

Expositions of the Text: Aquinas's Aristotelian Commentaries

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. . . libro Aristotelis, qui Peri hermeneias dicitur,
multis obscuritatibus involuto, inter multiplices
occupationum mearum sollicitudines, expositionem
adhibere curavi, hoc gerens in animo sic altiora pro
posse perfectioribus exhibere, ut tamen iunioribus
proficiendi auxilia tradere non recusem.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Epistola Nuncupatoria* of
the Commentary on Aristotle's *Perihermeneias*

A slow but steady swing of a pendulum has been discernible during the second half of the twentieth century in an old debate on the nature of the Aristotelian commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas.¹ In 1950, Jean Issac, O.P., wrote

Leo Elders, Daniel Frank, Jorge Gracia, Mark Jordan, David O'Connor, Thomas O'Meara, O. P., Robert Pasnau, and Paul Weithman were all most generous in reading and commenting on various versions of this article, and I am most grateful for their help. Versions were read at a colloquium of the Notre Dame philosophy department, at the 1994 meeting of the Midwestern Division of the American Philosophical Association, at the 1994 Summer Thomistic Institute at Notre Dame, and at a conference at the University of Fribourg (Suisse), and I have benefited from comments made by members of the audience on these occasions. Of course, opinions expressed herein are to be ascribed to me alone.

1. Cardinal Cajetan, the first to provide a detailed commentary on one of Aquinas's works, addressed the problem in *Angelici doctoris Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Summa Theologica in quinque tomos distributa: cum commentariis Thomae de Vio Cardinalis Cajetani; et elucidationibus literalibus P. Seraphini Capponi a Porrecta Ordinis Praedicatorum* (Patavii: ex typographia Seminarii, 1698), IIa-IIae, 172, art. 4, commentaria Cardinalis Cajetani; and in subsequent centuries a succession of Thomistic scholars offered their opinions. Influential in shaping the twentieth-century debate were Pierre Mandonnet, O.P., in *Siger de Brabant et L'Averroïsme Latin au XII^{me} Siècle* (Louvain: Institut superieur de philosophe de l'Universite 1911), pp. 39–42; and Martin Grabmann, *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben: Abhandlungen sur Geschichte der Scholastik und Mystik* (Munich: Hueber, 1926), pp. 266–313. More recent contributions include Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry, O.P., and D. Hughes, O.P. (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), pp. 203–32; Georges Ducoin, S.J., "Saint Thomas Commentateur d'Aristote," *Recherchés de Philosophie* I (1955): 85–107; R. P. Ioannes Issac, O.P., "Saint Thomas Interprete Des

that in the Aristotelian commentaries Aquinas expresses his own philosophical views, just as the *Summa theologiae* puts forth his theology.² In this *appropriationist* reading (as I shall call it), what Aquinas presents in the commentaries are his own views, albeit only philosophical ones which do not rely on Christian revelation. Etienne Gilson countered and claimed that Aquinas's "commentaries on Aristotle are so many expositions of the doctrine of Aristotle, not of what might be called his own philosophy."³ And more recently Mark Jordan argued that these works are of the genre of a literal commentary, and such a commentary "does not assert that the text under explication is true. It asserts only that the text merits careful reading."⁴ In this *historicist* reading (as I shall call it), Aquinas intends only to offer an exegesis of Aristotle's writings, not to present his own views on the matters under discussion.

In what follows I shall argue that Aquinas's commentaries on Aristotle were guided by sophisticated hermeneutical principles missed by both the appropriationist and the historicist. However, Aquinas gives no extended discussions of the principles which guided his commentaries on Aristotle, as he did for the interpretation of scripture and Christian patristic writers.⁵ Aside from brief and general remarks, such as the epigraph above, it is only

Oeuvres D'Aristote," in *Scholastica Ratione Historico-Critica Instauranda* (Rome: Bibliotheca Pontificii Athenaei Antoniani, 1951), pp. 353–63; Etienne Gilson, whose remarks are brief but influential, in *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955), p. 367, and in *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 282; James A. Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 272–285; Joseph Owens, C.Ss.R., "Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator," in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), pp. 213–38; René Antoine Gauthier, O.P., "Saint Thomas et L'Ethique a Nicomaque," in *Sentencia libri politicorum. Tabula libri ethicorum*, Leonine Edition of Thomas's *Opera Omnia* 48 (Rome, 1882–), i–xxv; and the preface to *Sentencia libri De anima* in *Opera Omnia* 45, pp. 293*–88*; Ludwig Hödl, "Philosophische Ethik und Moral-Theologie in der Summa fratris Thomae," in *Thomas von Aquin* (Berlin: Zimmermann, 1988), pp. 23–42; Mark D. Jordan, "Thomas Aquinas's Disclaimers in the Aristotelian Commentaries," in *Philosophy and the God of Abraham: Essays in Memory of James A. Weisheipl, O.P.*, ed. R. James Long (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991), p. 104, and in *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas*, Etienne Gilson Series 15 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992); Francis Cheneval and Ruedi Imbach, in the *einleitung to Prologe zu den Aristoteleskommentaren* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1993), pp. xiii–lx.

2. Issac, "Saint Thomas," p. 355. Although others may not have asserted this view as starkly as Issac, it is not uncommon to find in the literature writers citing, without further comment, passages in the Aristotelian commentaries when they are trying to discover Aquinas's own views on some philosophical issue. Such a procedure implicitly endorses Issac's position.

3. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, p. 367.

4. Jordan, "Thomas Aquinas's Disclaimers," p. 104.

5. For a discussion of the principles which guided scriptural interpretation, see, for example, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.9 and 10 and the preface to the commentary on the Book of Job. For those that guide his reading of patristic writers, see the preface to *Contra Errores Graecorum*. Hereafter the *Summa theologiae* will be referred to as *ST*.

from a careful study of his texts that we can infer the best account of these commentaries. My strategy here shall be, first, to argue that the now dominant historicist reading cannot explain certain passages in which Aquinas's views clearly intrude in his commentaries, and for this I shall offer representative examples of three kinds of such passages. Second, I shall contend that if we take seriously Aquinas's dialectical treatment of authorities, and of what determines the meaning of an author's words and the content of his or her thoughts, we can see that for Aquinas the interpretation of Aristotle's texts would have not only allowed but also required the interpreter to bring to bear his or her own views on the truth of the issue under consideration.

I

Although not wholly uncontroversial, the following theses constitute a common view about the nature and circumstances of composition of Aquinas's Aristotelian commentaries.⁶ First, Aquinas wrote the commentaries for pedagogical purposes, and the intended audience was students in the arts, whose course of studies would have been focused primarily on the works of Aristotle.⁷ Second, Aquinas wanted to help his students understand Aristotle's thought as it is expressed in his texts, not to present own. As he often writes in the commentaries, Aquinas's concern is with understanding the "words" or the "intention" or the "mind" of Aristotle, and therefore he was not interested in passing judgment on Aristotle's claims or in constructing his own account of the matter. Third, he was concerned that in those places where

6. Very prominent dissenters from the following account include Gauthier and others who endorse his fundamental claims, such as Hödl, Cheneval, and Imbach. Gauthier claims that as a theologian Aquinas saw his tasks as those of a sage, to proclaim truth and refute error. In Aquinas's Aristotelian commentaries he attempts to refute certain perennial theological and philosophical opinions thought to be in conflict with Christian revelation. Thus, in *De anima* commentary, he attempts to refute the materialism of the pre-Socratics and the idealism of Plato and to extract from Aristotle's texts a philosophical account of the soul, valid for all times, which could give the Christian a better understanding of the truth about human beings, as this is revealed by the word of God. Due to limitations of space, I will not discuss Gauthier's understanding of Aquinas's commentaries here but confine myself to another reading. Nevertheless, I believe that Gauthier's position is extremely important and interesting and that my central claims here can enable us to understand Aquinas's project in the commentaries even if we adopt his approach. An explanation of how this is so, however, will have to await another occasion.

