

FAITH, REASON, AND CHARITY
IN THOMAS AQUINAS'S THOUGHT

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Aquinas's thought is often considered an exemplary balance between Christian faith and natural reason. However, it is not always sufficiently clear what such balance consists of. With respect to the relation between philosophical topics and the Christian faith, various scholars have advanced perspectives that, although supported by Aquinas's texts, contrast one another. Some maintain that Aquinas elaborated his philosophical view without being under the influence of faith. Others believe that the Christian faith constitutes an indispensable component of Aquinas's view; at least when Aquinas focused on those statements that, though maintainable by mere reason, belong to the Christian revelation.

In this essay I intend to show that the aforementioned perspectives can be reconciled on the basis of Aquinas's concept of faith. If we do not limit ourselves to considering faith as the assent to the revealed truth, but also look at what leads the believer to assent—i.e., charity that unites the believer with God and is gratuitously conceded by God himself—then the relation between faith and reason appears to be twofold. On the one hand, the truths of faith cannot participate in the rational inquiry, because according to Aquinas faith lacks the evidence searched for by natural reason. On the other hand, since Aquinas holds that faith is the assent to the revelation due to the love for God that is granted by God himself, the believer will take faith as more certain than intellect and science, and the truths of faith will constitute the *orientation* and *criterion* of her/his

rational investigation. The truths shall constitute *orientation* because the believer aims to confirm what she/he already believes from the rational point of view. They will also be *criterion*, because in case of a contradiction between rational arguments and revealed truths, reason must be considered mistaken and the rational investigation must start anew from the beginning.

1 The autonomy of the rational investigation

Many thinkers maintain that Aquinas uses natural reason without being influenced by faith. This view can be fruitfully investigated by referring to natural theology. Aquinas and his followers considered natural theology as the most arduous rational inquiry—it goes without saying that if reason alone were able to attain the truth in such a field, it would be all the more able to successfully perform any other type of intellectual research. Many of Aquinas’s interpreters affirm that natural theology was developed by Aquinas only on the basis of natural reason. Ralph McInerny points out that, according to the Angelic Doctor, some truths searched for by natural theology “were known even by the pagan philosophers.” (McInerny 2006, p. 26) He makes reference to some of Aquinas’s well-known and uncontroversial statements. For example, in the very beginning of the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas writes:

The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected.¹

¹ “Quod Deum esse, et alia huiusmodi quae per rationem naturalem nota possunt esse de Deo, ut dicitur Rom. I non sunt articuli fidei, sed praeambula ad articulos, sic enim fides praesupponit cognitionem naturalem, sicut gratia naturam, et ut perfectio perfectibile” (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1, quoted in McInerny 2006, p. 29).

This seems to imply that Aquinas's faith did not play any role in the development of his philosophical theology. McInerny then refers to another famous text:

In one and the same man, about the same object, and in the same respect, science is incompatible with either opinion or faith, yet for different reasons. ... The reason why science and faith cannot be about the same object and in the same respect is because the object of science is something seen, whereas the object of faith is the unseen, as stated above.²

In the above passage Aquinas affirms that faith and knowledge exclude one another when referring to the same subject at the same time and in the same person. He bases this statement on his conception of *evidence*. For him, evidence is the quality due to which some things, “of themselves, move the intellect or the senses to knowledge of them.”³ The object of faith is not evident, which is why the assent of faith is given only “at the command of the will moved by the grace of God.”⁴ As a result, if the object of knowledge is (able to become) evident, human intellect can (be able to) attain it without being helped by the will that in turn is moved by the divine grace. It is precisely the case of the so-called “preambles of faith.” With respect to these truths Aquinas affirms that “there is nothing to prevent a man, who cannot grasp a proof, accepting, as a matter of faith, something which in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated.”⁵ Aquinas specifies that

² “De eodem secundum idem non potest esse simul in uno homine scientia nec cum opinione nec cum fide, alia tamen et alia ratione. ... non potest simul idem et secundum idem esse scitum et creditum, quia scitum est visum et creditum est non visum, ut dictum est” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad 4).

³ “... per seipsa movent intellectum nostrum vel sensum ad sui cognitionem” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 4).

⁴ “... ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 9).

