

Thomas Aquinas: Christian Conscience and Human Actions

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In my twenties, I was completely invested in the fortified religio-philosophical system known as Thomism. Catholicism was a massive castle of argumentation that was impenetrable to any skeptical challenger that might bombard the system with (what I assumed were) futile attacks. I recall reading Umberto Eco in his dissertation on Aquinas' aesthetics commenting that he, too, was once an ardent Thomist until he came to the conclusion that the system just didn't work. At that time, I couldn't understand why anyone would come to that conclusion. How could something so vast and, as my friend James Kelley said, "elegant," be fundamentally flawed? (Dyer, 2013)

Abstract: *It is not the intention of this writer, nor is it possible to diminish the vital contribution of Thomas Aquinas to Christianity and Western philosophy. Indeed, an author of any caliber will demonstrate inconsistencies and certainly one as great as Aquinas should be given a pass as they examine difficult ontological questions. Instead this paper concerns itself with the question of Christian conscience as informed by the teachings of Aquinas and as put forward in *The Summa Theologica* (1992). The purpose is to analyze the logical coherency of Aquinas's arguments and defenses for their utility in making decisions of Christian conscience. Thus, it is not intended as an indictment of Aquinas himself. The paper introduces his views representing the foundation for his assertion on conscience, human actions, comparing and contrasting some to those of Aristotle, to whom he often defers. But, the primary focus will be to show how Aquinas presents logically incoherent arguments concerning conscience and human actions and how this presents insurmountable moral dilemmas for Christians and ethical people to this day.*

1. Introduction

There is an urgent need for an honest assessment of Thomism and to highlight the difficulties it presents to both modern Christians and non-Christians. The difficulty for Aquinas and the Thomists begins as Aquinas attempts to defend church tenants by relying on the ontology of Aristotle. For example, in drawing upon Aristotle, Aquinas asserts there is a First Cause or unmovable mover. However, he radically departs from Aristotle when he recasts the First Cause as "God," which he then personifies in the Trinity, as well as angels. Aquinas also incorporates the idea of evil as a privation of good, but then personifies evil as "the devil." It is within this departure from Aristotle that Aquinas's arguments begin to unravel and they no longer offer persons seeking moral guidance meaningful resolution. Aquinas offers no explanation or proof for how he arrives at his conclusion of a Trinity of God or angels from his premise of a First Cause. He also fails to show how he can conclude that the absence of good called evil is somehow a presence known as the devil or demons. The important point is that while this may be a perfectly acceptable approach to faith, it cannot be defended as a reasoned approach for the conduct of one's life.

It is widely accepted that to understand the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, one must look to the scholasticism of the Middle Ages and the particular way in which the ideas of Aristotle are first introduced during that period. According to Colin Morris (1990):

The works of Aristotle on physics and metaphysics had been previously unknown in the Latin West. They arrived primarily through the Arab world, and with them were translated commentaries by Arabic Aristotelians, notably Averroes. (Morris, 216)

Morris points out that in addition to impacting the natural sciences, these ancient Western ideas (heretofore lost to the West), are also to have a dramatic impact upon theology. These ideas are perceived to be heresy and largely contrary to the teachings of faith (216).

However, as Morris notes: “The reconciliation between Catholic belief and the new learning was largely the works of two great Dominican thinkers... (216).” One of them is Thomas Aquinas (1274), according to Morris. Most importantly Morris asserts:

Much of Thomas’s theology was traditional in character, but (as his biographer observed) he ‘discovered new methods and employed newsystem of proofs’. In particular he argued that, distinct from the supernatural order of grace, there was a natural order which could be studied by reason, but which itself pointed towards God: there were natural proofs of the existence of God, and natural grounds for ethics. (216)

Here it can be seen that for Thomas Aquinas, the ideas of Aristotle provide an essential tool to argue not only for the existence of God, but for a system of ethics. For such a system to have utility to persons of conscience, it is reasonable to ask whether that system is logically coherent and consistent. Because the powerful legacy of Aquinas endures, so too does the compelling relevance of this question.

Simona Vieru (2010) reinforces how central the ideas of Aristotle are in defining Aquinas’s views:

Aquinas approved of Aristotle’s description of man as a ‘social animal’; he agreed that man may only achieve virtue when he or she is part of society. Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that the purpose of law was to promote the good of the community, or the ‘common good’.

