



## Wisdom in Aristotle and Aquinas From Metaphysics to Mysticism

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**Abstract:** This essay contains an attempt to trace the evolution of the concept of wisdom as found in the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas in terms of how the philosophical concept of wisdom as an intellectual virtue is understood and used to express the theological concept of wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit. The main aim is to understand how Aquinas derived the concept of wisdom from Aristotle's metaphysics and developed it in his mysticism. This research is based on a close study of *Book Six* of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the corresponding sections of Aquinas' *Sententia libri Ethicorum* and question forty-five of the second part of the second part of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. The insights gained from the study are then used to decipher the theoretical meaning of Augustine's famous saying: "love and do what thou wilt" and to expound on the practical value of wisdom for religious leaders.

**Keywords:** Aristotle; Augustine of Hippo; Aquinas, Thomas; wisdom; metaphysics; mysticism; intellectual virtue; gift of the Holy Spirit; leadership.

### Overview

Mysticism can be described as a state of union with the divine, which is achieved by contemplation. This rests on a belief in the power of a human being to gain access to ultimate reality through knowledge that is not produced by mundane thought processes.<sup>1</sup> The nature of this knowledge under study is understood in terms of wisdom. This research is based on Aristotle's discussion of wisdom as an intellectual virtue as it is found in *Book Six* of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The subsequent interpretation is guided by Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's text. This serves as preparation to explore

question forty-five of the second part of the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* and to show how Aquinas derives his understanding of the gift of wisdom from Aristotle's description of the virtue of wisdom. The aim of this essay is to trace the development of wisdom from the classical understanding of metaphysics as knowledge in natural theology to the medieval understanding of mysticism as knowledge in supernatural theology, also known as dogmatic theology. Thence an account of the relevance of this research for theoretical and practical issues is offered in the concluding remarks. The first part is a theoretical application to understanding a precept of Augustine. The second part is a practical application to understanding the necessity of the gift of wisdom in church leaders, especially in bishops.

<sup>1</sup> Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press 2003, p. 243.

### Aristotle on Wisdom

According to Aristotle, wisdom is considered one of the intellectual virtues. An intellectual virtue is a habit of the soul by which the truth is expressed by affirmation or denial. There are five intellectual virtues: art, science, prudence, wisdom, and understanding.<sup>2</sup> On this account, the virtue of science deals with the evaluation of necessary truths and the virtue of understanding deals with the first principles of knowledge (*NE VI.6, 1139b20-30*). Aristotle understands the nature of wisdom as the most perfect mode of knowledge. In terms of its structure, the virtue of wisdom is a combination of both the virtue of science and the virtue of understanding. In addition, wisdom is the supreme intellectual virtue because it is the science of the most honorable things (*NE VI.7, 1141a16-19*).

According to Aristotle, a young person can study mathematics but not science or philosophy due to a young person's lack of life experience, for mathematical truths are known by abstraction and abstraction does not require empirical knowledge. In contrast, the principles of nature (science) and the things related to wisdom (philosophy) are learned by experience (*NE VI.8, 1142a11-19*). The virtue of wisdom does not directly apply to human happiness, since wisdom does not consider any specific human activity. However the virtue of wisdom is an object of choice in itself and it is a virtue that perfects the rational part of the soul. The virtue of wisdom performs some operation in the human person. Wisdom is part of virtue as a whole and the person who acts according to wisdom becomes happy (*NE VI.12, 1143b16-1144a5*). For Aristotle, happiness is not a disposition. Rather, it is an activity that is desired for its own sake. The nature of human happiness consists of the activity of contemplation. On this account, Aristotle does not attribute happiness to animals. To him, they do not participate in the activity of contemplation. Happiness is necessarily connected with contemplation and those who are able to contemplate more fully are more truly happy.

### Aquinas on Aristotle

According to Aquinas, the intellectual virtues regulate the use of reason and perfect the rational part of the

soul.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas elaborates: "Knowledge exists in parts of the soul according as they have a certain likeness to the things known" (*SLE VI.1, 1117*). What is proper to a human being is to know the truth and to act as one with mastery over one's actions (*SLE VI.2, 1126*). He then explains how the intellective and appetitive faculties can work in harmony. The intellective faculty acts by affirmation or denial. Affirmation is agreement with the truth while denial is disagreement with falsehood. The appetitive faculty acts by pursuit or flight. Pursuit is adherence to the good while flight is withdrawal from the bad. At this passage, Aquinas comments:

In this manner the intellect and the appetitive faculty can be brought into harmony inasmuch as what the intellect declares good the appetitive faculty pursues, and what the intellect denies to be good the appetitive faculty seeks to avoid. [*ANE VI.2, 1128*]

The intellective faculty of a human being must be in agreement with the truth, and the appetitive faculty must be in adherence to the good in order to be able to make a good choice. This is so that the intellective faculty will affirm and the appetitive faculty will adhere to the same thing. Also: "In order that there be perfection in action it is necessary that none of its principles be imperfect" (*SLE VI.2, 1129*).