⁵ “Nihil tamen prohibet illud quod secundum se demonstrabile est et scibile, ab aliquo accipi ut credibile, qui demonstrationem non capit” (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1).

those who do not know such truths by demonstration “must know them at least by faith.”⁶ In this way Aquinas seems to mean that not only are demonstration and faith mutually exclusive with respect to the same object, but that the former is also somewhat preferred to the latter. At any rate, McInerny consistently concludes that, according to the Angelic Doctor, natural theology can be adequately developed by both believers and non-believers. McInerny criticizes another prominent interpreter of Aquinas, Etienne Gilson (whom I shall refer to in the next section), because the French philosopher “ended by so confining Thomas’s philosophy to a theological setting that it is difficult to see how philosophy so understood could be shared by non-believers.” (McInerny 2006, p. 159)

This position is supported by Aquinas’s text from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. The author says that “the judgment uttered by everyone concerning truth cannot be erroneous,” and for this reason constitutes a reliable starting point for any demonstration.⁷ Aquinas deals with the eternity of the world and explains the reason for taking the well-known conviction of *ex nihilo nihil fieri* as a criterion for the metaphysical investigation. According to the Angelic Doctor, this conviction belongs to those statements that must constitute the basis on which to build any knowledge, since they are not controversial and are accepted by all. Elsewhere Aquinas points out that “the first principles of demonstration” are precisely those sentences “the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of.”⁸ In the passage in question Aquinas explains *why* what is known by all cannot be false. His reasoning is simple and straightforward:

⁶ “... saltem per fidem praesupponi ab his qui horum demonstrationem non habent” (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3, my translation).

⁷ Aquinas’s statement resembles the definition “what in principle everybody knows,” which has been used precisely by McInerny to stress the autonomy of philosophical reflection from the influence of faith. To put it in McInerny’s own words, “philosophy is a discourse that pins itself to truths that are in the public domain, so that an argument must always be hooked up to the things that in principle everybody knows.” (1998, pp. 145-146). Let me add that perhaps Alvin Plantinga’s words make the meaning of “what in principle everybody knows” clearer: “What we all or nearly all know or take for granted or firmly believe, or what at any rate those conducting the inquiry know or take for granted or believe” (2000, p. 272).

⁸ “... sicut patet in primis demonstrationum principiis, quorum termini sunt quaedam communia quae nullus ignorat” (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 2, a. 1).

A false opinion is a kind of infirmity of the understanding ... But defects, being outside the intention of nature, are accidental. And nothing accidental can be always and in all things. ... Thus, the judgment uttered by everyone concerning truth cannot be erroneous.⁹

In conclusion, the argument that Aquinas offers for his conviction that demonstrations must start from sentences universally shared consists of a reasoning that is based on universal acceptance and is free from any influence of faith. Since this argument regards the points of departure of knowledge, it appears to be particularly appropriate here. It supports this section of the thesis in that Aquinas uses natural reason without any influence from the Christian faith.

2 The rational inquiry under the influence of the Christian faith

The other perspective I mentioned at the beginning of this essay is the one according to which Aquinas lets faith influence his rational investigation; at least when he focuses on those rational truths that, since they have also been revealed by God, can be both attained by reason and affirmed by faith. Etienne Gilson can be considered a prominent representative of such a perspective. As I said in the previous section, McNerny accused the French philosopher of having mistaken Aquinas's philosophy for theology. According to Gilson, Aquinas

would have been very much surprised to hear that, in giving philosophical demonstration of philosophically demonstrable truths revealed by God to men, he was,

⁹ “Falsa ... opinio infirmitas quaedam intellectus est. ... Defectus autem per accidens sunt: quia praeter naturae intentionem. Quod autem est per accidens, non potest esse semper et in omnibus. ... Ita iudicium quod ab omnibus de veritate datur, non potest esse erroneum” (Aquinas 1955-57, II, 34).

although commenting upon the word of God, indulging in a non-theological activity.

(Gilson 1957, p. 182)

Gilson's conviction is that Aquinas's philosophical reflection has, in the modern age, been separated from faith,¹⁰ because of Descartes and "a great many Catholic professors of philosophy": "To them, as to Descartes himself, where theology begins, philosophy comes to an end. If we philosophize, we cannot be theologizing at the same time."¹¹

A similar reading of the relationship between the modern age and Aquinas's thought has more recently been advanced by John Jenkins who focused on another outstanding representative of modern philosophy—John Locke. Jenkins's intentions are to free the modern and contemporary interpretations of Aquinas's relation between faith and reason from the widespread influence of the theses presented by Locke, especially in the fourth part of the *Essay on Human Understanding*. Jenkins's idea is that there is a noteworthy difference between the two perspectives:

Locke, with his epistemological project, first sought to establish universal, neutral principles of reason which all parties to debates would accept. To discover these, he had to set aside any religious beliefs or experiences, for these might be in dispute among people. ... Aquinas, on the other hand, was not engaged in Locke's epistemological project, was not seeking neutral principles of reason. He was trying to formulate an account of the rationality of Christian beliefs given all he thought he knew -- which included the propositions of Christian faith. (Jenkins 2007, p. 223)

¹⁰ A similar perspective has been advanced by Arvin Vos who attentively compared Aquinas' and Protestant's positions on the relation between faith and reason. According to him, it is in the modern age that preambles of faith have been seen as a rational way to justify the Christian belief, while this was not of interest to Aquinas (see Vos 1985, p. 89).