Aquinas employed Aristotle’s syllogistic method and teleological approach. One plausible explanation is that Aquinas found ‘truth’ in Aristotle’s approach (i.e. Aristotle’s systematic and logical approach appealed to Aquinas). Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* exemplifies his preference towards a systematic, detailed and logical approach. (Vieru, 7)

For Aquinas then, Aristotle provides the rational basis for defending his core beliefs and this is further evidenced within the text of *The Summa* by his repeated references to Aristotle in presenting his arguments. For example, Aquinas states: “Further those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher says is true of the first principles of demonstration” (*Summa*, 11). As this example illustrates, Aquinas’s continuous reference to “the Philosopher” is to Aristotle and his intent is to employ Aristotle as evidentiary to his thesis. This use of Aristotle and his syllogistic methods is far from accidental. It is Aquinas’s

primary alternative defense for his ethical and theological ontology, with the other being that one can know the truth through faith (3).

Within *The Summa*, Aquinas describes the nature of God, presents arguments for the existence of God and details how God is personified in the Trinity. Aquinas argues that God is the First Cause of all things. According to Aquinas, because things moved by other things cannot go on to infinity: "...it is necessary to arrive at a first mover which is moved by no other. And this everyone understands to be God" (13). Thomas Aquinas supplies additional arguments for the existence of God even though he asserts that God's existence is self-evident to those who are "learned" (11).

Aquinas also describes the nature of God as being absent of substance, unmovable and in a state of "act." (14) According to Aquinas: "...it has been already proved (Q. II, A. 3), that God is the First Mover unmoved. Therefore it is clear that God is not a body" (14). There can be little doubt that his ideas of a First Cause without body, can be seen to be derived from the thinking of Aristotle (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 601).

However, Thomas Aquinas makes a radical departure from Aristotle (1992) when he links his concept of First Cause to the idea of a being he calls God and then personifies God into the Trinity. As the word implies, Trinity represents the three personifications of God. Consistent with Christian teaching, Aquinas identifies the Trinity as the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost (153).

Thomas Aquinas describes how God is both a unity and is personified into the Trinity. In the following passage Aquinas explains how a unified God can be a Trinity:

...it was shown above (Q. XXIX, A. 4) that this word person signifies in God a relation as subsisting in the divine nature. It was also established (Q. XXVIII AA. I, 3, 4) that there are several real relations in God; and hence it follows that there are also several realities subsistent in the divine nature, which means that there are several persons in God. (167)

It is important to observe that for Aquinas one of these persons of God takes on a mortal form. The son of God is both God and man. Aquinas asserts: "These words are to be understood of Christ's nature, wherein He is less than the Father, and subject to Him; but in His divine nature He is equal to the Father" (228). In addition to the Trinity, Aquinas also discusses the angels whom he calls a perfect assimilation of God (269). As a result, the angels can also be characterized as an additional personification of God.

For Aquinas, all goodness originates from God. He declares: "Therefore, since God is the first effecting cause of all things, it is manifest that the aspect of good and of desirableness belong to Him..." (28). However, Aristotle has a very different view of goodness. There is no evidence that Aristotle thinks that goodness originates from a deity or from the First Cause. In *Physics*, Aristotle (1992) appears to define good as living well because it is derived from lessons of pleasure or pain (Aristotle, 330).

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1992) says: "...by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become cowardly" (349). Several important observations must be made concerning this statement.

First, it is clear that contrary to Aquinas, Aristotle does not see the virtue of men as originating from some deity, but rather from learning and experience with pleasure and pain. Second, the assertion made by Aristotle is one which is based on observation. Aristotle is seeking truth by looking at what people do and drawing conclusions. But for Aquinas the starting point is entirely different. Based on faith, Aquinas *knows* the truth before observation. He is using argumentation to defend what he is *certain* of, without observing or gathering data to seek truth.

The values of conscience are also given expression by Aristotle (1992) in *Politics*: "If, then, there are many forms of government, it is evident that there is not a single virtue of the good citizen which is perfect virtue (473)." This view of virtue in citizens based on Aristotle's observations of differing forms of governance is clearly at variance with those of Aquinas. These differences from Aquinas are important to highlight because absent divine revelation and faith, Aquinas employs Aristotle's ontology as his primary defense for his own ontology. In a philosophical sense, Aquinas can only use the logic of Aristotle to defend his views if his views are consistent with Aristotle's ontology. If this is unnecessary, then there is no reason for Aquinas to resort to employing them. One could see a perfectly acceptable argument put forward for Christian teaching based solely on the notion that the truth can be understood by faith. Indeed, though it is unverifiable, many have successfully made just such an argument.

Thomas Aquinas (1992) defines evil as the privation of good. According to Aquinas: "...evil has no formal cause, rather is it a privation of form; likewise neither has it a final cause, but rather is it a privation of order to the proper end, since not only the end has the nature of good, but also the useful, which is ordered to the that end (Summa, 265). He also asserts that evil has an agent which is accidental. This according to Aquinas is because it is an action caused which has an effect (265). Each of these concepts is taken from Aristotle (Metaphysics, 349).

