

The Intellectual Ethics of Revealed Truth: A Thomistic Approach

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I

At the beginning of the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], Thomas Aquinas says that “we must first show what way is open to us in order that we may make known the truth which is our object” (SCG I, ch., 3, no. 1).¹ To question ourselves in *this* way is to do what we, today, call *epistemology*. So, in my opinion, in the first chapters of the SCG, Aquinas examines questions belonging to the so-called “Epistemology of religious beliefs.”² Aquinas wonders how we may have the right to claim that God exists and what his attributes are, and to believe the revealed truths.

So understood, epistemology of religious beliefs is part of what I will call “intellectual ethics.” It is less about beliefs themselves—to know whether or not they are justified—than about believers, about *persons* and their *intellectual virtues*. Do they have a blameless and even a superior intellectual life? Or, are they immoral in having received their religious beliefs in the way that they did? In particular, it raises as a central question whether it is consistent with intellectual virtue for a person to receive beliefs by revelation, that is in the name of God. Is it possible to receive truths from the divine external source and donor, through the biblical text itself, or even through those who are purportedly in charge of manifesting the Word of God, and be an epistemologically virtuous, irreproachable person?

¹ All quotes of *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] are from Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis, F.R.S.C. (New York: Image, 1955).

² See Roger Pouivet, *Épistémologie des croyances religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 2013).

My hypothesis is that the opening chapters of the *SCG* may be viewed as a step into the field of intellectual ethics examining the acquisition of religious beliefs from the perspective of intellectual virtue and defending the legitimacy of certain intellectual attitudes.

II

Let us distinguish two accounts of epistemology. What we may call an “epistemology of justification” deals with the norms or rules whose observance ensures the justification of our beliefs and the legitimacy of our claims to knowledge. It does not concern itself with the norms of behavior of a seeker after knowledge, but rather with the question whether what someone believes or claims is backed by evidence; and it debates what does or does not count as evidence and which are the rules by means of which evidence may support, or fail to support, beliefs or knowledge claims. Such an epistemology likewise concerns itself with the reflective control that we exert over our beliefs.

In the second account, epistemology explores intellectual virtues as qualities of character. Our epistemic life is laudable when our acquisition of beliefs depends upon these virtues. However, in the perspective that we find in Aquinas, virtues are not understood simply as *skills* (or competences) that ensure that we arrive at beliefs that are justified by evidence, in the usual meanings given to that term. So, this second account of which I speak here differs from so-called “virtue reliabilism,” for which, ultimately, virtues are simply faculties functioning properly for the maximization of our knowledge.³ An “epistemology of intellectual virtues” in a Thomistic approach addresses the question of what a “good epistemic life” is. So, it is not intended to define justification or knowledge to indicate what are the *right rules* (as in an epistemology of justification) to control beliefs, or even not what are the *right procedures* (as in an epistemology of skills) to acquire beliefs.

In epistemology of the first type, the main epistemic commandment to persons is to believe only on the basis of sufficient evidence. It is essential that this evidence be recognized internally, through an examination of the reasons to believe. Any defense of the legitimacy of revealed beliefs or of any claim to know through revelation will prove, on this basis, utterly

³ “Virtue reliabilism” or “virtue theoretic epistemology” is the sort of position advanced by Ernest Sosa or John Greco. It may be considered to be a form of intellectual ethics, but it is not the form that I here hypothesize may be extracted from the *SCG*.

implausible, and so epistemically blameworthy. Revealed beliefs suppose our complete intellectual dependence upon an external source. We are not in the position to exert any internal control. The standard of such control would itself be received from the same source, and not grounded in our own epistemological initiative. So, in modern epistemology, the primacy of the rule of evidence has led to religious beliefs being deemed to be intrinsically irrational.

As I read the first nine chapters of the *SCG*, Saint Thomas offers, as I have indicated, another epistemology, close to that which I presented above as the “second type”: an epistemology framed in terms of intellectual virtues. Our belief that God exists and in divine revelation presupposes that there is an appropriate mode of apprehending the Gospel truth which is not governed by the rule of evidence, but which is, however, fully legitimate from an epistemological point of view. In order to appreciate this, we would have to highlight an epistemology based upon the value of certain virtuous epistemic attitudes, and not upon epistemic norms that are independent of people and of *who* these people are. We can understand the beginning of the *SCG* as setting up an epistemology of this sort. I am therefore not claiming that Aquinas was a virtue epistemologist on the contemporary model.⁴ Historically, that would not make much sense. I am saying only that, with what we now call virtue epistemology in mind, it may be easier for us to understand what Aquinas proposes in these chapters.

