



Aristotle

# Why St. Thomas Aquinas Is Not an Aristotelian

by William F. Wertz, Jr.

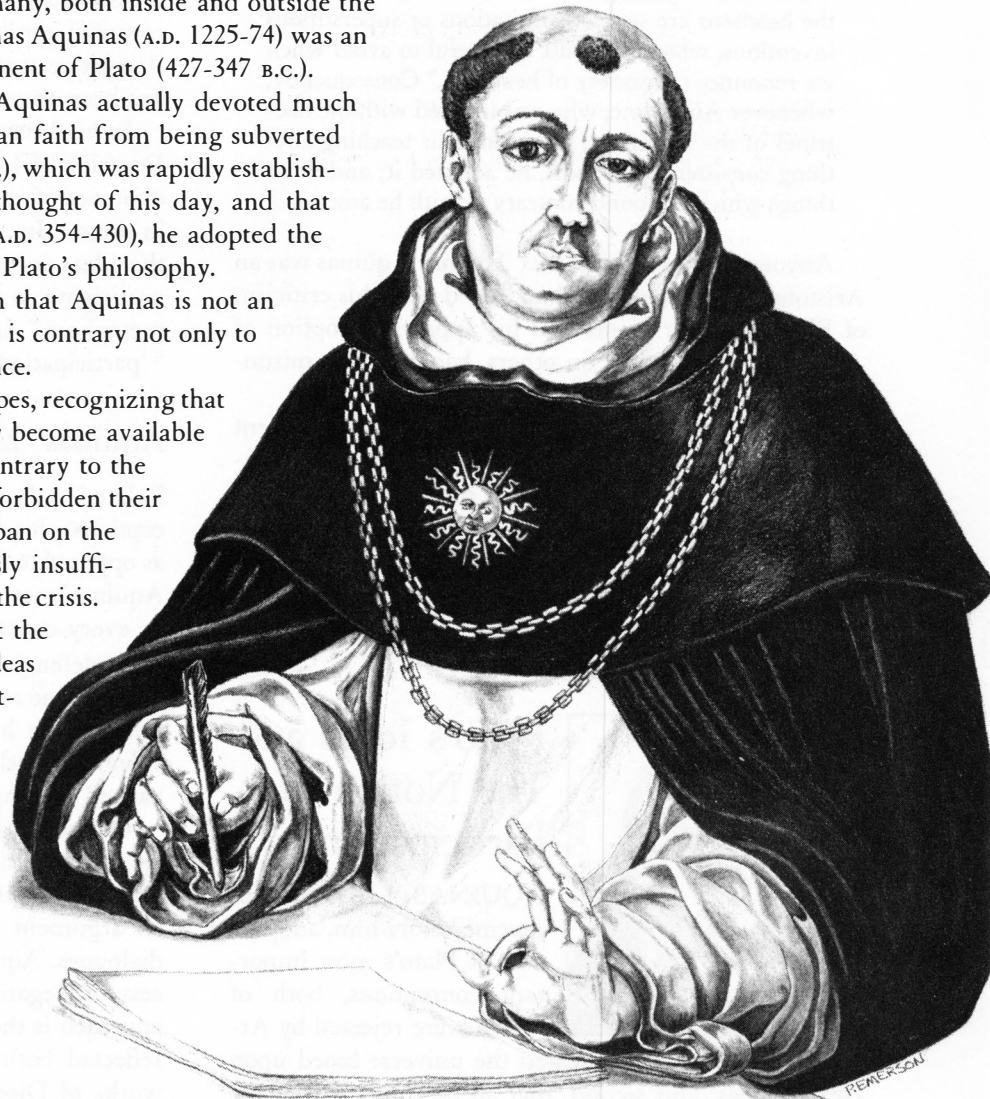
**T**he accepted view today among many, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, is that St. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-74) was an Aristotelian and as such an opponent of Plato (427-347 B.C.).

The truth, however, is that Thomas Aquinas actually devoted much of his adult life to defending the Christian faith from being subverted by the philosophy of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), which was rapidly establishing its hegemony over the intellectual thought of his day, and that through the influence of St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), he adopted the method and most crucial conceptions of Plato's philosophy.

The reason it is important to establish that Aquinas is not an Aristotelian, is that Aristotle's philosophy is contrary not only to the Christian faith, but also to true science.

During Aquinas' time, a number of Popes, recognizing that the works of Aristotle, which had newly become available in Europe by way of the Arabs, were contrary to the Christian faith, had on several occasions forbidden their being read in the schools. But a simple ban on the reading of Aristotle's works was obviously insufficient, and may very well have even fueled the crisis. Therefore, in order to effectively combat the influence of Aristotle, especially as his ideas were put into circulation through the writings of Averroës (A.D. 1126-98), Pope Urban IV entrusted the defense of the Christian faith against the influence of the philosophy of Aristotle, to Thomas Aquinas.

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Drawings by Pamela Emerson

St. Thomas Aquinas

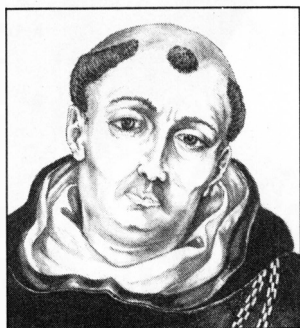
However, rather than explicitly attacking Aristotle's philosophy as anti-Christian, Aquinas took the approach, which the Catholic Church has traditionally taken in respect to pre-Christian religions and philosophies; that is, not to reject anything that may happen to be true in them, while at the same time correcting that which is false from the standpoint of Christianity.