Nonetheless, he also argues for the personification of evil in his descriptions of the devil and demons (583). In addressing whether the sins of man are due to the temptations of the devil, for example, Aquinas states that this is possible directly and indirectly. He writes: "...we might say that he who dries the wood is the cause of the wood burning. In this way, we must admit that the devil is the cause of all our sins..." (583). He adds, however: "But a thing is said to be a direct cause of something when its actions tend to it directly. And in this way the devil is not the cause of every sin. For all are not committed at the devil's instigation, but some are due to the freedom of choice and the corruption of the flesh" (583). Thus, Thomas Aquinas appears to argue that evil is both the absence of goodness and a personified agent of intent.

He also asserts that humans possess both free choice and free will. He says of free will that it is an inclination to something distinguished from natural inclination by being voluntary (432). As a power of the soul, intellect is sometimes higher than will. According to Aquinas: "...a thing is considered to be such absolutely which is considered in itself, but relatively as it is such with regard to something else" (433). But, will can sometimes be higher as a power than the intellect according to Aquinas: "When, therefore, the thing in which it is good is nobler than the soul itself, in which the idea understood, by comparison with such a thing the will is higher than the intellect" (434).

Free will is different from free choice, according to Thomas Aquinas. He distinguishes them in the following way: "...the will is said to regard to an end, which is a desire for itself. But to choose is to desire

something for the sake of obtaining something else..." (440). Although he claims that Free will and free choice are different, he regards them as part of the same power (440). This is the appetitive power of the soul (407).

Yet, Aquinas also strongly argues for the existence of predestination, fate, and preordainment. He begins by laying out his case for predestination as follows: "...the type of this direction of a rational creature towards the end of life eternal is called predestination. For to destiny, is to send. Thus it is clear that predestination, as it regards its objects, is a part of providence" (133). What he expresses in these words he argues is directly the result of God's plan (133). Aquinas observes: "It is fitting that God should predestine men. For all things are subject to his providence" (132). By this reasoning then, there can be nothing that man does which is not in some way at the direction of God.

Aquinas extends this reasoning to address the questions of whether fate or preordainment exists. He orders the causes as first and second and contends that fate is the ordering of the second causes (595). But to further buttress his claim that God's predestination is the source of human behavior, he argues:

Consequently, nothing hinders what happens here by accident, by luck or by chance being reduced to some ordering cause which acts by the intellect. For God alone can change the will as shown above (Q. CV, A. 4). Consequently, the ordering of human actions, the principle of which is the will, must be ascribed to God alone. (593)

Aquinas concludes by asserting that this means all occurrences are preordained through Divine Providence and this admits to the existence of fate (593).

For Thomas Aquinas, the conscience is part of the soul but it is not one of the powers of the soul (426). He says: "...conscience, according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of knowledge to something..." (426). He also asserts: "...the application of knowledge to something is done by some act" (426). Thus, conscience is directly connected to human actions. He describes conscience as an innate knowledge of what is morally correct (synderesis) that serves as a witness to actions and stirs or binds human emotion (426).

It is evident from *The Summa* that Aquinas believes that in order for one to act in good conscience, one must follow the Eternal Law of God. As noted, Aquinas believes humans possess an innate knowledge of this through synderesis. Aquinas says the following about human actions: "When, therefore, a human action tends to the end, according to the order of reason and of the Eternal Law, then that action is right; but when it turns aside from rightness, then it is said to be a sin" (717). He reasons further that all voluntary action is a choice made between good and evil: "Hence it follows that a human action is right or sinful by reason of its being good or evil" (717). It can be inferred that for Aquinas, in order for human actions to be good, they must be informed by the whole of the Christian notion of God, God's goodness, good and evil, in addition to free will and choice.

2. Aquinas's Incoherence

It is a given that decisions of consciences play a critical role in human actions. As with any great thinker, therefore, the ideas of Thomas Aquinas require careful scrutiny before they are applied to such questions. However, Aquinas's arguments present numerous problems. Perhaps it can be argued that one should let faith be their guide in these matters and therefore, one need not call these issues into question. But even if these questions are articles of

faith, Thomas Aquinas has insisted on rational construction to defend them. Therefore, a person of conscience must determine whether these arguments hold up.

It has been noted that Aquinas's notion of God is foundational to his idea of morality. In order to make moral choices (choices of conscience), one must fully accept the goodness of God as represented by the Eternal Law. To do less according to Aquinas, means human actions become sinful (717). As noted, he defines God as the First Cause, the unmoved mover and without a body. In spite of this, he makes a leap in logic that this First Cause is also the three persons of the Trinity whom he calls the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (153). Aquinas does not explain how a bodiless, infinite actuality can take on personages. The question presented to a person seeking to be moral then is, what sort of entity is one to convey their trust and allegiance. What is the nature of this being and how can it be good?