III

The canonical formulation of the evidentialist principle was given by William Clifford: “It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”⁵ So, our legitimate beliefs and knowledge result from empirical data or analytically true propositions, as logical empiricists said in the 1930s. Evidentialism as Clifford formulates it is a norm of intellectual ethics. Notably, Clifford’s famous article “The Ethics of Belief” especially targets religious beliefs and pretends to show that they are immoral. It is required of the believer to prove that he maintains his beliefs without his judgment being vitiated, which can consist

⁴ See my “Was Thomas Aquinas A Virtue Epistemologist?,” in *Analytically Oriented Thomas*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2016).

⁵ Originally published in *Contemporary Review*, 1877; reprinted in William K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan, 1886).

only of putting forward convincing arguments or evidence in their favor. But the religious believer, because his judgment is vitiated by his belief, is quite incapable of that. So, the religious believer is morally blameworthy. Shame on him!

The reason for this condemnation is that the religious believer arrives at a proposition, represented as true, by his own intellectual means. Therefore, no truth is actually given—there is no evidence for that proposition; and especially no truth results from a grace given to creatures who receive it directly (such as the apostles in the Gospel or those who heard the Sermon on the Mount) or through testimony (for instance, those who hear and read the Gospel). It is held to be epistemologically and morally mandatory that our beliefs result from an epistemic control exerted on a proposition regarding which one examines his right to accept it as true. What can be accepted as true is only what a person can hold to be true after an inspection carried out according to the epistemological standards laid down by philosophers, such as Clifford's principle, or those formulated by René Descartes in the second part of the *Discourse on Method*, or John Locke's requirement in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* that belief must be proportionate to the available evidence.

To show that proper epistemic control exerted on our beliefs is incompatible with the immediate revelation of a truth, it is possible to argue in the following way. Suppose this rule: "Accept as true any proposition that is revealed." This would assume a distinctly human capacity to identify a proposition as revealed, a standard of authentic revelation. This standard could be, for example, the recognized status of the one who claims this truth: he is a prophet, he is the Son of God, he speaks with the authority of the orthodox Church. But to be plausible, this standard itself presupposes that the rule of evidence has been respected; for example, if someone speaks in the name of God, his entitlement to do so must be supported by sufficient evidence. Evidence may not itself be a revealed truth. So, an unrevealed truth, acquired according to the rule of evidence, is necessarily the condition of acceptance of any revealed truth. That we must have evidence in favor of the standard according to which a proposition is revealed shows that it is not enough that it is claimed to be revealed to be accepted as such. It is acceptable as revealed, and thus as a truth, *only* on the basis of evidence in which revelation necessarily plays no role.

In the two following quotations from the *Essay*,⁶ Locke appears to me to be reasoning in the manner just described:

⁶ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Basset, 1690).

Whatsoever truth we come to the clear discovery of, from the knowledge and contemplation of our own *ideas*, will always be certainer to us than those which are conveyed to us by *traditional revelation*. For the knowledge we have that this *revelation* came at first from GOD can never be so sure as the knowledge we have from the clear distinct perception of the agreement or disagreement of our own *ideas*. (bk. IV, ch. 18, no. 4)

Whatever GOD hath revealed is certainly true: no doubt can be made of it. This is the proper object of faith; but whether it be a divine revelation or no, reason must judge, which can never permit the mind to reject a greater evidence to embrace what is less evident, nor allow it to entertain probability in opposition to knowledge and certainty. (bk. IV, ch. 18, no. 10)

Modern justificatory epistemology, as exemplified here in Locke's comments on revelation, is then incompatible with the straightforward possibility of revealed truths taken at face value. Revealed truth has always to satisfy a standard of belief to validate it. And this standard must be independent of all revealed origin. Its source is in our own ability of evidential control.

