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Aquinas's View of Natural Theology

Natural theology, true knowledge of God without appeal to divine grace, has been a live question in Christianity since Tertullian asked what Jerusalem has to do with Athens. The question is variously framed as philosophy (Athens) or natural reason over against the divine truths revealed in scripture or the life of Christ. Aquinas comes down decisively on the side of permitting natural theology and acknowledging that it does allow us to know things about God (I.12.12). It allows us to know that God exists and that God is the first cause (I.12.12c). It does not, however, allow us to know the deep truths about God which are beyond God's visible causes; e.g. that God is triune. For this, grace is necessary (I.12.13r1).

Aquinas's epistemology is teleological in the sense that it depends on the final state of humanity—beholding God. Once we understand why humanity was created, we are able to grasp how it is that we can, in our incomplete state, begin to know things of God through grace and through natural reason (Shanley's commentary ¶301-302). Humanity's imperfect knowledge is ordered towards our ultimate happiness as a rock is ordered to seek the lowest point. Even in our fallen and corrupt state we still seek our beatitude—blindly and without success. Graced knowledge surpasses our corruption and finitude and gives us a means of seeking our beatitude beyond our nature, but our nature is still active.

On the whole I agree with Aquinas on this issue. I find the teleological arguments to be compelling and reasonable (and credit them in part with my own return to the faith). Where I differ from Aquinas is in my understanding of creation. I believe that creation itself is a kind of grace and that natural human reason is also an expression of God's grace and goodness. The superadded grace of revelation in Christ and through the scriptures (and prophesy) do offer us knowledge that transcends our "natural" capacities. My point is that even our "natural" capacities are grace upon grace and so I'm not so quick to draw the line between nature and grace that Aquinas is.