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Natural Theology in St. Thomas's early doctrine of Truth

I. Introduction: A New Instance of an Old Problem

One of Thomas Aquinas's great legacies is the clarity of his teaching about the relationships between theology and philosophy, faith and reason, and grace and nature in general. Of course, that clarity has not prevented the occasional dispute over the philosophical or theological status of any number of particular doctrines. And, in fact, a new controversy has recently begun to form around the status of Thomas's doctrine of truth.

The dispute turns on whether or not Thomas's doctrine of truth is fundamentally theological. In his book Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas, Jan Aertsen contends that Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals is a philosophical teaching. Inasmuch as Thomas takes truth to be one of the transcendentals, Aertsen must, of course, (re)construct Thomas's doctrine of transcendental truth on philosophical grounds—or, as he describes it, without a "theological foundation"[1]. It is worth noting that Aertsen's use of the term "theology" here includes natural theology; thus, in his effort to claim Thomas's doctrine for philosophy, Aertsen goes so far as to eschew even any natural theological underpinnings. On the other side of the dispute, in their recent book *Truth in Aquinas*, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock argue that Thomas's doctrine of truth is "inherently theological"[2]. It is striking that Pickstock and Milbank also use the term "theology" in such a way as to include not only *sacra doctrina*, but also tenets that most scholars would recognize as "natural theology". They contend, however, that there can be no

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[1] Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Brill, 1996). See pp. 105, 107.
[2] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 19. See also pp. xiii, 1, 4, 6.

"natural" knowledge of God, which means that Thomas's doctrine of truth must be primarily a matter of *sacra doctrina*. Thus, while these parties disagree about whether or not Thomas's doctrine of truth is "theological", they seem to agree, if only tacitly, that any reference to God is to be avoided in a properly philosophical account of truth. It is this assumption, I think, that leads Aertsen to attempt to (re)construct transcendental truth without reference even to natural theology. The same assumption leads Pickstock and Milbank, who recognize that Thomas's early doctrine of truth does entail reference to God, to construe his teaching as inherently theological (i.e., a matter of *sacra doctrina*).

In this paper, I propose to examine Thomas's early teaching on truth in order to assess whether this doctrine is adequately described as "theological" (as Milbank and Pickstock claim) or as lacking "theological foundation" (as Aertsen claims). I will conduct this examination with an eye toward supporting two claims. First, I take it that Thomas's early doctrine of truth does entail God. (The conception of God entailed in this doctrine is accessible to natural reason and can therefore be construed as a matter of natural theology). Second, I will argue that both parties in our interpretive dispute have misconstrued Thomas's teaching on truth because of their own misgivings about the category of natural theology—misgivings that reveal more about contemporary polemics than about Thomas's thought.

II. The Foundation of Thomas's Early Doctrine of Truth

St. Thomas renders his first independent discussion of truth in the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (*DV*), a work produced during his first Parisian regency of 1256-59[3]. It is the teaching propounded in this text that I here refer to as Thomas's "early" doctrine of truth and that I examine in this essay. The Disputed Questions on Truth take their title from the topic announced in the first question (*quaestio est de veritate*), and indeed the majority of Thomas's account of truth can be gleaned from this first question[4]. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to focus on one of the most salient features of this text: the transcendentality of truth.

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[3] I say "independent" discussion because Thomas does in fact treat the topic of truth in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (*In I SN* 19.5). The *De Veritate* is, however, the first treatment of truth wherein Thomas was at complete liberty to determine both the order and the topics to be examined.

[4] As I argue elsewhere, though, Thomas's early doctrine of truth cannot really be understood apart from the larger context of the entire disputed questions. See my article "*Truth or Transcendentals: What Was St. Thomas's Intention at De Veritate 1.1?*" in The Thomist 67 (April, 2003): 197-219; see also my dissertation Truth Beloved: *Thomas Aquinas and the Relational Transcendentals* (University of Notre Dame, 2000).

Thomas's early doctrine of truth is perhaps best known for its claim that truth is transcendental[5]. In point of fact, though, the text often cited as Thomas's more or less systematic discussion of the transcendentals, and truth's place within them, is really devoted to ascertaining the definition of truth[6]. Thus, Thomas begins the first article of the De veritate by announcing: "the question is about truth, and first it is asked 'what is truth?' / *quaestio est de veritate, et primo quaeritur quid est veritas*"[7]. The familiar "quid est" formulation suggests that Thomas will be seeking the quiddity of truth[8], and in fact the article culminates with Thomas's assertion that truth consists in the "adaequation" of thing and intellect (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*)[9].

The route to this "definition" is by no means easy, though, for the body of the article is complicated by the problem of "adding to being". As becomes clear in the corpus, Thomas thinks that truth is a *modus entis generaliter consequens omne ens* —a general mode of being, or what we now refer to as a "transcendental". But there is a difficulty with trying to define any transcendental. Definitions are comprised of a genus and a specific difference, which difference must be outside the essence of the genus itself. Now, transcendentals, as general modes of being, run through all of the categories of substance and accidents, and cannot be contained within any single genus. Thus, the only category —and here I use the word in the non-technical *sense*— sufficiently broad to contain a transcendental is being itself. However, as Aristotle noted, being cannot be a genus, for there is nothing outside the nature

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[5] Most commentators acknowledge that Thomas held truth to be transcendental throughout his career. See, however, Lawrence Dewan, OP, "*St. Thomas's Successive Discussions of the Nature of Truth*", in Sanctus Thomas de Aquino Doctor Hodiernae Humanitatis, Studi Thomistici 58 (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana): 153-168.