Does this mean that modern epistemology is incompatible with the very fact of being a Christian? Certainly, Locke's intention is not to say that it is. Locke even intended to consolidate the Christian religion on a more secure basis. So modern epistemology was not invented by him (or by others, including Descartes, Hume, and Kant) *to counter* Christianity. But it gets turned into a war machine against Christianity if it is claimed that it is epistemologically vicious to believe in revelation without having sufficient evidence that the revelation is authentic, and that we never have such evidence about revealed truths. If Christian beliefs cannot satisfy the rule of evidence in demonstrating the authenticity of revelation (i.e., its derivation from an authentic source), then they are in a terrible position.

The only solution for the Christian believer would be to believe without, or even against, pertinent evidence. For, to be a Christian, you have to recognize certain revealed truths as revealed and known as truths in the name of God *because* they are revealed. You have then to believe them true without satisfying the rule of evidence. This is not optional or accidental for a Christian. It seems even to be constitutive of Christian faith. Christ declares this in John 18:37: "It is for this that I was born, and that I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth," a passage that Thomas quotes in *SCG* I, chapter 3, precisely at his very beginning. If modern

epistemology cannot tolerate such a mode of access to truth through revelation, in certain cases merely because someone utters it—most especially if that someone is Jesus Christ, or God himself—then there are three possibilities: (1) we have to renounce Christianity in the name of evidentialism; (2) we have to reject evidentialism in the name of Christianity; (3) we must be fideists.

The fideist solution (3) consists in asserting that religious belief, at least as faith, is not supposed to be justifiable by reasons, or even that it consists in ignoring reasons. This may be understood as a reaction to the impossibility of founding religious beliefs, and especially revealed ones, upon evidence. The fideist attitude as an answer to modern epistemology has not been systematic, of course. But among Christian philosophers, the critique of natural theology, and even of philosophical theology, has been constant since Locke.⁷ Concerning (2), if it is immoral to reject evidentialism, as Clifford suggests, then to believe that a proposition is true because it is revealed, without sufficient evidence in the authenticity of the revelation, would be intellectually vicious.⁸ On any such view, (2) would be a promotion of intellectual immorality.

IV

Does Thomas offer an argument that can respond to a critique of the epistemological irresponsibility and intellectual immorality of religious beliefs? In particular, can he dispute what is presented in modern times as the irresponsibility and immorality of the claim to have received a truth by revelation?

Regarding “divine things,” Thomas distinguishes between two kinds of truths. Natural reason suffices for the first kind. Man comes, by the sole effort of his reason, to know that God exists and to know some of

⁷ The important development of a phenomenology of religion (in France in particular, with Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and many others today) could also be the result of the evidentialist critique; it would make more sense to think of religious engagement in terms of the subjective experience we have rather than in terms of objective requirements which beliefs must respect. So, it would be the whole program of an epistemology of religious beliefs, focused on the question of their legitimacy, that would have to be canceled for the benefit of a philosophical investigation of what it is like to have religious experience. What then is important is the phenomenal description of our religious conscience and epistemological and ethical investigations.

⁸ Indeed, Clifford claims more: for him it would be simply immoral, not merely an intellectual offence.

his properties: eternity, immateriality, simplicity, perfection, goodness, uniqueness, infinity, omniscience. The other sort of truths “go beyond any enterprise of reason” (*SCG* I, ch. 9, no. 1). One of the examples given by Thomas is thus “that God is triune and one.” The epistemological doctrine is so summarized: “There are therefore in God intelligible truths which are accessible to human reason, but there are others which absolutely exceed its force” (ch. 3, no. 3). All truths are in God: some are accessible by reason, others only by revelation.

This distinction between two kinds of truths determines the division between the main two parts of the *SCG*. The first part consists of books I–III and concerns the truths of religion that reason can achieve by itself. Book IV then turns to revealed truths. But Aquinas does not mean to say that these truths are not rational. Reason proceeds first from the bottom—the empirical apprehension of reality—upwards to the knowledge of God as creator and providence. Then, reason receives the truths from above. But we have not to take advantage of this distinction between what we know by reason and what we know by revelation to assume a duality of truth. These are therefore the same truths which we come to know by reason, if we are able, and in any case, by revelation—and for some of us, only by revelation.