In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas makes it clear not only that this is the approach that he is taking to Aristotle, but also that in so doing he is following in the footsteps of St. Augustine. Citing St. Augustine's work entitled *On Christian Doctrine*, Aquinas writes as follows:

As Augustine says, "If those who are called philosophers said by chance anything that was true and consistent with our faith, we must claim it from them as from unjust possessors. For some of the doctrines of the heathens are spurious imitations or superstitious inventions, which we must be careful to avoid when we renounce the society of heathens." Consequently, whenever Augustine, who was imbued with the doctrines of the Platonists, found in their teaching anything consistent with faith, he adopted it; and those things which he found contrary to faith he amended.

Anyone who maintains that Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian opponent of Plato, based upon his criticism of Plato on some points and his apparent adoption of Aristotle's terminology on others, has therefore misunderstood Aquinas' method.

If one were to classify Aquinas as being in any current of thought, one would have to consider him an Augustinian. Aquinas makes no criticism of Plato's philosophy which was not already made explicitly or implicitly by Augustine. Therefore, it is accurate to say that Aquinas employed the Platonic method as corrected by Augustine to amend those doctrines of Aristotle which were contrary to the Christian faith.



## Plato's Ideas and The Notion of Participation

AQUINAS, LIKE St. Augustine before him, adopted two of Plato's most important conceptions, both of which were rejected by Aristotle: first, that God created the universe based upon eternal ideas; and second, that all creatures participate in these ideas, which are located in the Divine Mind.

Both for Aquinas and Augustine, this is expressed in the concept that the Word is the Form of all forms and all things are created through it.

In respect to the first conception—Plato's eternal ideas—Aquinas repeatedly cites Augustine's discussion in a work entitled "Eighty-three Different Questions," in which Augustine writes: "Ideas are the primary forms or the permanent and immutable reasons of real things and they are not themselves formed; so they are, as a consequence, eternal and ever the same in themselves, and they are contained in the divine intelligence." Aquinas clearly adopts this Platonic viewpoint in the *Summa Theologica*, where he writes: "Ideas are types existing in the divine mind, as is clear from Augustine."

In respect to the second conception—Plato's notion of participation in the eternal ideas—Aquinas writes in the *Summa Theologica* that "this manner of speaking is common among the Platonists, with whose doctrines Augustine was imbued; and the failure to refer to this has been to some an occasion of error."

In his *Metaphysics*, in the section entitled "Critique of Doctrine of Ideas," Aristotle explicitly rejects both the existence of eternal ideas and the notion of participation in them: "In addition, other things do not come 'from' the ideas in any of the usual senses of 'from.' But to participate in them is to use empty words and poetic metaphors." Later in the same book Aristotle writes: "'participation,' as we have said before, is nothing."

## Aquinas' Method as Dialogue

Related to Aquinas' adoption of these two Platonic conceptions is his employment of Plato's method of dialogue, as opposed to Aristotle's logic. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas' method is to present a negative thesis followed by every conceivable argument that could be mustered in its defense. Next he asserts the contrary based either upon divine revelation or the right use of natural reason, followed by his own reasoned answer. Finally, he responds to each of the objections, which had been advanced in support of the thesis under consideration.

Obviously, this is not the method of syllogism. With respect to each topic under discussion, Aquinas enters into a dialogue with all those who have put forward an argument contrary to the truth. Like Plato in his dialogues, Aquinas then derives the truth from the process of negating these false assertions. This negative approach is the hallmark of the Platonic method and is reflected both in the works of Augustine and in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, another Christian theologian whose Platonic writings influenced Aquinas.

Thus, both in respect to his method and in his conception of God and His relationship to His creation, Aquinas effectively aligned himself with the Platonic tradition of St. Augustine, who wrote in the *City of God*: “It is evident that none come nearer to us than the Platonists.”

Aquinas was also aware of the fact that in *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine explained why he believed the philosophy of Plato was so much in harmony with Christian theology:

Did not the famous bishop [Ambrose], when he had considered the history of the pagans and found that Plato had traveled in Egypt during the time of Jeremiah, show that Plato had probably been introduced to our literature by Jeremiah so that he was able to teach or to write doctrines that are justly commended?

Although Augustine later concluded in the *City of God*, that Plato could not have seen Jeremiah (who had died earlier), and could not have read the scriptures (which had not yet been translated into Greek), he nonetheless insisted that Plato probably learned the contents of the scriptures through an interpreter:

[T]hat which most of all inclines me almost to assent to the opinion that Plato was not ignorant of those writings, is the answer which was given to the question elicited from the holy Moses when the words of God were conveyed to him by the angel; for, when he asked what was the name of that God who was commanding him to go and deliver the Hebrew people out of Egypt, this answer was given: “I am who am; and you shall say to the children of Israel, He who *is* sent me unto you”; as though compared with Him that truly *is*, because He is unchangeable, those things which have been created mutable *are* not—a truth which Plato vehemently held, and most diligently commended.

