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## Aquinas and the knowledge of God

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AQUINAS AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis concerns the introduction of mystical knowledge into a debate about God that relies on scientific evidence. The thesis focuses in particular on the relevance of Thomas Aquinas' view of mystical experience. After first presenting Aquinas' theory of rapture as an anticipation of the beatific vision and distinguishing it from other ways of knowing God, I argue that such a theory convincingly renders mystical knowledge inadmissible into a debate about God that relies on scientific evidence, owing to one's inability to either remember or communicate such an experience. As a result, introducing mystical knowledge into the debate causes the religious participants in the debate to appear intellectually inept.

## INTRODUCTION

The headline ticker for the Fox News Channel recently reported something of interest to philosophers. In one line, the news bite stated that a "prominent atheist" had changed his mind about God's existence. It gave no details about the reason for the change or how suddenly it may have arisen. One thing was certain: after being a devoted defender of atheism for fifty years, Flew now believed in God.

To understand exactly how Flew defines his fresh position, we have to go beyond the headlines.<sup>1</sup> First of all, he has certainly not become a card-carrying member of any organized religion. In fact, Flew is quoted as saying that he retains his hostility to the concepts of God that are to be found in the world's largest religions:

I'm thinking of a God very different from the God of the Christian and far and away from the God of Islam, because both are depicted as omnipotent Oriental despots, cosmic Husseins (Associated Press).

Rather than speculate about how exactly God is related to us in the present, whether as despot, king, or father, Flew focuses on God's role in the primordial moment of the genesis of life. As he states:

My *one* and *only* piece of relevant evidence [for an Aristotelian God] is the apparent impossibility of providing a naturalistic theory of the origin from DNA of the first reproducing species...[In fact] the only reason which I have for beginning to think of believing in a First Cause god is the impossibility of providing a naturalistic account of the origin of the first reproducing organisms (Carrier 4).

It should not be surprising that the accumulation of scientific knowledge is what brought Flew to a turning point. Even when defending the atheistic position, he admitted that an argument from design would not be to produce if design itself could be clearly seen in nature.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a difficulty in determining what exactly Flew's position is, due to its very recent publicizing. Since Flew himself has not yet clarified his views in print, though he plans to do so in 2005, I have collected a sketch of his thoughts comments posted on the internet, mostly in the form of news updates on that focus on topics related to atheism. The article by Richard Carrier which I cite is reliable because Carrier has recently been in personal contact with Flew regarding his shift in view.

If [order and design] were indeed so there would, of course, be no at all about developing a demonstrative proof of the existence of one or more Designers. But it appears that, while design is thus undeniable, it is also not (*God: A Critical Inquiry* 160).

It seems, then, that Flew has in fact changed very little; what is new is simply what he judges to be scientific evidence for design, evidence which until recently science had not been able to furnish.<sup>2</sup> Flew had always maintained that the discovery of such evidence would necessitate God's existence. And in this vein Flew recently defended his decision when he said

My whole life has been guided by the principle of Socrates: Follow the evidence, wherever it leads (AP).

The argument from design, though, only demands that God be an intelligent being. It says little else about what characteristics God has possesses. *That* God exists can be deduced from a body of evidence, but that same body does not open the door to a flood of about what God is like *in Himself*. Strictly making current scientific evidence the only thing which valid conclusions about God can be drawn severely limits the number of statements one can make in describing a divine being. This does not bother Flew, who does not seem interested in developing any positive theory that would describe what God is like. He arrives at God as a necessary piece that can fill in the gap in science's account for the origin of life, but he is also willing to postpone or simply disregard any conversation about what God is like or the possibility of His being accessible to prying human eyes.

Given that this is a newfound position for him, Flew may yet decide that such a venture would be worthwhile. After all, he is a brand new theist, having undergone a groundbreaking shift in his lifelong worldview. We should not expect him or anyone else in such a situation to

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<sup>2</sup> By no means has the intelligent design movement won over the majority of the scientific community. Most scientists agree with a naturalistic explanation for life's origin. Indeed, it is characteristic of the proponents of the design movement to describe themselves as working against an entrenched majority.

have developed a positive theory of how exactly God operates or what his characteristics are. Adjusting from a world without divinity to a world where the divine is responsible for life itself: this is no easy task, not only in the sense that the world may seem a different place, but also because, for Flew, there is the messy problem of undergoing a drastic break with the bulk of one's own career and the public perception of one as a longtime standard bearer for a movement. But when the controversy quiets down, it is possible that Flew will begin to develop his new stance so that it accommodates the inevitable stream of questions he will face about what exactly he means when he says "God." In fact, it would be quite natural for him to address such issues not only in order to respond to inquiries put to him, but to clarify the questions that are likely to arise in his own mind concerning the nature of the deity. Flew has judged God to be real. The next step is to attempt to come to grips with God's nature.

This leads to the theme of this paper: how it is that the human mind can possibly come to what God is like, with an emphasis on how Thomas Aquinas addresses this problem and on his tacitly contradictory that one can have direct access to God's nature in an extreme experience of prayer called rapture. Such a study might seem antiquated or irrelevant at first glance -were it not for contemporary examples such as that of Antony Flew.

This recent turn of events helps to underscore several salient points. First, there is a difference between knowing that God exists and knowing what God is. Aquinas is in strong agreement with this position, as he makes clear:

God's effects can serve to demonstrate that God exists, even though they cannot help us to know him comprehensively for what he is (ST Ia 2.2 ad2).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I have adopted Robert method of citing Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. All quotations of the *Summa* come from the Blackfriars edition.

While science provides a body of evidence that can be used in affirming or denying God's existence, the fact that an immaterial being would likely fall outside of the limits of scientific inquiry makes it dubious that science could ever produce a picture of God. Second, there is something intuitively wrong with the position that affirms that God exists but that does not show interest in what He is like. There are some cases in which affirming without interest makes sense. I can believe in Jacques Chirac, acknowledging that he is a real person and strongly adhering to that belief. In other words, it would be hard to convince me that the French president does not exist. However, at the same time, I am perfectly capable of taking no interest whatsoever in the man's characteristics and activities, especially because of the gulf between us leads to an absence of actions of his that might have a detectable influence on me.

Where God is concerned, however, it is more likely that believing in Him will followed closely by an inquiry of what He is like. The stimulus for this inquiry would be the great impact God's existence would have on the life of the believer. In most cases, God will play a role in determining the ethical norms for one's behavior, as well as determining the result, in some form of hereafter, of the choices made throughout one's life. Moreover, to most believers, God will not suffer the distance that prevents influential actions from taking place between myself in the United States and someone else in France. The majority of believers conceive of God as always being in contact with them in some way, regardless of place. This form of relationship, one with such high stakes that cannot be avoided by any amount of distance, makes it very probable that a believer will want to know more and more about God, in order to be better able apply oneself to the kind of life belief demands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Such a personal God is consonant with the God of Judaism and Christianity, against whom Flew has traditionally argued. This characterization, however, would not apply to many of the deities of Eastern religions.



Initially it seems there might be the possibility of belief without interest if the conception of God involved is one that does not entail ethical rules or other consequences for one's life. From the limited available evidence of his new views, it seems Flew endorses this conception and prefers a deistic God who is not involved in the present activities of the world. As Richard Carrier writes, Flew

says he has in mind something like the God of Aristotle, a distant, impersonal "prime mover." It might not even be conscious, but a mere force (1).

However, even the conception of a God who is distant in terms of involvement with the world should spur inquiry into what God is like. Since many adherents of deism base their belief – as Flew has – on the explanatory power God provides for the order of the universe, deists who are devoted to explaining the formation of life would be obliged to investigate God's nature, at least in order to follow through on their scientific endeavors. If God is to be appealed to as a cause for life, then He must be studied in Himself if a full understanding of how - and why - life ever came about is to ever be achieved.

Science has long been a central issue in the debate between theism and atheism. For the most part, science has been taken to be on the side of the atheists, and the theists have been accused of arguing against the consensus of the scientific community and of being irrational. The advent of new developments in science, however, of discoveries that indicate to some interpreters evidence of an intelligence behind the formation of the universe or the genesis of life - with such theories issuing not only from the religious faithful seeking to support their beliefs by interpreting relevant findings in their favor, but by staunch opponents of religion who would only

come to the conclusion of a divine influence after the most thorough and critical inquiry - such a mass of scientific evidence could serve to foster a new debate which does not pit theism against atheism, but instead focuses on fresh attempts to dialogue about God's nature.

