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The Concept Of Truth As Contained In The Summa Theologica Of St. Thomas Aquinas

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THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH
AS CONTAINED
IN THE SUMMA THEOLOGICA
OF
ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

BY

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"All men, says Aristotle, have a natural desire for knowledge. The need for knowledge is a law of our mind. Just as hunger and thirst urge upon man the necessity of satisfying his desire for nourishment so as to safeguard the conversation and development of his physical being, in the same way a nobler appetite unceasingly stimulates his intellect and prevents it from ever forgetting that he needs the food of truth if he wants to attain to the perfection of his human nature. Thus the desire for knowledge is innate in the human mind. It manifests itself in the many whys and hows which the child never tires of asking, since even in the most humble state of its evolution the human intellect feels the need for a certain totality of understanding." (1)

To know is to possess truth. (2) Every question of

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(2) Knowledge is a primitive fact of consciousness and cannot be defined. It can be examined and described but it cannot be resolved into simpler terms. Knowledge is knowledge.
Philosophy and, for that matter, of any other science, is basically a question of truth. If all Philosophy is out after truth, it must concern itself with the notion of truth. The Angelic Doctor considers truth in several of his writings.* It is our purpose in this dissertation to present the Thomistic teaching as found in the *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 16). The present writing is primarily a presentation, not a commentary.

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*A special treatise, *De Veritate*, is a classical analysis of the whole problem of truth.
CHAPTER I

TRUTH RESIDES PRIMARILY IN THE INTELLECT

The intellect, by its very nature, tends to the true, just as the appetite tends to the good. However, knowledge bespeaks the presence of the known thing in the knowing subject, whereas, appetite is a tendency toward something. The aspect of goodness passes from the object desired to the appetite, and in so far as the object of the appetite is good, then the appetite is called good. Since the true must be related to intellect and be in the intellect as far as it is conformed to the understood object, then the aspect of truth passes from the intellect to the known object; so also is the understood object true in so far as it is related to the intellect. The objective reality known may bear an essential or accidental relation to intellect. The relationship is essential if it depends on the intellect for its essence. A thing is related accidentally to an intellect from the point of view of its knowability. A house is related essentially to the intellect of the architect; it is related accidentally to the intellect of one who merely knows the house but did not plan it.
An object is judged by what is in it essentially and not accidentally. The true in the absolute sense attaches to a thing because it is related to the intellect from which it depends. The house mentioned is true if it embodies the form in the architect's intellect. Natural realities are true since they embody the likeness of the species in the mind of God. A stone is a true stone in as much as it embodies the species of stone which are in turn in agreement with God's preconception. Basically then, truth is primarily in the intellect, secondarily in things.

Since you can regard truth from its primary aspect or from its secondary aspect, the definition, "Truth is the equation of thought and thing" is a general definition embracing both aspects of truth. (1)

Other definitions will lean one way or the other:

Augustine says (De Vera. Relig. xxxvi), Truth is that whereby is made manifest that which is; and Hilary says (De Trin. v) that Truth makes being clear and evident; and this pertains to truth according as it is in the intellect. As to the truth of things in so far as they are related to the intellect, we have Augustine's definition (loc. cit.), Truth is a supreme likeness without any unlikeness to a principle; also Anselm's definition (De Verit. xii), Truth is rightness, perceptible by the mind alone; for that is right which is in accordance with the principle; also Avicenna's definition (Metaph. viii. 6), The truth of each thing is a property of the essence which is immutably attached to it. The definition

(1) Present writer.
that truth is the equation of thought and thing
is applicable to it under either respect.

Problems Raised and Answered

St. Augustine (Soliloq. II. 5) objects to the definition of truth as (1) That is true which is seen; and also the definition (2) That is true which is as it appears to the knower, who is willing and able to know; and he defines truth as "that which is". According to this things would seem to be in things and not in the intellect. However, Augustine is not considering things in relation to our intellect, he is speaking about the truth of things, or essential truth, and is excluding the accidental.

