

Comparative Analysis of Bonaventure's and Aquinas' Epistemologies

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Introduction

Examining the historical context in which Bonaventure developed his illumination theory reveals an important piece of information that is useful in interpreting his philosophy: that he developed his theory at the emergence of the translation of Aristotle's originally Greek works into Latin. Aristotle's texts and commentaries had a certain influence on Bonaventure and the development of his philosophy. While Bonaventure hesitated to embrace Aristotle's philosophy, Bonaventure's contemporary, Thomas Aquinas, wholeheartedly adopted Aristotle's wisdom and methodology. Given these two different approaches to the work of Aristotle, these two philosophers, viz. Bonaventure and Aquinas, are often viewed as having developed opposing philosophies—in particular their epistemologies. Bonaventure's epistemology is grounded in his illumination theory; Aquinas' is established in his theory of knowledge involving the agent intellect. However, by taking the three-term model for Bonaventure's illumination theory, as explained by John White in his article "Divine Light and Human Wisdom: Transcendental Ele-

ments in Bonaventure's Illumination Theory," I propose that the two theories are not at odds with each other, but that the Thomistic notion of the agent intellect accounts for the third-term Logos in Bonaventure's illumination theory.

I will first delineate Bonaventure's illumination theory, pulling from White's article to construct a three-term theory that accurately portrays the illumination theory. I will then focus on Aquinas' notion of the agent intellect and how this essentially autonomous agent parallels Bonaventure's model of knowledge. Finally, I will evaluate the validity of this substitution, ultimately showing that the task at hand is an immensely complex one that requires an all-encompassing understanding of the implications each position suggests.

Bonaventure's Illumination Theory

Bonaventure's epistemology is founded upon God, who is the First Truth and the "adequate and actual Cause."¹² The Divine, acting as a first cause, conditions certainty in knowledge. Bonaventure asserts a reliance upon the Divine in philosophizing primarily because He (Who is Truth Itself) encompasses all truth. In his *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, Bonaventure delineates two positions of obtaining knowledge.³ One view is that the uncreated wisdom manifested in the eternal forms is so sublime that it "can never be attained"; the other extreme is that human knowledge is unchangeable and

1 Bonaventure, *The Mind's Road to God*, Chapter 3 Section 4.

2 Bonaventure, *On the Eternity of the World*, Section 5.

3 Speer, Andreas. "Illumination And Certitude: The Foundation Of Knowledge In Bonaventure." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly: Journal Of The American Catholic Philosophical Association* 85.1 (2011): 131. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 30 April 2013.

eternal reason only has a mere “influence.”⁴ The former relies too heavily on the objective transcendence, such that knowledge can never be arrived at through the human intellect; the latter asserts the sublimity of the human person, not taking complete account of ignorance or the limitations of the human perspective. In short, one absolutely transcends human capabilities, whereas the other does not allow for much transcendence.

Bonaventure’s next move is to reject both of these positions and propose his own between the two extremes, one that realizes the capacity of the human intellect to reflect on the world’s intelligibility while respecting that absolute and eternal truth cannot be compressed into a finite understanding. Drawn out to the proposition’s logical conclusion, certainty is a “function of both intentional and participatory relationships.”⁵

Bonaventure develops his middle course in reaction to the limitations imposed by the two extremes. The first position in which knowledge is conditioned by eternal reason to the human mind produces a skepticism of the changing material world. Bonaventure rejects this outlook because of its intellectual absurdity in dismissing the corporeal and the temporal orders, which are innately intelligible. The other extreme is that the Divine intelligence only shines forth in the “essences of things” and not in the act of obtaining knowledge about these things.⁶ Bonaventure rejects this viewpoint because of

4 Ibid. 131

5 White, John R. “Divine Light And Human Wisdom: Transcendental Elements In Bonaventure’s Illumination Theory.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 48.2 (2008): 175. *Biography Reference Bank (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

6 White, John R. “Divine Light And Human Wisdom: Transcendental Elements In Bonaventure’s Illumination Theory.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 48.2 (2008): 175. *Biography Reference Bank (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

the fluctuating relationship between objects and subjects. Material objects are known in instances because not only do the objects themselves change, but the subject observing the changing objects is also changing. The varying relationship between objects and subjects cannot produce certainty (as in, constancy of knowledge) in this manner, but can only produce instances of knowledge, i.e., a certain object known by a particular subject at a certain point in time.