For example, Aquinas writes: "It is absolutely true that God is not a body..." (14). He further asserts that it is impossible for God to exist as matter (15). He also says: "Now since God is being itself by its own essence, created being must be his proper effect..." (34). By "essence," Aquinas is referring to the divine essence of God. This insertion of the word "being" seems to be Aquinas's method of recasting a bodiless, infinite and perfect First Cause as possessing personhood, because he offers no more explanation or proof of how this is possible. Instead as noted, Aquinas moves into describing both the Unity of God (46), the Trinity of God (153), and the angels (269), all as personifications of First Cause or God (167). If it is to be taken on more than faith that this is so, the person seeking to be moral is presented with logical paradoxes.

In describing what he means by "being," Aquinas says: "Hence by its substantial being, anything whatsoever is called being absolute; but by any act added to this it is said to have been relative" (23). He follows this discussion by asserting that good signifies the notion of perfection and that the ultimate perfection is good absolutely (24). Hence, Aquinas is contending that God is good absolutely. But unfortunately, this does not answer the problem of how a bodiless infinite First Cause can be characterized in this manner.

To find an answer to what Aquinas means it is necessary to look at his *On Being and Essence*. Here Thomas Aquinas (2006) states:

We should know that, as the Philosopher says in Book 5 of the *Metaphysics*, something is said to be a being [ens per se] in two different senses: in one sense, [only] those things [are called beings] that are sorted into the ten categories; in the other sense [calling something a being] signifies the truth of a proposition. And the difference between the two is that in the second sense everything can be said to be a being of which a [true] affirmative proposition can be formed, even if it posits nothing in reality; it is in this way that privations and negations are said to be beings... (227)

Aquinas attempts again to draw his meaning from Aristotle, as shown in this passage. Although both Aquinas and Aristotle address the issue of essence separately, one can infer that it is this "second sense" that Aquinas has applied in reference to the "being" which is derived from Aristotle for the First Cause. But even if one accepts this line of reasoning by Aquinas, nowhere does Aristotle attribute this to the first principle of which he writes (*Aristotle, Metaphysics*, 606). There is no evidence that Aristotle perceives a deified Trinitarian presence as the driver of all things, nor even a Unitarian one. Aquinas therefore, is expropriating a concept to defend a predetermined church

tenant and not arriving at a conclusion based on observation or demonstration. This creates a logical fallacy because unfortunately Aquinas is guilty of cherry picking. That is, he is premising the logic of his entire ontology on selected portions of Aristotle and suppressing others.

In the book *A History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell (1967) is not charitable to the writings offered by Aquinas. Russell says of Aquinas:

He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an inquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith. If he can find apparently rational arguments for some parts of the faith, so much the better; if he cannot, he need only fall back on revelation. The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers either of Greece or of modern times. (Russell, 463)

Russell then, is pointing to a central weakness in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas is not engaged in seeking meaning. Instead he seeks rationalizations.

But according to Catherine Peters (2016), the way one should understand Aquinas's use of the word "being" is to know it through analogy by looking at one's self. In discussing Thomist Karol Wojtyła, she says:

The causal relationship of the natural law to the eternal law is also seen in Wojtyła's account of 'person.' Reflection on "person" in the created order, he holds, allows access to some understanding of the divine persons, though Wojtyła hastens to note that 'person' in this case 'must be realized in an incomparably more perfect degree in God. 'There is nonetheless a true analogy between human and divine 'person'. (Peters, 40)

Perhaps it can be argued that understanding personhood would provide insight into understanding the nature of the being that Aquinas describes in connection with the First Cause. But in terms of resolving the question of how such being exists within something bodiless and without substance, it begs the issue. The assertion is that the perfect persons in the First Cause bear a resemblance to the personhood with which one is familiar and this is because the personhood one understands is similar to the perfect persons in the First Cause.

G.K. Chesterton (2016) argues that Aquinas sees form and matter as "actual." This is central to understanding Aquinas's idea of "being," according to Chesterton:

Roughly when he describes a thing as made out of Form and Matter, he very rightly recognises that Matter is the more mysterious and indefinite and featureless element; and that what stamps anything with its own identity is its Form. Matter, so to speak, is not so much the solid as the liquid or gaseous thing in the cosmos; and in this most modern scientists are beginning to agree with him (Chesterton, Par. 16).

Chesterton may indeed be correct that this is how Aquinas defines form and matter, and that this informs Aquinas's understanding of "being." But unfortunately, Aquinas states unambiguously that God exists without form or matter (Aquinas, *Summa*, 15). It is not likely that Chesterton would argue that God is not a being and therefore, does not exist. But this conclusion would be inescapable based on this premise.

