

THE RELATION BETWEEN HUMAN AND DIVINE INTELLECTION IN
ARISTOTLE'S *THEÔRIA* AND THOMAS AQUINAS'S *CONTEMPLATIO*

A Thesis

by

ANDREW CHAD HELMS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2009

Major Subject: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The Relation Between Human and Divine Intellection in Aristotle's *Theôria* and Thomas Aquinas's *Contemplatio*. (May 2009)

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Some comparative studies of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas put emphasis on the similarities between Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics. In this study, however, I have attempted to show a salient difference; a respect in which Thomas's system cannot accommodate certain Aristotelian tenets. I have argued that, although Thomas tries to incorporate Aristotle's account of intellection, he cannot consistently do so. For an integration of this sort entails that the created intellect is identical with God when it contemplates him. This, however, is a conclusion that would rightly be rejected as metaphysically implausible in Thomas's system.

Aristotle's view of intellection entails that the intellect is identical with whatever it contemplates when that object possesses no matter. For, intellection, which is itself immaterial, assumes the form of whatever it contemplates, and furthermore, matter is what individuates distinct entities that share the same form. If all this is so, then the human intellect becomes identical with Aristotle's god when it contemplates him. In Aristotle's system, this would not present any problems, for a very interesting reason: Aristotle, on an interpretation of his thought that seems textually plausible, teaches that

part of the human mind **is** identical with divine intellect, or *nous*; that this part is “implanted” in the human being “from outside” and is the most divine part—and so, part of the human being can rightly be said to be eternal.¹ Thomas, however, in accordance with Christian doctrine, holds that the human intellect has its own created identity, and differs numerically from person to person. But Thomas’s adoption of prominent theses from Aristotle’s account of intellection unfortunately entails that the human intellect, in *contemplatio*, becomes identical with God, since God is immaterial and identical with his essence. After looking at some possible solutions, I argue that this is not a desirable outcome in Thomas’s Christian metaphysic, for several good reasons.

¹ Cf. *De Anima* 408b18-29, but also *De Generatione Animalium* 2.3.736b27-28, where he says that intellect comes from outside, and “it alone is divine.”

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: *THEÔRIA* IN ARISTOTLE

The metaphysics and ethics of Aristotle both center on Aristotle's god, whose nature is most memorably described in *Metaphysics* Λ as *noêseôs noêsis*, "thought thinking itself." This god, timeless and impassible, is the end toward which all things strive, each of them in accordance with its nature. As a compendious statement of one possible reading of Aristotle, however, this requires much explication and support. For one thing, the diversity of natures is enormous; how can different kinds of being all be said to "strive" after Aristotle's god? And what is it about Aristotle's god that makes him worth striving after? Similarly, how can one being properly be the "end" or "goal" of another? I will show how Aristotle's answers to these questions, insofar as the human being is involved, crucially involve the doctrine of contemplation, or *theôria*. If Aristotle is to be believed, *theôria* is the most worthy activity for human beings, and even has within its gift the enjoyment of a supreme and godlike beatitude. In this chapter, I will explicate Aristotle's doctrine of *theôria* by placing it in the proper relation to the rest of his thought, using Aristotle's doctrines of *eudaimonia*, *nous*, *sophia*, the human person, and the Aristotelian god as coordinates. I will argue in the first section of the chapter that for Aristotle, *theôria* is properly placed at the very center of paradigmatic *eudaimonia*, notwithstanding contrary interpretations. In the second section, I will examine Aristotle's doctrine of the human person, specifically in relation to the intellectual

This thesis follows the style of *Philosophical Review*.

virtues of *nous* and *sophia*, arguing for a certain interpretation of these two virtues in Aristotle's system. In the third section, I will examine the doctrine of god as *nous*, using it to help delineate *theôria* in the Aristotelian corpus with respect to its nature and object. At this point, it will be possible to give an explanation of the metaphysics behind *theôria*'s supreme value; I will argue that the concept of *participation* in the divine thought unifies Aristotle's views most helpfully.

1.1. How is *Eudaimonia* Gained? (The Controversy)

On Aristotle's view, how does a rational human nature attain its proper goal, *qua* the sort of creature it distinctively is? Both the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics* offer answers to this question; but it is not at all clear that the answers of these two treatises are the same (in fact, it seems that they are not the same).² It is not even clear that the *Nicomachean* treatise gives only one answer; book X seems to offer a different answer than the rest of the ethics, in that it advocates the pure pursuit of *theôria* (unmixed with the practical concerns of politics and the virtuous life) as the highest good that a human being can attain: "[P]erfect happiness is a kind of contemplative activity..."³ But the difficulty is that up through the first nine books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle has

² Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 6.

Cf. 88-89: "So the concluding section of the NE, instead of offering, like the EE, a single life containing all the value sought by the promoters of the three traditional lives [i.e., the political life, the contemplative life, and the life of pleasure], offers us a first-class, perfect happiness, consisting in the exercise of understanding. As an alternative, the NE goes on to offer a second-class career consisting in the exercise of [89] wisdom and the moral virtues; that too is a form of happiness, but it is not perfect happiness (1178a9-b8)."

Cf. 93: "In the EE happiness is clearly a combination of the activities of various kinds of excellence. Like the NE, the EE argues to the nature of happiness from the notion of function: but unlike the NE it takes as its starting-point not the function of man (a doubtful notion) but the function of the soul."

³ NE 1178b7, trans. J.A.K. Thompson.

been elaborating the seminal code of virtue ethics and detailing the excellencies of man as an active being (except for book VI, in which he catalogues the intellectual virtues—some of which, however, are practically oriented); so has he been painting a picture of perfect human happiness, or not? *Eudaimonia* is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, as Aristotle has officially formulated it; and what is the whole scheme of *Nicomachean Ethics* if not an in-depth characterization of the virtue(s) through which happiness is gained? It is pretty obvious that no-one can pursue both the active and the contemplative life at the same time, since they are actually defined by way of explicit contrast; so one easy way of avoiding the exegetical dilemma is obviously wrong.⁴ Only exacerbating the interpretive problem are the things that he says in book I about how political science is the highest type of science: “[I]f politics makes use of the other sciences, and also lays down what we should do and from what we should refrain, its end must include theirs; and this end must be the good for man.”⁵ But if the end of politics is the good for humankind, and the pursuit of politics is an active one (which it clearly is), then it seems obvious from this particular pronouncement that man reaches his good through activity.

Aristotle straightforwardly says that happiness is the primary goal of the human being, since all other goods are chosen for its sake; what he does a poorer job of making clear (judging by the amount of controversy in the literature) is the way in which a rational nature is to pursue happiness. Of course he offers an official definition of

⁴ Cf. the explicit contrasting of the two kinds of life in NE 1177b25-1178a10.

⁵ NE 1094a22-b12.

happiness, which, if it were perfectly understood by Aristotle scholars, would also settle the question of how happiness is to be pursued; but the interpretation and explication of this definition is in some respects a vexed question. The passage runs:

...[I]f all this is so, the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind.⁶

The interpretative question is, “Just how inclusive does Aristotle mean to be when he uses the phrase, ‘the best and most perfect kind’ of virtue? Is Aristotle referring strictly to the intellectual virtue of *sophia*, whose proper activity is *theôria* (or, to take nothing for granted, is he referring to whatever other virtue might be supreme over the rest), or is he referring more broadly to the (plural) virtues that might form an aggregate of ‘the best and most complete kind of virtue’?” The controversy is partly over how to translate the word *teleios*; does it mean “complete,” or rather “perfect”? If it means “complete,” then there might be some excuse for interpreting “the most complete kind [of virtue]” to mean a conglomerate of different virtues, perhaps including *sophia*, along with *dikaiosynê*, etc., as parts or components of the most complete kind of virtue (where complete means all-inclusive of different subsidiary virtues). If it means “perfect,” on the other hand, then Aristotle thinks that there is a supreme virtue, probably wisdom (*sophia*), whose activity alone (i.e., *theôria*) leads to proper happiness; and other virtues, though their proper activities may serve an important and possibly subsidiary purpose, do not in and of themselves lead to the consummation of happiness. “It is true that Aristotle does not think that the moral virtues are separable from wisdom”; the question

⁶ NE 1098a16-18.

remains whether the whole of moral virtue, or exclusively *sophia*, brings about happiness *per se*.⁷ Each of these interpretations solves problems that the other gives no help towards solving; and it is clear they are mutually exclusive interpretations of Aristotle's thought as a whole. There are, however, more interpretations than just these two, which the next few pages will explore.

In response to the interpretive problem posed here, the "inclusivist" school of interpretation (in the terminology first used by W.F.R. Hardie in 1965)⁸ holds that the "best and most complete kind" of virtue in Aristotle's official formulation of *eudaimonia* refers to a conglomeration or aggregation of virtues. On this view, happiness becomes an activity of the soul in accordance with *all* the virtues from the encyclopedic collection of virtues that the *Nicomachean* treatise lists; active, intellectual, and whatever other category there may be. For inclusivist interpreters, this helps to explain, among other things, how Aristotle can think of the active and political life as one that can be happy since he appears not to think that the life of contemplation is the only happy kind of life; it helps account for the laudatory things that Aristotle says about the science and practice of politics, such as that politics is "the most authoritative and directive science" and, since politics "makes use of the other sciences...its end must include theirs; and this end must be the good for man."⁹ Inclusivists sometimes quote from passages like NE

⁷ Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 6, fn. 6.

⁸ W.F.R. Hardie, "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics," *Philosophy* 40 (1965), 277-95.

⁹ NE 1094a22-b12

1097b14-25; in this passage, Aristotle talks about the importance of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) as an essential characteristic of happiness:

A self-sufficient thing, then, we take to be one which by itself makes life desirable and in no way deficient; and we believe that happiness is such a thing. What is more, we regard it as the most desirable of all things, not reckoned as one item among many; if it were so reckoned, happiness would obviously be more desirable by the addition of even the least good, because the addition makes the sum of goods greater, and the greater of two goods is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed.¹⁰

These scholars point to the “self-sufficiency” of happiness as implying that it is composed of all the other kinds of virtue, since a life that was lacking in one of the virtues could not be self-sufficient (or rather, if there were more goods other than happiness, which would be the case if happiness was the function of a non-inclusive single virtue, then happiness would not be self-sufficient). There are problems, however, in this reading of the passage; as Kenny points out, “if happiness were meant as an inclusive end, as the sum total of goods sought for their own sake, it would be absurd to speak of goods additional to happiness” (as the passage in question appears to do; but there is, of course, a debate about whether Aristotle actually means to speak absurdly here).¹¹ There are other problems as well; in NE1098a16-18, Aristotle has said that happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with the best (*aristos*) and most perfect/complete (*teleios*) virtue. Inclusivists read *teleios* as “most complete,” and “most complete” as describing a composite or aggregate of other virtues; but, as Stephen Bush

¹⁰ NE 1097b2-21

¹¹ Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 24. See Stephen White, “Is Aristotelian Happiness a Good Life or the Best Life?” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1990), 103-44.

points out, “[T]his is an unnatural and implausible reading of ‘best and most complete’ virtue in English and Greek since ‘best’ (*aristos*) implies the single most valuable item in a set of items, not the set itself.”¹² In other words, the logic of the word “best” would seem to point towards a single virtue, instead of a collection of many. However, for inclusivist scholars, these problems seem to be balanced by the emphases of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole. Aristotle scholars who support the inclusivist interpretation include J. L. Ackrill (1980) and Terry Irwin (1985); Anthony Kenny thinks that the *Eudemian Ethics* is more inclusivist in its orientation, while the *Nicomachean* treatise is not.¹³

The “dominant,” or “monist” interpreters hold that *sophia* is the “best and most perfect kind” of virtue mentioned in NE1098a16-18 and therefore that Aristotle’s view of happiness is exclusively (or at least primarily) intellectualist; in other words, that *eudaimonia* is, most properly, a function of the act of *theôria*, and other kinds of virtue are only valuable insofar as they are means to prepare life for this end (or in some other way, see below). Aristotle scholars on this side of the debate include Richardson Lear (2004) John Cooper (2004) and Richard Kraut (1989).¹⁴

The dominant-monist-intellectualist view seems strongly supported by book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially X.7:

¹² Stephen Bush, “Divine and Human Happiness in *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Philosophical Review* 117 (2007), 50.

¹³ Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 6.

¹⁴ Bush’s list, p. 51.

If happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable to assume that it is in accordance with the highest virtue, and this will be the virtue of the best part of us. Whether this is the intellect or something else that we regard as naturally ruling and guiding us, and possessing insight into things noble and divine—either as being actually divine itself or as being more divine than any other part of us—it is the activity of this part, in accordance with the virtue proper to it, that will be perfect happiness.