Another objection which led ancient philosophers into error is that if truth is only in the intellect, a thing must be understood in order to be true. On this hypothesis contradictions could be true at the same time because different minds might understand them differently. The answer is simple. The truth of things lies in their relationship to the divine intellect, not to the finite intellect. These ancient philosophers did not understand that the forms of reality correspond to the preconceptions of God. (2)

(2) The architect's mind, mentioned in connection with the house, is not the divine mind. There are poor houses because there are poor architects.
A third objection is that truth would seem to reside in things rather than in intellect. It would seem from two statements of Aristotle, namely, that on account of which a thing is so—is itself more so, and—that our thought or word is false or true from the fact that a thing is or is not, that truth resides in things and not in the intellect. However, the cause of truth in the intellect is the being of the thing and not its truth. Consequently, a thought or word is true from the fact that a thing is, not because a thing is true.
CHAPTER II

THE ATTAINMENT OF TRUTH BY COMPOSITION AND DIVISION

Truth resides primarily in the intellect. Since an object embodies the form proper to the nature of the thing that it is, the intellect "is true" when it possesses the likeness of the known object. On this score, then, truth can be defined as the conformity of the intellect with the thing. A knowledge of this conformity is proper to the intellect but not to the senses. Only the intellect can know its conformity with the intelligible object and it knows this conformity when it judges that the object corresponds to the form. The intellect affirms truth when it makes a judgment. The predicate of the judgment affirms some form of the subject or "removes" some form from the subject. A type of truth, then, resides in the senses and in the intellect, but it resides properly in the intellect judging, i.e., composing and dividing. (3)

(3) Necessary and contingent judgments are both judgments, the former are based on self-evidence while the latter are based on evidence. The first principles of thought and being are self-evident.

For instance, The Principle of Identity: "Whatever is, is," "Everything is what it is," Or "A thing
Problems Raised and Answered

One: "The Philosopher says (De Anima III) that as the senses are always true as regards their proper sensible objects, so is the intellect as regards what a thing is. Now composition and division are neither in the senses nor in the intellect knowing what a thing is. Further, Issac says in his book On Definition that truth is the equation of thought and thing. Now just as the intellect with regard to complex things can be equated to things, so also with regard to simple things; and this is true also of sense apprehending a thing as it is." (4) The answer is contained in the body of the article. To explain: Both the senses and the intellect receive a form when they merely know a thing—the senses, and accidental form; the intellect, an essential form. However, the senses cannot know is identical with itself." By merely stating the principle its truth is shown. The Principle of Contradiction: "Whatever is, cannot at the same time not be," or, "It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time and in the same respect." You may 'sit and stand' at different times, but you cannot 'sit and stand' at the same time. Then the intellect not only asserts these principles but it must assert them under compulsion as self-evidently true. The subject and the predicate are seen to be identical in comprehension.

When judgements are not identical, the intellect learns the relationship between subject and predicate.

(4) Summa Theologica, I, q. 16, a. 2.*

*(All subsequent quotations from St. Thomas Aquinas will be taken from Volume I of the Summa Theologica.)
the conformity as conformity. Nor does the intellect advert to conformity when it merely knows a thing, but the intellect can know and expresses truth formally when it judges that the thing known actually corresponds to the form it apprehends. *

CHAPTER III

THE TRUE IS CONVERTIBLE WITH BEING

Truth is related to knowledge. As far as every thing has being, then it is knowable or intelligible. Aristotle went so far as to say that the soul is in some manner all things. (5)

Just as being and good are convertible, so also are the true and being. Good is being under the aspect of desirability—in relation to appetite; true is being in its relation to intellect.

Problems Raised and Answered

One: The true resides properly in the intellect, but being is properly in things. However, being as well as the true is in things and in the intellect; therefore, since truth is in the intellect primarily and in things secondarily, being and truth differ in aspect and each aspect can be the special object of an idea. So the true and being are said to differ in idea.

(5) To know is to possess the form—to be united with it, but the union is not a substantial one; it is cognitional.
Two: The true and being are not convertible because that which applies to being and not-being cannot be convertible with being. Non-being is neither true nor false since it is nothing; the true is based on being and it is only in terms of being that being can be known.

