



PROJECT MUSE®

Was St. Thomas Aquinas a Platonist?

Luis Cortest

The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, Volume 52, Number 2, April 1988, pp. 209-219 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1988.0046>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/638495/summary>

WAS ST. THOMAS AQUINAS A PLATONIST?



FORTY YEARS AGO, few students would have called St. Thomas Aquinas a Platonist. At that time he was almost universally recognized as a brilliant exponent of medieval Aristotelianism. In fact, St. Thomas was considered by many to be a "pure" Aristotelian. This position was aptly expressed by Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*:

Aquinas, unlike his predecessors, had a really competent knowledge of Aristotle. His friend William of Moerbeke provided him with translations from Greek, and he himself wrote commentaries. Until his time, men's notions of Aristotle had been obscured by Neoplatonic accretions. He, however, followed the genuine Aristotle, and disliked Platonism, even as it appears in Saint Augustine. He succeeded in persuading the Church that Aristotle's system was to be preferred to Plato's as the basis of Christian philosophy, and that Mohammedans and Christian Averroists had misinterpreted Aristotle.¹

Russell, however, although correct in saying that St. Thomas "had a really competent knowledge of Aristotle," neither knew how his philosophy was different from that which had come before nor had any idea of the extent to which the overpowering influence of Neoplatonism had been felt by almost all medieval thinkers, including St. Thomas. Concerning St. Thomas's Aristotelianism, Wayne Hankey has observed the following:

Indeed one might say that his Aristotelianism should be seen within the context of his Neoplatonism. Certainly he generally reads Aristotle through Neoplatonic spectacles, but more significant is that the movement toward a more positive view of Aristotle is a feature of the later Neoplatonism and especially of its Christian

¹ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 453.

adherents. Nor is it exclusively a feature of the Iamblichan tradition; for Porphyry's view of the first principle is closer to Aristotle's than are the positions of either Plotinus or Iamblichus and his followers, and he is responsible for the assimilation of Aristotle's logic into Neoplatonism after Plotinus's critique. It is perhaps enough to mention that Porphyry, Boethius, and the Arabs provide the main western medieval sources for the knowledge of Aristotle until the time of St. Thomas.²

On the surface, it would seem that Russell, never an admirer of Thomistic philosophy, was neither accurate nor objective in his evaluation of St. Thomas's Platonism. This judgment of Russell's position, however, might perhaps be too severe.

It must be remembered that modern Neoplatonic studies were only in their infancy when Russell's text was first published in 1945. Actually, this scholarship dates, for the most part, from the time of Dodd's edition of Proclus's *Elements of Theology* in 1933.³ In fact, only in recent years have these studies been cultivated by an impressive number of scholars. Even in the early years of Neoplatonic scholarship, however, there were a few works devoted to St. Thomas Aquinas and Platonism. In 1939, Cornelio Fabro published his important study, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino* in Milan. This work not only stressed the importance of the Platonic doctrine of participation in the works of St. Thomas, but also considered the Thomistic corpus in terms of medieval Neoplatonism. Along with Fabro's works, many others soon appeared focusing on the Platonic side of St. Thomas, including those of L. B. Geiger,⁴ Joseph Santeler,⁵ and Arthur Little.⁶ Some concluding remarks from Little's

² Wayne Hankey, "Aquinas' First Principle: Being or Unity?" *Dionysius*, IV (1980), 147-148.

³ Eric Robertson Dodds, *Proclus. The Elements of Theology* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933).

⁴ L. B. Geiger, *La Participation dans la Philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1942).

⁵ Joseph Santeler, *Der Platonismus in der Erkenntnislehre des Heiligen Thomas von Aquin* (Innsbruck: F. Rauch, 1939).