[6] Properly speaking, of course, it is not possible to "define" truth since truth transcends the bounds of all genera. But this is only a lesson learned after the question has been asked in *De Veritate* 1.1, and the question is still framed in terms that would normally demand a definition: *quid est veritas*?

[7] All Latin quotations from the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* in this paper are taken from *Quaestiones Disputatae*, Vol. I (Romae: Marietti, 1949). English translations of the text are my own.

[8] This suggestion becomes problematic, though, almost as soon as the article is under way: for the topic actually disputed in the objections and the objections contra is whether "true" adds anything to "being". The polemic of the objections is, I suspect, one reason why commentators have often been distracted from recognizing the central endeavor of this article. Another reason is that the discussion of the general modes of being is really quite intriguing. In the end, though, both the problem of adding to being and the discussion of the general modes of being are subordinate to the task of defining truth.

[9] To be precise, the article culminates in St. Thomas's harmonization of several authoritative definitions of truth according to the logic of analogy. Thomas's states that truth has been defined in three ways: the first is according to that which precedes the ratio of truth (namely, being); the second is according to that which formally completes the ratio of truth (namely, the conformity of thing and intellect); and the third is according to the effects following from truth (namely, judgments and statements). Notice, though, that Thomas is only able to maintain a place for the first and third sorts of definitions by connecting them analogically to the second, focal definition. I take it to be an open question whether the need for a young theologian, like Thomas, to present a doctrine that was reconcilable with authoritative statements might have influenced his judgment that the formal notion of truth consists in the conformity of intellect and thing.

of being that can be added to it in the manner of a specific difference[10]. This is the problem of adding to being: one cannot add anything to being in the manner of something extrinsic to it, as, for example, specific differences add to genera. And yet truth (like all transcendentals) cannot be contained by any genus less broad than being itself.

Before he can "define" truth, then, Thomas must articulate a solution to the problem of adding to being. He spends approximately the first twenty-percent of the corpus describing the problem itself and gesturing toward a solution, namely, that some things are said to add to being inasmuch as they express a mode of being that the name "being" itself does not express[11]. He then devotes about forty-five percent of the corpus to sketching a taxonomy of the ways in which these various modes of being might be articulated. First there are the "special" modes of being (*specialis modus entis*), which constitute the various genera of substance and the accidents. Then there are the "general" modes of being (*modus generalis consequens omne ens*). These general modes can be formed in two ways: either according to every being in itself (in se) or according to every being in relation to another (in ordine ad aliud). In the first way, one can posit something about every being both positively (producing the terms "*ens*" and "*res*") and negatively (producing the term "*unum*"). In the second way, one can also posit something of every being both positively and negatively. Here Thomas reverses his order of exposition to note that one can either speak (negatively) of beings as they are divided from others (producing the term "*aliquid*") or speak (positively) of beings in relation to others. But in order for there to exist some relation that is predicable of every being, there must be some thing that is capable of being related to every being (aliquid quod natum sit convenire cum omni ente). As Aristotle notes in book III of *De Anima*, the soul is just such a thing[12]. Now, the soul (*anima*) has two faculties through which it can relate to all being: namely, the appetite and the intellect[13]. Thus, the name "good" (*bonum*) is said of being in relation to appetite (*ad appetitum*), and the name "true" (*verum*) is said of being in relation to intellect (*ad intellectum*).

With all of this happening as propaedeutic to Thomas's discussion of the definition(s) of truth—which discussion is the focus of the last thirty-five percent of the corpus—it is easy to see why some

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[10] On the impossibility of being's being a genus, see Thomas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* b. III, l. 8 (par. 433); see also Aristotle's Topics 122b20 and 127a25.

[11] Thomas's solution to the problem of adding to being is worked out in greater detail in DV 21.1, where he treats the related question «whether "good" adds anything to being» / «*utrum bonum aliquid addat supra ens*».

[12] *De Anima* III.8 (431b21).

[13] Thomas''s provocative statement is actually better translated: "In the soul, however, there is a power cognitive and appetitive / *In anima autem est vis cognitiva et appetitiva*". While the letter of Thomas's text actually suggests that we are dealing with just one faculty dually described as cognitive and appetitive, it is sufficient for our purposes to use the traditional description of intellect and appetite as separate faculties of the soul.

interpreters have lost sight of the centrality of Thomas's attempt to define truth and concentrated instead on his comments about the transcendentals. However, Thomas's discussion of the problem of adding to being and his sketch of the modes of being in article 1.1 are primarily intended to prepare for the definition of truth as a general mode of being in relation to the intellect, an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*[14].

Isn't it intriguing, then, that while Thomas obviously assumes truth to be a transcendental, he proposes a definition of truth that cannot sustain its transcendentality? Notice that the two terms of the truth relation Thomas has proposed in article 1.1 are "thing" (or *res*) and the intellectual faculty of the soul (*anima*). By "soul", one presumes that he means the human soul[15]; but not every instance of being is actually related to a human intellect. For example, somewhere deep within the earth, there are surely rocks that no human has ever known. (The example is Augustine's, not mine[16]). And yet, because these rocks exist, the transcendentality of truth would demand that they be conformed to some intellect.