¹¹ Gilson 1957, p. 184. Also, Guy de Broglie stated that this idea should not be attributed to Aquinas's reflection, but was rather elaborated by those Cartesian thinkers who used to demonstrate God's existence and soul's immortality in order to show the rationality of the act of faith. See de Broglie 1953.

According to Jenkins, faith contributes to the formation of Aquinas's perspective regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology. The idea of reason itself has been settled, thanks not only to natural reason, but also to the Christian faith: "His [Aquinas's] account of reason was therefore shaped by many of his theological convictions as well as other beliefs." (Jenkins 2007, p. 223) Affirming a certain influence of faith on many of Aquinas's philosophical positions thus seems acceptable.¹² In a well-known passage the Angelic Doctor says that if natural reason attains conclusions that contrast with the truths of faith, the argument developed is certainly wrong:

If ... anything is found in the teachings of the philosophers contrary to faith, this error does not properly belong to philosophy, but is due to an abuse of philosophy owing to the insufficiency of reason. Therefore also it is possible from the principles of philosophy to refute an error of this kind, either by showing it to be altogether impossible, or not to be necessary.¹³

I shall return to the above passage in more depth and detail in the last section. Here it suffices to highlight Aquinas's conviction that any argument contrasting with the truth of Christian revelation, even if it appears to be rationally convincing, must be rejected as wrong. Moreover, it is possible to conjecture that something similar might also be affirmed in the absence of the aforementioned contrast, though the Angelic Doctor does not state it explicitly. In fact, rejecting *any* rational statement contrasting with faith logically implies the conviction that reason could be mistaken, even

¹² In my opinion Eleonore Stump has also interpreted Aquinas's epistemology in this sense. On the basis of her view of Thomistic doctrine of knowledge, if our cognitive faculties have been given to us by God in order to let us achieve the truth, then "when we use sense and intellect as God designed them to be used in the environment suited to them," our cognitive capacities will turn out to be *reliable* (see Stump 1992, p. 147). For more on this, see Di Ceglie 2014.

¹³ "Si quid ... in dictis philosophorum invenitur contrarium fidei, hoc non est philosophia, sed magis philosophiae abusus ex defectu rationis. Et ideo possibile est ex principiis philosophiae huiusmodi errorem refellere vel ostendendo omnino esse impossibile vel ostendendo non esse necessarium" (Aquinas 1946, q. 2, a. 3).

if every argument apparently supports its conclusions. It is precisely what Aquinas seems to say elsewhere: “In order to avoid mistakes in demonstrating, one should be aware of the fact that quite often something universal seems to be demonstrated, which is not being demonstrated.”¹⁴ It is, therefore, possible to attribute to Aquinas the conviction that even when rational arguments confirm the truths of faith, the certainty is offered by faith (which for Aquinas is infallible) and not by reason (which for Aquinas could be mistaken even if every argument apparently suggested that it is not).¹⁵

3 Aquinas’s multiform definition of faith

The two views presented in the previous sections are clearly opposite to one another. According to the former, Aquinas does not reason under the influence of his faith, whereas according to the latter he benefits from such influence, at least when he investigates those truths that, although rationally demonstrable, have also been revealed by God. I have already said that this opposition seems to be founded in Aquinas’s texts themselves, and I have tried to show this so far.

It is now time to wonder whether the opposition at stake can be overcome by considering every aspect of the Angelic Doctor’s concept of faith and its possible relations to natural reason. On the one hand, if faith is taken as *adherence* to Christ due to the *love* for God, which God himself grants to the believer, it does not seem possible to conclude that such a crucial experience in the believer’s life does not contribute to her/his intellectual experiences. On the other hand, if faith is taken as a certain type of *knowledge*—adherence to Christ implies a kind of knowledge about him and his message—such knowledge cannot take part in the philosophical investigation since it lacks

¹⁴ “Quod non accidat in demonstratione peccatum, oportet non latere quod multoties videtur demonstrari universale, non autem demonstratur” (Aquinas 1970, I, lectio 12).

¹⁵ My hypothesis appears to be supported by the following passage: “A man of little science is more certain about what he hears on the authority of an expert in science, than about what is apparent to him according to his own reason: and much more is a man certain about what he hears from God, Who cannot be deceived, than about what he sees with his own reason, which can be mistaken” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 4 a. 8 ad 2).

rational evidence. Thus, it is time to highlight—in the current text and the text in the next section—exactly what Aquinas’s concept of faith consists of and what consequences such a concept can have for the relation between faith and natural reason.