Thus, it is no accident that, although Aquinas did not have access to Plato’s actual works, which with the sole exception of the *Timaeus* only became available in Europe in the fifteenth century, he was nevertheless heavily influenced by Plato’s philosophy, through his predecessor St. Augustine, who considered the Platonic distinction between “Being” and “becoming” to have been derived from divinely revealed truth.

Moreover, it was due to this influence of Plato on his work that Aquinas was so highly esteemed by such later Christian Platonists as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), who wrote the following in defense of Aquinas in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686):

The many investigations which I carried on compelled me to recognize that our moderns do not do sufficient justice to Saint Thomas and to the other great men of that period, and that there is in the theories of the scholastic philosophers and theologians far more solidity than is imagined, provided that these theories are employed *a propos* and in their place. I am persuaded that if some careful and meditative mind were to take the trouble to clarify and direct their thoughts in the manner of analytic geometers, he would find a great treasure of very important truth, wholly demonstrable.

In his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz goes so far as to derive his entire refutation of Descartes’ concept of extension from Aquinas’ notion of substantial form.



## The Transfinite

PERHAPS THE clearest way to distinguish between Aquinas and Aristotle is through an examination of their respective views of the

infinite, as they are reflected in the scientific debate at the end of the nineteenth century over the concept of the “transfinite,” which was set forth by the German mathematician, Georg Cantor (1845-1918).

In August 1879, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical entitled *Aeterni Patris* (*On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy*). In this encyclical, Pope Leo called for a revival of the study of St. Thomas Aquinas both as a means of defending the faith against the atheistic and materialistic philosophies then on the ascendancy—which claimed that the Church was opposed to the advance and development of natural science—and to give proper direction based on the Christian faith to the exercise of reason in the natural sciences. As the Pope stressed in the letter, “there is no conflict worthy of the name between certain and accepted conclusions of modern physics and the philosophic principles of the schools.”

In response to this encyclical, there ensued a renaissance of studies of the works of Aquinas in Catholic academies throughout the world, for the purpose of countering the rationalist enlightenment claim that modern physics had exposed the Christian faith as contrary to reason. One of the most productive results of this renaissance was the collaboration which developed be-

tween Georg Cantor and a group of Thomist theologians, who, working in the spirit of Pope Leo's *Aeterni Patris*, accepted Cantor's revolutionary concept of the mathematical transfinite, as coherent with the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The importance of this issue in establishing that Aquinas was not an Aristotelian, but rather an Augustinian in the tradition of Plato, is that the predominant current in modern science during the nineteenth century was Aristotelian, and as such *denied* the existence of the transfinite. This Aristotelian current argued that there is an unbridgeable gap between God, the absolute infinite, and the created universe, including man, which it claimed to be entirely finite. Therefore, according to this view, the transfinite or an *actual infinite* is impossible. The practical result of this outlook was to reduce science to materialism and to render God impotent in the world.

The primary source of opposition to Cantor's theory that an actual infinite exists is Aristotle, who, in his *Metaphysics*, argued that "the actual infinite does not exist."

It was assumed falsely by some students of Thomas Aquinas, that Aquinas followed in the footsteps of Aristotle in denying the existence of the actual infinite. To this day, the source usually cited for this assumption is Aquinas' argument in the *Summa Theologica* in the article "On the Infinity of God." However, a close reading of this article shows conclusively that Aquinas did not follow Aristotle, but in reality actually refuted Aristotle.

### Aquinas' Notion of the Relative Infinite

Aquinas argues that "God Himself is infinite and perfect," whereas matter without form is imperfectly infinite and is made finite by form: "The infinite of quantity is the infinite of matter, and such a kind of infinite cannot be attributed to God." Also: "[T]he fact that the being of God is self-subsisting, not received in any other, and is thus called infinite, shows Him to be distinguished from all other beings, and all others to be apart from Him."

Since "everything outside of God is from God as from its first principle, . . . besides God nothing can be infinite." However, Aquinas goes on to explain that "things other than God can be relatively infinite, but not absolutely infinite." Furthermore, "[i]t is against the nature of a made thing to be absolutely infinite."

Finally, Aquinas argues:

The fact that the power of the intellect extends itself in a way to infinite things is because the intellect is a

In contrast to Aristotle, who argues that the human mind is finite, Aquinas correctly argues that the power of the human intellect 'extends itself in a way to infinite things.'

form not in matter, but either wholly separated from matter, as is the angelic substance, or at least an intellectual power, which is not the act of an organ, in the intellectual soul joined to a body.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas explicitly states that Aristotle did not prove that there can be no actual infinite: "In the *Physics* and *On the Heavens* he proves there is no actual infinity in natural bodies, but he does not prove that there is no actual infinity in immaterial substances."

Therefore, according to Aquinas, although only God is absolutely infinite, an actual infinity does exist in immaterial substances. However, because such substances are created, they are relatively infinite.

It is interesting to note that in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* Leibniz specifically points to "what St. Thomas says . . . regarding angels and intelligences" as being "true of all substances."

In his "Treatise on the Angels" referred to by Leibniz, Aquinas reiterates his contention that a creature can be relatively infinite: "Every creature is finite absolutely, since its being is not absolutely subsisting but is limited to some nature to which it belongs. But there is nothing against a creature being considered relatively infinite."

