

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S FALLIBILISTIC INTERPRETATION OF AQUINAS' THEORY OF TRUTH

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1. Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre in line with his emphasis on historicism and dialectical method with regard to truth and rationality has concluded that his account of Thomism is rationally superior to other traditions including Aristotelianism, Augustinianism, and even Kantianism and Nietzschean genealogy. The major theme of MacIntyre in assigning rational superiority and truth to a position is the dialectical success and the survival of the position against the strongest challenges presented against it. MacIntyre believes Aquinas' Thomism has been resourceful enough to meet these challenges and establish its superiority. As a result of this dialectical method, MacIntyre contends a feature of Thomism is its essential incompleteness. This feature sometimes for MacIntyre leans toward fallibilism, in the sense that we should hold our truth-claims always open to falsification and refutation. MacIntyre (2006, 163) states that considering judgments as falsifiable is a condition of warranted ascription of truth to a theory.

Only types of enquiry, we have had to learn from C. S. Peirce and Karl Popper, which are organized so that they can be defeated by falsification of their key theses, can warrant judgments to which truth can be ascribed (MacIntyre 2006, 163).

Some critics—including Robert P. George (1989) and J. Coleman (1994)—have objected to MacIntyre at this point, stating that this fallibilism is not compatible with Thomism, as in Thomism there are eternal truths which are thought to be irrefutable and accessible to all; as Coleman put it, “a definition [for Aristotle and Aquinas] is not culture bound nor is it temporal. Both names and definition which grasp the essence of a subject have no temporality” (Coleman 1994, 81).

In this paper, I seek to evaluate MacIntyre's claim about Aquinas' Thomism, to see if it is possible to offer a cogent fallibilistic account of Aquinas' thought which MacIntyre is aiming at. To this purpose, I emphasize two aspects of Aquinas' thought. One is his account of the mechanisms of the intellect, and the second is his account of first principles. The discussion will show that Aquinas' thought might be consistent with a particular kind of fallibilism, but that it does not cohere completely with Popperian fallibilism.

2. The Intellect's Operation and Mechanism in Aquinas' Theory of Knowledge

In this section, two issues will be sketched. The first is how, in Aquinas' view, the intellect operates. The purpose of this discussion is to explain the activity of intellect in attaining knowledge. The second issue is to explain two operations of the

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intellect, by which I seek to explain further Aquinas' epistemological optimism and its scope.

2.1. Intellect's Operation in Aquinas' View

Aquinas has made a distinction between cognition (perceptive knowledge) and knowledge (science). Knowledge or *scientia* is a perfect understanding provided by the intellect. Cognition is what we perceive by our senses. We cannot get a full understanding of a thing through our senses, since our external senses are selective and provide a partial picture of the thing. The disparate data received through the senses should be reassembled by the internal senses or the intellect to produce a complete picture of the thing. In this process firstly phantasms and secondly intelligible species are produced, respectively, by the imagination and the intellect (Eardley and Still 2010, 51-56). A phantasm is made out of disparate perceived data that represent the thing in its completeness, and is the thing's likeness. In the next stage, the universal features of the thing are abstracted from the phantasm by the intellect, and so intelligible species are produced.

An intelligible species is also the likeness of a thing, but unlike a phantasm, it is totally de-individualized and de-materialized. The phantasm of a red car still pertains to one particular red car, but its intelligible species includes only the nature of a car, leaving aside all particular conditions that pertain to this particular car (Eardley and Still 2010, 51-56).

An intellect, in order to achieve knowledge, should grasp the essence of things. The perception of the accidental attributes like colour and texture is not enough to yield *scientia*. To know the thing perfectly, the intellect should understand its four causes—the material, formal, efficient, and final cause—and its effects. This perfect knowledge is not an instantaneous and individual endeavour; rather, it is a collective and a long enterprise, and it is even possible that such knowledge will never be obtained. The intellect should distinguish between the accidental and the essential features of a thing. This process, however, does not apply to artefacts, since their forms are imposed on their matter, and they do not have essences like those of natural things, so no artefact qualifies as a substance, but we can understand their four causes and effects to know them perfectly (Eardley and Still 2010, 8-60).

Intellect has an active role in providing cognition and knowledge. Things are only potentially intelligible; they become actually intelligible when the intellect reassembles the disparate object produced by the external senses into the phantasm, and then abstracts the universals from it in the intelligible species (Eardley and Still 2010, 54-55). Without the operation of the internal senses and the intellect all the data received from the object by the external senses are disparate and un-integrated due to the partiality of each of the senses. It is the intellect that combines these data to provide a picture that is intelligible and might match the real object. In this process, both the intellect and the thing get actualized from a prior state of potentiality. The thing becomes actually intelligible while it was only potentially intelligible before; the intellect actually possesses the form of the thing

while it had the form potentially before; or better put it, it had only the potentiality to receive the form.