Bonaventure proposes his *via media*, steering between the two erroneous extremes. His middle course, known as his illumination theory, engages not only two terms (as in, the Divine and the subject or the subject and object in the two extreme positions) in developing knowledge but includes a third term necessary to produce certainty.⁷ Wisdom attained by a human knower is a participation in the light of the eternal wisdom—which both illuminates the human intellect and the essence of the object of knowledge. The eternal wisdom is nominally the Logos, the second Person of the Trinity, through Whom, in Whom, and for Whom, all creation was made. The Logos contains the unchanging essences of all of creation. The relationship between the eternal Logos and the temporal, created world is predominantly two-fold. First, in relation to the object (indeed all objects) of knowledge, the Logos shines down the divine ideas upon all of creation and the object of knowledge receives its essence insofar as it participates in its divine idea. The Logos also illuminates the subject, which enables the subject to see the essence of the object in the elucidating hierarchy of being. The subject can clearly perceive the essence intimated in the object in the invisible light of the Logos.

7 Ibid.

The knowledge acquired in divine illumination participates in the Logos, as the objects of knowledge participate in the divine ideas. Due to the eternal character of knowledge obtained in the divine light, as opposed to the mere instances of truth grasped through the relationship between solely an object and subject, the illumination theory produces a certainty known as “created wisdom.”⁸ The created wisdom, although certain, is limited by the finitude of the human knower. This means that it is nonetheless a participation in the unconditional, unlimited eternal wisdom associated with the Logos.

It is important to realize that Bonaventure did not see the Logos as completely separate from the temporal, merely shedding light upon the subject-object relationship, but as the necessary bond for knowledge, imparting intelligibility upon all of creation and illuminating the subject to understand not merely a particular object, but a particular object within the whole hierarchy of being. The relationship between the human subject (whose soul by nature is connected with the divine) and the Logos is not characterized by a distant, indirect illumination, but is a connection which cannot be dismissed—as is the relationship between the object and the Logos, who imbues intelligibility into the dust of creation.

Aquinas’ Theory of Knowledge

Accepting the three-term model for Bonaventure’s illumination theory makes evident the similarities in Aquinas’ theory of knowledge. Aquinas’ theory of knowledge is based upon a linear process in which a further step fol-

8 Speer, Andreas. “Illumination And Certitude: The Foundation Of Knowledge In Bonaventure.” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly: Journal Of The American Catholic Philosophical Association* 85.1 (2011): 134. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 1 May 2013.

lows the completion of its previous step; with one of the steps missing, the process for knowledge about the particular object of knowledge cannot be completed.

Aquinas reasons that all knowledge begins in the senses. The sense faculties, which are powers of the soul, are the channels through which the objective, outside world enters the subject in order to be known. Although the process for knowledge begins with the sense experience, not all knowledge is sensory knowledge (as will be demonstrated later). After the outside world becomes available to the intellect through the senses, the object is converted to a phantasm. The phantasm represents the object as an image in the mind. The characteristics of the specific object picked up through the senses are then imprinted in this image of the mind. From here, the agent intellect illuminates the phantasm, extracting the general essence from the specific image. The agent intellect, Aquinas reasons, is a power of the intellect itself. Each human person has his or her own agent intellect, which, insofar as each intellect functions, is a participation in the Divine intellect. In this sense, the power of the agent intellect to come to knowledge resides inside each individual knower.