There are said to be “two kinds of truth” only in the sense of there being truths that we apprehend in two different ways; truth itself is the same in both cases. Thus, truth, in metaphysics and rational theology, on the one hand, and in revelation and revealed theology, on the other, is truth in one and the same sense. As Thomas puts it: “I say: ‘two kinds of truth in divine things,’ placing myself not on the side of God, who is the one and simple truth, but on the side of our knowledge, which relates to various ways to divine realities” (*SCG*, I, ch. 9, no. 1). The truths of metaphysics and rational theology may be demonstrated against a reasoning opponent. Let us suppose he denies the existence of God, or that he questions his eternity. Reason can be persuasive against such denials, by means of arguments in good standing. By contrast, in the truths of revelation and revealed theology, the doubter recognizes the authority of Sacred Scripture, and the way to convince him lies in demonstrating which truths are actually revealed. Thus, as Thomas says, the difference between the two kinds of truth does not exist on God’s side. It is a difference that concerns only intellectual debate. First, it concerns the ways in which we can apprehend truth. Second, it concerns how we can defend truth. And third, we must also consider the opponent against whom one defends truth. Is it someone who does not recognize the authority of the Old Testament? An unbeliever? Or someone who does not accept some religious truths but who nevertheless

shares a large part of the Bible (for instance, the Old Testament) with Christians, recognizing its authority?

That Christian philosophers are able to apprehend certain important religious truths by natural reason makes them different from those who are unable even to understand the arguments of rational theology. Christian philosophers are also importantly different from those who might be able to understand truth but who are deprived of the time necessary for metaphysical speculation, being too much busy with temporal affairs. Some others, who might have the time, are simply lazy, because one needs intellectual drive to apply your reason to difficult metaphysical and theological matters. Acquiring those religious truths that reason can bring us to presupposes certain virtues, both intellectual and moral. It is these human qualities that are called upon in the contemplative life. This is why the *SCG* opens with this quote: "My mouth shall meditate truth, and my lips shall hate impiety" (Prov 8:7). The examination of truth commensurate with reason, as opposed to the acceptance of truth only in the name of God, is thus a matter of wisdom. The speculative courage that moves one to look for reasons for fundamental truths about divine things is exactly what underpins the best life—the life of contemplation—for beings such as we are. Concerning the truths to which reason cannot lead us, one also needs a spiritual effort sustained by the virtues of the mind: it requires a disposition to hear the voice of God, mainly in the Old and New Testaments, and the virtue of trust, without which one can learn nothing through testimony.

Why is the first chapter of the *SCG* devoted to "the office of the wise man"? It is because we have to determine how *the desire to know divine things* is to be *ordered*, conducted in the best way. This is typically a matter of intellectual ethics. For some truths, the desire must be ordered by the virtues of *wisdom* (knowledge of the highest causes of reality), *science* (systematic demonstrative knowledge), and *understanding* (capacity to grasp the first principles of demonstration). For certain other truths, the desire must be ordered by the welcoming of revelation and testimony through an appropriate relationship with the Sacred Scripture. Other virtues are called upon as well: an understanding which supposes the virtue of studiosity (as a part of the virtue of temperance). It supposes also the capacity to listen to the word of God and the love of Truth, which is yet another virtue.

The truths that we access by reason and by listening to the word are equally gifts of God. The difference between them is epistemological, not ontological. Our ways of apprehending truths are linked to our intellectual attitudes, which are, in part, related to our social lives. Do we have the time

needed to pursue wisdom and to discern the word of God? Do we have the virtues of mind that make us sensible to the gift of the Holy Spirit, without which the reasons for faith and even what one should believe in faith—which is revealed—would escape us?

On the basis of such considerations, one can understand better, it seems to me, this famous passage:

There is, then, in man a threefold knowledge of things divine. Of these, the first is that in which man, by the natural light of reason, ascends to a knowledge of God through creatures. The second is that by which the divine truth exceeding the human intellect descends on us in the manner of revelation, not, however, as something made clear to be seen, but as something spoken in words to be believed. The third is that by which the human mind will be elevated to gaze perfectly upon the things revealed. (*SCG* IV, ch. 1, no. 5)

The final sentence pertains to the condition of our intellectual life after bodily death, in eternal life. That aspect of Thomas's account will not be considered in this paper. But the significance of the greater part of this passage should by now have been made pretty clear.

V

An objection to my reading of the *Summa contra gentiles* would be that my interpretation takes us quite far from the letter of the texts. In the first three books of the *SCG*, Aquinas discusses arguments whose merits must be controlled, but he says nothing about the virtues to be exercised in this operation. And in the fourth part, where he discusses truths that reason cannot itself account for—revealed truths—he does not present this as a question of virtues. But let us take a closer look.

