence of the Order of Preachers founded by St. Dominic. Their vocation was spreading of the gospel to the people, both by word and deed and life of poverty. When Aquinas joined the order in 1243, his family reacted angrily and locked him up in the castle. To his parents, the Dominicans appeared to be an order of a bunch of “rag tag” and “never do well”. After gaining his freedom, Aquinas travelled to Paris and later to Cologne to study Philosophy and Theology. He returned to the University of Paris in 1252 to lecture and received his doctorate in Theology in 1256. From 1259 to 1268, he taught at several Dominican monasteries in Italy (Tunga & Singh, 2016).

Aquinas was a prolific writer; the two most outstanding of his works are *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. His other works include: *De Ente et Essentia*, *De Malo*, *De Veritate*, *De Anima*, *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averoista*, and his other commentaries on Aristotle’s works. He later returned to Paris only to go to Naples in 1272. St. Thomas died at Fossanova, near his birth place in 1274 (Ezenwanne, 2011).

### **BACKGROUND TO MEDIEVAL EPISTEMOLOGY**

It is worthy to note from the outset that one may not be mistaken also to describe this brief historical survey as background to Medieval Philosophy. The great Roman Empire was under threat from two fronts namely, the internal squabble and the incursion of the Barbarians from the North; this took place in the 4th century AD. Following this threat Emperor Constantine, who later became Constantine the Great, relocated the capital city of the empire from Rome to Constantinople, a city he founded close to the Black Sea. The

empire was finally divided into two in 395. Rome became the capital of the West, while the Capital of the East was at Constantinople (Haegeland, 2019).

Similarly, the barbarians plundered Rome in 410, and in 476, the entire Western part of the Roman Empire was totally annihilated. The Eastern Empire continued to flourish until Constantinople was captured by the Turks and its name was changed to Istanbul in the year 529 (Luttwak, 2009). This became significant in the history of the middle ages. At this time, the Church put a final nail on Greek philosophy. It was from this year 529 that monasteries took monopoly of education, reflection, research and other academic activities (Emmanuel, 2018). This time in the medieval history of philosophy, Christianity was taken to be absolute which must be accepted. As it were, whether Christian truth must be believed without question or whether they can be subjected to reason was the hinge of the situation. Is there any connection between the positions and teachings of Greek philosophy and the Christian Bible was among the questions of primary significance to the medieval philosophers.

Two issues were prominent at this moment thus; an attempt to synthesize faith and reason; and the efforts to prove the existence of God with the aid of the human ratiocinative acumen. St. Anselm's Ontological argument and St. Thomas Aquinas' *Quin qui via*-five ways are the most prominent of the proofs of the existence of God not losing sight of the contributions of the earlier medieval thinkers like Aristides Marcianus and St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. The philosophic connections of this period where faith took dominance over reason were Platonism championed by St. Augustine and St. Gregory. In the last part of the 8th century down to the 14th century, the idea of spiritualism and nationhood took over and overshadowed the mundane way of approaching issues. At this period the philosophic thought and systems of the Carolingian renaissance was elaborated. It will be a mark of analytic inconsistency if I fail to note that not all medieval philosophers were Christians. Notable among the Arabian (Islamic) medieval thinkers include: Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and Averos (Ibn Rashid), who had great influence on the medieval period (Emmanuel et al., 2018). It is in the philosophy of the Angelic doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas that Christian philosophy came to its high point. This historical analysis cannot be concluded without recalling that Plato's Academy in Athens, Greece, and Aristotle's Lyceum were destroyed around 529. The Christian medieval thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas never threw away completely the philosophic ideas of Plato and Aristotle, respectively (Uzoigwe, 2019).