⁶ Arthur Little, *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism* (Dublin: Golden Eagles Books, 1950).

book, *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism*, are indicative of the scholarship from this period in Thomistic studies:

Whether wittingly or unwittingly he [St. Thomas] taught a Platonic doctrine rejected by Aristotle when he taught participation. That doctrine is only one stone in his building but it is a stone of the arch without which Thomism would collapse. It is not merely fundamental in the sense that its denial would render important doctrines untenable. It is itself of the first importance, central to the system, for it is the doctrine of the relation of man to God. And God cannot be known and creatures cannot begin to be understood unless participation is presupposed; for the first thing true of them is that they *are* creatures, related to God, Being Itself, yet distinct from him by non-being. Therefore the doctrine of participation must be conclusion or premises to every truth in a true philosophy.⁷

By the early 1950s the new direction in Thomistic scholarship had clearly been established.⁸

In 1956, with the publication of R. J. Henle's *Saint Thomas and Platonism*,⁹ scholars working in this field were offered a work which not only directly addressed the question of St. Thomas's alleged Platonism but also afforded them an excellent research tool, since Henle's monograph provided the reader with a complete list of references to Plato and Platonic texts which appear in St. Thomas's works. In terms of pure research, no study of this question published before or after Henle's has been as thorough.

Perhaps the most important contribution made by Henle's study is its treatment of St. Thomas's use of his Platonic sources. Henle's thesis is that the Angelic Doctor consistently rejects certain Platonic principles and always interprets the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁸ See Charles A. Hart, "Twenty-Five years of Thomism," *New Scholasticism* XXV (1951), 18-20. For a more detailed discussion of these and other earlier works on the Platonic elements in Thomistic Philosophy see Robert J. Henle, S.J., *Saint Thomas and Platonism: A Study of the Plato and Platonic Texts in the Writings of Saint Thomas* (The Hague: Marinus Nijhoff, 1956), pp. xvi-xx.

⁹ See note 8.

works of the Christian Platonists from his own point of view. This is especially true in the cases of Pseudo-Dionysius and Saint Augustine:

The two most important *Sancti* whose *auctoritas* was universally recognized and with which he had to deal, were Saint Augustine and Dionysius. In both cases, Saint Thomas expressly recognizes, in terms of his own analysis of Platonism, the Platonic background. When critical issues are at point, he consistently uses the Platonic background as a reason for a clear determination within a framework of his own theories. The entire commentary on the *Divine Names* is a sort of general determination of *auctoritates*, in which, text by text, Dionysius becomes an *auctor* of Thomistic positions and in which he is, on critical issues, freed from the force of Platonic principles. The strategy of Saint Thomas thus aligns the *auctoritates* of Saint Augustine and Dionysius on his side of the argument.¹⁰

Another very important point made by Henle is that for St. Thomas Platonic influence can be both positive and negative. If certain Platonic principles are the issue, this influence is considered negative and rejected. However, when the authority of Plato himself is the question, he is seen, along with Aristotle, as a positive figure:

The reduction of positions to the rejected *via Platonica* allows Saint Thomas to turn the full force of his critique of Plato against others by assimilating, to a greater or lesser degree, their positions to Platonic ones. Thus positions of Avicenna, Avempace, and Avicbron are brought under the general condemnation. On the other hand, the *positio-auctoritas* treatment of Plato enables him to use the great names of both the outstanding Greeks—Plato and Aristotle—in constructing his own doctrines and defending his own views. The most extended example of this is in the second part of the *De Substantiis Separatis* where Aristotle and Plato are played off against the errors of subsequent and lesser philosophers. But perhaps the most striking case is the double use of Plato against the Averroistic doctrine of the separated agent intellect. For, in some points, Saint Thomas is able to assimilate Averroistic positions to objectionable Platonic ones while in others he can appeal to Plato

¹⁰ Henle pp. 423-424.

in direct opposition to Averroes and thus assist him in his effort to deprive Averroes of the support of the Greek tradition.¹¹

The conclusion we can draw from Fr. Henle's excellent study is that St. Thomas drew widely from Platonic materials. He was very conscious of the fact that two of his most important sources, St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, were heavily influenced by the "Platonists." St. Thomas, however, interprets his sources in a personal way, making the texts conform to a view which is less Platonic. When he does accept a Platonic principle, such as the notion of participation, he greatly modifies it so that he can incorporate other doctrines into the principle.¹² The result, therefore, is quite different from the purely Platonic notion. St. Thomas makes use of Platonic doctrine, but he cannot really be called a "Platonist." He is a philosopher who avails himself of all the philosophical ideas at his disposal.