Thomas affirms, as I have already said, that, in the first place, the truths about God to which natural reason arrives are offered to men as objects of faith and, in the second place, that the truths which reason reaches are not of a nature different from those that are revealed—it is the modality of access that differs, as we noted earlier. Therefore, the philosopher, when he accepts the first truths, does not normally depend upon controlling his judgment antecedently through rational argument. He does not await the arguments of reason about the truths to be believed. It was the same for Bertrand Russell: he did not wait until he had finished *Principia Mathematica* to believe that $2 + 2 = 4$! He believed it and later offered an account

of the legitimacy of his belief. The philosopher does not have to summon the truths about the things of God to appear before of the tribunal of reason. His job is not to determine whether we have the right to have the beliefs that we hold. He is not looking for the data that might lead him to say to God: "Well, that's credible. I can accept to believe that." The philosopher receives a "supernatural inspiration," as Aquinas says (*SCG* I, ch. 4, no. 1). He does not entertain faith while he aims to justify it on the basis of arguments. On the contrary, he argues *from* faith. That is the venerable tradition of *fides quaerens intellectum* and *credo ut intelligam* inherited from Saint Augustine and Saint Anselm.

The legitimacy of our belief in the truths of the faith and our assurance of knowing them do not therefore rest on the prerequisite of epistemological control. Rather, it presupposes a triply appropriate intellectual attitude: first, appropriate to who we are, rational beings who perfect themselves in their intellectual lives; second, appropriate to the kind of truths to be known, whether or not they can be attained by reason; thirdly, appropriate to interlocutors, according to whether they share or name with us the Sacred Text, and whether they share it in part or not at all.

At the start of the *SCG*, Thomas in no way proposes a set of epistemological rules to be observed in the inquiry. What he proposes does not resemble at all Descartes's *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, or the *Discourse on the Method*! There are no rules, principles, or deontological claims. But Aquinas makes explicit the conditions of intellectual ethics about divine things and God as Truth. He describes the kind of attitude, wisdom, that should be adopted. We must not to be boorish; we have to move away from occupations that would distract us from the contemplative life; we have to overcome laziness or what he also calls, in the *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] II-II, question 35, *acedia*. There, he says, that "spiritual good is a good of every truth, sorrow about spiritual good is evil in itself." We have not "to walk as also the Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind, having, their understanding darkened," says Aquinas (*SCG* I, ch. 4, no. 3) by quoting the Epistle to the Ephesians (4:17–18); we have to be wise, and it is possible only by receiving the gift of wisdom.

We are able to arrive at the inquiry concerning the aforementioned truth only on the basis of a great deal of labor spent in study. Now, those who wish to undergo such a labor for the mere love of knowledge are few, even though God has inserted into the minds of men a natural appetite for knowledge. (*SCG* I, ch. 4, no. 3).

Those who enter into the inquiry realize, in the virtue of studiosity (see *ST* II-II, q. 166), their nature which includes a natural desire to understand and to know. This studious inquiry therefore does not aim to *justify* Christian beliefs, or to ground them rationally, as if such truths were waiting to be justified and grounded by us. Inquiry correctly managed makes us better through understanding arguments, but that is because of the character of the truths we thereby gain access to. The very exercise of reason is so difficult in dealing with such truths that we would never comprehend their rational support without starting from them, as something given to us.

VI

I now borrow a distinction made by Roderick Chisholm, that between *methodist* epistemology⁹ and *particularist* epistemology, although I use it in my own way and not in Chisholm's.¹⁰

The methodist epistemology asserts that determining what we are warranted in believing or claiming to know presupposes the prior formulation of epistemic criteria or rules. Beliefs satisfying the prescribed criteria or satisfying the defined rules are justified. This epistemology is ambitious: we can discover all the genuine epistemic and cognitive content that enters our minds by methodically following these rules. It is for the philosopher to discern and formulate the laws of thought. The Clifford Principle is an example of such an epistemic criterion or rule.