7. As a 1255 decree of the University of Paris makes clear, the texts lectured on and studied in the Arts Faculty of Paris were the known works of Aristotle, some works falsely attributed to Aristotle, and a handful of other works; *Chartularium universitatis Parisiensis*, ed. Henricus Denifle, O.P. (Paris: Parisii: ex typis fratrum Delalain 1889), vol. 1, pp. 277–79. The education in Dominican houses of study seems to have followed closely that at Paris (pp. 385–86).

Aristotle's works were in conflict with orthodox Christian doctrine, or at least thought to be so, his students would not be led to take up heretical opinions. This concern would, of course, have been heightened by the Latin Averroist controversies at Paris from the mid-1260s until the mid-1270s.⁸

These theses give us a historicist reading, with a minor twist: Aquinas wrote the commentaries to help students understand Aristotle's writings, but he brought in Christian doctrine where Aristotle's texts were in conflict with, or thought to be in conflict with, orthodox doctrine. If these assumptions are correct, we would expect Aquinas to do several things in the commentaries: (1) for the most part, he would, prescinding from any judgments on the truth of Aristotle's claims, simply help the reader understand Aristotle by providing as exegetically careful and accurate a commentary as he could; (2) he would, however, try to protect the reader from heterodoxy by noting where Aristotle's views are in conflict with orthodox doctrine; and (3) he would show the reader that where Aristotle's arguments were in conflict with the faith, they were not valid and sound demonstrations with necessary conclusions, and thereby show that correct philosophical reasoning does not conflict with divinely revealed doctrine.⁹ To a great degree, these expectations are fulfilled.¹⁰

In certain passages, however, Aquinas's own theological and philosophical views intrude in places and in ways fundamentally discordant with the essentially historicist reading just recounted. What follows is not an

8. Weisheipl claims that Aquinas undertook the writing of the commentaries in response to the controversy over Latin Averroism at the University of Paris. Aquinas wrote them, Weisheipl contends, to keep students from Averroistic heresy while they attempted to understand Aristotle's works. Gauthier and Jordan argue that this could not have been his initial motivation for writing, for the first commentary, on *De anima*, was written between December 1267 and September 1268 at Santa Sabina in Rome, before he returned to Paris and entered the Averroistic fray (Gauthier, preface to *Sentencia libri De anima*, pp. 283*-94*; Jordan, "St. Thomas's Disclaimers", p. 105). Still, even if we grant Gauthier's and Jordan's point, because Aquinas wrote the commentaries not for his peers but for students, he naturally would have paid special attention to those places where Aristotle's doctrine seemed to conflict with Christian doctrine and take care that his students would not have been led to heretical views. When we turn to the relevant passages in the commentaries, we do find evidence of this concern.

9. As Aquinas writes, "If the adversary believes none of that which has been divinely revealed, there is no way to prove the articles of faith through arguments, but only to refute arguments against faith, should he bring any forward. Since faith is founded on infallible truth and it is impossible that something contrary to truth be demonstrated, it is clear that the proofs brought forward against faith are not demonstrations, but refutable arguments" (*ST* 1.1.8). This and all other translations of Aquinas are mine.

10. A good example of a passage in which Aquinas pursues these goals is found in *In octo libros physicorum Aristotelis expositio* 8.2.986 (hereafter *In physica*). There Aquinas presents a careful exegesis of the text and shows where Aristotle's claims do and do not conflict with faith. (Aquinas writes, "And one part of this, namely, that *motio* always was, is incompatible with our faith. . . . But another part is not

exhaustive list but representative examples of three sorts of passages which are problematic for the established account.

Suggestive Glosses

In the famous passages in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7 and 8, Aristotle argues that a life of contemplation is the highest happiness for a human, although a life of moral virtue according to practical wisdom is happy in a secondary way:

Hence it is clear that both the moral virtues and prudence are about composites. The composite virtues, properly speaking, are human insofar as a human being is a composite of soul and body. Thus also a life which is according to these (viz., according to prudence and moral virtue) is a human life, which is to say an active life. And consequently the happiness which consists in living this life is human. But the contemplative life and happiness, which is proper to the intellect, is separate and divine.¹¹

In one reading this gloss is a straightforward summary of some of Aristotle's key claims in these chapters. Aristotle, as Aquinas recognizes, is contrasting two kinds of happiness that one may achieve on earth.¹² The first consists in living a life in accordance with the moral virtues and practical wisdom; the second consists in living a contemplative life, one whose happiness is the excellence of the activity of the intellect. The latter sort of happiness, the excellence of reason, Aristotle writes, "is a thing apart [*κεχωρισμένη* in Aristotle's text; *separata* in Aquinas's translation],"¹³ for it is the excellence

wholly contrary to faith. . . . We hold by faith that at some time the substance of the world began to be, but, on the other hand, it would never cease to be.") Aquinas contends that insofar as Aristotle's arguments are successful, they do not undermine Christian faith. ("If anyone rightly examines the arguments here presented, the truth of faith cannot be efficaciously assailed by such arguments.") In the course of this *lectio* he adamantly rejects Averroes's interpretation of Aristotle. This and similar passages are strikingly consonant with Weisheipl's views. See, for example, *In duodecim libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio* 7.5.2495–99 (hereafter *In meta.*); *In decem libros ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio* 1.9.113–17 (hereafter *In ethica*); *In Aristotelis librum de anima commentarium* 3.9.726 (hereafter *In de anima*); *In libros Aristotelis de caelo et mundo* 1.4.64–66 (hereafter *In de caelo*). The numbers in all references to the Aristotelian commentaries are to the book, *lectio*, and paragraph number in the Marietti editions.

11. *In ethica* 10.12.2115.

12. Aquinas writes, "*ille qui vacat speculationi veritati, est maxime felix, quantum homo in hac vita felix esse potest*" (*In ethica* 10.11.2110).

13. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.8, 1178a22 trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), vol. II.

of the activity not of the composite of intellect and body but of the intellect alone. Hence, it is not a human happiness, the excellence of the activity of the whole human person, but is something apart or separate. And it is divine because its activity is most akin to [συγγενεστάτη; *cognatissima*]¹⁴ or some likeness of [ὁμοίωμα; *similitudo*]¹⁵ the activity of God, which is contemplation.¹⁶

For Aquinas's Christian audience, however, these words would have suggested something more, and Aquinas's glosses encourage this further suggestion. For them the life of perfect contemplation is a thing apart also in the sense that it is enjoyed after one's earthly life, when one beholds the divine essence and knows other things through beholding the divine essence.¹⁷ This activity of the intellect is separate or apart in the further sense that the intellect is actually separated from its earthly body, and one lives a life apart from earthly life. Aquinas encourages this suggestion when, immediately after the passage quoted above, he writes, "To learn this much about this matter at present is sufficient, for whatever else which can be made known with certainty is beyond what pertains to the proposition at hand. [Aristotle] treats this in the third book of the *De anima*, where he shows that the intellect is separate."¹⁸ According to Aquinas's understanding of the third book of *De anima*, Aristotle argues that the intellect is separate in the sense of being separable from the body and is destined for an immortal life after the death of the body.¹⁹

The term 'divine' (*divinus*) would also suggest more to Aquinas's readers than seems clearly expressed in the text at hand. In one place Aquinas glosses Aristotle's claims by saying that the intellect is something divine in us, and he adds, "plainly, a human participates with respect to his intellect in a divine similitude."²⁰ Aquinas's readers would have been reminded of his understanding of the doctrine in the book of Genesis that humans are made in the image and likeness of God.²¹ Moreover, since he is here speaking about perfect happiness or beatitude, his comment would have suggested the scriptural claim that when we behold the divine essence in heaven, "we will be like [God], for we will see him as he is" (1 John. 3:2). Aquinas understands this state as the perfection of our assimilation to God.²²

Although Aquinas does not explicitly attribute these Christian understandings to Aristotle's words in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7 and 8, he does not

14. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.8 1178b24, 1179a26.

15. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.8 1178b25.

16. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.8 1178b21–22.

17. *ST* 1.12.6–13.

18. *In ethica* 10.12.2116.

19. *In de anima* 3.10.742–43.

20. *In ethica* 10.11.2106.

21. "Manifestum est autem quod in homine invenitur aliqua Dei similitudo, quae deducitur a Deo sicut ab exemplari. . . . Et ideo in homine dicitur esse imago Deo, non tamen perfecta, sed imperfecta" (*ST* 1.93.1).

22. *ST* 1.93.4.

discourage their suggestion, and in some places his comments encourage them. This is difficult to understand on a historicist reading. If he is trying to understand and help his readers understand Aristotle's views, it seems that he should be as interested in making the differences between Aristotle and a Christian view known as he is in making similarities known. It would count against neither Aristotle nor Christian doctrine to admit that a pagan philosopher did not fully grasp what could be known through Christian revelation about perfect beatitude for humans, and it would discourage the overly zealous Aristotelianism of some Averroists. But Aquinas seems interested in encouraging suggestions of a Christian understanding of Aristotle's claims, not in marking differences.

Ambiguous Glosses

In *Metaphysics* 12.9.1174b15–34, Aristotle considers the nature of divine thought. He begins with puzzles. Does divine thought have an object or not? Is its substance the faculty of thought or the act of thinking? If it has an object, does it think of itself or of something else? And if something else, the same thing always or something different? Does it matter whether it thinks of the good or any chance thing? Aristotle then briefly argues that the divine thought is of that which is most divine and precious, which is God, and it is changeless, for its substance is the act of thinking. He concludes, "Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking."²³

Aristotle's theology appears at odds with a Christian view. When he states, "Either [the divine being] thinks of itself or of something else," he clearly seems to imply that one but not both of the alternatives is true.²⁴ In adopting the former alternative, that God's thinking is of his own thinking, Aristotle rejects the latter. But this sharply contrasts with Christian theology, according to which God not only knows but also providentially orders and guides His creation.

In his *lectio* on this text, Aquinas sets forth Aristotle's arguments and claims clearly and follows the text closely. After stating Aristotle's conclusions, he writes,

We should also consider that the Philosopher intends to show that God does not understand another but himself, insofar as the thing understood is the perfection of the one understanding, and of the one who is to understand. And it is evident that nothing else can be understood

23. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1074b33–34.

24. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1074b22. Aquinas's own translation of this line uses the disjunction *aut* rather than *vel*. The former, but not the latter, tends to imply that only one of the disjuncts is true.

by God in such a way that it is the perfection of his intellect. Nevertheless it does not follow that all other things are unknown to him: for in understanding himself he understands all other things.²⁵

Aquinas then justifies the final sentence in the above comment by arguing that the First Mover understands Himself perfectly, and "the more perfectly some principle is known, the more perfectly is its effect known in it."²⁶ Because "the heaven and all of nature" depend on God, it is clear that "God, in knowing himself, knows all things."²⁷ Aquinas concludes by countering a possible objection that God's knowledge of things other than himself denigrates his dignity.²⁸

This gloss is ambiguous. On one reading, Aquinas intends to set forth not only what Aristotle explicitly claims but also what Aquinas recognized, and expected his readers to recognize, followed from Aristotle's claims. But if this is so, Aquinas's reading is clearly tendentious. He adopts an interpretation which goes beyond and even conflicts with Aristotle's texts, one which is shaped by Aquinas's own views. Such a reading is clearly at odds with a historicist account of the commentaries.

A second possibility is that Aquinas intends, after presenting Aristotle's views, to tell the reader what does or does not follow from the philosopher's claims, even though Aristotle did not recognize these consequences. Such a practice is understandable, a historicist may argue, because this is an issue on which Aristotle's claims seem to be in conflict with orthodox doctrine, and Aquinas would wish to show that there is no genuine conflict between the truths of revelation and the conclusions of natural reason. But even in this reading, which is more innocuous for the historicist, it is hard to understand why Aquinas left the text ambiguous and did not acknowledge the differences between Aristotelian and Christian doctrine, as he does elsewhere.²⁹

Tendentious Glosses

In *Metaphysics* 2.1.993b23–30 we find the following passage:

A thing has a quality in a higher degree than other things if in virtue of it the similar quality belongs to the other things as well (e.g., fire is the hottest of things; for it is the cause of the heat of all other things); so that that which causes derivative truths to be true is most true. Hence the principles of eternal things must always be most true (for they are not merely sometimes true, nor is there any cause of their being, but

25. *In meta.* 12.11.2614.

26. *In meta.* 12.11 2615.

27. *In meta.* 12.11 2615.

28. *In meta.* 12.11 2616.

29. See n. 10 above.

they themselves are the cause of the being of other things), so that as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth.

Aristotle's argument begins from this principle: if x is the cause of F in y , then x is more F than y . He applies this to the causes of truth: if x is the cause of the truth of y , then x is more true than y . He concludes that the principles of eternal things are most true, for (1) they are always true, and (2) they are the cause of being (and hence truth) of other things, though they have no cause of their being (and truth).

A key phrase in this compact and obscure passage is "cause of being" (αἰτίον τοῦ εἶναι; *causa ut sint*). Aristotelian commentators generally read the passage in the light of *Metaphysics* 12 and the "eternal things" to be the celestial spheres, the celestial bodies they carry and their attributes, and the "principles of eternal things" to be the separate substances which correspond to each sphere. There is no hint there of any doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.³⁰ Rather, the separate substances are principles of the spheres in that they move them as final causes. Thus the separate substances are "causes of being," not in the sense that they are causes of the being of the celestial spheres and bodies themselves, but in the sense that they are principles of the eternal *motion* of these eternal spheres, which they bring about as final causes.