Necessary at the outset of such a dialogue might be the sets of different criteria which the participants admit are valid avenues for arriving at some kind of knowledge about God. If the groups involved could be envisioned as those who are members of organized religion and those who have arrived at a belief in God based solely on conclusions drawn from scientific evidence, with each of these no doubt being subdivided into smaller groups with varying views on detailed points, it is likely that the latter group will be adamantly opposed to any appeal by the former to revelation or mystical experiences concerning God's nature. In fact, the presentation of mystical knowledge to the scientific minded participants in the debate would likely be coldly received, on account of that group's judgment that what counts as scientific knowledge should be empirically available to anyone interested in finding it out, whereas mystical knowledge is held exclusively by the who gains it through experience.

I would suggest that Thomas Aquinas provides a useful approach to mystical experience that can contribute to the guidelines for appealing to mystical experience in the proposed debate. Therefore my aim will be to show how one important philosopher has asserted that through the mystical experience of rapture God's nature can be known, and what implications this view has on the contemporary debate that is deeply intertwined with the latest scientific evidence.

## HOW KNOWLEDGE HAPPENS

One path that most religions suggest for coming to know God more fully is to strive to assume for oneself a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are meant to enable a person to be able or at least ready to experience the divine. The religious language that announces exhortations to conversion is often accompanied by reminders that the effects of the alterations in lifestyle are meant to correctly align the areas in which a person is falling short of the standard for which human beings have been created. The situation is usually contextualized in a narrative that consists of an idyllic primordial state for humans and the misfortunate events that overturn the originally intended order. The chaos that ensues is then integrated into an account of the present functioning of the world and is used to help explain all manner of conflict and unhappiness.

The knowledge of the narrative that allows one to understand the forces at play in the world is itself not given up front. The introduction of chaos that is an element of the narrative also acts to obscure the true nature of the world. It threatens to permanently shroud the reality for which humans were created. On the surface the chaos itself is all that is apparent in the way things operate, so that it can be mistakenly classified as reality.

Religions, then, commonly operate along lines of being and seeming, reality and appearance. Effort is called for on the part of the believer in order to overcome the debilitating effects of the fallen world that surrounds and influences one and to recover as much as possible the proper life originally accorded humans. Thus we read about seeing the light, emerging from the cave, ascending the mountain, piercing the veil, and scales falling away from the eyes.

The efforts and methods involved in the lives of some religious people to regain their lost vision is the stuff of legends. The actions of these believers represent their own strivings for improvement, but they also contain elements that others recognize and seek to imitate in their

own way; the externals of their practice - dancing, meditation, solitude, study - play an influential proselytizing role and often spark large organized movements.

Yet in spite of the popularity enjoyed by many of the world's most accomplished mystics, their experiences are often defined by ineffability. Whatever occurs in the span of that mysterious hour or so usually stays hidden with the one who experienced it. Attempts to convey its content are frustrated by the limits of language or a lack of eloquence on the part of the speaker. Many resort to poetry to try to express what they have experienced, but these poems can sometimes only arouse a sense of reverence and communicate that something mysterious indeed is being talked about. John of the Cross actually spoke about his mystical experiences as the "I-don't-know-what".

Thomas Aquinas does attempt to give a reasoned account of the mystical experience. assigns it particular characteristics that will show why such experiences should not be appealed to as binding evidence in debates about whatever their content may be. This will have consequences for the debate about God that is poised to go forward today.

The account of mysticism and, more specifically, rapture, that Aquinas offers is located in the second part of his *Summa Theologiae*. It is situated among other articles that concern the finer points of theology. This account, however, draws heavily on the philosophy of mind that Aquinas develops much earlier in the *Summa* and elsewhere. In order to better address the question of how rapture operates it will be helpful to present an overview of Aquinas' theory of cognition. The Middle Ages are sometimes seen as a shift from Platonic to Aristotelian thinking. Plato is strongly represented in the early stages of the period by Augustine, who took the teachings of the neo-Platonist Plotinus to heart and worked out many of his beliefs along such lines. The increasing importance of the Church created an atmosphere in which Augustine's philosophy and theology were the most important for hundreds years after his

death in 430. This mode of thought eventually received competition when a confluence of historical events led to many of the works of Aristotle, long in Arabic hands, being translated into Latin and then dispersed to prominent European centers of learning, yet not without opposition from those who recommended caution against this flood of new ideas. Though the transition was by no means swift and without involved and intense dialogue, the Aristotelian corpus gradually supplemented Augustine's works as the texts which would, for a time, steer philosophical investigation.

The wrangling over the legitimacy of Aristotelian thought often broke down along partisan lines, literally depending the particular religious order to which one belonged. At the forefront of these academic disputes were the Dominicans, principally represented in the intellectual milieu by Thomas Aquinas, and the Franciscans, who had Bonaventure as their Master General. It may be worth noting the strong biographical similarities between the two:

They were both born in Italy; each joined a new mendicant order; they were elected to professorial chairs at the University of Paris on the same day; both died in 1274 (McInerny 143).

Both were also, of course, ultimately canonized. Though both orders were at the time quite green, the situation concerning the reception may be viewed as an evolution of an earlier debate between the two groups, when in their infancy there arose a disagreement about the value of the charitable work of the Franciscans versus the intellectual activities of the Dominicans.

When the Franciscans made learning a part of their order, Bonaventure emerged as their most capable thinker. His teachings are a continuation of the Platonic tradition that had benefited from the support of Augustine for so long. His *Journey of the Mind to God* is filled with mystical language. The emphasis in that

work is on contemplation of God, first through creatures, then through one's own mind, and finally above the mind.

In *Journey*, Bonaventure recommends contemplation of God as a means as coming to grasp the truth. With this Aquinas would agree. For Bonaventure, however, the highest contemplation is an activity of the immaterial mind unassisted by the body or any other mediating influence. He says, "This is the light of Eternal Truth, since our very mind is formed immediately by Truth itself" (81). The key for Bonaventure is that we ought to seek such high contemplation. Human effort combined with grace allows us to rise through mystical stages to a contemplation which makes no use of the body. Aquinas disagrees with a program of this sort. Even though he believes to be man's highest good, he suggests practicing contemplation of God by reflecting on our imperfect knowledge of him, and for Aquinas, as we shall see, this engages the body, except in the extreme case of rapture, a form of contemplation Aquinas believes cannot be sought after. Thus, the similarity between Aquinas and Bonaventure lies in what they identify man's final end to be. They differ about the role of the body in contemplation, and Bonaventure is more likely to be identified as a mystical figure.

Rarely is Thomas Aquinas accused of indulging in the florid language of mysticism. Even in his poetry, Aquinas exhibits a restraint and straightforwardness that focuses on the articles of faith and the practice of virtue, not a seemingly mysterious contact between the mind and the divine. Philosophy of mind is one of the areas in which Aquinas decisively follows the thought of Aristotle rather than that of Plato. In his own day, this would not have been seen as a con conservative

move gauged to preserve the affirmations made by one ancient philosopher. Rather the controversy that the arrival of Aristotle's works aroused made standing up in support of them something of a radical move.

The easiest way to summarize Aquinas' philosophy of mind, which is necessary in order to understand rapture, might be to simply walk through the steps of the process which encompasses Aquinas' epistemological account. An individual act of knowing shares elements with other acts of knowing like itself, so detailing the features of such an act is a good way of explaining what Aquinas means by "knowing" or cognition and how he thinks the mind functions. In discussing Aquinas's account of knowing I will pass over the issue of how we know a proposition or certain relation between propositions to be true and focus on how we come to know what a thing is, because this emphasis has the most ramifications for an understanding of rapture.<sup>5</sup>

Our knowledge, taking its start from things, proceeds in this order. First, it begins in sense; second, it is completed in the intellect. As a consequence, sense is found to be in some way an intermediary between the intellect and things (*Truth* 1.11c).

Properly functioning human beings are equipped with five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Each of these senses is the power of a certain organ: the eye, the ear, the skin, the tongue, and the nose, respectively. The continual bombardment of our sense faculties by sensible species sets cognition in motion. Thus the catalyst for an act of knowing is not the knower, but rather the external objects that are appropriately arranged so as to be sensible and which act on those sense organs that are such as to be affected by the acting objects' sensible

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<sup>5</sup> My understanding of Aquinas' account has been especially formed by three secondary Robert Pasnau's *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, Pasnau's commentary on Aquinas' *Treatise on Human Nature*, and some relevant chapters from Stump's recent *Aquinas*.

qualities. The material world acts as the starting point, then, for cognition.

Now we need to define what exactly is transmitted from the sensible object to the sense organ, and this requires a classic Aristotelian distinction, that between form and matter. Matter is the sheer material stuff of which a thing is composed -whether flesh, wood, silver, or another material or composite of materials. In material things, form is the arrangement of matter which makes an individual thing the member of the species to which it belongs. Form is what makes a thing the kind of thing that it is and not some other kind of thing. All material things must have form, for matter without form simply does not exist.