The aspects of faith just mentioned meet the traditional distinction between *fides qua* and *fides quae* that traces back to Augustine. Paraphrasing a well-known Aristotelian expression, it can be affirmed that “faith is said in many ways.” For the Angelic Doctor faith is “an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine Truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God.”¹⁶ Faith consists not only of the work of the intellect and will, but also the intervention specifically granted and the support gratuitously offered by God. This resembles another of Aquinas’s tripartitions, on the basis of which faith means “believing in a God” (*credere Deum*), “believing God” (*credere Deo*), and “believing in God” (*credere in Deum*):

The object of faith can be considered in three ways. For, since "to believe" is an act of the intellect, in so far as the will moves it to assent, as stated above, the object of faith can be considered either on the part of the intellect, or on the part of the will that moves the intellect. If it be considered on the part of the intellect, then two things can be observed in the object of faith. ... One of these is the material object of faith, and in this way an act of faith is "to believe in a God"; because, as stated above nothing is proposed to our belief, except in as much as it is referred to God. The other is the formal aspect of the object, for it is the medium on account of which we assent to such and such a point of faith; and thus an act of faith is "to believe God," since, as stated above the formal object of faith is the First Truth, to Which man gives his adhesion, so as to assent to Its sake to whatever he believes. If the object of faith be considered in so far as the intellect

¹⁶ “Actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 9).

is moved by the will, an act of faith is "to believe in God." For the First Truth is referred to the will, through having the aspect of an end.¹⁷

It is clear that only the first of these three dimensions of faith takes God as an object of knowledge (*credere Deum*), thus defining the intellectual character of faith: that is, it is an act of the intellect with its noetic contents (*fides quae*, which—as is known—must be distinguished from *fides qua*, the act of faith that is meant by the two other aspects). The second aspect (*credere Deo*) allows us to see that the act of faith depends on God, in the sense that there is no faith without divine revelation. The third aspect (*credere in Deum*) allows us to see that the object in question is also the ultimate goal; it is the good that should be looked for and not a mere truth or a person like any other.¹⁸ To put it another way, the first two aspects concern the content of faith (the material object: *credere Deum*) and the way in which it is proposed to the believer (the formal object: *credere Deo*); the third aspect determines the proper task of the will, which, since it aims at the highest good, leads the intellect to give assent to the revealed truth.

Faith is, therefore, not reducible to assent of the intellect. Although Aquinas insists that faith is formally an act of intellect, he also “does recognize the large part which the will plays in the act of faith.” Consequently, for him “the act of faith is an act intrinsically determined by affective

¹⁷ “Obiectum autem fidei potest tripliciter considerari. Cum enim credere ad intellectum pertineat prout est a voluntate motus ad assentiendum, ut dictum est, potest obiectum fidei accipi vel ex parte ipsius intellectus, vel ex parte voluntatis intellectum moventis. Si quidem ex parte intellectus, sic in obiecto fidei duo possunt considerari. ... Quorum unum est materiale obiectum fidei. Et sic ponitur actus fidei credere Deum, quia, sicut supra dictum est, nihil proponitur nobis ad credendum nisi secundum quod ad Deum pertinet. Aliud autem est formalis ratio obiecti, quod est sicut medium propter quod tali credibili assentitur. Et sic ponitur actus fidei credere Deo, quia, sicut supra dictum est, formale obiectum fidei est veritas prima, cui inhaeret homo ut propter eam creditis assentiat. Si vero consideretur tertio modo obiectum fidei, secundum quod intellectus est motus a voluntate, sic ponitur actus fidei credere in Deum, veritas enim prima ad voluntatem refertur secundum quod habet rationem finis” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 2).

¹⁸ Henry Price, in an essay which does not present any reference to Aquinas, states something similar: “There are two senses of ‘believe in’. First there is a factual sense. Here belief-in is clearly reducible to belief-that.... Secondly, there is also the “evaluative sense of ‘believe in’. Here believing-in amounts to something like esteeming or trusting; and in this second sense, believing-in seems to be quite a different attitude from believing-that.” (Price 1965, p. 17)

elements.” (Riga 1971, p. 168) Moreover, it is to be stressed that faith is not limited to human activity. In the case of faith, the object (*credere Deum*) is also the source of knowledge; it is so *exterius* because “those things which are of faith surpass human reason. Hence, they do not come to man's knowledge, unless God reveals them” (*credere Deo*). *A fortiori*, it is so *interius* because “since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God.”¹⁹ That God is also the source of faith can be viewed as an aspect of *credere in Deum*; that is, the intension of the will to the good. God is the good, by definition, since he is the end of all things. At the same time he is the principle of everything. Thus, the faithful tend to God because of what he has revealed (*exterius*), and love him thanks to the work he does in their interiority (*interius*) to move them to assent. Of course for Aquinas the believer believes for many reasons, but what moves the believer to assent to the revelation is principally “the inward instinct of the divine invitation.”²⁰ Aquinas is convinced that God is “the chief and proper cause of faith.”²¹