We have already said that it is a contemplative activity...For contemplation is both the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known), and also it is the most continuous, because we are more capable of continuous contemplation than we are of any practical activity...¹⁵

This passage certainly appears to be a straightforward designation of the virtue of *sophia* (and/or *nous*, for the two are linked in an important way) as the *teleios* and *aristos* virtue of NE 1098a16-18. If the link between the two passages is sound, then X.7 certainly appears to spell doom for most inclusivist interpretations of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, at least. The monist interpretation, however, is not without its own problems. In 1178a9ff, Aristotle tells us that “for man...the best and most pleasant life is the life of the intellect...[but] life in conformity with the other kind of virtue will be happy in a secondary degree, because activities in accordance with it are human [italics mine].” As Stephen Bush points out, it is difficult for monist interpreters to explain how the life of active virtue can be happy, even when it does not contain the paradigmatic activity of happiness—i.e., contemplation: “It is natural to assume that what makes a life happy is the presence of the activity of happiness within the life. But if this is the case,

¹⁵ NE 1177a5-25

intellectualist interpretations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are impossible.”¹⁶ This is because an exclusively active and moral life can be secondarily happy, as the above passage indicates. Apparently, practical *species* of virtue are able to provide some kind of second-rate or derivative happiness (derivative in some way from true happiness); but the mechanics of this secondary happiness are explicated in different ways by different monist interpreters, insofar as they have recognized the problem at all.¹⁷ Another problem for the monists is found in I.9, where Aristotle says that good actions are *hêdeiai*, *agathai*, and *kalai* in themselves, and that they are so to the highest degree; but also that happiness is what is best and finest and pleasantest, clearly equating good actions with happiness.¹⁸

Each of these contrary interpretations explains a lot of data and runs into problems; however, there are also Aristotle scholars like Stephen Bush (2008) who have put forward interesting incorporative hypotheses in order to try to explain everything better. Bush’s interpretation of Aristotle holds that *eudaimonia* is dualist, or that there are two different kinds of *eudaimonia* within the power of humans to attain. One type of *eudaimonia* is properly human; it is “the human good.” This is the type that is attained through living a virtuous life and engaging in political activity. The other kind of *eudaimonia*, however, is much more valuable, because it is actually divine; human

¹⁶ Bush, 53.

¹⁷ Bush, 51ff. explains the different intellectualist strategies for interpreting Aristotle with respect to this problem.

¹⁸ Bush, 59.

beings do not enjoy this boon *qua* human, but only insofar as they share a spark of divine *nous*. Bush explains:

In the dualistic reading I will propose, Aristotle views contemplation...as the divine good. He does not see it, properly speaking, as a human good. Humans, or at least a select few of them, can obtain the divine good of contemplation, but the human good is the activity that is characteristically human: morally virtuous activity.¹⁹

One argument for Bush's view seem to be that it fits very well with certain Nicomachean passages like this one: "A human being's function we posit as being a kind of life, and this life as being activity of soul and actions accompanied by reason."²⁰ In this passage, what is distinctive of human beings seems to be rational *activity*, "actions accompanied by reason." Another passage was mentioned above from 1178a9ff, where Aristotle says that actions in accordance with "the other kind of virtue" (i.e., *not* purely intellectual virtue) are *human*. The strongest confirmative evidence for Bush's reading seems to come from 1177b26-32:

But such a life [i.e., the contemplative one] will be higher than the human plane; for it is not insofar as [a man] is human that he will live like this, but insofar as there is something divine in him, and to the degree that this is superior to the compound, to that degree will its activity too be superior to that in accordance with the rest of virtue. If, then, intelligence is something divine as compared to a human being, so too a life lived in accordance with this will be divine as compared to a human life.

Aristotle here actually uses the phrases, "insofar as he is a human" and "insofar as there is something divine in him." True, he does not explicitly say that there are two kinds of happiness for man to pursue; but the other parts of Bush's thesis seem to be confirmed strongly here—namely, that Aristotle thinks of the contemplative life as supra-human,

¹⁹ Bush, 51.

²⁰ NE 1098a13-14.

and that there is an integral part of the human psyche which is not, strictly speaking, *human*; and that the activity of this part is superior to properly human activity.

Bush himself admits that there are apparent problems with his dualist view as well; not the least are passages in which Aristotle seems to say that *nous* is really the most essential part of the soul, defining the identity of a person: “And each of us would seem actually to *be* this [i.e., *nous*], given that each is his authoritative and better element...”²¹ There are other passages like this one in which Aristotle says that a human person is most of all (*malista*) his or her *nous* (cf. 1166a17ff., “...the intellectual part of him, which is held to be the self of the individual,” and 1168b35, “[t]herefore one who loves this authoritative part and gratifies it is in the truest sense a self-lover”). These passages cause problems for Bush’s interpretation because his position is that for Aristotle, *nous* is precisely *not* what makes us human; it is a spark of the divine, and there is a distinction in kind between divine and human. Bush concedes, “If Scott is correct that in the strictest, primary sense, the human is *nous* [he calls this the strict-identity reading], then in the strictest sense, contemplation is a human activity and so also a human good, the highest human good in fact.”²² This would be a falsification of his dualist hypothesis.

One way for Bush to avoid this problem might be to say that personal identity is a different thing from human nature, and that *nous* is definitive of personal identity rather than of human nature as such; this route, however, must be compared in the next

²¹ NE 1177b31-1178a8

²² Bush, 70.

section with Aristotle's complete doctrine of the human person and the intellectual virtues. At any rate, it seems that the monist interpretations make more sense of Aristotle than the inclusivist interpretations, while dualist interpretations like that of Bush apparently cover even more evidence (that is, if successful).

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that if the *Nicomachean Ethics* has any weight in our deliberations about what Aristotle really thought, we are at least justified in thinking (*pace* the inclusivists) that pure, unsupplemented *theôria* plays a central role in Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*, especially when that *eudaimonia* is envisioned as going beyond the prerogatives and possibilities of (merely) human nature. Even though book X takes up a relatively small percentage of text of *Nicomachean Ethics*, its subject matter is enormously important for Aristotle, as witnessed also by the *Metaphysics* Λ. Its importance is bound up with the nature of the human person, the divine capabilities of *nous*, and the "endiness" of Aristotle's god for the rational individual, to all of which we now turn in their proper order.

1.2. On the Human Being and the Intellectual Virtues

So far, we have seen that supreme *eudaimonia* is a function of *theôria*. In this next section, it should become clear exactly which human faculties generate the activity of *theôria*; but for this to work, it is necessary to know something about Aristotle's anthropology and psychology. Everyone knows that Aristotle's human being is a "rational animal;" but what does Aristotle take "rational" to mean, and what are the different kinds of rationality? Any answer to this question must take into account book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which lists and characterizes the intellectual virtues. It

must also take into account Aristotle's pre-scientific but profound treatise, *De Anima*; especially book III, in which the enigmatic *nous* makes an important appearance.

In book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle glances back to 1103a3ff, where he classified the virtues of the soul as virtues of the character and virtues of the intellect; up to this point, he has been discussing virtues of character, virtues associated with the non-rational parts of the soul. He makes a further division of the intellectual virtues into those virtues that are associated with the "scientific" part of the intellect, and those associated with the calculative (deliberative) part of the intellect.²³ The scientific part of the intellect is used to contemplate "those things whose first principles are invariable."²⁴ The calculative/deliberative part of the intellect is useful for making practical decisions; it contemplates variable things (since no-one deliberates about invariable things). This is the famous distinction between the practical and the theoretical intellect, each of which has its own peculiar virtues, activities, and ends. Of course, both kinds of intellect aim at truth; but the practical intellect aims at truth as a means to the most useful action, whereas the theoretical intellect aims at truth for its own sake; and therefore, the kinds of truth at which they aim will be different. The pattern of the practical intellect's function is chiastic; what is first in intention and thought is last in execution. The theoretical intellect has no such pattern since it is not at all concerned with action.

When Aristotle lists the intellectual virtues in book VI, he lists the virtues of the practical intellect together with those of the theoretical intellect. First comes scientific

²³ J.A.K. Thompson's translation

²⁴ NE 1138b35ff.

knowledge, or *epistêmê*; this is presumably a virtue of the theoretical intellect (since Aristotle says that its object is of necessity and eternal), and is constituted by the ability to demonstrate what one knows (where demonstration involves deduction from principles that are sometimes arrived at through induction). Aristotle says, “Thus scientific knowledge is a demonstrative state...i.e., a person has scientific knowledge when his belief is conditioned in a certain way, and the first principles are known to him...”²⁵ Next, Aristotle juxtaposes the two main virtues of the practical intellect; namely, art (*technê*) and prudence, or practical wisdom (*phronêsis*). Though they are both practical and hence non-theoretical, they are, of course, distinguished by way of a “generic difference;” art is oriented towards production, while prudence is oriented towards action as such: “Hence neither is included in the other; because action is not production, nor production action.”²⁶

Next, Aristotle discusses *nous*, which is one of the most mysterious intellectual virtues and also preeminent among the others. At this point, Aristotle makes very few positive statements about *nous*, except that it is the “state” or faculty of mind that apprehends the truth of principles (which are the beginning-points of a science). Later in book VI, Aristotle says that *nous* “apprehends the definitions, which cannot be logically demonstrated.”²⁷ This raises a question about the value of *nous*; why is the perception and understanding of definitions so valuable? The answer must at least involve

²⁵ NE 1139b18-36

²⁶ NE 1140a1-23

²⁷ NE 1142a12-29

recognizing that Aristotle takes the definition of a substance to be more than merely stipulative or nominal; in other words, he thinks that understanding a substance's *true* definition is tantamount to insight into the nature of the substance. So it is a large part of the role of *nous* to understand natures. The value and function of *nous* will be revisited in section 3.

Aristotle moves on to wisdom (*sophia*). Aristotle makes it clear that he is talking about wisdom without qualification, *not* a particular type of practical “wisdom,” as when we call Phidias a “wise” sculptor. “So evidently wisdom must be the most finished form of knowledge.” He moves on from here to a delineation of wisdom's scope:

The wise man, then, must not only know all that follows from the first principles, but must also have a true understanding of these principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuition (*nous*) and scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*): knowledge ‘complete with head’ (as it were) of the most precious truths.²⁸

So wisdom is a complex of *nous* and *epistêmê*; it is interesting that Aristotle speaks of *nous* as divine, but not, evidently, *epistêmê*.

It would be a mistake to conclude from Aristotle's formulation that *sophia* is simply the simultaneous possession of comprehensive *nous* and comprehensive *epistêmê*, and to let that stand as a complete formulation. The object of these two intellectual virtues, i.e., insofar as they together constitute *sophia*, needs to be specified; and Aristotle has specified it for us even in the passage above, though not in a very salient way. He has said that wisdom is knowledge “of the most precious truths.” He does not explicitly tell what these truths are in book VI. He does, however, make clear

²⁸ NE 1141a18-20

why wisdom's object is the most precious truth: "[Most precious:] for it is extraordinary that anyone should regard political science or prudence as the most important (*spoudaios*), unless man is the highest being in the world."²⁹ His elaborations on this theme make it clear that for Aristotle, the meaning of "prudence" in a particular context is indexed to the nature of the being of which prudence is being predicated, while the meaning of wisdom is absolute. In other words, *sophia* is the same in the human being as it would be in any other being (a god, for example); the meaning of *sophia* is not relativised or indexical. The reason for this is that *phronêsis* aims at the good of a particular species, and the goods of different species are different. Wisdom, on the other hand, aims at the knowledge of those truths that are in themselves most precious, and not instrumentally valuable for the good of the species in any way. After this discussion, Aristotle reiterates his original definition more formally: "It is clear, then, from what has been said that wisdom is scientific and intuitive knowledge of what is by nature most precious."³⁰ It is my contention, along with Richard Kraut and David Conway, that Aristotle here refers obscurely to the knowledge and contemplation of god.³¹

In VI.12, Aristotle raises a possible doubt about the value of wisdom, given that it is not practically useful: "A problem might be posed about the intellectual virtues:

²⁹ NE 1141a20-22

³⁰ NE 1141b1-3

³¹ "The fact that the philosopher contemplates truths about these most knowable objects [i.e., the highest objects in the universe] constitutes part of Aristotle's case in [NE] X.7 for the superiority of this contemplative activity to any other (1177a20-21). The highest object of knowledge, he thinks, is the unmoved mover, and so he is saying in X.7-8 that the ultimate end for human beings is to activate their understanding of this foremost cause of the universe." Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 73-74.

what is the use of them? For wisdom studies none of the things that go to make a man happy (because it is not concerned with any kind of process); prudence has this quality, [but merely knowing about good actions does not make it more likely that we will do them]...³² Aristotle's way of solving the problem of wisdom's value is instructive and significant: "Wisdom produces happiness, *not as medical science produces health, but as health does*. For wisdom is a part of virtue as a whole, and makes a person happy by his possession and exercise of it [italics mine]."³³ In other words, wisdom is the formal cause of happiness, rather than the efficient or material cause.³⁴ In Bush's dualistic scheme, it is of course the more divine sort of happiness that is in view here.

A final question remains about how prudence and wisdom are related.

At the same time, prudence does not exercise authority over wisdom or over the higher part of the soul, any more than the science of medicine exercises authority over health; for it does not use wisdom, but provides for its realization; and therefore issues orders not to it, but for its sake.³⁵

Prudence thus has an ancillary relationship to wisdom; it "provides for its realization." It may be difficult to reconcile this with the fact that he says that prudence is valuable on its own account as well, since it is a virtue; but this is not an important problem at this point; it may be that the second-class happiness in Bush's scheme explains it.³⁶ The rest of book VI lists the remaining intellectual virtues and compares them with one another.