As noted, one of the persons of the Trinity (the Son) according to Aquinas is a part man (Summa, 228). This means something infinite and without a body is a finite body. Aquinas fails to explain this apparent contradiction. As he notes: “We must consider therefore that a thing is called infinite because it is not finite” (31). This can only mean that Aquinas concedes to the impossibility of a bodiless, infinite actuality in finite human form. Aquinas also states: “...it is shown that God is immutable” (38). However, he describes the Son in this context: “But since in men generation is a certain kind of change of one proceeding from potency to act, it follows that a man is not equal at first to the father who begets him...” (228).

Aquinas tries to explain away this obvious contradiction by ascribing it to a relation to the Father based on “piety” and “paternity” but this in no way negates the underlying paradox and so is not an adequate explanation (228). Thus, Thomas Aquinas admits that it is a contradiction to assert as he does, that an immutable God changes when it takes on human form and fails to provide an adequate explanation for how this is possible.

For a person of conscience this contradiction must force them to confront their entire understanding of the nature of God and so too the Eternal Law which is supposed to be derived from it. Some modern Christians examine this extensively today. *The Lords’ Witness* (2016) of London for example, make the following observation: “The trinity is therefore a ‘Brainwashometer’. If the victim is prepared to believe that one is three and that a father is his own son and that a son is uncreated, then he is prepared to believe anything at all and so he is fully brainwashed.” Perhaps the vernacular used in this statement can be criticized, nonetheless it reveals a great deal about the contradictions inherent to this and the unsatisfying way in which they are addressed by those who defend it.

Additionally, Aquinas fails to show evidence for how such a First Cause can be the source of goodness. He asserts: “I answer that, Good and being are really the same...” (Summa, 23). Thus, Aquinas is arguing that God is a being by virtue of his perfect goodness, out of which all good originates (28). But as noted, he inserts the word “being” into his description of the First Cause and nowhere does he demonstrate how it is possible for it to be characterized as a being (28). Hence, because Thomas Aquinas fails to prove how a bodiless, infinite and immutable First Cause is a being, his argument for a God of goodness crumbles.

The important point to understand is that these contradictions leave a person seeking moral answers in the dark. An individual attempting honest inquiry is left in a quandary and this means they cannot determine based on such a system how to live their life. As a theologian, Aquinas can be readily granted license to present his ideas this way, but they cannot be peddled as serious philosophical discourse.

An additional problem of personification is presented by Aquinas’s argument for the existence of angels whom he calls the perfect assimilation of God (269). It is obvious that if something is a perfect assimilation of anything else, it is impossible for it to be anything different. It must necessarily be the same thing, or it cannot be called perfect. This would mean that the angels would be God. But Thomas Aquinas attempts to get around this by drawing distinctions between the Trinity of God and the angels. He contends for example: “Therefore if there be no matter and supposing that the form itself subsists without matter, there nevertheless still remains the relation of the form to its own being, as of potency to act. And such a kind of composition is to be understood in the Angels...” (271). But as noted, he has already established that angels are perfect assimilations of God. God is pure act, according to Aquinas (14). By parsing in this way, he argues against his own assertion.

Thomas Aquinas creates additional problems when he describes the devil and demons as fallen angels. According to Aquinas: “But the agent which brought the angels into being, namely, God, cannot be the cause of sin. Consequently, it cannot be said that the devil was wicked in the first instant of creation” (330). The devil then, becomes wicked after being good, according to Aquinas. Notwithstanding, he says this about angels: “It must necessarily be maintained that the angels are incorruptible of their own nature (274). It is worth observing that Aquinas cites Augustine on this point, noting that angels obtain perfect immutability only by God’s grace (274). Thus, the difficulty is that while Aquinas grants angels incorruptibility, they somehow do become morally corrupt. If angels reside in an immutable state, it is impossible to assert they can change (be corrupted) into immoral demons.

As noted, for Aquinas God is where all goodness originates, and he defines evil as the privation or absence of good. Nonetheless, Aquinas’s personification of evil in the form of the devil or demons is itself yet another problem. As mentioned, Aquinas reasons: “For every evil is the absence of the good which is natural and do to a thing” (265). He argues further: “But evil has no formal cause, rather is it a privation of form...” (265). To put a fine point on this, he notes: “Evil, however, has a cause by way of an agent, not per se, but accidentally” (265).

Later, however, he describes demons: “Nevertheless the demons who are sent to punish, do so with an intention other than that for which they are sent; for they punish from hatred or envy...” (582). Here then, Aquinas has created personifications of what he has called “absence” and “privation” earlier. As noted, Aquinas also argues that evil has no formal cause and occurs only through an accidental agent. Here, however, his demonic personifications of evil are both intentionally sent by God to punish and in possession of deliberate intention borne out of hatred and envy.