### Cantor and Cardinal Franzelin

Although Cantor held discussions concerning the transfinite with many leading Thomist theologians, by far his most important discussion partner was Cardinal Johannes Franzelin. In his *Communications on the Theory of*

*the Transfinite* (1887-88), Cantor reproduced copies of an exchange of letters between Cardinal Franzelin and himself.

In response to the questions raised in Cardinal Franzelin's first letter about how Cantor distinguished between the Absolute Infinite and the actual infinite, Cantor wrote that he employed the expressions "*natura naturans*" and "*natura naturata*" in the same manner as the Thomists:

So that in the first expression, God is that which is outside the world, not of created substance, both the permanent Creator and Preserver, but the latter expression describes the created world. Correspondingly, I differentiate between "an eternal, uncreated or absolute infinite," in reference to God and his attributes, and "a created infinite or transfinite."

As should be clear from the above referenced quotes from the *Summa Theologica*, this is precisely the distinction made by Aquinas between God, who is the Absolute Infinite, and His creation, which cannot be absolutely infinite, because it is made, but which can be relatively infinite.

Once Cantor clarified this fundamental distinction, Cardinal Franzelin wrote back as follows:

Thus the two concepts of the Absolute-Infinite and the Actual-Infinite in the created world or in the Transfinitum are essentially different, so that in comparing the two one must only describe the former as properly infinite, the latter as improperly and equivocally infinite. When conceived in this way, so far as I can see at present, there is no danger to religious truths in your concept of the Transfinitum.

## Univocal, Equivocal, and Analogical Predication

Besides the cited distinction between the Absolute Infinite and the relative infinite or transfinite, Franzelin makes a further, related distinction, derived from Aquinas' philosophy, that is, the distinction between a univocal and equivocal concept of the infinite.

This latter distinction is made by Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* in the article "On whether what is said of God and of creatures is univocally predicated of them." Aquinas concludes that although God created man in His own image, because God, who is absolutely infinite, is the cause of creatures including man, no name belongs to God in the same meaning (univocally) that it belongs to creatures. Thus, although man is created in

the likeness of God, he is not the same as God. Therefore, whatever is said of God and of creatures is predicated equivocally.

As Aquinas writes: "Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures. The reason of this is that every effort which is not an adequate result of the power of the efficient cause receives the likeness of the agent not in its full degree, but in a measure that falls short." To counter those who argue that therefore nothing can be known or demonstrated about God from creatures, an error which Aquinas refers to as the fallacy of equivocation, he further stipulates that for this reason he prefers the concept of analogy to that of equivocation. Therefore, predication between God and creatures is "according to analogy, that is, according to proportion. . . . Thus whatever is said of God and creature is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently." In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas states that "because every other being besides God is a being by participation, its being is predicated analogically."

With the application of this additional distinction, we now see that Cantor's concept of the actual infinite is completely coherent with the theology of Aquinas. Man and the created universe are relatively infinite in a manner analogous to, rather than univocal with, God, who is the Absolute Infinite.

In contrast to Aristotle, who argues that the human mind is finite, Aquinas correctly argues that the power of the human intellect "extends itself in a way to infinite things." This is precisely the point made by Cantor in his *Foundations*:

[T]he human understanding must also be granted the predicate 'infinite' in certain respects, which, in my considered opinion, is the only correct thing to do. . . . As limited as human nature may in fact be, much of the infinite nonetheless adheres to it, and I even think that if it were not in many respects infinite itself, the strong confidence and certainty regarding the existence of the Absolute, about which we are all in agreement, could not be explained.

If one reflects upon it, the opposite, Aristotelian conception, that the human understanding is finite, is actually blasphemous from a Christian standpoint. If God created man in His likeness and the human mind were finite, then God Himself were finite or His work defective. In 1888, Cantor quoted St. Thomas Aquinas in making this precise point in a letter to the Thomist priest Ignatius Jeleir:

[W]ere I correct in asserting its truth in terms of the possibility of the Transfinitum, then there would be (without doubt) a certain danger of religious error for those of the opposite opinion since: “error concerning creatures redounds in false knowledge concerning God” (*Summa Contra Gent.* II, 3).

## Cantor and Christianity

That Cantor’s work was not only coherent with the Christian faith, but actually inspired by it, is clear from Cantor’s correspondence and published work. He himself was baptized a Lutheran, but his mother was a Roman Catholic and he explained his interest in Catholic theology by reference to his mother’s Catholicism.

In Nov. 1895 in a letter to the French mathematician Charles Hermite, he echoed the Platonic conception of Aquinas and Augustine, in arguing that the natural numbers “exist at the highest level of reality as eternal ideas in the Divine Intellect.” In Section 5 of his *Communications on the Theory of the Transfinite*, he reproduced Chapter 18 of Book XII of St. Augustine’s *City of God* (“Against those who assert that things that are infinite cannot be comprehended by the knowledge of God”), in a lengthy footnote to support his notion of the actual infinite. In his 1883 *Foundations*, he stated that his concept of the transfinite was related to Plato’s conception of the infinite, which he says “is an entirely different one than that of Aristotle.” In the same location, he further states, “I find points of contact for my conceptions in the philosophy of Nicolaus Cusanus.” Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa was a direct successor of Aquinas and himself developed the conception that man is a “finite infinite” or a “contracted infinite,” a concept directly related to Aquinas’ notion of man as a “relative infinite.”