³² NE 1143b18-21

³³ NE 1144a3-5

³⁴ In this respect, I agree with J.A.K. Thompson's footnote on p. 222 of his translation.

³⁵ NE 1145a2ff

³⁶ NE 1144a2

We have already seen in section 1 how Aristotle thinks of *nous* as a divine thing that somehow resides in the human being (whether it is actually identical with the individual or not).³⁷ This puzzling stance caused the interpretive problems confronting the inclusivist and monist interpretations of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, since *human* happiness and function as such are not based upon the activity of *theôrêtikos nous*, but upon practical virtue and political science; whereas the *highest possible* happiness for rational individuals *is* based upon the exercise of *nous* or *sophia* in the activity of *theôria*. This problem has led some interpreters, like Scott, to posit that Aristotle held that human beings have a double nature; one nature that is merely human, and another that is divine, so that Aristotle held to a "bifocal anthropology."³⁸ This view, however, is controversial; it is enough at least to recognize that the Aristotelian human being has an element in his essential make-up that cannot be explained in terms of animal nature, nor in terms of practical rationality. Furthermore, this is the element that is "most divine" and has to do with the "most precious truths." It is also the element whose exercise is linked to the highest state of beatitude that any sort of rational beings can attain.

1.3. God as *Nous*

In both *Eudemian* (1217b31) and *Nicomachean* (1096a24-25) Ethics, Aristotle uses the phrase, *ho nous kai ho theos* or *ho theos kai ho nous*. Stephen Menn argues that the *kai* is

³⁷ Especially important here is *De Anima* 408b18-29, which the next section will discuss.

³⁸ Dominic Scott, "Primary and Secondary *Eudaimonia*" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. 73:225-42.

epexegetic—in other words, that *theos* and *nous* have the same referent.³⁹ Menn argues that *ho theos kai ho nous* must have been a standard expression for referring to the First Principle, citing similar passages from other works of Aristotle and other ancient philosophers.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he urges that *nous* in these passages cannot refer to the human mind, since the passage in question is referring to “substantial” goods as opposed to qualitative ones: “A [merely] human mind, like a body, can be good or bad according to the qualities it possesses, such as ‘justice’ ...or ‘the virtues’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a25), listed here as qualitative rather than substantial goods. If *nous* [here] were the human mind, it could not possibly be called a substantial good.”⁴¹ Anthony Kenny is another scholar who would apparently rule out a simple identification of *nous* in these passages with the human mind, if they did in fact refer to god: “It is true that Aristotle calls the human mind ‘divine,’ but he never calls it ‘God.’ God is superior to the human understanding ([EE] 1248a29); God is always in a state of actuality, but the human understanding needs a principle to set it in motion (1248a17-21)...”⁴² Myles Burnyeat, on the other hand, seems to argue that being god and being an aspect of the human mind are not necessarily incompatible for Aristotle. In titling his lecture “Aristotle’s Divine Intellect,” Burnyeat gives his readership to understand that he is deliberately exploiting the ambiguity in this phrase: “When we read *Metaphysics* Λ and *De Anima* III 5, we

³⁹ Stephen Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 45 (1992), 551-552.

⁴⁰ *Politics* 1287a28, Theophrastus’s *Metaphysics* 7b22-23, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 1075b11.

⁴¹ Stephen Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” 552.

⁴² Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 97.

encounter God, the Active Intellect, explaining itself. Or so Aristotle would have us believe: when his intellect is actively explaining itself, that is his Deity explaining itself.”⁴³

If this is not actually a contradictory interpretation, it seems to raise important questions, at least. What is the proper *locus* and activity of *nous*? Or, what is the activity of *nous* insofar as it constitutes part of the human soul, and what is the activity of *nous* insofar as it constitutes the divine First Principle—or is there a distinction to be made between human and divine *nous*? And how can it properly be the *telos* of human mental activity, as well as the supreme *object* of that activity—*noêseôs noêsis*? Through the medieval ages to the present day, these interpretative questions have been vexed,⁴⁴ and have most famously given rise to the dispute in medieval philosophy between Thomas Aquinas and the Averroists about the soul and its relation to the “Active Intellect.” Although the debate was partly over the proper interpretation of Aristotle, it also had implications for Christian theology because it touched on the ontological status of the soul.

Directly relevant to resolving this controversy is Aristotle’s account in *De Anima* of how *nous* indwells the human being, and how it functions. We know from Aristotle’s

⁴³ Miles F. Burnyeat, *Aristotle’s Divine Intellect* (Marquette University Press, 2008), 9.

⁴⁴ Andrea Falcon speaks of certain passages that have occasioned “struggling:” “[In *De anima* 3.5] Aristotle famously argues for the existence of an intellect that is separate, unaffected, and unmixed (430 a 17-18). In antiquity commentators traditionally referred to this intellect as the active (or productive) intellect, *nous poiêtikos*. Discussion on how exactly this intellect is to be understood started very early... Among other things, it is not obvious what sort of thing the active intellect is supposed to be. More directly, it is not clear whether it is a human or a divine intellect.” Andrea Falcon, “Commentators on Aristotle,” SEP, copyright 2005.

psychology that in the human soul, *nous* is the only human faculty that does not use a bodily organ for its proper activity:

Therefore, since everything is a possible object of thought, mind [i.e., *nous*] in order...to know, must be pure from all admixture; for the co-presence of what is alien to its nature is a hindrance and a block: it follows that it too, like the sensitive part, can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity. Thus that in the soul which is called mind (by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges) is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing. For this reason it cannot reasonably be regarded as blended with the body: if so, it would acquire some quality, e.g. warmth or cold, or even have an organ like the sensitive faculty: as it is, it has none.⁴⁵

Aristotle thinks that in order to reflect on (or know) bodily things, the mind must use images, or phantasms; but it can only acquire these through the bodily senses, and being mixed with the body would give it a determinate nature which would be incompatible with its ability to take the shape of any reality. *Nous*, therefore, although its activity may derive material from phantasms (in a way that is not totally clear), is essentially independent of organs. But being independent of organs implies that it is immaterial in some way; one might even think, divine—as has been hinted in the first and second sections. In *De Anima* 1.4, he says:

The case of mind [i.e., *nous*, as opposed to passions in the previous discussion] is different; *it seems to be an independent substance implanted within the soul and to be incapable of being destroyed*. If it could be destroyed at all, it would be under the blunting influence of old age... The incapacity of old age is due to an affection not of the soul but of its vehicle, as occurs in drunkenness or disease... That is why, when this vehicle decays, memory and love cease; they were activities not of mind, but of the composite which has perished; *mind is, no doubt, something more divine and impassible* [italics mine].⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *De Anima* 429a18-27, translated by J.A. Smith.

⁴⁶ DA 408b18-29.

Nous is thus both a separate substance in itself *and* an important element “implanted” in the composite of the human mind, but in such a way that it survives when the human has died. According to Myles Burnyeat, “[DA I 4, 408b11-29] implies (a) that *nous*, unlike ordinary thought, is divine and immortal, (b) that it can come to reside *in* a human being as itself an extra kind of substance, distinct from the mortal substance it resides in, and (c) that it remains completely unaffected by the death of its temporary human vehicle.”⁴⁷ This seems cognate with the Stoic idea of the “divine spark” of Reason dwelling in individual human beings, as well as with some neo-Platonic ideas about *Nous* and salvation.

In *De Anima*, Aristotle speaks (in 3.4) of the aspect of mind that has become known as *nous pathêtikos*. This is the potential element in Aristotle’s philosophy of mind that is able to take on the form of the object of knowledge—which is how Aristotle thinks of the event of knowledge. But in order for this fusion to happen, Aristotle thinks there must be an active, causal element, which he goes on to describe in the obscure and important passage 3.5:

Since in every class of things, as in nature as a whole, we find two factors involved, (1) a matter which is potentially all the particulars included in the class, (2) a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all (the latter standing to the former, as e.g. an art to its material), these distinct elements must likewise be found within the soul.

And in fact mind as we have described it [*nous pathêtikos*] is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another [*nous poiêtikos*] which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is a sort of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential colors into actual colors.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Myles Burnyeat, *Aristotle’s Divine Intellect*, 32.

⁴⁸ DA 3.5

Not only does *nous poiêtikos* play an important epistemological role; it also seems to be identical with the unmoved mover; or at least some commentators have made this identification, on the basis of passages like this:

Mind in this sense of it is separable, impassible, unmixed, since it is in its essential nature activity...*this alone is immortal and eternal* (we do not, however, remember its former activity because, while mind in this sense is impassible, mind as passive is destructible), and without it nothing thinks [*italics mine*].⁴⁹

Interestingly enough, in book Λ of the *Metaphysics*, “substance” and “eternal” are some of the characterizations of the First Principle, *noêsis noêseôs*.⁵⁰ Aristotle’s most important unmoved mover, his god, is an immaterial, separate, substance—one that is pure actuality, impassible, and eternal; this being moves the world by being the object of desire. I argue that another name for this being, in whom contemplating humans participate, is *nous*. I think that this participation is the key to answering the question whether Aristotle’s disputed passages refer to a divine or human intellect—but it is a strange species of participation. Aristotle holds that in the exercise and actuality of *nous theôrêtikos*, human beings participate in the divine; *not* in such a way that *noêsis noêseôs* is actually divided and distributed among many subjects (since it is simple⁵¹), and not by a Platonic resemblance of substances to Ideas, but in such a way that the human intellect

⁴⁹ 430a20-25.

⁵⁰ *Met.* 1071b1-10, translated by W.D. Ross.

⁵¹ *Met.* Λ.9: “We answer that everything which has not matter is indivisible...”

becomes one with its object. In Aristotle's metaphysics, this is actually possible when that object possesses no matter.⁵²

It seems a warranted conclusion from these passages that the capstone of Aristotle's epistemology is also the first cause in his universe, similarly to his teacher, Plato; so when Aristotle explains active mind, he is explaining one of the aspects of *noêsis noêseôs*. Other commentators have drawn this conclusion as well: "The *De Anima* is a treatise in physics or second philosophy... But III 5, as I propose to interpret it, is first philosophy, theology, metaphysics. For it is wholly focused on God, the Divine Intellect."⁵³ It seems that there is a part of the human soul that possesses the ability to become one with this Divine Intellect in virtue of its shared nature; and the quest to pursue this ultimate consummation may not be the quest for the human good as such, but rather, for the good of *nous*, of which humans partake, and which they can develop into its proper flowering through the exercise of *theôria*.

⁵² *Met.* A.9: "Since, then, thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its object will be the same, i.e., the thinking will be one with the thought."

⁵³ Burnyeat, *Aristotle's Divine Intellect*, 38.

CHAPTER II

CONTEMPLATIO IN THOMAS AQUINAS

Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of *contemplatio* resembles Aristotle's doctrine of *theôria* in many respects, but there are also crucial divergences. His integration of Aristotelian metaphysics with Christian philosophy creates tensions with which he must attempt to deal satisfactorily—though it is possible that he does not recognize all of the instances of tension that a contemporary interpreter might name, two or three of which this chapter will explore in particular. There are long-standing controversies among interpreters about how much Thomas changed Aristotle, and for what reasons: whether his motivation was to read Aristotle in a way consonant with Christian belief, or whether he mostly took himself to be faithfully exegeting Aristotle, or whether he thought of his project as a simple and natural development of Aristotle's thought with regard to certain points.⁵⁴ An important factor to take into account is the fact that much of Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle was forged in the fires of controversy; especially the controversy with the Latin Averroists led by Siger of Brabant, who held to Averroes's rationalistic interpretation of Aristotle's active intellect. This chapter will read Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics of *contemplatio* with Aristotle's *theôria* in mind, seeking to answer these interpretive questions about Thomas's use of Aristotle in light of the literature that has been devoted to them. At the end, I will briefly survey the interaction

⁵⁴ An important study in this regard is James Doig's *Aquinas on Metaphysics* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1972).

of Thomas with the Latin Averroists in his *opusculum, De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*. .

A few of the differences between Aristotelian and Thomist theology are salient; as has been widely noted, Aristotle's god, or *nous*, absolutely simple in his being, does not concern himself with the world; in fact, does not even create the world (which is indeed eternal)—he is only the eternal cause of its eternal movement, by being the object of desire. Furthermore, on the interpretation I have argued for in the first chapter, the intellectual part of the human soul, the part which is most truly the self, is already divine, identical with *noêsis noêseôs*, in a real sense. This is possible because the deepest identity of the human person, as well as the unmoved mover itself, is *nous*; and because *nous* is not enmattered; and because *nous* in general is identical with whatever immaterial reality it contemplates; so when a person contemplates the unmoved mover, we can say that this reality takes its place as the *nous* of the human being.⁵⁵ This clearly does not introduce any change into *nous* itself, but only into the composite individual; in some way, the individual person is now associated with the divine reality so that it is most properly considered his ruling part.