2.2. Aquinas' Epistemological Optimism

For Aquinas, John Jenkins (1997, 112-13) argues, "each potency receives intrinsic ordination [direction] to its proper object"; therefore, errors only enter in the operation of potencies that are under the control of the will, and have the possibility to act in different ways. Intellect as a potency has the quiddity of things as its objects, and is not deceived in its grasp of the quiddities. This is the same as for sight when the organ is healthy, and there is not any impediment to seeing (Jenkins 1997, 112-13).

Aquinas discusses the directedness of the intellect toward its proper objects. He holds a very optimistic view to the intellect's capacities, according to which the intellect—like other cognitive faculties—does not or even cannot err in cognizing its proper object; the quiddity or the essential attributes of a thing is the proper object of intellect, thus it does not err in knowing them.

Hence, as long as the faculty exists, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail. Now the proper object of the intellect is the "quiddity" of a material thing; and hence, properly speaking, the intellect is not at fault concerning this quiddity (*Summa Theologica* 85-6).

Aquinas does not explain adequately why the intellect does not err with regard to its proper objects, or why being the proper object of the intellect precludes errors. One way to explain this is that, in Aquinas' view, the intellect at this stage is not dealing with composites. In Aquinas' view, the possible errors of the intellect come in when it composes and divides concepts in a way that does not correspond to reality:

By accident, however, falsity can occur in this knowing of quiddities, if the intellect falsely joins and separates. This happens in two ways: when it attributes the definition of one thing to another, as would happen were it to conceive that "mortal rational animal" were the definition of an ass; or when it joins together parts of definitions that cannot be joined, as would happen were it to conceive that "irrational, immortal animal" were the definition of an ass (*Questiones Disputatae de Veritate* I-XII).

The discussion so far shows that for Aquinas, error does not enter into the intellect's first operation of defining things as it is dealing with the quiddity of things as its proper object. In sum, the intellect has the capacity to apprehend the essences of things by its natural light (Jenkins 1997, 113-114).

Jenkins (1997, 115) states that though, as explained above, the intellect in its first operation grasps the essences fully, there is some textual evidence in which

Aquinas speaks about our imperfect apprehensions of some natural essences like flies, fire and bees². Indeed, as Pasnau (2004, 166) points out, in Aquinas' view, "the knowledge of an essence is not an all-or-nothing affair." The intellect has a rough account of essences which is adequate to some extent, but is not complete. Human cognitive capacity is so weak, in Aquinas' view, that he states "no philosopher could have ever completely investigated the nature of a single fly" (Aquinas' *symbolum*, cited in Pasnau 2004, 166). On this basis, Jenkins (1997, 115) concludes that though, in Aquinas' view, the intellect is voracious in identifying natural kinds and distinguishing them according to their essences, or in other words it is able "to cut the world at its joints", it is not able at least initially to apprehend the whole essence of some things; the intellect in these cases uses reasoning to move from an imperfect to a full grasp of the essences. In this interpretation, we need to use fallible discursive reason to come to a full grasp of some essences, and since our grasp of the essentials is deficient we should instead use accidents in our definitions of the things; however, in Jenkins' view (1997, 117), Aquinas may still hold that intellect due to its abilities and natural light can claim the correspondence of its ideas to the essences that are casually responsible for the formation of the phantasmata. Our intellect in its initial understanding "cuts the world at its joints" though it has many things to learn through discursive reasoning. In Jenkins' view (1997, 126), this assurance about the correspondence of the intellect's ideas to reality, despite the incomplete understanding of essences, indicates that Aquinas is epistemologically optimistic. The acknowledgment of the role of reason by Aquinas mitigates to some degree what might otherwise appear to be an unrealistic optimism with regard to the power of intellect; as he himself puts it, the need to reason is correlated with human beings' imperfect knowledge:

... to reason is to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to know an intelligible truth. And therefore angels, who according to their nature, possess perfect knowledge of intelligible truth, have no need to advance from one thing to another; but apprehend the truth simply and without mental discussion...(*Summa Theologica* I.79.8).