Form can, however, be found without matter, as when, for example, Aquinas posits angels as a whole class of being below God who do not have matter as a part of their being. Yet the separability of form is also essential to the process of cognition, for it answers the question of what is received by the sense organs when they are acted on by sensible objects. When an object that is a composite of form and matter is sensed, the form of that object is what is properly sensed. The classical problem for this account is that the sense organs do not in fact take on the form of whatever they sense, because it is evident that, for example, the eye does not transform into a stone when a stone is visually sensed. Aquinas dodges this concern with his reference to the *spiritual* reception of the form of a sensible object. Whereas forms that are naturally received arrange the matter that receives them into the forms that they are, forms that are spiritually received are received in such a way that they do not materially transform the matter that receives them. It is the structure of a sense organ that gives it the capacity to receive forms spiritually. Note that the spiritual reception of a form does not exclude the possibility that the same form can also be received naturally, as when something that is hot emits heat that the skin senses, and that also causes the skin itself to become hot. In addition, for a form to traverse the



distance the object to the sense organ, there must be a medium - usually in the form of air or water - that is suitable for allowing the transmission of the form from the object to the sense organ to take place.

If sense and intellect are the two parts of the cognitional process, phantasms, though technically belonging to the sensation, serve as a meeting place between the two. Once a sense has received the form of a sensible object, the likeness of the form is stored in the phantasia, a capacity that retains the images of sense impressions, then properly called phantasms. Aquinas physically locates phantasia in the brain, for he speaks of head injuries as causing damage to the phantasia's ability to function correctly. All the varied sense images we receive, then, are funneled into the storehouse that is the phantasia. Sensation culminates in the accumulation of phantasms. A person with senses in good working order will end up with a storehouse full of images. But phantasms are not gathered for their own sake. With them, and only with them, the process of intellection can begin.

Some time before in the *Summa Theologiae* explaining the role of the intellect in cognition, Aquinas offers some of the intellect's more general features. It is an immaterial faculty that belongs to human beings alone among the creatures of this world. Although an angel possesses an intellect, humans are ordered to use their intellect in a unique way. Human beings are a composite of soul and body, the immaterial and the material, form and matter, and our nature is such that we come to have knowledge only through both sense and intellect. Our intellects are made to know universal essences as they exist in individual particulars, and this only takes place in a process that begins with sensible objects and eventually ends, as we shall see, by reflecting back on those sensible objects after some intellectual work has been done. Thus human beings are the only beings with intellectual capacity that require sensation for the

functioning of their intellect.

It should not come as very surprising, then, that the first move of the intellect in the process of cognition is to turn toward phantasms, images of the sensible forms received through the senses. The intellect is divided into two parts: the active intellect and the passive intellect, the functions of which will become clear as the account progresses. When a phantasm is stored, the active intellect abstracts from it the intelligible form that is present in the image. This abstracting is a process of removing the features of the object that are not essential for it being an object of its kind. Thus if the image of man was in a phantasm, the agent intellect would remove some of the attributes or accidents, whether skinny or tall, old or young, smart or stupid, and so on, because these features are not essential for being a man. Abstraction departicularizes an object's essential qualities in so far as they are individually instantiated in the particular object at hand.

Thus Aquinas says that, even if bones and flesh are themselves essential to man, the intellect

abstracts the *species* of a human being from *this* flesh and *these* bones, which do not belong to the nature of the *species* but rather are the parts of an individual  
(ST Ia 85.1)

The passive intellect comes into play next. When the active intellect has abstracted an intelligible species from a phantasm, it delivers this species or form to the passive intellect, which preserves the form. The passive intellect provides a space or fertile ground for the final act of cognition. When the intelligible form rests in the passive intellect, there arises an intellected intention of the thing being cognized. This intention' is a mental concept which Aquinas sometimes refers to as an "internal word," for external words are merely linguistic communications of the concepts we hold inwardly. The intellected intention is the completion of the "first operation of the intellect", according to Aquinas, the intellectual act by which we come to know the essential concept of something that has been sensed. Once the intention has been formed, though, we do not merely contemplate it directly. Aquinas believes that, whenever we

reflect on what has been cognized, we turn back to the phantasms, engaging the senses in the knowing process, because human nature dictates that we know with both sense and intellect.

The summary of Aquinas' account of sensation and cognition provided in a section of this length is by no means complete. Aquinas incorporated the thought of Aristotle, Augustine, and the contemporary Islamic philosophy of his own day into his system, and it is an astounding example of a rational attempt to understand human knowledge without the aid of much rigorous biological science as it is understood today. Much more could be said of the role of the common sense, the disparate meanings of phantasms, the distinction between phantasms and memory, complex forms of knowing that involve compounding and dividing concepts, and other issues. Fortunately it is not necessary to expound on all the details in order to fulfill the present purpose -setting up the norm for cognition in order to see how far rapture deviates from this norm.

Many quotations could be presented in order to demonstrate how devoted Aquinas is to the regular process of cognition as the only way we achieve knowledge. For example, "The intellect cognizes nothing not gathered from the senses" (ST Ia 78.4c). This will not be the case for rapture, as we will see. But before turning to rapture itself, it might also be helpful to understand how Aquinas believes we usually come possess a knowledge of God's qualities, given the limitations sensation places on our cognitive capacities. Understanding how Aquinas believes we ordinarily come to know about God will help draw a contrast between how this ordinary knowledge comes about and the much more exceptional case of rapture.

## KNOWING GOD ON EARTH

To varying degrees, many philosophers in the twentieth century have asserted that it is impossible to have a rational discourse about God. Three of the most famous and influential of these philosophers are A.J. Ayer, Rudolph Carnap, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Ayer helped to popularize emotivism by arguing that, from the point of view of logical positivism, statements about metaphysical entities -God included -are not meaningful, because their content is not empirically verifiable.<sup>6</sup> Carnap devoted more effort to accounting for why metaphysical statements have exercised so much control over and elicited such great devotion from "so many men in all ages and nations, among them eminent minds" (78). He concluded that the purpose of metaphysical statements is to "serve for the expression of the general attitude of a person towards life" (78). Thus discourse about God would be similar to art as a form of expressing oneself. For Carnap, however, art rises above metaphysics because it is honest about its purpose, metaphysics is deluded about its own function, which it takes to be valid descriptions of reality.

More than Ayer and Carnap, Wittgenstein could be associated with the apophatic tradition of theology. "How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world" (*Tractatus* 6.432). God would be one of the many realities at which we grasp with our language. What is outside the world cannot be spoken, and what cannot be spoken cannot be thought. For a variety of reasons, then, several positions, founded on atheistic or linguistic concerns, asserted that "God" is not eligible for adequate expression or conceptual reasoning.

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<sup>6</sup> The *locus classicus* for Ayer's view is Chapter Six of *Language, Truth, and Logic*.

In Thomas Aquinas' lifetime, similar ideas were being floated in some circles.<sup>7</sup> The nature of the period would not allow any substantive debate about whether or not God actually existed, but by the Middle Ages there was already a long tradition of disagreement between apophatic and kataphatic schools of theology with regard to the ability of humans to ever know God's essence. Widely speaking, the disagreements were cast as East versus West. In the East, John Damascene and Pseudo-Dionysius championed the view that God's essence could not be known by us whether on this earth or in the afterlife. They could rely on biblical support, which reminds that it is God alone "Who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). Their views seek to preserve an approach to God that is marked by reverence and modesty with regard human power in comparison to divine.

The West, primarily through the teachings of Augustine and Gregory the Great, was more generous in appraising the human capacity to know God. Though the possibility of attaining anything resembling a perfect knowledge of God in this life was ruled out, this tradition optimistically understood heaven as a state in which a human being is given privileged access to divine riches, and the hereafter allows a person to see God face to face. In this vein writers drew on biblical passages such as "We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2) and attempted to square such lines with the texts quoted by those in the East. Important to the position is the belief that the highest good for man is to see God as He is - not in an image or theophany, but by a staring directly into the divine essence. If there remains any intermediary between us and God, there would be room for improvement, and heaven would then not be the highest beatitude possible for man.

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<sup>7</sup> The history that follows has been borrowed from account in Chapter Two of *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*.

The movement which took the Eastern view in Aquinas' day believed that it was impossible to have a knowledge of God's essence - not only impossible for human beings, but for angels as well. Shielding God's essence to this extent even drew an official condemnation from the bishop of Paris. In it the bishop reasserted the traditional Western view: "God is seen in his essence or substance by the angels and by all the saints, and will be seen by the glorified souls" (Torrell 28).