In recent years, a number of scholars have made an effort to examine the Thomistic *corpus* in the context of medieval Neoplatonism.¹³ One such scholar is Wayne J. Hankey. In an im-

¹¹ Henle, p. 425.

¹² Thus, St. Thomas's use of participation is modified by the assimilation of the principle of causality. See Henle, pp. 374-381.

¹³ There are many studies of this type which could be listed. Among the more important in recent years are: Klaus Kremer, *Die neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971). Cornelio Fabro, "The Overcoming of the Neoplatonic Triad of Being, Life, and Intellect by Saint Thomas Aquinas" *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982, pp. 97-108. "The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation" *Review of Metaphysics*, XXVII (1974) pp. 449-491. "Platonism, Neo-Platonism and Thomism: Convergencies and Divergencies" *The New Scholasticism*, XLIV (1970), pp. 69-100. Wayne J. Hankey, "Pope Leo's Purposes and St. Thomas' Platonism" *Atti dell'VIII Congresso Tomistico Internazionale sull'Enciclica 'Aeterni Patris' e nel centenario della fondazione dell'Accademia S. Tommaso, Rome 1980*, ed. A. Piolanti, 1982, VIII, pp. 39-52. "The *De Trinitate* of St. Boethius and the Structure of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas." *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi boeziani*, Pavia, 5-8 ottobre, 1980, ed. L. Oberthello. Rome, 1981, pp. 367-75. "Theology as System and Science: Proclus and Thomas Aquinas" *Dionysius*, VI (1982), 83-93. "The Place of the Proof for God's Existence in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas" *The Thomist*, XLVI (1982), pp. 370-393. Pierre Faucon, *Aspects néo-platoniciens de la doctrine de s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Champion, 1975). (See also note 2.)

pressive study, Hankey has shown that the *summa* as a literary form is actually of Neoplatonic origin:

It is Proclus' invention which the medieval *summa* recreates. Thomas follows Iamblichus' school in the doctrines belonging to this literary development and he is imbued with its formalizing and systematizing spirit. In his Aristotelian and other commentaries, he not only looks at the content through Neoplatonic spectacles but, indifferent to its own form, he divides and restructures it into a systematic chain of arguments. The greatest fruit of this spirit in him is his *Summa Theologiae*. It is, like the *Elements* of Proclus, an explicit, consistently formalized system containing the complete circuit of reality. It begins by justifying itself because of the formal inadequacies of the available writings on the subject. It proceeds to show how its object—God, in himself and as principle and end—can be unified under one formal consideration—the *revelabilia*—in order to produce a science. The whole immense content is divided into components organized in a single form—the *quaestio*—itself a product of that same endeavor to both think and remain faithful to the conflicting authorities which characterizes our Neoplatonists after Plotinus.¹⁴

Hankey then goes on to show how still another literary form is derived from Proclus:

Proclus, mediated by Dionysius, also provides Thomas with a second genre—that for treating God in himself in the *Summa Theologiae*. For this treatise may be regarded as a *de divinis nominibus*. This form was Christianized by Dionysius but the very first tract *de divinis nominibus* is contained in the *Platonic Theology* of Proclus which Dionysius was imitating and transforming.¹⁵

It remains to be seen, however, just how Neoplatonic St. Thomas's philosophy truly is. The fact that the medieval *summa* is, at least in part, a Christian adaptation of a Neoplatonic genre, does not mean that the authors of the *summae* are therefore Neoplatonists themselves. It is not the form of a text which determines the philosophical content. The Angelic Doctor uses the literary forms and terminology available to him to create what is, in fact, a new philosophy. St. Thomas's

¹⁴ Hankey, "Aquinas' First Principle . . ." p. 154.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

new ontological system must be understood on its own terms, and not simply as a further development of earlier systems, different in both spirit and content.