What I have so far recalled can rightly be considered the *core* of Thomistic doctrine of faith. It seems to also represent—in a sufficiently complete and coherent way—the more general Catholic doctrine on this issue, and even what is shared by the great traditions of Christianity in regard to faith. As I said, God is both the principle and the end of faith, not only because he reveals certain truths, but also because—though he fosters and supports human freedom—he moves the believer to accept them. God is love and he guides human beings to partake of him by generating in them the

¹⁹ “Ea enim quae sunt fidei excedunt rationem humanam: unde non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante. ... Quia cum homo, assentiendo his quae sunt fidei, elevetur supra naturam suam, oportet quod hoc insit ei ex supernaturali principio interius movente, quod est Deus” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 6, a. 1).

²⁰ According to Aquinas the believer is moved to believe for many reasons such as miracles and, what is more (*quod plus est*), “by the inward instinct of the Divine invitation (*interiori instinctu Dei invitantis*)” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 9, ad 3).

²¹ Aquinas states that “science begets and nourishes faith, by way of external persuasion afforded by science; but the chief and proper cause of faith (*principalis et propria causa fidei*) is that which moves man inwardly to assent” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 6, a. 1, ad 1).

desire to love him more and more and believe what he has revealed.²² For Aquinas, love for God granted by God himself is the very center of the Christian faith, the source of its perfection: “Charity is called the form of faith in so far as the act of faith is perfected and formed by charity.”²³ Charity solicits believers to know of God and his works—i.e., everything that exists. Maybe this is what Aquinas referred to by saying that “of what God does or can do any intellect can know the more, the more perfectly it sees God.”²⁴ It is worth noting that the knowledge of God to which Aquinas refers in this passage depends on the love towards God:

The intellect which has 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 degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified.²⁵

Believers’ reflections, including philosophical research, seem to be caused principally by the love for God. One wishes to know everything about whom one loves. If it is God whom one loves, then everything God has done—everything that exists—becomes of interest. Aquinas seems to confirm

²² This perspective has been summarized by P. J. Riga in the passage I have already partially quoted above: “For St. Thomas faith is the assent to the true on the authority of the one who reveals this truth, and thus faith is formally an act of the intelligence. Yet, Thomas does recognize the large part which the will plays in the act of faith. Love renders the act of faith meritorious and, as it were, informs and gives life to faith and the adherence itself is a work of love so that the act of faith is an act intrinsically determined by affective elements” (Riga 1971, p. 168).

²³ “Caritas dicitur forma fidei, in quantum per caritatem actus fidei perficitur et formatur” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 4, a. 3)

²⁴ “Sed horum quae Deus facit vel facere potest, tanto aliquis intellectus plura cognoscit, quanto perfectius Deum videt” (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 12, a. 8).

²⁵ “Intellectus plus participans de lumine gloriae, perfectius Deum videbit. Plus autem participabit de lumine gloriae, qui plus habet de caritate, quia ubi est maior caritas, ibi est maius desiderium; et desiderium quodammodo facit desiderantem aptum et paratum ad susceptionem desiderati. Unde qui plus habebit de caritate, perfectius Deum videbit” (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 12, a. 6).

this when he takes into consideration the relationship between philosophy and theology. In his view the *philosophus* and the *fidelis* investigate the same subject—reality as a whole—and both of them do so from a scientific point of view. They differ from each other by their aim. In fact, the *philosophus* investigates reality in itself, while the *fidelis* investigates all things *as they are related to God*:

The philosopher and the believer consider different matters about creatures. The philosopher considers such things as belong to them by nature -- the upward tendency of fire, for example; the believer, only such things as belong to them according as they are related to God -- the fact, for instance, that they are created by God, are subject to Him, and so on.²⁶

The author of *Summa Contra Gentiles* (a work that has often been seen as a *summa philosophica*) ends up affirming explicitly that he is acting as a *fidelis*.²⁷ To him, love for God causes the obedience to his revelation and the confidence that all things can be known thanks to such a revelation.²⁸ At the beginning of the work just mentioned, Aquinas takes St. Hilary's words as orientation for his reflection: "I am aware that I owe this to God as the chief duty of my life, that my every word and sense may speak of him."²⁹ For the Angelic Doctor this is a *duty*, as it is confirmed

²⁶ "Alia circa creaturas et Philosophus et Fidelis considerat. Philosophus namque considerat illa quae eis secundum naturam propriam conveniunt: sicut igni ferri sursum. Fidelis autem ea solum considerat circa creaturas quae eis conveniunt secundum quod sunt ad Deum relata: utpote, quod sunt a Deo creata, quod sunt Deo subiecta, et huiusmodi" (Aquinas 1955-57, II, 4).

