

What Can Thomas Know

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In this essay I will explore questions concerning the way Thomas believes that we may know things. I will examine the “light of the intellect” and the “light of faith” in particular. I hope to establish what they are, what their objects are, how they work, where they come from, how they interreact with each other, to what extent are they limited, and their relationship to each other.

Ultimately, I wish to answer the questions: What can Thomas know, and by what means? How does God play a role in what Thomas can know, and how does Thomas himself play a role in determining what he can know? How does the influence of God or Thomas change with the object of knowledge? What is the difference between the different kinds of knowledge?

Thomas begins his *Summa Theologica* with an exploration of the study of the sacred doctrine. The second article of the first question is an argument for theology being a science. This forces us into the questions of what theology is and what science is.

We must start with the question of science, its origins and extent. Thomas tells us that science is of two kinds.

“...sciendum est quod duplex est scientiarum genus. Quaedam enim sunt, quae procedunt ex principiis notis lumine naturali intellectus, sicut arithmetica, geometria, et huiusmodi. Quaedam vero sunt, quae procedunt ex principiis

notis lumine superioris scientiae, sicut perspectiva procedit ex principiis notificatis per geometriam..."¹

To understand this, it is helpful to look at the *Elements*. The definitions, postulates and common notions from Euclid's *Elements* could be considered the closest thing to the platonic ideal of first principles recognized through the light of the intellect on the Johnny program. There are seemingly self-evident truths, such as "Τὰ τῶ ἀύτῶ ἴσα καὶ ἀλλήλοις ἐστὶν ἴσα."² In the *Elements* we see how from a large group of these first principles a series of propositions follow by logical necessity, as if the proofs were implicit in the first principles. We also see their logical necessity, as the Philosopher says "ὅλως μὲν γὰρ ἀπάντων ἀδύνατον ἀπόδειξιν εἶναι· εἰς ἄπειρον γὰρ ἂν βαδίζοι, ὥστε μηδ' οὔτως εἶναι ἀπόδειξι..."³ If we do not start off with first principles taken for granted, there will be nothing upon which to base any proof.

Thomas' understanding of science based on first principles recognized through the natural "light of the intellect," is most clearly demonstrated in his proofs that some god exists. In his second proof, he says all things have an efficient cause, nothing is its own efficient cause and "...si procedatur in infinitum in causis efficientibus, non erit prima causa

¹ From the *I say that* of article 2, question 1, the first part, Thomas's *Summa Theologica*.

I translate this as "...science is of two types. Some emerge from first principles recognized through the natural light of the intellect, e.g. arithmetic, geometry and others of the same kind. Other emerge from first principles recognized through the light of a previous science, like perspective, which emerges from first principles recognized through geometry."

² The first common notion from book 1 of Euclid's *Elements*.

I translate this as "Things that are both equal to another thing, are equal."

³ From Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book IV, 1006a.

I translate this as "It is impossible for everything to be demonstrated, as one would have to demonstrate *ad infinitum*, so, therefore nothing would to be demonstrated."

efficiens, et sic non erit nec effectus ultimus, nec causae efficientes mediae..."⁴ This is the line of reasoning he uses to determine that there must be a first cause, a god. We see several principles used as necessary preambles to the conclusion that a god exists. Some of the most obvious of which, everything has a cause, and nothing is its own cause, directly follow from observation of the world. This is why Thomas uses the metaphor of light to describe the "natural light of the intellect" and the "light of faith" because the things we know through science, are based on directly observable principles. Thomas himself says "*omnis scientia habetur per aliqua principia per se nota, et per consequens visa. Et ideo oportet quaecumque sunt scita aliquo modo esse visa.*"⁵ This is why the Philosopher opens his *Metaphysics* by saying "*Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναί ὀρέγονται φύσει. σημεῖον δ' ἡ τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἀγάπησις*"⁶

It is necessary to note that the "light of the intellect" is acting in another way, of which Thomas might not have been very cognizant. The very foundations of logic to get to the conclusion from the principles, seem to me to be an act of the "light of the intellect."

However, we do see some departure from the observable in the claim that if there is an infinite regress of causes, there will be no final effect. Because Thomas has never

⁴ From the *I answer that*, article 3, question 2, the first part, Thomas' *Summa Theologica*.

I translate this as "... if there is an infinite regress of efficient cause, then there will be no first cause, and therefore, neither will there be ultimate effects, nor intermediate effects..."

⁵ From article 5, question 1, the second part of the second part, Thomas' *Summa Theologica*.

I translate this as "All science is maintained by self-evident, thus seen principles; therefore, all objects of science must in some way be seen."