According to Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotle, understanding "deals with the principles of demonstration" while wisdom "deals with the principles of being." Furthermore the conclusions of science deal with universal and necessary things (*SLE VI.6, 1175*). On the one hand, the virtue of understanding enables a human being to know principles that cannot be demonstrated (*SLE VI.6, 1179*). On the other hand, the virtue of wisdom enables a human being to know the most general principles, which is the type of knowledge with the greatest certainty (*SLE VI.7, 1181*). Hence wisdom is a combination of understanding and science:

Wisdom, in declaring the truth about principles, is understanding; but in knowing the things inferred from the principles, it is science. However, wisdom is distinguished from science, taken in the usual sense, by reason of the eminence which it has among other sciences; it is a kind of perfection of all sciences.... wisdom is not science of any sort whatever but the

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. W. D. Ross, New York, NY: Random House 2001, VI.3, 1139b15-16. [Henceforth cited as *NE*]

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum* [Commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*], transl. C. I. Litzinger, Aristotelian Commentary Series, Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books 1993, VI.1, 1113-4. [Henceforth cited as *SLE*]

science of the most honorable and divine things, inasmuch as it has the essential elements to be head of all sciences. As the senses located in the head direct the movements and operations of all the other members, so wisdom directs all the other sciences since they take their principles from it. [ANE VI.7, 1183-4]

From this follows that there can only be one overall form of wisdom, since the virtue of wisdom applies to what is at the core of all things.

Aquinas offers an interesting account concerning the nature of mathematics when he reads into Aristotle that mathematics has to do with material objects. He states, "the principles of mathematics are known by abstraction from sensible objects." In contrast, the things of wisdom have to do with immaterial objects: "the principles of nature, which are not separated from sensible objects, are studied via experience" (SLE VI.8, 1209). In this context it becomes plausible that young people can understand mathematics because its range of action falls under sense and imagination. On the other hand, young people cannot understand wisdom since it exceeds sense and imagination (SLE VI.8, 1210).

Wisdom is an object of choice in itself because it is an intellectual virtue that perfects the rational part of the human soul: "Anything is an object of choice by reason of its perfection" (SLE VI.12, 1266). Aquinas explains the connection between wisdom and human happiness:

Wisdom or prudence is not compared to happiness in the same way as the medical art to health, but rather as health to healthful activities. The medical art brings about health as a particular external work produced, but health brings about healthful activities by use of the habit of health. However, happiness is not a work externally produced but an operation proceeding from the habit of virtue. Hence, since wisdom is a certain species of virtue as a whole it follows that, from the very fact that a man has wisdom and operates according to it, he is happy. [ANE VI.12, 1267]

### Aquinas on Wisdom

For Aquinas, the purpose of wisdom is to enable a person to perform the act of ordering and judging. This is done with a lower thing being judged by means of a higher cause. Sacred doctrine deals with God as absolutely the highest cause using philosophy and revelation. Therefore, sacred doctrine is absolutely the

highest form of wisdom.<sup>4</sup> On this account, wisdom has to do with judgment and this can take place in two ways. First, judgment can be done by inclination when one judges wisely because one is inclined toward what one judges. In this case, wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Second, judgment can be done by knowledge when one judges wisely because one knows about what one judges. In this case, wisdom is acquired through study (ST I.1.6 ad3). According to Aquinas' plan of the *Secunda Secundæ*, the virtue of wisdom is considered together with the gift of wisdom because the virtue and the gift share the same name (ST II-II prologue).