The essence extracted from the phantasm is impressed upon the possible intellect. The possible intellect's reception of the essence is a reception of the essence of the object. The possible intellect cognizes the essence and understands the nature of the object illuminated. The final step involves a *verbum mentis*, or a "word of the mind," to express the cognition. The concept formed is useful in expressing the idea of the object as well as recalling it.

In the process of knowledge, the active intellect takes "information that is material and particular" and con-

verts it “into something immaterial and universal.”⁹ The whole process is instantaneous and unintentional; Aquinas’ theory of knowledge is an expression of the automatic epistemological processes of the human mind.

Applying the tripartite model of knowledge deduced from Bonaventure’s illumination theory to Aquinas’ theory of knowledge makes evident the substitution I seek to highlight, i.e., of Aquinas’ agent intellect for Bonaventure’s Logos. It is important to note that the following substitution I delineate is a fundamental and simple one; the specific details involved as a consequence of making such a switch will be explicitly articulated in the next section of this paper in order to predominately emphasize the general principle of the substitution, not whether the substitution is an absolutely effective one.

The primary difference between both theories of knowledge is the role the Divine takes in the philosophical model, which is made comparable in both cases in the “substitution” I will delineate. In Bonaventure’s illumination theory, the divine light allows for a clear and illuminating ground for realization. Without the powerful luminosity of the Divine, the intellect, dark and ignorant, would not come to the illuminated and certain conclusions attributed with knowledge. However, the luminosity of the Divine is comparable to the power of the intellect planted in the human person and the possession of intellectual forms that the material world contains in Aquinas’ theory.¹⁰ The human person is implanted with

9 Templeton, Kirk. “Avicenna, Aquinas, and The Active Intellect.” *Journal Of Islamic Philosophy* 3.(2008): 44. *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 4 May 2013.

10 Doolan, Gregory T. “The Causality of the Divine Ideas in Relation to Natural Agents in Thomas Aquinas.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44.3 (2004): 394. *Philosopher’s Index*. Web. 4 May 2013.

the divine gift of an autonomous intellect.¹¹ The human intellect, supplied entirely by the Divine, relies on the Divine for its contingent existence and continuity. However, the divinely endowed capacity does not rely on the Divine in the process of coming to an understanding. In this sense, then, the radiating light of the Logos of Bonaventure's theory is replaced with the innate power of the Logos endowed in the human intellect of Aquinas' theory. The illumination factor of the external, third-term Logos is poured into the human intellect in an essentially two-term model.

In Bonaventure's theory, the Logos, the subject, and the object are necessary in the process of philosophizing; neglecting one of the terms results in uncertainty, and thence knowledge is not possible. The Logos provides the light and truth overshadowing both the subject and object—without the overshadowing light of the Logos, the subject cannot see the object.¹² The lack of the subject or object clearly cannot allow for knowledge, as the subject is the one to whom knowledge is attributed and the object is the aim of knowledge.

The three terms collectively allow for the attainment of knowledge. Although Aquinas' model of knowledge is essentially a two-term theory (although the object partakes in the Divine ideas), Aquinas' theory is nonetheless able to attain knowledge like Bonaventure's. The stability and coherence of Aquinas' predominantly two-term theory (in contrast to the frequent unreliability and flux of the relationship of other two-term models) is made possi-

11 "The seeds of forms are implanted in created things." ST I, q. 65, a. 4, ad 2

12 White, John R. "Divine Light And Human Wisdom: Transcendental Elements In Bonaventure's Illumination Theory." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 48.2 (2008): 175. *Biography Reference Bank* (H.W. Wilson). Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

ble by the indirect combination of the Logos (which sheds light upon the intellect in Bonaventure's theory), and the human intellect, thereby producing the same power and ability as is in Bonaventure's model. In this way, the substitution of the Logos in Bonaventure's three-term theory is in essence a sort of combination of the Logos and the subject to produce a cognitively self-sufficient human intellect in Aquinas' theory of knowledge.

