

Thomas Aquinas and the Practice of Disputation

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Abstract

In a somewhat forgotten passage (*Quodlibetum* IV, q. 9, a. 3), Thomas Aquinas addresses the problem of whether theologians should determine theological questions simply by appealing to theological authorities or by advancing arguments by reason. Here I mean to comment on the wisdom of his solution, and the moral we could draw to improve our argumentative practices. As a side effect, I hope to contribute to the determination of the *method* of Thomas Aquinas.

In the midst of the controversies surrounding the adoption of Aristotelianism in the mid-13th Century at the University of Paris, we find a rather interesting piece of advice coming from one of the most controversial theologians at the time. In this paper, I'll deliver a translation of this passage, making some comments on it, to get to my final point, which is the lesson, I dare to say, we *should* draw from this rather old piece of scholarship.

However, for a better understanding of what I mean to say here, I shall remind you of this somewhat neglected fact regarding the source of this piece of advice: Thomas Aquinas regarded himself chiefly as a *theologian*, and his main works are of a *theological* nature.¹ Bearing this fact in mind, it should not surprise us that this particular passage from Aquinas's works deals with a theological problem; and from this very fact, indeed, I shall draw some particular conclusions.

1 *Quodlibetum* IV, 9, 3

The passage I'd like to comment on today is rather short, so I will just quote it here to make my comments afterwards.

Whether a teacher determining the answer to theological questions should use reason rather than authority.

It seems that a teacher determining theological questions should use authorities rather than reasons.

For, in any science, questions are best determined through the first

¹ See Thomas D'Andrea, "Towards an Understanding of Aquinas' Self Understanding of his Work", *Topicos* 4, no. 7 (1994), for a longer defense of this claim.

principles of that science. But the first principles of theological science are the articles of faith, which become known to us through authorities. Therefore, theological questions most of all should be determined by means of authorities.

On the other hand, Titus 1.9 says, that he may be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to confute those who contradict it. But gainsayers are better confuted by reasons than by authorities. Therefore, it is necessary to determine questions by reasons rather than by authorities.

I answer that any act should be carried out as befits its end. But disputation can be ordered toward a twofold end. (1) Some disputations are directed toward removing doubt whether something is so; and in a theological disputation of that sort one should use especially the authorities one's fellow disputants accept. If one disputes with Jews, one must bring in authorities from the Old Testament; if with Manicheans (who reject the Old Testament), one must use only authorities from the New Testament; if with schismatics who accept the Old and New Testaments but not the teaching of our Fathers—this is the case with the Greeks—, then one must dispute using authorities from the Old and the New Testament and from those Doctors they accept. But if disputants accept no authority, one must have recourse to natural reasons for the purpose of refuting them. (2) Other disputations are pedagogical disputations in schools, meant not for removing error but for instructing their hearers so that they might be led to understand the truth; then, those investigating the root of truth and making known how what's said is true must rely on reasons; otherwise, if a teacher determines a question with bare authorities, the hearer will indeed be assured that something is so, but he will acquire no science or understanding and will go away with an empty head.²

2 Aquinas on argument and inquiry

I'd like to emphasize three points in Aquinas' discussion of this problem.

First of all, it is noteworthy that Aquinas assumes here that *science* is attainable. In fact, from what we can collect from his many pronouncements on this subject, he goes so far as to claim, like many of his contemporaries, that Theology itself is a science.³ In doing so, however, it is obvious that he seems to assume some version of the description of science attributed to Aristotle in the mid-13th century.

