

A Comparative Analysis of Bonaventure's and Aquinas' Epistemologies

Luke Wajrowski

Abstract: Bonaventure's and Aquinas' theories of knowledge are often seen as contradictory; however, I argue that Bonaventure's third-term illumination theory is comparable to Aquinas' two-term theory of knowledge, as the Logos in Bonaventure's illumination model is compressed into the second term in Aquinas's model, forming what Aquinas calls the agent intellect. I will evaluate the validity of this substitution to show that the removal of an explicit third-term is not an effective alternative, for this "substitution" diminishes a direct reliance on the illuminating Logos for knowledge. This paper proceeds from an explanation of the similarities between the two epistemologies to the problems encountered in Aquinas' model and finally explains how Bonaventure's theory of knowledge overcomes these problems by integrating the third-term.

I. Introduction

Examining the historical context in which Bonaventure developed his illumination theory reveals an important piece of information that is useful in interpreting his philosophy: that he developed his theory at the emergence of the translation of Aristotle into Latin. Aristotle's texts and commentaries had a limited influence on Bonaventure and the development of his philosophy. While Bonaventure hesitated to embrace Aristotle's philosophy, Bonaventure's contemporary, Thomas Aquinas, wholeheartedly adopted Aristotle's wisdom and methodology. Because of these two different approaches to the work of Aristotle, these two philosophers, Bonaventure and Aquinas, are often viewed as having developed opposing philosophies—in particular opposing epistemologies. Bonaventure's epistemology is grounded in his illumination theory, which has its roots in Augustine and neo-Platonic thought; Aquinas' is established in his theory of knowledge involving the agent intellect, developed out of the Aristotelian tradition. However, by taking the three-term model for Bonaventure's illumination theory (involving the human knower, an object of knowledge, and the Logos (the principle of knowledge) as explained by John White in his article *Divine Light and Human Wisdom: Transcendental Elements in Bonaventure's Illumination Theory*, I propose that the two theories aren't at odds with the other, but that the Thomistic notion of the agent intellect accounts for the

third-term Logos in Bonaventure's illumination theory. This comparison, at face value, seems tricky, but the substitution of the third term Logos in Bonaventure's illumination theory for the natural light of the agent intellect in Aquinas' epistemology will be spelled out in what follows along with the implications of making such a "substitution."

I will first delineate Bonaventure's illumination theory, pulling from Bonaventure's own writings as well as more modern takes on Bonaventure to reconstruct a three-term theory that accurately portrays the illumination theory. I will then focus on Aquinas, turning to his notion of the agent intellect and how the natural light of the human knower parallels Bonaventure's model of knowledge, which involves illumination from the Logos. Finally, I will evaluate the validity of this substitution to show that the task at hand is an immensely complex one that requires an all-encompassing understanding of the implications each position makes.

II. Bonaventure's Illumination Theory

Bonaventure's epistemology is founded upon God, who is the First Truth and the "adequate and actual Cause". The reason for such a foundation involves the fact that the material world—including the human knower is in constant flux; the stability that emanates from God as the first principle of knowledge (Who doesn't change) can condition certainty of knowledge

(knowledge that is infallible and immutable). Thus, the divine, acting as a first cause, conditions certainty in knowledge. Bonaventure asserts a reliance upon the divine in philosophizing primarily because He (Who is Truth Itself) encompasses all truth. In his *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, Bonaventure delineates two positions of obtaining knowledge through the Logos. One view is that the uncreated wisdom manifested in the eternal forms is so sublime that it "can never be attained"; the other extreme is that human knowledge is unchangeable and eternal reason only has a mere "influence". The former relies too heavily on the objective transcendence such that knowledge can never be arrived at through the human intellect; the latter asserts the sublimity of the human person, not taking complete account of ignorance or the limitations of the human perspective. One absolutely transcends human capabilities; the other doesn't allow for much transcendence.

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

Bonaventure develops his middle course in reaction against the limitations imposed by the two extremes.

The first position in which knowledge is conditioned by eternal reason to the human mind produces skepticism about the changing material world. Bonaventure rejects this outlook because of its intellectual absurdity in dismissing the corporeality and the temporal order, which is innately intelligible. The other extreme is that the divine intelligence only shines forth in the “essences of things” and not in the act of obtaining knowledge about these things. Bonaventure rejects this viewpoint because of the fluctuating relationship between objects and subjects. Material objects are known in instances, because not only do the objects themselves change, but the subject observing the changing objects is also changes. The varying relationship between objects and subjects cannot produce certainty (constancy of knowledge) merely in this manner, but can only produce instance of knowledge, i.e., a certain object known by a certain subject at a certain point in time.

Bonaventure, deeming the two extremes epistemologically unsatisfying, proposes his *via media*, steering between the two erroneous extremes. His middle course, known as his illumination theory, engages not merely two terms (the divine and the subject or the subject and object in the two extreme positions) in developing knowledge but includes the third term necessary to produce certainty. Wisdom attained by a human knower is a participation in the light of the eternal wisdom—which both illuminates the human intellect and the essence of the object of

knowledge. The eternal wisdom is nominally the Logos, the second Person of the Trinity, through Whom, in Whom, and for Whom, all creation was made. The Logos contains the unchanging essences of all of creation. The relationship between the eternal Logos and the temporal created world is predominantly two-fold. In relation with the object (indeed all objects) of knowledge, the Logos shines down the divine ideas upon all of creation, and the object of knowledge receives its essence insofar as it participates in its divine idea. The Logos also illuminates the subject, so that the subject can see the essence of the object in the elucidating hierarchy of being. The subject can clearly perceive the essence intimated in the object in the invisible light of the Logos.