First Aquinas provides no explanation for how “absence” can become a presence. Second, if such a thing is possible, Aquinas contradicts himself when he asserts that evil is only accidental and later argues that evil is intentional. A person of conscience is compelled to ask how they can recognize and then grapple with an evil formless form somehow intent, accidentally on doing them harm. It is worth observing that Aquinas is attempting to apply Aristotle’s notion of “accidental” occurrence in nature (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 537). But what Aristotle means is that one thing will be true and another will be coincident to it. For example, a musician may also be a builder. Thus, Aquinas is not only cherry picking but misapplying this when describing the devil and demons because he has established clear intention in them.

There is also the problem of the mere existence of evil. Aquinas fails to explain how a perfect, infinite God which is the source of all goodness can allow evil to exist. For example, he notes: “...God is the supreme good absolutely...” (*Summa*, 29). He adds: “Since therefore the divine being is not a being received in anything, but He is His own subsistent being as was shown above (Q. III, A, 4), it is clear that God Himself is infinite and perfect” (31).

However as noted, Aquinas argues for the existence of evil which is accidental (265). It does not seem possible for evil to occur accidentally if God is truly the supremely good and infinite. But in defending the existence of evil, Aquinas quotes Augustine as saying: “Since God is the highest good, He would not allow evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good out of evil” (13). But certainly good is always of higher value than evil and if God is allowing evil with such intent, it cannot be accidental. It would seem

logical that a God who is the infinite, perfect source of goodness would give preference to good as a means to good over evil. This would surely be the best option.

But if God does indeed permit evil as a route to attaining good, God must be an accessory to evil. This interpretation is unavoidable and its acceptance mean the acceptance of a God who in some sense is evil. It is therefore no longer possible to argue for a God of perfect goodness. Presented with these sorts of contradictions it is unclear exactly how a person of conscience should determine their actions.

For many today, the problem of the existence of evil makes a belief in God untenable. The topic has been explored exhaustively by modern theologians and secularists. Christianity has attempted to supply reasonable answers. Yet, these do not seem satisfactory. For example, Keith Augustine (2016) notes:

Other versions of the evidential argument concede that God *could* have a morally sufficient reason for allowing certain evils to occur—e.g., to ensure that some greater good is achieved as a consequence of an evil. However, proponents add, God would only allow as much evil or suffering as is absolutely necessary in order to achieve greater goods. But when we look at the world around us, we find prevalent instances of apparently gratuitous evil—pointless evils from which no greater good seems to result. According to proponents, the existence of apparently gratuitous evil provides strong evidence that God (as traditionally defined) does not exist (e.g., William Rowe). (Augustine, Par. 2)

If news reports reveal how an infant is incinerated in a house fire only because nobody knew about bad electrical wiring, it is difficult to comprehend a “greater good.” Yet clearly because some believe so fervently, the attempts at reconciling these discrepancies persist.

But for Aquinas, the problems do not end with these contradictions. As noted, He argues that humans possess free will and free choice (Summa, 432). There are two difficulties presented by Aquinas’s argument concerning this. To begin with, it is very troubling that Aquinas asserts the existence of agents of good and evil (angels and devils) who on some level determine whether one is good or evil independent of human decisions.

For example, Aquinas describes angels moving human will: “...the will is moved from without. As regards an angel, this can be the only way, - by the good apprehended by the intellect” (569). Aquinas also observes: “In this way, we must admit the devil is the cause of all our sins, because it was he who instigated the first man to sin...” (583). Yet with respect to God, Aquinas also asserts: “Consequently it is evident that human actions acquire merit or demerit in reference to Him; otherwise it would follow that human actions are no business of God’s” (720). Thus, it would appear that humans can be judged by God for that which is entirely beyond their control.

To address this apparent contradiction, Thomas Aquinas argues for a division between actions that are voluntary and actions that are not (644). He states: “Hence it follows that good or evil, involuntary actions alone, renders them worthy of praise or blame; and the actions of this kind, evil, sin, and guilt are one in the same” (718). However, Aquinas also asserts: “When a man commits sin without being instigated to it by the devil, he nevertheless becomes a child of the devil...” (583). It appears from this then, that Aquinas is trying to have it both ways. Human actions are judged when they are voluntary and when they are not. Sinful acts are both caused by the devil and they are caused by humans, which means they are children of the devil.