At this point, it would seem that Thomas has several logical options. First, he could maintain that truth consists in the adaequatio rei et intellectus, but reject the notion that it is transcendental. Let's call this the "non-transcendental" option. Second, he could continue to hold to the transcendentality of truth but alter his definition so that things are called "true" merely by virtue of their conformability to the human intellect, not necessarily their actually being so conformed[17]. Let's call this the "anthropological" option (because truth is grounded in a potential relation to the human intellect). Finally, Thomas could maintain his commitment to the transcendentality of truth and insist on

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[15] Pickstock seems to think that the term "soul" (or, as she pens it, "Soul") applies both to the human form and to God (see *Truth in Aquinas*, 8-9). This strikes me as odd, particularly since Thomas makes explicit reference to the Aristotelian theory of soul in this passage. For Aristotle, the term "soul" (*anima*) denotes the form of a living thing, which makes it proper to plants and animals (see *De Anima* 402a6, 412a28, 414a13). Inasmuch as Thomas's account demands a soul with both appetitive and intellectual faculties, he obviously has in mind the soul of the human animal. It is striking, however, that Thomas does not simply construe truth and goodness in relation to intellect and appetite, since these faculties are (analogically) common to humans, angels and God. The philosophical advantage of this alternative approach will become apparent when we consider the foundation of Thomas's theory of truth.

[16] See *Soliloquies*, bk. II, ch. 5.

[17] In other words, things could be called "true" in virtue of their potential to be known rather than their actually being known.

the adaequatio formulation of the ratio of truth, but modify his description of the intellect that must actually be related to the individual thing in order for that thing to be "true". Let's call this the "theological" option. Perhaps we should consider each of these options in turn.

Option #1: Truth Is Non-transcendental

It seems apparent that Thomas is committed to the transcendentality of truth in his early doctrine. First, as we have seen in article 1.1, he classifies truth as one of the general modes of being. Second, in the responses to the objections of article 1.1, Thomas also describes the relationship between truth and being in terms classically associated with the transcendentals: truth and being differ *in ratione* but are the same *in re*[18].

Option #2: the Anthropological Foundation

There is, however, evidence that Thomas considered the possibility that transcendental truth might better be described as the conform-ability of being and intellect rather than the actual conformity of the two. On multiple occasions, Thomas actually describes the truth of things (i.e., extra-mental truth) in terms that would suggest truth to be precisely being's potential to be known rather than its actually being known. For example, at De veritate 1.1 ad 5, Thomas states that "inasmuch as something has being, it is capable of being equated to intellect / *ex hoc quod aliquid habet de entitate, secundum hoc natum est aequari intellectui*". And at DV 21.1 co., Thomas claims "... any thing whatsoever is said to be'true' just insofar as it is conformed or conformable to intellect; and therefore all who rightly define'true' place intellect in its definition /... *unumquodque ens in tantum dicitur verum, in quantum conformatum est vel conformabile intellectui; et ideo omnes recte definientes verum, ponunt in eius definitione intellectum*". Inasmuch as every being is knowable by the human soul, this gambit of reducing the truth of things to their potential to be known would surely enable the anthropological foundation to preserve the transcendentality of truth.

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[18]   Thomas suggests that truth and being differ *in ratione* in DV 1.1 ad 5. In *DV* 1.1 ad sc 1, he also suggests that truth and being differ *in nomine* but do not differ *in re*.

Option #3: the Theological Foundation

In spite of the fact that Thomas occasionally describes extra-mental truth in terms of the potential to be known, and in spite of the fact that this description preserves the transcendentality of truth, it appears that this was not Thomas's preferred solution. Notice: the definition of truth that Thomas posits in article 1.1 is *"adaequatio rei et intellectus"*. This formulation does not describe truth as an "ability" to be equated with intellect, say, an *"adaequabilitas rei et intellectus"*; it posits an actual relation between thing and intellect. Now, no less an authority than Augustine himself chaffed at the suggestion that such a relation could be built into the definition of truth, precisely because there are many things that are not known by the human intellect and that would therefore not be "true". And, indeed, Thomas confronts this argument in the fourth objection of *De veritate* 1.2. His response is worth noting:

> To the fourth, it should be said that Augustine is speaking about the vision of the human intellect, upon which the truth of the thing does not depend. For there are many things that are not known by our intellect(s); but there is no thing that the Divine Intellect does not know in actuality and the human intellect in potentiality... Therefore, in the definition of the true thing can be placed the vision of the Divine Intellect in act, but not the vision of the human intellect, save in potency.../ *Ad quartum dicendum, quod Augustinus loquitur de visione intellectus humani, a qua rei veritas non dependet. Sunt enim multae res quae intellectu nostro non cognoscuntur; nulla tamen res est quam intellectus divinus in actu non cognoscat, et intellectus humanus in potentia... Et ideo in definitione rei verae potest poni visio in actu intellectus divini, non autem visio intellectus humani nisi in potentia...*