Thomas Aquinas draws on the condemnation when developing his own position:

Treating this question, some philosophers have erred by saying that no created intellect can see God through His essence; for they concentrated only on the distance lying between a created intellect and the divine essence. Since this position is heretical, it cannot be held" (DV 8. 1c).

Thus Aquinas believes that there are some circumstances that allow us to see God's essence, and these circumstances are primarily those present in a heavenly afterlife. While being the core of Western view concerning our relationship to God in the afterlife, Aquinas emphasizes the Eastern position to our knowledge of God in this life, asserting that it is impossible to know God's essence while on earth.

Since rapture, an experience of God's essence had on this earth, is the goal toward which we are proceeding, we can first examine Aquinas' account of the ordinary knowledge we have of God in this life, and the usual means by which we acquire such knowledge. This will help to emphasize what an extreme position rapture is.

Before presenting his own account of a topic, Aquinas almost always lists objections to the position he will defend. Aquinas believes that we can have some knowledge of God in this life, but one objection to this assertion can be easily derived from the account of cognition presented in the previous section. If all knowledge begins with sensation, a point Aquinas so strongly emphasizes, then how can we come to know anything of an immaterial God? This question is

obviously encompassed by the broader worry of whether we can know any immaterial realities at all. The short answer for Aquinas is that we cannot do so. The simple fact is that if there is no matter in a thing to serve as a starting point for the cognitional process, then we cannot come to know that thing through that process. Aquinas phrases the problem this way:

Our intellect, in its state of life at present, has a natural orientation toward the natures of material things, and as a result it cognizes nothing except by turning toward phantasms.. So it is clear that immaterial substances, which do not fall under sense and imagination, cannot be intellectually cognized by us first and per se, by the means of cognition we presently experience (ST Ia 88.1c).

Notice the "first" and "per se". These qualifications provide the escape from the problem. What we can understand first and per se are things which fall under the purview of the normal cognitional process. Most importantly, these are things of which phantasms can be produced. Abstracting from phantasms leads to a grasp of the essence of a thing - and this is understanding a thing per se, in itself. Even though it is impossible to form a phantasm of anything immaterial, the suggestion that there are ways of knowing a thing not per se leaves open the possibility that immaterial realities can be known in another fashion. Put succinctly, the way we have a knowledge of immaterial things is this:

Incorporeal things, of which there are no phantasms, are cognized by us through a comparison to sensible corporeal things, of which there are phantasms (ST Ia 84.8).

This approach keeps Aquinas' account of cognition as simple as possible - at all cognitional times and places there must be phantasms. He does not have to develop one account for knowing material things, and another for immaterial. Every operation can take place within one epistemological system. At the same time, the appeal to comparison (or analogy) yields the possibility of knowing immaterial things, obviously vital to someone with Aquinas' religious assumptions.

The concept of analogy is essential to many comparisons made between material and immaterial things.<sup>8</sup> An analogous term is one which has many meanings but whose meanings are all partly the same. A classic example would involve our family dog Allie and "health". Consider the following phrases: "Allie is healthy"; "exercise is healthy for Allie"; and shiny coat is healthy". In all these phrases health is used in different ways, but certainly all refer to health in some primary sense. Attention has been called to the way analogy captures the "family resemblances" among the use of certain words (Incandela 23). Analogy will play a role in the way in which we come to know God from material things.

Our knowledge of God is the result of a threefold process that begins with the normal cognitional process outlined in the last section (Torrell 40). We amass knowledge of material things through our exposure to the world. On the second of Aquinas' Five Ways, and on his strong religious convictions, God is the first cause of all things. The effects of the maker and sustainer are to be found in all creation, especially human beings, who are made in the image of God. Thus, when we know material things through interaction with the world, we also acquire knowledge of the effects of God that are present in them, even though no created thing bears the full effects of God's power. What being, goodness, and wisdom we conceptually glean from this world we predicate of God but in an imperfect way. As their first cause, God must possess these qualities in a supereminent manner, or in a way that supercedes our understanding. When we assert that God is good supereminently, it is beyond our grasp to understand what that means. Finally, we renounce the concepts that are based on creatures, since they must inevitably fall short of God. In this way we can assert that God is not changing, not finite (but rather infinite), not temporal (but rather eternal), and so on.

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<sup>8</sup> My understanding of Aquinas' use of analogy has been aided by McInerney's "St Thomas Aquinas: An Overview".



We can say that at the end of our argument, we know God as unknown, because the mind discovers that it has reached the highest point of its knowledge when it knows that the divine essence is above everything that it may grasp in our present state of life; and although what God is remains unknown to the mind, it knows nonetheless that he is (In Boeth. 1.2 ad1).

Torrell has suggested that the process of coming to know God in this life resembles a certain party game in which a player has in mind a certain object and the other participants try to guess its identity through questioning (32). So they might ask: "Is it alive? Is it an animal? Is it a cat?" To win the game one would have to narrow down the possibilities so as to be able to offer an educated guess about the object. In the case of God, however, every question would be answered with a resounding no. The most perfect knowledge of God to be had in this life would be to ask every question about God ("Is he this? Is he that?") and to have it met with a negation, and then to refrain from attributing to God any of the things which have been denied Him. The aim is not to know less about God, but to know that we know nothing of Him.

Two moves in Aquinas' account of our knowledge of God show him sympathetic to both East and West. Aquinas has a firm belief in a vision of the divine essence that constitutes the afterlife. This allies him with the West. As for the East, Aquinas walks the *via negativa*, and he steadfastly maintains that the only knowledge we have of God in this life comes from knowing Him as unknown.

There are pertinent features of this overview that will be applied to the rest of the discussion, and these can now be highlighted. First, Aquinas' view of our ordinary knowledge of God is faithful to his account of cognition - both begin with our sensing material things. Second, Aquinas does not believe that we can, with the conditions under which our intellects operate in this life, see the divine essence. Third, the knowledge of God that we are able to obtain leaves us

in the dark, inasmuch as it does not provide us with any of God's positive characteristics. It will be helpful to keep these points in mind during the presentation of rapture in the next section.

## **RAPTURE**

Thomas Aquinas has been called an optimist. Happiness is essential to his understanding of human nature. He believes that happiness is the final end for which all human beings long. His moral philosophy is anchored by happiness, the achievement of which is the goal of every free human action. Even if in most cases ignorance or weakness causes people to make bad choices about where true happiness lies, this is due to a deficiency on the part of the agent. The fact that we sometimes act in ways that make us unhappy only indicates the difficulty we face in knowing what will make us happy. It does not rule out the notion that we always make our choices with an eye toward becoming happier.

The optimistic side of Aquinas' philosophy is that ultimate happiness is attainable. True happiness is not an illusion, nor does it belong to the elite, nor is it trivial when attained. The conditions that facilitate happiness are in place and ensure the possibility that someone can be perfectly happy. What are these conditions for Aquinas? He defines happiness in the context of his religious beliefs.

Now at the end of our desires is God; hence, the act by which we are primarily joined to Him is basically and substantially our happiness. But we are primarily united with God by an act of understanding; and therefore, the very seeing of God, which is an act of the intellect, is substantially and basically our happiness (QQ VIII 9.19c).

Man has been created in order to exercise his highest faculty - the intellect - in knowing or contemplating God. "Seeing" the divine essence is often referred to by Aquinas as the beatific vision. There is nothing left to strive for after one has attained such a vision, for it satisfies all desire. Further, although the beatific vision is only possible in heaven, the knowledge of God had in this life serves as a kind of foretaste of the heavenly experience. This is why in this life contemplation of God in the non-knowledge we have of Him is the closest we can ordinarily come to happiness. Perfect happiness can only occur when we reach heaven. There the limits of our cognitive abilities, especially our

reliance on sensation and finite forms, are overcome and we are able to see God's essence directly, which yields a positive knowledge of God, not the negative variety we possess in this life. God's infinity prohibits any finite mind from ever totally comprehending his essence, so the human mind's finitude ensures that the happiness experienced in heaven will go on forever, because we can never fully comprehend God's essence (ST Ia 12.7c). Ultimately, human beings in heaven are a composite of body and soul constantly at the peak of the highest operation their nature permits.

Somewhere in between the imperfect contemplation of this life and the glorious vision the next is rapture. While rapture takes place in this life, it allows one to catch a glimpse of God's essence as the heavenly souls do. It seems to contradict much of what Aquinas says about our meager capability to know God on earth, that in our earthly state we are relegated to a negative form of contemplation, accompanied by a hope that the true contemplation for which we were made will be ours in the future. This section will explain what rapture is and how Aquinas thinks it is possible.