Aquinas reads the *Metaphysics* 2.1 passage otherwise. His comment is for the most part clear, straightforward, and well grounded in the text. But near the end, regarding the reasons why the principles of eternal things are most true, he writes,

These principles have no cause but are the cause of the being of other things. And because of this they transcend the celestial bodies in truth and being: although [the celestial bodies] are incorruptible, nevertheless they have a cause not only of their movement, as some have thought, but also with respect to their being, as the Philosopher here expressly says.³¹

Aquinas believes that Aristotle is claiming that the separate substances are causes of the being of the spheres, not only of their motion. Aquinas finds in this text a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Having found such a doctrine expressed here, Aquinas goes on to interpret other lengthier passages, such as *Physics* 8, in light of it.³²

30. Aristotle insists in the strongest terms that motion, and hence substances, are eternal (*Metaphysics* 12.6, 1071b6–7); and he gives no indication that he feels there is a need for a cause or principle of their existence.

31. *In meta.* 2.2.295.

32. See especially *In physica* 8.2.974. Aquinas attributes to Aristotle a notion of creation *ex nihilo* but a creation that was from eternity and not in time. Such a notion of creation was not wholly foreign to Christian thought. Boethius endorses it and attributes it to Plato; *Philosophiae consolatio* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1960), lb. 5, pr. 6, 109–10.

If we isolate the passage in *Metaphysics* 2.1, Aquinas's reading of "principles of eternal things" and "cause of being" is possible. Taking the whole corpus into account, however, the evidence from other Aristotelian texts is too slender to suppose he held a full-blown doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The interpretation which Aquinas explicitly rejects, that the First Mover is the cause of the motion and not the existence of eternal things, seems clearly preferable. Aquinas's reading of Aristotle seems biased by his Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Since Aquinas was not generally a careless reader of Aristotle's texts, his comments on these passages are difficult to understand in a historicist account of his intentions.

Although large portions of the commentaries consist of careful and commendable exegeses with occasional comment and elaboration, as the historicist would expect, there are places where Aquinas's own views seem to shape his comment on and interpretation of Aristotle's text, as the appropriationist might expect. Thus some have been inclined to think that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P. claimed that while Aquinas showed great concern with the literal meaning of Aristotle's text, he engaged in "reverential exegesis" in which "the principles and the first steps toward truth included in the text will be brought, so to speak, to their ripening."³³ Chenu quoted Cajetan: "Very often, [St. Thomas] glosses Aristotle as Philosopher, not as Aristotle as such; and thus, in favor of truth."³⁴ But how, in Aquinas's own understanding of his project, do the exegetical and constructive elements fit together, and what sort of work results? If Aquinas intended exegesis of Aristotle but allowed his own views to intrude, it would seem that he did was bad exegesis. If, on the other hand, he intended to construct and present his own views and yet did so in the context of what appears to be a literal exegesis of Aristotle, it would seem that he knowingly confused the reader.

What is needed is an account of how the exegetical and constructive elements fit together in a coherent understanding of these works. In the next section I shall try to identify the hermeneutical principles behind Aquinas's procedure and the factors which gave rise to these principles.

II

Aristotle was for Aquinas and his contemporaries not simply an ancient philosopher but also an authority (*auctoritas*). For them the writings of an authority were not texts to be simply learned and parroted; they were, rather, aids in one's inquiries into truth. Dialectical reasoning provided a

33. Chenu, *Understanding Saint Thomas*, p. 207. See also Ducoin, "Saint Thomas," who takes a similar position.

34. Chenu, *Understanding Saint Thomas*, p. 207.

method by which authoritative claims could be used in one's inquiries. In this section I shall first consider the dialectical treatment of authorities, highlighting certain aspects that, I shall argue, influenced Aquinas's commentaries on Aristotle. Central to this sort of treatment is a distinction between an author's understanding of a key word or phrase and a fuller, more adequate account which the author may have only vaguely expressed or even imperfectly recognized. Subsequently, I shall consider aspects of Aquinas's views on linguistic meaning and mental states which further clarified and justified this distinction. We can then begin to discern the hermeneutical principles which guided Aquinas's commentaries on Aristotle.

Authorities and Dialectic

In the twelfth century Peter Abelard wrote *Sic et Non*, a juxtaposition of divergent claims of authorities on 158 theological issues. Although collections of the sayings of authorities were not uncommon before Abelard, his work is distinguished by its systematic character and logical perspicuity. Abelard's 158 questions are divided into three parts, which together cover the range of issues in Christian theology.³⁵ Each question arises from a point on which there are apparently divergent authoritative opinions, and the opposition among them is rather starkly presented.³⁶

Although some have suggested that Abelard contrived surreptitiously to undermine accepted authorities, the prologue to the work suggests that his intention was the opposite. He hoped the collection of sayings "would stimulate young readers to the greatest effort in inquiring into truth" for "through doubting we come to inquiry; through inquiring we learn the truth."³⁷ Faced with an apparent conflict between authorities, Abelard makes clear that one's first tactic should be to attempt to reconcile the authorities by showing that the conflict is merely apparent.³⁸ He offers in the prologue several strategies by which the dicta of authorities might be reconciled and conflict eliminated. Central to most of these is close attention to the signification of terms and to the context of statements.

35. The first part (qq. 1–105) concerns faith, God, divine power and providence, angels, the fall, redemption, and Christology. The second part (qq. 106–35) concerns the sacraments. The third part (qq. 136–58) concerns Christian ethics.

36. On how Abelard's work is traditional and how innovative, see Jean Jolivet, *Arts du Langage et Théologie chez Abélard*, Etudes de Philosophie Médiévale Series (Paris: Vrin, 1982), especially pp. 238–51.

37. Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non: A Critical Edition*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976–77), p. 103.

38. Abelard recognizes that reconciliation will not always be possible and recommends that in such a case, "The authorities are to be brought together and the one of stronger testimony and better confirmed is to be held as preeminent (*Sic et Non*, p. 96)."

We find here what we can label, somewhat loosely, an Abelardian approach to the dialectical treatment of authorities. Among the important features of this treatment are (1) an identification of issues on which divergent authoritative opinions exist, which issues in turn become questions for the inquirer; (2) an assumption that authoritative opinions carry weight in deciding a question, although this may not be absolute;³⁹ thus (3) an assumption that for any question a resolution is to be preferred *ceteris paribus* if it can be harmonized with authoritative sayings; and (4) strategies for reconciling resolutions to questions with authoritative sayings which emphasize the signification of words and the context of statements. It was by following such a procedure, Abelard believed, that beginning from doubt one could engage in a fruitful inquiry that leads to truth.

Abelard's approach was carried into thirteenth-century universities by Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*, which was to become the standard text for theological instruction, and by the institutionalization of the disputed question.⁴⁰ As both a student and master, Aquinas was thoroughly imbued with this dialectical approach to accepted authorities in a discipline. He was trained in disputations as a student, and as a master conducted numerous disputations. When he came to write the *Summa theologiae*, although he was willing to be innovative in many respects, he adopted the structure of a disputed question in each article.