Evaluating the “Substitution”

After spelling out the substitution and consequently unifying the two comparable epistemologies, the implications of making evident the comparison between the two epistemologies must be effectively evaluated. However, it should be explicitly noted that there is a particular difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of one epistemology over another because many times a combination of distinct positives and negatives characterize each philosophy. This reality thereby makes it difficult to compare two entirely different entities under one objective rubric. In attempting to conclude which philosophy surpasses the other, I will spell out both the advantages and disadvantages of both Bonaventure's and Aquinas' theories and will make a final conclusion based on the totalities of both.

Bonaventure's illumination theory asserts the necessity of a transcending beyond relationship between a knower and an object. The mutability of the knower cannot be trusted, and neither can the inconsistencies of the object. The emanation of the unchanging, eternal Logos allows for the knower to “see” and attain certain knowledge, contextualizing the object in the stable order of being.

Aquinas' theory aims at the imminence of the Divine

in the natural world. From the divine intellect “forms flow forth into all creatures,” allowing for the sovereignty of the human person in cognizing the natural world.¹³ However, from a Bonaventurian perspective, the neglecting of the direct radiance of the Logos would not guarantee the certainty at which knowledge aims. Without the illumination attributed to the Divine, knowledge is a mere science of the natural world at best.

While this last point is seen through the scope of a Bonaventurian philosophy, it is a crucial one to realize. Although the stability associated with the Logos is somewhat accounted for in the firm human intellect of Aquinas’ theory, the independence of the human knower is primarily asserted over the continual dependence on the Divine light. Certainly the Divine gifted the human person with the intellect, but the stress on the continual recollection of the Divine is an important one. In Aquinas’ model, the cognitively independent agent intellect does not necessarily recall the Divine in the act of knowledge and in turn, neglects to contextualize objects in the broader and no less important reality.

Bonaventure’s illumination theory surpasses Aquinas’ theory of knowledge on this essential point: that the illumination theory brings about not only the certainty attributed to the unchanging, eternal, transcendent reality, but also the contextualization of the knowledge. The contextualization may appear as a minor addition to knowledge of an object, but it is in principle a vital element that must not be separated from knowledge of an object; the contextualization of the knowledge intimates an ethical framework of valuing goods in their proper order.

13 Doolan, Gregory T. “The Causality Of The Divine Ideas. In Relation To Natural Agents In Thomas Aquinas.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44.3 (2004): 394. *Philosopher’s Index*. Web. 4 May 2013.

Aquinas' theory implies neglecting the immaterial light that allows for knowledge in the first place, while erotically grasping onto objects in the natural world to know. Knowledge treated simply as a natural science lacks its inherent companion, the science of ethics. Given the separation of natural science and ethics implicitly embraced in the philosophy of an intellectually self-sufficient person, Bonaventure's illumination theory exceeds Aquinas' theory of knowledge with respect to the moral implication behind a cognitively sufficient individual.

However, this remark must be further qualified. Aquinas' implicit expression of the autonomy of the human intellectual to know an intelligible world does not straightforwardly "neglect" the Divine; it relies on the Divine for the complete gift of the intellect and continues to rely on the sustaining of the intellect.

Another necessary qualification is that the sovereignty of the cognitive element of the human knower does not imply the exclusion of the ethical element of the human person, nor does it imply that the intellectualizing cannot be done in an ethical manner or setting. Aquinas' philosophy must not be unnecessarily deemed unethical merely because it does not explicitly and continually rely on the light of the Divine (but upon the gift of the Divine).

The issue at hand i.e., of asserting the better of the two theories of knowledge after being unified under a common term, viz. the "substitution" of the Logos for the autonomous human intellect, is an immensely complex one. One must first realize that one epistemology is not absolutely superior to the other, but that each theory has its strengths and weaknesses that must be accounted for in comparing both epistemologies. Depending on what relative aspect of their epistemologies is the focal point, the strength of one over the other will exceed. Therefore, the position of an absolute superiority of either Bonaven-

ture's illumination theory or Aquinas' theory of knowledge to the other cannot be held.

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