## **ST. THOMAS AQUINAS' COGNITIVE DEBATE**

In his approach to epistemology, Aquinas like Aristotle holds that there are no innate ideas. At birth the human mind is a *tabula rasa* and this view was greatly adopted and further espoused by the empiricist thinkers most notable was John Locke. Aquinas maintains that all knowledge comes from sense perception. He says: "*Nihil est intellectus quod non prius fuerit in sensus* -There is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses" (Bates & Bates, 2017). Aquinas' epistemic postulates can be discussed under the following headings:

### **How is Knowledge Acquired?**

In his response on knowledge acquisition, Aquinas argues, "For there to be knowledge, there must be a similarity of the thing known in the knower" (*Summa Theologiae* 1.q.88a i ad 2m). Essentially, what is known must be present in an immaterial way in the mind of the knower. There must be similarity between what is known and what is in the mind of the knower. In his work, *De Veritate*, Aquinas in order to instantiate his claim articulates: "The first comparison of being with the intellect lies in the fact that being corresponds to the intellect. This correspondence is known as 'Adequatio' of the thing and

the intellect and in it truth is formally realized” (Wippel, 2007). Aquinas distinguished between different kinds of knowledge, especially sensory knowledge, which for him, is the lower form of knowledge. It arises from sensing particular object or thing. They are determined by the apprehension of particular thing. Employing Zanzky’s example, “Brutes have sensation, they don’t have knowledge of universal or general ideas. So the image which arises from imagination and which represents a particular material object perceived by the senses is itself particular” (Wippel, 2007).

One must not lose sight of the fact that the thought or ideas which Aquinas expressed in his *opus magnum*, *Summa Theologiae*, is an elaboration of Aristotle. According to Aquinas, knowledge can be derived by abstraction (Vaughan et al., 2016). Abstraction is the process of isolating from an image of a particular object or thing, the elements that are essential to its being an object of that kind. For him, knowledge is derived when an active intellect abstracts a concept from an image. For example, from the image of a dog the active intellect abstracts the qualities of being alive, four legs, etc. To be noted is that Aristotle in his bifurcating approach to knowledge had earlier argued that the form of an object is in the mind or intellect of the receiver, while the matter is outside the intellect of the knower. He held this view to escape the absurdity of holding that the material object exists in the mind the same way in the physical world. To be recalled is that matter is material, while the form is immaterial.

To escape the pitfall in Aristotle’s position, Aquinas went in contradistinction to Aristotle’s view by arguing that it is not only the form but also the species of an object that can be found in the intellect. A species for Aquinas is an admixture of the form and a general idea which Aquinas called *common matter*. He contrasted common matter with individual matter, which is a stuff that constitutes the physical bulk of an object. This position of the angelic doctor can lead to idealism. Nevertheless, he anticipated the criticism.

In his epistemic ideas, Aquinas further holds that science is not aimed at knowing any particular object, but rather at knowing “what is common to all objects of a certain kind” (Green et al., 2007). By implication Aquinas’ position has a close similitude with that of the modern scientists. To resolve this matter, Aquinas distinguished between what is known and that by which what is known is known. This, (Ebojele & Ezenwanne, 2014) calls Aquinas’ epistemic gymnast.

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

The Aristotelian tradition where Aquinas belongs maintains that truth is the conformity of the mind with reality. By implication, when what is in the mind conforms to what is in reality, then, that is truth (Ramsey, 2013). In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas defines truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (Aquinas, 2000) that is, conformity of the intellect with reality. Further in his classical definition Aquinas writes: “Truth is defined by the conformity of intellect and the thing, and hence to know this conformity is to know truth. But in no way can sense know this. For although sight has the likeness of a visible thing, yet it does not know the comparison which exists between the thing seen and that which itself apprehends concerning it. But the intellect can know its own conformity with the intelligible thing: Yet it does not apprehend it by knowing of a thing what a thing is...”. To say that truth lies in the conformity of the intellect with reality implies that truth lies in judgment, that is, the judgment of intellect concerning reality... It is the function of the intellect to make judgments about things and it is conscious of itself making such judgments. Thus truth pertains to the intellect not to senses (Omogbe, 2003) reflecting on this adds:

“Saint Thomas repeats the classical definition of truth: *Veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus* (truth is a perfect correspondence between the mind and the thing). Saint Thomas exactly specifies the importance of this definition, indicating the cases where the correspondence required for truth is not present. This happens either when the mind adds some element which the represented thing does not possess, or when the mind takes away some element that the thing contain” (p. 300).