Thomas here recognizes that a relation to human intellect could not be built into a definition of truth that allowed for it to be transcendental, unless it be qualified that this relation need merely be in potentia. While Thomas's diction does occasionally suggest that extra-mental truth might consist in such a potential relation, his definition of truth as *"adaequatio rei et intellectus"* does not seem to posit a merely potential relation[19]. An *adaequatio* is an actuality, not a

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[19] One might object that perhaps Thomas abandoned the *adaequatio* definition of truth after realizing that it made it impossible for transcendental truth to be grounded in a relation to the human intellect. And, in fact, the description of truth as *"conformatum vel conformabile intellectui"* in *DV* 21.1 might even be taken as evidence that Thomas''s definition of truth developed from 1256 to 1259 (the likely years when the disputations behind *DV* 1 and 21 occurred). However, in Thomas's most mature treatment of truth (*Summa Theologiae* [*ST*] 1.16.1), he still gives the *adaequatio* definition a privileged place and does not describe truth in terms of a conformability. Moreover, he insists that the relation to intellect that is essential to the truth of things is the relation to the Divine Intellect (*ST* 1.16.1, co.) and he supports the exclusion of the human intellect from the ratio of truth on the grounds that this relation is accidental to extra-mental truth (*ST* 1.16.1 ad 1). Thus, I see no reason to maintain that Thomas ultimately abandoned the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* formulation in favor of one that would make transcendental truth consist primarily in the potential relation between things and

potentiality. Thus, if Thomas intends to maintain the transcendentality of truth, and if he intends to maintain the definition of truth as an adaequatio rei et intellectus, then the intellectual term of the truth relation must actually be found in the Divine Intellect.

And this is precisely where Thomas grounds ontological truth in *De Veritate* 1.2. Thomas's main concern in this text is to explain how truth is primarily in the intellect but secondarily in things (*res*); however, in order to explain how truth is in things, Thomas is obliged to note that things are related differently to the practical intellect and the speculative intellect. The practical intellect is the measure of the things it makes, whereas the speculative intellect is measured by the things it knows. Thus, Thomas states, real things (*res*) are the measure of the human speculative intellects that know them; but they are measured by the Divine Practical Intellect that makes them. Because natural things (*res naturales*) stand between these two intellects, they can be called "true" either in relation to the human intellect (inasmuch as they are apt to produce knowledge of themselves) or in relation to the Divine Practical Intellect (inasmuch as they fulfill that to which they have been ordained by the Divine Intellect)[20]. But Thomas is careful to point out that the relation between thing and Divine Intellect is prior to the relation between human intellect and thing. And while it might look as though even the *posterior ratio* of truth in terms of the relation to human intellect could sustain a transcendental theory of truth, we should recall that just a few lines later (in the response to the fourth objection) Thomas will state that the human intellect cannot be introduced into a definition of extra-mental truth unless it be qualified that the relation between thing and intellect need only be potential. Thomas's definition, of course, does not make this qualification; so it appears that Thomas means to ground transcendental truth in the Divine Practical Intellect. This is likely why, after apparently beginning to establish truth on an anthropological foundation in article 1.1, Thomas so quickly turns to delineate the relations between natural things and the Divine Practical Intellect in article 1.2. To be sure, he does maintain that things can also be called "true" in relation to the speculative human intellects that know them. This complicates his account of truth and runs the risk of distracting readers from the fact that things are essentially called "true" in relation to the Divine Practical Intellect that creates them[21]. At the same time, by maintaining space for the anthropological account of

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human intellects.

[20] See *DV* 1.2, co.: "*Res ergo naturalis inter duos intellectus constituta, secundum adaequationem ad utrumque vera dicitur; secundum enim adaequationem ad intellectum divinum dicitur vera, in quantum implet hoc ad quod est ordinata per intellectum divinum ... Secundum autem adaequationem ad intellectum humanum dicitur res vera, in quantum nata est de se formare veram aestimationem ...*"

[21] For the notion that things are "essentially" true in relation to the Divine Intellect but only accidentally true in relation to the human intellect, see *ST* 1.16.1 co. and ad 1.

transcendental truth within the theological account, Thomas does greater justice to the fact that we do indeed call things "true" in relation to human intellects. Put slightly differently, Thomas's account of transcendental truth preserves the domain of the "natural" while acknowledging its dependence on the divine. We should not lose site of the fact, then, that the primary ontological foundation of truth is the Divine Intellect. Nor should we overlook the fact that the knowledge of God required for this doctrine—viz., that He exists, that He is intelligent, and that He creates the world—is accessible to natural reason[22].

III. Natural Theology Shunned

As I mentioned at the beginning of his paper, there has recently been controversy about the doctrine of truth. status of Thomas's Jan Aertsen maintains that Thomas's theory of truth does not have a "theological foundation," while John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock insist that it is "inherently theological". It should be clear from the preceding discussion of *De Veritate* that Thomas's doctrine of truth is grounded in the Divine Intellect, which can be known by natural theology. Interestingly, though, neither Aertsen nor Pickstock nor Milbank is keen on acknowledging the natural theological foundation of this teaching.