Three: Apparently the true is prior to being, for being is understood under the aspect of truth. If one is prior to the other they are not convertible. True, unless the idea of the true follows the idea of being, we could not judge concerning being. On the other hand, we can form the idea of being without the idea of the true anterior to the idea of true (formally considered). Before we understand the intelligibility of being we can know being. However, it does not follow that the true is understood by understanding being. The idea of one is implied in the idea of the other.
CHAPTER IV

THE LOGICAL PRIORITY OF THE TRUE AND THE GOOD

The good and the true differ logically although they are convertible with being as to individual things. In an absolute sense, the true is prior to the good on two scores. First, truth is an aspect of being considered in itself, on the other hand, a thing is good in as much as it has some perfection from which follows its desirability. Secondly, knowledge must precede appetite and so the idea of the true precedes the idea of the good. The good, the true, and being are convertible (the same). They differ in idea. (6)

Problems Raised and Answered

One: The more universal is logically prior and the good is more universal than the true which is a type of good, namely, the good of the intellect. So the good is

(6) Robles and Reinhardt (The Main Problems of Philosophy, p. 131) define the good as a metaphysical concept. The good, says Aristotle, is that which all beings desire. All things, however, desire their own perfection, so that a thing is desirable in virtue of the perfection which it possesses. But perfection denotes being "in act" and we therefore conclude that the "being in act" includes perfection; including perfection, it is desirable and therefore good. Thus the "being in act" and the "good" are identical.
logically prior to the true. However, intellect and will include one another and co-operate in function—the intellect understands the will and the will wills the intellect to understand. The objects of the intellect include the objects of the will and vice versa. Regarding the desirability of things the good is the universal, regarding the intelligibility of the things the true is the universal. So the good takes priority over the true in so far as things are desirable. But it is not an absolute priority. The true takes priority over the good so far as things are intelligible.

Two: "Further, good is in things, but the true in the intellect composing and dividing as said before (A. 2). But that which is in things is prior to that which is in the intellect. Therefore good is logically prior to the true. However, a thing is prior logically in so far as it is prior to the intellect. Now the intellect apprehends primarily being itself; secondly, it apprehends that it understands being; and thirdly, it apprehends that it desires being. Hence the idea of being is first, that of truth second, and the idea of good third, though good is in things." (7)

Three: The good is prior to the true because virtue,
of which truth is a species, is included under good. However, truth is used in a particular sense and not as truth in general.
CHAPTER V

GOD IS THE FIRST AND SOVERIGN TRUTH

Truth is in the intellect when it knows a thing as it is; truth is in things when they are conformed to the knowing intellect. This truth is found ultimately in God Himself who is the cause of all finite being, and who is His own intellect and understanding. He is the first intellect and the source of all being and not only is truth in Him, He is truth. (Here is an instance where we must avail ourselves of the method of negation or remotion and Eminence. In our human way we might think of God's Being conformed to His intelligence. But He is utterly simple. His Being is His Act of Intelligenece and Understanding.) Cf. Contra Gentiles I, 1.

Problems Raised and Answered

One: Since there is no composition or division in God, and since truth consists in the intellect composing and dividing, then it may be said that there is no truth in God. However, because God is utterly simple, He is able to judge and know all things complex. Hence there is truth in God's intellect.
Two: From Augustine's definition (De Vera. Relig. xxxvi) that truth is a likeness to a principle it would seem that truth is not in God, since in God there is no likeness to a principle. The truth of our intellect is a likeness to that from which it receives knowledge, truth of things is a likeness to their principle, i.e., the divine intellect. However, the only way in which divine truth can be understood is by negating the affirmative, as for example: The Father is of Himself, because He is not from another. Consequently, because there is no dissimilarity between the Father's existence and His intellect, it can be said that the divine truth is a likeness to the principle.

Three: Truth is from God and all apprehension of the intellect is from God. It is a truth that someone sins, and the intellect apprehends this. Is then, sin from God? No, God is not the cause of the sin though He is the cause of our apprehension of the sin.
CHAPTER VI

UNITY AND MULTIPLICITY OF TRUTH

To handle the problem of the unique and ultimate basis of all individual truth, it must first be ascertained whether the predication of our judgments is univocal or analogous. If something is predicated univocally of many things, it is predicated strictly and according to the exact nature of every member of the species. When something is predicated analogously it is predicated properly of one thing and in some other way of other things. For instance, health is predicated of an organism in a proper sense. But medicine is called healthy when it is the cause of health, urine is healthy when it indicates health. And although neither urine nor medicine are healthy in themselves, they are so causally or indicatively.

