

Scot C. Bontrager (HX8336)

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## Nature and Grace in the First Question of the Summa

The question of the respective roles of nature and grace in human knowledge is one with which we seem destined to wrestle until the eschaton. As recently as September 2006 the issue briefly surfaced once again in the broader public discourse; Pope Benedict XVI addressed the topic in a speech that garnered a substantial amount of media attention for his comments on Islam.<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate that the remainder of this discussion of the limits of contemporary scientific epistemology seems to have gone unnoticed by the academy. Here at the south end of our own campus the validity of seriously discussing theology in a university setting is taken for granted. This position is not unquestioned ‘up the hill.’ Even in Aquinas’s own age the question was live—the answer could safely be assumed, but the question was still raised. The problem is far more acute for us now given that the consensus definition of scientific knowledge has become, as Benedict XVI frames it, “the kind of certainty resulting from the interplay of mathematical and empirical elements.”<sup>2</sup> In Aquinas’s day, music and art were considered inferior and probable sciences—sciences dependent for their first principles on the conclusions of other sciences—but unquestionably sciences.<sup>3</sup> Now they are assigned to the dreaded sub-scientific status in the modern university: the humanities. I do not think it

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1. Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html) (accessed January 31, 2010).
  2. *Ibid.*
  3. ST I 1.2c

inaccurate to say that theology is seen by those in the “hard” sciences as even less valid in the university than the humanities. Theology is seen as, at best, superstition, and more frequently a means of social control through manipulation of people’s fears and desires. This paper explores what, if any, help Aquinas’s arguments for the validity (and supremacy) of the science of sacred doctrine can offer us in the current discourse concerning the status of theology in the contemporary academy by looking at how Aquinas employs the categories of nature and grace.

In the medieval period, natural reason and the sciences that arise from it consisted of what we now consider both sciences and humanities. As stated above, music was considered a science, but one that depended on the higher science of arithmetic.<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking, natural reason consists of anything that could be determined by the senses (empirical) or is either self-evident (tautological) or deducible from self-evident principles or the conclusions of another science. Aquinas, following Aristotle and the earlier scholastics, held that there is nothing in the intellect which is not first in the senses.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas’s epistemology is a kind of *tabula rasa* empiricism coupled with a positive view of natural reason’s ability to work with abstract concepts. By the natural light of our intellect we are capable of knowing true things about the world; “he does not need a new light added to his natural light in order to know the truth in all

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4. ST I 1.2c

5. ‘*nihil est in intellectu quod non fuit prius in sensu.*’ Aristotle, *De Anime* § III.7-8; *Metaphysics*, § I.1.

things, but only in such things as transcend his natural knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Natural reason (which is itself a kind of grace, but one given by in our nature) is sufficient for knowledge of the world.

Our natural abilities to discern truth about the world ceases with things invisible—lacking senses to perceive the invisible world there is no way for us to know truths that lead to our eternal beatitude—the perfection for which we were created. The most we can do through natural reason is determine what God is not, but only through discerning God’s effects in the world. To get beyond our natural limitations and progress towards our perfection (sharing in the divine nature), we need God’s help: an infusion of grace. This grace, for Aquinas, comes in the form of the Holy Scriptures, which are God’s willing self-revelation to us.<sup>7</sup> Grace, specifically the grace of revelation as found in the Holy Scriptures, enables a “radical transcendence of the self.”<sup>8</sup> Grace, then, is the method and means by which we can come to know things necessary for our perfection that we could not know by our natural reason.