For Aquinas, the gift of wisdom is related to the virtue of charity (ST II-II.45 introduction). One uses wisdom to know the highest cause. Knowledge of the highest cause enables one to judge the other causes so as to order everything. The highest cause can be understood in a particular genus or simply. When the highest cause is understood in a particular genus, one is able to judge and order everything in one genus alone. For him, the highest cause is God. When the highest cause is understood simply, then one is able to judge and order everything according to the divine precepts (ST II-II.45.1). Aquinas explains that the virtue of wisdom is natural while the gift of wisdom is supernatural, and then goes on to explain the difference between the gift of wisdom and the virtue of faith:

The wisdom which is called a gift of the Holy Ghost, differs from that which is an acquired intellectual virtue, for the latter is attained by human effort, whereas the former is "descending from above." ...In like manner it differs from faith, since faith assents to the Divine truth in itself, whereas it belongs to the gift of wisdom to judge according to the Divine truth. Hence the gift of wisdom presupposes faith, because "a man judges well what he knows." [ST II-II.45.1 ad2-3]

Wisdom refers to an ability to make right judgments according to the divine precepts. Judging rightly can be understood in two ways. First, one can judge rightly by the use of reason. Second, one can judge rightly by having some affinity with the matter to be judged. Aquinas writes:

Accordingly it belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgment about Divine things after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Ghost to judge

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London, GB: Benzinger Brothers 1947, I.1.6. [Henceforth cited as ST]



aright about them on account of connaturality with them. [ST II-II.45.2]

Aquinas believes that the virtue of charity unites the human person to God and creates an affinity within the human person for the things of God. As a result, the gift of wisdom is caused by the virtue of charity. Since wisdom is caused by charity, the cause of wisdom is in the will. But since the act of wisdom is to judge, the nature of wisdom is in the intellect (ST II-II.45.2). In addition, the two acts of the intellect are perception and judgment. The gift of understanding deals with the intellectual act of perception. Both the gift of knowledge and the gift of wisdom have to do with the intellectual act of judgment. The gift of knowledge deals with the intellectual act of judgment regarding natural realities while the gift of wisdom deals with the intellectual act of judgment regarding supernatural realities (ST II-II.45.2 ad3).

Furthermore, the gift of wisdom is both speculative and practical. Wisdom is speculative because the intellect considers the divine ideas in God when the intellect contemplates the divine ideas. Wisdom is practical because the intellect also consults the divine ideas in God when the intellect judges and orders human acts according to the divine precepts (ST II-II.45.3). But Aquinas stresses that wisdom is primarily speculative and secondarily practical:

A thing is considered in itself before being compared with something else. Wherefore to wisdom belongs first of all contemplation which is the vision of the Beginning, and afterwards the direction of human acts according to the Divine rules. [ST II-II.45.3 ad3]

He also insists on the superiority of the gift of wisdom over the virtue of wisdom:

Wherefore from the very fact that wisdom as a gift is more excellent than wisdom as an intellectual virtue, since it attains to God more intimately by a kind of union of the soul with Him, it is able to direct us not only in contemplation but also in action. [ST II-II.45.3 ad1]

On this account, wisdom cannot exist together with mortal sin. This is because wisdom is caused by charity and charity cannot exist together with mortal sin (ST II-II.45.4). Further, wisdom is in all who are free from mortal sin and in a state of sanctifying grace. This is because nature and grace do not fail in necessities. Thus all believers in a state of grace have the ability to contemplate the divine realities and to order their acts according to the divine precepts for their own salvation.

However wisdom does admit of degrees. According to Aquinas, some believers receive a higher degree of wisdom from the Holy Spirit and this is expressed in two ways. First, those with a higher degree of wisdom are better at contemplating the divine realities. This means they are able to know the higher mysteries of faith and are able to teach the knowledge of these mysteries to others. Second, those with a higher degree of wisdom are better at ordering human acts according to divine precepts. This means they are able to direct their own actions and others' actions as well (ST II-II.45.5).

Aquinas sees the gift of wisdom as being connected with the seventh beatitude:<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).<sup>6</sup> Aquinas follows Augustine in defining peace as "the tranquility of order." He also follows Aristotle that "it belongs to wisdom to set things in order." Wisdom is connected with peace since wisdom is the ability to put things in order and order results in peace. Furthermore the wise become the children of God by gaining some likeness to Jesus who is the Wisdom of God (ST II-II.45.6). In light of the connection between wisdom and peace, Aquinas provides an interesting commentary on the following Scriptural passage: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (James 3:17).

### From Metaphysics to Mysticism

Aquinas received the philosophical concept of wisdom as metaphysical knowledge from Aristotle, clarified it, and then developed the theological concept of wisdom as a form of mystical knowledge. To recapitulate, for Aristotle, the state of wisdom is the most perfect mode of knowledge. The virtue of wisdom is a combination of both the virtue of science and the virtue of understanding. In addition, wisdom is the supreme intellectual virtue because it is the science of the most honorable things. The virtue of wisdom is an object of choice in itself and it is a virtue that perfects the rational part of the soul. The virtue of wisdom performs some operation in the human person. Wisdom is part of

<sup>5</sup> The beatitudes refer to declarations that some groups of people are blessed due to the type of persons they are or due to their actions.