Thus, the source of Cantor’s monumental contribution to the physical sciences was clearly his religious faith, and he acknowledged as much. In 1888, he wrote to Jailer: “I entertain no doubts as to the truth of the transfinites, which I have recognized with God’s help. . . .” In a letter to Hermite during January 1894, Cantor—who was not a practicing Catholic—wrote: “Now I only thank God, the all-wise and all-good, that He always denied me the fulfillment of this wish (for a specific university position teaching mathematics), for He thereby constrained me, through a deeper penetration into theology, to serve Him and His Holy Roman Catholic Church better than I would have been able to with my probably weak mathematical powers through an exclusive occupation with mathematics.” As he told

Esser in February 1896: “From me, Christian philosophy will be offered for the first time the true theory of the infinite.”

## The Concept of God

Having thus introduced our refutation of the portrayal of Aquinas as an Aristotelian by a discussion of his notion of the infinite as that bears on modern science, we shall now proceed to discuss a number of other key concepts which Aquinas held in direct opposition to Aristotle, beginning with the concept of God.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle rejects Plato’s notion that God is self-moving, saying, “It is scarcely consistent for Plato to say, as he sometimes does, that what moves itself is the source of all movement.”

In his “Treatise on God” in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas rejects Aristotle’s criticism of Plato and endorses the idea that God is self-moving, rather than being an unmoved mover, as Aristotle suggests:

In the sense, therefore, in which understanding is movement, that which understands itself is said to move itself. It is in this sense that Plato also taught that God moves Himself, not in the sense in which movement is an act of the imperfect.

Moreover,

since the will of God is His essence, it is not moved by another than itself, but by itself alone, in the same sense as understanding and willing are said to be movement. This is what Plato meant when he said that the first mover moves itself.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas notes that Plato

understood the name *motion* in a wider sense than did Aristotle. For Aristotle understood motion strictly, according as it is the act of what exists in potency inasmuch as it is such. So understood, motion belongs only to divisible bodies. . . . According to Plato, however, that which moves itself is not a body.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle also argues that the unmoved mover is subordinate to the necessity of his own nature: “If, therefore, there are any things eternal and immovable, nothing can be . . . against their nature.” Aquinas, on the other hand, argues that such a conception would deny God freedom in respect to His creatures. Directly contrary to Aristotle, he writes: “We must hold that the will of God is the cause of things and that He

acts by the will and not, as some have supposed, by a necessity of His nature.”

Directly related to Aristotle’s false conception of God as not self-moving and subordinate to necessity, is Aristotle’s contention that matter is uncreated. Although his unmoved mover “induces” the movement of the world as a whole, Aristotle’s God does not create the world out of nothing. In the *Physics*, Aristotle writes that matter “is necessarily outside the sphere of becoming and ceasing to be. For if it came to be, something must have existed as a primary substratum from which it should come and which should persist in it; but this is its own special nature, so that it will be before coming to be.” Aquinas, on the other hand, insists that the world did not always exist, but was created out of nothing by God.

## The Trinity

That Aquinas is not an Aristotelian, but rather an Augustinian, is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in his “Treatise on the Trinity” in the *Summa Theologica*. This work, which is based almost entirely upon St. Augustine’s book *On the Trinity*, also looks forward to the work of Nicolaus of Cusa on the same subject. In fact, it is interesting to note that Cusa’s treatment of the Trinity as unity, equality, and the concord of equality and unity, is immediately derived from Aquinas, who in turn derives it from Augustine, who wrote in *On Christian Doctrine* as follows: “Unity is in the Father, equality in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit is the concord of equality and unity.”

In his “Treatise on the Trinity,” Aquinas explicitly makes the point that the Trinity cannot be known by the natural reason as employed by Aristotle. Aquinas takes note of the fact that in *On the Heavens*, Aristotle recognizes the importance of the number three. Aristotle writes as follows:

For as the Pythagoreans say, the world and all that is in it is determined by the number three, since beginning, and middle, and end give the number of an “all,” and the number they give is the triad. And so, having taken these three from nature as (so to speak) laws of it, we make further use of the number three in the worship of gods.

However, as Aquinas points out, Aristotle clearly had no conception of the Trinity of the Divine Persons in the One God:

So when Aristotle said “by this number,” etc., we must not take it as if he affirmed a threefold number

As a consequence of his adoption of Plato’s idea of the Good, which Aristotle rejected, Aquinas necessarily rejects every significant conclusion of Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

in God, but that he wished to say that the ancients used the threefold number in their sacrifices and prayers on account of some perfection residing in the number three.

In answer to the question whether the Son is in the Father and conversely, Aquinas makes it clear why Aristotle is incapable of understanding the Trinity. He first points out that the Son and the Father are in each other according to none of the eight modes of one thing existing in another that Aristotle gives in the *Physics*. However, this does not mean that the Son and the Father are not in each other. Rather, according to Aquinas, “What is in creatures does not sufficiently represent what exists in God; so according to none of the modes enumerated by the Philosopher are the Son and the Father in each other.”