Augustine lays down that God's own substance could be seen by some in a life state, as it was by Moses and Paul who was rapt up to hear ineffable words no man can utter (ST 2a 2ae 175.3sc).

Rapture is a temporary experience that imitates heavenly beatitude. It is initiated by God's action which wrests the intellect from its reliance on the senses and situates it so that it is able to see the divine essence itself without mediation.

Before Aquinas even goes into the details of rapture as a vision of God, he addresses rapture in a more general way, of which the contemplative experience of rapture described above is a subdivision or version. The broader notion of rapture Aquinas describes concerns a person being in a state that is above or below his nature. In a basic sense rapture is constituted by any situation in which a person acts in a way above or below nature on account of external forces

which pull one up or drag one down, as it were. The median state of normalcy to which the "above" and "below" stand in reference is the ordinary mode of functioning for a human being.

It is possible for someone to be dragged below nature when the lower appetites overcome the will. Aquinas believes that the will should rule the passions or desires in accordance with reason and, importantly, nature. Reason, not the desires we feel, ought to determine the course of our actions. Plato famously illustrated this idea with his example of the charioteer who guides his unruly horses, bringing them into submission. The daily occurrences of our will faltering in its control over the passions are little instances of acting against nature. But such lapses are usually minor and followed by a restoration of the will to its role as director of the passions. But a form of rapture occurs, Aquinas says, when the passions, or lower appetite, exert such total control over the will, the higher appetite, that they knock the charioteer from his conveyance, as it were:

The higher appetite is left behind and a man is wholly carried away by what relates to his lower appetite... Because the higher appetite is more characteristic of man, when a man is torn away by the violence of a lower appetite from the influence of a higher appetite, he is being drawn away from that which is most characteristically his (ST 2a 2ae 175.2 ad2).

A lower appetite dragging down the will is not likely to be a process that could be initiated by us. I would be unable of generating such a level of passion in myself that would be capable of overpowering my will. Yet if intense passions come about and do make a power grab against the will, Aquinas believes that the will should for the most part be able to withstand such attacks and maintain its primacy. If the will allows itself to yield to desires not in accord with reason, then this is a moral failing, as Aquinas sees it. He does allow, however, that a strong enough onset of passion can execute an unstoppable coup de grace, toppling the will and putting one in a state below nature, "as happens to those who are mad because of the intensity of their wrath or their love"(ST 2a 2ae 175.2 ad 2). To be ruled by our passions would entail chasing

after whatever objects of desire our passions presented to us, with no ability to resist such urgings of the will. The rule of the passions is a state below nature because it corresponds to the activity of animals whose natures are below the more sophisticated nature of man, which features an intellect and will. Although it is possible for the passions to drag us below nature, the fact that they are usually under the power of the will means that we are not passive players in such instances. We are responsible for ordering our passions such that we never arrive at a point where the passions can bring the will into submission. But even in the form of rapture in which one is dragged below nature, Aquinas refers to the "violence" with which we are pulled down by the passions, meaning that at some point, it is possible for us to not be able to control our passions any longer, even if earlier attempts at temperance would have prevented our losing such control. In this case the violence done to us has been in some way invited or made possible by a weak will. Moreover, being brought below nature is not a momentary phenomenon immediately followed by a restoration of our will to its ruling place. Aquinas' reference to being "mad" implies a somewhat prolonged state that is not easily or quickly resolved. To be below nature would seem to entail being in a state that is against nature, in as much as it is always against nature for the will to be ruled by the passions.

The dragging down of the will is a matter of the appetitive functioning of man, centering on the upset of the relationship between the higher and lower appetites, and this dragging down puts man in a state below nature. The aspect of rapture with which we are more concerned is that in which one is elevated to a mode of functioning that is above nature, and such an elevation involves an operation of the intellect, not the will.

A human being is a type of creature who possesses knowledge by a cooperative functioning of sensual and intellectual faculties. Section Two was intended to emphasize that without sensation there can be no knowledge. The hard line Aquinas holds on how we gain

knowledge - that is, through sensory experience - extends even to his treatment of how we know our own minds (even though the intellect itself is immaterial!). Recall that the intellect abstracts the form of what it knows from phantasms, and that in doing so the intellect assumes the immaterial form of whatever abstracts. Now for Aquinas the intellect always has some such form, for this is what it means for the intellect to actually exist. When we seek to know the intellect, however, we do not want to know it as it is when it takes the form of something it knows. Instead, we are looking for what is essential in the intellect that stretches across many instances of knowing.

Take a lump of clay, for example. It always comes in some shape or other. Even when we don't recognize the clay as sculpted, it is likely to be in the form of a ball or just a messy heap. To define the clay essentially, we would not point out one or all of the clay's molds. Ultimately, to define the clay we would have to do so without reference to its shape, even though we would always have encountered the clay in some form. Just so, to know the intellect requires that we reflect on our memory of the forms the intellect has taken, and reason toward what the intellect is in itself - something which has the potential for all these forms, but is itself identified with none of them. Aquinas traces the movement from knowledge of material things to knowledge of the intellect:

Therefore what is first known by the human intellect is this object; then, in the second place, the act by which the object is known is itself known; and finally, by the way of the act, the intellect, of which the act of understanding is the perfection, is itself known (ST Ia 87.3r).

The relevant point for us is that even in the case of our own minds we cannot grasp an immaterial object without first going through what is material. namely the memory of our acts of understanding, stored in physical phantasms.

So human nature involves sensation through and through. But Aquinas's believing so creates two durable obstacles with regard to rapture. First, if sensation is

always involved in knowing, then it does not seem we can have an experience in which we can have a direct vision of God, who is immaterial. Aquinas will address this by saying that God gives us the intellectual aid that allows us to see Him. The second problem is the reverse of the case in which one is dragged below nature, because rapture involves an elevation of one above nature, above the ordinary mode of understanding to a mode that does not make use of sensation. Since it is in man's nature to know by way of sensation, Aquinas needs to explain why such an elevation does not run contrary to nature.

A possible answer to the charge that in rapture one acts against nature is to claim that rapture restores man's true nature, in the sense of man's "original blessedness." If it were so that in the garden Adam and Eve enjoyed the beatific vision, then they only would have lost this vision on account of the first sin. Thus rapture could be a restoration of the paradisiacal experience of the first humans. This would imply that our normal earthly lives are not being lived in accordance with what our nature *really* is. Our ability to live by nature was ruined by sin. Thus rapture, and eventually heaven itself, is just an ordering of what went wrong in Eden.

Aquinas is too straightforward, however, for us to misconstrue the original human experience as involving a vision of the divine essence while still on earth. He unambiguously states that Adam did *not* see God's essence in this life (DV 18.1c). What Adam (and Eve) enjoyed in Eden was the most advanced form of knowledge of God through creatures which can be attained in this life. This knowledge of theirs would have been similar to our usual knowledge of God on earth, but it would have been superior on account of their intellects not having yet been corrupted by sin, as are ours. The knowledge of God that Eve received from surveying the created Eden was vastly superior to the knowledge of God we arrive at through



observing our surroundings, since she would have been well equipped to recognize the Creator when contemplating creation.

One way that Aquinas addresses the issue of whether rapture is a state against nature is to examine man's natural inclination:

For him who is carried away by some external force it must be in a direction other than that taken by his natural inclination. It differs in two ways; first as regards the term of the inclination; as when a stone, which naturally tends to fall, is projected upwards; and secondly as regards the way it tends, as when a stone is hurled downwards at a greater speed than that caused by gravity's pull.. So when he is abstracted from the apprehension of sense-objects, his is said to be carried away, even if uplifted to those truths to which he is naturally ordered. (ST Ia 175.1r).

When someone's passions pull them down below nature, so that the passions rule the will, that person is like a stone that is thrown upwards. The stone has a natural capacity to fall, Just as it is in man's nature to have his will rule his lower appetites. And as the stone that can be thrown in the direction opposite that to which it tends, man's passions can overpower the ability of the will to rule.

In the case of rapture, however, the intellect can be compared to the stone that it pushed downward when it is already falling. The intellect is ultimately made for the beatific vision, even though it cannot achieve such a vision by itself. When God gives the intellect a vision of himself, he is hastening the situation that the intellect longs for, just as a rock can be pushed down faster than it can go on its own. This is different from the case of being pulled below nature, because that state is not one toward which man naturally inclines.