If truth is referred to in its proper nature (in intellect) then there are as many truths as there are finite intellects, and there are as many truths in one intellect as there are things known. When however reference is to truth in things, although there are as many essences or forms, they all conform to the truth of the
Problems Raised and Answered

One: All things are true according to one truth.

St. Augustine says (De Trin. xv. 1) that nothing is greater than the mind of man, except God. If truth were not greater than the finite mind, this mind would be the judge of truth; but the finite mind does not judge everything by its own measure, even though it judges everything according to truth. Therefore no other truth exists because God alone is truth.

However, the soul is able to judge because of the first principles of knowledge and it is inferior to primary truth. And in so far as created truth is perfect, then to a certain degree the soul is inferior to it also. God is the greatest subsisting being and the rational soul is inferior to Him.

Two: One truth is the measure by which all things are true just as there is one time which exists for all temporal things. Anselm says (De Verit. xiv), that, as is the

* Truth found in things and in finite intellects flow from, and is dependent upon the first truth. The truth found in things is determined by the truth of the divine intellect which gives being or existence to them and the relationship of that being to itself. Things are true (in regard to finite intellects) in so far as they can be known because of their forms; and the forms because they are what they are, come from the exemplary and efficient cause of all things, i.e., the divine mind, God. Truth is in the finite intellect when it knows what a thing is and it knows this when it possesses the forms of things and makes predications of the things. Thus it is clearly shown that the
relation of time to temporal things, so is that of truth to true things. This comparison is true so far as a relation to the divine intellect is concerned.

intellect which is the source of these forms and also the source of their own nature, power, and operation is the divine mind — of the Creator, who is the first truth and the source of all truth.
CHAPTER VII

THE ETERNAL AND THE TRUE

The truth of enunciations* (judgments or propositions) is the truth of the intellect and enunciation may be verbal in speech or mental in the intellect. The truth of speech depends on the truth of intellect just as urine is healthy because of the health of the animal. Things are true because of the truth in the intellect and truth would not be eternal unless some intellect was eternal. But there is eternal truth because the divine mind is eternal. Indeed, God is His Intellect (A.5) and the One Infinite Truth.

Problems Raised and Answered

One: Saint Augustine says (De Lib. Arbit. ii. 8), Nothing is more eternal than the nature of a circle, and that two added to three make five. Since these are created truths, created truth itself is eternal. "The nature of a circle, and the fact that two and three make five, have eternity in the mind of God." (8)

(8) Summa Theologica, I. q. 16, a. 7.
Two: That is eternal which is at all times. Universals are eternal since they are always and everywhere. Consequently, the most universal thing of all, truth, is eternal. We reply that something is always and everywhere when it has within itself the power of extension to all time and all places, as is proper to God who is everywhere and always. Something may be everywhere and always in different ways. For instance, God is always and everywhere because in Himself is the power of extension to all times and places. On the other hand, if something is utterly undetermined, as primary matter, it is one because of the lack of distinguishing form. It is in this way that universals are everywhere and always, i.e., they are independent of place and time. They are eternal only in the eternal mind of God.

Three: "Further, it was always true that what is true in the present was to be in the future. But as the truth of a proposition regarding the present is a created truth, so is that of a proposition regarding the future. Therefore some created truth is eternal." (9) What actually is at the present time was at another time future, or was future in past time due to its connection with its cause. Had there been no cause of the being there would have been no (actual)

(9) Cf., Summa Theologica, I. q. 16, a. 7.
future of the being. But things (finite) now existing are caused. Ultimately their being was in the sempiternal cause or God.