⁶ From 980 a 22 of the Philosopher's *Metaphysics*.

I translate this as "By nature, all people yearn to know. The love of senses is indicative of this."

observed the infinite, any claim he makes about the infinite must be known purely through the “light of the intellect” and not his experience.

The question of infinite regress creates a difficulty in my attempt to understand Thomas’ cosmivision. I cannot understand the problem with infinite regress through observation, because I have never observed infinity. I was tempted to try to understand the absurdity of infinite regression as a first principle, but Thomas cites the Philosopher as saying “*nullus potest cogitare oppositum eius quod est per se notum*”⁷ However, in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius sets forth a well-conceived cosmivision, in which he holds “*nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam*.”⁸ and “*...natura neque ad nilum interemat res*.”⁹ This means that Lucretius’ cosmivision is dependent on an infinite regress of causes, which because he can think, means the opposite cannot be a first principle.

I find myself in the difficult position of seeing that Thomas holds a certain position, an infinite regression of efficient causes is absurd, and knowing that it cannot be a first principle because someone, i.e. Lucretius, can think the opposite, and that it cannot be based off of observation because Thomas has not observed the infinite.

I had the urge to simply write Thomas’ cosmivision off as incoherent at a granular level. However, this did Thomas and his “light of the intellect” insufficient justice. The “light of the intellect” seems to shine more readily, clearly, and consistently on certain objects

⁷ Thomas cites the quote in the *On The Contrary*, first article, second question. He says it is from *Metaphysics*, IV, 6, but I was unable to find the original quote.

I translate this as “Nobody can think the opposite of that which is self-evident.”

⁸ Line 150 from Book I of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*.

I translate this as “No matter is divinely begot from nothing.”

⁹ From line 216 of book I of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. I translate this as “...nature does not abolish matter to oblivion.”

than others. I think Plato's Socrates and Lucretius both work with the "light of the intellect" when crafting their cosmovisions.

Examining Lucretius, he sticks out in his attempt to create a coherent account of the world only using the "light of the intellect." Lucretius is only led by intellectual principles. Whereas, Thomas has the "light of faith," Lucretius has only that which physically exists, with which to work in crafting his cosmovision. The resulting worldview is very earthly. The natures of taste and magnets seem to hold as much importance for Lucretius as that of the gods, and morality is almost without mention.

Aristotle uses the "light of intellect" to create his understanding, but unlike Lucretius, he does not stick entirely to the physical. We see this "light of the intellect" mixed with something else when he speaks of forms and ethics as existent things. We see Aristotle go beyond the realm of the pure "light of the intellect" when in his *Physics* he holds the same principle against infinite regression, as Thomas.¹⁰

In the process of Plato's Socrates' recollection, the mixing of the "light of the intellect" and something else is even clearer. This is particularly demonstrated in Plato's *Meno*. After leading Meno's slave through the doubling of a square Socrates asks "Τί σοι δοκεῖ, ὦ Μένων; ἔστιν ἤντινα δόξαν οὐχ αὐτοῦ οὕτως ἀπεκρίνατο;"¹¹ This is of course, much like the questions Socrates asked the slave was meant to illicit a specific answer, no. Socrates acts as an aid to the slave's "light of intellect."

¹⁰ Aristotle's *Physics*, a26

¹¹ From B 85 of Plato's *Meno*.

I translate this as " So, Meno, does it seem to you that there's any judgment he made not out of his own belief?"

We see this process of Socrates' aid combined with the "light of the intellect" play out with mathematical objects, which seem to lend themselves well to the "light of the intellect." However, the deeper question explored in the dialog is that of how virtue comes to be known. The conclusion Socrates extends is that virtue can only be known by way of supernatural act. He says "ἀρετὴ ἂν εἴη οὔτε φύσει οὔτε διδακτόν, ἀλλὰ θεία μοίρα παραγιγνομένη ἄνευ νοῦ,"¹² This is similar to how Socrates claims his daemon aids him in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* "μοι μαντικὴ ἢ τοῦ δαιμονίου ἐν μὲν τῷ πρόσθεν χρόνῳ παντὶ πάνυ πυκνὴ ἀεὶ ἦν καὶ πάνυ ἐπὶ μικροῖς ἐναντιούμενη."¹³

In the *Meno*, they compare the process by which virtue is divinely distributed to right opinion. I think this is how we can begin to understand this mixing of the "light of intellect" and something else, in the context of Thomas. The belief that an infinite regression of efficient causes is inherently absurd is not purely a stance reached through the "light of the intellect," but a matter of opinion. I say this because he cannot observe the infinite, so there can be no principle up which this axiom is based, and the objects of science must be seen.

Upon this conclusion, I have a difficulty. Lucretius and Thomas contend opposite positions on the same issue, so how does one determine which one is right? Ideally, we could simply trace back the steps each took, to a point where it is clear that they are working with first principles found through the "light of the intellect." However, as the

¹² From Plato's *Meno*, section 100 A.

I translate this as "Virtue is neither by nature nor teaching but is divinely distributed without understanding."

¹³ From 40 A of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*.

I translate this as "My prophetic daemon, before would always come to oppose me even on small things."

claims they make have to with the infinite, I do not think there is any step further back to take, because the infinite is unobservable.

Now arises the question of what does qualify as a first principle recognized purely through the “light of the intellect” and not a matter of opinion. In his contention that nobody can think the opposite of a first principle, Thomas sets a very high bar, one I am not sure anything can meet. As a being who has experienced dreams, illusions and misrememberings, it seems to me, that at the least a shadow of opinion would creep into even my most basic empirical beliefs. I do not think I can be one hundred percent certain I ate a bagel this morning, if I have any memories of ever incorrectly remembering something.

We are left with only the most basic of first principles. I think the syllogism is a good representative of this kind of first principle. While one could try to question the validity of something so seemingly self-evident as the syllogism with a line of reasoning akin to “if we lived in a universe so contrary to our perception of it, that syllogisms did not work, our perception would be so unreliable, that we would not be able to perceive that our perception was wrong;” this line of reasoning is detached from anything anyone on the program has said and is radical enough I think Thomas could disavow it as inconsistent with what the “light of faith” has revealed to him.

At first glance I was unsure about the distinction between opinion and faith. They both deal with the unseen, reveal different principles according to different people and to me seem like an unsteady basis for a logical conception of anything. It seemed like the only distinction was that faith was about the divine. In this way, faith seemed like a subsection

of opinion. However, Thomas speaks of a specific faith, one that is not determined by what it reveals, but rather, the source of that revelation. Thomas's faith "*...assentit alicui nisi quia est a Deo revelatum*"¹⁴

After accepting the divine origin of faith in Thomas' cosmivision, the role it plays in his cosmivision becomes clear. It is easy to understand his conclusion that "*...fidei non potest subesse aliquod falsum.*"¹⁵ because God would not reveal a falsehood to be true. It is here that the distinction between opinion and faith lays. "*Possibile est enim hominem fidelem ex coniectura humana falsum aliquid aestimare. Sed quod ex fide falsum aestimet, hoc est impossibile.*"¹⁶ Essentially that which one has faith in, is true by the definition of faith. If it is discovered that something which someone had previously thought that they had faith in, was false, then, by Thomas' definition of faith, they never had faith in that thing, but held it as an opinion.

From an intellectual standpoint Thomas' definition of faith can seem like a cop-out. It is reminiscent of the fourth proof of Euclid's *Elements* where he breaks the structure of his logical system to make a proof. It is not falsifiable in any reliable way. From a practical standpoint, the only way one could distinguish between an opinion and faith would be if they found out that a certain article of opinion/faith was false, they would then know it had to be opinion. However, with many articles of faith, the only way to verify or refute it, is

¹⁴ From the *I Answer That*, article 1, question 1, second part of the second part of the Thomas' *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as "... does not accord with anything, except that which is revealed by God."

¹⁵ From the *I answer that*, article 3, question 1, the second part of the second part, Thomas' *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as "...No falsehood can fall under faith."

¹⁶ From the *reply to Objection 3*, article 3, question 1, second part of the second part of Thomas' *St.* I translate this as "For it is possible for a person of faith to hold a false belief through human interpretation (this word can also be translated 'divination'), but it is impossible to hold a false belief through faith."

though faith and faith alone. Even if someone were to prove an article of faith, there would be no way of knowing that it was not an opinion.

However, it is similar to a definition of “know” where if someone had thought they knew something that turned out to be false, they would have never known it at all. It is obvious that faith would not lend itself to intellectual understanding, just as an account of why syllogisms work, beyond the fact that they are seen to work, would not lend itself to the intellect very well.

There do seem to be somethings which are known, not through the intellect, but through a kind of divine revelation outside of the faith that is superadded onto the believers. The natural law is a prime example

“Unde et in ipsa participatur ratio aeterna, per quam habet naturalem inclinationem ad debitum actum et finem. Et talis participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura lex naturalis dicitur... ..quasi lumen rationis naturalis, quo discernimus quid sit bonum et malum, quod pertinet ad naturalem legem, nihil aliud sit quam impressio divini luminis in nobis.”¹⁷

At this point it is important that we be careful with our words. An uncareful reading could lead someone to think that Thomas is saying that we understand the law through principles recognized by the “light of the intellect.” However, “intellect” and “reason” are not the same, and so the “light of the intellect” upon which the first principles of science are based is not the same as the “light of reason” through which we differentiate good and bad.

¹⁷ From the *I say that*, article 2, question 91, first part of the second part of Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as “Whence it shares in the eternal reason, in such a way [the rational creature] has an inclination to its obliged acts and end. And such participation in the eternal law by the rational creature is called the natural law... As such the natural light of reason, through which we differentiate what is good and bad, which pertains to the natural law, is nothing but an impression of a divine light within us.”

What exactly the light of reason is, I cannot say for sure. This “light of a divine impression within us” does not seem to be wholly natural to humanity, like the “light of the intellect” does, nor does it seem wholly superadded to humankind, like the “light of faith. Of course, the ability to differentiate between good and bad was not something that humanity was created with. It arose and spread through all of humanity with the ancestral sin.

While, it is necessary to note, that the “light of reason,” does enable us to differentiate between good and bad, I am not comfortable saying that this is its only function. There are many things people know, which are clearly the object of neither the “light of faith” nor the “light of the intellect” e.g. any experience of a quality, such as a rock being smooth; or any subjective judgment.

At this point it can be clearly argued why faith is necessary for a coherent cosmovision or basic philosophy. One simply cannot understand the world very well purely through the seen. People like the Philosopher and Lucretius will unavoidably have some disagreement where the only difference is a matter of opinion. We live in a world which we cannot understand without supernatural intervention. Without faith, the other lights of knowledge have no foundation on which to construct anything with any true stability.

I do not know if Thomas would accept my argument that all but the most basic of first principles are marred by the stain of opinion; but I am confident he would agree that a combination of all the lights of knowledge are necessary. Nowhere is this more evident than the law. As Thomas says

“...[legem] ita etiam ex praeceptis legis naturalis [inventae], quasi ex quibusdam principiis communibus et indemonstrabilibus, necesse est quod ratio humana procedat ad aliqua magis particulariter disponenda. Et istae particulares dispositiones adinventae secundum rationem humanam, dicuntur leges humanae...”¹⁸

The lights of reason and intellect build on each other from the recognition of the most basic principles of the natural law and first logical principles to create human law. These natural lights of understanding allow us to construct complex systems that forbid some evil and promote the common the good of our community.

We proceed from the execution of these natural lights of understanding to the need for a supernatural light of understanding. Because the natural lights only reveal the seen, they are ill-equipped to allow us to reach our proper end. As Thomas says *“Ludicium autem hominis esse non potest de interioribus motibus, qui latent, sed solum de exterioribus actibus, qui apparent.”*¹⁹ In this way, we say how the “light of faith” and the divine law are not so much an addition to the “light of the intellect” and human law, but a completion of them. Because on their own they are insufficient to handle their charges.

Now that we can see how the “light of the intellect” and the “light of faith” fit into each other, we can examine another aspect of the light of faith, that is, faith as an act of choice.

“...intellectus assentit alicui non quia sufficienter moveatur ab obiecto proprio, sed per quandam electionem voluntarie declinans in unam partem magis quam

¹⁸ From the *I answer that*, article 3, question 91, first part of the second part, Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as “[the law] is [found] from precepts of natural law, common and indemonstrable principles, which need to be progressed to certain dispositions by human reason. And these particular dispositions reached according to human reason, are called human law.”

¹⁹ From the *I answer that*, article 4, question 91, first part of the second part, Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as “However, people’s judgment is not qualified for internal movements, which are hidden, but rather, only exterior acts which appear.”

*in aliam. Et si quidem hoc fit cum dubitatione et formidine alterius partis, erit opinio, si autem fit cum certitudine absque tali formidine, erit fides.*²⁰

This is admittedly a difficult passage for me to interpret. As someone who Thomas would not consider to have faith, I cannot comment from personal experience on the voluntary nature of his faith. I do have to wonder to what extent Thomas thought one could simply choose to have faith. Obviously, it would have to be more complex than accepting Christ on a whim and then being filled with divine revelation.

However, Thomas has said enough to explain why one would choose faith, even if it could not be chosen on a whim, even if choosing faith would amount to grueling task beyond the edge of natural human ability. Just as the divine law fulfills the end of human law far more perfectly than human law alone could hope to, a life lived with faith would fulfill the end of the intellect, the soul, more perfectly than intellect alone.

