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EXCELENTNÍ STUDENTSKÉ PRÁCE

Inherent Problems with Thomistic Thought**Edward Simpson**

The purpose of the following essay is to take a look at the work of Thomas Aquinas, specifically his work *The Summa Theologica*¹ and examine several of the difficulties that face this work, and present my beliefs as to the reasons that the difficulties are within Aquinas at all. It is my belief that there are several intrinsic contradictions within *The Summa Theologica*. However there are reasons as to why these thoughts remained within the context of Thomistic thought. These include his sources, blasphemy, and the alleviation of the responsibility of God regarding the state of affairs in the world, and try to place it back on the shoulders of human beings. In order to understand this we will first look at Aquinas' over arching idea of who God is. We will then examine the contradictions that are inherent to his proposed attributes of God. I will conclude with comments as to why I believe that he allowed the contradictions to remain in the *Summa*.

Attributes of God

The main concepts behind Thomistic thought are the idea that God is infinite² and perfect³. Further God is immutable⁴, which means that God does not have within his character or essence the ability to change or be changed in any way shape or form, both literally and figuratively. God is also in all things⁵ and everywhere by his 'essence, presence and power'⁶ as a consequence of his infinity. God knows all things that 'are'⁷ or 'are not'⁸, and this knowledge is the cause of all things⁹. Further, this knowledge includes future contingent things¹⁰, and is invariable¹¹. From this brief overview the contradictions may not be easily seen. It is when we take a look at each of the terms used that the contradictions become apparent.

The first idea is that God is infinite. To put it simply God has no boundaries. One unstated premise that is included in this statement is that everything that is finite is contained within the infinite. If we were to have an infinite set of numbers it would follow that every number (the finite) would be contained in that set. If we were to have infinite space it would follow that anything taking up space would be contained in that infinite space. I believe it is the idea of everything being in God when Thomas states that everything is in God “for the idea of the thing known is in the knower.”¹² This is reiterated more in the *Summa* when Thomas states that God is everywhere and in all things. Thomas states:

Therefore, God is in all things by His power, inasmuch as all things are subject to His power; He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to His eyes; He is in all things by His essence, inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being.¹³

That is to say that as a consequence of God’s infinity is that he is everywhere in the ways that Thomas has outlined above. This means that God is both within everything, as he is the cause of all things and must be in all things as that cause¹⁴, and that everything is in God, at the very least because of the fact that God knows what exists. So far there are no contradictions within Thomistic thought. For it is logical to say that if God is infinite, then he is both in everything, and that everything is within God. To define the infinite in any other way would be to put a boundary on something that is boundary-less.

The next thought of Aquinas’ that we will look at is the idea of perfection in God. Perfection in and of itself is a vague category. Thomas uses a contrast between ‘actuality’ and ‘potential’ in order to define the perfect. To be perfect is to be completely ‘actual’. To be imperfect would be to have any level of ‘potentiality’.¹⁵ Thus God being perfect he is completely ‘actual’. It is here that we run into the first problem. If God is completely ‘actual’ then he is to lack in himself any ‘potential’. But if we take into account that God, according to Aquinas, is infinite, then the problem becomes apparent. As to be infinite is to contain everything that is finite. One of those finite things is matter. For Aquinas matter has ‘potential’ and is therefore imperfect¹⁶. Thus imperfect matter is contained within God. Therefore God, by necessity of His infinite nature, contains imperfection.

Aquinas tries to side step the issue of the imperfection of matter being present in a perfect God by saying, “[a]ll created perfections are in God. Hence He is spoken of as universally perfect, because He lacks not...any excellence which may be found in any genus.”¹⁷ That is to say that God is perfect because he contains within him everything that is perfect. Thomas also says:

there must be removed from each of them [types of knowledge], so far as they enter into divine predication, everything that savors of imperfection.¹⁸

Thus in order to be included in God all imperfections must be excluded. That is to say that the imperfections are external to God. Or, rather, that imperfection is where God is not. This would seem to contradict the idea of God’s infinity, as it would mean that there was something in existence that was external to God. If it were true that there was at least one thing external to God, then that would mean that God was in fact finite. I think that this problem with God’s perfection could be resolved with a change in definition of what it is to be perfect. However, Aquinas’ attempt to avoid the issue of the relation of the ‘imperfect’ to the ‘perfect’ only muddies the waters. This is further complicated by the concept of God’s knowledge, which is the next idea we will talk about.