The answer to the apparent asymmetry between rapture and human nature is to claim that rapture, like heaven, is above, but not contrary to, nature. In a very literal sense, rapture is supernatural, or above nature, for it demands that a person. be raised above natural capacities by a higher power:

It belongs to the mode and worth of a man to be uplifted to the divine because man was created in the image of God. But as the divine goodness infinitely surpasses human capacities, man needs to be supernaturally helped to attain this good --and this takes place in any bestowal of grace. That a mind should so be uplifted by God is not against nature but above the capacities of nature (ST 2a 2ae 175.1 ad2).

To be created in God's image means that man shares God's capacities of intelligence and will to a much, indeed infinitely, lesser degree. Only a creature made in God's image, if we take this to mean created with an intellect, could be raised to a vision of God. Creatures below man, though they can be said to resemble God to a lesser extent, do not possess the image of God that man does. Animals know nothing at all in the sense of understanding a thing's essence. They have no intellect. They can only gaze with their eyes, not with a mind. For such an animal to experience rapture would not be possible. It would require an intellectual capacity they do not have.

Man is from the beginning *created* in the image of God. The image is not something that he acquires at some point during the course of his life. Man's being created in this way at once inscribes in him a final end and also endows him with the capacities -intellect and will -that will play a part in the actualization of that end. But these capacities by themselves and without God's help cannot take man as far as his nature would have him go -to the vision of God. So from the start, man is destined for an end, the beatific vision, that he cannot accomplish solely by his own capabilities. Man's nature alone is not for his end. That man needs God is not a sentimental notion for Aquinas. It is based on his understanding of the limited nature of the human person combined with man's final end.

Another difficulty arises out of the necessity for an outside source, namely God, to raise the mind to a higher level. Naturally it is beyond human power to force God's hand in the elevation of one to rapture. Simple petitionary prayer does not suffice to elicit the desired response from God. Instead the initiative in rapture belongs to God. But attributing to God complete control over whether or not rapture occurs creates a problem concerning free will.

Does God force anyone to experience rapture? Aquinas has enough regard for human freedom to be interested in safeguarding it from coercion from on high by God.

Now recall the universal longing for happiness, ultimately experienced in a vision of God's essence in heaven. Since this longing is universal, anyone God might select to elevate will already desire to behold God's essence directly. Even if such a desire to see God remains hidden its possessor, it remains fundamental and prior to all other desires. For Aquinas, a person can be mixed up about what they want, and even an atheist wants to see God's essence in the end. Therefore, when God elevates a person to rapture, that person's ultimate desire is being fulfilled. God nudges the person in the direction she already wants to go, rather than pull her toward himself kicking and screaming.

There are two more reasons why rapture does not involve coercion. First, God's omniscience is assumed, so there can be no doubt about whether he is correct about what our desires are. If God could miscalculate about our desires, then it would seem wrong for him to act on the assumption of what they are. Since there is no such danger, and God is absolutely certain that everyone wants to see his essence, there is no chance of his causing an experience that someone would rather not have. Second, although Aquinas does not analyze who would be most likely to experience rapture and who would be less so, the people he seems to be talking about are the most devout (he holds up Moses and Paul as examples), those who without rapture would at least come to such a knowledge of God as is possible in this life. These are the kinds of people who, if offered a choice, would choose to see God's essence. So these particular people are not being forced to do something against their will, not only in the sense that the beatific vision is a fundamental desire buried beneath the more pressing desires they profess, but rather that they have a conscious desire to see God.

Above we noted that Aquinas thinks that having knowledge without sensation in rapture does not destroy human nature. A further question is exactly how a person can cognitively without sensation, and how the human intellect can see God's essence. In other words, what kind assistance is God providing that makes it possible to see him? Aquinas speaks to the issue:

The divine essence cannot be seen by created intellect except through the light of glory, of which the psalm speaks, in *thy light we shall see light*. There are two ways in which a man can participate in this light. First, by an immanent form. Thus with the saints made blessed in heaven. Secondly, by a sort of transient affection, as was said of the light of prophecy. In this way was the light in St Paul when he was rapt up (ST 2a 2ae 175.3 ad2).

To understand this passage it is necessary to be familiar with Aquinas' analogy of intellectual light. He speaks of the light of natural reason, which refers to the power of the intellect to illuminate that which is intelligible. This intellectual light allows the mind to "see" what it is trying to know in the form of phantasms, as material light allows the eye to see objects. Although the intellectual light is sufficient for the vast majority of our experiences, given our instantiation in matter, it alone is not sufficient for knowing God's essence. Thus the additional "light of glory" is necessary. The light of glory signifies that light which in heaven God continually bestows upon the intellect and which fits the intellect to be able to receive the intelligible form of God's essence. The exact way in which the light of glory operates is difficult to ascertain. It does seem clear that the light of glory is not just an intensification of the natural light of our intellect, whose object is primarily material things:

The intensification of a natural power does not suffice, since this vision is not of the same essential type as the vision proper to a natural created intellect. This is evident from the difference between the objects of these visions (SCG III 53.5).

One important aspect of the light of glory is that it is not a gift separate from God himself, but rather is a part of himself. According to Aquinas, the three things present for God's knowledge are in fact the same thing. God's knowledge, the light which enables God's knowledge, and the

object of God's knowledge: these are all in fact God himself (SCG 53.2). This is because God knows everything through the forms of all things which are eternally present in himself. The light of glory is a participation in the light by which God also knows himself. By our participation in that light we know what God knows, namely himself, although incompletely and according to the capability of our finite minds.

The occasion of rapture might occur as follows. On a certain day Paul is functioning like a normal human being, with his sensual and intellectual faculties working in tandem to facilitate his knowing the things around him as well as his acting in his environment. He is, say, spending his time making tents or in prayer. At that moment God initiates rapture in Paul by removing from his mind all sensible knowledge, adding an intellectual light which enhances his intellectual capability, and impressing his own form directly upon Paul's mind. Two points that are as yet unaccounted for: the state of Paul's body during rapture and the return to normal functioning after rapture is finished.

We can answer what happens to Paul's body during rapture by further detailing the example. Apparently, when Paul was piecing together his tents or engaging in his meditation, all bodily activity at the moment of rapture would stop and his body would go entirely limp. His physical condition would essentially be one of sleep, but minus dreams or any other activity which would in any way draw on the senses or memory. The activity of the senses must stop altogether, because of the purity of intellect required to see God's essence, as Aquinas says:

There must be abstraction from the sense powers, because their activities can lessen the soul's application to intellectual knowledge (ST 2a 2ae 175.6 ad3).

The cessation of sense experience during rapture while the intellect is occupied with viewing the divine essence does not equal a separation of the body from the soul.

During rapture the body remains in a dormant state in which basic bodily functions necessary for survival, vegetative functions, continue.

When rapture ends the light of glory that enables the mind to see God's essence is withdrawn, and the intellect returns to its previous mode of operation. Since memory can only function with the use of phantasms which store sense impressions, and since sensation ceases during rapture, the question of whether one can remember the experience at all arises. Even if sensation did not cease during rapture and phantasms could be formed, no phantasm could be formed of the divine essence because phantasms can only be formed of finite things. Thus it seems that rapture would resemble what happens when someone faints but cannot remember doing so. At the end of rapture, Paul might just sit up and return to constructing his tent, surprised to find out from others that he was laid out on the ground for a few minutes (or so). But Aquinas maintains that the divine essence makes a sort of impression upon the intellect and this impression contributes an abiding idea of the experience.

St Paul, after he had ceased seeing God in his essence, remembered the things he had known in that vision, by means of some sort of intelligible species behind by the experience as an inclination; so too when sense-realities vanish, some impressions remain in the soul. Subsequently turning to phantasmata he recalled the intelligible species. That is why he could not think of or express in words all the knowledge he had (ST 2a 2ae 175.4 ad3).

Perhaps the phantasms of which Aquinas speaks are memories of the experience of rapture in general, but not memories of God's essence itself, since these could not be formed. Thus Aquinas believes that someone can know that she experienced rapture, but the details or content of the experience cannot be adequately expressed. Yet it is difficult to see how such a memory could ever be formed at all. It does seem that one would recall absolutely nothing of rapture. The

memory that Aquinas allows for will be vague enough to make a point about the value of our memories of mystical experiences.

The obstacles to a cogent account of rapture are many. So why should Aquinas go through the trouble of trying to overcome the many objections to a taste of the beatific vision in this life? It is true that the beatific vision had in the afterlife is essential to Aquinas' understanding of human nature. His belief that there must be a way for human desire to be satiated leads him to posit the heavenly life as one which puts desire to rest. Thus, the heavenly beatific vision has a philosophical motivation, namely, man's final end. Rapture, on the other hand, cannot be as philosophically driven. Being a temporary experience granted to a select few, it has little to do with human nature as a whole. Rapture has the feeling of being tacked on somehow, as if Aquinas' project could get along just as well without it. Rapture must have an explanation, however, for one with Aquinas' attitude toward the inviolability of sacred texts. Such an attitude gives him a theological motivation for validating rapture. If, like Aquinas, one understands St. Paul's own account of mystical experience to be the same as seeing God's essence in this life, then rapture needs to be capable of rational explanation, which Aquinas always seeks, in spite of arguments to the contrary.