Aristotle’s lack of knowledge of the Trinity leads necessarily to crucial differences between Aristotle’s concept of man and nature, and that of Aquinas. First, because man is created in the image of God, according to Aquinas, as with Augustine before him, “[w]e must therefore say that in man there exists the image of God, both as regards the Divine Nature and as regards the Trinity of Persons; for also in God Himself there is one Nature in Three Persons.” Thus, according to Aquinas, the human mind in the likeness of God, is triune, consisting of memory, understanding, and will. As Aquinas writes: “So Augustine says that the mind remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself. If we perceive this, we perceive the trinity, not, indeed God, but, nevertheless, rightly called the image of God.”

At the same time, since all creatures were created by

the triune God, even though we find a likeness of image only in man as a rational creature, in all other creatures “we find a likeness by way of a trace. . . . In other creatures . . . we do not find the principle of the word, and the word, and love; but we do see in them a certain trace of the existence of these in the Cause, that produced them.” Aquinas derives this conception from Augustine, who says in *On the Trinity*, that “the trace of the Trinity appears in creatures.”

From this Christian notion of the creation of the human mind as the image of God, and of the physical universe as a trace of the same God, follows inescapably the conclusion that the laws which govern the physical universe are coherent with the laws of human mentation. This is the basis for the conclusion arrived at by Georg Cantor in his 1883 *Foundations*, to the effect that a concept which exists intrasubjectively or immanently in the mind will always exist transsubjectively or transiently in the physical universe as well.

## The *Filioque*

In his “Treatise on the Trinity,” Aquinas asks whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son. This issue of whether the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son (*Filioque* in Latin) is the primary theological issue which has traditionally divided the Roman and Eastern Orthodox Churches since the schism of A.D. 1054.

Aquinas’ defense of the *Filioque* is a further demonstration of his anti-Aristotelianism, insofar as denial of the *Filioque* is a reflection of the Aristotelian conception of God and man. One of the arguments Aquinas cites as an objection to the *Filioque* is based explicitly on Aristotle’s *Physics*: “the actual and possible do not differ in things perpetual.” According to this argument, it is possible for the Holy Spirit to be distinguished from the Son, even if He does not proceed from Him, since each has his being from the Father in a different way, one by birth and the other by procession. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is actually distinct from the Son, without proceeding from Him.

Aquinas replies to this Aristotelian argument as follows:

The Holy Spirit is distinguished personally from the Son, since the origin of the one is distinguished from the origin of the other; but the difference itself of origin comes from the fact that the Son is only from the Father, while the Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son; for otherwise the processions would not be distinguished from each other. . . .

According to Aquinas, there are two processions from God the Father, that of the Word or intellect and that of the will or love: “Although in God the will and the intellect are the same, still since love requires by its very nature that it proceed only from the conception of the intellect, there is a distinction of order between the procession of love and the procession of the Word in God.” As Aquinas emphasizes, “nothing can be loved by the will unless it is conceived in the intellect.” In other words, “love must proceed from a word. For we do not love anything unless we apprehend it by a mental conception.”

Another misconception of the Trinity adopted by the Orthodox Church on the authority of Aristotle, was the idea that the Son and the Holy Spirit are inferior to the Father rather than equal. There are two arguments derived from Aristotle to this effect which Aquinas attacks. First, according to Aquinas, Aristotle says that “principle and cause are the same.” Aquinas points out that, following Aristotle, “The Greeks [Orthodox Church] use the words cause and principle indifferently when speaking of God, but the Latin Doctors [Roman Church] do not use the word cause, but only principle.” The Latin Doctors do not use the word cause, because between the cause and the effect there is always a distance of perfection and power, which would imply the inferiority of the Son and the Holy Spirit in respect to the Father, which is not the case.

The second argument derived from Aristotle to deny the equality of the Divine Persons is that equality is in relation to things which are “one in quantity.” From this standpoint, since there is no numerical quantity in the Divine Persons, there can be no equality. Aquinas counters this Aristotelian argument by stressing that the equality of the Divine Persons is in respect to the unity of their essence. To this effect he cites Augustine: “no one of them either precedes in eternity, or excels in greatness or surpasses in power.”

## The Christian Concept of Man

Aquinas’ support of the *Filioque*, in opposition to the Aristotelian arguments of the Orthodox (Greek) theologians, reflects his own commitment to the idea that man has the capacity to participate in divinity through the imitation of Christ. This is the critical conception, which distinguishes the concept of man in the Christian West.

In his “Treatise on God” in the article “On whether any creature can be like God,” Aquinas argues that we do participate in God, since we are created in His image and likeness. Insofar as man is created and God uncre-



ated, man does not participate in God directly according to the same specific and generic aspect, but rather according to some sort of analogy. Aquinas quotes Dionysius:

When the Holy Writ declares that nothing is like God, it does not mean to deny all likeness to Him. For the same things can be like and unlike to God: like according as they imitate Him, as far as He, Who is not perfectly imitable can be imitated; unlike according as they fall short of their cause.

In other words, according to Aquinas: “a creature can be spoken of as in some sort like God, but not that God is like a creature.”