Thomas Aquinas, like Aristotle, believes in a simple God who is the source of all intellectual wisdom; but the Thomist God is also a God who created the world and is providentially responsible for all that occurs in it. This, however, might seem to be an impossibility, since simplicity of an Aristotelian kind would not leave room for thoughts

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima* III.4.

about other things, nor room for creative power. For the idea that God is simple in his being, adopted enthusiastically by Thomas, is explained and defended first in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Λ.9. This chapter contains a discussion about certain “problems” with “the nature of the divine thought,” and concludes that it must be perfectly simple. For Aristotle, its simplicity is bound up with its necessity of having itself for its own object, since *nous* is the most divine thing there is. A few important selections from *Metaphysics* Λ.9 demonstrate something of the nature of this relationship (i.e., between its simplicity and its having itself for its own object):

Further, whether its substance is the faculty of thought or the act of thinking, what does it think of? Either of itself or of something else; and if of something else, either of the same thing always or of something different. Does it matter, then, or not, whether it thinks of the good or any chance thing? Are there not some things about which it is incredible that it should think? Evidently, then, it thinks of that which is most divine and precious, and it does not change; for change would be change for the worse...Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking.⁵⁶

Since...thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its object will be the same, i.e. the thinking will be one with the object of its thought.⁵⁷

A further question is left—whether the object of the divine thought is composite; for if it were, thought would change in passing from part to part of the whole. We answer that everything which has not matter is indivisible—as human thought, or rather the thought of composite beings, is in a certain period of time (for it does not possess the good at this moment or at that, but its best, being something *different* from it, is attained only in a whole period of time), so throughout eternity is the thought which has *itself* for its object.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Λ.9

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Λ.9

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Λ.9

For Aristotle, as one interpreter has said, “[Aristotle’s god] knows nothing but itself, not because of any defect or imperfection, but because there are things which it is better not to know. A knowledge of these would debase the knowing subject.”⁵⁹ It must know the “most precious” things, similarly to the *sophia* of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Furthermore, because *noêsis* (the verbal form representing the action of *nous*) is immaterial, and because it assumes the form of what it cognizes, whenever it cognizes something immaterial, it actually becomes identical with this cognized object (since matter is the individuating, multiplying principle). But in the enigmatic passage cited above, this train of thought seems to lead somehow to the conclusion that the divine thought is perfectly simple and has no parts—i.e., does not pass from one thing to another. In Aristotle’s system, this is what it means for the divine thought to be simple—i.e., to have just one object, and itself to be identical with that object.

As the nature of *nous* is particularly important to this discussion, this chapter will also show exactly how Thomas’s philosophy of mind also resembles that of Aristotle, incorporating Aristotle’s *nous poiêtikos* and *nous pathêtikos* as active and potential intellect (for Thomas makes a distinction between the “passive intellect” and the “potential intellect” that is not in Aristotle). During the Latin Averroist controversies, in which Thomas was embroiled, the ontological status of Aristotle’s active intellect was a highly debatable item between the Averroists and Thomas Aquinas, as having implications for the immortality of the individual soul (though it was also an argument

⁵⁹ Fernand van Steenberghen: *The Problem of the Existence of God in St. Thomas’ Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*,” trans. John Wippel, *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 3, March 1974, p. 554

about the correct interpretation of Aristotle). Some allege that Thomas was attempting to “Christianize” Aristotle by reading his active intellect as multiple and belonging to individual cognizers. However, as Ralph McInerny rightly states, “His interpretation may be right or wrong, but the matter must be decided on the basis of textual interpretation, not vague remarks about Thomas's intentions.”⁶⁰ It is a legitimately debated question about the interpretation of certain texts in *De Anima*, and will probably be debated as long as Aristotle is read.

Among other things, this chapter will examine Thomas’s remarks in his commentary on *De Anima*, especially when it comes to the active intellect and the nature of Aristotle’s *nous*. Importantly, Thomas follows Aristotle in making intellect (*nous*) entirely independent of matter, *chôristos* (i.e., “separate”) in its being and operation. For both of them, however, *nous* or intellect takes its objects from *phantasia*, which is a faculty thoroughly rooted in the sensitive organs; *phantasia* is a faculty which operates in and through matter. There might initially be questions about whether the potential intellect (*nous pathêtikos*) is actually located in a material organ. One might think that it is, since it must house the forms after its potency is actualized by them; however, Thomas makes clear that this is not the case, that both active and passive intellect are separate from matter.⁶¹ It is the *locus* of active intellect that is disputed between Thomas and the Latin Averroists—i.e., whether it is an independent separate substance, or whether each individual has his own active intellect. With respect to this important issue,

⁶⁰ Ralph McInerny, “Thomas Aquinas,” SEP, copyright 2005.

⁶¹ As I will show from his discussions in *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*.

Thomas gives what is often called a “deflationary” interpretation of all the Aristotelian passages that suggested to the Latin Averroists that the active intellect is a single divine substance. He interprets *chôristos* in a way that does *not* entail that the intellect can exist in a fully autonomous way from the human body, as its own divine entity.

In symmetry with the previous chapter, I will first discuss Thomas’s description of the relationship between *beatitudo* and *contemplatio*, with Stephen Bush’s “dualist” reading of Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* as the backdrop. Then, I will discuss the intellectual virtues of *sapientia*, *intellectus*, and “first philosophy/divine science/metaphysics” in Thomas Aquinas, as I discussed *sophia* and *nous* in Aristotle. I will finish with a discussion of Thomas’s metaphysics of *contemplatio*, surveying and critiquing his attempted resolution of the conceptual difficulties mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

2.1. “Happy As Men”: Aristotle’s Cue?

I have attempted to show in the first section of the first chapter that Stephen Bush’s dualist reading of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is correct, and that Aristotle actually spoke of two different kinds of humanly attainable fulfillment, one of them greater and one less, but subordinately related (in that practical virtue prepares the way for theoretical virtue even though the two are qualitatively different). On this reading of Aristotle, *theôria* is at the center of the highest type of *eudaimonia*, and a virtuous and political active life is associated with a secondary kind of happiness. This interpretation seems to make the most sense of Aristotle’s claim that the exercise of *theôria* is a divine thing, and more fit for gods than for properly human capacities, while the moral life befits mankind. On this

reading, properly human function is thus better fulfilled by the virtuous active life, while *nous*, being the highest part of the human being, is fulfilled in a state that is not really human, *stricte loquendo*. Aristotle speaks of being happy in a merely human way, happy as men, implying that human nature as such is best fulfilled by a certain type of happiness, though individual humans can avail themselves of the capacities of a higher nature—the exercise of the divine spark of *nous* that is implanted from outside in every rational being.⁶²

Thomas Aquinas, relying heavily on Aristotle's ethics, paints an intellectualist picture of man's supreme good, and speaks of it as being nobler than the active life for reasons that are largely echoed from Aristotle, though they take on a Christian resonance in Aquinas.⁶³ It is possible to read Thomas as taking certain cues from Aristotle about the dual kinds of happiness and developing these hints in a way that dovetails with Aristotle but also with Christian philosophy. In one reading of this type, advocated by

⁶² "Second happiest is the life in accordance with the rest of virtue, for activities in accordance with this are human." NE 10.8

⁶³ "Accordingly we must reply that the contemplative life is simply more excellent than the active: and the Philosopher proves this by eight reasons (Ethic. x, 7,8). The first is, because the contemplative life becomes man according to that which is best in him, namely the intellect, and according to its proper objects, namely things intelligible; whereas the active life is occupied with externals...The second reason is because the contemplative life can be more continuous, although not as regards the highest degree of contemplation, as stated above (180, 8, ad 2; 181, 4, ad 3)... Thirdly, because the contemplative life is more delightful than the active...Fourthly, because in the contemplative life man is more self-sufficient, since he needs fewer things for that purpose...Fifthly, because the contemplative life is loved more for its own sake, while the active life is directed to something else...Sixthly, because the contemplative life consists in leisure and rest...Seventhly, because the contemplative life is according to Divine things, whereas active life is according to human things...Eighthly, because the contemplative life is according to that which is most proper to man, namely his intellect; whereas in the works of the active life the lower powers also, which are common to us and brutes, have their part..." Thomas Aquinas, ST 2a2ae 182.1

James Doig, Aristotle's double happiness becomes important for Thomas insofar as it points to Thomas's own distinction between superior and inferior *beatitudo*, and Aquinas merely elaborates on this distinction in a natural direction. James Doig's view is thus that Thomas's double reading of happiness is rather a natural extension of these hints left in Aristotle (namely, the same hints that lead Stephen Bush to his "dualist" reading of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*.) Antonio Donato describes Doig's view, which can almost be stated as asserting that Thomas "completed" Aristotle's view, or rendered explicit certain latent tendencies:

[W]hen Aristotle observes that some men are called "blessed" he adds the qualification that he is speaking about being blessed only "as men." In Doig's reading, this implies that Aristotle himself recognise that this worldly happiness, based on contemplation, is imperfect. Given that way of interpreting Aristotle, Doig can then easily show that Aquinas's theory of the two kinds of contemplation is only a rather natural development of Aristotle.⁶⁴

Donato further describes Doig as a member of the school that reads Aquinas as making philosophically motivated elaborations on Aristotle's thought, rather than theologically motivated alterations. This school, in essence, holds that Aquinas was not just utilizing Aristotle for the purpose of better exposing an independently given Christian orthodoxy, but rather attempting to elaborate or "complete" Aristotle's system. Doig himself asserts: "By tracing Aquinas's use of the expression (blessed as men) we discovered that he completed Aristotle's doctrine of human happiness, not by

⁶⁴ Antonio Donato, "The End of Human Nature in Aquinas's *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*," 31.

interjection of some Christian belief, but by addition of his own philosophically argued conviction that perfect happiness is open to man after death.”⁶⁵

However, other interpretations of Aristotle are also possible; and it is not clear that Aristotle’s distinction between the two types of happiness dovetails perfectly with the distinction that Aquinas wishes to make:

Jaffa...considers the problem of how Aquinas can introduce the doctrine of the kinds of contemplation, taking into account the same Aristotelian text studied by Doig. Differently from Doig, he does not think that the formula “blessed as men” can be interpreted in Aquinas’s sense. This would be to ignore the context in which this discussion is contained. In these lines of Book I, indeed, Aristotle is discussing the characteristics of the moral life and its peculiarity, whilst the contemplative life will be considered only later. Hence, Aquinas’s use of the formula “blessed as men” to make room for the doctrine of the two kinds of contemplation adds something to the text. Thus, in Jaffa’s view, this is a clear case in which Aquinas has to change Aristotle’s perspective because of his Christian principle.⁶⁶

The point here is that Aristotle’s distinction between two different kinds of happiness, divides a happiness associated with contemplation from a happiness associated with action, rather than a happiness associated with perfect contemplation from a happiness associated with imperfect contemplation. According to Thomas, man has a

two-fold final good . . . The first of these is proportionate to human nature since natural powers are capable of attaining it. This is the happiness about which the philosophers speak . . . The other is the good which is out of all proportion to man's nature because his natural powers are not enough to attain it either in thought or desire. It is promised to man only through the divine liberality: “The eye hath not seen. . .” (1 Cor. 2:9). This is life everlasting. It is because of this good that the will is inclined to give assent to those things which it holds by faith.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Doig, *Aquinas’s philosophical commentary on the Ethics: a historical perspective* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 135.

⁶⁶ Antonio Donato, 33.

⁶⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 14, art. 2, reply.

In this passage, it is interesting and significant that he associates being “in proportion to human nature” with being attainable by natural human powers. But the distinction drawn here does not seem to coincide with the distinction that Aristotle makes between supreme happiness and secondary happiness.

It is true that both Aristotle and Aquinas speak of true, paradigmatic contemplation as a divine thing, which merely human capacities cannot attain to. It is important to note the fact that for Aquinas, created intelligences can only see God through God’s own essence.⁶⁸ And in the same way, Aristotle’s *theôria* only becomes accessible to human beings insofar as humans participate in divine *theôria*. For Thomas, humans must participate in God’s contemplation of himself (which is metaphysically indistinguishable from God) in order to see God in any sense at all:

Hence, if God's essence is to be seen, the intelligence must see it in the divine essence itself, so that in such vision the divine essence shall be at once the object which is seen and that whereby it is seen.⁶⁹

But the divine essence is the proper intelligible form of the divine intelligence, and is proportioned to it: for in God these three are one, that which understands, that whereby it understands, and that which is understood.⁷⁰

And because in God being and understanding are the same and He is to all the cause of understanding, He is on that account called “light”...⁷¹

These passages seem to promote a doctrine almost identical with “a thinking that is a thinking upon thinking,” *noêsis noêseôs* from *Metaphysics* Λ.9. Furthermore, more

⁶⁸ Thomas Aquinas, SCG 3.51

⁶⁹ SCG 3.51

⁷⁰ SCG 3.53

⁷¹ SCG 3.53

pertinently, they imply that contemplation of the divine essence is strictly a divine thing, something which can be experienced by humans only insofar as they somehow participate in the cognitive abilities of the divine essence. In addition, the designation of God as “light” is particularly interesting in view of the fact that Aristotle uses the analogy of light in describing the active intellect.⁷²

Antonio Donato quotes an Aquinas text where the distinction between perfect and imperfect happiness is apparent:

By the name of beatitude is understood the ultimate perfection of rational or of intellectual nature; and hence it is that it is naturally desired, since everything naturally desires its ultimate perfection. Now there is a twofold ultimate perfection of rational or of intellectual nature. The first is one which it can procure of its own natural power; and this is in a measure called beatitude or happiness. Hence Aristotle (*Ethic. X*) says that man’s ultimate happiness consists in his most perfect contemplation, whereby in this life he can behold the best intelligible object; and that is God. Above this happiness there is still another, which we look forward to in the future, whereby “we shall see God as He is.” This is beyond the nature of every created intellect, as was shown above.⁷³

Similarly, in ST 2a2ae 180.8, Thomas follows Aristotle in his characterization of perfect, paradigmatic contemplation as continuous and uninterrupted. A perfect and divine activity must not be terminated, since this would be unnatural; since there is no human goal at which it aims, it cannot come to a natural end. Furthermore, since it is the activity of the gods or of God, it must be eternally sustainable. However, humans can approximate it; they can participate imperfectly in contemplation. This section also quotes the NE 10.7 to the effect that the contemplative life “is better than the life which

⁷² DA 3.5

⁷³ Thomas, ST 1a.62.1. Quoted in Antonio Donato, p. 29

is according to man.” This reference recalls the interpretive disputes about whether Aristotle’s man has two natures, one merely human and one divine; but it acquires special significance in Thomas Aquinas’s Christian metaphysics, since it is not possible for him to say that man is in any sense identical with God. However, he must say that man’s mind is united to God in some way; for only God, properly speaking, can contemplate God.