Sacred doctrine, the teaching that come from grace, is the highest form of science since all other sciences point towards the same end. Just as military science is used in service of political science, making political science superior to military science, so all other sciences point towards the perfection of humanity which can only be fully known through the science of sacred doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Instead of certainty resulting from mathematical and empirical elements,

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6. ST IIae 109.1c

7. Joseph P. Wawrykow, “Scripture,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 137.

8. Joseph P. Wawrykow, “Nature and Grace,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 98.

9. ST I 1.5c

Aquinas's vision of the science of sacred teaching is even more certain given that its certainty comes "from the light of God's knowledge, which cannot be deceived."<sup>10</sup> This certainty is superior to the certainty that comes from other sciences since by its very nature it transcends natural human reason whereas all the other sciences are limited to what can be grasped by natural human reason. Given that "the knowledge proper to this science comes from revelation rather than natural reason," the line between what we have by grace and what we can grasp by natural reason is the point of demarcation between sacred doctrine and the other sciences.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the wisdom that comes from sacred doctrine is not limited "merely in one domain, but absolutely."<sup>12</sup> Since the wisdom that comes from sacred doctrine is certain and of the highest cause, it is the highest wisdom and applies to all other realms of knowledge and wisdom.

What we call natural theology is permissible in Aquinas' understanding because God's effects can be seen throughout all of creation even as God's essence remains incomprehensible.<sup>13</sup> The content of natural theology is very limited and does not properly fit into the science of sacred doctrine, but is permissible to use as a preamble to the science, "The existence of God and all the other truths about God that can be known through natural reason are not articles of faith, but rather preambles to the articles."<sup>14</sup> Aquinas can make this move

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10. ST 1 1.5c

11. ST I 1.6c

12. ST I 1.6c

13. ST I 2.2.c

14. ST I 2.2 ad1

because he holds that, “grace does not destroy nature but rather perfects it.”<sup>15</sup> Nature, which includes our natural capacity for reasoning, is good, but insufficient for our beatitude. Grace is what allows our natural capacities, which were distorted in the fall, to overcome their distortion and once again draw us to the end for which we were created.<sup>16</sup>

Given the positive relationship between grace and nature, Aquinas is comfortable using the products of the natural sciences in the elucidation of sacred doctrine. While knowledge from sacred doctrine is certain because its source is God, our understanding of it may need assistance by clarifying and articulating its concepts through the work of the natural sciences. Since our knowledge comes through our senses, natural science is necessary for us to correctly understand what is given in grace.<sup>17</sup> The science of sacred doctrine thus construed is primarily concerned with the correct interpretation of scripture, which may have meanings other than the obvious (literal) interpretation. Given that not all people have properly trained intellects and some are terribly unsophisticated, passages of scripture are written that describe the incorporeal God using metaphors of embodiment to ensure that scriptural truths can be grasped by everyone. Natural sciences can and should be used as tools to aid in the proper understanding of the truths revealed by grace. But, when correctly understood, what is known

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15. ST I 1.8ad2; I have questions about the curious statement that follows concerning how the natural inclination of the will follows charity—my own understanding is that the will, without grace, is unable to follow charity as discussed in ST IIae 109ff.

16. Joseph P. Wawrykow, “Original Sin,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 102.

17. ST I 1.9c

by grace is always correct. Aquinas does not discount that we do misunderstand and misinterpret scripture, but asserts that scripture is never wrong.<sup>18</sup>

What help does this framework provide theology in the contemporary academy? Modern empirical science rejects any form of teleology—within this framework there is no perfection for humanity, no aim towards which we are going. Humans—like all living things—are simply one stage of an ongoing evolutionary process that is determined only by what traits allow our genetic material to be passed on. The notion of a beatitude or perfection cannot be empirically or mathematically determined and therefore is inadmissible as scientific. Without the teleological assumption, Aquinas’s arguments for the primacy of sacred doctrine fall on deaf ears. There is no need for grace to enable our beatitude if there is no beatitude. Given the rules by which science now operates, it is no wonder that theology is relegated to the south end of campus. Benedict XVI’s questioning of those very rules seems to be a promising way of reestablishing a role for theology in the academy. However, as long as empirical science continues to deliver on its promises of health, comfort and less manual labor, it will be difficult for these criticisms to be heard. Why search for our ultimate beatitude when what we have now is not so bad? Excuse me while I catch this re-run of “Survivor...”

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18. ST I 1.5ad2