This outline of rapture brings out a couple of points worth mentioning. First, that it is God who takes the initiative in rapture, and that human effort can do nothing to bring about a vision of the divine essence. Second, rapture goes so far beyond normal human capabilities that thinking about it once it ends would be an impossible task, and equally impossible would be the task of communicating what the infinite is like in human language. I will examine the importance of these two points for any discussion in which mysticism is an issue in the next section.

## **THE PROBLEM WITH PROPHECY**

The psychic has become a more and more accepted figure in society. In Baton Rouge alone, those who desire to do so can avail themselves of the services of Brigitte Nielson's Witches of Salem Network, La Toya Jackson's Psychic Network, Sister Ann, Sister Eve, The Palm Beach Psychic, and Super Psychic Jo-Jo, among others. All these psychics claim to possess knowledge to which those without their abilities do not have access. Such knowledge might include the state of a deceased loved one, the fidelity or lack thereof of a significant other, the winner of the next presidential election, or this week's lucky lottery numbers. These examples show that the psychic claims to have knowledge that is temporarily or spatially distant from oneself, or that is of a different plane of existence, such as the land of the dead.

In addition to psychics, those who are today deemed prophets also claim to have knowledge of future events, though for prophets this knowledge does not usually result from supernatural means. Prophets are also often characterized as reactionaries whose views are contrary to majority opinion. Luddites, for example, refuse to make use of technology for fear of its corrupting influence on what they consider to be most essentially human. In doing so, these individuals act against the grain of society as a whole. They claim that the effects of technology have had an overall negative impact on human life. Beyond their descriptive claims of how technology has harmed society, some Luddites take their argument a step further. They predict that the resources used to maintain our technology will one day be depleted, and the technological infrastructure on which society has come to rely will crumble. The disaster will be multiplied because most of society, trained to let technology do the hard work for them, will be ill-equipped to provide themselves with basic necessities. Thus, Luddites who foresee and warn against cataclysmic future function as "doomsday prophets". Most other forms of modern prophecy, including religious omens concerning Armageddon, also take the form of predictions concerning future disasters.



Old Testament scholar Joseph Jensen, in tracing the development of prophecy in ancient Israel, describes prophecy as having a different focus than that of today. He notes that, in its earliest stage, prophecy had at its center a religious community that aimed for communion with God. He states:

The activity described as "prophecy" here is ecstatic prayer induced by rhythmic dancing and singing. This is a type of enthusiasm found frequently in religious movements, akin to that of later Mohammedan dervishes (149).

This early form of prophecy, then, had less to do with predicting the future or revealing some other hidden information than with the building up of religious devotion. What Thomas Aquinas calls prophecy could best be described as a mixture of elements of modern day psychic powers and the early form of prophecy practiced in ancient Israel. The claim made by psychics is that by supernatural means they enjoy knowledge off limits to the rest of us. This claim parallels Aquinas' definition of prophecy: "Prophecy is firstly and principally a knowledge; prophets in fact know realities which are remote from the knowledge of men" (ST 2a 2ae 17 1.1 c). Unlike many psychics, however, Aquinas does not locate the source of prophetic knowledge in an innate talent that runs in one's family or a level of mental concentration that one has worked hard to master. Similar to the earliest prophets, Aquinas always associates prophecy with God. He claims that wherever there will be prophecy it will occur only with God's assistance, and always within the limits He chooses to set (ST 2a 2ae 172.1). This means that the knowledge the prophet receives is not debatable. God is the one who determines what a prophet knows and what a prophet does not. Thus the practices of psychics and early prophets help to highlight the two essential features of prophecy for Aquinas: it concerns knowledge and is dependent on God.

There is another characteristic of prophecy which Aquinas and the psychic would likely agree upon. Aquinas holds that a prophet can never be wrong. A prophet who receives knowledge from God himself receives with that knowledge an absolute certitude that what has been received is true and is from God.

About what the prophet knows by a spirit of prophecy he has a maximum of certitude, and he is certain that these truths are divinely revealed to him.. Otherwise if the prophet himself did not have certainty, that faith, which rests upon the utterances of the prophets, would not be certain. A sign of prophetic certitude is offered to us in the story of Abraham. He was admonished in prophetic vision, and prepared himself for the sacrifice of his only son; this he would never have done were he not absolutely certain about the divine revelation (ST 2a 2ae 171.5c).

Here Aquinas uses an example dear to the heart of Kierkegaard. In Kierkegaard's eyes Abraham is thrust into an uncertain situation by God's request that he take up the mountain to the place of sacrifice, and he is torn between God's will and an ethical rule, which are in Thus faith is just the renunciation of what is certain, ethical norms, for what is uncertain, God. Aquinas understands Abraham's motivations in an opposite way, because to him Abraham was acting with supreme confidence that the order to sacrifice Isaac had issued from God and ultimately could not be in conflict with God's other commands.

The most obvious of conclusions arises: could Abraham have only *thought* he received a from God, and could he not feel as certain of the fact as an Abraham who really did hear God? Even if the certainty that God gives as a part of prophetic knowledge were of a supernatural kind, a super-certainty, the certainty felt by someone who only *thought* God had spoken to them could still be very great, and great enough to act as motivation for carrying out what the pseudo-prophet believes God's will to be. Aquinas does address the issue of whether a prophet can confuse God's message with the prophet's own utterances. His view is that even if a prophet does occasionally mistake his own voice for God's, God speedily comes to the prophet's aid in such situations and ensures that the prophet knows the source of the prophecy (ST 2a 2ae 171.5c).

The problem with this account is that it only applies to prophets. Whenever Aquinas talks about prophets, he means the real prophets, those who actually receive prophetic knowledge and certainty from God. He is not referring to pseudo-prophets, those who only think that they have received prophetic knowledge from God. Unlike for the real prophets, Aquinas offers no safety net designed to prevent a pseudo-prophet from getting the idea that God has spoken to him. There is no such safety net, because the situation of pseudo-prophets on a mission is a common one.

What ought to make it clear that prophecy is pertinent to the discussion so far is that rapture is a division of prophecy. All the conditions for prophecy are met in the case of God is the only one who can initiate the event; rapture features knowledge of a kind remote from human knowing; one can have a certainty that rapture has occurred. Since there nothing preventing a pseudo-prophet, there must also be nothing preventing a case of pseudo-rapture.

Thus I can determine two problems for rapture's being appealed to in a debate of the kind described in Section One. The two problems correspond to prophecy's two main features: the role of God and the knowledge that is received. First, the problem concerning God: just as people can be mistaken about whether they received a prophecy from God, so they can be mistaken about whether they have experienced rapture. And since in a case of pseudo-rapture someone can exhibit confidence about the veracity of their experience that rivals that of someone who really experienced rapture, the fact that someone seems "really sure" they saw God should not be convincing. The first problem, then, is that we cannot determine whether or not God is the source of a claimed experience of rapture.

The problem concerning knowledge is more closely related to the topics discussed in previous sections. If rapture anticipates the heavenly experience by temporarily having God provide the conditions necessary for seeing His essence, then it is doubtful that the knowledge of

God one receives will stay with one after rapture ends. Once the light God provides to the mind is removed, *if* one forms a memory of the experience (which is itself doubtful because of the suspension of all sensation), then that memory will at most be a vague recollection of what the experience was like, and it will not be a memory of what God is like in Himself. Not only would the suspension of sensation prevent the formation of a memory of God's essence, but God's essence could never be encapsulated in a finite mind anyway. Rapture resembles the case of a hit and run automobile accident. If we are sideswiped, we may be able to recount how "It all happened so fast" or "All I heard was a loud boom", while at the same time being unable to recall any description of the car that rammed us. Similarly, seeing God's essence might be remembered as glorious, majestic, even far out, but it would impossible to recount what God is like from the experience.

As Aquinas describes, rapture entails a wresting away of our intellect from its reliance on sensation. Thus rapture bears the mark of a very personal experience, a kind of private audience with God. In the same way that God's essence cannot be brought back to one's community, so one's community cannot be brought to God's essence. The initiative is totally God's. When we find something of interest to us, we often want to tell our friends and bring them to it so that they can see it too. But anyone who experiences rapture would have to be content with simply having had the experience. Even if the awe or wonder that stays with one achieves a deeper understanding of the distance between God and us, and even if this leads one to perform deeds that benefit others, rapture is meant for the direct benefit of the individual to whom it is granted to see God.