### **THE FOUR SENSES POSTULATED BY AQUINAS**

Apart from his *quin qui via*-five ways which Aquinas employed in his proof of the existence of God (that is, the cosmological argument, which comes subsequently), he, in addition to the five outer senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell) goes much further to postulate four internal senses which include: common sense, imagination, estimative sense (the cognitive sense) and memory. When he was asked how ideas are formed, Aquinas went back to Aristotle. Employing his four internal senses (Omoregbe, 2003) presents it thus:

“When we perceive things with our various senses, the common sense put together the various perceptions and synthesizes them into coherent whole. The power of imagination forms an image (a phatasmata) out of them. Then the active intellect takes over and extracts (abstracts) the essence out of that image, leaving out the non-essential aspects. It is then passed on to the passive intellect which receives it as a *species impressa* (impressed species) and becomes transformed into it thereby producing a *species expressa* (expressed specie) i.e. a concept, a universal idea. The object of knowledge then becomes immaterially part of oneself. Your knowledge becomes part of you. What you know becomes part of you in an immaterial way” (p. 74).

### **KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: THE HIGH POINT OF AQUINAS’ GNOSEOLOGICAL DEBATE**

It is of importance to state from the very beginning of this aspect of our findings that in recent times some philosophers are of the view that the cosmological argument employed by St Thomas Aquinas to prove the existence of God is also part of his epistemology.

“The cosmological argument which was championed in the medieval era of philosophical discourse can also be included in St. Thomas’ epistemology. It is so because there is an element of experiential and of course metaphysical undertone in the arguments espoused by Aquinas. It only depends on how one construes it. For me, it is not out of place to see it from the epistemological divide. It is no longer news that there is a link between epistemology and metaphysics” (p. 96).

There is no doubt that the crux of St. Thomas Aquinas’ epistemology in particular and philosophy in general is on the knowledge of God or proof of the existence of God. It is also of importance to note that one of the ways where Aquinas differs from Aristotle in his epistemology is on this idea of the knowledge of God. Apart from Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God, Aquinas had earlier rejected the argument from ontology and posited...his own proof for the existence of God popularly called cosmological argument. To be noted is that this argument dates back to Aristotle’s argument for the “prime mover.” Solomon further argued that, “The basis of these arguments is the intolerability if not the unthinkability of an infinite regress and the need for some ultimate explanation” (p. 115).

The first and pronounced argument on God's existence advanced by Aquinas is that from motion. It is apparent and certain to our senses that things are in motion. It is also evident that nothing can be moved unless it is in potency to that toward which it is moved. However, a thing is moved in so far as it is in act. Experience has also shown that what is moved is moved by another, but if that by which it is moved is itself moved, then it needs another to move it. Movement therefore cannot continue *ad in finitum*, because there will be no first move. It therefore becomes necessary that there is a first move, and this everyone understands to be God-The *primum immobile*, the unmoved mover or the first mover. The argument from the nature of the efficient cause is the second. There is an order of efficient cause in the world and in no known case is a thing found to be the efficient cause of itself. If such is the case, it would be prior to itself. As it were, it is not also possible to have a movement indefinitely. If we remove the cause, we also remove the effect. If there is no first cause among efficient causes there will be no ultimate cause. It is therefore necessary to admit a first efficient cause, which is given the name God.