IIIa. Aertsen's Philosophical Rendering

In his Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, Aertsen argues that Thomas's entire doctrine of the transcendentals is mustered on philosophical grounds and without "theological foundation"[23]. Presumably, inasmuch as Aertsen takes Thomas's doctrine of transcendental truth to be part of his larger doctrine of the transcendentals, his thesis about the non-theological nature of the transcendentals should pertain to Thomas's theory of transcendental truth as well. Let us, then, consider whether Aertsen's thesis holds with respect to Thomas's teaching on truth.

One of the most puzzling claims in Aertsen's book is that "Thomas follows Albert in his view of the relational character of *verum* and

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[22] I suspect most Thomists would be willing to take it for granted that these are tenets of natural theology. However, one could muster abundant textual evidence that Thomas holds the relevant propositions to be accessible to natural reason: that God exists (see *ST* 1.2.3 and *ScG* 1.13); that God is intelligent, (see *ScG* 1.44); and that God creates the world (see *In II Sent* 1.1.2 and *ScG* 2.15-16). For a more general discussion of philosophy's ability to know God, see *In De Trinitate Boetii* (*In DT*) 5.4.

[23] See *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals* (*MPT*), 1, 2, 19-20, 23. See also *MPT*, 105, 107, 377-78.

bonum, but not in his theological foundation"[24]. Now, I do not find this claim puzzling because I think Thomas's theory of transcendental truth is fundamentally theological, i.e., a matter of *sacra doctrina*. On the contrary, Thomas grounds transcendental truth in the relations of things to the Divine Intellect; and inasmuch as one can know philosophically that the Divine Intellect exists and that every created being is related to It through the act of creation, it seems clear that Thomas's theory of transcendental truth could be constructed on philosophical grounds. My puzzlement arises from the fact that Albert grounds his own theory of transcendental truth and goodness in the same kind of naturally knowable relations between creatures and God[25]. Aertsen even states that one might call the foundations of transcendental truth and goodness in Albert's construction «theological», "as long as the term is not understood in opposition to «philosophical», but as a further qualification of it"[26]. Thus, Aertsen is knowingly using the term "theological" to describe a philosophical enterprise, namely, natural theology. So, when Aertsen says that Thomas does not follow Albert in his "theological" foundation of the transcendentals, he does not mean to assert that Thomas's theory is philosophically established whereas Albert's is a matter of *sacra doctrina*. Rather, he means to suggest that Thomas's theory is grounded in the "anthropological" foundation Thomas initially appeared to be constructing in *De Veritate* 1.1.

Now, as we have already noted, Thomas himself recognized that the attempt to ground transcendental truth in a relation to the human intellect is fraught with difficulty. Most notably, it is quite unlikely that every instance of being is actually known by some human intellect. Thus, if one wants to preserve truth as a transcendental and determine it in relation to the anthropological foundation, one would have to tinker with Thomas's definition of truth as an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. And, in fact, this is precisely what Aertsen does. In several texts, he suggests that truth consists in the "conformability" or "knowability" of being rather than its actually being conformed to intellect or its actually being known[27]. While Thomas's diction does sometimes lend itself to constructing truth in this way, his definition of truth is not easily squared with the notion that the truth of things consists in a potentiality rather than an actuality. Moreover, the progression of Thomas's own texts suggests that transcendental truth is not securely founded in an accidental relation to the human intellect: for just as soon as he has

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[24] *MPT*, 105. See also *MPT*, 107, 377-78.
[25] See Albert's *Comentarii in I Sententiarum* d. 46, N, art. 13-14
[26] *MPT*, 55. See also *MPT*, 60, 64. Aertsen also uses the term "theological" in this way to describe the causal foundations of the transcendentals in the thought of Philip the Chancellor (*MPT*, 39) and Alexander of Hales (*MPT*, 46).
[27] See *MPT*, 254, 271, 398.

described truth in terms of the relation between being and the human intellect, Thomas quickly seeks to delineate the prior and essential relation that exists between the thing and the Divine Intellect. I suspect that even Aertsen himself recognizes that Thomas really did intend for transcendental truth to be founded primarily in the relation to the Divine Intellect, for he eventually admits as much, stating that "The relation to the divine Logos is essential for the truth of things. Ontological truth has a divine ground"[28]. And again, "In Thomas's account of'True as a relational transcendental'... the ultimate meaning of the definition of truth in terms of adaequation is the conformity of the thing with the divine intellect"[29]. What is even more odd, after stating explicitly that "Thomas follows Albert in his view of the relational character of *verum* and *bonum*, but not in his theological foundation," Aertsen admits in the final chapter of his book that "The theological foundation of the transcendentals is common to Thomas and his predecessors"[30]. Now, perhaps Aertsen means to situate the theological foundation of truth alongside the anthropological foundation, so that ontological truth would be grounded in both relations simultaneously; perhaps he might even acknowledge the ontological priority of the theological foundation while still insisting that Thomas's theory of transcendental truth could stand on the anthropological foundation alone[31]. However, even this qualified account would seem to fall short, for the anthropological foundation, as we have already noted, simply cannot support transcendental truth as long as one defines truth in terms of an actual adaequatio. Thus, as long as Thomas holds to the description of (transcendental) truth as adaequatio rei et intellectus, he would seem to be bound to the theological foundation.