I have stated my most important reasons for why what is at the root of rapture cannot be communicated to others. But this does nothing to change the fact that some people choose to publicize their private mystical experiences in forums which are not receptive to such. I have

provided some conceptual reasons for why an experience like rapture cannot be shared, but in the next section I will show how attempting to communicate mystical experiences in a debate about God with those who have assumptions far different from one's own can be detrimental to the advances such a debate might make.

## CONCLUSION

In a debate about God's existence and characteristics based on scientific evidence, scientists play an essential role because their work provides the evidence upon which the debate is centered. If such a debate is to ever get off the ground in the first place, if philosophers are to ever be able to formulate any accurate assessments of God from the available evidence, then the evidence by the scientists must meet a consensus of what counts as "good science". It is necessary for scientists who are competent with regard to the proposed evidence to truthfully evaluate the quality and accuracy of the evidence that is used in the debate. Without scientific facts that have the respect of the scientific community, there can be no reputable starting point which the debate can embark.

Some notable areas which are relevant to the debate are the manner of the origin of life, the issue important to Flew, the genesis of the universe, and the nature of evolution. Arguments for God's existence and for His being an intelligent being have been advanced on the basis of each issue. On the other hand, the scientific facts in each case have been challenged, or of those who agree on the facts, there are those who dispute an interpretation of the facts that leads to God's existence or that describes Him. Thus, in order to understand the different approaches to scientific evidence, we can imagine a cascading series of debates, each with a different emphasis concerning certain scientific facts.

The first debate is of a purely scientific nature. It revolves around the accuracy of scientific facts and resembles what we commonly think of as hard science. It involves scientists with training in their field who are able to competently discourse about scientific evidence. Their aim, through observation and testing, is to arrive at the facts about the natural world. Disagreements at this level of debate take the form of some scientists thinking that the world is one way and other scientists thinking the world to be another way. These disagreements can be resolved by the accumulation of more and more evidence and a cogent presentation of that

evidence. Those scientists who are in agreement about scientific facts can move on to the next level of debate -how those facts should be interpreted. Scientific evidence can be understood to support further claims that are drawn out from that evidence. These claims are not like those of the first debate, which could be settled by perhaps having two scientists look into a microscope see who is right. Instead, two scientists can understand evidence in the same way, while one takes a step further and thinks that the facts mean something else must be true, and the other believes that the facts have no meaning beyond themselves, or that the conclusion that can be drawn from them is not the one drawn by our first scientist. This is the situation among those scientists who believe that God can be argued for on the basis of some facet of the natural world, and those others who believe no such argument can be made, or those who see the world as ruling out God's existence. This debate features scientists who do philosophy and philosophers who are scientifically trained.

So we come to those who agree on the scientific evidence and also assert that the evidence supports the claim that God exists. The focus of this debate is what can be known about God from the available evidence. The participants in this debate are more likely to be philosophers than scientists, and the scientists who are involved will be acting in the capacity of philosophers. Since philosophers do not usually have an extensive enough scientific background to recognize the accuracy of the scientific claims on which the assertion that God exists rests, they are dependent on the abilities of competent scientists who vouch for the reliability of the scientific evidence involved in the debate. Yet after the proper scientific work is in place, thanks to the scientists, the philosophers can begin to speculate about God on the basis of the evidence.

At this point it seems that the debate would be stalled by Aquinas' view of the limited knowledge of God we can have in this life. Even if God's existence can be argued for on the basis of scientific evidence, this same evidence cannot tell us anything about what God is like.

The first place to look in order to avoid this sort of a standstill is to God's intelligence, since it is the most likely attribute to be assigned to God on the basis of scientific evidence. Some of today's most well-known arguments for God's existence are based on what some see as the role of God in the long process of evolution. These arguments are essentially for an intelligent designer. And if intelligence can be agreed upon as an attribute of God, then this opens the door to a series of questions about what God is like. What is the nature of God's intelligence? How is God's intelligence like or unlike human intelligence? Need a being of God's intelligence have a motive to act on the natural world? If so, what might God's motivation be in creating the universe, initiating life, etc.? How could God ever influence events in the material world?

I want to emphasize that answering questions such as these requires recurring to the scientific evidence, though they also involve philosophical work. Asking how God could have created the universe, for example, might draw on a philosophical theory about interaction between material and immaterial entities, but it also means devoting attention to the evidence we have about the first moment of the universe's existence.

The third level of debate is the one for which this thesis has attempted to formulate a guideline. Recall that the participants of the third debate agree that God's existence can be argued for on the basis of scientific evidence, but that the participants have different religious backgrounds and views. Some, the religious participants, may have been believers their whole lives, while still believing that God's existence can be argued for naturally, balancing philosophy and science with their own faith. On the other hand, there may be those like Flew, the scientific participants, who maintained that there is no evidence for God until new scientific discoveries prompted them to change their minds.

The only hindrance to the debate that the scientific participants could cause would be to exercise a prejudice against the religious participants because of their religious views, amounting



to a breach of good etiquette. Remedying this would only require an exhortation to the scientific participants to focus on the arguments offered by religious participants. The same would apply any religious participants who might harbor some prejudice about the scientific participants not being particularly religious. But the religious participants also another danger they must keep in check.

The religious participants can become prophets rather than philosophers. Their religious practices and devotion can sometimes involve what they consider mystical experiences, and these experiences can engender what they to be some certain knowledge of God. The temptation for the religious participants with such experiences would be to introduce the knowledge they have gained in this fashion into the debate. The difficulties of doing natural theology make falling back on mystically grounded assertions even more attractive. When we consider that only a of durable arguments for God's existence have been formulated after thousands of years, each with an equally durable counterargument, the lure to eclipse the whole messy debate by relying on personal experience can seem very great.

Offering a mystical experience as evidence at the third level of debate, however, would a detrimental effect on the debate as a whole. The only thing that this would accomplish would be to reduce confidence in the competency of the religious participants. If the scientific participants see some of their religious counterparts using subjective religious experience as a valid form of argument, they are liable to believe that all the religious participants assume mystical experience to be a legitimate form of argument, a notion that runs contrary to the assumptions on which the scientific participants operate. This casts the religious participants in a poor light because it seems that they can suggest no arguments to which everyone has equal access. They are characterized as intellectual lightweights whose religious beliefs impede their ability to philosophize. Such a result is not what the religious participants ought to aim for.

Instead they should value progress made in the debate, and the best way to achieve this is for all parties involved to advance arguments based on the scientific evidence on which they are in agreement, and hence to restrain themselves from temptation to resort to evidence in the form of mysticism.

What I suggest is that Thomas Aquinas offers an understanding of mysticism that the religious participants could adopt. Aquinas' understanding is built upon his theories of human cognition, the nature of the afterlife, and of prophecy. If the participants of the debate were to understand a mystical experience in the way that does, then they would also see the futility in raising such experiences in debate, because of their ineffability and the serious doubts about our ability to remember them in a significant way. Not only did Aquinas conceptualize mysticism in this way -he also practiced what he preached. To illustrate this, I would like to conclude with the most well-known event from his life.

Thomas Aquinas kept a strict schedule. Throughout a normal day his time was allotted prayer, study, and teaching.<sup>9</sup> One December morning in the last year of his life the friar was celebrating mass. During the liturgy, unknown to his companions and without any flashy external signs, Aquinas was deeply affected by an inward experience. From that point onward, he gave up writing and spoke but little. Reginald, a fellow friar, noticing the alteration in Aquinas' routine and worried about his friend, asked why he would stop writing the Summa, then into its third and final part. After persistent questioning, Aquinas replied, "Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me." (Weisheipl 321). Weisheipl notes that the experience Aquinas had at mass could have been of a physical nature, such as a stroke that would impair one's ability to move and think. This is possible,

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<sup>9</sup> The following account is adopted from Weisheipl.

but Aquinas himself believed he had received some sort of private revelation from God, as seems clear from a later statement of his to Reginald:

Promise me, by the living God Almighty and by your loyalty to our order and by the love you bear me, that you will never reveal, as long as you live, what I shall tell you. All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me (Weisheipl 322).

Thus Aquinas' subsequent actions and the decrease in his writing were in response to a perceived mystical experience, perhaps rapture. He did not proceed to teach on the basis of whatever knowledge he had gained. He did not think it wise to put his experience at the center of a new argument about God. Aquinas' actions have something to say about how to react to mystical experience – to benefit from it if possible, but silently.

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## **VITA**

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