Aquinas' third cosmological argument is that from possibility and necessity or from the contingency of being. Experience has shown that in nature there are things that are possible and some that are not. All the things in the world come and go. They come into existence and eventually get corrupted and go. It then implies that their existence is not necessary, they may exist or may not exist. If all beings are of this nature, it would be impossible to explain their coming into existence. There must therefore be a necessary being that is responsible for the coming of being of the contingent being. Nothing would have come into existence at all if there were no necessary being. It is the nature of the necessary being to exist, because it cannot but exist. This being is called God.

The perfection or gradation of things forms the crux of the fourth argument advanced by Aquinas. In things, there are some more and some less good, true, noble, etc. The perfections experienced or observed in the world shows that they must have come from something that is perfect, and that which is perfect is God. Aquinas' argument from Order or governance of the world ranks the fifth. We experience things that lack knowledge but always work towards the best. The end is achieved by design, but anything that lacks knowledge cannot move towards the end unless it is directed by more intelligent being that is responsible for their tending toward their end in their activities. It must be this intelligent being that has given them this orientation towards their end, and that is responsible for the order of observable or experiential things of the cosmos. This intelligent being is what we call God.

From another perspective, it is Aristotle's position that God is perfect and because the world is imperfect and God is infinitely perfect, God does not know the world. The implication of this position is that, if God were to know the world, it would become part of Him. This will further imply that imperfection would become part of God. Aquinas goes in sharp contra distinction to this view and argues that God is the author of the world, by knowing Himself He knows the world, since the world came from Him. From another perspective, Aquinas holds that our knowledge of God is imperfect. We cannot know God's essence; all we know about God is by analogy.

Similarly, Aquinas did not only disagree with Aristotle, he also disagrees with St. Augustine that the human intellect needs special Divine illumination, to acquire knowledge. For him, the intellect is naturally capable of acquiring knowledge without Divine illumination. To round off this analysis, it is considered necessary to point out that though Aquinas disagreed with Aristotle on some points, his proof of the existence of God – *quin qui via* (five ways) discussed above has a close link with Aristotle's four causes namely, the material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause. This really shows that Aquinas had knowledge expansion and consolidation of the works of his predecessors.

## EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The thoughts espoused by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* are critical elaboration of Aristotle. This paper has been an attempt to give an analytic evaluation extrapolating the cognitive insight of St. Thomas Aquinas, which of course, complements his philosophy and theology. It has been pointed out that truth for Aquinas is the correspondence of the intellect with reality. In Aquinas' understanding, knowledge is derived by abstraction, when an active intellect abstracts a particular concept from an image. This work did not lose sight of Aquinas' postulate that the knowledge of God is the most detailed of all; though he made it clear that, it is not as if the human mind is not capable of grasping the knowledge of God, but that the knowledge of physical objects are better suited for human capabilities. St. Thomas Aquinas to a very large extent can be rightly described as an empiricist, in that he believed in application of sense experience in grappling with the problems of knowledge. That does not preclude the fact that he also incorporated reason in some areas of his gnoseological discourse. The epistemic position of the philosophers of Augustinian tradition, and some positions of Aristotelian tradition where Aquinas belongs are carefully jettisoned by Aquinas. It has been clearly demonstrated that Aquinas was not only a deeply religious man and a theologian, but indeed a philosopher in a very true sense of it.

In his gnoseology, Aquinas abandoned Augustinian illumination and in the proof of the knowledge of God he also downplayed Aristotelian position that God does not know the world, because for Aquinas, God superlatively knows the world which he is the architect. *Cognitive expansion and solidification* arises from the analysis of Aquinas' approach in a contradistinction to those of St. Augustine, his fellow churchman and Aristotle, whose epistemic tradition he adopted as a take-off point. This radical shift helps in insightful introduction, awakening and articulation of new ideas thereby bringing further development into the epistemic enterprise. Such is indeed a good development and blessing in disguise and not a problem as such bearing in mind the expansion and consolidation of the epistemic frontiers as its resultant effect in the final analysis.

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