The particularist epistemology is modest. By examining our beliefs, we can make the norms of their rationality explicit. We are rational by nature, even though we are fallible—because our reason is weak, especially when it comes to divine things that lie so far beyond it. But this does not mean that the alleged beliefs and knowledge concerning divine things are illegitimate until they are brought before the Tribunal of reason. Beliefs are legitimate as long as nothing militates heavily against them. In that case, it would be intellectually vicious to pretend they are innocent. We must reject a belief because it is wrong, not because it does not satisfy a principle such as Clifford's or meet certain other deontological requirements. What matters then in the formation of beliefs is a virtue like the desire of truth, or what could also be called an epistemic sensibility. The obstacles to a good intellectual life are intellectual pride, temerity, confusion, obsessive thoughts,

⁹ "Methodist" is not at all related to Methodism as a Protestant confession, but to the notion of "method," as in the *Discourse on the Method*.

¹⁰ Roderick Chisholm, "The Problem of Criterion," in *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 61–75.

and other epistemic vices, not the absence of epistemic control according to some previously determined criteria.

Chisholm distinguishes two questions, A and B:

A: What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge?

B: How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge?"

And he says:

Going back to our questions A and B, we may summarize . . . three possible views as follows: there is skepticism (you cannot answer either question without presupposing an answer to the other, and therefore the questions cannot be answered at all); there is "methodism" (you begin with an answer to B); and there is "particularism" (you begin with an answer to A). I suggest that the third possibility is the most reasonable.¹¹

In my opinion, Thomas is particularist. He adopts an epistemology which, starting from beliefs, examines the reasons we have for having them, but does not search for their justification according to some philosophically mandated epistemic criteria. There is not a kind of epistemic extra-territoriality of the philosopher in charge of controlling the warrant for beliefs in terms of his own formulas for rational justification. This attitude of Descartes, Locke, and the majority of modern philosophers is not accepted by Aquinas in connection with religious beliefs.

But is this not epistemological lightness on the part of Aquinas? Is it not an epistemologically culpable laxity? Is it not "foolishness"? Is it not about following fables of ignorant people (*indoctas*), as Aquinas himself formulates this imagined reproach (*SCG* I, ch. 6)? Not at all. We are able, according to the conditions of an appropriate intellectual attitude such as I have characterized, to achieve religious truth by reason. This does not amount to justifying them, but to understanding them as best we can. And doing so, the kind of reasonableness that it supposes—wisdom—realizes our nature at its best, since our nature is rational. Concerning revealed truth, it is no less rational than for unrevealed truth; rather, it is even more rational. That there are things the knowledge of which we cannot bring under natural reason shows that, among divine things, there are some that

¹¹ Chisholm, "Problem of Criterion," 69.

are still more divine than those the belief in which we can support with natural reason. This is indeed the case with the Trinity.

What has been passed on to us in the words of sacred Scripture may be taken as principles, so to say; thus, the things in those writings passed on to us in a hidden fashion we may endeavor to grasp mentally in some way or other, defending them from the attacks of the infidels. Nonetheless, that no presumption of knowing perfectly may be present, points of this kind must be proved from sacred Scripture, but not from natural reason. For all that, one must show that such things are not opposed to natural reason, in order to defend them from infidel attack. This was also the method fixed upon in the beginning of this work. (*SCG* IV, ch. 1, no. 10)

Thomas indicates that some men, at the very beginnings of Christianity, were so divinely inspired “. . . that simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and the readiest eloquence” (*SCG* I, ch. 6, no. 1). They were followed, “without the violent assault of arms or the promise of pleasures and (what is most wonderful of all) in the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors, (by) an innumerable throng of people, both simple and most learned, who flocked to the Christian faith” (ch. 6, no. 1) This account of the formation of Christian beliefs by the intervention of the Holy Spirit would certainly not satisfy the methodist and evidentialist epistemologist. But Thomas, being a particularist, is humble even concerning such beliefs, which are not guilty before the tribunal of reason even if they have not been shown to satisfy some externally specified epistemological criteria. Aquinas intends to show that the Christian does not believe absurdities and is not epistemologically guilty when he claims to have received revealed truth. What is needed for receiving such truths by a rational creature, whether a brave simple person or one of the wise, is simply intellectually virtuous attitudes, which are, for Aquinas, simply common-sensical.