²⁷ "And so, following this order, after what has been said in Book I about God in Himself, it remains for us to treat of the things which derive from Him" (Aquinas 1955-57, II, 4).

²⁸ Perhaps this is why an interpreter of the Angelic Doctor has affirmed that "Aquinas has a great confidence in the rectitude of nature as it came out of the hands of the Creator" (Elders 2008, p. 249).

²⁹ "Ego hoc vel praecipuum vitae meae officium debere me Deo conscius sum, ut eum omnis sermo meus et sensus loquatur" (Aquinas 1955-57, I, 2).

by the words he uses—“*officium*” and “*debere*”. Such a duty arises from Aquinas’s *desire* to completely devote himself to reflect on God and his works.

4 Aquinas conciliates primacy of faith and autonomy of reason

So far I have pointed out that for Aquinas faith is the assent to the revealed truths and it is made perfect by charity; i.e., the love for God which God himself grants to believers. I have also highlighted that Christian faith, so conceived, implies not only certain knowledge about God and whatever is related to him, but also the desire to improve and progressively increase such knowledge. It is now time to focus in more detail on the relation between faith so conceived and rational investigation. I intend to proceed by showing that, according to Aquinas, (1) the charity that makes faith perfect—i.e., the “love for the truth believed,” as we will see Aquinas name it—cannot be put aside by believers in the context of philosophical research, and (2) rational investigation must be developed autonomously from faith, since *scientia* requires evidence and evidence is to be attained by reason alone. I will then consider how it is possible that, although the love for the truth believed does not disappear in investigations performed by believers, natural reason functions autonomously from its influence.

Let us focus on the passage where Aquinas reflects on how to argue with respect to the revealed truths:

Human reason in support of what we believe, may stand in a twofold relation to the will of the believer. First, as preceding the act of the will; as, for instance, when a man either has not the will, or not a prompt will, to believe, unless he be moved by human reasons: and in this way human reason diminishes the merit of faith. ... Secondly, human reasons may be consequent to the will of the believer. For when a man's will is ready to believe, *he loves the truth he believes*, he thinks out and takes to heart whatever reasons

he can find in support thereof; and in this way human reason does not exclude the merit of faith but is a sign of greater merit.³⁰

Aquinas emphasizes the intellectual value of “the love for the truth believed”; that is, the love for God which leads believers to reflect on him and his works in order to attain as much evidence as possible.³¹ Aquinas adds that this disposition operates also when the subject at stake can become completely evident. In such a case, the faith conceived as a certain amount of non-evident truths disappears, whereas the form of faith—i.e., charity—keeps operating. It is precisely the case of the so-called *praeambula fidei*:

Demonstrative reasons in support of the preambles of faith, but not of the articles of faith, diminish the measure of faith, *since they make the thing believed to be seen*, yet they *do not diminish the measure of charity*, which makes the *will ready to believe them, even if they were unseen*.³²

³⁰ “Ratio ... humana inducta ad ea quae sunt fidei dupliciter potest se habere ad voluntatem credentis. Uno quidem modo, sicut praecedens, puta cum quis aut non haberet voluntatem, aut non haberet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, nisi ratio humana induceretur. Et sic ratio humana inducta diminuit meritum fidei ... Alio modo ratio humana potest se habere ad voluntatem credentis consequenter. Cum enim homo habet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, *diligit veritatem creditam*, et super ea excogitat et amplectitur si quas rationes ad hoc invenire potest. Et quantum ad hoc ratio humana non excludit meritum fidei, sed est signum maioris meriti” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 10, emphasis added).

³¹ Aquinas uses arguments once he is sure that God exists. According to Brian Leftow, Aquinas “does not raise it [the existence of God] as a matter he seeks to settle by argument. *He takes it for granted that God exists*” (2006, p. ix, my emphasis). Another scholar of Aquinas, Brian Davies, says that *Summa Theologiae* “contains a lot of sustained philosophical arguments even while presupposing the truth of certain religious beliefs” (2006, p. ix).

³² “Rationes demonstrativae inductae ad ea quae sunt fidei, praeambula tamen ad articulos, etsi diminuant rationem fidei, quia faciunt esse apparens id quod proponitur; non tamen diminuunt rationem caritatis, per quam *voluntas est prompta ad ea credendum etiam si non apparerent*” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 10, ad 2, my emphasis).