2.2. Contemplatio, Sapientia, and Intellectus

In this section, I will attempt to describe the object and nature of Thomist contemplation, and its relationship to *sapientia* and *intellectus*. It is related to *sapientia* because of its object—God, the cause of all things; this is because wisdom knows the ultimate causes. The difference between contemplation and wisdom is almost negligible, but there is a distinction to be made. Contemplation is related to intellect insofar as it is a species of intellectual activity; but what kind should become plain in the following paragraphs. This section is also meant as an analogue to 1.2, where I discussed Aristotle’s views on *theôria*, *sophia*, and *nous*; so the exposition will be against the backdrop of Aristotelian metaphysics and ethics. The unique problem that emerges, as in the first chapter, is the nature of the relationship between the divine first principle and lesser separate substances like the human intellect.

The similarities between *theôria* and *contemplatio* are notable. Thomas begins his discussion of *contemplatio* by citing *Metaphysics* α .3, “The end of contemplation is truth.” It is not, however, the attainment of new, hitherto unknown truth; rather, it is the

dwelling on truth already attained, the “simple act of gazing on truth.”⁷⁴ This is fundamentally Aristotelian, and has to do with the classical conception of wisdom as a dwelling upon the highest truths, the causes of all things.

Similarly to Augustine, Thomas’s concept of the mind involves both intellect and will; and the operation of these two is intimately related.⁷⁵ He begins *quaestio* 180, the section having to do with the contemplative life, by arguing that *contemplatio*, although properly intellectual, has to do with the affection of love as well: “And since everyone delights when he obtains what he loves, it follows that the contemplative life terminates in delight, which is seated in the affective power, the result being that love also becomes more intense.” This move apparently attempts to forestall charges that an intellectualist view of happiness has nothing to do with human emotions; but its main point is to designate the will as the initiator of human contemplation. It is also reminiscent of Aristotle’s argument in NE X that pleasure attends the actual exercise of human faculties; but the point is also, in part, that the action is *begun* because of the lure of that which is desired: “From the very fact that truth is the end of contemplation, it has the aspect of an appetible good, both lovable and delightful, and in this respect it pertains to the appetitive power.”⁷⁶ “The appetitive power moves not only the bodily members to

⁷⁴ Thomas Aquinas, ST 2a2ae 180.3

⁷⁵ Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind*, 42.

⁷⁶ ST 2a2ae 180.1, ad 1.

perform external actions, but also the intellect to practice the act of contemplation, as stated above.”⁷⁷

In 2a2ae 180.4, Thomas argues that God is the only proper object of contemplation. Whether this position is fundamentally Aristotelian is debated by some Aristotle scholars; *Nicomachean Ethics*, as we have seen, says that wisdom is complete knowledge of “the most precious truths.” David Conway is one interpreter who argues for the affirmative position in his book, *The Rediscovery of Wisdom*. In this book, he argues that Aristotle holds to what he calls the “classical conception of philosophy,” which holds that the purpose of philosophy is to become aware of and to contemplate the divine first principle (and further, that this is the noblest activity for the human intellect).

Ralph McInerny seems to agree:

When Aristotle rejected the Platonic Ideas or Forms, accepting some of the arguments against them that Plato himself had devised in the *Parmenides*, he did not thereby reject the notion that the *telos* of philosophical enquiry is a wisdom which turns on what man can know of God. The magnificent panorama provided at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* as gloss on the claim that all men naturally desire to know rises to and culminates in the conception of wisdom as knowledge of all things in their ultimate or first causes.⁷⁸

It is, at any rate, evident that Thomas thought of Aristotle as thinking about contemplation in this way—i.e., as having its proper object in God. Thomas says that the contemplation of God in this life will never be complete; however, it “...bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come; wherefore the Philosopher (Ethic. x, 7) places man's ultimate happiness in the

⁷⁷ Ibid., ad 3

⁷⁸ McInerny, “Thomas Aquinas,” SEP.

contemplation of the supreme intelligible good.”⁷⁹ This does not have to mean that Aquinas thought of Aristotle as believing in some sort of afterlife in which God is contemplated by the individual soul. However, it does entail that he thought of Aristotle as subscribing to this position: that the supreme happiness attainable by human beings comes from contemplating Aristotle’s god. It is not clear how much Aquinas takes his God to differ from Aristotle’s.

This quotation raises an important interpretative question about Thomas’s doctrine of *contemplatio*: Thomas obviously believes that the activity becomes more perfect after death, but is this as a result of the intellect’s separation from the body at death, thus leading to a more perfect access to the divine? If so, this doctrine is in tension with the Christian belief in a physical resurrection as the final, perfect state for humanity, which Thomas Aquinas himself holds. A preliminary to this question is the important point that for Thomas, the intellect is already separated from the body (or at least its proper function takes place separately from body), even before death. Thomas’s Aristotelian doctrine of intellect entails its absolute standing and operation apart from bodily organs; any study of Thomas’s philosophy of mind makes it clear that the proper activity of intellect does not use a bodily organ, although it derives its material from the phantasms produced by the bodily faculty of *phantasia*, just as in Aristotle. This is because the objects of intellection are themselves immaterial—they are the “intelligible species”; for Thomas, intelligibility requires immateriality.⁸⁰ The only way that the

⁷⁹ ST 1a.180.4

⁸⁰ Thomas Aquinas, ST 1, 79, 3.

human being can contemplate intelligible species is through the creative operation of the active intellect (as it distills or extracts them from the material given to it in phantasms), and the cooperative role of the passive intellect, which receives the impress of these forms from the active intellect.

So Thomas thinks it is important to view the whole process of understanding as strictly immaterial; even in human life, intellectual activity is separate from body. Taking for granted for the moment that contemplation is a species of intellectual activity, it seems a bit puzzling, initially, as to why death does bring a greater degree of perfection to Thomist contemplation. He asks the question whether “in the present state of life the contemplative life can reach to the vision of the Divine essence” and answers the question in the negative. In support of this negative answer, he quotes Augustine: “As Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii, 27), ‘no one seeing God lives this mortal life wherein the bodily senses have their play: and unless in some way he depart this life, whether by going altogether out of his body, or by withdrawing from his carnal senses, he is not caught up into that vision.’”⁸¹ This quotation hints at a possible answer to our problem, found in Thomas’s doctrine of “rapture,” in which the human soul apparently leaves its body in mystical and ecstatic contemplation of the divine essence. The person is still clinically alive, but is not using any bodily organ as he contemplates God. So the possible answer to the interpretative dilemma is that Thomas attaches a peculiar sense to the phrase “in this life;” he uses it to mean, not “before death” *per se*, but rather,

⁸¹ 180.5

pertaining to the exercise of properly bodily organs in the senses and *phantasia*. This would yield a meaning consonant with the rest of Thomas's philosophy, in which the deity cannot be cognized through imagination but only through immaterial intellection. As Thomas says in ST 2a2ae 175.5 when discussing St. Paul's supernatural vision and experience of rapture, "Therefore it was not necessary that his soul in rapture should be so separated from the body as to cease to be united thereto as its form; and yet it was necessary for [Paul's] intellect to be withdrawn from phantasms and the perception of sensible objects." The *quaestio* under discussion here is whether Paul's experience of rapture entailed separation of his soul from his body; Thomas's answer is in the negative.

Thomas's discussion in ST 2a2ae 180.6 is a confusing and obscure discussion on the intellectual "movements of contemplation"—"circular," "oblique," and "straight." This part of the discussion draws heavily on medieval mysticism, especially Pseudo-Dionysius's steps to the contemplation of God. A modern reader is apt to find this section rather cumbrous, though the discussion of Richard of St. Victor's *De Gratia Contemplatione* is slightly more intelligible when he speaks of the six steps "whereby we ascend by means of creatures to the contemplation of God." This language is reminiscent of Bonaventure's classic mystical work, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, in which he speaks of the mind's ascension to God by means of following God's "footprints," his *vestigia*, in the created world. This kind of process, beginning in empirical observation and culminating in mystical ecstasy and unification of the mind with God, seems exactly what Thomas has in mind.

In *Quaestio* 182.1, Thomas argues for the superiority of the contemplative life over the active life, giving voice to a dominant-monist-intellectualist reading of Aristotle. Just as the action of the faculty of *phantasia* is used in service of intellection, so the action of the political and virtuous life should be used in service of *contemplatio*, just as for Aristotle, prudence somehow serves wisdom. Thomas quotes NE 10.7,8 in support. In articles 3 and 4 of this quaestio, the active life is preparative or propaedeutic for the contemplative life. If we were to take Thomas's *beatitudo* as the analogue for Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, Thomas's *contemplatio* seems to have the same place in his account of *beatitudo* that *theôria* has according to the dominant-monist-intellectualist interpretation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, rather than according to Bush's dualist view. However, although there are certain tantalizing similarities between Aquinas's two types of happiness and Bush's dualist view of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, there is too much dissimilarity to make a perfect analogy. When Aquinas uses language apparently reminiscent of Bush's dualist interpretation, he is actually referring to the Christian distinction between imperfect and perfect contemplation of God, demarcated by death and entrance into the next life; something Aristotle never even remotely would have thought.

2.3. God's Relation to the Intellect

Up to this point, I have used this chapter to show to what extent Aristotle's doctrines of *theôria*, *nous*, and *sophia* are different from their analogues in Aquinas's system. I have related how Aquinas used Aristotle to create his own intellectualist doctrine of happiness. In this section, I will review Thomas's efforts to resist the "Averroistic"

interpretation of Aristotle, which, if true, would render Aristotle's doctrine obviously at odds with Christianity. This exposition will be a way to explore Thomas's view of how God is related to human intellection; which will furnish data for the argument of the third chapter.

In this famous interpretation, whether "the Commentator," Ibn Roschd himself, actually held to it or not, the active intellect is a single divine substance, identical with Aristotle's God; and it plays the same role for all men in aiding them to understand. According to this story, God actually functions as a part of the human intellect; and when the composite person dies, God is the only part of the composite that survives. These interpreters pointed to certain enigmatic passages in *De Anima* which suggest either personal mortality or the divinity of *nous*, some of which I have already referenced in the first chapter to develop my interpretation of Aristotle. For example, Aristotle seems to say in *De Anima* that "[*nous*] seems to be an independent substance implanted within the soul and to be incapable of being destroyed," and that after an individual's death, "memory and love cease."⁸² In addition to this, Aristotle also has a passage in *De Generatione Animalium* that affirms that intellect "comes from outside" and that "it alone is divine."⁸³ Further textual data to which the Averroists pointed, included Aristotle's constant designation of intellect as separate, *chôristos*.

As part of his attempt to explain these passages in a way that does not entail Averroism, Thomas has several textual arguments in which he offers "deflationary" (i.e.,

⁸² DA 408b18-29.a

⁸³ *De Generatione Animalium* 2.3.736b27-28

the opposite of “conflationary”) readings of Aristotle. Most of these arguments are offered (in summary form, at least) in short book or *opusculum*, *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*.⁸⁴ In this work, he attempts to *distinguish* the active intellect from Aristotle’s God, instead of identifying the two. One argument has to do with the interpretation of Aristotle’s terminology; Thomas says that when Aristotle calls the intellect *chôristos*, he simply means *aneu sômatôs*—which Thomas explains as meaning merely that intellect is not the actualization of a certain bodily organ. This does not entail, as the Averroists thought, that it is a separate substance—it still differs from individual to individual. When it comes to the *De Anima* passage cited above, in which “memory and love cease,” Thomas explains these as Themistius does, i.e., by asserting that Aristotle is temporarily taking on the part of the “doubter”: assuming for the sake of argument that intellect and sense are the same.⁸⁵ Thomas realizes that some readers of Aristotle might find this answer contrived; so he offers a backup explanation: “Understanding is said to be the act of the composite [human being], not essentially but accidentally, insofar as its object the phantasm, is in a bodily organ and not because this activity is exercised through a bodily organ.”⁸⁶ When Aristotle says that *nous* is

⁸⁴ Translated by Ralph McInerny and titled *Aquinas Against the Averroists* (Purdue University Press, 1993).