Far more lethal to the reasoning of Aquinas however, is his argument for the existence of predestination, preordainment, and fate. As noted, he begins this argument by asserting that God's predestination for humans is connected to his plan and so humans are directed like arrows toward life eternal (133). As mentioned, Aquinas says: "Consequently the ordering of human actions, the principle of which is the will, must be ascribed to God alone. (593). In the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, the word "ascribe" means: "to refer to a supposed cause, source or author" (ascribe, 2003). In this case, Aquinas is asserting that only God is the cause of the human will which orders human actions. It follows then, that God determines human will which dictates choice and action. It is obvious that if this is true, it is impossible for voluntary human action to exist. There can be no free will or choice. This would mean that human actions of conscience do not exist.

But he attempts to avoid this contradiction by arguing: "But man acts from judgment because by his knowing power he judges that something should be avoided or sought" (Summa, 437). Thus, humans according to Aquinas have free choice because they possess reason. But he has already stated that "Consequently the ordering of human actions, the principle of which is the will, must be ascribed to God alone" (593). Aquinas is asserting the existence of predeterminations as well as preordainment in human actions (fate). For him to then claim that humans have free choice would appear to be counterfactual since all reasonable choices made by humans would be dictated by God, rendering free choice nothing more than an illusion.

The Thomists refute this point, however. According to Rev. Alfred Wierzbicki (2012), the verification for free choice comes from "self-possession." He states:

Self-possession is the evidence of the autonomy of the person, of the person's actual «belonging» to him- or herself. Human beings as persons are capable of deciding for themselves with the acts their will, because they «possess» themselves: freedom is not merely a quality of actions, but it is manifested in the actions of the person, being originally a quality of the person (Wierzbicki, 7)

Wierzbicki suggests that "self-possession" is a product of human actions where choices are made between good and evil. Presumably, he is claiming that just as one may have a sense of ownership over their house, one may also experience self-possession and that this proves the existence of free choice. Of course, there is no evidence that feeling possessive of one's house, car or any other item is proof of free choice. Therefore, self-possession cannot be claimed as evidence for free will or choice any more than possession of something else.

This argument is also silent on the underlying contradiction. Wierzbicki does not mention Aquinas's predetermination but he says: "Yet neither is the indeterministic interpretation of human freedom, which ignores all its objective rootedness, correct. Human actions are not accomplished in a metaphysical vacuum..." (Wierzbicki, 5).

Aquinas is describing a predetermination which originates in God. It behaves in a manner consistent with any deterministic model based on objective conditions. To defend it necessitates the elimination of free choice. This is because any choices made will always be determined.

But if one accepts Aquinas's argument that reason can be something apart from God and that it causes the will to be voluntary, it is still problematic. For reason and intellect to have the capacity to govern the will, they must be a higher power of the soul (Aquinas, Summa, 433). However, Aquinas writes: "But relatively and by comparison

with something else, we find that the will is sometimes higher than the intellect” (434). By this logic then, the free will ceases to be free when it becomes a higher power in the soul.

In short, Aquinas’s inconsistencies when attempting to balance predestination with freedom of choice are irreconcilable. He describes human actions as being dictated solely by God (593), but then proceeds to argue that the devil (583), and angels (569) can both shape the will and behavior of man. He adds to this contradictory argument the assertion that humans have free will and free choice (432), and that this justifies God’s judgment of humans (720).

What Aquinas presents is a compatibilist argument. Today this same sort of argumentation is put forward by those who contend that determinism and free choice can coexist. But as Marcus Arvan (2013) asserts: “It’s not the case that if I *tried* to behave otherwise than I do, physical laws would step in and stop me. It’s that *I can’t even try to behave otherwise* if physical determinism is true (it is not a physical possibility).” Joachim Krueger (2012) also notes:

Some aspiring compatibilists maintain that only humans are judged morally because only they could have acted differently. Those who try this argument must realize that they are not compatibilists at all; they are libertarians. The acceptance of determinism is a defining element of compatibilism. It forbids us to say that evil-doers could have done good if only they wanted to.

Well yes, if they wanted to, but they were determined to not want to. (Krueger, Par.5)

The point then, appears to be for compatibilists to have it both ways. Compatibilists try to push the boundaries of reason so that everything is controlled by some external source, yet persons can be held accountable for their actions because they can make choices freely. Krueger adds: “Compatibilism breeds shame, not guilt. Recall that according to Humean compatibilism, you are responsible for your actions because they reveal your character, not your free will. If responsibility demands an emotion, it is shame, not guilt.” (Par. 15). Of course Krueger is referencing David Hume in this statement who like Aquinas, is a proponent of Natural Law. Thus, Krueger highlights what has been employed for centuries by Christianity to keep people in line. As long as one can never feel good about what they do, they will surely avoid the emotional pain of doing something wrong. But as this distorts human perceptions, the individual is left in endless turmoil never really knowing right from wrong. Any superficial survey of the cruel saga of human history demonstrates the crude ineffectiveness of this.