Given that the "theological" solution is more readily harmonized with Thomas's definition of truth and his commitment to its transcendentality, and given that even Aertsen must eventually admit that it is Thomas's fundamental approach, one wonders what could have motivated Aertsen to deny that Thomas's doctrine of transcendental truth has a "theological" foundation in the first place. At this point, I can only speculate, for Aertsen's motives are never made explicit. However, Aertsen does state that he intends his Medieval

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[28] *MPT*, 273.

[29] *MPT*, 370.

[30] *MPT*, 377-78. The quotation continues: "Characteristic of medieval thought is that it inquires into the origin of being, into the ultimate ground of truth and goodness. Yet there are differences too. The theological foundation is not for Thomas the first thing to be said in explanation of the transcendentality and convertibility of the primary notions but the final conclusion of his metaphysical analysis. The theological foundation is absent in his basic texts about the transcendentals".

[31] Thus, Aertsen's statement that "the theological foundation is not for Thomas the first thing to be said in explanation of the transcendentality and convertibility of the primary notions but the final conclusion of his metaphysical analysis" might be taken as an indication that the theological foundation exists but that the anthropological foundation is the first ground of ontological truth. See *MPT*, 377-78.

Philosophy and the Transcendentals to contribute to discussion of the question "what is philosophy in the Middle Ages?" Aertsen's thesis is that 1) "there is a philosophy in the Middle Ages," and 2) "philosophy in the Middle Ages expresses itself as a way of thought that can be called "transcendental"[32]. It becomes clear, moreover, that Aertsen intends the category "medieval philosophy" to be quite distinct from "medieval theology"[33]. Accordingly, Aertsen must present an account of the transcendentals that is completely devoid of theology[34]. Now, inasmuch as Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals provides the case study for Aertsen's thesis, Aertsen has an obvious interest in presenting Thomas's account of transcendental truth in terms that are decidedly not theological[35]. If Thomas's theory is constructed on theological grounds, Aertsen's thesis fails——at least with respect to the case he chose to illustrate it[36]. It seems to me, then, that while attempting to separate the transcendentals——and thus medieval philosophy——from theology, Aertsen might have become over zealous and tried to keep God out of the picture altogether. If this diagnosis is correct, the unfortunate irony of the situation is that Aertsen could have argued for Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals having a "theological" foundation and still being thoroughly philosophical. Instead, for reasons he does not make clear, he chooses to distance his account from even the natural theological foundation of truth. Whatever his motives,

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[32] See *MPT*, 1: "The title of this book speaks of 'Medieval Philosophy' and 'the Transcendentals.' It can be read as affirming that there is a philosophy in the Middle Ages and that this philosophy encompasses a doctrine of the transcendentals alongside many others. But our aims in this work are more ambitious. Our title means to suggest a more intrinsic relation between the terms 'Philosophy' and 'Transcendentals' than mere juxtaposition. We want to show that philosophy in the Middle Ages expresses itself as a way of thought which can be called 'transcendental'. The present book may therefore be seen as a contribution to the discussion of the question: what is philosophy in the Middle Ages?"

[33] See *MPT* sections 0.1 and 0.3, where Aertsen discusses Gilson's conception of medieval philosophy as "Christian philosophy" and Alain de Libera's conception of medieval philosophy as the intellectual's "experience of thought" (respectively). Aertsen is critical of both accounts because of their insufficiently distinguishing philosophy from theology. Presumably, Aertsen means for his own theory to avoid this shortcoming. See especially *MPT*, 8-10 and 17.

[34] Thus Aertsen's insistence that there is no theological grounding of the transcendentals. See, for example, *MPT*, 107.

[35] In fact, Thomas's account of truth plays an especially important role in Aertsen's understanding of Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals. First, the text that Aertsen takes to be Thomas's most complete exposition of the transcendentals (*DV* 1.1) actually comprises a discussion of the quiddity of truth (see *MPT*, 243). Second, Aertsen thinks that Thomas's attempt to define truth in terms of a relation between res and the human intellect is an innovative moment in the history of the transcendentals (see *MPT*, 105 and especially 257).

[36] It seems to me that when Aertsen is performing careful exegesis of the texts, as he does for example in his sixth and ninth chapters, he is more apt to acknowledge that transcendental truth has a divine ground (e.g., 377). However, when he is arguing for his thesis about the nature of medieval philosophy (or when he is trying to distinguish Thomas from his predecessors), he is prone to claim that Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals is not theologically founded and thus to alter the description of truth to make it consist in a potentiality to be known by the human intellect rather than an actual relation between intellect and thing. For examples of Aertsen's claiming that the transcendentals (or transcendental truth) do not have a divine ground within the context of arguing about the nature of medieval philosophy in general, see *MPT*, 20 and especially 378. For examples of Aertsen's making the same claim within the context of trying to distinguish Thomas's doctrine from his predecessors', see *MPT*, 105.

it seems apparent that inasmuch as Aertsen denies the natural theological foundation of truth, he departs from Thomas's own dominant conception.

IIIb. Pickstock and Milbank's Theological Rendering

Like Aertsen, Catherine Pickstock and John Milbank also use the term "theology" (or "theological") to refer to matters that most Thomists would recognize as pertaining to natural theology (e.g., God's existence and the doctrine of creation)[37]. Given that Thomas's account of (transcendental) truth depends on ontological participation in the Divine truth, it should not be surprising that one of the primary tenets of their recent book *Truth in Aquinas* is that "for Aquinas, truth is theological without remainder"[38]. What is surprising is that Pickstock and Milbank deny that there is any such thing as "natural" knowledge of God, and therefore take Thomas's doctrine of truth to be (primarily) a matter of *sacra doctrina*[39].