On the one hand, since non-evident sentences are no longer needed once evidence has been attained, what Aquinas calls “the measure of faith” turns out to be diminished or eliminated. On the other hand, since the believer does not give up her/his love for God and the beliefs implied by such a love, what Aquinas calls “the measure of charity”—the love for God conceded by God himself—keeps functioning. It can therefore be maintained that the believer can know and believe at the same time, where only at first sight should this seem to negate the well-known Thomistic passage quoted in the first section.³³ In fact, at this stage of the present essay it should be clear that to Aquinas knowing (taken as possession of rational evidence) cannot replace believing (taken as the adherence to God’s revelation due to charity and divine grace). According to Aquinas, divine grace cannot be replaced by human activity: “Grace is more perfect than nature, and, therefore, does not fail in those things wherein man can be perfected by nature.”³⁴ Natural reason, even if made perfect, cannot take the place of the divine grace that has more dignity. As a result, once reason alone has attained evidence, faith keeps operating to the extent that it is conceived as adherence to God due to the love for him and what he has revealed.³⁵

According to Aquinas, faith always accompanies the rational investigation performed by the believer. Now it is necessary to clarify why the autonomy of reason does not decrease or disappear. As already said, Aquinas considers such autonomy indispensable. Let us take into account what he claims when he wonders whether or not faith is more certain than other intellectual virtues such as intellect, science, and wisdom. As a believer, Aquinas affirms that with respect to the cause of faith, faith is more certain, since the cause in question is God and not human reason. But with regard to

³³ See footnote 2.

³⁴ “*Gratia est perfectior quam natura: unde non deficit in his in quibus homo per naturam perfici potest*” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 9, a. 1).

³⁵ A conviction that is widespread among Christians, as rightly pointed out by Terence Penelhum, can therefore be rejected: “It is common for Protestant, as well Catholic, thinkers to say that there cannot be conclusive reasons for the commitment that faith involves, since if there were such reasons, there would be no freedom in the commitment and hence no merit in making it” (1977, p. 140). On the contrary, “perhaps what makes faith voluntary is not that its grounds are inconclusive, but that even if they are conclusive, men are free to deceive themselves and refuse to admit that they are” (p. 153).

the subject of faith (i.e., the believer), he states that “the more a man’s intellect lays hold of a thing, the more certain it is,”³⁶ and “on this way, faith is less certain.”³⁷ If reason searches for evidence, faith, taken as assent to non-evident statements (*credere Deum*), cannot serve this end. In the passage just quoted, Aquinas clearly affirms that the certainty of faith is determined by divine *grace* and not by rational evidence.³⁸ It follows that from the point of view of the subject of faith, the certainty can be attained only by natural reason, which functions without being under the influence of faith.

This portrayal of the relation Aquinas sees among faith, reason, and charity can be easily found in the passage he devotes to the possibility that rational arguments negate truths of faith; I have already referred to this passage in the second section. Aquinas’s thesis is that once those arguments have been rejected—because of their contrast with faith—reason must start anew from the beginning, “from its own principles.” Aquinas acknowledges that only reason is able to look for evidence. He shows a noteworthy trust in its potentialities, because for him reason, in spite of the mistakes it might have made, is supposed to recommence its work:

Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties that can be answered.³⁹

³⁶ “Dicitur esse certius quod plenius consequitur intellectus hominis” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 4, a. 8).

³⁷ “... ex hac parte fides est minus certa” (ibid.).

³⁸ “Certainty can mean two things. The first is firmness of adherence, and with reference to this, faith is more certain than any understanding [of principles] and scientific knowledge. For the first truth, which causes the assent of faith, is a more powerful cause than the light of reason, which causes the assent of understanding or scientific knowledge. The second is the evidence of that to which assent is given. Here, faith does not have certainty, but scientific knowledge and understanding do” (Aquinas 1953, q. 14, a. 1, ad 7).

³⁹ “Cum enim fides infallibili veritati innitatur, impossibile autem sit de vero demonstrari contrarium, manifestum est probationes quae contra fidem inducuntur, non esse demonstrationes, sed solubilia argumenta” (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 1, a. 8).