A much more serious argument presented by Hankey in favor of a Neoplatonic reading of St. Thomas is his contention that the ontology of *esse* is, in fact, Porphyrian in origin:

It is of revolutionary import that the Anti-Christian Neoplatonist Porphyry, uniting the One and the first intelligible triad, identified the One and *élat*. It is also significant that he is the source of this doctrine in the Christians Victorinus, Augustine, and Boethius and that they held it well before Thomas. Indeed Thomas is only one in the long line of interpreters of the crucial early texts in Boethius which convey it to the Middle Ages. Finally, it is important that it is Porphyry, not a common scriptural revelation, that stands behind the similar teaching in Arab Neoplatonists like Avicenna. Avicenna and Thomas both maintained that God was the simple act of being and that, in contrast, existence and essence were distinct in creatures. Indeed Avicenna may be one of Thomas's sources of the Porphyrian tradition. If these considerations destroy the notions that Thomas's ontology—his philosophy of *esse*—is unique, or Christian, or a "metaphysic of Exodus", or reflects the Aristotelian rather than Platonist side of his thought, the historical investigations used to establish these views are not therefore useless. What served to distinguish Thomas from Aristotle in this regard—Thomas was thought to have been able to grasp the import of Exodus 3,14 because of the Aristotelian direction of his thought, though his "existential" philosophy of being was contrasted with Aristotle's "essentialism"—in fact rather serves to distinguish his position as Neoplatonic as opposed to Aristotelian.^{15, 16}

On this question, Hankey's argument is one of content rather than form; it is, therefore, truly a philosophical point which is disputed.

Hankey's position is, at least in part, based on the theory P. Hadot adopts in his study, *Dieu et l'être*.¹⁷ If this point is valid, then it is certainly true that the previous scholarship de-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

¹⁷ P. Hadot, *Dieu et l'être* (Paris: Centre d'études des religions du livre, 1978), pp. 57-63.

voted to the "metaphysics of Exodus" is in need of immediate revision. However, even if we conclude that St. Thomas's philosophy of *esse* finds its historical model in Porphyry's identification of the One and *εἷναι*, we still have not shown that his ontology is, in itself, less Aristotelian. Aristotle's own solutions to metaphysical problems are themselves often further developments of "Platonic" notions. St. Thomas's ontology must be understood in terms of the solutions it proposes to ancient metaphysical problems. In particular, St. Thomas's ontology must be seen in the context of Aristotelian aporetic ontology. In his recent monograph, Edward Booth has examined the place of St. Thomas's philosophy within this tradition.¹⁸ Booth's study, which considers all of the major figures in the development of this metaphysical problem from Aristotle to St. Thomas Aquinas, discovers in the Angelic Doctor the synthesis of two lines of ontological thought, the "Cryptoproclean", which refers to "Pseudo-Dionysius's Aristotelianisation of Proclus's ontology"¹⁹ and a more pure form of Aristotelianism, which St. Thomas found in the translation of William of Moerbeke. It is precisely the confluence of these two philosophical traditions which gives St. Thomas's ontology its distinct character:

The ontology of Thomas is neither pure radical Aristotelianism, nor pure Cryptoprocleanism: it is a combination of both, taken together in a far closer union than Ibn Sīnā's union of peripatetic ontology with an ontology of the dependence of possible being on necessary being, with existence extrinsic to the essence of possible things. Albert's reflections on *esse* had led Thomas partially to transpose it into the Aristotelian category of act; and he extended its meaning to include its standing for the whole of the thing. He brought the ontology of the Aristotelian analysis together with an ontology of being, especially of the dependence in being on the Creator, into a single ontology; even though, because of the considerable complexities of each, he could not express these two ontologies simultaneously in their fullness. . . . However, he found

¹⁸ Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 205-267.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

in Pseudodionysian ontology the facilities for including the data of both in a compendious though limited way, in which the Aristotelian data, treated quite unaporetically, were subordinated in an intellectually satisfying way to the philosophy of *esse*. . . . His doxographic reduction of the Aristotelian material to its characteristic points, which demanded the solution, or at least omission, of whatever was aporetic, and the fundamentality of his conception of *esse* as a locus of union with it, allowed the two ontologies to be brought together with the least disturbance to the concepts of each, their relationship facilitated by his own overall uniform stylistic treatment. The search for a total interpretation of Thomas's philosophy as Aristotelian is a vain one; as also the search for a partial Neoplatonist ontology within it, in the sense of integral wholes and parts: neither proposal discerns the way in which it was intended to bring the two elements together.²⁰