Perhaps this may not be the proper place to discuss the details of his account, but

² Latin text from the Leonine Edition: Thomas de Aquino, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales. Opera Omnia* 25-1 (Paris et Roma: Du Cerf et Comissio Leonina, 1996), 339-40; English translation by Thérèse Bonin, Duquesne University. <http://www.home.duq.edu/~bonin/qg493.html>

³ See a defense of this claim in *S.Th.* I, 1, *passim*, and parallel passages. Aquinas discusses the requirements for scientific knowledge in his *Expositio* on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. My following remarks apply to his commentary.

according to the most recent scholarship, Aristotle seems to have believed that we have scientific knowledge whenever we can give an *account* of some fact, either by pointing to the causal power bringing it into existence, or by providing some piece of evidence pointing to the acknowledgment of its existence. In the latter case we might speak of a *proof* of the fact, while in the former we might talk about an *explanation* instead.⁴ The paradigmatic form of an explanation or proof is, in Aristotle's terms, an *apodeixis*, a *sylogism* or *argument* pointing to the cause or the evidence supporting the existence of the fact involved in our discourse. The propositions containing the terms necessary to build the proof or explanation are its *first principles*. The goal of an inquiry is to find these propositions for a given fact, and to articulate them in the proofs or explanations necessary to account for them.⁵

Following a similar line of argument, Aquinas seemed to claim that we may actually achieve some properly scientific knowledge, in the forms of proofs or explanations, of facts; this assumption seems to rule out that the work of a theologian is exclusively *hermeneutical*. A theologian is not interested simply in providing "interpretations" of "canonical texts", but to *discover the truth* of the matter. The remainder of this question deals precisely with the way the interpretation of canonical texts contributes to the "discovery of the truth", as we shall see shortly.

Indeed, the second point is that, according to the question's *sed contra*, and to Aquinas's *responsio*, it seems that it is necessary to appeal to reasons, *even in theological matters*. In the *responsio* Aquinas clearly draws a line between two sorts of theological problems or discussions: discussions about *matters of fact* ("whether something is so"), and discussions about *explanations* (or "pedagogical"). In my opinion, we might see here a mirror of Aristotle's distinction between *apodeixis quia* and *propter quid*.⁶ Here I find what seems to me the most important contribution of this passage: Aquinas seems to say that appeals to authority may work to provide *proofs* for *facts*, but sometimes

⁴ For the difference between the account of the *proof* and the account of the *explanation* see *An. Post.* B13.78a22-79a16; the corresponding *Commentary* in Aquinas's *Opera* is *In II Posteriorum*, lect. 23-24. In my reading, *quia* (ὅτι) corresponds to a *proof* of a previously unknown fact and *propter quid* (διότι) is translated as the *explanation* of a fact, perhaps previously known.

⁵ There are holy wars and rivers of ink running in the discussion of Aristotle's true doctrine on science. Although I deem my approach as quite feasible, I acknowledge that its details may seem somewhat blurry in this account; but this is not the occasion to discuss it in length. For the basic tenets of the modern approach to Aristotle's theory of science, see the discussion on the meaning of *episteme* in Miles F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge", Berti, Enrico ed., *Aristotle on Science. The Posterior Analytics* (Padova: Antenore, 1975), the discussion on the principles of science in Jaakko Hintikka, "On the Ingredients of an Aristotelian Science", *Nous* 6 (1972), and the emphatic defense of Aristotle's recourse to causal powers in Max Hocutt, "Aristotle's Four Because", *Philosophy* 49 (1974). I partly adopt their terminology in this rather sketchy account.

⁶ See *APt* A13.78a22-79a16.

students (*discipuli*) ask for *explanations* of these facts; and in those cases, one must seek *reasons* to account for the facts, already known by *authority*. In either case it is necessary to provide some sort of argument, but the sort of argument required is completely different in each type of discussion. So theologians should not content themselves by appeals to authority in theological matters, if what they are asked for are *explanations*...

The third and last point I want to make is that, in his answer to this question, Aquinas shows exactly how to use appeals to authority and to reason in trying to solve theological problems. If, indeed, appeals to authority help to determine *that* something is the case, Aquinas is very aware that these appeals only work if the authority is accepted by the audience: otherwise, appeals to authority might commit *petitio principii*: appeals to authority stop working by the failure of the audience to recognize their status. This seems to mean that even the determination of the fact is relative to the audience, and therefore, the solution of theological problems is highly contextual.