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

It is important to realize that Bonaventure did not see the Logos as completely separate from temporality and merely shedding light upon the subject-object

relationship, but as the necessary bond for knowledge, imparting intelligibility upon all of creation and illuminating the subject to understand not merely a particular object, but a particular object in the whole hierarchy of being. The relationship between the human subject (whose soul by nature is connected with the divine) and the Logos is not characterized by a distant, indirect illumination, but is a connection which cannot be dismissed—as is the relationship between the object and the Logos, who imbues intelligibility into the dust of creation.

III. Aquinas' Theory of Knowledge

Accepting the three-term model for Bonaventure's illumination theory makes evident its similarities to Aquinas' theory of knowledge. Aquinas' theory of knowledge is a linear process in which a further step follows the completion of its previous step; with one of the steps missing, the process for knowledge about the particular object of knowledge cannot be completed.

Aquinas reasons that all knowledge begins in the senses. The sense faculties, powers of the soul, are the channel through which the objective, outside world enters the subject in order to be known. Although the process for knowledge begins with the sense experience, not all knowledge is sensory knowledge (as will be shown later in the process). After the outside world become available to the intellect through the senses, the object is converted to a phantasm. The

phantasm represents the object by an image in the mind. The characteristics of the specific object picked up through the senses are imprinted in this image of the mind. From this step, the agent intellect illuminates the phantasm, extracting the general essence from the specific image. The agent intellect, Aquinas reasons, is a power of the intellect itself. Each human person has his or her own agent intellect, which, insofar as each intellect functions, is a participation in the divine Intellect. In this sense, the power of the agent intellect, to come to knowledge, resides inside each individual knower.

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

In the process of knowledge, the active intellect takes “information that is material and particular” and converts it “into something immaterial and universal.” The whole process is instantaneous and not deliberate; Aquinas' theory of knowledge is an expression of the automatic epistemological process of the human mind.

Applying the tripartite model of knowledge deduced from Bonaventure's illumination theory to Aquinas' theory of knowledge makes evident the substitution

I want to highlight of Aquinas' agent intellect for Bonaventure's Logos. It will be important to note that the following substitution I delineate is a fundamental and simple one; the specific details involved as a consequence of making such a switch will be explicitly articulated in the next section of this paper in order to first emphasize the general principle of the substitution, not whether the substitution is an absolutely effective one.

The primary difference between both theories of knowledge is the role the divine takes in the philosophical model, which is made comparable in both cases in the substitution I will delineate. In Bonaventure's illumination theory, the divine light allows for a clear and illuminating ground for realization. Without the powerful luminosity of the divine, the intellect, dark and ignorant, would not come to the illuminated and certain conclusion attributed with knowledge. However, the luminosity of the divine is comparable to the power of the intellect planted in the human person and the possession of intellectual forms that the material world contains in Aquinas' theory. The human person is implanted with the divine gift of an autonomous intellect. The human intellect, supplied entirely by the divine, relies on the divine for its contingent existence and continuity; however, the divinely endowed capacity does not rely on the divine in the process of coming to an understanding. In this sense, then, the radiating light of the Logos of

Bonaventure's theory is replaced with the innate power of the Logos endowed in the human intellect of Aquinas' theory. The illumination factor of the external, third-term Logos is poured into the human intellect in an essentially two-term model.

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

The three terms collectively allow for the attainment of knowledge. Although Aquinas' model of knowledge is essentially a two-term theory (although the object partakes in the divine ideas), Aquinas' theory is nonetheless able to attain knowledge like Bonaventure's. The stability and coherence of Aquinas' predominantly two-term theory (in contrast to the frequent unreliability and flux of the relationship of other two-term models) is made possible by the indirect combination of the Logos (which sheds light upon the intellect in Bonaventure's theory), and the human intellect, thereby producing the same power and ability as is in Bonaventure's model.

In this way, the substitution of the Logos in Bonaventure's three-term theory is in essence a sort of combination of the Logos and the subject to produce a cognitively self-sufficient human intellect in Aquinas' theory of knowledge.

IV. Evaluating the Substitution

After spelling out the substitution and consequently unifying the two comparable epistemologies, the relative merits of their divergences must be evaluated. However, there is a particular difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of one epistemology over another because, many times, a combination of positives and negatives characterize each philosophy, making it difficult to compare two entirely different entities under one rubric. In attempting to conclude which philosophy surpasses the other, I will spell out the benefits and setbacks of both Bonaventure's and Aquinas' theories and will make a final conclusion based on their totalities.

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

Aquinas' theory grasps at the imminence of the divine in the natural world. From the divine intellect "forms flow forth into all creatures," allowing for the sovereignty of the human person in cognizing the natural world. However, from a Bonaventurian perspective, the neglecting the direct radiance of the Logos wouldn't guarantee the certainty at which knowledge aims. Without the illumination attributed to the divine, knowledge is a mere science of the natural world at best.

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

Bonaventure's illumination theory surpasses Aquinas' theory of knowledge on this essential point: the illumination theory brings about not only the certainty attributed to the unchanging, eternal, transcendent reality, but the contextualization of knowledge. The

contextualization may appear as a minor addition to knowledge of an object, but it in principle is a vital element that must not be separated from knowledge of an object; the contextualization of the knowledge intimates an ethical framework of valuing goods in their proper order.

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

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

Another necessary qualification is that the sovereignty of the cognitive element of the human knower does not imply the exclusion of the ethical element of the human person. Nor does it imply that the intellectualizing cannot be done in an ethical manner or setting. Aquinas' philosophy must not be

unnecessarily deemed unethical because it does not explicitly and continually rely on the light of the divine (but upon the gift of the divine).

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