For Aquinas the more immaterial something is the closer it is to the infinite, and since knowledge is not a material thing, it is therefore immaterial, and closer to the infinite. Further, lacking the imperfections of matter, “God is in the highest degree of immateriality...[and] it follows that He occupies the highest place in knowledge.”¹⁹ Further, Aquinas states quite clearly that, “In God there exists the most perfect knowledge.”²⁰ As stated above in God’s knowledge He contains everything. However, in order to be a perfect knowledge, the knowledge would have to be complete. If the knowledge were not complete then we could hardly say that the knowledge was perfect. If the knowledge that God possesses is complete then it follows that God would have to have a complete knowledge of everything. That is to say that if God did not have the knowledge of the imperfection of that which is, his knowledge would not be complete. However, if God did have knowledge of imperfection then he would, in some way, contain within him imperfection. This is evident when we remember that the known is in the knower. It might be argued that God has perfect knowledge of the imperfect. That is to say that all of the imperfect are contained within God’s knowledge perfectly. But this

doesn't take away from the presence of the imperfect within God, and is just another way of saying that in order to have a perfect knowledge God would have to have complete knowledge of all the imperfect. So we are again left with a problem, either God has a perfect knowledge, including that of the imperfect, or he has no knowledge of the imperfect and thus does not have a perfect knowledge.

The next problem that we have with God's knowledge is that it is the source of all things. Meaning that creation, in all its diversity is a direct consequence of God's knowledge. This is backwards from the way in which we normally think about knowledge, for we usually think of it as post-fact; we have knowledge of something because that something is. But God's knowledge is pre-anything. That is that God's knowledge of any particular thing is the effective cause of that thing²¹. This implies that even the actions of people are included in what is caused by God. If God has a knowledge of the action of people then, and his knowledge is the cause of everything then it follows that the actions of people are caused by God. Yet Aquinas states that the actions of people are contingent and subject to free will²². So the actions of people are not caused by God. This brings us to the problem at hand. Either God and his knowledge are the cause of everything, or they are not. Either the actions of people are caused by God, or they are not. If men's actions are contingent and based on free will, then they are not caused by God, and God's knowledge is not the cause of all things. If God's knowledge is the cause of all things, then this would include the actions of people thus people's actions are not 'free' in any way.

I believe that Thomistic thought tries to resolve the issue of God's knowledge and free will by taking the stance that God is 'above time'²³. Thomas describes God as being able to see everything as one that is above a road looking down upon the actions of people. Thus the cause and effect relationship between people's free will and God's knowledge is avoided. But, in this manner time becomes irrelevant to God, and outside of God, for to be above something is to be above something that is external to you. It might be argued that this isn't necessarily the case, as I can see my feet from above, yet my feet are part of me, thus not external to me. But this brings into account the idea of relations between separate parts of one being. My feet are external to my eyes, thus I can use my eyes to see my feet, yet both are internal to my being in the material world. But

God is immaterial according to Aquinas, and the word 'above' implies a relationship of externality. So to say God is above time, would mean that time is outside of God. Yet, we as people are in time, yet in God as well. As shown above we cannot resolve the issue by stating that perhaps part of us is in time, while the other is in God, for that would mean that there was something that was outside of God and thus infringe upon the infinite nature of God. And to say time is external to God would also take away God's infinite nature. Thus time has to be within God, and ultimately relevant to God, or God is not infinite. Ultimately we are still left with the previous problem of God's knowledge being the source of people's actions or people having 'freewill'.

Finally, according to Aquinas God is immutable; unchanging and unchangeable. To recap, God is an infinite being, whose perfect knowledge is the cause of all things, except contingent actions (according to Thomistic thought). The final problem that we will talk about is the idea of God's immutability (unchanging). If we were to agree that up until now Thomistic thought was without the problems that we have already discussed that the idea of God's immutability brings with it its own dimension of problems. If we accept the fact that God is infinite, thus containing everything, has a perfect (complete) knowledge of everything as it was, is and will be, but allows for the contingent actions of man's free will, God's immutability negates the idea of free will. If something is unchanging then no part of that thing can change, for if one part of that thing changes then the whole has changed. It might be argued that it is the complete 'whole' that does not change, but that the 'parts' can change. But this makes for an internally completely mutable being, which I don't believe is what Aquinas was going for. Besides which, this would mean that mutability was internal to the very nature of God, which would bring a contradiction to the statement that God is immutable.

At the very least if God's knowledge contained contingent things, such as man's actions, then God's knowledge would have to have the ability to change based upon the actions that the contingent actors undertook. That is to say that God's knowledge of what is would have to change with the choices that people make to do this, that, or the other. But, God is completely unchanging and unchangeable, thus his knowledge cannot be affected by our choice of one thing over the other.

Further, if God is infinite and contains within him everything, that everything would include human beings. Human beings have the apparent ability to change, to grow up, grow old, move, think, 'change our minds', etc. God being immutable and containing within him things that have the apparent ability to change would imply that all change is illusory, thus not real. But Thomas argues, by the very nature of contingency, that change is real and possible. So again we are with the problem of God either being immutable, and not having any part of him ever change, or God having within himself the ability to allow for contingency, and thus mutable. If both were to be allowed then we would arrive at a contradiction within God.