Four: "Further, all that is without beginning and end is eternal. But the truth of enunciables is without beginning and end; for if their truth had a beginning, since it was not before, it was true that truth was not, and true, of course, by reason of truth; so that truth was before it began to be. Similarly, if it be asserted that truth has an end, it follows that it is after it has ceased to be, for it will still be true that truth is not. Therefore truth is eternal."(10) Truth is eternal in the divine mind. Truth in all other intellects had its beginning in time, and before the existence of finite intellects truth in finite intellects did not exist. "Hence it is true to say that truth did not exist, in so far as we apprehend its not-being as preceding its being." (11)

(10) Summa Theologica, I. q. 16, a. 7.
(11) Loc. cit.
CHAPTER VIII

TRUTH AND IMMUTABILITY

Truth resides primarily in the intellect; however, things are true because they reside in an intellect. Hence the intellect, whose truth consists in its conformity with reality, determines the changeability of truth. It is possible for the conformity of the intellect with reality to vary in two ways. There is a variance of truth on the part of the intellect from the fact that even though a thing which in itself has not changed, the opinion of the thing changes, and at another time, the opinion remains and the thing itself changes. However, truth is immutable in an intellect wherein exists no change of opinion, and from the knowledge of which nothing can escape. This is the divine mind, the truth of which is immutable. But the truth of our intellect is mutable because our intellect can change from truth to falsity. Natural things are said to be true because of their relationship to the truth of the divine intellect which is immutable. (12)

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Problems Raised and Answered

One: Augustine says (De Lib. Arblt. ii. 12), that Truth and mind do not rank as equals, otherwise truth would be mutable, as the mind is. Hence truth is immutable. However it is of divine truth that Augustine speaks.

Two: When a change occurs whatever remains is immutable; just as primary matter, which is unbegotten and incorruptible, remains after all generation and corruption. Truth remains despite change for a thing is or is not after every change. Hence truth is immutable. However, the true and being are convertible. And since being is generated and corrupted accidentally--so also does truth change, in this respect, that the truth which was before no longer remains.

Three: The truth of an enunciation does not change with the changing of the thing. St. Anselm (De Verit. viii) regarded truth as a certain rightness in so far as a thing conforms to the type in the divine intellect. In the statement that Socrates sits, the divine mind signifies that there is a time when Socrates does sit and there is another time when Socrates does not sit. Consequently, in no way does the truth of the statement change. However, if a proposition corresponds with its preconception in the mind of God then it has truth as other things have it; but when indicating the the truth of the finite intellect, i.e., the minds grasp of
an essence, it has truth in a special way. (13) The truth of the proposition and the truth of the opinion no longer hold when the conformity ceases to be. Therefore it is true to say that Socrates sits as long as he sits.

Four: The same cause supposes the same effect. The truth of the three statements that Socrates sits, will sit, and sat has the same thing for its cause. Consequently, each truth is the same. But one truth must be the true one. Therefore, their truth is immutable and the same may be said for any other statement. However, when Socrates sits his sitting is the cause of the truth of the first statement and there are different meanings when he sits, after he sits, and before he sits. Because these statements or propositions concern the present, past, and future, the resulting truth varies. But if it is said that one of the three propositions is true it cannot be said that the same truth does not vary.

(13) Which is understood as logical truth.
CONCLUSION

We have presented a resume of the eight articles or points of inquiry concerning truth as found in the Summa Theologica. (1) Truth is primarily in the intellect; secondarily in things; (2) a type of truth resides in the senses and in the intellect, but it resides properly in the intellect judging, i.e., composing and dividing; (3) true is being in relation to intellect; (4) although the good, the true, and being are convertible (the same) they differ in idea; (5) truth is in God for He is truth itself and the source of all being; (6) the truth whereby all things are ontologically true is ultimately one; (7) eternal truth exists because the divine mind is eternal and God is the One Infinite Truth; (8) the truth of our intellect is mutable because our intellect can change from truth to falsity. This is possible because the finite mind can attain to truth, whereas it was in error; and it can attain a more real conformity—i.e., a fuller possession of truth. The truth of the divine intelligence is altogether immutable.
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*Summa Theologica Diligenter Emendata, De Rubeis, Billuart, and Allorum, Taurini (Italia) Ex Officina Libraria Marietti anno 1820 condita nunc Marii E. Marietti Sanctae Sedis Apostolicae, S. RR. Congr. nee non Archiepiscopi Taurinensis Typographi, MCMXXXVIII*