So, if my reading is right, Aquinas acknowledges that appeals to authority in theology would, in the best case scenario, only work to settle down the question whether something is the case, the statement of a fact: they may show *that* something is the case without telling us *why*; appeals to authority settle down questions of fact depending on the consent of the audience; and most of the discussion in theological schools is aimed precisely to find the *explanation* of those things already accepted on authority.

3 The method of Thomas Aquinas

Here I'd like to make some personal contribution: I'd like to say that in the solution of this question Aquinas not only pointed to the right answer, but also that he endorsed some elements from the theory and practice of a method (or "methods", if you like) very close to those discovered by the most recent Aristotelian scholarship, and indeed, he may predate some very recent developments and applications in argumentation theory.⁷ However, I conjecture that Aquinas' own practice seems to display a slight bias in one particular direction.

⁷ For the first part of this latter claim, I appeal to G. E. L. Owen's "Τιθέναι τὰ φαινόμενα", *Aristote et Les Problèmes de la Méthode* (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1961), who introduced the whole discussion on the role of dialectic in Aristotle's *Physics*, and Jonathan Barnes, "Aristotle and the Methods of Ethics", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 34 (1980), and T. H. Irwin, "Aristotle's Discovery of Metaphysics", *Review of Metaphysics* 31 (1977), extended this discussion for the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Metaphysics*, respectively. For detailed discussions on begging the question, appeals to authority, and fallacious arguments in general, see Douglas N. Walton, "Begging the Question as a Pragmatic Fallacy", *Synthese* 100 (1994), and Douglas N. Walton, *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995).

According to some recent scholarship, Aquinas did not have to surrender his claim for a “scientific” theology even if in some main theological arguments there is extensive use of appeals to authority. Indeed, he may be perfectly right in endorsing such a strong epistemic status for theology, as theology might not be that different from, say, physics, ethics, or even metaphysics. Owen, Barnes, and Irwin have led a school of interpretation of Aristotle emphasizing that, according to Aristotle’s actual theory and practice, appeals to authority are inherent to scientific research. Indeed, the very first thing Aristotle does when faced with a problem, is to review the opinions of “the wise”, for often these opinions are the guidelines to find the right answer. If this is true of the *Physics*, the *Ethics*, and the *Metaphysics*, I see no reason to deny the pertinence of appeal to expert opinion as a starting point for theological or philosophical inquiry. It seems to me that the only qualification implied in Aquinas’ *responsio* is that, while in most inquiries proofs and explanations are found by *induction*, some form of qualified experience,⁸ in theological matters the basic propositions are taken on faith, i.e. on authority. Otherwise, theology seems to be a science in any way like any other, at least according to Aristotle.

I acknowledge that the determination of this authority in theological matters is still subject of much debate even among contemporary theologians; however, for my current purposes it is enough to show that, from Aquinas’ point of view, authoritative texts provide the starting points necessary to “determine” the truth related to some particular theological conclusion. I like Aquinas’ answer to this question for pointing out that the right approach does not imply an exclusive choice between appeals to authority and appeals to other sorts of argument; instead, he acknowledges that appeals to authority may be the *first* word in theological research, although they may not be the *last* one.

Appealing to authority, however, is not a trivial task. Different audiences accept different authorities, and it is the work of the theologian to find the right kind of authority for every single audience, or to find the right reasons to make an audience accept a determinate kind of authority. Modern tradition following Descartes and Locke despise appeals to authority as “unscientific”: indeed, they seem to have developed the tendency to regard appeals to authority as inherently fallacious. Modern scholarship in argumentation theory, however, acknowledges that there is nothing inherently fallacious in appeals to expert opinion; fallacious appeals to authority occur, basically, in two cases: first, whenever the authority is not recognized by the audience—as

⁸ If, indeed, Aquinas follows Aristotle’s *dicta* in *APt* B19.99b15–100b17, and *Mf* A1.980a21–982a3, among other places.