One would think that with the immutability of God that Thomas would lean further to the side of God's knowledge being the cause of people's actions. The argument would be that God's infinite nature would mean that everything is contained within God. One of the ways God contains things is in his knowledge. God's knowledge is the cause of everything. Further, it is not within God's nature to change, or be made to change. Therefore it would be beyond us to have an affect on God. From this we get the conclusion that God causes all things, and we have no actual affect on existence. Yet we do not get that from Aquinas, for he does keep in the idea of man's contingency, man's freewill, and thus we have some kind of affect. But why do we find these concepts together in Thomistic thought? With that question in mind we start the next section.

Why the thoughts remain

In this section we will look at theoretical reasons as to why these apparently contradictory concepts are within Thomistic thought. I believe that Aquinas attempted to synthesize the attributes of infinity, perfection, knowledge, immutability and allowance for human activity because of his sources, avoiding blasphemy, and responsibility. These are not listed in the order of importance for Aquinas, but merely as a few of the more important reasons for the synthesis of God's attributes.

One of the main reasons, I believe, that Thomas kept the ideas of an infinite, immutable God that allows for human contingency is the sources that he was drawing from when writing the *Summa*. He makes constant references to several sources throughout his work. These include, but are not limited to, the Bible, the 'Philosopher' (Aristotle) and Augustine. These are representative of the three ways in which Thomas

was 'being pulled'. In essence he was attempting to synthesize the ideas of these sources. The Bible is obviously at the core of his thought, but he adds on Church tradition (Augustine) and philosophical ideas (Aristotle).

He took several verses out of the bible in order to try to make a complete idea of who God was. Add on to this the tradition that he inherited and held in high regards, despite disagreements with it, in terms of Augustine. He also pulled in the extra-traditional ideas of Aristotle and his use of logic, and proof of the existence of God, in order to complete the picture of God and his relationship to creation. These sources didn't always agree with each other. Augustine had his own interpretation of the bible, and Aristotle had no apparent reference or relationship to the bible and its contents. Further, Augustine and Aristotle both had conflicting ideas of God (Aristotle's God was infinite and Augustine had a finite God). But as Thomas held all three in high regards he tried to synthesize the ideas contained within them to make a complete whole.

Secondly, I believe that Thomas kept the apparently contradictory ideas in place because he thought that to do otherwise would ultimately take away from the idea of God and lead to blasphemy. If God was not infinite then how could he be all powerful, and all knowing? If God is not perfect, how is He good? If God did not know then how could he be all powerful, and how could he be the cause of everything? If God's knowledge (in Thomas the epitome of intellectual capacity) was not the cause of all then how could God create? If God changes how is He to be relied upon? It was Thomas' goal to portray God realistically, while maintaining reverence, and in such a way that would explain why God is worthy of worship. If God was limited by the answers to any of the questions asked in this paragraph it could be considered, to Aquinas, to be considered blasphemy.

Thirdly, Thomas kept the ideas of an infinite, immutable, knowing God who allows for human contingency due to the concept of responsibility. Thomas goes to great lengths to try to show that human contingency and free will are present within God's creation despite the knowledge of God being the cause of all. It is my belief that Thomas did not haphazardly place contingency in his work because of the extensive arguments he goes into in regards to human action. But that leaves the question why? What happens if you take away the idea of contingency from an infinite, knowing, immutable God? In the end all responsibility for the state of the world is taken away from people. For if God is

the cause of everything and doesn't allow for human action within his infinity then people are not responsible for the actions that they undertake. This takes all responsibility for evil, pain, suffering, the poor, all the atrocities of the world, squarely on the shoulders of God. And this would do two things: 1) it would take away from the perfection of God; 2) it could be considered blasphemous.

As we have seen it is not with all the attributes that Thomas assigned to God there are inherent contradictions or even problems. Rather, it is with the combination of God's infinity, perfection, knowledge, immutability and allowance for contingency, as defined by Thomas, that bring about the contradictions in Thomistic thought. The reasons for the attributes staying in Thomistic thought are various, including the sources used as inspiration, his attempts to avoid blasphemy, and trying to take into account human responsibility. These are not the only arguable reasons for the synthesis that Thomas put forward, but I believe that they are among the more important reasons.

¹ All references to *The Summa Theologica* were taken from the website <http://www.newadvent.org/summa> as of December 7, 2003.

² <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100701.htm>

³ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100401.htm>

⁴ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100901.htm>

⁵ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100801.htm>

⁶ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100803.htm>

⁷ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101401.htm>

⁸ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101409.htm>

⁹ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101408.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101413.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101415.htm>

¹² <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101401.htm>

¹³ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100803.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100801.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100401.htm>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100402.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101401.htm>

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101408.htm>

²² <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/101413.htm>

²³ *ibid.*