Aquinas, then, stands firmly in the Abelardian tradition of a dialectical approach to authorities. He differs, however, in that respect in which the whole of the thirteenth century is distinguished from earlier scholars in the Latin West: he had access to and studied carefully the whole Aristotelian corpus. Abelard, Peter Lombard, and their twelfth-century contemporaries knew only some of Aristotle's logical works. They had the *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, which are important works on dialectic, but they could not see how dialectic played a role in Aristotle's own philosophical investigations. Moreover, the study of dialectic after Boethius had moved away from the genuine dialectical context presupposed by Aristotle's *Topics* and toward a focus on abstract principles, which would enable one to find the middle term for syllogisms. In this respect, it was more Boethian than Aristotelian.⁴¹

Thus, although Aquinas was heir to the Abelardian tradition, his approach to discordant authoritative voices was enriched and further specified by his study of Aristotle. Abelard recommended reconciling authorities by showing that the disagreement was merely apparent. Aristotle suggested

39. As Aquinas makes clear in *ST* 1.1.8, ad 2, different sorts of authorities vary in the weight their statements carry in a discipline.

40. On this see Weisheipl, *Thomas D'Aquino*, pp. 124ff.; and Gorden Leff, *Paris and Oxford in the 13th and 14th Centuries: An Institutional and Intellectual History* (New York: Wiley, 1968), pp. 167–77.

41. For a discussion of the differences between early medieval and Aristotelian dialectic, see Eleonore Stump, *Dialectic and Its Place in the Development of Medieval Logic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), especially chaps. 1–5.

more subtle ways in which established opinions, though in one way actually discordant, might be harmonized in some higher synthesis.

In *Topics*, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of examining the number of meanings a term may have for the sake of (1) clarity, (2) ensuring that our reasoning is addressed to the facts and not merely to verbal disagreements, and (3) avoiding being misled by false reasoning.⁴² Moreover, he says, we must not only note differences of senses but also try to render definitions of terms, and thus see how different senses of a term are related to one another:

We must not only treat of those terms which bear different senses, but we must also try to render their definitions; e.g., we must not merely say that justice and courage are called 'good' in one sense, and that what conduces to vigor and what conduces to health are called so in another, but also that the forms are so called because of a certain intrinsic quality they have, the latter because they are productive of a certain result and not because of any intrinsic quality in themselves. Similarly also in other cases.⁴³

Aristotle goes on to give an elaborate set of tests for determining similarity and difference of meaning.

In Aristotle's own scientific inquiries the attention to similarities and differences of sense is central. When faced with a conceptual question,⁴⁴ Aristotle begins, in accord with the proper dialectical method outlined in *Topics*,⁴⁵ by considering the various ἐνδόξα (i.e., common or reputable opinions) on the matter. Each of these is shown, as it stands, to be unable to account for certain difficulties. A critical step in the procedure is to recognize some possible equivocation in each of the ἐνδόξα and to go on and differentiate the various senses of the key term or terms. Aristotle is able to give a full answer to the question when he has identified a certain sense of a key term as "unqualified" (ἀπλῶς), "primary" (πρῶτον), or "strict" (κυρίως). Finally, although each of the ἐνδόξα is then shown to have gone wrong because it failed to grasp the fully adequate sense of the term, nevertheless each is shown to have partially grasped the solution and thus

42. Aristotle *Topics* 1.18, 108a18–35.

43. *Topics* 1.15, 106a2–8, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Bolingen Series (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), vol. I.

44. I do not wish to suggest that there is a sharp distinction between empirical and conceptual questions in Aristotle. Yet as G. E. L. Owen has pointed out in "Tithenai ta Phainomena," in *Articles on Aristotle: 1. Science*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji (London: Duckworth, 1975), pp. 113–18, in some of Aristotle's enquiries the *phainomena* seem to be straightforward empirical observations, whereas in others they are common or reputable opinions. It is the latter cases, which are not based immediately on a specific set of observations, which I am calling, rather loosely, "conceptual."

45. See Aristotle *Topics* 8.5.

is accommodated in the final, full answer. In this way, Aristotle believes, his solution “saves the phenomena.”⁴⁶

Consider, for example, Aristotle’s discussion of the question of “how a man who judges rightly can behave incontinently.”⁴⁷ He begins by citing Socrates’s view that incontinence is impossible, that “no one . . . when he judges acts against what he judges best—people act so only by reason of ignorance.”⁴⁸ This position, Aristotle notes, is opposed to the phenomenon that people regularly behave incontinently. After listing some further puzzles, Aristotle identifies some possible equivocations in key terms and makes some crucial distinctions. First, with respect to kinds of knowledge, knowledge may either be of a universal premise or of a particular premise in a practical syllogism. Second, with respect to ways in which something may be known, a person may have knowledge in the sense of actually using it or one may have it and not be using it; the knowledge is then merely dispositional. With these distinctions, Aristotle is in a position to offer his own analysis of incontinence. The incontinent person is aware of two universal premises, such as

- (1) Sweet things ought not to be tasted.
- (2) Tasting sweet things is pleasant.

He is also aware of a particular proposition, such as

- (3) This is sweet.

Driven by a strong appetite for pleasure, the incontinent person is led to subsume (3) under (2), and consequently he eats the cake. Thus (1), though he has knowledge of it, remains dormant. Aristotle then concludes the discussion by remarking that “the position Socrates sought to establish actually seems to result.”⁴⁹ Although Aristotle, unlike Socrates, recognizes the possibility of incontinence, his account is such that the incontinent person does not act against what he actually judges best but rather his knowledge of a universal premise remains merely dispositional and does not come into play in this practical syllogism. Although Aristotle disagrees with the Socratic position about the possibility of incontinence, he believes he is able to accommodate Socrates’s central insight in his solution.

Aristotle’s dialectical procedure in scientific inquiry, then, involves (1) a sensitivity to equivocation in key terms in competing answers to some

46. My description of Aristotle’s method follows closely that of Michael Ferejohn, *The Origins of Aristotelian Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 54–55. See also J. D. G. Evans, *Aristotle’s Concept of Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), especially chap. 3; and Owen, “Tithenai ta Phainomena.”

47. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 7.2, 1145b22–23.

48. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 7.2, 1145b27–28.

49. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 7.3, 1147b15–16.

difficulty; (2) recognition that the solution lies in some more adequate grasp of the sense of certain key terms; (3) a presumption that the less than adequate opinions nevertheless have some partial insight into the full answer; and (4) an attempt to show that the partial insight of other answers is included in, though superseded by, that of the full answer. Such a procedure helps bring conviction on the part of disputants, for they see how they have grasped the truth, albeit partially.

Translated into the thirteenth-century context of the disputed question, the Aristotelian strategy becomes a powerful and widely applicable procedure for dealing with conflicting authoritative claims. A survey of Aquinas's responses to objections from authoritative sayings shows it is one which he employs ubiquitously.⁵⁰

We find in Aquinas, then, a fruitful fusion of two traditions. On the one hand, he inherited the Christian, Abelardian tradition, which finds inquiry within a discipline on authorities, identifies questions where there is an apparent conflict between authoritative claims, and seeks resolution by harmonizing authorities. On the other hand, Aquinas adopted and adapted the Aristotelian tradition of dialectical inquiry beginning from ἐνδόξα, which emphasizes attention to the possible equivocality of key terms in competing opinions and seeks an adequate understanding of key notions which will resolve difficulties and enable one to understand ἐνδόξα as partial or perhaps vague anticipations of the wholly adequate account.