In Aquinas’s ontology it is difficult to conceive of how one can describe a perfect God of goodness (Aquinas, *Summa*, 28), when such a God is engaged in casting judgments on humans for actions over which they have no control. If one accepts that human actions can in whole or in part be determined by God, angels, or the devil, that conclusion is unavoidable.

Second, if it is accepted that angels and devils are separate beings from God (271), it is not possible for human actions to be ascribed solely to God. Conversely, if it is accepted that human actions are ascribed solely to God (593), then it is not possible for those actions to be swayed by angels or devils which are separate.

Third, if it is granted that predetermination as well as fate, and specifically, human actions are ascribed solely to God, then to argue that freedom of choice is possible because of human reason, is also contradictory. This is because if one grants that human reason falls outside preordainment, one is then arguing against the assertion that all human actions are ascribed solely to God, because one is claiming that some reasonable actions are not.

Conversely, if it is asserted that human reason falls inside preordainment, then the choices made resulting from reason are illusions because whatever is chosen is predetermined and preordained. Therefore, to say free choice exists is counterfactual.

But these teachings persist within the Christian dogma to this day. Navigating this landscape in an earnest quest for moral direction is made impossible by these dilemmas. Santi Tafarella (2014) writes the following about the Thomist influence in Christianity:

So my first argument against metaphysical philosophy of the Thomistic sort is that it is poetry. It's a way of framing the world; of narrating it; of making some parts of it central and seen, and other parts marginal or not seen. This is what poetry, especially epic poetry, does. And this is fine if you aren't under the spell of your metaphysical system. But when you translate your metaphysics into dogma, you've stopped taking your poetry with a light touch, and you're now in the realm of treating your deductions and system with 100% certainty. This is akin to the way a fundamentalist reads the Bible or Quran. The system is impermeable to reality testing even in principle, and you believe it 100%. (Tafarella, Pars. 1-2)

No one can deny that poetry is a powerful medium for the expression of essential truths as well as aesthetic pleasures. But what Tafarella is asserting is that the beauty evident within the writings of Thomism is not a replacement for critical inquiry. There is danger that complacent believers become doctrinaire instead of asking authentic questions about the nature of reality.

3. Conclusions

In the *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas has written a rationale for the Christian faith. To accomplish this, he draws heavily on the ideas of Aristotle. Consistent with Aristotle, Aquinas asserts that there is a First Cause or unmovable mover. However, he departs from Aristotle in fundamental ways when he characterizes the First Cause as a being called "God," which he then personifies in the Trinity. He includes in this, a description of angels. Aquinas incorporates the idea of evil being the privation of good but then follows with a personification of evil as the devil.

His claim that an infinite, bodiless and immutable First Cause is manifest in the changing, finite and mortal form of the Son in the holy Trinity is an obvious contradiction which he seems to concede.

His argument for a God of perfect goodness conflicts with his notion of a God complicit in evil and judgmental of human behaviors influenced by forces over which humans have no control.

He also demonstrates serious inconsistencies when attempting to reconcile his claim of predestination and preordainment with his assertion that humans have free will and free choice. If the reason which influences free choice falls outside that which is ascribed to God, then predetermination does not really exist. If the reason Aquinas describes does fall within what God ascribes, then the free choice is an illusion and therefore, contending that it exists is counterfactual.

Although it is impossible for Aquinas to make his arguments without the ontology of Aristotle, unlike Aristotle, he is not interested in truth through observation. Aquinas has no interest in learning from what he sees around him. In the *Summa*, his true motives are transparent. Aquinas is defending dogma about which he has

already decided and over which there can be no dispute. Furthermore, he cherry picks from Aristotle, creating a logical fallacy. That fallacy is that his ontology is supported through reason when in fact, it is not.

When he deviates from Aristotle, his arguments become incoherent. He offers no explanation or proof for his conclusion that a Trinity of God exists within the First Cause. Furthermore, he fails to show how he can conclude that the absence of good called evil is somehow a presence known as the devil or demons. The *Summa*, therefore, as a work of systematic thought seriously lacks philosophical rigor.

As noted, the person seeking moral guidance in earnest will likely be left confused and perhaps even very disappointed. On the other hand, those seeking to justify what they already believe through their faith may feel validated by this reinforcement of their views. But this ought not be granted the distinction of being called true philosophic inquiry. It may also be time for the long legacy of Thomism to be examined with honesty. Like the emperor's transparent clothes, the Thomist reason does nothing to dress up their naked faith. An understanding of Western history and religious values necessitates knowledge of Thomism. But as a guide for human actions it is painfully anachronistic. Regrettably, the *Summa* offers little utility in matters of conscience and human actions.

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