Aquinas further argues, that although a created intellect cannot see the Divine Essence by its natural powers, it can do so, if God unites Himself to the created intellect by His grace. In other words, if the created intellect is illuminated by divine grace, it can then see the essence of God, because it itself has been made as Aquinas says, “deiform,” that is, like to God. Moreover,

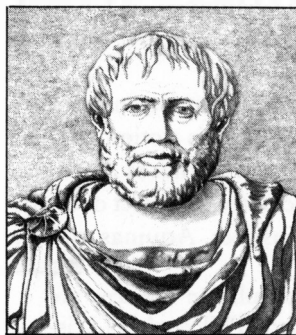
the intellect, which participates more of the light of glory, will see God the more perfectly. And he will have a fuller participation of the light of glory who has more charity, because where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire, and desire in a certain way makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the thing desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity will see God the more perfectly and will be the more happy.

In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas writes that “charity is not something created in the soul, but is the Holy Spirit Himself dwelling in the mind.” Thus, “the charity by which formally we love our neighbor is a participation of Divine charity.”

What is more, there is no limit to the increase in charity. Aquinas writes: “For charity itself considered as such has no limit to its increase, since it is a participation of the infinite charity which is the Holy Spirit.” Since, as Aquinas wrote earlier, “we do not love anything unless we apprehend it by mental conception,” the infinite capacity of man to increase his charity entails necessarily the infinite capacity for concept formation. Aquinas states as much elsewhere: “The intellectual soul, because it can comprehend universals, has a power extending to the infinite.”

In taking this view, Aquinas once again does combat with Aristotle, who insisted that the capacity of man as a rational creature is finite. Aquinas first cites the following Aristotelian objection to man’s having an endless

capacity to increase his charity: “every movement is towards some end and term,” and therefore charity does not increase without limit. Aquinas then counters: “The increase of charity is directed to an end which is not in this, but in a future life.”



## Aristotle’s Ethics

ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT appear from a superficial reading of the *Summa Theologica* that Aquinas was not critical of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, the opposite is the case. Aristotle’s *Ethics* begins by rejecting Plato’s idea of the Good and Plato’s view that all goods derive from participation in the Good itself, which Plato identifies with God. Aristotle first claims that this idea was introduced by “friends of ours,” and then sanctimoniously insists that it is “our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth, even to destroy what touches us closely . . . for piety requires us to honor truth above our friends.”

In total opposition to Aristotle, Aquinas writes:

Everything is therefore called good from the divine goodness as from the first exemplary, effecting and final principle of all goodness. Nevertheless, everything is called good by reason of the likeness of the divine goodness belonging to it, which is formally its own goodness, by which it is denominated good. And so of all things there is one goodness, and yet many goodnesses.

As a consequence of Aquinas’ adoption of Plato’s idea of the Good, which Aristotle rejected, Aquinas necessarily rejects every significant conclusion in Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

First, having denied the existence of the Good, Aristotle argues that the end desired by man is happiness, which he locates ultimately in contemplative reason, which aims at no end beyond itself. Thus he writes:

[T]he activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity. . . .

In his “Treatise on the Last End,” Aquinas argues, to the contrary, that since the human soul is not the universal good, but only a participated good, “that which constitutes happiness is something outside the soul.” Because every creature has goodness by participation, the universal good, which constitutes man’s happiness, is not to be found in any creature, nor in the good of the universe as a whole, but rather in God alone.

Aquinas continues, that happiness consists in the contemplation or the vision of God, but his notion of contemplation has nothing in common with that of Aristotle, because Aristotle’s notion of speculative intellect does not extend beyond knowledge of sensibles. Aquinas writes:

Now the first principles of speculative sciences are received through the senses, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] clearly states at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, and at the end of the *Posterior Analytics*. Therefore the entire consideration of speculative sciences cannot extend further than knowledge of sensibles can lead. Now man’s final happiness, which is his final perfection, cannot consist in the knowledge of sensibles.

Therefore, in contrast to Aristotle’s view in the *Ethics*, that contemplation has no end beyond itself and is self-sufficient, Aquinas argues that man cannot attain happiness by his natural powers, but only by the grace of God: “Happiness is a good surpassing created nature. Therefore it is impossible that it be bestowed through the action of any creature, but man is made happy by God alone, if we speak of perfect Happiness.”

Second, in his *Ethics*, Aristotle names ten moral virtues, each of which is a mean between some excess or deficiency. On the surface it would appear that Aquinas accepts these moral virtues and Aristotle’s notion of the mean. However, the reality is quite the opposite.

The first thing Aquinas does in his “Treatise on Habits” is to add to Aristotle’s list of ten moral virtues a not-insignificant eleventh virtue omitted by Aristotle, namely, justice, so that Aristotle’s moral virtues include the four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, the exemplars of which, according to Aquinas, pre-exist in God.

Aquinas next introduces the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which man can obtain by the power of God alone, by a kind of participation in the Godhead, and which alone lead to true happiness. These virtues, according to Aquinas, do not observe the Aristotelian mean between excess and deficiency, because “there is no sinning by excess against God, Who is the object of theological virtue.” In other words, there can be no excess of faith, hope and charity.

What is more, Aquinas totally devastates Aristotle’s notion of the self-sufficiency of virtuous actions by arguing that the moral virtues cannot exist without the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Aquinas first cites St. John: “He that loves not, abides in death.” He then refers to St. Paul: “All that is not of faith is sin.” Thus, without the theological virtues, Aristotle’s moral virtues lead only to sin and death.