⁸⁵ *Aquinas Against the Averroists*, 59 (1.39).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 1.40.

impassible,” he only means that it cannot be “corrupted” or “exhausted” by being filled with its object—as the senses can.⁸⁷

Thomas also has philosophical arguments which attempt to prove that the active intellect is unique from man to man. Thomas says in these arguments that man’s nature must possess in itself the wherewithal to accomplish its end, in order to be complete; for him, this principle entails that there must be as many active intellects as there are individual rational beings. This inference relies for its strength on the necessity in a teleological universe that a given nature be complete in order to accomplish its natural ends. He reasons that rationality is part of man’s nature:

In the nature of every cause there is contained a principle sufficient for the natural operation of that cause . . . But man is the most perfect of all inferior causes; and his proper and natural operation is to understand, an operation which is not accomplished without a certain receiving of impressions, inasmuch as every understanding is determined by its object; nor again without action, inasmuch as the intellect makes potential into actual terms of understanding. There must therefore be in the nature of man a proper principle of both operations, to wit, both an active and a potential intellect, and neither of them must be separate in being (or physically distinct), from the soul of man.⁸⁸

Interestingly, as we have already seen, he also says that contemplation of God is a good out of all proportion to man’s nature; and by this he clearly means that man is unable to contemplate God by his natural powers. This naturally raises the question, was man created to contemplate God or not? Another way of asking the same question is this: If Aquinas thinks it is particularly important that man have complete intellectual power if

⁸⁷ Ibid. 1.18. For, an important part of Aristotle’s theory of sensation is that the sense organ takes on the form (whether intentionally or actually) of its object, in such a way that this form must be “erased” before it can move on to the next. This is not true of intellect.

⁸⁸ SCG 2.76.9

he is to fulfill his identity as human, then does this power extend to the contemplation of God? If it does, then the things that Aquinas says about man's natural *inability* to contemplate God (as referenced in section 2.2), seem futile or contradictory. If it does not, then man's nature doesn't seem to be primarily orientated towards the contemplation of God. Neither of these possibilities seems to be a desirable interpretation of Aquinas. Not the first, because he emphasizes man's inability apart from grace. Not the second, because he says that "the end of every subsistent intelligence is to understand God."⁸⁹

Exactly how much of a role does Thomas's God have in human intellection? Despite Thomas's strong affirmation that man contains a principle sufficient for the exercise of his understanding, there is evidence that suggests that Thomas's God is the cause of cognition, in a way that reminds us of the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle: "And because in God being and understanding are the same and He is to all the cause of understanding, He is on that account called 'light'..."⁹⁰ For Thomas, even though there is an active intellect for each rational being, the *source* of the active intellect in each person is God.⁹¹ This is true *at least* in the sense that God is the creator and sustainer of the

⁸⁹ SCG 3.25

⁹⁰ SCG 3.53

⁹¹ In ST 1a.79.4, it is interesting that Thomas argues the following: namely, that even though human beings each possess their own individual active intellect, there must also be a "higher" intellect, also described as "separate," that helps humans understand; he identifies this with the Christian God:

"...Wherefore we must say that in the soul is some power derived from a higher intellect, whereby it is able to light up the phantasms...But the separate intellect, according to the teaching of our faith, is God Himself, Who is the soul's Creator, and only beatitude; as will be shown later on (90, 3; I-II, 3, 7). Wherefore the human soul derives its intellectual light from Him, according to Psalm 4:7, 'The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us'."

whole human intellect. But wouldn't it be a mistake to conclude from this that Thomas is an occasionalist, or that he holds that the human intellect's performance of its function only produces effects because God independently causes those effects? There are at least some confusing interpretative questions here, which will be raised again in the next chapter in the course of discussing the relation between God and human intellection (especially when that intellection is envisioned as having God for its object).

CHAPTER III

THE CREATED INTELLECT AND GOD

In the first chapter of my thesis, I explained Aristotle's view of *theôria*. First, I demonstrated its centrality to his view of paradigmatic *eudaimonia*, also showing how his apparently dual view of happiness is connected with a certain tension in his doctrine of the human person. Then, I related *theôria* to the *sophia* and *nous* that are described in *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Metaphysics*, and *De Anima*, by way of further explication of its divine and immaterial nature, as well as its probable object. Lastly, I also took a certain position in an ancient debate, arguing for an identity (i.e., participatory) relation between human *theôria* and divine *theôria*, through the middle term of Aristotle's doctrine of *nous*.

In my second chapter, I compared Thomas Aquinas with Aristotle with respect to the meaning of certain key terms, showing what different Aristotelian concepts became in Thomas's system: *theôria* (*contemplatio*), *eudaimonia* (*beatitudo*), *sophia* (*sapientia*), and *nous* (*intellectus*). I attempted to show some of the differences between Aquinas and Aristotle with respect to the nature of contemplation, which might easily be obscured by the fact that they used essentially the same terms. I also briefly reviewed Thomas Aquinas's "deflationary" reading of the particular Aristotelian passages which suggested to the Latin Averroists that the active part of the human intellect is a single divine substance that all men share.

In this third and final chapter, I will show the relation in Thomas Aquinas's system of human *intellectus* to divine *intellectus*, when that intellection is envisaged as having the divine essence for the object of its operation. I will make the case that Thomas's adoption of an essentially Aristotelian account of intellection, in which the intellect assumes the form of what it cognizes, leads to the undesirable conclusion that the created intellect must become actually identical with God when it contemplates him. I argue that this would not be problematic in Aristotle's system, since one Aristotelian theme is that *nous* is "implanted" in the human person, or comes to exist in the human "from outside."⁹² These texts apparently entail that the most important part of the human person, that which is "most truly" the person, as Aristotle says, is already divine. But in Thomas's system, the human intellect is envisaged as one of God's creations; and it is puzzling to see how this *created* entity could become identical with God, a simple, uncreated entity.

In the course of the chapter, I will suggest certain solutions to the problem, some more directly based on textual suggestions than others; I will then show how they variously either fail or are inadequate. In the final analysis, by surveying the particular way in which all the possible solutions fail, I will have shown in detail exactly how Aristotle's doctrines of *nous* and *theôria* are bound up with a metaphysics and a philosophy of mind essentially unlike Thomas's (at least with regard to certain questions). This means that Aquinas's attempt to incorporate Aristotle's account of

⁹² Cf. *De Anima* 408b18-29, but also *De Generatione Animalium* 2.3.736b27-28, where he says that intellect comes from outside, and "it alone is divine."

intellection into his description of how the created intellect contemplates God, is unsuccessful from the start. Their metaphysical systems, being disparate in certain important respects, cannot comfortably share an account of intellection; unless, that is, Thomas is willing to admit that the human soul shares a spark of divine essence.

One reading of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical system yields the following propositions as theses that Thomas either explicitly affirms or else apparently implies:

1. The created intellect (CI) can contemplate God.⁹³
2. The operation of the CI is to assume the form of what it contemplates.

Usually, the operation described in proposition 2 happens through the active intellect's (*intellectus agens*) abstracting the intelligible *species* of a material object from that object's sense-phantasms and impressing it upon the potential intellect (*intellectus possibilis*).⁹⁴ However, Thomas also has a separate story for the cognition of immaterial objects, which is also to be expressed by the generic proposition 2. Furthermore:

3. The CI, both active and potential, is immaterial, and the intelligible product of its intellection is immaterial as well.⁹⁵
4. Matter is what individuates a single form (or *species*) into many.⁹⁶

⁹³ ST 1a.12.1.

⁹⁴ The "potential intellect" is to be distinguished from the "passive intellect," which is not really intellect but only a form of phantasm (cf. *Of God and His Creatures*, ed. Joseph Rickaby [The Carroll Press, 1950], p. 122). The formulation I have given entails that the human intellect's natural function is *to create and receive universal intelligible objects, from the particular physical objects that are presented as data by the senses*. Importantly, this entails that the human intellect does not *naturally* understand realities that exist apart from matter.

There are several places in the Thomist corpus that support this statement as being a fair reading of Thomas's account of intellection (which I will be using synonymously with "cognition"). I will refer to these passages in the next few pages: ST 1a.17.3, ST 1a.12.4, ST 1a.75.5, ST 1a.79.2. Cf. SCG 2.76.9. ST 1a.79.3 argues for the function of the active intellect: "We must therefore assign on the part of the intellect some power to make things actually intelligible, by abstraction of the species from material conditions. And such is the necessity for an active intellect."

⁹⁵ SCG 2.67, SCG 2.63.

⁹⁶ ST 1a.50.4

Add an apparently justified inference from the last three statements and a further premise drawn from Thomas's system:

5. When a CI contemplates an immaterial object, it becomes identical with that object (from 2, 3, and 4).⁹⁷

For proposition 5, it is important to note parenthetically (as I have already hinted) that immaterial objects are not directly associated with phantasms—yet Thomas still thinks that they can be cognized. It seems a legitimate inference that the active intellect is not used in this kind of cognition, since its role is to extract intelligible *species*, from *phantasms*—which are associated with our experience of a material entity. Proposition 5, in addition to being apparently implied by 2-4, is also independently confirmed in Thomas's writings, as I have pointed out in the preceding footnote. Here is the further (obvious) premise from Thomas's system:

⁹⁷ Although I have stated it is an inference from the two previous propositions, proposition 5 also seems to have independent textual support; cf. ST 1a.87.1—Thomas quotes Aristotle's dictum from *De Anima* 3.4, "in things void of matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same." The quotation, admittedly, is contained in the *objectio* that Thomas means to oppose; however, his answer to the *objectio* confirms his own adherence to Aristotle's dictum:

“Reply to Objection 3. This saying of the Philosopher [i.e., ‘in things void of matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same’] is universally true in every kind of intellect. For as sense in act is the sensible in act, by reason of the sensible likeness which is the form of sense in act, so likewise the intellect in act is the object understood in act, by reason of the likeness of the thing understood, which is the form of the intellect in act. So the human intellect, which becomes actual by the species of the object understood, is itself understood by the same species as by its own form. Now to say that in ‘things without matter the intellect and what is understood are the same,’ is equal to saying that ‘as regards things actually understood the intellect and what is understood are the same.’ For a thing is actually understood in that it is immaterial. But a distinction must be drawn: since the essences of some things are immaterial—as the separate substances called angels, each of which is understood and understands, whereas there are other things whose essences are not wholly immaterial, but only the abstract likenesses thereof. Hence the Commentator says (*De Anima* iii) that the proposition quoted is true only of separate substances; because in a sense it is verified in their regard, and not in regard of other substances, as already stated (Reply to Objection 2).”

6. God is an immaterial object *par excellence*.⁹⁸

If we take propositions 1-6 seriously, the logical conclusion seems to be a further proposition; namely, that

7. The CI, in contemplating God, becomes identical with God.

Thomas does say in the *Summa Theologiae* that the intellect becomes “deiform” in the contemplation of God,⁹⁹ but he never actually goes so far as to use the stark language of the proposition I have labeled 7; in fact, it seems somehow inconsistent with the tenor of the rest of his thought. In one passage, he seems to deny proposition 7, although it is not altogether clear that this is what he is doing (in fact, in the passage I have in mind, he seems not to be talking about the actual vision of God’s essence, but only the gracious preparatory light, which is itself created, and merely disposes the creature to the actual vision of the divine essence—which cannot itself be represented by any created thing).¹⁰⁰ In other passages, however, especially in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, he seems to deny more explicitly that the human mind can be actually divine.¹⁰¹

But momentarily leaving aside the question of whether Thomas means to affirm proposition 7 or not, let us now also point out that proposition 7 seems inconsistent with

⁹⁸ This proposition is highly confirmed in Thomas’s system; cf. ST 1a.3.1.

⁹⁹ ST 1a.12.5

¹⁰⁰ At SCG 3.54, Thomas is explaining the divinely given light that is *graciously* bestowed and raises the creature above its natural powers so that it can contemplate God:

“This light [which is received in the created intelligence] raises the creature to the vision of God, not that there is no interval between it and the divine substance, but it does so in virtue of the power which it receives from God to such effect, although in its own being it falls infinitely short of God. For this created light does not conjoin the intelligence with God in point of being, but only in point of understanding.”

¹⁰¹ Cf. Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), 150-166.

common sense; for how could it be that a created entity could become identical with an uncreated entity? At first glance, this statement appears to be a blatant contradiction, analytically false.¹⁰² There seems no plausible way to interpret it, unless we were to say that there is some aspect of the human intellect that is already divine, or unless there is some nuance in Thomas's full account of intellection that the above propositions do not capture. But which of these is the correct solution?

We might initially think that this is a question solely about the correct interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. But as a matter of fact, the claim that the human mind can become actually identical with God is one that has a long history in ancient and medieval philosophical tradition. Sometimes, mystics make the claim to *union* with the divine, short of actual identity; sometimes, they make a stronger claim that sounds like actual metaphysical identity.¹⁰³ Whether or not we should read Thomas as actually

¹⁰² We might think that we could avoid the problem by the following maneuver: We could deny that the fact that entity X is created and entity Y is uncreated, presents any impediment to their becoming ontologically fused or combined into one entity (since such a combination would not entail that the resultant entity Z is both created and uncreated). But this maneuver is dissatisfying, for reasons I will address in a later section.