One feature of Aquinas's Aristotelian approach is particularly important for our concerns. In some cases, reconciliation of a position with an authoritative saying may require finding a sense of the words of a writer or speaker which he or she did not fully realize. In reconciling his own account of incontinence with Socrates's view, Aristotle claims that the incontinent man does not act against his knowledge because the relevant piece of knowledge is universal, whereas practical judgment is of particulars, and it remains merely dispositional in this case. But these are distinctions which Socrates did not make with respect to his claim. Thus, the harmonization of Aristotle's analysis with Socrates's claim requires that we attribute to Socrates's words an understanding which Socrates did not share and this implies some distinction be-

50. In a survey of the first five questions of parts 1, 1-2, and 3 of the *Summa theologiae*, I found thirty-nine objections in which a nonscriptural authority is cited and convincingly read as opposing the position Aquinas adopts (I discounted (1) scriptural citations, for these are complicated by the great number of possible senses of a divinely revealed text; (2) obviously sophistical arguments, which are based on a clear misconstrual of an authoritative statement, which Aquinas dismisses summarily; and (3) cases in which the authority is cited only to support a premise of a contrary argument but does not explicitly oppose Aquinas's position.) In all of his responses we find the elements of an Aristotelian approach: he points out a possible equivocation in the authoritative statement; he distinguishes two or more senses of the term or phrase in question; and he argues that although, if taken in one way, the authoritative statement seems opposed to his position, taken in another way it can be fully reconciled with his view.

tween a speaker's understanding of the claims the speaker makes and another understanding which the speaker did not fully grasp.

In his own writings Aquinas presupposes the same distinction between a speaker's understanding and a fuller account. This distinction, I shall now argue, was further justified and clarified by other views Aquinas held.

Externalism

According to Aquinas, general terms signify common natures, or quiddities⁵¹ through a *ratio*, or idea,⁵² which is an apprehension of the intelligible structure of the essence, or quiddity.⁵³ The definition of a term expresses the quiddity.⁵⁴ When someone fully apprehends a quiddity, he or she grasps and is able to give its proper definition.

Aquinas recognizes, however, that it is possible and even common for a subject to have an imperfect grasp of the quiddity signified by the terms the subject uses. For instance, in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, Aquinas writes that "our understanding is so weak that no philosopher has ever been able fully to discover by investigation the nature of a single fly; and it is said that one philosopher spent thirty years in solitude that he might understand the nature of a bee."⁵⁵

When someone's understanding is imperfect, he does not fully grasp the quiddity and his understanding is not expressed by a definition which makes clear the essence (which we will call an *essential definition*). However, he does have some grasp of the quiddity, and this understanding is expressed by a definition which refers to common, salient attributes (which we will call a *nominal definition*). In the case of fire, for example, Aquinas tells us that we can be ignorant of the substantial difference of its proper definition, and must allow "hot, dry body"—a definition which employs proper accidents—to stand in as the definition of "fire."⁵⁶ And in another place he writes, "Nevertheless because substantial forms, unknown to us of themselves, are known through their accidents, there is no difficulty with sometimes using accidents in place of substantial differences."⁵⁷ In a nominal definition, the proper accidents are used as "effects of the substantial forms, and as making these forms known [*manifestant eas*]."⁵⁸ When the

51. ST 1.30.4.

52. ST 1.13.1.

53. Thomas Aquinas *Expositio super librum Boethii de trinitate* 5.2; ST 1.85.1, ad 1 and 2.

54. ST 1.29.2.

55. Thomas Aquinas *In symbolum apostolorum, prologus*, 864, in *Opuscula theologica*, vol. II (Rome: Marietti, 1954).

56. ST 1.29.1, ad3.

57. ST 1.77.1, ad7.

58. ST 1.29.1, ad3.

effects of a form are used in a nominal definition, there is some reference to the form which is the cause; such definitions are implicitly or explicitly reference-involving.⁵⁹

Implicit in these and other passages is a view which has been dubbed *externalism* in recent literature.⁶⁰ The thought experiment which has been used to motivate this doctrine, and which we can use to illustrate it, turns on precisely the sort of partial or imperfect understanding of a concept or nature which Aquinas discusses in the passages just cited.⁶¹ Imagine the following: Catherine lives on earth and has a twin living in a world extremely similar to earth.⁶² The only difference between the respective worlds is that whereas on earth the liquid in oceans, lakes, and rivers is H₂O, in twin-Catherine's twin-earth the clear, colorless, tasteless liquid in oceans, lakes, and rivers is indistinguishable from H₂O to ordinary observation but is in fact a different compound (or element), which we will call XYZ. Otherwise, the worlds are as similar as possible, and this similarity extends to the respective internal states of Catherine and twin-Catherine, which are taken to include bodily states, proximate sensory stimuli, and behavioral dispositions.

Externalism is a doctrine which consists of two distinguishable but not independent theses, the first of which is *semantic externalism*. In the twin worlds described, both Catherine and twin-Catherine call the respective liquids in lakes and oceans in their respective worlds 'water', their experiences of the respective liquids is indistinguishable, and the nominal definition of each of the respective liquids is (let us say) 'a certain transparent, colorless, tasteless liquid'. Still, 'water' means something different for each: for Catherine it is H₂O, and for twin-Catherine it is XYZ. The meaning of 'water', then, depends on the sort of liquid in the speaker's environment and not solely on the speaker's internal states. Semantic externalism is the

59. For a fuller exposition of Aquinas's views on nominal definitions and for a more detailed argument that Aquinas espoused what we call *externalism* below, see my "Aquinas on the Veracity of the Intellect," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 88 (November 1991): 623–32, and "Good and the Object of Natural Inclinations in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 3 (1993): 62–96.

60. Among the most important articles are Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," in *Mind, Language, and Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Tyler Burge, "Individualism and the Mental," ed. P. French, T. Vehling, and H. Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), pp. 73–121; "Other Bodies," in *Thought and Object*, ed. Andrew Woodfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 97–120; and "Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 697–720; Colin McGinn, "The Structure of Content," in *Thought and Object*, pp. 207–68; and *Mental Content* (New York: Blackwell, 1989).

61. Tyler Burge, in a clear and illuminating discussion in "Individualism and the Mental," argues that the possibility of imperfect understanding of a concept by competent language users is what is key to externalist arguments.

62. These worlds may be imagined to be actual worlds in different parts of the universe, or one or both may be thought to be merely possible.

thesis that the meaning or signification of certain terms (though certainly not all terms) of a speaker or linguistic community depend partially on the speaker's or community's environment.