Whereas Aertsen's motives for trying to remove the natural theological underpinnings of Thomas's early doctrine of truth are opaque, Pickstock and Milbank provide some hints as to why they construe Thomas's doctrine of truth as properly theological. In keeping with the agenda of the "Radical Orthodoxy" movement, they aspire to a "persistent refusal" of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural[40]. One of the consequences of this goal is that Pickstock and Milbank want to erase the distinction between natural theology and *sacra doctrina*, thereby destroying the category of natural theology altogether[41]. After all, if there is no such thing as the "natural," there can be no such thing as natural knowledge and a fortiori no natural knowledge of God. Their deconstruction of the category of natural theology seems to rest primarily on the argument that all rationality, as a participation in the Truth of the Divine Intellect, is a consequence of grace and, thus, grounded in faith[42]. Accordingly, in their interpretation, "It follows that reason and faith are... construed by Aquinas as

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[37] See *Truth in Aquinas*, 23, 26, 43. See also, for example, pp. 20-21, 39, 51-52. My point here is not so much that they actually describe these individual doctrines as matters of *sacra doctrina* ("theological"), although they sometimes do; rather, I mean to suggest that by holding Thomas's doctrine of truth to be a matter of *sacra doctrina*, they also imply that God's existence, God's intelligence, and creation —which points comprise the premises essential for deducing Thomas's doctrine of truth— are not accessible to natural reason. And, in fact, Milbank and Pickstock make some of these (entailed) claims more or less explicitly. See, for example, pp. xiii and 39.

[38] *Truth in Aquinas*, 6. See also pp. xiii, 1, 4, 19.

[39] See, for example, *Truth in Aquinas*, xiii and 39.

[40] Or, at least, to render the notion of an autonomous naturalism nihilistic. See *Truth in Aquinas*, 21.

[41] *Truth in Aquinas*, xiii, 19, 30, 35, 36, 51, 52, 55, 56; see, however, 20, 32.

[42] For a general form of this argument, see *Truth in Aquinas*, xiii. On rationality as participation in the divine light, see 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17-18, 22, 23, 24. For the further notion that this participation comes through grace, see 39, 43, 51-52.

successive phases of a single extension always qualitatively the same"[43].
Sometimes Milbank will go so far as to argue that reason and faith are
not even distinct "phases"[44]. Logically, of course, even if one grants
Milbank and Pickstock their claim about faith and reason not being
distinct, the resulting "extension" could be either philosophy or
theology. To preclude the possibility of an autonomous philosophy,
Milbank asserts that we should not conceive of philosophy as
naturalizing the supernatural, but rather as being legitimated only in the
supernatural knowledge of *sacra doctrina* received by faith through
grace[45]. Thus, for Milbank and Pickstock, there is no autonomous
philosophical knowledge of God, save perhaps the barest glimmer that
He exists[46]—and even this carries with it a glimpse of the Divine
Essence, which can only be had by grace[47].

Now, while it might indeed be the case that all understanding (like
created existence itself) is ultimately participation in the Divine Truth
and is therefore an effect of grace (or, at least, God's gratuitous action),
it seems to me decidedly un-Thomistic to construe this as an indication
that all truth is grounded in faith and is, thus, inherently theological. We
should begin our examination of Milbank and Pickstock's position by
noting that it is not clear whether they mean primarily to assert an
ontological claim about truth or an epistemological one. If their claim is
ontological, their logic might be that it is impossible for the natural
realm to exist as dependent upon God while simultaneously being
"natural", and thus there can be no "natural" knowledge precisely
because all knowledge is ultimately participation in God's knowledge. If
their claim is epistemological, their logic might be that in order to know
that something is true, we must know it in relation (i.e.,
correspondence) to God, and since we can only know God through
faith, truth is accessible only to faith, not natural reason. Perhaps
Milbank and Pickstock even mean their assertion that all truth is
grounded in faith to encompass both ontological and epistemological
concerns.

But, of course, Thomas's doctrine of creation is evidence that neither
the ontological nor the epistemological concerns stated above reflect
Thomas's own views. The first thing to be said here is that Thomas
takes the doctrine of creation to be demonstrable by reason: from our
natural knowledge of the world, we can understand that the world is a
contingent being and that it depends upon a God who necessarily

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[43] *Truth in Aquinas*, 24.
[44] See, for example, *Truth in Aquinas*, 39, 43.
[45] See, for example, *Truth in Aquinas*, 55.
[46] See, for example, *Truth in Aquinas*, 25, 30; see, however, 32.
[47] See, for example, *Truth in Aquinas*, 32 and especially 39.

exists[48]. Thus, we can have natural knowledge of God as cause of the world, contra the epistemological concern raised above[49]. Moreover, if we can have natural knowledge of anything, which natural knowledge is itself created by God (according to the assumption we have granted Milbank and Pickstock), then it must not be impossible for natural things to exist as dependent upon God while remaining "natural", contra the ontological concern raised above. Indeed, this separation of the natural and the divine seems quite foreign to Thomas's viewpoint. From a brief reflection on Thomas's doctrine of creation, then, it is apparent that the fact that all truth ultimately derives from God's creative agency does not necessarily imply that the doctrine of truth is accessible only to *sacra doctrina* nor that all rationality is grounded in faith[50].