VII

Could it not be objected that, as he is interpreted here, Thomas chooses a convenient epistemology at will, because it helps him to justify unjustifiable beliefs? Would it not greatly facilitate the task in the epistemology of religious beliefs to resort, as Thomas does, to a so-called epistemology

of virtues? Is this not simply a way of ensuring, at little epistemological expense, an overly easy path to purported “knowledge”?

Must we think, in response to such questions, that we have no choice: that epistemology is necessarily what the moderns have proposed? That we must accept the necessity of finding norms for the control of beliefs, norms that we must respect if we are to be considered epistemologically virtuous believers? We will of course be reminded that, historically, methodists (and skeptics) prevailed over particularists. We will be told that to claim that we may legitimately start from what we believe, or pretend to know, in order to determine the true extent of our knowledge is to beg the epistemological question, and that epistemology must come first. The *Summa contra gentiles* would then have to begin, like Descartes’ *Meditations*, by setting aside all beliefs until a preliminary criterion of their legitimacy is settled.

However, for Thomas, as I have tried to explain, Christian beliefs do not wait for reasons to maintain them. Christian faith is even, by its very nature, a reason to be confident in our rationality. The truths of natural reason are not opposed to the truths of the Christian faith: faith, as virtue, is the fullest realization of our nature, of our rationality. This is why certain divine truths can be reached by reason, and also why we do not stop being rational beings, or stop living fully rational lives, when we confidently receive the gift of revelation.

Now, although the truth of the Christian faith which we have discussed surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless that truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith. For that with which the human reason is naturally endowed is clearly most true; so much so, that it is impossible for us to think of such truths as false. Nor is it permissible to believe as false that which we hold by faith, since this is confirmed in a way that is so clearly divine. Since, therefore, only the false is opposed to the true, as is clearly evident from an examination of their definitions, it is impossible that the truth of faith should be opposed to those principles that the human reason knows naturally. (*SCG* I, ch. 7, no. 1)

The work of the sage is therefore, on this account, to make explicit the two kinds of truths which are given. It is not to set up, like the modern philosopher, criteria which would be the epistemological preconditions of truth. If we read Aquinas as starting from the modern

epistemological project, we misunderstand him radically; and we also see only shortcomings. Thomas says:

And so, in the name of the divine Mercy, I have the confidence to embark upon the work of a wise man, even though this may surpass my powers, and I have set myself the task of making known, as far as my limited powers will allow, the truth that the Catholic faith professes, and of setting aside the errors that are opposed to it. To use the words of Hilary: "I am aware that I owe this to God as the chief duty of my life, that my every word and sense may speak of Him." (*SCG*, I, ch. 2, no. 2)

Unacceptable as it may be to moderns, it is crucial to understand that Aquinas is speaking *from* the truth. He receives it, and meditates on it in two ways, by argument (in the first three books of the *SCG*) and by interpretation (in the fourth book). It is not a question of exercising control according to epistemological standards that the philosopher establishes, according to an ethics of control, but of upholding the truth according to an ethics of intellectual virtues. The only method for truth is to live a good intellectual life, whereby we realize our rational nature at its best. In Aquinas's religious epistemology, "no opinion or belief is implanted in man by God which is contrary to man's natural knowledge" (*SCG* I, ch. 7, no. 4).¹²

The difficulty for a contemporary reader of the initial three parts of the *SCG*, and also of the first chapter of its fourth part, is to free his mind, as he reads, of the epistemological model which has been dominant in modernity. Modern epistemology appeals, as is evident in Clifford, to the notion of epistemic responsibility. We must be intellectually responsible for our beliefs. But the difference with Aquinas is that for him epistemic responsibility is a matter of ordered receptivity to truth, and therefore an epistemic particularism. It is not an a priori control of reasoning, and therefore not a question of "method" in the sense of Descartes and his followers. The following passage from the once-famous book by Father Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, indicates, in flowery writing, what it is really a question of a Thomistic particularist:

¹² On this topic, see Roger Pouivet, *L'éthique intellectuelle, une épistémologie des vertus* (Paris: Vrin, 2020).

Responsiveness of the soul to the ineffable spring, its filial and loving dispositions, lay it open to receive light after light, and ever-increasing fervor and rectitude. Truth, when loved and realized as a life, shows itself to be a first principle; one's vision is according to what one is; one participates in truth by participating in the Spirit through whom it exists.¹³ N.V

¹³ Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges, O.P., trans. M. Ryan (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), 24.