Third, in his *Ethics*, Aristotle puts forth friendship, based upon one’s love for oneself, as an ethical ideal. He further argues that a man needs virtuous friends in order to achieve happiness.

Although the Christian concept of charity includes love of oneself, love of oneself is not the basis of charity towards others. Rather, as Aquinas writes, “inordinate love of self is the cause of every sin,” and the “love of neighbor results from perfect love of God.” In the “Treatise on Faith, Hope, and Charity,” Aquinas argues that “charity is friendship”; however, it is first and foremost “the friendship of man for God.” Thus, while agreeing with Aristotle that friendship is a form of love, Aquinas bases his notion of friendship on man’s participation in Divine Charity, not on self-love, as Aristotle does. Aquinas writes: “God is the principal object of charity, while our neighbor is loved out of charity for God’s sake.”

Citing Ambrose, Augustine’s teacher, Aquinas argues that “charity is the form of the virtues.” “It is charity, which directs the acts of all the other virtues to the last end.” Aquinas describes the last end as “the goodness of God and the fellowship of everlasting life.”

Based on this concept of charity as the form of virtue, Aquinas argues, as does Nicolaus of Cusa in *On the Peace of Faith*, that “charity is the form of faith.” Faith without works of charity is dead, as St. James said. However, faith which is perfected and “formed” by charity is living and leads to eternal life.

On the other hand, even as love of God requires love of neighbor—and not just the virtuous friend, as Aristotle argues, but also the sinner and even the enemy—Aquinas rejects Aristotle’s contention that the happy man “needs” friends. Aquinas writes: “But if we speak of perfect happiness, which will be our heavenly Fatherland, the fellowship of friends is not essential to Happiness, since man has the entire fullness of his perfection in God.”

## Aristotle’s Politics

Although Aquinas does not refer at length to Aristotle’s *Politics* in the *Summa Theologica*, the fundamental prem-

ises of Aristotle's notion of the state, as should be clear from our treatment of his *Ethics*, are necessarily at variance with Aquinas' concept of man.

While posing as a defender of the family and private property, Aristotle himself subordinates the individual and the family to the state by arguing that "the state is by nature prior to the family and the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part."

Next, Aristotle argues that slavery is natural: "he who is by nature not his own but another's man, is by nature a slave. . . . For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth some are marked out for subjection, others for rule."

For Aristotle, "a distinction between the ruling and the subject element" is a principle of the universe: "Such a duality exists in living creatures, but not in them only; it originates in the constitution of the universe . . ." "It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter, slavery is both expedient and right." "And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments . . ."

In addition, Aristotle makes it clear that his notion of virtuous activity precludes the productive labor necessary to the economic sustenance of society. He therefore writes that in the best form of government, "the citizens must not lead the life of mechanics or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble, and inimical to virtue. Neither must they be husbandmen, since leisure is necessary both for the development of virtue and the performance of political duties."

Directly related to Aristotle's view, that it would be immoral for citizens to engage in labor, is his advocacy of population control. In the *Politics*, he explicitly attacks Plato's refusal to limit population in his *Laws*. In the *Laws*, Plato argues that

if mated love should cause an excessive glut of population, and we find ourselves at a loss, we have ready to our hand the old contrivance we have more than once spoken of—we can send out colonies of such persons as we deem convenient with love and friendship on both parts.

Aristotle, on the other hand, writes:

One would have thought that it was even more necessary to limit population than property; and that the limit should be fixed by calculating the chances of mortality in the children, and of sterility in married persons. The neglect of this subject, which in existing

states is so common, is a never-failing cause of poverty among the citizens; and poverty is the parent of revolution and crime.

And how does Aristotle propose to limit population? We read further in the *Politics* the following:

As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no *deformed* child shall live, but that on the ground of an excess in the number of children, if the established customs of the state forbid this (for in our state population has a limit), no child is to be exposed, but when couples have children in excess, let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun; what may or may not be lawfully done in these cases depends on the question of life and sensation.

## Conclusion

As should be clear from the above discussion, Aristotle's conception of society in the *Politics*, including his advocacy of slavery and abortion, flows directly from his rejection in the *Ethics* of Plato's view that man derives all good from participation in the Goodness of God. This rejection of Plato's conception of participation in the eternal ideas, to which Aristotle devotes the bulk of his *Metaphysics*, results in his denial to created nature of the capacity to participate in God's infinity.

It is for this reason that Aristotle's arguments have invariably been employed throughout history by those who for political reasons have opposed the Judeo-Christian conception of man as created in the image of God and the Christian concept of the Filioque, which implies that man can become increasingly "deiform" through imitation of Christ.

Thus, although some have falsely claimed St. Thomas Aquinas to be an Aristotelian, as we have seen, nothing is further from the truth. Aquinas is not only the direct successor to St. Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite, but also the immediate predecessor of Nicolaus of Cusa, all of whom saw themselves in the Platonic tradition of philosophy.

If properly understood, Aquinas' notion of "relative infinity" is the immediate precursor of Cusa's concept of the "finite infinite" or "contracted infinite," from which Georg Cantor later developed his notion of the "transfinite."

And thus it is, as Pope Leo XIII reaffirmed in his encyclical, "Aeterni Patris," that Christ, who is "the power and wisdom of God," (I Cor 1:24) and "in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge," (Col 2:3) is "the restorer of human science."