¹⁰³ Jerome Gellman distinguishes the mystics' claims of "union" with the divine, from stronger claims of actual "identity" that are made by some few mystics:

"'Union' with God signifies a rich family of experiences rather than a single experience. 'Union' involves a falling away of the separation between a person and God, short of identity. Christian mystics have variously described union with the Divine. This includes Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) describing unification as "mutuality of love," Henry Suso (1295-1366) likening union with God to a drop of water falling into wine, taking on the taste and color of the wine (Suso, 1953, p. 185), and Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) describing union as "iron within the fire and the fire within the iron" (see Pike, 1992, Chapter II). Generally, medieval Christian mysticism had at least three stages, variously described, in the union-consciousness: quiet, essentially a prelude to the union with God, full union, and rapture, the latter involving a feeling of being "carried away" beyond oneself (see Pike, 1992, Chapter I)." Jerome Gellman, "Mysticism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Copyright 2005.

Gellman goes on to speak of the actual "identity" claims:

"Theistic mystics sometimes speak as though they have a consciousness of being fully absorbed into or even identical with God. Examples are the Islamic Sufi mystic al-Husayn al-Hallaj (858-922) proclaiming, "I am God" (see Schimmel, 1975, Chapter II), and the Jewish kabbalist, Isaac of Acre (b.

making this claim (i.e., on behalf of the CI that contemplates God) is part of the subject of this chapter. But we are also asking: If it is correct to interpret Thomas as making this claim, is there a *coherent* way (i.e., within Thomas Aquinas's standard, classical-theistic system, shared by other Christian mystics) in which the claim can be read?

3.1. Thomistic Texts

When it comes to the correct interpretation of Thomas, one might try to look for an escape route (i.e., from being compelled to affirm that he held to proposition 7) by questioning whether any or all of the above propositions are fair statements of Thomistic thought. But each of them seems strongly supported by textual evidence. Proposition 1 is the stated subject of *Summa Theologiae* 1a.12.1, and is explicitly affirmed as the *demonstrandum* of that article.

Proposition 2 is affirmed, in whole or in part, in several places in the Thomist corpus. There are many *loci* that support this statement as being a fair reading of Thomas's usual account of intellection (which I will be using synonymously with "cognition"). For example, in *Summa Theologiae* 1a.17.3, Thomas says, "Now as the sense is directly informed by the likeness of its proper object, so is the intellect by the likeness of the essence of a thing." In chapter II, I have already shown in part how this "informing" process happens; but for the sake of greater clarity and sounder proof, I will

1291?), who wrote of the soul being absorbed into God "as a jug of water into a running well." (see Idel, 1988, p. 67.) Also, the Hasidic master, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745-1812) wrote of a person as a drop of water in the ocean of the Infinite with an illusory sense of individual "dropness." And, the (heretical) Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327/8) made what looked very much like identity-declarations (see McGinn, 2001 and Smith, 1997). It is an open question, however, when such declarations are to be taken as identity assertions, with pantheistic or acosmic intentions, and when they are perhaps hyperbolic variations on descriptions of union-type experiences."

reference a few more places. In *Summa Theologiae* 1a.75.5, he says: “Now a thing is known in as far as its form is in the knower.” *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2.76.9 proves that man must possess both an active and a potential intellect in order to be complete, rationally speaking; the active intellect for abstracting forms from the phantasms, and the potential intellect for receiving them. *Summa Theologiae* 1a.79.3 argues for the necessity of the function of the active intellect: “We must therefore assign on the part of the intellect some power to make things actually intelligible, by abstraction of the species from material conditions. And such is the necessity for an active intellect.”¹⁰⁴ It is thus highly characteristic of Thomas’s account that the intellect can only understand natures when it has abstracted them from matter and from material conditions; before it does this, they are only potentially intelligible:

[O]ur soul possesses two cognitive powers; one is the act of a corporeal organ, which naturally knows things existing in individual matter; hence sense knows only the singular. But there is another kind of cognitive power in the soul, called the intellect; and this is not the act of any corporeal organ. Wherefore the intellect naturally knows natures which exist only in individual matter; not as they are in such individual matter, but according as they are abstracted therefrom by the considering act of the intellect; hence it follows that through the intellect we can understand these objects as universal; and this is beyond the power of the sense.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Scott MacDonald characterizes the broad features of Aquinas’s account of intellection in these words: “[C]ognition of universals, like all human cognition, originates from sense perception, and so from the external world of material particulars. But he acknowledges that something is required on the side of the soul, namely, a cognitive capacity (in particular an agent intellect) that manipulates sensory data to produce intelligible universals. We cognize the universal real natures that constitute the subject and predicate of epistemic first principles when we possess actually intelligible species or forms abstracted by this mechanism from the material conditions that render them merely potentially intelligible.” Scott MacDonald, “[Aquinas’s] Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 182.

¹⁰⁵ ST 1a.12.4

This citation is one of the many passages that illustrate the logical-equivalence linkage in Thomas's thought between immateriality and intelligibility. For him, to be immaterial is to be intelligible, and vice versa. However, in the case of material substances, the phantasms provide the necessary input for abstracting the *species*; and our intellects are associated with the body in such a way that their natural operation is to cognize the forms that are in material entities.¹⁰⁶ In true Aristotelian fashion, the Thomistic *species* of a material substance does not exist apart from matter—at least, not until it is abstracted by the intellect. And so, the human intellect's natural object is the form of a material substance. Human intellects do not *naturally* cognize God or angels.

All these, so far as they go, are true characterizations of his account of intellection, but it is also essential to take note of Thomas's story about how immaterial substances like angels and God are cognized. This presents what might be seen as a difficulty, since all human understanding, at least in the current bodily state, comes through the senses *via* phantasms, as noted above.¹⁰⁷ But, obviously, there are no phantasms directly associated with angels or with God. Thomas still wants to say that we can cognize God in some sense, but neither does he surrender the Aristotelian empiricist dictum that *nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu fuit*. So he is forced to say that material phantasms somehow help us to cognize God and other immaterial things. The story that he gives here is part of his whole story about natural theology. First, created things provide us with the data to reason back to an uncaused cause; they allow us to

¹⁰⁶ “But...in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object...” ST 1a.87.1

¹⁰⁷ Indeed, ST 1a.84.7 proves this explicitly.

conclude *that* God is, without showing us *what* he is. But they do not help us to perceive the essence of God.¹⁰⁸ In order for this to happen, Thomas concludes, God must actually unite himself to the human intellect; and this is an act of grace, to which natural powers cannot attain. This will leave the door open for further developments in the next sections.

Proposition 3 is a given in Thomas's Aristotelian account of cognition. In *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2.67, Thomas (closely following Aristotle) says that "Intelligence is not the actualization of any bodily organ." And in 2.63—"Every cognitive faculty, as such, belongs to the immaterial order. Therefore it is impossible for any cognitive faculty to be caused by a combination of elements. But the potential intellect is the supreme cognitive faculty in us: therefore it is not caused by a combination of elements....Therefore there must be posited in us some immaterial intellectual faculty, and that is the potential intellect." The actually intelligible object—i.e., the *species* which is the result of the active intellect's operation—must be immaterial as well. Insofar as something is material, it is only potentially intelligible.

¹⁰⁸ ST 1a.12.12: "**I answer that,** Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God "whether He exists," and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him. Hence we know that His relationship with creatures so far as to be the cause of them all; also that creatures differ from Him, inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him; and that creatures are not removed from Him by reason of any defect on His part, but because He superexceeds them all."

Proposition 4 can easily be supported by considerations about the implications of Thomas's angelology, in which angels, since they are immaterial, are differentiated solely by being of different species (since there is no matter to differentiate them):

For such things as agree in species but differ in number, agree in form, but are distinguished materially. If, therefore, the angels be not composed of matter and form, as was said above (Article 2), it follows that it is impossible for two angels to be of one species; just as it would be impossible for there to be several whitenesses apart, or several humanities, since whitenesses are not several, except in so far as they are in several substances. And if the angels had matter, not even then could there be several angels of one species. For it would be necessary for matter to be the principle of distinction of one from the other, not, indeed, according to the division of quantity, since they are incorporeal, but according to the diversity of their powers; and such diversity of matter causes diversity not merely of species, but of genus [italics mine].¹⁰⁹

The above represents a specific case of the general principle I have numbered as 4.

Proposition 5, in addition to being an inference from 2, 3, and 4, is actually affirmed as true by Thomas in *Summa Theologiae* 1a.87.1, where he approvingly quotes Aristotle's assertion from *De Anima* III, 4, "in things void of matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same." It is true that he quotes this in one of the opposing arguments; but in the response, he actually affirms that it is indeed true, even if the consequence in view was badly drawn.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ ST 1a.50.4

¹¹⁰ In response to the argument he is opposing, Thomas says: "This saying of the Philosopher [i.e., 'in things void of matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same'] is universally true in every kind of intellect. For as sense in act is the sensible in act, by reason of the sensible likeness which is the form of sense in act, so likewise the intellect in act is the object understood in act, by reason of the likeness of the thing understood, which is the form of the intellect in act. So the human intellect, which becomes actual by the species of the object understood, is itself understood by the same species as by its own form. Now to say that in 'things without matter the intellect and what is understood are the same,' is equal to saying that 'as regards things actually understood the intellect and what is understood are the same.' For a thing is actually understood in that it is immaterial. But a distinction must be drawn: since the essences of some things are immaterial--as the separate substances called angels, each of which is understood and understands, whereas there are other things whose essences are not wholly immaterial, but

Proposition 6 is too obviously Thomistic to need citations of textual support; but for a paradigm passage, see *Summa Theologiae* 1a.3.1.

Given that all of the propositions 1-6 seem so strongly supported by the Thomistic corpus, it seems that we are stuck with the conclusion that the created intellect, whether human or angelic, becomes identical with God whenever it contemplates him; and this seems an inherently implausible state of affairs.

3.2. Possible Solutions

Now that I have set up the central problem, I will suggest some solutions. I will be evaluating them both for their faithfulness to the Thomistic corpus and for their independent plausibility, considered apart from that corpus. So it could be that the most plausible way of reading mystical identity claims in a Thomistic context, turns out to be one that Thomas did not obviously endorse in explicit terms—if indeed there is a plausible way. At the same time, however, given the massive capacity of Thomas’s metaphysical mind, and the diligence with which he dealt with the implications of each passage across the panorama of his entire doctrine, it would be surprising if his system really did lead to a contradiction that it gave no help towards solving. If this were to turn out to be the case, it might indicate something about the advisability of Thomas’s use of Aristotle in his account of human contemplation of God.

One initially attractive solution turns on a certain ambiguity in the way that the problem was set up. Maybe the contradiction initially cited (in setting up this problem

only the abstract likenesses thereof. Hence the Commentator says (*De Anima* iii) that the proposition quoted is true only of separate substances; because in a sense it is verified in their regard, and not in regard of other substances, as already stated (Reply to Objection 2).”

towards the beginning of the chapter) was solely in the way that it was phrased. I portrayed it as a matter of the “created” becoming “identical with the uncreated.” This seemed to be an analytic falsehood. But why did it seem analytically false? For the sake of argument, how if it were the case that X were uncreated, but Y were created; why would this necessarily hinder the fusion, or union, of X with Y? Of course, we are not saying that the resultant entity, call it Z, is both created and uncreated. It seems true to say that “created” and “uncreated” refer to facts about the past history of an entity, not its actual essence in the present. Why would it not be possible for one entity to become metaphysically fused or unified with another, regardless of their past histories?

An obvious objection to this view, at least from the classical theist standpoint espoused by Thomas Aquinas, is that God is simple in his being. To say that a created intellect could become “fused” with his being suggests that God could become composite, which would be a serious theological error, at least in Thomas’s theistic vision. That is, unless the created intellect ceased to be anything at all; but then, it would be ridiculous to speak of a “fusion” of two entities, in which the created intellect was one component. Not only would it violate simplicity; it would also seem to negate divine immutability. So this route seems to lead to a double error—unless a creature can become mixed in God’s essence without affecting its ontologically pure percentage levels; and it seems difficult to make sense of how this could be. Maybe it could be said that the created intellect, when contemplating God, gives up any claim to its former identity as the intellect of some created being, and somehow loses itself in God’s

substance. But it is hard to see what is the sense in saying this, unless indeed we wish to say that the created intellect loses its existence altogether and God becomes all in all.

Or maybe Thomas has a very weak notion of “identity.” According to at least one commentator, Lynne Spellman, Aristotle has a notion of “identity” that is different from his notion of “numerical sameness”.¹¹¹ Maybe something of the same sort is true of Thomas Aquinas. Maybe there are weaker notions and stronger notions of identity; but exactly what this might mean, and whether it might actually be relevant to the problem, requires further specification. “Identity” and “sameness” might have different logical properties in Aristotle, Thomas’s teacher.¹¹² But it is difficult to see how these distinctions can help us to work our way out of the conundrum. Thomas never seems to distinguish between different kinds of identity, and it is hard to see where his text justifies changing the sense of a word. He pointedly affirms Aristotle’s dictum that the intellect is “the same” with whatever immaterial substance it contemplates.