We have examined instances where the superadded “light of faith” completes the natural “light of the intellect.” However, this is not the complete story of how the lights of understanding interreact with each other in Thomas’ conception of knowledge. Throughout the *Summa Theologica* Thomas starts with principles found through the “light of faith” and uses the “light of the intellect” to expand upon them. To give just one example, in article 3, question 50 of the first part, Thomas starts with principles of faith and applies the “light of the intellect” upon them to conclude that there are many angels. This means that not only is

²⁰ From the *I Answer That*, article 4, question 1, second part of the second part of Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as “The intellect is not in accord with anything because it is moved by its own object, but by electing to turn to one part more than another. And if this is done with doubt or fear of another part, it will be opinion, if however, it is done with certainty and without fear, it will be faith.”

the “light of the intellect” incomplete without the “light of faith,” but the “light of faith” is likewise incomplete without the “light of the intellect.”

Now that we see the interdependence of the lights of understanding on each other, we are in a place to tackle the question: to what extent can each of the lights take us? Thomas seems to believe he can get far with the “light of the intellect” alone. Not only does he believe he can prove the existence of a god with the “light of the intellect,” but he also believes that with the light of the intellect alone he can make statements pertaining to the nature of the universe and human life based on his proofs. He has a proof that “...*quod Deo conveniens est homines praedestinare*”²¹ This seems to follow as a logical conclusion from his proof of there being a god because “*Ea autem quae non habent cognitionem, non tendunt in finem nisi directa ab aliquo cognoscente et intelligente... Ergo est aliquid intelligens, a quo omnes res naturales ordinantur ad finem...*”²²

However, he is restricted in what he can say about God with the “light of the intellect.” His proofs for there being some god rely on *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. Furthermore, when he does make statements about God, beyond that God exists, he only makes negative statements, e.g. when he proves that God is not finite.²³

The inability to use the “light of the intellect” to make positive statements about God, and to see God, seems to be its only limit in understanding the universe. But, without

²¹ From the *I Answer That*, article 1, question 24, first part, Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as “...it suits God to predestine people.”

²² From the *I Answer That*, article 3, question 2, first part, Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. I translate this as “Now, that which does not have thought does not tend towards an end unless directed by something with thought and intelligence... Therefore, there is some intelligent being which directs all natural things to an end...”

²³ See article 1 of question 7 of the first part of Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*.

God we can neither reach our proper end nor make sense of the universe. The “light of faith,” as the act of divine revelation, does not seem to have any limit, except so far as it is a product of God’s will, and cannot go against it.

Having examined the relationship and limits of the lights of understanding, we can now address the differences between the “light of the intellect” and the “light of faith. First, is the fact that the “light of the intellect” is naturally occurring in people, whereas the “light of faith” is superadded onto us. Second, the objects revealed by each light are different. Third, all people partake in the “light of the intellect,” but not all in the “light of faith.”

The difference between “natural” and “supernatural” is an interesting one in Thomas’ cosmivision. To say that any act of God would be a “supernatural” act, would mean that all acts of nature are supernatural, as God is the one that directs all natural objects to their end. I suspect the distinction is born purely from a human perspective. “Supernatural” things, like faith and grace, we can strive, hope and pray for, but the “light of our intellect” is something with which are created and will not see change.

Outside of these few differences, I am not convinced that the “light of the intellect” and the “light of faith” are different at all. They both come from God, reveal otherwise ineffable truths, and I imagine, work in the same manner within the intellect. This could lead someone to think that they are fundamentally the same thing, and thus faith is a kind of knowledge. However, if we are thinking of this from the perspective of “knowledge” is what we know based on our own intellectual power, and is objectively demonstrated to others with the same intellectual power; and faith is that which we know based on the power of God, I think it might be more helpful to think of knowledge being a kind of faith.

The “light of the intellect,” that is the path to science, is a divine thing, just as the “light of faith,” that is the path to faith, is also a divine thing. Humans may direct their intellect to understand an object and not another, just as they can elect to have faith, but ultimately the power through which they reach either faith or knowledge belongs to God.

The lights of understanding are the basis through which all first principles of any science are founded. They are inherently good and come from and work by the power of God. They are interdependent and intertwined, and have the same function, but different objects and can come to all people. They are each necessary to live a life directed towards its proper end.

The answer to the question “what can Thomas know?” depends on through which light Thomas strives to know. Through the “light of intellect” Thomas can know the things of the body and the earth. Through the “light of faith” he can know the unseen truths of the universe and its creator. Through them both together he can know the science of the sacred doctrine. Through them both we can understand the lights of understanding themselves.