The above quote implies that the need to reason is a consequence of imperfect human knowledge. This approach can be used to support democratic and deliberative kinds of reasoning, since our knowledge of things is limited and partial, and needs to be complemented through dialectical and discursive reasoning. This line of reasoning can be used as a response to some critics of MacIntyre, including George (1989) and Coleman (1994), who claim that for Aquinas some truths are evident to all. According to these critics, as was mentioned in the beginning of the article, "a definition [for Aristotle and Aquinas] is not culture bound nor is it temporal. Both names and definition which grasp the essence of a subject have no temporality" (Coleman 1994, 81). While according to the interpretation just of-

² Thomas Aquinas, In *Symbolum apostolorum*, prologus 864, in *Opuscula theologica*, vol. II, cited in Jenkins (1997, 115).

ferred, though Aquinas is optimistic about the capacity of the intellect, this optimism does not apply to the second operation of the intellect in which it forms judgments; indeed, as argued above, his optimism does not apply to all of the first operation. The intellect will gradually know the essence, and thus, the element of temporality comes in. As will be explained further in the next section, the enquirer begins its enquiry from contingent points, and not from self-evident principles, and finally might arrive at first principles. These contingent starting points are culture-dependent, in the sense that they might differ across cultures. Therefore, fallible and dialectical reasoning is compatible with Aquinas' thought. This is despite the fact that MacIntyre (2006, 162-3) claims Aristotle and Aquinas have not adequately taken into account that progress in enquiry is often torturous and uneven, and that it might even result in regress and frustration.

3. Aquinas' Account of First Principles

Another approach that can be used to support a fallibilistic interpretation of Aquinas is based on his account of first principles. First principles are the principles which are used as the foundations of theoretical and practical reasoning. According to the modern and the Cartesian understanding of first principles, these principles are epistemological propositions, in the sense that they are or should be self-evident and distinct ideas that do not need to be derived from other propositions. MacIntyre is critical of this epistemological account of first principles, and imputes a dialectical interpretation of first principles to Aquinas, which, in turn, yields a fallibilistic account of his theory of truth.

MacIntyre's view of dialectical method rests on two denials. The first is denying the possibility of knowing the first principles of knowledge at the beginning of an enquiry; the second is denying the need for an initial knowledge of the first principles as a condition of acquiring knowledge. Instead, in his view, first principles become known at the end of enquiries. MacIntyre, from an anti-Cartesian perspective, argues that enquiries start from established contingent beliefs, not from first principles which are self-evident to every rational and competent agent. The mind through a dialectical method might finally know the first principles regarding some matter or phenomenon (MacIntyre 2006, 146-147).

The enquirer in the Thomistic perspective, unlike the Cartesian view, does not need to know and be aware that he knows something. The mind might, in fact, know first principles and use them in its enquiries, but it might not be aware of the fact that it knows them, and is using them. In the Cartesian view, by comparison, first principles should be knowable, distinct and indubitable at the beginning of any enquiry.

For the Cartesian it is always a reference backwards to our starting-point that guarantees our knowledge, and hence, it is only through knowing that we know that we know. By contrast, for the Thomist our present knowledge involves reference forward to that knowledge of the arche/principium which will, if we

achieve it, give us subsequent knowledge of the knowledge that we know (MacIntyre 2006, 149).

MacIntyre argues that the mind by becoming adequate by means of a dialectical method might finally be able to know the first principles, which it has used unwittingly in its enquiries (MacIntyre 2006, 149).

In this view, Aristotelian and the Thomistic first principles—*arche* for Aristotle and *principium* for Aquinas—are not epistemological principles. First principles for Aquinas express metaphysically immediate principles in a sense which I shall shortly explain. In this view, the fact that some principles are fundamental to a belief-structure, such that other principles are derivable from them, and that they themselves are not derivable from others, does not qualify them as first principles. First principles for Aquinas express what is ontologically immediate, in the sense that as a matter of fact they constitute the essence of the thing. For instance, the proposition “the human being is a rational animal” has some factual counterparts in the being of human beings; the proposition is not only an epistemological foundation, which is self-evident to the mind. If it is evident to the mind, in the Thomistic view, this is due to the fact that the proposition expresses some features of the object, and the mind dialectically has become adequate to the object so as to know its nature; accordingly, for such a mind, one that is adequate to the object, the proposition regarding the objects' essentials becomes self-evident. First principles might not be knowable at the beginning of an enquiry, because the mind might not yet be adequate to the object. The process of adequation of mind to its objects is a gradual and dialectical process.

Aquinas' view concerning the metaphysical immediacy of self-evident principles leads him to distinguish the principles which are self-evident *per se*, from the principles which are self-evident for us. The former are metaphysically and as a matter of fact self-evident, whether or not we know them; the latter are epistemologically self-evident to us as well.

A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject, as "Man is an animal," for animal is contained in the essence of man. If therefore, the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all (*Summa Theologica*, I.2.1).