Aquinas suggests—, or second, whenever the authority does not deliver the kind of argument asked for: v. gr., if the authority simply states a fact, and the questioner demands an *explanation*—as Aquinas explicitly states.

So, to outline an account of Aquinas' method in theology, it seems to me that, for the most part, Aquinas plays the game explained by Aristotle in the *Physics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Topics*. Indeed, pretty much any *quaestio disputata* shows this underlying pattern: Aquinas is always trying to find the middle course in the proofs and explanations provided by his predecessors, the "opinion of the wise" in Aristotelian terms, and almost always he finds some way to "save the appearances". Following Aristotle's thread, Aquinas finds that appealing to authorities might be enough to make theology a *science* but in a qualified sense, as authorities may only work as a proof of the fact (*quia*) of some theological issue. Authoritative texts give only one particular sort of *apodeixis*, i.e., *quia* proofs, *proofs of facts*. However, the determination of the *truth* of a theological claim based on *authority* is not the end of the story. If we are to find some *understanding* (*scientia demonstrativa*, or *propter quid*) of theological issues, or even of the *solutions* discovered by the authorities, it is necessary to go somewhat beyond the authorities themselves, as to find the *cause* of the fact; and in trying to do this, *fides* is already seeking *intellectus*.

However, the very format of Aquinas' main works (the *Summa*, the *Disputatae*, the *Quodlibetales*) makes me think that the underlying structure supporting all his efforts are somewhat biased precisely to determine *the facts*, among the different theological authorities at the schools, instead of a full *understanding* of those facts. I have no time to develop this conjecture, but it seems appropriate to me to point to this apparent inconsistency between Aquinas' answer and his own practice.

On a final note, it is interesting to point out that Aquinas applies both kinds of arguments in his solution: on the one hand, Aquinas appeals to the authority of the *Letter to Titus* to reply to those claiming that the use of authorities is determining, for the authority of Paul is used to suggest that authority alone must be supplemented by reasons in understanding the facts already believed; and to those claiming that reasons must prevail over authority, Aquinas replies by giving reasons to say that the statement of the facts may only be achieved by appealing to the authorities recognized by those we are discussing with. An effective reply to both sides of the dilemma.

4 Why should we care

Aquinas may believe that there are two sorts of arguments related to the solution of

theological disputes, and one of them may include appeals to authority; but why should we, philosophers, care about his opinion on this matter?

I think there are three lessons we could learn from Aquinas' views.

First of all, some of us, especially we, medieval and classical scholars, may be tempted to rely heavily—if not exclusively—on historical, philological, or hermeneutical analysis, leaving aside, perhaps unwillingly, the question of *truth*. I appeal to Aquinas to remind us that all our scholarship, in the end, may actually help us to determine *only* the facts; perhaps only some *particular* facts: whether Aquinas endorsed a full-blooded argumentation theory, or the true Aristotelian theory of science, for instance. Whether this argumentation theory, or that theory of science, are right, is quite another issue, and it is our job, *qua* philosophers, not *qua* classical or medieval scholars, to give an account for that.

Secondly, Aquinas reminds us that even if our goal is truth, our argumentative practices are context-dependent. We might be convinced that some particular expert or authority—our favourite philosopher, for instance—is right, yet that does not qualify us to use it in any argumentative dialogue. What counts, if one should appeal to expert opinion, or “authorities”, is that the audience accepts those experts or authorities. Otherwise, to our dismay, we might be committing a fairly crude fallacy, even if our conclusion is right. In any event, if the question is whether some authority must be accepted, we should start a new argumentative cycle.

Finally, Aquinas reminds us that in public argumentation it is always necessary to take the beliefs of the audience into account, if we want our argumentation to be effective. Often well-meaning and even well-informed proponents fail to follow this little piece of advice, and thus they commit gross fallacies by begging the question. Having the audience in mind is a classical rule of good old rhetoric.

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