Moreover, claiming that reason alone has to carry out a new inquiry seems due not only to the just mentioned trust in the possibilities of reason,⁴⁰ but also to the conviction that the certainty of faith—although it implies certain statements and promotes a permanent investigation—never depends on reason. In fact, this certainty consists of *adherence*—“to adhere” (*inhaerēo*)—to the revealed truths that is due to the love for God. Certainty of faith is *certainty of love*, thanks to which believers tend to unite themselves with God and are ready to accept as true what he has revealed. By virtue of such a certainty, believers—at least those who experience a paradigmatic level of faith—refute any argument—even if rationally convincing—only because it negates the truths of faith. (It is maybe superfluous to repeat that precisely thanks to the love for God and everything related to him, this refusal is to be followed by further investigations to show that the argument rejected is in fact wrong; also from the speculative point of view). Faith is, therefore, surer than any rational certainty,⁴¹ but cannot participate in the demonstrative process since it is due to love for God and not due to evidence. Believers’ love for God and the consequent certainty they feel about his revelation constitutes the *orientation* of their rational inquiry, which they develop as further confirmation of the revealed truths and as a means to clear away objections and criticisms. At the same time believers take the truth believed and loved as a *criterion* of their speculative investigation, since it is on the basis of the agreement or disagreement with such truth that they either accept or reject reason’s conclusions.⁴²

⁴⁰ Notice that the trust in question is not strictly due to reason. As I have just shown, it is based on two principles. The former (faith is based on the infallible truth) is clearly due to faith, the latter (it is impossible to demonstrate what negates the truth) seems to be proposed by Aquinas neither as a demonstration nor as an intuition.

⁴¹ “In so far as science, wisdom and understanding are intellectual virtues, they are based upon the natural light of reason, which falls short of the certitude of God’s word, on which faith is founded” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 4, a. 8, ad 3, my emphasis).

⁴² My position appears quite distant from another proposal advanced by John Wippel that intends to conciliate the influence of the Christian faith on reason and the autonomy of reason from faith. Wippel believes that some philosophical hypotheses can be drawn from the Christian faith: “for the Christian it may be that in certain instances some revealed datum serves as a leading question or working hypothesis for his philosophical inquiry.” At the same time he thinks that it is necessary to keep such truths out of philosophical reflection. Wippel suggests distinguishing “between the order or moment of discovery, on the one hand, and the order or moment of proof, on

A substantial objection might be raised. If rational investigation is the search for truth, then the criterion of such investigation should be offered by reason alone, and love should not take part in it. It should be replied that Christians do not consider God as “a good among others.” For them, he is the good in itself. Consequently, the more they love him, the more they love the good and engage in attaining it. With respect to searching for knowledge, those who do not look for a good among others –such as success and money– but look for the good in itself put aside any immediate interest that could spoil the search for truth, such as exaggerating confidence in one’s capabilities, lacking consideration of the opinions of others, jumping to conclusions from premises, and so on. Moreover, if God is not only the good in itself, but also the truth in itself, love for him coincides perfectly with the love for knowledge. It is therefore no surprise that for Aquinas all things can be known thanks to God:

God is indeed that by which all things are known, not in the sense that they are not known unless he is known (as obtains among self-evident principles), but because all our knowledge is caused in us *through his influence*.⁴³

the other.” For him, “in the moment of proof his [the Christian's] procedure cannot be described as Christian philosophy. But since in the moment of discovery it was his religious belief that first suggested this particular issue to him as a possible subject for philosophical investigation, one might refer to such a procedure as Christian philosophy in the order of discovery” (1984, p. 280). In short, philosophy is the “moment of proof” in which one demonstrates the rational validity of the hypothesis. Truths of various origin can contribute to philosophical discourse only as suggestions and possible answers that must be verified by the philosophical process. This process remains “philosophical” only if strictly argumentative, while “Christian” is what Wippel names the “moment of discovery”; that is, a pre-philosophical context from which suggestions and possible answers are drawn. Philosophy is then “pure philosophy” when it coincides with the “moment of proof”: it is a process of demonstration. In conclusion, though Wippel’s proposal constitutes an insightful attempt to conciliate faith and reason, he considers such relation only from the point of view of the intellectual character of faith—that is, faith seen as a complex of truths to believe. In this way he ends up dividing two stages too rigidly, and saying that “Christian philosophy” is not “pure philosophy.”

⁴³ “Deus est quidem quo omnia cognoscuntur, non ita quod alia non cognoscantur nisi eo cognito, sicut in principiis per se notis accidit: sed quia *per eius influentiam* omnis causatur in nobis cognitio” (Aquinas 1955-57, I, 11, my emphasis).

These above words appear as a summary of what I have claimed in the course of this essay. On the one hand, Aquinas points out that the rational knowledge is grounded on self-evident principles. As a consequence the truths of faith cannot participate in this research, since they do not enjoy evidence. On the other hand, Aquinas states that thanks to God's influence, everything can be known. By virtue of such influence believers love God, trust him, and consider true whatever he has revealed. Consequently, they take the truths of faith as *orientation* and *criterion* for their rational inquiry: *orientation* because they aim to confirm by reason what they already believe; *criterion* because in case of a contradiction, reason must be considered surely mistaken and rational investigation must start anew from the beginning.

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