<sup>6</sup> Translations of biblical books are taken from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989.

virtue as a whole and the person who acts according to wisdom becomes happy.

Aquinas reads Aristotle as explaining that wisdom expresses an understanding of knowledge about the first principles. Wisdom is science when it expresses knowledge by inference from the first principles. On this account, wisdom is a form of perfection of knowledge. He also explains that wisdom is to happiness as the state of health is to healthy operation. In a healthy person, healthy operation is produced by the habit of health. Similarly, in a wise person, happiness arises through the habit of wisdom. This is why a person who has the virtue of wisdom and acts according to wisdom is happy. Aquinas subsequently adopts the Aristotelian concept of wisdom for a theological purpose. He declares that sacred doctrine is absolutely the highest wisdom because sacred doctrine deals with God as absolutely the highest cause using philosophy and revelation.

Aquinas also distinguishes in three ways the virtue of wisdom from the gift of wisdom. First, he explains that the virtue of wisdom is natural because it is acquired by human effort while the gift of wisdom is supernatural because it comes from God. Second, wisdom refers to an ability to make right judgments according to the divine precepts. Judging rightly can be understood in two ways. One can judge rightly by the use of reason; this refers to the operation of the virtue of wisdom. One can also judge rightly by having some affinity with the matter to be judged; this refers to the operation of the gift of wisdom. It can be seen that Aquinas' understanding of the gift of wisdom is based on his interpretation of Aristotle in the epistemological principle: "Knowledge exists in parts of the soul according as they have a certain likeness to the things known" (*SLE VI.1*, 1117). Third, Aquinas insists on the superiority of the gift of wisdom over the virtue of wisdom because the gift of wisdom allows the human soul to be more closely united to God.

### Applying Augustine's Precept

Aquinas' study of wisdom may have applications for theory and practice. I present here two suggestions. The first is a theoretical application. To recapitulate, according to Aquinas, the virtue of charity enables the human person to be in union with God and creates an affinity within the human person for the things which are related to God. Hence, the gift of wisdom is caused by the virtue of charity. By assuming that wisdom is caused by charity, the cause of wisdom is in a person's will. Yet,

since the act of wisdom is to judge, the nature of wisdom is in a person's intellect. In Aquinas' understanding, there is an inherent connection between wisdom and charity because of the relationship between intellect and will. This can aid the understanding of Augustine's famous injunction to "love and do what thou wilt":

Once for all, then, a short precept is given thee: Love, and do what thou wilt: whether thou hold thy peace, through love hold thy peace; whether thou cry out, through love cry out; whether thou correct, through love correct; whether thou spare, through love do thou spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.<sup>7</sup>

In Aquinas' account, wisdom is caused by charity and wisdom provides guidance on how one is supposed to act. Therefore, the one who loves (has charity) will have the wisdom to know how to act rightly. Also, the one who loves will aspire to act in a good manner, since charity is incompatible with sin.

*The Relevance of Wisdom to Leaders.* My second suggestion is a practical application. Believers in a state of grace believe in their ability to contemplate the divine realities and to order their acts according to the divine precepts for their own salvation. As wisdom admits of degrees, believers in leadership positions arguably receive a higher degree of wisdom from the Holy Spirit and this can be expressed in two ways. First, those who claim to have a higher degree of wisdom feel justified to claim that they are better at contemplating divine realities. This means they claim to be able to know the higher mysteries of faith and feel justified to teach the knowledge of these mysteries to others. Second, those with a higher degree of wisdom are generally better equipped to order human acts according to the divine precepts. Ideally this will allow them to appropriately direct their own actions as well as to provide supportive guidance for the actions of others as well. This can aid the understanding of why church leaders are required to have the gift of wisdom:

To be a suitable candidate for the episcopate, a person must be outstanding in strong faith, good morals, piety, zeal for souls, wisdom, prudence and human virtues and possess those other gifts which equip him to fulfill the office in question.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *In epistulam Johannis*, transl. H. Browne, New York: Christian Literature Publishing 1888, VII. 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Codex Iuris Canonici* c. 378 §1; 1°. Translation is taken

In Aquinas' understanding, there is an inherent connection between being moral and being wise. This helps to explain the requirement for a bishop to have good morals and wisdom. As Bishops are entrusted with the duty to teach and to guide the people of God,

they are to be men who have received a higher degree of the gift of wisdom for two reasons. First, they are expected to excel in knowing the faith in order to teach it to others. Second, they are expected to provide suitable guidance to others according to God's will.

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from *The Code of Canon Law: New revised English Translation*, London: HarperCollins, 2004.