Only when we consider all of the diverse elements that work together to form the Thomistic synthesis are we able to understand the true character of St. Thomas's philosophy. All of the parts are in fact distinct; however, together they form a complete philosophical system which offers a unique interpretation of reality. The clarity and simplicity of the Angelic Doctor's thought is evident in almost all the solutions it offers to questions of timeless debate. Thus, St. Thomas's treatment of the problem of how the one and many are distinguished in reality and in perception is both clear and simple:

[U]num opponitur privative multis inquantum multa sunt divisa. Unde oportet quod divisio sit prius unitate non simpliciter sed secundum rationem nostrae apprehensionis. Apprehendimus enim simplicia per composita, unde definimus punctum cuius pars non est vel principium lineae. Sed multitudo etiam secundum rationem consequenter se habet ad unum, quia divisa non intelligimus habere rationem multitudinis nisi per hoc quod utrique divisorum attribuiamus unitatem. Unde unum ponitur in definitione multitudinis, non autem multitudo in definitione unius. Sed divisio cadit in intellectu ex ipsa negatione entis. Ita quod primo cadit in intellectu ens, secundo quod hoc ens non est illud ens et sic apprehendimus divisionem, tertio unum, quarto multitudinem.²¹

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

²¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* v. 2 (I, q. 11 a.2) (New York: Blackfriars, 1963), p. 162.

The Angelic Doctor also knows that this same question can be understood differently from distinct perspectives:

[N]ihil prohibet id quod est uno modo divisum esse alio modo indivisum (sicut quod est divisum numero est indivisum secundum speciem), et sic contingit aliquid esse uno modo unum et alio modo multa. Sed tamen si sit indivisum simpliciter (vel quia est indivisum secundum id quod pertinet ad essentiam rei, licet sit divisum quantum ad ea quae sunt extra essentiam rei, sicut quod est unum subjecto et multa secundum accidentia; vel quia est indivisum in actu et divisum in potentia, sicut quod est unum toto et multa secundum partes), hujusmodi erit unum simpliciter et multa secundum quid. Si vero aliquid e converso sit indivisum secundum quid et divisum simpliciter (utpote quia est divisum secundum essentiam et indivisum secundum rationem vel secundum principium sive causam), erit multa simpliciter et unum secundum quid, sicut quae sunt multa numero et unum specie vel unum principio. Sic igitur ens dividitur per unum et multa quasi per unum simpliciter et multa secundum quid. Nam et ipsa multa non continentur sub ente nisi secundum quod aliquo modo continentur sub uno. Dicit enim Dionysius ult. cap. de Div. Nom. quod non est multitudo non participans uno: sed quae sunt multa partibus sunt unum toto, et quae sunt multa accidentibus sunt unum subjecto, et quae sunt multa numero sunt unum specie, et quae sunt multo specie sunt unum genere, et quae sunt multa processibus sunt unum principio.²²

Clearly, St. Thomas's solution to this problem (and so many others) is both Platonic and Aristotelian. The precision and clarity of the philosophical explanation, which proceeds logically from one established point to another, is the result of many years of devoted study and commentary on Aristotle. From the Stagirite, St. Thomas learned to solve problems in this logical manner. The "Platonic" St. Thomas is found in the constant references to the "cryptoproclean" Pseudo-Dionysius, who is never far away when the most profound philosophical questions are addressed. St. Thomas, however, was neither a "pure Platonist" nor a "pure Aristotelian;" he was (in the nonpejorative sense) an eclectic philosopher who

²² *Ibid.*, (I, q. 11 a. 1) p. 158.

brought together all of the important philosophical currents of his day and created the only philosophy to resolve satisfactorily the metaphysical enigma created by Aristotelian aporetic ontology.

LUIS CORTEST

*Department of Modern Languages
The University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma*