

**Thomistic Papers  
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## AN INCREDULOUS FIRST REACTION TO *FAITH AND RATIONALITY*

Henri Dulac

It seems to me that any discussion about the relation of human reason, or "rationality," to the acceptance of knowledge about God has to take into account three distinct problems: (1) whether "God exists" can be known by the human intellect unaided by revelation; (2) whether "God exists" and other propositions about God that can be known by the human intellect unaided by revelation can also be known by faith, i.e., by God's word; (3) whether propositions such as "God is triune" or "Christ is the Redeemer of mankind" can be known by the human intellect unaided by faith. In my reading of *Faith and Rationality* I do not find these issues consistently distinguished from one another. At times I do find some recognition of the need for making some distinctions, but I do not find the distinctions consistently made.

Certainly St. Thomas Aquinas was extremely careful to keep these issues distinct from each other. This is evident both from his explicitly philosophical writings (mostly commentaries on works of Aristotle) and from his theological writings in which he sometimes recounts philosophical arguments for propositions which can also be known by divine revelation.



Although the book contains frequent references to St. Thomas Aquinas and seems somewhat preoccupied with positions taken by him, I find the attempts to present those positions inadequate, and I shall try to draw attention to some of these points.

At least one matter of terminology needs to be clarified before one can approach any of these issues--at least if one's approach includes reference to St. Thomas's writings. Since the time of John Locke the word "belief" has been used to refer to any proposition accepted by a holder of the belief, regardless of the justification for it. In this sense I can say "I believe what I just wrote in the last sentence to be true." St. Thomas, on the other hand, uses "belief" (*fides*) or the verb *credo* and its cognates, e.g., *credibile*, in a much more restricted way in speaking about a proposition accepted on the word of another person, human or divine. For St. Thomas such a proposition is accepted not because of evidence of the object, but because of some evidence extrinsic to the object; he is careful to distinguish *fides* from *scientia*. A proposition accepted on the basis of extrinsic evidence that renders a human proponent credible can never be more than probable, and St. Thomas would regard such a proposition in the same way as he would regard other probable propositions.

For St. Thomas an effort to establish the existence of God by argument is a part of what Aristotle called First Philosophy, which later came to be known as Metaphysics. The conclusion of such an argument does not pretend to arrive at a belief in his sense of the word, but at what he would call scientific knowledge, i.e., certain knowledge based on evidence. Such an argument must be judged purely philosophically and not as it might lead to an act of faith.

Mr. Plantinga seems to regard "self-evident" propositions as simply "easily known." It would be quite inaccurate to regard that as St. Thomas's view. St. Thomas is clear that a proposition *per se notum* is one in which the predicate is contained in the definition of the subject. If one takes the propositions (13) to (23) that Plantinga has on pages 55 and 56, it seems to me that St. Thomas would recognize only 19 (The whole is greater than the

part) and 20 (Man is an animal) as *per se nota*. Proposition 14 (No man is both married and unmarried) could be regarded as the principle of non-contradiction stated in a restricted subject matter. The fact that Plantinga regards "Man is an animal" as dubiously self-evident I think shows that he has a notion of self-evident at variance from what St. Thomas regards as *per se notum*. For St. Thomas, *per se nota* propositions may not be easy to know at all; Plantinga recognizes that St. Thomas indicates that some propositions are *per se nota quoad sapientes* and others *quoad omnes*. Since the *per se notum* status of a proposition depends on the predicate's being part of the definition of the subject, the lack of a precise knowledge of the definition of the subject would prevent a knower from knowing the proposition as *per se notum*. A precise knowledge of the definition of "man" might indeed be hard to come by and in any case would require an exhaustive search in order to guarantee its accuracy. St. Thomas is not setting out criteria for ease of knowing propositions, but rather criteria for scientific knowledge. He is simply doing what Aristotle did in the *Posterior Analytics*, chap. 2 (St. Thomas's commentary, Lect. 4-6) and chap. 4 (commentary, Lect. 9-11). Such knowledge of a subject is necessary if one is going to prove that a property belongs to a subject, e.g., that the property "having interior angles equal two right angles" belongs to "triangle." This kind of proof or demonstration he calls "demonstration by proper cause" or "*propter quid*." The argument or arguments for the existence of God are not of this type. They are rather arguments from effect to cause, i.e., they attempt to arrive at knowledge of the existence of a cause on which some observable effect depends. They do not demonstrate a property of a subject whose definition is previously known.

The first of the other two issues is whether "God exists" and other propositions about God that can be known by the human intellect unaided by faith can also be known by faith, i.e., by God's word. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book I, chap. 4, as well as in other places, St. Thomas points out that it was fitting for God to propose even these truths that can be naturally known. Why? Because most people are too dull, too busy, or too lazy to discover them by the use of their own intellects, and these natural



truths are too important to permit such wide-spread ignorance. Natural theology is not everyone's cup of tea, and even those who attempt to brew it often have a pretty thin beverage.

Mr. Wolterstorff has things backward when he alleges:

But the goal of natural theology for Aquinas was exactly the same as for Anselm: to transmute what one already believed into something known. . . . They were engaged in the transmutation project of altering belief (faith) into knowledge (p. 141).

I cannot speak of what St. Anselm precisely had in mind, but I think St. Thomas makes it clear that arguments made by unaided human reason can be given for certain propositions that God has also chosen to reveal. One intellect cannot have evident knowledge and not have evident knowledge of the same truth at one and the same time, and therefore does not have an act of science and an act of faith about the same object at the same time. However, that problem would arise for very few people, since very few people would actually have evident (demonstrated) knowledge of the truths of natural theology. If, by hypothesis, someone, e.g., presumably St. Thomas himself, did have demonstrated knowledge about a truth of natural theology, he would assent to it by reason of the evidence he had in his metaphysical reasoning. I shall comment later on the influence his divine faith might have on his assent.

I found Plantinga's quotations from the nineteenth century Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, on the whole an excellent presentation of what I judge to be the correct view of the relation between natural theology and divine revelation. I think it is also the view of St. Thomas. Plantinga twice quotes Bavinck: "Scripture . . . does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority. Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point" (pp. 64 and 71). St. Thomas would certainly agree with the Reformed thinkers that the

"rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form the natural theologian's stock in trade" (p. 72).

Bavinck, as well as Karl Barth, recognizes the utter transcendence of supernatural truth. By supernatural truth I mean truths about the Trinity, the Incarnation, Christ's redemption of man, the grace which Christ won for us and which He grants us to transform us, and our supernatural destiny of eternal happiness with Him. On this issue, no one has been more emphatic about the completely supernatural character of such knowledge than St. Thomas. The human intellect is in no way capable of reaching such knowledge by the exercise of human rationality. For such knowledge (I use the word generically, not to designate science; the Latin word would be *cognitio*) we are dependent on the word of God; our act of assenting to such propositions is an act of faith (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 3). The word of God alone is the motive for assent to such truths. Such assent is not dependent on a prior knowledge of natural theology.

There were perhaps some theologians in the past who thought of the ultimate assent of divine faith as a kind of smooth progress from natural theology through apologetic arguments for Christianity to the final assent of divine faith, but St. Thomas was clearly not one of them. Such a view proceeds as if the posterior step were always dependent upon the prior, and as if one were dealing with a homogeneous kind of rational procedure, with a homogeneous kind of evidence at each stage, resulting in a homogeneous series of conclusions. It seems to me that Bavinck, Barth, and Calvin himself find this conception just as unacceptable as St. Thomas does.

However, the alternative is not to deny the problem by slipping off into some new kinds of "basic propositions." It is a little hard to know just what Plantinga thinks are the attributes of a "basic proposition" when he suggests that "I had breakfast more than an hour ago" is such a proposition. If my own very fallible memory or that of my absent-minded colleagues is to be taken as producing "basic propositions," I am afraid "belief in God" is in



worse shape than it has ever been in. Would it not seem ludicrous or worse to the garden variety of academic today or any other day? Particularly since the objector would merely be content to say, "I just don't see that it is universally accepted."

Rather than deny that human reason has anything whatever to do with making an act of faith, perhaps it would be more productive to examine other acts of faith we make which have nothing to do with divine faith. Let us say I encounter an unusually pleasant Hoosier whose judgment I come to respect (partly, I must admit, because it often coincides with mine). He tells me that southern Indiana is a lovely country of rolling hills, green forests, quaint bridges, and streams and lakes crowded with bass. Now, my own experience is limited to the northern part of the state--an area hardly known for the most enticing terrain in North America. With regard to evidence about southern Indiana my intellect is at best agnostic--with perhaps even a little inclination to disbelieve in its attractiveness. However, my congenial Hoosier has in the past been reliable in his judgments: he recommended a good restaurant in Washington, he suggested a good lecturer for my college, he likes Jane Austen. I am inclined to regard his judgment as sound. It appears to me to be "a good thing" to accept his judgment and to assent to the proposition, "Southern Indiana is charming." What I have done is to make an assent without evidence of the object but with evidence that is outside the object--namely, the reliability of the speaker. Thus, "Southern Indiana is charming" becomes credible to me, because I have experience of the speaker's making good judgments at other times, and I now find it good for me to accept his judgment on this point. I make an act of human faith in the charm of southern Indiana; the motive for my assent is the word of my congenial friend. Am I certain of the charm of the area? Emphatically not. My friend is fallible. I too am fallible in judging the evidence of his past judgments. Is my acceptance of the charm of southern Indiana sufficient for me to make a detour to see for myself the next time I am driving south? Yes, I would regard it as a prudent decision to treat myself to the charms of the area even at the risk of possibly being disappointed. That is the sort of assent we make by human faith--an act of belief.

I might make somewhat the same judgment about the area by consulting a map and noting that it is near the Ohio River, and recalling that the terrain on either side of a river is frequently picturesque. Such a judgment would be no more certain than the judgment based on my friend's word. Both would be at best probable. In neither case would I have evidence of the object but in each case something outside the actual object would incline me to assent to the proposition, "Southern Indiana is charming."

I think it is something like this that better explains what John Calvin has in mind than an appeal to instinct. A child growing up in a household where God is taken seriously accepts God's presence and influence readily because of his reliance on his parents' word. Similarly, an adult marvels at the skies and readily regards the cause of such wonders as something transcending his experience. The first is an act of faith and, insofar as it depends on the parents' word, it is an act of human faith. The second is an act of probable reasoning, simple and informal though it be; but there is no necessary and evident connection made between the evidence perceived and the conclusion.

When one reads or hears the word of God, many factors can impress us to establish its credibility. I shall not review the various elements that have formed the apologist's "stock in trade" over the centuries. I suppose most often the hearer is impressed by the evident goodness of the one presenting the word of God. In recent years Malcolm Muggeridge has indicated that Mother Theresa has had this effect on him. But, whatever the hearer or viewer perceives, it seems good to him to accept the propositions being presented. Now, in making the assent of divine faith, the motive for the assent is the word of God; the human proposer is merely the instrument, albeit an important one. The crucial thing, however, is that the intellect is moved to assent not because of evidence of the object but because of something outside the object. Assent is judged to be "a good thing." The will is inclined toward that good and moves the intellect to make its assent. The reasonableness of that move is found in the judgment of credibility preceding the will's moving the intellect to assent. Notice that this



is "rationality," not in the sense that something is proven but more in the sense that it is prudent to embrace this good.

In the case of making the assent of divine faith, the "good thing" that attracts the prospective believer is the possibility of eternal happiness which God has promised to believers. It is worth noting that this good is the same as the good of theological hope; it is the good which is the believer's own happiness rather than the good of theological charity, which is God Himself, an object to which all possessors of grace can be united (*I Cor.* 13:13; *Heb.* 11:1; *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 4, a. 1c; a. 7c and ad 5).

Since supernatural happiness transcends merely human capability to achieve, and since knowledge of the possibility of that happiness transcends the power of the unaided human intellect, Catholic doctrine (and certainly St. Thomas's theology) insists that the impetus moving the will to bring the intellect to make the assent of divine faith has to be the grace of God--i.e., something supernatural and dependent on the will of God. However, that is another issue.

What I have said about the assent of divine faith applies whether one is dealing with a proposition which can be known only by divine revelation or with a proposition which can also be known by human reasoning. In neither case is the assent of divine faith dependent on reasoning about the object known. As I said earlier, one intellect cannot both be moved by evidence and not be moved by evidence of the same object at the same time. If the natural theologian assents to a proposition by the evidence presented to his intellect, and the same person also is prepared to assent to whatever is revealed by God's word, that person does not lose the merit of the act of divine faith, even though he assents because of evidence of the object (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 10).

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