Semantic externalism implies a second externalist thesis, *mental content externalism*. Since the meaning of 'water' for Catherine depends on the nature of the liquid in her environment, the individuation of Catherine's beliefs, desires, intentions, and other contentful mental states, which include the concept of water, also depend partially on her environment. Catherine's belief that water is good to drink is a different belief from twin-Catherine's belief that water is good to drink, for the former is a belief about H_2O and the latter about XYZ. Mental content externalism is the thesis that the individuation of some (though not all) contentful mental states of a subject depend partially on the subject's environment.⁶³

It will be helpful for the ensuing discussion to introduce certain terms, some of which do not have a clear correlate in Aquinas's writing. Nevertheless, though certain terms may not be found, the distinctions they help us make are implicit there. When we assign a meaning to a certain speaker's sentence, we implicitly attribute to the speaker the mastery of certain concepts—or, to use more Thomistic language, we attribute the apprehension of certain *rationes*. We can only suppose that Catherine meaningfully asserts that water is good to drink, and is not simply uttering nonsensical sounds, if we suppose that she is a competent English speaker who has grasped the concepts of *water*, *good*, and *drinking*. In a case of imperfect understanding, the speaker's grasp of a concept falls short of full apprehension but is sufficient for competent use of the term in ordinary situations. Thus we must distinguish between the *concept* of, say, water, which is its full essence or *ratio*, and a speaker's *conception* of water, which is her understanding of the concept which is expressed in a nominal definition. Although it is somewhat of an oversimplification, we will suppose that a speaker's conception is determined strictly by conditions internal to the speaker and not by the environment. For example, when Catherine understands water as 'a certain transparent, colorless, tasteless liquid', her apprehension of these sensible predicates, unlike that of the natural kind of water, does not depend on the external environment. The conception, then, gives us the subject's understanding, which depends on internal factors of the subject individualistically considered and not on external, environmental conditions.⁶⁴

63. We do not here take up the question of the number and kinds of terms for which externalism is true. Natural kind terms, such as 'water', are clear examples. Elsewhere I have argued that for Aquinas, 'good' is an externalist term (see my "Good and the Object of Natural Inclinations"). But many other terms, such as terms for sensible forms, are not, I would argue, externally determined.

64. The oversimplification lies in supposing that a speaker's conception of an externalist concept F is always internally determined. It may be that in some cases a speaker's conception itself includes another externalist concept G. In this case, however, we can replace that concept G by the speaker's conception of G and thus identify the speaker's internal, individualistic understanding of the concept F.

When a speaker utters a sentence which involves the mastery of concepts of which her conception is only partial, the meaning of her sentence is externally determined. Thus, we can distinguish *two components of meaning*: first, there is the speaker's understanding, constituted by her conceptions; second, there is the full meaning, constituted by the concepts involved. Similarly, in ascribing a propositional attitude, such as a thought or desire, we can distinguish *two components of mental content*: there is the subject's understanding of the content, determined by her conceptions; and there is the full understanding, determined by the concepts.⁶⁵

Most relevant to our present concerns are the implications of these externalist doctrines for interpretation. Given the dual-component account of meaning and mental content, interpretation becomes a twofold task. If I am fully to understand Catherine's thoughts and claims about water, then I must not only consider her conceptions; I must also consider the concepts, the natures of the things in her environment, as I can best determine these. Full interpretation, then, requires not only that I attempt to clarify what is in Catherine's head, as it were, but also that I construct the best theory I can about what is in her environment. In this account, interpretation brings the effort to discern what a subject is thinking or saying together with the effort to construct an adequate theory of the natures or essences about which he or she is thinking or talking. And in the latter effort it may be that I will arrive at an account which is superior to the subject's understanding, and thus I may be said to know what he or she is talking and thinking about better than he or she does. For example, if I can distinguish H₂O from XYZ, I can make distinctions regarding the thoughts and claims of the two Catherine's which they themselves were unable to make.

The implications of Aquinas's externalism for his interpretation of Aristotle are perhaps apparent. Since Aquinas was an externalist with respect to semantics and mental content, he held that interpreting Aristotle's thoughts and words required not only that he elucidate Aristotle's understanding, as this is individualistically considered, but also that he bring in the best available account, as he could determine this by his own lights, of the issues which Aristotle discussed. Thus we see how for Aquinas the exegetical concern to make clear what was in Aristotle's head was joined with the effort to construct an adequate theory of the matters which Aristotle discussed. We have, then, the beginning of a rationale for the presence of constructive as well as exegetical elements in the Aristotelian commentaries. However, more needs to be said about Aquinas's strategies in these works, and in the next section I will show how our claims enable us to deal with the problematic passages discussed in section I.

65. For this term and for a clear discussion of a dual-component account of content, I am indebted to McGinn, "Structure of Content."

III

The sort of interpretation one gives of the sentences of a given speaker depends on one's purposes in the particular context. Full interpretation, as defined by dual-component accounts of meaning and mental content, could only serve as a distant ideal of interpretation and not as a practical goal of Aquinas's commentaries. Elucidation of all the essential definitions and concepts involved would require final knowledge of Aristotle's sciences, the completion of all inquiry in these areas. In the commentaries, Aquinas was not interested in ending inquiry, but on the contrary, he wanted to introduce his readers to Aristotle so that they could fruitfully employ this authority in their own inquiries. In this effort, I contend, his strategy was to teach his readers about Aristotle's own individualistic understanding—the first component of meaning and mental content—of the issues discussed. Yet he also wanted to suggest or show the ways in which Aristotle's words are open to, and can be incorporated in, a fuller and more adequate understanding—the second component of meaning and content. A full account of key concepts is the work of further inquiries, and we should not expect Aquinas to give it here. Still, he was interested in showing how Aristotle's words may be open to this full account which may be further clarified in the inquiries of teachers and students. I shall now attempt to use the principles identified to make sense of the problematic passages discussed above.

Nicomachean Ethics 10.7 and 8

In *Summa theologiae* 2–1.3.6, Aquinas asks “whether beatitude consists in consideration of the speculative sciences.” Aquinas's Christian view is that human beatitude consists in the full vision of God's essence in heaven, but he must contend with Aristotle's position, cited in the first objection of this article, that human beatitude consists in activity according to virtue, and among these are the intellectual virtues of science, wisdom, and understanding, which pertain to consideration of the speculative sciences.

Aquinas responds that “the Philosopher speaks in the book of the *Ethics* about imperfect felicity, and about how it can be attained in this life.”⁶⁶ This imperfect beatitude is “a certain participation in the true and perfect beatitude,”⁶⁷ and thus Aristotle's understanding of beatitude is not incompatible with Aquinas's Christian understanding. But, of course, we do not find the imperfect-perfect beatitude distinction clearly expressed in Aristotle's texts. Aristotle recognizes that human beatitude in this life is imperfect in several ways,⁶⁸ but he does not speak straightforwardly about a

66. *ST* 1–1.3.6. ad 1.

67. *ST* 1–2.3.6.

68. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.11, 1101a20–21.

perfect beatitude in an afterlife.⁶⁹ Aquinas can make such a distinction with respect to Aristotle's text, and thus reconcile Aristotle's claims to his own, only by attributing a sense to "human beatitude" which Aristotle did not, or at least did not clearly, recognize.