One solution is suggested by certain phrases that Thomas uses without much explication. Maybe the human intellect does not actually change to assimilate itself to God’s essence; rather, God’s essence comes to stand in a particular relation to the particular human person, such that it can reasonably be considered as “standing in” for the

¹¹¹ “In short, on the account which I am proposing, Socrates and Socrates-qua-builder are numerically the same. They are *not*, however, identical.” Lynne Spellman, *Substance and Separation in Aristotle* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 30. Spellman thinks that substances are specimens of natural kinds for Aristotle, “where specimens, as particular forms lacking the accidents introduced by matter, are numerically the same as sensible objects yet not identical with them” (Spellman, 2).

¹¹² In this thesis, I have not been able to pursue this line as fully as one might. It is possible that Aristotle might use *tauton* (“the same”) and *hen* (“one”) with different technical senses, given that he has both terms in his vocabulary (as Dr. Robin Smith pointed out in a conversation). In *Metaphysics* K.1, Aristotle distinguishes between different uses of “one”. In *Metaphysics* Z.6, Aristotle discusses whether a thing is “the same as” (*tauton*) its essence. It might be that these concepts have different logical properties which could contribute towards solving the problem.

intellect of that person. In this case, it would seem that there would necessarily be more to the conscious human person than the intellect, in order for it to be logically possible for the person as such to undergo the experience. Some possible textual support for something approximating this interpretation comes from the 12th *quaestio*, article 5: “[W]hen any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect.”¹¹³ Of course, if we know Thomas’s system, we also know that “the essence of God” is identical to God himself; in God, there is no distinction between his essence and his existence, or between his essence and himself. So, when a person contemplates God, God himself comes to stand towards the person in such a way that he himself is properly considered to be the “intelligible form” of person’s intellect. This means that he is identical with the person’s intellect, since an intellect is nothing until it is “in act,” and for the intellect to be “in act” is for it to possess an intelligible form.

But in this case, what is the human intellect doing before God is contemplated? And isn’t there supposed to be a process that changes the created intellect when it contemplates the divine essence? Also, is it just obvious that “being a person’s intellect” and “being the intelligible form of an intellect” are synonymous? The formulation that I have cited above only uses the second expression, not the first.

In order to attempt an answer here, it may be helpful to develop Thomas’s stated thought with respect to some of its implications. In accordance with Aristotelian philosophy of mind, Thomas seems to hold that the intellect, before it understands, is

¹¹³ ST 1a.12.5

actually nothing, but potentially everything. Does this formula literally mean that the intellect has no existence apart from acts of understanding? That is certainly what seems to be entailed by the text. So we will say that Thomas's intellect, like Aristotle's, possesses no actual essence (whatever this means) until it understands; then, it possesses the essence of what is understood. When a *material* entity or state of affairs is cognized, however, the resulting compound is more than just the entity alone; it is the entity *considered as* fully intelligible and "in act." In the case of *subsisting immaterial entities* like angels, there is no difference between the entity considered before it is cognized and the entity as actually cognized. In the case of material things, the thing that is understood is the abstract species and is only formally identical with the entity considered as non-cognized; for the material thing in its concrete being possesses matter as well as form. If all this is so, then cognizing God, just like cognizing anything else, must bring the intellect from a state of mere potentiality into actuality. This might be taken as a reasonable answer to the question about what the created intellect is doing before God or something else is contemplated; it literally does not exist yet.

There are further problems, however, that this solution must face. If there is really no metaphysical distinction to be drawn between God and the intellect contemplating him, if any distinctions to be drawn here are purely conceptual, then how is it that we can say that a *person* is actually contemplating God? Hasn't the created person dropped out of the account altogether, so that we come back to a solitary *noesis noeseos*? I mean that on this picture the person's intellect, whatever that is, has become subsumed into the divine essence, without any indication that it is still connected to the

person's conscious states: *Is personal intellection actually conscious?* It seems that we must add some further dimension to Thomas's account of the human mind; unless we do this, it seems that there is no one to undergo the experience of actually contemplating God—there is only God, contemplating himself. He, of course, stands in such a relation to the human being that he can properly be considered that human being's intellect; but there is no account of how the whole human being actually perceives God. Maybe there is an account to be given; but Thomas does not seem to have given any helpful pointers towards finding this account (if indeed the above sketch represents his thought accurately).

It could be objected that Thomas's Aristotelian view of intellection is incoherent in itself. In this thesis, however, I am making the logically distinct claim that because this view is essentially connected to an Aristotelian anthropology and metaphysics, it will always be impossible to solve the metaphysical problem in mystical claims of identity with the divine, when they are made from within the context of Thomas's system. In fact, maybe it is just such an account of intellection that leads to the claims (made by some small percentage of mystics) about identity with God.

3.3. Further Textual Hints

There are other propositions to which Thomas holds, which may possibly mitigate the stark conclusion I have indicated; but obviously, this hope is viable only if there is a way in which they can be applied to mitigate or divert the logical force of one of the relevant propositions. I will assess what other dialectical moves may be possible.

In addition to 1-6, Thomas also holds the following:

8. No CI can contemplate God through its own *natural operation*.¹¹⁴
9. A CI, if it is to contemplate God, must contemplate him “through God’s own essence.”¹¹⁵
10. Complete “comprehension” of the divine essence is not entailed by contemplation of the divine essence.¹¹⁶

It seems that statements 8-9 (leaving aside 10 for the moment) could be taken to mean that Thomas’s normal account of human intellection, encapsulated in my proposition number 2, does not apply to the contemplation of God. Or is it simply that God is not associated with phantasms, and so represents a special case? As we have seen, there are no phantasms for God, even though contemplation of God can be seen as taking its starting point from phantasms of created objects. The story of what happens here involves natural theology—the whole project of reasoning from created entities to the mere existence of the prime mover. Thomas says that the natural intellect can only know *that* God is, not *what* he is. But it is not clear that this is *all* that Thomas has in mind when he says that the CI cannot come to the contemplation of God through its own natural operation. Could it be that other relevant parts of his account of intellection must change in order to accommodate the contemplation of God?

It seems important to Thomas to affirm that God must be contemplated through his own essence; but does this actually mean that the created intellect is somehow

¹¹⁴ ST 1a.12.4

¹¹⁵ ST 1a.12.5, ST 1a.12.9; SCG 3.50—“[I]f God’s essence is to be seen, the intelligence must see it in the divine essence itself, so that in such vision the divine essence shall be at once the object which is seen and that whereby it is seen.”

SCG 3.53: “[I]n God these three are one, that which understands, that whereby it understands, and that which is understood.”

¹¹⁶ SCG 3.55: “[E]verything that is comprehended by any knowing mind is known by it as perfectly as it is knowable...It is impossible therefore for any created intelligence to comprehend the divine substance.”

circumvented altogether when God becomes manifest to the soul? If this were the case, then how could it be possible to affirm in any meaningful sense that the created intellect sees God (as in proposition 1)? Or maybe only one step in Thomas's account of intellection is replaced by a divine operation of some kind; but if so, which step? All these questions, if answered, would tend to help us resolve the larger question of whether Thomas must hold that the contemplation of God causes the intellect to become identical with God. After introducing another interpretative difficulty, I will attempt to see what answers might be possible here.

Proposition 8 leads to a further question about the correct interpretation of Thomas. When this proposition becomes part of the picture, it seems to become *ipso facto* unclear whether Thomas can consistently believe that the created intellect was created *for the purpose* of contemplating God: He believes that it cannot do so by virtue of its *natural powers* (i.e., the proposition I have numbered 8), yet in another passage also defends the proposition:

11. A created being must have the innate power to accomplish its function.¹¹⁷

That Thomas holds this position is demonstrated by his arguments with the Latin Averroists about the active intellect (which I have already briefly described in chapter II). Aquinas holds that even for Aristotle, each human being possesses an individual active and passive intellect. This grounds the position that human beings have enough natural "light" to perceive the intelligible species of something, since they must have enough "light" to perform rational activity (since rational activity is distinctive of

¹¹⁷ SCG 2.76.9

humans and therefore constitutes the function of humans).¹¹⁸ In his arguments in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* about the active intellect, Thomas asserts that the human being must have “a principle sufficient” to autonomously accomplish the human purpose, which has to do with the exercise of intellect:

In the nature of every cause there is contained a principle sufficient for the natural operation of that cause . . . But man is the most perfect of all inferior causes; and his proper and natural operation is to understand, an operation which is not accomplished without a certain receiving of impressions, inasmuch as every understanding is determined by its object; nor again without action, inasmuch as the intellect makes potential into actual terms of understanding. There must therefore be in the nature of man a proper principle of both operations, to wit, both an active and a potential intellect, and neither of them must be separate in being (or physically distinct), from the soul of man.¹¹⁹

So human nature must have the wherewithal to accomplish its end; and that end is to understand. However, understanding cannot happen without something active or without something passive; so the particular human being must have an active and a passive intellect. But Thomas even goes so far as to affirm that the purpose of created intelligences is to contemplate God.¹²⁰

However, Aquinas also denies that human beings have enough natural light to contemplate the divine essence (and this is just another way of affirming proposition number 8).¹²¹ For him, the natural light of humanity only extends to showing *that* God is, not *what* he is. But this seems to lead him to an apparent contradiction: CI has

¹¹⁸ As in the famous “function argument” of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹¹⁹ SCG 2.76.9

¹²⁰ SCG 3.25

¹²¹ ST 1a.12.4.

contemplation of God as its purpose, and every created thing must have the wherewithal to accomplish its purpose; yet CI does not have the innate power to accomplish its purpose.

The conjunction of the two positions described above (i.e., 8 and 11) apparently entails that humanity was not created to contemplate God, a conclusion that is very un-Thomistic. One might attempt to determine how Aquinas reconciles the two in a way that is compatible with the contemplation of God being man's supreme end; maybe this would throw light on the question of whether proposition number 7 is acceptable in the Thomistic system—namely, by helping us to achieve the most precision possible in our account of how man contemplates God in the Thomist system. If this complete description in any way entailed that the *natural* powers of man's intellect are not really engaged when man contemplates God, then it is possible that proposition 2 does not properly describe the contemplation of God. But denying that Thomas's usual account of human intellection applies to the contemplation of God, leaves an unfilled gap. What other account does he have?

But the most pertinent question here relates to whether proposition 5 essentially hangs on 2 and 3, together with 4, or whether it is independent in Thomas's system—in such a way that it stands regardless of whatever variations might be introduced into his account of intellection. Proposition 5, at the least, seems to be a principle that Aquinas explicitly endorses, independently of the considerations that I have portrayed as leading to it.

A final attempt at a solution is to take more seriously a certain principle about intellection that Thomas iterates in certain places: namely, that the *intelligibile* exists in the knower, *according to the mode of the knower*. Thomas believes that this principle entails, among other things, that given created intellects, in contemplating God, can understand the divine essence better or worse than other created intellects.¹²² This position is related to proposition 10, which draws a distinction between comprehension and mere contemplation of the divine essence; to comprehend something is understand it as fully as it can be understood—which is impossible for the created intellect to do in the case of God; and created intellects understand him to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their capacity. But this maneuver seems to lead to the conclusion that the identicalness of individual intellects with God is just a matter of degree; however, the property of being identical with anything obviously does not admit of degree.

¹²² SCG 3.58.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have shown how Thomas's adoption of Aristotle's theory of intellection into his own account of *contemplatio* causes unique problems for him that do not arise for Aristotle—problems that apparently cannot be solved within the context of this theory and account together. The reason that they do not arise for Aristotle is that Aristotle does not have to accommodate the doctrine of creation into his metaphysical system. Aristotle's human being, when in the act of contemplation, can be portrayed as actually sharing in the divine intellect, the universal *nous*, which is eternal and impassible. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, has to explain how the *created* intellect can come to be identical with the *uncreated* and *simple* God, while still remaining in some sense associated with the human person. For, although he does not explicitly say that the human intellect becomes identical with God, he does hold that it becomes identical with its object when that object is immaterial. He cannot say that the human person and God become united into one being; for this would make God composite. Neither can he say that the human being was already in some sense divine, because his whole discussion of this problem takes place on the presupposition that he is talking about the "created" intellect.

Other commentators have come to a similar conclusion. Jaffa writes:

There seems little doubt that Thomas virtually imputes to Aristotle his own view that human souls are brought into being by creation, which is the only way in which he could consistently speak of them as not eternal yet immortal. What Thomas says is, however, absolutely inconsistent with manifest Aristotelian doctrine. . . Thus Thomas

agrees with Averroes that the intellect is immortal and divine, but is inconsistent (as an interpreter of Aristotle) in saying that it is not eternal.¹²³

In addition to the theses implied in this quotation, I have also argued, most importantly, for this thesis: That an Aristotelian account of intellection, if adopted into Thomas Aquinas's classical-theistic framework, necessarily leads to the conclusion (undesirable for Thomas) that the created intellect becomes identical with God when it contemplates him.

¹²³ Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, 165.

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