As MacDonald's puts it, Aquinas here is not engaged in a strictly epistemological enterprise, since what is at stake here are the natures and the quiddities of things and not propositions as truth-bearers. In Aquinas's view, soul has certain cognitive powers which let the subject have cognition of the nature of things. In this view, cognition of immediate propositions relies on having a true knowledge of the essences used in those propositions. For instance, the proposition “the human being

is a rational animal” would be an immediate first principle, if we have a true grasp of the nature of human beings, and realize that the predicate used in the proposition is present in the real definition of the subject, in the sense that it expresses some reality about the subject of the proposition, and corresponds to its reality (MacDonald 1993, 181). MacDonald (1993, 179-80) holds that in Aquinas’s view, the kind of justification acquired through immediate propositions and based on the cognition of natures is an ideal and paradigmatic justification quite difficult to attain. There are two other kinds of justification beside this ideal case; one is demonstrative justification—*sciential*—and the other is non-demonstrative and probabilistic-dialectical reasoning. The latter is based on uncertain and non-necessary propositions held by most people that produce a positive epistemic status in the agent which amounts to taking them as true propositions.

This picture of first principles is congruent with dialectical and fallibilistic reasoning, because we at the beginning do not and do not need to know the self-evidence of first principles; rather we start with contingent beliefs, and in a process of discursive and argumentative reasoning attempt to arrive at an adequate picture of the thing in our mind, as is pointed to in Aquinas’ definition of truth as “the conformity of thing and intellect” (*De Veritate*, q.1, article 2). The sign of having an adequate picture of the things, in MacIntyre’s view, is that the account can survive against all opposing challenges to it (MacIntyre 1988, 358).

All told, we should not confuse the kind of fallibilism which Aquinas’ thought might allow for with a Popperian version of fallibilism. A full discussion of the different between the two accounts of fallibilism is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffices it here to note that, in my view, the truth/certainty distinction, which Popper (1994, 4) has made might not appear in the Thomistic view. While in Popper’s view (1994, 4), knowledge consists in the search for truth, and not for certainty, from a Thomistic/MacIntyrean perspective, the fact that we can discover our errors and realize the unstable nature of sciences tacitly assumes some certain knowledge. On such a basis, though we hold our judgments to be fallible, it does not mean that we should be agnostic about our current knowledge; furthermore, the very act of falsification is based on some truths of which we are certain, which are used as the measures of falsification. In MacIntyre’s view (2006, 12), putting judgments in question and their falsification requires the context of a tradition which is replete with different certainties:

Although, therefore, any feature of any tradition, any theory, any practice, any belief can always under certain conditions be put in question, the practice of putting in question, whether within a tradition or between traditions, itself always *requires the context of a tradition*. Doubting is a more complex activity than some skeptics have realized. To say to oneself or to someone else "Doubt all your beliefs here and now" without reference to historical or autobiographical context is not meaningless; but it is an invitation not to philosophy, but to *mental breakdown*, or ra-

ther to philosophy as a means of mental breakdown (MacIntyre 2006, 12). [Emphasis added]

The main reasons that can account for this difference might be summarized in Aquinas' theological reliabilism and the hierarchical order of his *Summa Theologica*. By reliabilism, I mean the view that our cognitive capacities are in principle in order such that we can come to know the world; Aquinas has a theological version of this view, which holds our cognitive capacities have this character as they are created by a benevolent Creator to let us know the world as it is (MacDonald 1993, 185).

The hierarchical order of *the Summa*, in MacIntyre's view (1988, 172), endows Aquinas with more rational confidence, because the answers to questions are ordered hierarchically such that the more fundamental truths are taken as certain knowledge. This picture is different from the swamp-picture of science offered by Popper:

Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or 'given' base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being (Popper 1959, 94).

4. Conclusion

In this paper I attempted to provide a basis for MacIntyre's fallibilistic interpretation of Aquinas' theory of knowledge. I argued that Aquinas' optimistic epistemology does not apply to the second operation of the intellect in which it forms compositions and judgments. Indeed, in his view, such optimism is not even seamless with regard to the first operation of the intellect. From another perspective, I argued that Aquinas' account of first principles, in some interpretations like that of MacIntyre, is not epistemological, which means we might not have the full knowledge of them and of their evidence at the beginning of our enquiries; rather, we possess this knowledge dialectically when the intellect becomes adequate to its object. This process is gradual, dialectical and open to falsification. I argued that the need to engage in discursive reasoning, in Aquinas' view, stems from our human condition, and from the limited and uncompleted nature of our knowledge. In passing, I pointed to some profound differences between a Popperian and a Thomistic fallibilism. In my view, Aquinas' theological and metaphysical convictions do not allow him to endorse a full-fledged Popperian fallibilism.

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