When Aquinas comments on Aristotle's discussion of beatitude and contemplation in the tenth book of the *Ethics*, he makes clear, as best he can, Aristotle's own individualistic understanding of the key concepts *beatitude*, *separate*, and *divine*. However, he also suggests to the reader ways in which Aristotle's words are open to an understanding which Aristotle did not clearly express or even fully recognize. His comments indicate to his audience the ways in which a fuller understanding of Aristotle's key concepts is possible, given their metaphysical and religious convictions, and thus shows them how to incorporate Aristotle's claims in their own inquiries.

Metaphysics 12.9

In the key passage in Aquinas's gloss (which is quoted above), Aquinas tells us what Aristotle claims ("The Philosopher intends to show . . .") and then goes on to tell us what does and does not follow from his claim ("It is evident that . . ."). It is left unclear whether or not Aquinas thought that Aristotle understood the consequences of his claim. Given Aquinas's hermeneutical principles, however, whether or not Aristotle understood these consequences, they are still implied by the text. Aristotle had an understanding of the concept of God and of divine activity, and he did see that this divine activity consists in a thinking on thinking. Whether or not his understanding was limited to this, the full grasp of the concept of divine activity would include an apprehension that in thinking on Himself, God knows all other things. Thus the full meaning of Aristotle's claim that God's activity is a thinking on thinking implies that God knows other things, whether or not the speaker's individualistic understanding includes this implication.

Aquinas here does not show great concern with determining the speaker's meaning because, first, the evidence is insufficient. Although Aristotle does not explicitly assert the consequence, we cannot definitively rule out his recognition of it. Second, this determination is not critical for Aquinas's purposes in the commentary. Aquinas's concern is to help others read Aristotle so that Aristotle's texts can contribute to their inquiries. For this, it is more important that Aquinas show the truth Aristotle's words signify rather than determine precisely what Aristotle's understanding was.⁷⁰

69. Aquinas draws this conclusion for him (*In ethica* 1.16.202), but he does not clearly assert it.

70. See *In de caelo* 1.22.228.

Metaphysics 2.1

This passage is the most difficult to account for, for Aquinas attributes to Aristotle the doctrine of a cause of being on the basis of one passage alone, though Aristotle does not introduce this notion anywhere else. And, Aquinas gives no indication that this is an account of the full meaning and is distinct from that of the speaker's understanding. Indeed, he claims that Aristotle "expressly says" that the First Mover is the cause of the being, and not just the motion, of other things.

It may be that the polemical, anti-Aristotelian context of Paris in the early 1270s led Aquinas to give a tendentious reading of this passage. Still, given his hermeneutical principles, his reading is defensible.

Aquinas believed that the discovery of causes was gradual among the ancient philosophers. The earliest considered only the causes of accidental changes and for them all becoming was alteration. Subsequently, natural philosophers came to understand substantial change. Finally, Plato and Aristotle discovered the causality of the principle of all being.⁷¹ In another work, Aquinas says that Plato did not fully grasp the notion of a creation *ex nihilo*, for his first principle made the world from preexisting matter.⁷² Aristotle did discover the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, but only vaguely. He mistakenly thought that God's creation was from eternity. And although this sort of causality could not be what he calls a *motio*, it is left to Aquinas to label it an *eminatio* and to describe it.⁷³

It seems, then, that Aristotle might have hit on the notion of a cause of being, but he understood it only vaguely and "with an admixture of many errors."⁷⁴ If we are right that Aquinas embraced a dual-component account of meaning, this is understandable. On this account, a speaker may be said to have acquired the concept of F, even though his or her understanding of F is severely limited, for the speaker's concepts and the meaning of his or her words is not fixed by his or her understanding alone but by the nature or essence understood. Such a claim seems to be behind the belief that it was Joseph Priestly rather than Lavoisier who is credited with the discovery of oxygen, even though Priestly understood "pure air" in terms of a false phlogiston theory, dubbed it "dephlogistonated air," and had a very minimal understanding of its properties.⁷⁵ Similarly, Aquinas might claim, Aris-

71. *In physica* 8.2.975.

72. Thomas Aquinas *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis ad archiepiscopum Paniormitanum*, in Leonine Edition of *Opera Omnia* 42, p. 246.

73. *In physica* 8.2.988.

74. *ST* 1.1.1.

75. Antoine Lavoisier, of course, was the one who separated this newly identified gas from phlogiston theory and gave it the name *principe oxigine*, which he later shortened to *oxygène*. Although he claimed to have discovered oxygen, his claim is not recognized. See J. R. Partington, *A Short History of Chemistry* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 129.

tote grasped the notion of a cause of being in the brief passage in *Metaphysics* 2.1, even though his understanding of it was vague and in many ways mistaken. Nevertheless, Aquinas's principles of interpretation help us to understand his attribution of this understanding to Aristotle.

IV

In the epigraph, Aquinas states that in his commentary on the *Perihermeneias* he tried to provide an exposition of Aristotle's difficult text which would be useful both to the more and to the less advanced. In their attempt to understand these commentaries, appropriationists and historicists both seem to accept an exclusive disjunction: either Aquinas was giving us his own views on ethics, physics, metaphysics, and so on, or, prescinding from judgment, he was simply trying to understand Aristotle's thoughts on these matters. Since both sides can point to passages in which Aquinas is clearly doing one or the other, both can use this disjunction to marshal an argument for their position. Here, I have argued that the common premise of these two camps is mistaken. Aquinas's dialectical approach to authorities and his externalism led him to hermeneutical principles which required that in order to elucidate Aristotle's texts, he must both make clear Aristotle's individualistic understanding *and* construct, or at least suggest, the best account of the matter under discussion. In this way, Aquinas thought, he could provide expositions of Aristotle's texts which would be most useful for his readers' dialectical inquiries.

Although Aquinas adapted and refined Aristotle's procedures, he was, in commenting on Aristotle, following Aristotle's example. In his gloss on Aristotle's discussion of the teachings of Anaxagoras, Aquinas explains that Anaxagoras's more subtle doctrine can be found "if . . . one seeks diligently [to state] clearly and manifestly what Anaxagoras 'wishes to say', i.e., what his intellect tended toward, but he was unable to express."⁷⁶ Similarly, in the commentaries Aquinas often sought to be true to Aristotle's text by presenting not only what Aristotle understood but also what his intellect "tended toward," as Aquinas understood this by his own best lights. And Aquinas's best lights included both what he took as the insights of his own metaphysics as well as what he knew by the light of Christian faith.

If my major thesis is correct, there are implications for the pivotal question of the relationship of Aquinas's thought to Aristotle. Whereas appropriationists believe they can find in Aquinas's writings strictly philosophical doctrines which can in turn be identified with Aristotle's, historicists tend to draw a more or less sharp distinction between the thought of Aquinas and that of Aristotle. Jordan, for instance, recently remarked, "How

76. *In meta.* 1.12.196.

unhappy it is . . . in how many ways, to allege that Thomas himself is a philosopher of something called 'Aristotelianism.'"⁷⁷ But if we have correctly identified Aquinas's hermeneutical principles, "Aristotelianism" becomes more flexible, and Aquinas could have both recognized the limitations of Aristotle's teachings and still have considered himself to have incorporated them in his own, and thus to be an Aristotelian. But this is a topic for another time.

77. Jordan, *Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 41.