Obviously, the status of Thomas's doctrine of truth is determined largely by the status of his doctrine of creation. Milbank seems to understand this, and it is worth nothing that he does argue against Thomas's having a purely philosophical doctrine of creation. His argument amounts to this: Thomas never sets forth such a doctrine in a text that is both 1) an independent work, and 2) completely free of properly theological elements[51]. To the first point, one might acknowledge that it is important to distinguish between what Thomas says in the voice of commentator and what he says in his own voice. But, while one should not assume that the two voices are identical, they do, in fact, often concur. Milbank's second qualification is more germane to our concerns, though. To this second point, let us acknowledge that Thomas was a theologian by trade. Most of his writings were, accordingly, theological in nature. But that does not mean that none of the views propounded in his theological texts are accessible to natural reason[52]. This is especially true of a doctrine like

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[48] See, for example, *In II Sent.* 1.1.2 co.: "*Respondeo quod creationem esse, non tantum fides tenet, sed etiam ratio demonstrat.*"

[49] One could also question the premise that knowing something as true entails knowledge of God. Indeed, it would seem that we come to speak about truth in relation to God only after we have experienced truth in the created order.

[50] A fuller account of this matter would, of course, entail detailed explanation of the differences between faith and reason, including the role of revelation as source of propositions accepted on faith and the role of the will in eliciting the intellect's assent to these propositions. For purposes of this paper, it suffices to note that the gift of faith, through an infusion of grace beyond the divine assistance (*divinum auxilium*) offered to all people, grasps truths not accessible to the natural reason. It might also be helpful to bear in mind here Thomas's general theory of the relationship between grace and nature: grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it. It follows, then, that faith neither destroys reason nor exists entirely separate from it; rather, through the grace associated with faith, the natural power of reason is elevated to grasp truths it otherwise could not. For St. Thomas's account of faith, see *ST* 2-2.1-15

[51] See *Truth in Aquinas*, 26. By "independent work," I mean a text in which Thomas is not commenting upon another authoritative text, such as a work of Aristotle or the *Sentences of Peter Lombard*.

[52] Nor, indeed, does it mean that Thomas did not write *any* philosophical works. A thorough defense of the claim that Thomas did leave philosophical teachings embedded in his more properly theological texts would, of course, entail discussion of Thomas's various statements about the relationship between philosophy and theology, including *ST* 1.1.1, *ScG* 1.7-9, and *In DT* 5.4.

creation, which Thomas explicitly describes as being demonstrable by reason (even if this description occurs in a theological commentary)[53]. Inasmuch as Thomas's doctrine of truth can be extracted from his doctrine of creation, I take it to be equally the case that truth is something that exists "naturally" and is naturally knowable to the philosopher.

IV. Conclusion: Despoiling Nature In Thomas's Early Doctrine of Truth

In spite of their fundamental disagreement about whether or not Thomas's doctrine of truth is theological, Jan Aertsen, Catherine Pickstock and John Milbank all seem to share the same attitude toward the role of natural theology in this doctrine. Aertsen, who expressly states that natural theology can be construed as a subset of philosophy, nevertheless makes incredible concessions in order to remove Thomas's doctrine of transcendental truth from its natural theological foundation. I can see no good philosophical reason for him to do this; in fact, it makes better philosophical and exegetical *sense* to reject the anthropological foundation of transcendental truth in favor of the theological foundation. However, I suspect that Aertsen's desires 1) to produce a medieval philosophy that is separate from theology and then 2) to identify this philosophy with the doctrine of the transcendentals (especially Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals) has led him to reject even the hint of theological commitment that might be associated with the natural theological foundations of Thomas's early teaching on truth. Thus, in his rush to claim Thomas's doctrine of truth for philosophy, Aertsen seems needlessly to have jettisoned natural theology. Milbank and Pickstock, on the other hand, rightly note that Thomas's theory of truth depends upon the Divine Intellect. However, because they reject the notion that natural reason can know God's existence and His activity as Creator, Pickstock and Milbank have attempted to claim for *sacra doctrina* teachings that most Thomists would recognize as matters of natural theology. In the end, both parties seem to be trying to remove natural theology from Thomas's doctrine of truth, more likely because of their own contemporary polemics than because of any textual or systematic concerns emerging from Thomas's statements. The shame is that in doing so, they conspire to rob the

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[53] It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that creation *is* actually a philosophically demonstrable doctrine. However, it is clear enough that Thomas thinks it is. See *In II Sent.* 1.1.2 co.: "*Respondeo quod creationem esse, non tantum fides tenet, sed etiam ratio demonstrat*". See also *ScG* 2.15-16; *In Phys.* bk. VIII, l. 3 (par. 996) and l. 21 (par. 1154); *De substantiis separatiis*. For a good introduction to the topic of creation in Aquinas's thought, see Baldner and Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation* (Toronto: PIMS, 1997).

natural world of the divine, which is something it can scarcely afford to lose[54].

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